

FLORILEGIUM 12, 1993

ADRIFT ON THE SEVEN SEAS: THE MEDIAEVAL TOPOS OF EXILE AT SEA

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Readers of mediaeval literature may wonder at the frequency of encountering in the romance genre the motif of a hero, though most often a heroine, set adrift in a boat. In fact, so frequently does the motif appear that many critics write of it in an off-hand, if not disparaging, manner and have traditionally limited themselves to the superficial details of the image alone.

The comments of R.D. Fulk concerning the birth of Scyld Scefing best represent the typical critical perspective:

The motif of the hapless mother or child exposed in a floating vessel is common enough in folk-tales — indeed, the folkloric sea-lanes are thronged with women and infants drifting helplessly in chests, casks, tubs, bins, baskets, and oarless boats. (11)

Like many critics, he suggests the multiplicity of the motif and yet allows two or three examples to suffice; he admits to the role of the motif within a tale's structure and yet seems uncertain as to the value of that role. Consequently, to a great extent, he dismisses it. Yet the motif cannot be, nor should be, easily dismissed. Being set adrift was a fate shared by heroines both faceless and not: obscure heroines like Florence of *Le Bone Florence of Rome*, Christabelle of *Sir Eglamore of Artois*, Emare of *Emare*,

and Desonell of *Sir Torrent of Portyngale*; and of course a famous heroine such as Constance of Chaucer's "Man of Law's Tale."

Seemingly, setting adrift proved a popular practice to which romance writers routinely submitted their female characters. Aside from the obvious elements of danger and pictorial fascination that the motif supplied to the tale, however, setting adrift proved to be a powerful literary element that served other purposes as well, purposes that went far beyond the superficial necessities of episodic adventure.

Numerous cultures include a setting adrift motif in their myths and folktales, and, unlike the mediaeval romance vision, setting adrift in folktales encompasses not only women but more often than not heroes and also infants (heroes in embryonic form). To suggest part of the significance of the mediaeval romance version of the woman afloat motif, therefore, one must first view it in its true context as an image belonging first to world folklore, a perception not commonly accepted.

As an example of this narrowed perception, Gaston Bachelard suggests in *Water and Dreams* that a mark of educated, cultured individuals would be their easy recognition of certain "cultural signs." For instance, he writes that "the poorly read man would be amazed were we to speak of the poignant charm of a dead woman's flower-strewn body floating, like Ophelia, upon the current of a river" (109). Bachelard finds it fascinating that this particular image of beautiful death, "so unrelated to nature," should have fastened itself so tenaciously to the Western poetic culture, and remarks that its development remains largely unstudied by literary scholars (109).

In his observations, Bachelard touches upon both the need for a study devoted to this unique cultural sign, the image of a woman afloat, but also the unconscious bias that many critics harbor toward that sign, namely that the image at its most disturbing is merely pleasantly poignant. More significantly, Bachelard reveals the common misconception that Western culture somehow owns the image, a view not unique to Bachelard by any means. For instance, in 1923, when examining the setting adrift image as it finds its way into Old Irish tales of clerical and secular heroes adrift, William Flint Thrall denies the probability of there existing "pre-Christian full-fledged" material that would serve as the origins for the legendary tales of sixth-century Irish sea pilgrimages, whether penitential or missionary (283). Moreover, Howard Patch in 1970 also discusses the image of the drifting boat, but, again, the discussion centres primarily on the image's Celtic origins, though Patch does concede its presence within oriental and

classical mythology (320). Clearly, Patch's admission will prove the more accurate of the two assessments. Yet, one must expand upon his view to include folktales from cultures rarely looked at in the frame of mediaeval studies. For example, in the folktales, fairy tales, myths, and legends from Africa to Norway the image of people set to drift alone in perilous seas occurs with remarkable frequency. Stories of families set adrift as punishment exist in Italy and Korea; stories of infants sent out in skin bags or coracles for purposes of concealment or death can be found in tales as diverse as Chinese and Tongan; stories of heroes thrust into the waters occur in African and Irish literature; and stories of women set afloat exist in both Japanese and English romances. To appreciate the motif, then, one must recognize its wide context. Such a perspective accords the motif a far deeper significance and a far wider range of reference.

