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***The Constance Saga* in the First Half of the 14th Century:  
Plot and Genre Transformations**

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**Abstract.** Examines the evolution of a plot that emerged and developed in Western European literature in the 13th century and was later called *the Constance Saga*. Over the past century of research into stories that embody this plot and that form a unity based on the motif of the ‘accused queen’ or ‘calumniated wife’, no single plot formula has been presented for them and no trends in the plot genesis of this Saga have been identified. In this article, the author assumes that the formula for the plot common for stories in this unity consists of two fundamental situations: 1) ‘separation from the family’, consists of the motifs marriage, pregnancy, the husband leaves his wife for a long time on business, substitution of letters between spouses, unfair accusation of the wife and her punishment by exile; 2) ‘reunion’, represents recognition and a meeting after a long time. Each of these situations is preceded by its own motivational complex. Our task was to trace the extent to which the elements of the motivational complexes were fixed, whether new free motives appeared among them and whether they were associated with the choice of genre form for a specific text that embodied this plot with its four-part formula. The material for the study was the works of the first half of the 14th century: *The History of the Countess of Anjou* by Jean Maillard, the story of Marguerite from *Scala Coeli* by Jean Goby the Younger, the anonymous *History of the Daughter of the King of Hungary* and the story of Constance from *The Chronicles* by Nicholas Trevet. The main conclusions of the study: in the first three stories, minor introduced motives did not violate the established formula and at the same time turned out to be associated with a new genre form, and in Trevet’s work, revolutionary transformations were discovered that did not violate the two plot-forming events, but redefined the initial motivational complex, eliminating the theme of incest from the traditional story, and at the same time demonstrated the multi-genre nature of the story.

**Keywords:** novel, chronicle, genre, plot evolution, fabula

**Conflicts of interest.** The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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## «Сага о Констанции» в первой половине XIV в.: сюжетно-жанровые трансформации

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**Аннотация.** Рассматривается вопрос об эволюции сюжета, возникшего и развивавшегося в западноевропейских литературах XIII в., позднее названного «Сагой о Констанции». Единая сюжетная формула историй, воплощающих этот сюжет и составляющих общность на основе мотива «обвиненной королевы», «оклеветанной жены», пока не была представлена в исследованиях. Тенденции фабульного генезиса этой «Саги» также не были выявлены. В статье автор исходит из того, что формула общности для подобных историй состоит из двух основополагающих ситуаций: 1) «расставание с семьей», включающее мотивы брака, беременности, долгого удаления мужа от жены по делам, подмены писем супругов, несправедливого обвинения жены, ее наказания изгнанием; 2) «воссоединение» – узнавание и встреча спустя долгое время. Каждую из этих ситуаций предваряет ее мотивировочный комплекс. Задача исследования – проследить, насколько оказались фиксированы элементы мотивировочных комплексов, появлялись ли среди них новые свободные мотивы, были ли они связаны с выбором жанровой формы для конкретного текста, воплотившего этот сюжет с его четырехчастной формулой. Материалом послужили сочинения первой половины XIV в.: «История графини Анжуйской» Жана Майара, история о Маргарите из «Небесной лестницы» Жана Гоби-младшего, анонимная «История о дочери венгерского короля» и история о Констанции из «Хроник» Николаса Тревета. Основные выводы: в первых трех историях мелкие вводимые мотивы не нарушили устоявшейся формулы и в то же время оказались связанными с новой жанровой формой, а в сочинении Тревета обнаружены революционные преобразования, которые не нарушили двух сюжетослагающих событий, но переопределили начальный мотивировочный комплекс, устранив из традиционной истории тему incesta, и в то же время продемонстрировали мультижанровый характер истории.

**Ключевые слова:** роман, хроника, жанр, эволюция сюжета, фабула

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## Introduction

*The Constance Saga* is a collection of literary monuments of the Middle Ages, as well as the following cultural and historical eras, based on common plot motifs, which in the plot of each individual text could be supplemented by any secondary ones. The corresponding term was introduced by a Romance medievalist H. Suchier at the end of the 19th century (Gough, 1902, p. 1). One of the leading plot motifs (more precisely, a chain of sequential motifs that form a plot situation) in the examples of *the Saga* is the motif of the ‘Accused Queen’. In relation to the author’s literary texts, M. Schlauch used this name in the title of her work on the connection between *The Man of Law’s Tale* from *The Canterbury Tales* of Geoffrey Chaucer with the texts that make up *the Saga* (the mention of Constance in the title of the above collection is due to the fact that this is the name of Chaucer’s heroine) (Schlauch, 1927). Therefore, in English-language literary studies, the term ‘the Accused Queens’ is synonymous with *The Constance saga*. The doublet term exists only because folklorists have found a similar – and very common – situation in multilingual folklore sources. S. Thompson designated it as ‘Calumniated Wife’ (Thompson, 1946, p. 497).

