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## THE IMAGE OF MEDEA IN THE WORK OF A FOURTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH AUTHOR

The present paper deals with a work of John Gower, a well known writer of the later Middle Ages.

In the history of English literature the fourteenth century is regarded as the age of Geoffrey Chaucer. His works became the starting point for the further development of English literature. But, among other authors of the same period, the most distinguished was John Gower. Chaucer wrote only in English language and laid the foundation for the English literary language, while Gower used Latin and French as well. However, his best work 'Confessio Amantis' (1390) was written in English. The Cambridge History of English Literature highly appreciates the language of this work: 'That Gower, through the purity of his English style and the easy fluency of his expression, exercised a distinct influence upon the development of the language cannot be questioned.'<sup>1</sup>

The poem 'Confessio Amantis' includes more than a hundred stories. Some of them are rather long, others describe short episodes. This work of Gower was well known to the readers of the following centuries. It was used as a source of plots for the playwrights of the Renaissance, even for Shakespeare. Gower's narrative style is praised in the Cambridge History of English Literature, but at the same time it is pointed out that his work cannot be compared with the stories of Chaucer: 'We have in 'Confessio Amantis' more than a hundred stories told in a pleasing and simple style by one who clearly had a gift for story-telling, though without the large humanity which

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<sup>1</sup> Sampson G., The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature, Cambridge University Press, 1970, 64.

makes the stories of Chaucer unique in the literature of his time.<sup>2</sup> Chaucer's 'Canterbury Tales' opened the way to the further development of literature, while Gower's works wholly reflected the preceding traditions. In the opinion of M. Alekseev, Gower's creative work presents interest just by 'the summing up of the extensive and diverse poetic heritage of the Middle Ages.'<sup>3</sup>

Gower is known to have been one of the most erudite persons of his age. For his poem 'Confessio Amantis' he used a great number of different sources, highlighting in them didactical, moral aspects, typical of his manner of writing. He borrowed plots from the Bible, from ancient sources, collections of medieval stories, courtly romances, chronicles. Fairly often he referred to the works of Ovid, well known in the Middle Ages. Gower's story, with Medea as the central character, was composed according to Ovid.

Throughout ages the myth of the Argonauts attracted the attention of writers and received different interpretations. But, as L. Mallinger points out, 'the image of Medea never suffered such modifications as in the Middle Ages.'<sup>4</sup> The courtly romances accentuated her extraordinary beauty and her infinite love for Jason, while the writers of the later Middle Ages were more concerned with her power as a sorceress. It is in the latter aspect that Medea is shown by John Gower. The material is borrowed from the 'Metamorphoses' of Ovid, who relates how Medea returned youth to Jason's father with the help of magic medicines. This story is described in the seventh book of Ovid's poem. The author gives a brief account of Colchian stories and the seizure of the Golden Fleece; but the main action takes place in Greece after the return of the Argonauts. Medea makes Jason's father younger and ruins his uncle, who usurped his brother's throne and deceived Jason as well.

Gower's story is written according to Ovid's 'Metamorphoses'. However, the comparison of the English text with that of Ovid shows that Gower did not simply translate this episode of the Latin poem, but in many ways altered it. To begin with, the English version says nothing about Jason's uncle. Consequently, the composition of the story is entirely connected with one central problem. It is generally known that Gower is distinguished by his good, logical manner of narrating.

The changes made by Gower are seen in many episodes of the story. To begin with, Gower says nothing about Colchis and starts the narrative with the happy return of the Argonauts to Greece:

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>3</sup> Алексеев М. П., Литература средневековой Англии и Шотландии, Москва, 1984, 189.

<sup>4</sup> Mallinger L., *Medée*, Paris, 1898, 195.