To discover that significance, however, questions must be answered concerning the appearance of the motif within a tale. Only then can we understand more about the characters subjected to this trial and also about those semi-legendary figures who willingly undertook such a voyage. How should we view characters set adrift and the purpose of their tales? Was the voyage most often a consequence of the characters' sins? Or did the voyage reveal moral strength and yield vindication to an as-yet-untried, though "good," character? Do the tales in which the motif occurs agree on the initial circumstances of the journey, and do they reveal a similarity in their results?¹

From the perspective of English mediaeval romance, the victim, usually a woman, undergoes a terrible journey over water; after her ordeal, her persecutors are exposed and a new order is established, often built on bloodshed. Is the English mediaeval envisioning of the motif, with its heroine at first a pitiful victim and then later, when she returns, a figure of some vengeance, common to the vision of other cultures? Is the victim, for instance, always the central character? Such questions will be answered in part by the following sampling of folktales.²

A Masai folktale from Africa, for example, tells the tale of children set adrift by a woman jealous of their mother.

A widow, forced to become a cowherder, desires to marry the man who owns the cows. In order for her plan to succeed, she attempts to cast suspicion over the man's current wife. Therefore, when the wife is delivered of twin boys, the widow steals them, lays them in a box, and puts them to float on the river. So as to implicate the mother in the children's ghastly disappearance, the widow smears blood on the wife and plays the role of her accuser. The

mother is punished and sentenced to exile and the widow becomes wife to the cattle-owner.

The children, however, are found and grow to be warriors. As men, they are sent by their tribe into their father's land as spies. They meet a woman tending asses, hear her tale, and recognize her as their mother. She aids them in their attack on the tribe, and later leaves under their protection. (Hollis 177)

The motif of setting adrift is found in Hawaiian mythology also, where in "The Romance of Kae and the Island of Women," it functions as part of the islands' myths about the origins of natural childbirth.

The Marquesas tell a tale of Kae, abandoned at sea in a boat and later swallowed by a fish, who reaches an island of women. He marries and teaches his wife natural methods of childbirth. (Beckwith 502-03)

From the South-West Pacific, Edward Gifford records the Tongan myth "Muni-of-the-Torn-Eye," which incorporates two versions of the motif: the child set adrift and the hero who endures despite despair and great danger.

Kae, mother of Muni, embarked upon a ship bound for Lofanga. While on board she experienced labor pains, and gave birth to a son on a small island. When she and the child returned to the ship, however, the captain threw the baby into the sea. The child was carried by the waves to Lofanga where he was adopted, though not before a plover pecked out one of his eyes. (Another version of the birth of Muni holds that his mother was killed by the people on the ship and that, being cannibals, they baked her. Before this, they removed her womb and threw it with the unborn child into the sea. Within the womb, the infant floated on the waves until reaching land.) He and the old fishing couple who adopt him, however, continue to face adversity. The chief sets him various tasks in the hope that Muni will fail and therefore present the chief with an excuse to kill him. Finally, so as to escape an all-out attack, Muni sits out in a boat at anchor a short distance from the island. The chief manages to remove all equipment on the boat so that Muni has nothing with which to bail water or to paddle; that night [at the chief's orders] the rope is cut, and Muni's boat is left to drift with the wind and the tide. Muni survives and the story goes on to recount several more of his adventures. (Gifford 22-28)

From Phillipine mythology comes yet another tale of the Pacific island region.

A father tricks his wife into going to the village well. While she is gone, he makes a raft which he tells his son is a toy intended for him. When the raft is made, the father asks his son to change his clothes and to follow him to where his mother waits at the well. Instead, however, the child is led to a

stream. The father asks him to step onto the raft and tells him that he will pull him up stream. The child, Kanag, hesitates but his father lifts him onto the raft and then pushes it out into the current.

At first the mother searches for her child. When she discovers what her husband has done, she sits in sorrow by the stream. Meanwhile, an old woman, a witch, discovers the little raft in the well. She makes a pool that restores the dead and sick, the raft drifts to her, and she takes the child home. Years and several adventures later, Kanag is reunited with his mother, and they live together in a house of gold. (Cole 152)

Such tales illustrate the diversity that characterizes the motif. Despite the difference in versions involving children, culture heroes, and women, even this short, random selection of tales suggests that the motif allows the supernatural to enter into stories of harsh edification. Often, these stories present the bleakest vision of human existence in their concentration on the lonely figure of the good and deserving person separated by water from the sins and vices of the community: jealousy, cruelty, treachery, infanticide, abandonment, and mindless victimization. Indeed, the motif is eminently suited for this dismal list of human weaknesses. The image of the boat adrift at once symbolizes the uniqueness and frailty of the hero/heroine. Separated from those around him/her, s/he is beset and battered by the dark impulses of the community. As for the water, it, too, is a doubly-resonant symbol, suggesting cleanliness and rebirth but also death and surrender to the unknown.