The situation that peaks in the development of the plot, which is associated with the names of groups of literary and folklore works, consists of the following motives: the king (or prince) meets a stranger – he marries her – she soon becomes pregnant, but he urgently needs to leave – one of the relatives replaces the letters of the husband and wife in order to slander the latter, convicting her of either adultery or in connection with evil spirits – the king’s wife, who has given birth to children, is banished along with them (less often – into the deep forest, more often – into the open sea in a boat without oars, rudder and sail or in a barrel). With this event that completes the situation, the complex of motives cited will immediately remind the Russian-speaking reader of *The Tale of Tsar Saltan* by A.S. Pushkin. However, researchers of Russian literature have practically not developed the connection of Pushkin’s tale with the tradition of *The Constance Saga*. On the contrary, Russian medievalists who studied Western literatures have grasped this connection: “The plot of the work is based on a very common narrative structure, recorded in the folklore and literature of various peoples (up to Pushkin’s *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*)” (Mikhaylov, 1976, p. 316). According to A.N. Gorbunov, *The Man of Law’s Tale* is a poem that combines features of a folk tale, a medieval novel, and a religious didactic exemplum. It is connected with folklore by the motifs of the ‘Calumniated Wife’, a cruel mother-in-law, and sailing in a boat on the waves (remember *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*) (Gorbunov, 2010, p. 128).

The author of this article turned to the origins of *The Saga* and considered the emergence and development of its plot throughout the 13th century. The main result of the consideration was that the framework of the established plot

represents two situations: approaching the problem of characterizing the examples of *The Saga* from within the plot, we noticed that in each case the main theme is family, and therefore such important situations become: 1) separation from the husband, or rather, the whole complex of causal events leading to it, and 2) the final reunion of the family. The configuration of the plot is as follows: each of the indicated situations is preceded by others, playing the role of motivation, and all of them correspond to the compositional formula Iab–IIabc–III–IV (Semyonov, 2023, pp. 191–192), in which I and III are detailed motivations, and II and IV are the main situations. We will also add: for the examples of *The Saga* there were characteristic implicit plot repetitions, as if the main terrible event in the fate of the heroine (exile to the forest, by sea) was preceded by a similar event of exile or forced flight at the beginning of the plot. For example, a frequent element of the motivation of the first plot-subjunctive event is the theme of incest (at the beginning of the plot, the young princess resists her father's incestuous intentions and flees or is expelled from her country), while a less frequent accompanying motif is the theme of the princess cutting off her hands or otherwise damaging her own external beauty.

In this article we will try to find out: 1) whether the motivating, secondary motifs of *The Saga*, known from the monuments of the previous century, were preserved in the works of the first half of the 14th century, just as the two main plot events around which each new plot was built were preserved; 2) whether the number of small themes included in the groups motivating any of the pair of main plot events grew or not; and 3) whether this is connected with the author's deliberate transformation of the genre of the work, and also, perhaps, on the contrary, whether this number of free motifs entailed a qualitative transformation of the genre.

## Results and Discussion

At the turn of the 13th and 14th centuries, or perhaps in the 1310s (according to G. Delarue, in 1316, Delarue 1834, p. 190), the Frenchman Jean Maillard, a notary in the royal chancery, wrote a poem with the catchy title *Le Rommans du conte d'Anjou qui volt defflourer sa fille*, which contained 8156 verses and was addressed to Pierre de Chambly, chamberlain of Louis X, from whom Maillard claimed to have heard the story. The poem has been preserved in three manuscripts, but the full text under this title is in the manuscript *Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, nouvelles acquisitions françaises 4531*. And the manuscript *Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, français 765* reveals another title, more in keeping with the plot – *Le romant de la comtesse d'Anjou*. These manuscripts are attributed to the beginning of the 14th century, and the additional third one, based on linguistic data, to the 16th century.

