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**PERSONAL MOTIVES
IN THE *ARGONAUTICA* BY VALERIUS FLACCUS**

The *Argonautica* by Valerius Flaccus presents the literary images of Medea and Jason in an altogether new way, quite differently from the Greek tradition¹, so that it could provoke readers' interest. Although this epic work, as well as its author, was highly appreciated as early as by Quintilian², it failed to secure a worthy place in world literature. Valerius Flaccus belongs to the group of less-studied authors. There are not many critics who take interest in his works. However, I believe that this should be attributed to the high, and by no means poor, quality of his works. The Roman author is distinguished by rare erudition, which is attested by every line of the *Argonautica*. According to I. Peters, the scholar who studies the life and literary heritage of Flaccus, the *Argonautica* is the invaluable treasure (thesaurus locupletissimus).³ And in fact, it includes quite a lot of important information related to literature, mythology, history, archaeology, geography and other fields of the humanities and sciences, and the author presents this truly diverse and encyclopedic information not only in each plot element, but also through the images of the characters and through their deeds. This last aspect is certainly related to remarkable challenges on the part of the reader as it invites deeper thought, stronger concentration of mind, and even labor so that to be able to grasp the central theme of the work. The 'originality and talent'⁴ of Valerius Flaccus, 'who offered an absolutely different interpretation of the popular

¹ Ts. Gigauri, *Colchis in the Roman Literature*, Tbilisi, 1985, 84 (in Georgian).

² Quintiliani institutio oratorum, X, 1.

³ I. Peters, *De Valerii Flacci vita et carmine*, Regimonti, 1890, 2.

⁴ M. Val. Martialis epigrammaton, Lips., 1925, lib., VIII, 56, 45, 48 etc.

plot',⁵ 'who presented it with new episodes',⁶ and embellished with 'fine, pathetic style and harmonious hexameters',⁷ was not left unnoticed by European scholars of ancient studies, including Ursula Gärtner⁸ and David R. Slavitt.⁹

Remarkably, Valerius Flaccus, who had not been much privileged with the attention of literary critics before, in 2000 attracted considerable interest of not only classical philologists, but also of average readers. Such popularity of Flaccus should be ascribed to the translation of David R. Slavitt.

Ursula Gärtner studies the literary images of Medea, Jason and Heracles on the basis of comparisons. Heracles captures attention not only owing to Flaccus' ingenious elements, but also in order to make Jason's image more complete. Heracles has positive properties in the work, like Medea and Jason. Apart from having superhuman power, which enables him to fight against the mythological monsters, he is at the same infinitely noble. This quality of his is attested by his relationship with average people and Hillas. If Heracles of Apollonius Rhodius is more powerful than Jason, who is conveyed by the constant thematic accent, Valerius Flaccus presents Heracles and Jason as characters with equally distinguished personalities. Heracles is unanimously proclaimed the leader by the men of the *Argo* in Apollonius' *Argonautica*¹⁰, and only owing to his resolute request and calling that it was Jason who assembled them; they agree to make Jason their chief. This element is purposefully missing in Flaccus' work: Jason is the real leader from the start of the poem¹¹ and to its end. I would like to note here that David Slavitt 'puts right' what he considers a sheer discrepancy in Flaccus work.¹² Although Jason is characterized in a completely positive way, the text says: 'Let us recall how we all were filled with admiration and gratitude when Heracles joined us.'¹³ When the Argonauts were enjoying themselves in the company of the women of Lemnos, Heracles watched them indifferently. He proudly remained in solitude and complained to Jason: 'Why did you hire me. Give me Phasis, Aeetes, the hazards of Scythian seas, challenge me in a competition, and let me experience the sweetness of adventures and not

⁵ M. Schanz, *Geschichte der Römischen Literatur*, München, 1913, 138.

⁶ *A History of Latin Literature* by Moses Hadas, New-York, London, 1964, 265.

⁷ *A History of Roman Literature*, Moscow, 1962, V. II, 183 (in Russian).

⁸ U. Gärtner, *Gehalt und Funktion der Gleichnisse bei Valerius Flaccus*, Franz Steiner Verlag Stuttgart, 1994.

⁹ *The Voyage of the Argo, The Argonautica of Gaius Valerius Flaccus*, translated by D. R. Slavitt, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

¹⁰ Apollonius Rhodius, *The Argonautica*, The Loeb Classical Library, 1955, I, 341-9.