Moving from a general selection of tales, I will examine the role of the motif within tales concerned with families, because in addition to the solitary hero/heroine set adrift in myth and literature, families also undergo exile via water. For example:

An Irish fairy tale tells of the capture of a leprechaun by a half-wit. The half-wit only agrees to let the leprechaun go when the leprechaun promises to grant him a wish. The leprechaun promises and the half-wit wishes that his dish be filled with boiled carrots whenever he desires. Though the story suggests that the leprechaun grants him but one wish, later when the half-wit spies a beautiful lady, he wishes that she could have his child. She does and a child is born, though no one knows who the father is. The girl's father orders a search and the half-wit is discovered; they are married. After the marriage, the bride, the groom and the child are set adrift in a barrel. They are able to survive because of the half-wit's ability to fill his dish with carrots. They reach an island, and when they tire of this land, the half-wit wishes that they return home. Upon their return, he is convinced by his wife to also wish for his full senses, which he does and they live out their lives happily. (*Bealoideas* 92)

From the French folktales appearing between 1699 and 1760 in southern Illinois and southeastern Missouri, Joseph Medard Carriere records and summarizes an analogous tale, "Pieds Sales":

Dirty Feet [Pieds Sales], son of a poor widow, earns his living as a woodcutter. One day, an old fairy who wants to find out whether he is kindhearted asks for a cake. He gives her one immediately. In return she gives him a magic wand. In the evening, when he has finished his work, he wishes for the logs to start rolling and take him home. A princess sees him go by, and laughs at this strange way of locomotion. Annoyed at her behavior, Dirty Feet wishes her a child by him. When the child is old enough, the king gives a banquet to discover its father. The child walks up to Dirty Feet. The king, in his anger, puts his daughter, Dirty Feet, and their offspring aboard a sea-bound ship to starve. When the princess discovers the magic power of Dirty Feet's wand, she wishes a beautiful castle near her father's, and that Dirty Feet become a handsome prince. The king invites these wealthy neighbors to dinner. Through the magic wand, his daughter puts one of the cups into his pocket. When he asks her how it got there, she forces him to admit that it was just as easy for Dirty Feet to wish her a child as it was for her to wish that the cup find its way into the pocket. The king forgives, and arranges a great wedding. (Carriere, #48, 212)

Throughout, "Pieds Sales" is a fairy tale of magic and wish fulfilment. Following the characters being set adrift, the ensuing events right wrongs and re-establish order and continuity: after the sea exile, a second kingdom is created, that of the princess and Pieds Sales, when the old king publicly recognizes the rise and legitimacy of the new king. The punishment of being set adrift is severe, but it ultimately empowers the victims: once removed from the community, they are proven pure by the elements and upon their return prove themselves worthy to take power and to rule over their persecutors. Additionally, the decision to punish the offenders by setting them adrift occurs not because the king wished simply to exile the family — clearly the intent is that they will starve to death — but because the king has no wish to *directly* take the life of his daughter and thus have her blood on his hands.

The practice of setting victims afloat is nothing less than a death sentence, and therefore the word "victim" is appropriate because these tales suggest that the vast majority of those set afloat are innocent of criminal actions. Their actions are, however, most often offensive to those who would profit from their disappearance; consequently, victims need only *appear* to be guilty to incur such a fate. By setting the victim afloat, those who sit in judgment can rid themselves of a threatening or potentially embarrassing member of the community in a manner that does not directly cast them

in the role of executioners. The intention is that the boat, a "rotten carcass" often rudderless, without oars, sails, or provisions, will drift out to sea where it will either sink of its own accord, be capsized by the waves, or float indefinitely until its friendless passengers die from thirst and hunger. Hence, the intent is that the perceived "sin" of the victim be punished not by man but by God, or by the elements that act according to His will.

As J.R. Reinhard explains in his essay "Setting Adrift in Medieval Law and Literature," the ancient mind believed that water could judge one's guilt or innocence. One could journey over water without mishap only if one was pure and virtuous. On the other hand, if there were a shipwreck or a death on board a ship, those aboard were presumed guilty. Reinhard cites as an example the fate of Odysseus's crew, which, having committed the sin of eating the oxen of the sun, were drowned. Even Odysseus, because he had harmed Cyclops, the son of Poseidon, had to endure sore trials before being allowed to return home.

The ancient mind, then, believed that the sea deity would not allow those who sailed upon its waters to accomplish their journey without some form of judgment that in the case of the impure and sinful resulted in punishment and death.³ Yet the innocent were safe upon the water; the sea would not allow itself to be the instrument of their punishment. Anyone accidentally or falsely set afloat would be brought safely to shore. We have seen this phenomenon in some of the tales already cited. The sea's protection of the innocent proves true also for classical heroes: Apollonius of Tyre, saved after a shipwreck; Arion, saved by a dolphin; Phrixus, carried by a ram over the sea (Reinhard 36).