The main thing that distinguishes Maillard's epic poem from previous examples of *The Saga* is its striking *localization*. The works of the 13th century

had a geographical scope: the daughter of the Roman emperor becomes the wife of a Greek prince whose uncle is the king of Spain (*Mai und Beaflo*), the daughter of the Hungarian king marries the king of Scotland, and the plot ends in Rome (*La Manekine* of Ph. de Beaumanoir), the Russian princess turns out to be a Greek queen, and then also ends up in Rome (*Weltchronik* of Jansen Enikel). Here, the daughter of the Count of Anjou will marry the Count of Bourges, while the antagonist who replaces the spouses' letters will be his aunt, the Countess of Chartres, and the family reunifier is the Bishop of Orleans, the heroine's uncle. Other *topical* motifs also vary. Thus, in the works of the 13th century, the helpless heroine was sent to the open sea, only in the anonymous *Vita Offae Primi* the murderers left her in the wilderness and could not kill her, blinded by her beauty. And in *La contesse d'Anjou* there are traces of this influence: in the fake letter of the king – an order to throw his wife and child into an abandoned forest well with limestone clay, the executioners take the heroine into the forest and cannot kill her, so they let her go. The motives of the second motivational complex, which should lead to the final reunion of the couple, change (these motives represent the gradually forming second plot line – the husband's line). The count, who left his pregnant wife for a while and discovered her absence upon his return, wanders on foot along the path along which his wife supposedly left, asking people he meets along the way. His path resembles a religious pilgrimage, so it seems no coincidence that he and she independently of each other go to confession – and only then is the family reunited. Another motif is connected with the punishment of the villainess who substituted the letters. If in other works the heroine's husband takes revenge on her, then in *La contesse d'Anjou*, apparently due to the need to preserve the purity of the Christian heroes who have just gone through confession, the author replaces revenge with royal justice: having heard about the atrocities of the Countess of Chartres, the King of France besieged and captured Chartres, and tried and burned the Countess. The final formula of the plot is the same as in the works of the 13th century: *Iab–IIabc–III–IV*.

The author of the next version of *The Saga*, the Dominican monk Johannes Gobius Junior (Polo de Beaulieu, 2015, p. 184), was guided by the story of the daughter of the Count of Anjou. In the period 1323–1330, he collected a specific 'encyclopedia' of stories in the *exemplum* genre (as we know, priests used them as inserts in sermons), organized in alphabetical order of concepts characterizing the essence of man. This work *Scala Coeli* enjoyed a certain popularity, since it has been preserved in 26 manuscripts, and from 1476 onwards, over the next ten years, it was printed four times. In the chapter *De Castitate*, after a short moralizing introduction, a story is told, the plot of which is close to the romance of Maillard.

It is also *localized*. The action is transferred to Pictavia (i.e. the county of Poitou, adjacent to Anjou from the previous version of *The Saga*), the heroine flees not to Orleans, but to St. Egidium (Saint-Gilles-du-Gard), where she is



noticed by the prince of Arelate (Arles), who later became king and took her as his wife. As we see, this story moved through the lands of ‘lengua de oc’ – from the Atlantic shores of Aquitaine to the Provençal Mediterranean. And the place of the final family reunion, instead of Rome, is Bologna, where the bishop is not the uncle, but the heroine’s own brother, who at the beginning of the story is mentioned as having gone to Bologna to study. This, as well as the name that the heroine has acquired – Marguerite (apparently, the monk author hints at the holy martyr Marina of Antioch, whom Catholics call Marguerite, it is not for nothing that chastity is mentioned several times in the short text), constitutes an innovation within the framework of a very traditional story. Everything else is a repetition of already familiar motifs: the murderers, as in *Vita Offae*, take the heroine into the forest, but cannot kill her (here is a variation of the motif: not because of her beauty, but because of the joyful smile of her innocent child); the young husband-king, just as in Maillard, having learned the story of the failed execution of his wife and son, sets off after them in their footsteps (but the author strengthened the motif of repentance, showing the king of Arelate giving royal clothes to the poor, putting on rags and leaving on foot after his wife in order to live on alms along the way). Of course, here too the composition of the plot corresponds to the formula Iab–IIabc–III–IV, which has become traditional.