¹¹ Ts. Gigauri, *Colchis in the Roman Literature*, Tbilisi, 1990, 103 (in Russian).

¹² See Debra Hershkowitz: www.scholar.lib.vt.edu

¹³ D. R. Slavitt ..., *ibid.*, III, 765-8.

idleness and emptiness. I came with the love for perils, and you take pleasure in the perils of love' (II, 378-84).¹⁴ Ursula Gärtner prefers Heracles to Jason. When describing Jason's character in Flaccus' *Argonautica*, she refers to Apollonius and notes that although Jason is presented as 'primus inter pares', he is not recognized anywhere to be on the first place.¹⁵ In her opinion, Jason, who falls short of heroic qualities in Apollonius' *Argonautica*, is remarkably altered in Flaccus' epic. Putting forward general arguments and avoiding details, Ursula Gärtner concludes that the Roman epic writer presents Jason as a true hero, but at the same time she mentions Heracles and his heroic feats. What the scholar finds important is Jason's moral status and not whether he meets the functions of a leader or not.¹⁶ Comparing the opinions of various scholars, U. Gärtner states that Jason's positive qualities, which he often demonstrates, and which set him apart from other Greek heroes, can be generalized as his bravery. Comparing him to Heracles (134 ff., 387 f., VII 623 f., VIII 125 f., 228 ff.), the scholar admits that Jason is capable of presenting himself as a hero owing to his looks as well as to these qualities, which he has in common with Heracles.¹⁷

Ursula Gärtner refers to Flaccus' comparisons, when Jason, as a brave hero, is compared to Mars (Arg., III, 83 f.), to the tempest of winter (III, 151f.), to a lion (VI, 613 f., VII 645f.), a fighting steed, kept idle for a long time (II, 386 ff.).¹⁸ Dwelling on the comparisons, Ursula Gärtner notes that the gods which Jason is compared to are not positive, especially Mars, who is enraged, and embodies the eagerness for war. Consequently, Flaccus' comparison is more associated with a war-thirsty person, than a brave hero.¹⁹

This is how the majority of the comparisons, including those related to Medea, are interpreted.

In my opinion, Jason is compared with Mars not because the author regards war as a beneficial phenomenon, but in order to accentuate Jason's courage and heroic qualities. I believe that close consideration of Flaccus' epithets will enable us to find out his attitude to his characters.

The analysis of the characters of Flaccus' *Argonautica*²⁰ in the context of epithets will facilitate the understanding of their personal qualities and behavior. Since I am presently interested in Jason, I will recall the following

¹⁴ D. R. Slavitt . . ., *ibid.*, II, 378-84.

¹⁵ U. Gärtner . . ., *ibid.*, 285.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 286

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Flaccus Valerius, Works with an English translation by T. H. Mozley, The Loeb Classical Library, 1959.

epithets: individual – Aesone natus, Aesonides – the offspring of Aeson (I, 148f., II, 334 f., III, 8, IV, 675f., etc.), neutral – ductor – the leader (IV, 703f.), dux – leader (V, 310), heros – hero (VII, 614, VIII, 24, 109ff.); positive – decus – pride (I, 56f.), pulcher – good-looking (VII, 263f.), ferox – courageous (VI, 615f.), turbidus – swift, quick (VII, 67f.), fortissimus – most powerful (VIII, 419f.); genealogical – dux Thessalus – Thessalian leader (V, 277f.), ignotus – unknown (VII, 173f.); compassionate – profuga – fugitive (VII, 129f.).²¹

I find it relevant to cite the epithets because, despite the emphasis on the positive aspect, U. Gärtner sometimes questions the positiveness of Medea's and Jason's images.²² I believe that epithets, which vividly characterize literary personalities, will help to remove any undesirable doubts. In the scholar's opinion, the poet is distinguished by remarkable psychological intuition, and despite this, U. Gärtner finds Medea a dull character, unlike Flaccus, who presents Medea's personality in bright colors. Gärtner believes that all the characters in general suffer from ill anticipation. Admitting to a slightly more delightful disposition of the characters in Apollonius' *Argonautica*, the scholar anyway concludes that both epics are dominated with the fair of destiny, and therefore, the reader can feel sympathy rather than delight.²³