INFANTS

Often the magical and mystical element of the setting adrift motif serves well the tellers of infant abandonment tales, which are, with few exceptions, tales about male infants. A French Canadian tale tells of two sisters who put their infant brother into a golden basket and set him afloat (Barbeau 14); a Spanish story, "Los tres pelos del diablo," tells of a child who was put into a box and thrown into the river, but who later marries a princess (Espinosa 251-53).

The motif simultaneously suggests the uniqueness of the future hero and the nature of his life to be; it suggests that his life will be filled with perils equal to that experienced at birth. As a man, the hero will lead others and act as a model for their behaviour, and yet the singularity of his

birth indicates his separateness from others. Cast outside the community at birth, the hero is later brought within: he is at once a part and apart. And just as his infancy is a mystery, so also is his unstated mission. A hero borne over waters as a child is destined to serve the community, ridding the people of dangers posed by others—be they another tribe or hostile force—or leading the people out of their bondage and into the formation of a semi-paradisiacal kingdom; however, on occasion there is a private intent of the hero's mission based on past events unknown to the community, a private and darker intent that hinges on revenge.

Semitic legend from the Dynasty of Agade, c. 2400 B.C., tells of the founder of the first great emperor of Babylon, Sargon of Akkad. Like those of Oedipus and Romulus and Remus, Sargon's early years were years of obscurity. Sent adrift, like Moses, in an ark of bulrushes upon the Euphrates, Sargon lives to become a king of Babylon, his foreign conquests extensive. He invades Syria, Palestine, northern Mesopotamia, and reaches the margins of the Mediterranean. In doing so, he becomes known as a ferocious warrior; his monument, discovered in our century, depicts him as such: "He is seen passing his spear through the prostrate body of a warrior whose hands are upraised as if pleading for quarter" (Spence 16).

In legends about the origins of the nation, many cultures include the motif of the child found floating either on the sea or on a river. Obvious examples would be the Jewish religious hero Moses, found on the bank of the River Nile in a reed basket; the Mongolian warrior-king Genghis Khan, found adrift on a lake in a cradle; or the Roman founders of the empire Romulus and Remus, found floating on the river Tiber by a she-wolf. Other heroes abound for whom this motif constitutes an integral part of the legends surrounding their birth. For example, there is the Mongolian legend of Bulagat whose mother, impregnated by a bull, in her shame set her child adrift on a lake in a cradle; the Buddhist legend of T'ang-seng, the Floating Monk of the seventh century A.D., set adrift on the River Yangtze in a bucket; a Burmese tale of two princes born blind and put on a river in a raft by their embarrassed mother; and the sixth-century A.D. Welsh legend of St Cenydd, pushed out to sea in a cradle and fed by gulls (Cavendish 187). Another well-known hero is Scyld Scefing in *Beowulf*, who was first discovered as an infant alone in a boat (Klaeber, ed., lines 43-46).

However, the motif of setting infants adrift functions within tales concerning non-aristocratic heroes as well. For example, in a Turkish tale a stepmother puts two children into a box and throws them into the sea.⁴ As Margaret Schlauch writes,

A man has no children. So he buys a second wife, who naturally evokes the envy of the first. When the new favorite bears twins, the envious one substitutes a dead snake, boxes up the children, and has them thrown into the sea. They are found on the shore by another childless man whose wife's dream had sent him looking there. The man adopts the children. Their real mother is disgraced by the supposed unnatural birth, and driven into exile. Shepherds take care of her.

One day the companions of the boy taunt him as a foundling. He is impatient to find his own family. So he and his sister go on their journey guided by a dream, and the son finds his mother, besides dragons to encounter, and riches, and a wife. (21)

In the Welsh *Hanes Taliesin*, a newborn child is put into a skin bag and thrown into the water:

A witch named Ceridwen had a son so ugly that his nickname was Afagddu, meaning "utter darkness." So as to give him some advantage, Ceridwen sets about making a potion that will give him the wisdom of the world. To do so she boils a cauldron of herbs, the "Cauldron of Inspiration and Knowledge," but it has to be kept boiling for a year and a day. As she must stir it and at the same time gather additional herbs, she hires Gwion Bach to stir the cauldron while she is gone. At the end of the year, she is so tired that she falls asleep, but not before placing her son near the cauldron. Gwion, however, pushes him aside and when the cauldron splutters, three drops of the potion fall on his finger. He immediately puts his finger into his mouth and becomes the wisest man in the world. He flees and Ceridwen pursues him. To escape he changes himself into a hare, but Ceridwen changes into a greyhound. And so they continue, each trying to outwit the next. In the end, Gwion changes into a grain of wheat and Ceridwen assumes the form of a black hen and eats him. She becomes pregnant and nine months later, Gwion is reborn. Angered still but mindful that he is now her son, Ceridwen is swayed by the child's beauty, puts him in a skin bag and throws him to the waters. He is discovered, is able to speak the words "Taliesin bid!" ("Let it be Taliesin"), although only three days old, and is thus named. He lives to become a great poet in the court of Maelgwn Gwynedd at Degannwy. (Jerman and Hughes, 1: 107-08)