Soon, not only the plot’s action moved to the Mediterranean zone. In 1857, in Barcelona, Prospero de Bofarull y Mascaró published a volume of stories found in the manuscripts of the Archives of the Crown of Aragon, including the *Historia del Rey de Hungria* (Bofarull, 1857, pp. 53–79). Today, three manuscripts are known that preserve this short prose work from the mid-14th century in Old Provençal (however, in the most recent edition, in which the work is called *Història de la filla del Rei d’Hongria*, the publishers define the language of the authentic ancient text reproduced following the modern retelling as *Old Catalan*, i.e. the same Occitan (Prades, 2021, pp. 113–125).

On the one hand, it is the same traditional story with the plot formula Iab–IIabc–III–IV, but similar not to the works of Maillard and Gobius, but to *La Manekine* of Philippe de Rémi de Beaumanoir. Here are the incestuous intentions of the heroine’s father, the King of Hungary, incited by the barons and – a variation of the motif – not by the clergy, but by the devil. And the chopping off of not one, as was the case in de Beaumanoir, but both hands. And two exiles to a sea in an uncontrollable boat. And the villainous mother-in-law, who replaces letters. And the reunion with her husband (in this version he is the Count of Provence) in the finale. On the other hand, there are elements of the plot that show a deviation from tradition. Thus, the messenger who got to the royal mother always turned out to be a drunken and deceived pawn in the intriguer’s game. In this story, the mother of the Count, who has gone not to war but to his wife’s homeland to prove to everyone her origin, informs his subjects in a fake letter on his behalf that the heroine has turned out to be an exiled thief without family,

and demands that she be burned (another reminder of de Beaumanoir's plot), but the messenger knows the truth and manages to convey it to the Count's subjects. In the end, this saves the heroine from the fire (but not from a second journey in a boat). Another innovation is that the story is resolved not in Rome, but in an ordinary monastery, where the heroine became a gatekeeper. In an effort to help the priest during mass, she instinctively extended the stumps of her hands from under her cassock – and discovered that the hands were whole and miraculously in their places (in Beaumanoir's text the hand to la Manekine was augmented by the prayer of the pontiff himself). Thus, we see that the plot scheme is generally preserved, and the anonymous author departed from the material of his predecessors in the formulaic part III, i.e. in the motivational complex, where free motives that do not affect the essence of the story were possible. This Occitan monument, along with the two previous works, undoubtedly belongs to the examples of *hagiographic* narration.

A little earlier, *The Saga* had returned to England, but its fate there was different. The local example of *The Saga* that had been overlooked by scholars was first noticed by P.O. Bäckström (Bäckström, 1845, pp. 221–228). These were the prose *Cronicles* of Nicholas Trevet, an English Dominican monk who first wrote the text in Latin, then in Anglo-Norman, in which the text received the following title in one of the manuscripts *Cronicles que frere Nichol Trivet escrit a madame Marie la filhe mounseignour le roi d'Engleterre Edward le filtz Henri*. We are talking about Mary of Woodstock, the daughter of Edward I. This text is dated to the period before 1334 (the year of the author's death), it was apparently well known to Trevet's contemporaries, since it has been preserved in thirteen manuscripts. And its special significance today is that the version of *The Saga* presented in it was relied upon, practically retelling it in verse, in their magnum opus by two of England's greatest poets of the 14th century – John Gower (in *Confessio Amantis*) and Geoffrey Chaucer (in *The Man of Law's Tale* from *The Canterbury Tales*). In addition, the text of Trevet's *Cronicles* contains the earliest story in which the heroine is named Constance (Black, 2003, p. 109).

The work of Trevet is a turning point in the history of the evolution of *The Saga*. It certainly revolutionized the plot, although both the false accusations against the heroine and her reunion with her husband in Rome are preserved. But, firstly, so many events are added to the motivational complexes that the emphasis on the two pillars of the plot – exile and finding – seems weakened. Completely new situations are included in these complexes, while the motives that claimed to be obligatory for their reproduction have disappeared. Thus, from the initial part of the story, the motive with which the story of *The Saga* began – the motive of incest – has disappeared. Instead, the plot was replaced by a current political theme of contacts with Islam: The Roman Emperor Tiberius Constantine gives his daughter in marriage to the Syrian Sultan, who, at her request, undergoes a conversion ceremony (here one can hear echoes of the