To illustrate the above-mentioned, I have attached Flaccus' text to the comparisons cited by Gärtner. Remarkably, Gärtner quotes the comparisons which picture tender looks of the virgin and the power of her character. Flaccus' Medea is the fair daughter of the king, compared to a lily issuing irradiating white light (VI, 492f.), to a scared bird (VI, 505f.), caught in white flames (VI, 664f.). Gärtner understands the latter comparison as the storm, and parallels with an ear in the rain (VII, 24f.) and the emphasis on dog-like devotion (VII, 124f.), as well as the use of mythological figures, merely stirs sympathy in the scholar.²⁴

Undoubtedly, Ursula Gärtner is quite right as she talks about the moral conflict within Medea – when her love and responsibility to her father and homeland collide with her newly-born love for stranger Jason. I also appreciate that she finds Medea an attractive character, who stirs compassion.²⁵

In order to be convinced in Medea's attractiveness, virtues and noble mind, it is not necessary to closely consider the whole epic work; it suffices to

²¹ Ts. Gigauri, *Colchis ...*, 1984, 137-8.

²² U. Gärtner..., *ibid.*, 285.

²³ U. Gärtner..., *ibid.*, 280

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*..., 283.

look at the epithets. Valerius Flaccus accentuates Medea's nobleness at every step. According to Ludwig Radermacher, Medea, as the rescuer of Jason, could have belonged to the level of Hera, Athena and Aphrodite by her rank.²⁶

Valerius Flaccus refers to Medea with the following epithets: genealogical – Aeeta virgo (IV, 14f., VI, 267f.), Aetida – the daughter of Aeetes (VI, 481, VII, 445, VIII, 233), Regis filia (I, 61), Regina (V, 373, 441; VI, 657); positive – Medea iuventa – charming Medea (V, 257); sympathetic – infelix – poor (VI, 490; VIII, 160). She is compared to the sun and is referred to in the following way: Sol magne – the Great Sun (VIII, 350).

The detailed analysis of Flaccus' texts showed me that the negative attitude to Medea, shared by the majority of scholars, and even the meek attempt to praise her, the 'biting' praise, as illustrated above, is the influence of the established tradition. Admittedly, the literary source which lowered the set of Medea's and Jason's values was Euripides' *Medea*. Considering mythological material, scholars admit that, in fact, Medea did not kill her children, and that the child-slaughter was the imagination of Euripides.²⁷ The great gift of the tragedian and his reputation proved sufficient to blindly accept and 'be subdued' by this version, which defamed the distinguished, beautiful daughter of Colchis and brought her so much mischief. I will cite one opinion out of many related to this question: 'Euripides hat hier den überkommenem Sagenstoff, nach dem einst die Korinther Iason's und Medeias Kinder getötet haben sollen, um sich von der Herrsonaft eines mit Barbarenblut gemischten Geschlechtes zu befreien, mit größter Freiheit behandelt. Medeia als Mörderin der eigenen Kinder ist seine Erfindung.'²⁸

It can be openly declared that ancient tradition, which goes far beyond the personal fate of Medea and Jason, has no actual grounds.

Flaccus' Medea is not a blind weapon, a toy in the divine hands; she is an independent and smart young woman, who, seeing a brave and good-looking lad in the battlefield, fell in love with him in her devoted and frank manner.²⁹ This is the very element which proves innovative in the Argonautica-related literature. Inspired with pristine love, she is driven towards the supreme goal by a wild zeal; she unsparingly resorts to her potential faculties and is ready to sacrifice herself.

Valerius Flaccus freed Medea from the disgraceful label of a woman obsessed with passion, of a woman, who discarded all and everything for the

²⁶ L. Radermacher, *Mythos und Sage bei den Griechen*, Darmstadt, 1968, 235.

²⁷ See Ts. Gigauri, *Medea and Jason in Roman Literature*, Tbilisi State University Works, Tbilisi, v. 249, 1984, 226 (in Russian).

²⁸ Euripides, *Tragödien, Erster Teil, Medeia*, Griechisch und Deutsch von Dietrich Ebener, Akademie-Verlag, Berlin, 1972, 31.