Again and again, the element of the mystical enters into tales surrounding the birth of one of the "fatal children," to use Lewis Spence's evocative phrase (16). In the case of children, the practice of abandonment upon the water does not appear to be a form of direct punishment. The disposal of a child in such a manner, while ensuring his disappearance, puts ultimate responsibility for his death in the hands of the unknown, be it fate, be it the capriciousness of the elements, or be it the will of God or gods. Though

in a practical sense the placing of an infant in a basket or cradle is tantamount to a death sentence—baskets and cradles are not known, after all, for their sea-worthiness—the indirectness of the method suggests that the motif has less to do with premeditated murder than with setting the stage with the trappings of the heroic: adventure, danger, miraculous escape, and unseen protectors—signs that proclaim to even the most obtuse of bumpkins that this child is destined to be above the experience of the common man. Heroes enter the world not born of human flesh but borne by vessels that logic dictates would sink like stones were they the bearers of cargo less precious than those for whom princesses will swoon and nations unite.

HEROES

When the setting adrift motif becomes part of the adult adventures of a hero, however, a shift in emphasis occurs. First, the motif loses much of its fairy tale quality. For example, in *Tristan and Isolt*, one reads of Tristan's desire to be set adrift so as not to infect others with his dreadful wound. Here we see a clear illustration of a mature hero's voluntary decision to leave his people by means of a rudderless boat:

Tristan has been living in his hut for some time when he decides to commit himself in a little boat to the waves. . . . He bids farewell to Gorvenal, telling him to wait for him one year, and if he does not return, to go to his father and tell him to take him as a son, in Tristan's place. He bids his sword and harp be placed with him in a little boat without oars or rudder. There is general lamentation as he is borne down to the sea, and the winds and waves carry him where they will. He would rather die alone on the water than destroy the people with the smell of his wound. (Schoepperle 370)

The decision whether Tristan lives or dies from his hideous wound rests solely in the hands of the Unknown. Again, in such an instance the motif reveals that God sits in judgment over the passengers of such fateful boats.

Yet, admittedly, the Tristan example appears to be an exception. When one finds the motif within tales of adult male heroes, quite often these are religious heroes, not secular. For example, leaving the realm of folktales and fairy tales, myths and romance, one finds that the motif plays an increasingly significant role in Irish religious lore.⁵ In the *Imramma*, the hero undertakes his voyage voluntarily. As Gertrude Schoepperle writes, he is "usually impelled by religious motives. . . . The enterprise is a penance appointed by a spiritual director" (371). Although these tales are interwoven with aspects of the heroic—marvelous islands found and trials endured—

a number of the hagiographic examples of the motif illustrate Christian reliance upon divine providence. A good example would be the setting adrift of Macc-Cuil recorded in Whitley Stokes's *The Tripartite Life of Patrick*:

In order to prove to the skeptic, Macc-Cuil, that he is indeed ordained by God, St. Patrick raises a man from the dead. When he does, the crowd and Macc-Cuil believes, and at St. Patrick's bidding Macc-Cuil sets out to sea in a coracle. After a day, he reaches an island inhabited by two men. These men spy his coracle, take him from the sea, and give him welcome. They teach him God's word until at last Macc-Cuil, the skeptic, becomes a bishop of Christ. (1: 223)

A Ulidian story from the salt marshes at Lake Strangford gives another version of the story of Macc-Cuil and St Patrick, in which Macc-Cuil is an ogre: "The ogre MacCuill . . . tempts Patrick, is converted, and then, sent to drift in a boat of skin, without oar or helm, reaches the Isle of Man, of which he becomes bishop" (Bury 267).