Jason to Grece with his preie  
 Goth thurgh the see the rihte weie.<sup>5</sup>

The history of Jason's father is also told differently. According to Ovid, when the Argonauts returned home Jason's father – Aeson – was so weak that he could not take part in the joyous celebration:

Haemoniae matres pro gnatis dona receptis  
 Grandaeuque ferunt patres, congestaque flamma  
 Tura liquefaciunt, inductaque cornibus aurum  
 Victima vota litat. Sed abest gratantibus Aeson,  
 Iam propior leto fessusque senilibus annis.<sup>6</sup>

In Gower's version, at that time Aeson is in good health and celebrates his son's victory more than anyone else:

Eson, whan that he wiste of this,  
 How that his sone comen is,  
 And hath achieved that he soughte,  
 And hom with him Medea broughte,  
 In al the wyde world was non  
 So glad a man as he was on.<sup>7</sup>

Jason's father feels likewise well enough in the following years when his grandchildren are born:

And olde Eson gret joie made  
 To sen th'encress of his lignage;  
 For he was of so gret an age.<sup>8</sup>

Only later the old man becomes weaker, and Jason asks Medea to use her magic power and make his father young again.

This episode is another point of difference between the Latin and English texts. In Ovid's work, Jason wishes to make his father's life longer at the expense of shrinking his own life:

Cum sic Aesonides: 'o cui debere salutem  
 Confiteor, coniunx, quamquam mihi cuncta dedisti,  
 Excessitque fidem meritorum summa tuorum:

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<sup>5</sup> Gower John, *Medea as Queen of Air and Darkness*, *The Age of Chaucer*, vol. I, Penguin Books, 1976, 429.

<sup>6</sup> P. Ovidius Naso, *Metamorphoses*, Lipsiae, 1886, 131.

<sup>7</sup> Gower, 1976, 429.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 429.

Si tamen hoc possunt, – quid enim non carmina possunt? –  
Deme meis annis, et demptos adde parenti.<sup>9</sup>

In Gower's poem, Jason says nothing about himself and only asks Medea to make his father younger:

Jason, which sih his fader old,  
Upon Mede made him bold,  
Of art magique, which she couthe,  
And preith hire that his fader youthe  
She wolde make ayeinward newe.<sup>10</sup>

The central part of the work is devoted to the description of Medea's magic art, which the author finds miraculous:

Bot what she dede in that matiere  
It is a wonder thing to hier.<sup>11</sup>

In many places Gower modifies the text of Ovid's poem: some episodes are omitted, others are extended. In the same way as in the 'Metamorphoses', Medea leaves home at midnight pronouncing some magic words and flies in a chariot driven by dragons. Gower gives a more detailed account than Ovid concerning the places where Medea goes to find herbs and other materials that she needs. Very eloquent and impressive is Gower's description of how Medea prepares her mysterious solution and afterwards walks with magic yells around the old man who has already fallen asleep. The poet himself admires Medea's superhuman faculties and calls her a goddess:

For with the craftes that she can  
She was, as who seith, a goddesse.<sup>12</sup>

It should be noted that in the title of the work Medea is called 'Queen of Air and Darkness'.

The story has a happy end: Medea fulfilled her husband's request, and her father-in-law became young and strong. The wonderful transformation is compared with the month of May, when nature revives after cold rains.

The narrative is quite logical and clear; its short poetic lines are easy to read. According to critics, these are characteristic features of Gower's

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<sup>9</sup> Ovidius, 1886, 131.

<sup>10</sup> Gower, 1976, 430.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 430.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 434.

narrative style. As A. Fowler writes in his 'History of English Literature', 'Gower was our first major poet of formal elegance in narrative'.<sup>13</sup>

In the fourteenth century the theme of magic, sorcery certainly attracted the reader's attention. That is why Gower tried to describe the magic art of his heroine as fully as possible. In J. Speirs' opinion, Medea's image presented by Gower 'is typically medieval by character'.<sup>14</sup>

John Gower was a great erudite and his works clearly show the aesthetic interests of his age. The fact that Gower wrote a story about the myth of the Argonauts, proved that the image of Medea was well known in fourteenth-century English literature.

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<sup>13</sup> Fowler A., *A History of English Literature*, Harvard University Press, 1987, 12.

<sup>14</sup> Speirs J., *A Survey of Medieval Verse, The Age of Chaucer*, vol. I, Penguin Books, 1976, 52.