²⁹ Flaccus Valerius, *Argonautica*...., *ibid.*, VI, 663-7.

sake of her own desires, and deserved no sympathy as she remained in the memory of readers as a repugnant traitor. Flaccus' Medea is embellished with the best qualities, like Jason, who prior to the *Argonautica* by the Roman poet was notorious for his treachery, unfaithfulness, dishonesty and ruthlessness. It is only his name that Flaccus' Jason has in common with his prototypes. Instead of the perfidious, cowardly, insidious and murderous traitor, Valerius Flaccus presented a brave hero, who finds his good name and honesty most important, who intentionally meets any kind of peril; in short, he is the best Roman with his best and negative qualities.³⁰ The traditionally negative image of Jason acquires new qualities in Flaccus' epic. Jason is an active and promising person. This is the image of a Roman commander the conqueror.³¹

Valerius Flaccus, who dedicated his epic poem to the victory of Titus, made Titus the prototype for Jason. The Roman hero is noble and merciful. Despite Pelias' treachery, he is remorseful of Acastus' secret escape with him, without informing his father.³²

Jason is peaceful and benevolent not only with his friends, but with everybody. He is ready to help even those who he meets for the first time. This is illustrated by the episode with Cyzicus, whom he promises to help in the fight against savage tribes.³³

Jason is the worthy pupil of Chiron and justifies his royal descent. He behaves worthily when Aeetes deceives him; he shows fabulous courage as he is fighting against Aeetes' enemies, or the fire-breathing bulls of the field of Mars. Jason deeply falls in love with Medea and tries to arouse her love through his dignity and devotion to her.

Aeetes' hopes to scare the hero with the sight of the monster proved groundless. Jason, with the Golden Fleece on his shoulders, is compared to Heracles, after he slew the Nemean lion.³⁴

It is owing to such an innovative interpretation of the Argonaut legend that the famous poet and translator, David Slavitt took interest in Flaccus' work. He transformed the adventure of Medea and Jason in an original way, according to his own imagination. Commenting on his own translation, which not only altered the actions of the characters, but also rendered their language in modern terms, David Slavitt commented that he is delighted he has taken the courage of interpreting the language of Flaccus in terms of English.³⁵ D. Slavitt calls for peace on those fond of libraries and book-stores, and tells

³⁰ A History of Roman Literature..., *ibid.*, 180.

³¹ N. Deratani, I. Nakhov, A History of Roman Literature, Moscow, 1954, 442 (in Russian).

³² Flaccus Valerius, *Arg.*, *ibid.*, I, 693-703.

³³ *Ibid.*..., II, 656-664.

³⁴ *Ibid.*..., VIII, 121-6.

³⁵ D. Slavitt..., *ibid.*, IX.

them that he was admired by the episode from Book 8, when Flaccus allows Medea to put the dragon to sleep, thus giving Jason an opportunity to acquire the Fleece with a single strike of hand. None of the Latin authors thought of carrying this out in one minute. Only Medea allowed herself to take pity on the dragon. According to D. Slavits, this was such a surprise, that he was compelled to translate the poem in a new way.

David Slavits's translation, which made Flaccus' *Argonautica* popular in the 20th-21st centuries, succeeded in precise rendering of the main idea of the original and in making the book acceptable to modern readers. The public became acquainted with the brilliant epic author and at the same time, through the use of agreeable humor, D. Slavits skillfully 'cheered up' the 'sadness' and the 'gloom' which Ursula Gärtner found with the images of Medea and Jason. David Slavits admits that he had a lot of fun when working on the translation and calls on the readers to do the same.

Such 'transformations' are not alien to world literature. I. Kotlyarevski's *Aeneid*³⁶ is another example of it. The author treats the positive characters with considerable humor, but does not humiliate them. Through the humorous account, I. Kotlyarevski turned everything upside down – the 'high' became 'low', the heroic and pathetic – casual, the past became the present, and the present – the future, the great epic of the Roman poet was transformed into an amusing joke. I. Kotlyarevski made the Roman author extremely popular and owing to his work, the modern *Aeneid* was included in the classical literary fund of the Ukraine.³⁷

David R. Slavits's translation produced the same effect. Robert V. Albis³⁸ wrote in the *New England Classical Journal* that Valerius Flaccus became more agreeable and acceptable for the reader in Slavits's version, while the Brown University professor David Konstan stated that D.R. Slavits's translation will remarkably increase the number of readers of Flaccus' work.³⁹

³⁶ I. Kotlyarevski, *Aeneid*, translation from Ukrainian into Russian by I. Braghin, Moscow, 1955.

³⁷ I. Eriomin, I. P. Kotlyarevski and His *Aeneid*, introduction to the translation, *ibid.*, 9.

³⁸ For details see: www.amazon.com/VoyageArgo-Argonautica-ValeriusFlaccus/dp.

³⁹ For more details see: www.addall.com/detail.