Other semi-legendary tales include "The Voyage of Snedgus and Mac Riagla," edited by Whitley Stokes:

The brother of a murdered king sends for his friends Snedgus and Mac Riagla for advice on how to punish those responsible, the Men of Ross. Snedgus and Mac Riagla suggest that instead of burning them alive, Donnchad should set sixty couples in small boats to drift on the sea and let God pass judgment on them. It is done. Then as Snedgus and Mac Riagla return home in their own coracle, they "bethought them of wending with their own consent into the outer ocean on a pilgrimage, even as the sixty couples had gone, though these went not with their own consent." After the space of three days, God in his mercy brings them to an island on which flows a stream of milk. At that, they decide to submit to the will of God, saying, "Let us leave our voyage to God, and let us put our oars into our boat." The rest of the story tells of the many marvelous islands they visit: islands inhabited by warriors with the heads of cats, by a golden bird that speaks to them, by men with heads of hounds and manes of cattle. (19)⁶

The Life of Brendan of Clonfert, in which two examples exist of willing abandonment to God's will, presents St Brendan as a saint who undertook numerous voyages:

From the story of "The Island of the Intoxicating Water," Brendan and his companions battle against a terrible storm for three days and three nights. At the end of that time, the sea grew calm and Brendan said, "Take your [oars] into the boat, and let God direct us to whatever place He pleases." Then, from "The Procurator to Brendan and the Finding of the Paradise of Birds," Brendan counsels his brethren to save their strength, for they had

been rowing furiously in order to reach an island, saying, "Is not God our Pilot and our Shipman? Let Him bring us to whatever place He will." The remainder of the tale relates the finding of the procurator and the paradise of birds. (Plummer 2: 58-59)

Another Irish saint's legend, "The Voyage of the Hui-Corra," again illustrates the developing religious emphasis in the setting adrift motif. In the legend, one reads of three brothers, once marauders, who repent of their past sins and who choose as a penance to embark on a pilgrimage in a three-skinned boat. Praying to God to "restrain the storm of the waves and the roaring of the sea, and the many awful monsters," the Hui Corra leave their fate in God's hands (Stokes 41). And in one final example from Irish lore, we see the overt religious lessons of the lone figure cast adrift on the vast sea in "The Voyage of Mael Duin":

An episode in the life of Mael Duin relates an encounter with an ancient man discovered on a rock in the middle of the sea. The old man tells Mael Duin his story. Once it was that his boat of tanned hide lay becalmed far from the sight of land. As he looked around him, he saw a man sitting on a wave. The man tells him that his aloneness on the waters is an illusion and that, in fact, the voyager is surrounded by demons, "as far as thy sight reaches over the sea and up to the clouds," all because of his covetousness, pride, haughtiness, theft, and "other evil deeds." "Fling . . . into the sea all the wealth that thou hast in the boat," the mysterious man counsels him. Having done that, the voyager is given a cup of whey-water and seven cakes. "So I went, saith the ancient man, in the direction that my boat and the wind carried me: for I had let go my oars and my rudder." Thus was he cast on the rock, and there he had lived in contentment for seven years, surviving on the whey-water and the seven cakes. (Stokes 85-87)

The list of such penitential voyages continues. Schoepperle, for example, describes three additional tales: *The Tidings of the Three Young Clerics*, in which the three set out with three loaves of bread and a cat; *The Voyage of Maelduin*, in which another episode tells of Mael Duin's decision to "Leave the boat still, without rowing, and let it be brought whithersoever it shall please God to bring it"; and *The Life of St. Tathan*, in which the saint is carried in a rudderless ship to Britain.⁷ William Flint Thrall mentions in his "Clerical Sea Pilgrimages and the 'Imrama'" several other tales and gives a sample of a sixth-century list from the "Litany of Oengus." The unequivocal listing of such voyages of submission to the waves blurs the line between the fanciful and the historical, between literary motif and actual pilgrimage:

Thrice fifty true pilgrims who went with Buti beyond the sea.

The Twelve pilgrims who went beyond the sea with Moedhog of Ferns.

Twelve men who went beyond the sea with Rioc, son of Loega.

Thrice twenty men who went with Brendan to seek the land of promise.

The twelve youths of whom Brendan found the survivor in the island of the Cat.

Three descendants of Corra, with their seven companions.

Twelve men encountered death with Ailbe.

Four-and-twenty from Munster who went with Ailbe upon the sea to find the land in which Christians never dwell.

Twelve youths who went to heaven with Molaise without sickness.

The confessor whom Brendan met in the promised land, with all the saints who have perished in the isles of the ocean. (282)

Furthermore, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* reports that in the year 891 "three Irishmen came to king Alfred in a boat without any oars, from Ireland, whence they had stolen away because they wished for the love of God to be on pilgrimage, they cared not where" (99).