contemporary English novel *The King of Tars*, in which the heroine brings her husband, the Sultan of Damascus, to conversion). On the other hand, Trevet, who had obviously noticed the doubling of the exile motif in previous examples of the Saga, extended this plot device to a wider situation: the heroine's wedding with the Sultan is a prelude to her marriage to the King of the British Saxons; her first mother-in-law is as evil and treacherous as the second (the Sultan's mother gathers 700 Muslims to kill him and all who have been converted at her son's wedding; the heroine survives, but is exiled to sea in a boat without a rudder or sail, as if all these motivating actions were a prelude to the main plot element, *a rehearsal for the climax*). This allows us to conclude that Trevet has heightened the drama of the plot.

In addition, we note the drift of history towards the exemplum genre. The heroes and heroines of such religious insertions were outstanding (not necessarily famous) Christians. Constance is presented in this way: in Syria, she led the groom to conversion, and upon arrival – 44 months later and exactly at Christmas – to the shores of Northumbria, she is under the guardianship of Elda, the constable of one of the castles of the Saxon king Alle, and his wife Hermynigild, whom she subsequently encourages to accept Christianity. Next comes a short inserted story about a vengeful knight in love, who falsely accuses the heroine of murdering Hermynigild (the influence of the story of the chaste wife of the emperor Octavian from the popular collection *Gesta Romanorum*), and it is given to strengthen the motive of Constance's purity as a Christian. And this story is connected with seemingly unnecessary manifestations of *magicalfantasy*, which were not characteristic of previous plots: first, the sincerely believing Hermynigild healed the blind man, and after her murder and the knight's accusation of the heroine, a heavenly voice was heard, announcing her innocence. At the same time, the idiom 'hand of God' was materialized quite naturally: out of thin air, a huge fist really does appear, which knocks the eyes and teeth out of the skull of the evil knight.

Can we ultimately call the story of Constance in *Cronicles* melodramatic and action-packed (both are hallmarks of *entertainment literature*)? Yes, of course. Can we conclude that it is an exemplum example of the religious genre? Yes. And to the travels that have long been present in *The Saga*, fantastic motifs have now clearly been added (in general, the first attempt to weave the fantastic into *The Saga* is the divine augmentation of hands in *La Manekine*). From all that has been said, it follows that Trevet has found a successful genre formula: the title of his work falsely refers to the historical genre, although the entire text of the monument from different plots, including the plot of Constance, strictly obeys chronology; but *Cronicles* turned out to be at the junction of different groups of genres, entertaining and 'serious'. It remains to mention that a new situation has also been added to the second motivational complex – the heroine's visit to the castle of the pagan 'admiral'. Overall, Trevet



has complicated and detailed the general plot that was familiar to him from some previous examples of *The Saga*. At the same time, the basis of the plot scheme is recognizable; only the incest motif has disappeared from the formula:  $Ixb-IIabc-III-IV$  (where  $x$  is other motifs replacing the incest theme that have not yet become traditional for *The Constance Saga*).

## Conclusion

As we can see, many secondary motives as elements of two motivational complexes are preserved in the first half of the 14th century. The theme of incest existed until the appearance of the *Cronicles* of Trevet, but even after them, as evidenced by the story of the daughter of the king of Hungary, it continued to appear as a motivational one. Also, the theme of the husband's search for a wife was preserved as a whole as a situation, but various details were added to it, coloring the entire plot in the clothes of a different genre (the genre of exemplum, to which the old plot was applied, required that the husband not only search for a wife, but also simultaneously make a penitential pilgrimage – regardless of whether it is motivated in the plot for the husband's line or not). It can be noted that it was not the large plot situations that grew, but the small free motives related to them, dictated by the genre and the architectonics of the composition. Thus, if in the story from Gobius' *Scala Coeli* Marguerite was shown praying for the preservation of chastity (a new motif), this was due to the need to bring the story into line with the title of the section in which it was placed – *De Castitate*. The closeness of some stories to hagiographic literature was a consequence of some religious miracles (in Trevet, the former pagan Hermynigild, having become a believer, heals a blind man). And, as the example of *Cronicles* showed, the introduction of free motifs of different colors turned out to be a means of significantly updating the genre form that the average story of the 'Accused Queen', 'Calumniated Wife' had.

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