
MEDIEVAL HERPETOLOGY; PART III: HIER ENDT DIE TALE
INT GHEMENE.

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INTRODUCTION

For the last part of the general introduction of his *Der Naturen Bloeme* Van Maerlant has reserved the masterpieces of the medieval snakes. From him we get information about snakes, which he got from important men such as James of Vitri, Isidore of Seville and Ambrose.

The latter was Bishop of Milan in the fourth century AD, and mainly wrote moral and devotional books.

James of Vitri died in 1244 in Rome and was in his days a famous preacher.

Isidore, finally, lived in the seventh century AD and was Bishop of Seville.

It seems remarkable that so many clerical authors have functioned as a source of information, but that is connected with the opinion -among others- that there is nothing in nature that God had not had a hand in. As nature can be seen as proof of Providence religious authors wrote on subjects which are not per definition within their competence. That is why (in our deconfessed eyes) non-religious works can contain so many religious allusions.

HIER ENDT DIE TALE INT GHEMENE

*Ysidorus seghet, diet weet,
60 Ende Jacob, dat serpente sijn heet:
Bedi hebben si clene ghewout
Nachtes ende als die tijt es cout.
(vss 59-62)*

According to Isidore and James snakes are hot: which is to them, and so to Van Maerlant as well, the explanation for the fact that during the night and when it is cold they have little power, and not able to do much. ("clene ghewout").

*Over waer sprectmen, dat tserpent vliet
Daert den mensche naect siet.
(vss 63-64)*

The medieval human being must have been of no rousing appearance, because in those days it was taken for granted that a snake fled seeing a naked human being.

*65 Ambrosis sprect voer waerheit nu,
Dat des menschen nuchteren spu
Die serpente sterven doet:
Dus draghet elc anders doet."
(vss 65-68)*

From Ambrose Van Maerlant borrows the information that a man's saliva before having had breakfast, can make a snake die.

In consequence one carries the other's death, namely a snake carries the poison he can kill a human being with and man carries the saliva, before having had breakfast, which is lethal for the snake.

*Siet dat serpent hem in die noet,
70 Ic mach u segghen wat dat doet:*

*Alt lijf worptet in den slach,
Op dat thovet ondraghen mach.
Es hem thovet ghesont bleven,
Dan behoutet wel dat leven.*
(vss 69-74)

A snake noticing it is in danger, behaves as follows: it defends itself with its whole body in order that its head is saved.

For if its head remains unharmed, it will stay alive.

*75 Als et wille int water sijn,
Spuwetet uut sijn venijn;
Alst ute comet so neemtet weder
Sijn venijn, daert leide neder.
Verliestet sijn venijn oec mede,
80 Et doet hem ter selver stede."*
(vss. 75-80)

An amusing fable here is that when a snake wants to go into the water, it spits its poison. It picks up the poison again from that same spot, when it comes out of the water.

Time after time that must have been a precarious moment for a medieval snake, for if it did not find the poison it would die on the spot.

*Langhe leven mach tserpent,
Want alst hem veroudert kent,
Vastet ende wort magher dan,
So ruumpt sijn vel dattet heeft an,
85 So cruupt doer een nauw gat,
Daer et hem of mach stropen dat,
Ende verniewet sine joeghet.*
(vss 81-87)

In Van Maerlant's days they saw the shedding of the skin by snakes as follow: the snake can live for a very long time, for if it feels it is get-

ting older, it will start to fast and grow thin. The skin will become loose and the snake can crawl out of the skin through a narrow hole. Thus it has become young again.

*Hier toe helpt hem des venekel doeghet;
Ende als hem die oghen gaen ute,
90 Verniewetse an die rute.
Goede roeke es hem quat,
Want hi tserpent verslaet."*
(vss 88-92)

The "uptill here" - "hier toe" from verse 88 refers to verse 87: another thing that helps to rejuvenate apart from skinning, Van Maerlant says, is the fennel.

"Utegaen" in verse 89 is not in my Middle Dutch Dictionary in a meaning, which is appropriate here. I would like to translate it here with "growing worse". The translation of verse 89 then becomes: "and when its eyes grow worse"; what seems to be meant is that the eyes are getting misty.

Now when a snake has misty eyes, it fights it with herb of grace (a remedy we will also come across further on).

Here again is explicitly pointed at the fact that snakes are not exclusively carnivores.

In verse 21 of his general introduction Van Maerlant has already referred to this.

Furthermore a snake has reasons to be afraid of delicious smell, for that causes the snake's death.

*"Hier endt die tale int ghemene:
Nu hoert van elken allene,
95 Teerst in A, daerna in B,
Na dordine van den A. b. c."*
(vss 93-96)

Van Maerlant closes his general introduction saying he will deal with each kind in alphabetical order.

In the following series I will tell you more about that order.

REFERENCE

Maerlant, J. van, Der Naturen Bloeme.

Ed. dr. Eelco Verwijs, 1878. Ongewijzigde herdruk 1980.

Translation: Antoinette van der Voort-Van den Heuvel.