These tales illustrate that when the setting adrift motif appears in plots concerned with the adventures of mature male heroes, the mood tends predominantly toward the spiritual more than the fanciful. When the focus is on the hero, the motif, because the act is self-chosen, reinforces the courage and endurance needed to survive an experience fraught with loneliness, uncertainty, and physical hardship. The motif stresses the superiority of the hero, because it signals the one characteristic that truly makes him heroic: his ability to control his universe. Whether the hero is a child or a man, the fact of having been set afloat is less an indication of a retaliatory action for some unstated sin than it is a promise of his forthcoming greatness. In short, no suggestion of taboo taints the image of the male hero drifting beyond the reach of society. His being set adrift becomes an adventure that proves his defiance of the natural elements, his defiance of fate itself.

HEROINES

How different the experience when one turns to an examination of the motif within tales involving women! Here the heroines become "victim heroes," to use Vladimar Propp's phrase (69). While the hero's leaving gives him the opportunity to prove his innate fortitude, the heroine's leaving arises out of an imperfection within the family and almost always her family casts her out. Admittedly, like male heroes, when heroines are cast adrift, they are seldom doomed; however, while the hero's return is often marked by welcome and joy, the return of the heroine is marred by revelation and

disruption. No longer an adventure to accent manly prowess and to lend sparkle to the best characteristics and most treasured virtues of a culture, the motif in the female version pulls into the light the hobgoblins of a culture. In short, in this version the motif appears more foreboding than ever before. Shirley Marchalonis argues that while the heroine is often conceived of as one-dimensional and, consequently, insignificant, the heroine proves essential because she represents personal, social, and political order (89). Traditionally, readers have expected men to fight the harsh forces of the external world and women to live within the cloistered setting of interiors. Thus, an image of a woman thrust outside the protection of cities and parents becomes stark and unnatural, for it signals the expulsion of stability and virtue. Most significantly, in tales of heroines the concept of sexual sin emerges in a manner never present in male-centred stories.

Of course, there are tales in which the motif of the heroine afloat occurs for reasons other than of sexual misbehaviour. From Japan, for example, in the Okinawan tale of "The Gold Bearing Plant" ("Kin no Nasu; Kane no Naru Ki") a pregnant wife is sealed in a boat and set to drift simply because her husband believes the rumour that she had passed air in public (Ikeda 165-66). Another Japanese tale, "Why the Silkworm Sleeps Four Times" ("Kaiko no Yurai"), primarily offers an explanation of the origins of the silkworm via the adventures of a much persecuted princess who is, at one point, sealed in a dug-out by her stepmother and set adrift on the sea (Ikeda 167-68).

Other tales, however, are more explicit in their treatment of the motif's dark underside of sexual taboo; indeed, in many cases, the sexual tension underlies the violence that bubbles just below the filigree elements of romance: princes and princesses, secret letters and intrigues, escapes and rescues. For example, the Buddhist tale of "Kakavanna-Tissa" tells of the princess Devi who, to stop the floods sent by the gods as punishment for her father's murder of an innocent man, is set to drift upon the sea in a golden boat (Malasekera 1: 558). In this case, the woman cast adrift is not the central character, and yet the king's sacrifice of his own daughter is caused by his original jealousy over the queen's relationship with another man. Hence, though this tale does not explicitly affix the sin of sexual transgression to the heroine herself, we see that the violence is conducted specifically within and created by the family.

Generally speaking, then, the setting adrift motif in plots surrounding heroines symbolizes not adventure or heroism, but the ugliness and fearful unnaturalness that occur when the family, the basic human unit, is

corrupted or broken. Because the figure of the heroine is traditionally associated with marriage and unity, in tales where this motif of abandonment and alienation appears, the heroine becomes symptomatic of the disease and potential rupture of the family unit, and hence of the ever-present danger to the stability of the community or culture as a whole. Even within tales of Christian saints, the setting adrift motif occurs. The Welsh legend of the birth of St Kentigern, A.D. 603, is just such a tale, because it consists of two very different story lines. The first half belongs to the realm of romance and myth and describes how a king discovers that his daughter, Thaney, soon to be St Kentigern's mother, has become pregnant with the child of an unknown man. He orders first that she be hurled from the top of a hill, a fate she escapes. She does not, however, escape her second sentence: to be put into a coracle and cast adrift. The second half of the tale belongs to history and relates the life and preachings of St Kentigern; it is factual, dull, and safe. The initial tale of the daughter's mysterious pregnancy and her brutalization by her father exists in marked contrast to the goodness of St Kentigern's life. The reader is left to decide if St Kentigern is more of a saint because of the darkness that was his inception or less.

Clearly the image of a woman afloat is far more than ornamental; it complicates and darkens the text. It suggests that instead of the often externalized, impersonal violence confronted by heroes — giants, warriors, aggressive nations — the heroine faces violence of an internalized and very personal nature — fathers, mothers, and brothers. Two Italian tales serve as illustration. The first comes from Giambattista Basile's tales from *The Pentamerone*, written in 1788:

Penta scorneth to wed her brother, and cutting off her hands, sendeth them to him as a present. He commandeth that she should be put within a chest and thrown into the sea. The tide casteth her upon a seashore. A sailor findeth her, and leadeth her to his home, but his wife thrust her again into the same chest and into the sea. She is found by a king, and he taketh her to wife; but by the wickedness of the same woman, Penta is expelled from that kingdom. After sore troubles and travail she is recovered by her husband and her brother. (190)

The second tales comes from the fourteenth-century romance "La Madre Oliva." Margaret Schlauch describes it:

A Queen, dying, exhorts her daughter to continue her work of alms-giving. . . . One day the King sees his daughter and remarks to her abruptly, "My daughter, I am in love." She asks innocently, "With whom, father?" "With your beautiful hands," he replies. She promptly cuts them off and sends them in

a golden vessel to her father. He is much chagrined. To express his disapproval of her conduct, he sets her afloat over the sea in a chest. Near her landing place, she is found by a King who, of course, marries her. His mother disapproves strongly, and announces, "I shall retire to a monastery."

During the King's absence, the usual treason is perpetrated by the King's mother. The accusation is the birth of animals. The forgery demands the death of mother and child. Instead they cut off the hands of the young Queen [an odd detail, given that the maid has already cut off her hands] . . . and let her wander into the forest. She recovers hands and husband in the usual way. (35-36)

Even a classical source represents well the commonality of stories about women who suffer physical abuse at the hands of family members when they become objects of sexual interest. The Greek myth of Danae, in which Danae's father decrees the punishment, offers just such an example:

Acrisius, the father of Danae, is warned that he will die at the hands of his daughter's child. Seeking to thwart his fate, Acrisius imprisons Danae in a tower. She is visited there by Zeus, who assumes the form of a golden shower. From this union, a son is born: Perseus. Upon discovery of the child, Danae and her son are shut up in a chest and set to drift on the sea. The chest is found, the mother and child rescued, and Perseus lives to fulfill his destiny both as a hero — the slayer of Medusa — and as the avenging instrument of his mother's ill-treatment — the unwitting killer of his grandfather. (Bulfinch 202)

The Danae myth illustrates the motif well and shows to best advantage its formulaic nature: first, directly or indirectly, the heroine incurs the wrath of a member of her family; second, she is then placed in a vessel and set to drift far from sight of land and home; and third, upon her return to the family there is a restructuring in its dynamics and a form of justice is meted out in payment for her persecution. Indeed, as Margaret Schlauch shows in *Chaucer's Constance and Accused Queens*, stories using this motif were widespread; she summarizes, in fact, a number of stories that coincidentally open with the Danae situation, three of which are especially significant for this study:

From *Walachische Märchen*:

A maiden is condemned to seclusion in a tower, far away from men. But one day she eats a flower that a gypsy had given her, and, as a result, finds herself pregnant. Her father sternly casts her afloat in a cask, where she bears her son.

From *Sagen und Märchen der Südslaven*:

A girl is innocently made pregnant by a plot of the Queen mother, because of the latter's jealousy at the King's love for his daughter. She and her son are set afloat on a ship by the irate monarch.

From *Nordische Volksmärchen*:

A Princess looks out of her window one day and laughs at a ridiculously lazy fellow named Lars who is passing by. When she cries, "You ought to have a boy" (to help him in the work he so heartily detests), he replies, "You ought to have one too." And since he has the power of obtaining anything he wishes, he actually fathers a child on the Princess with his words. The King is exceedingly angry. When the child is old enough, he gives the boy an apple and bids him give it to his father. The child unhesitatingly presents it to Lars. The King is angrier than ever, and sets all three adrift in a boat. They reach an island. Here the Princess, having learned of her husband's wishing-gift, causes him to employ his power in building her a castle and reforming herself. So all ends happily; the old King himself is finally reconciled, and Lars is recognized by him. (Schlauch 57-58)⁸

Reading through these stories, one is struck again and again by the constancy of one shared theme: the disruptive quality of the motif when it is placed within "domestic" tales. Unlike the tales of heroes, when the victim afloat is a heroine, the action reflects less on her than it does on those around her. Unlike the experience of the solitary male child or the mature hero, the heroine experiences the lonely journey over water as an alienation from the family unit, a family unit fractured by jealousy, often sexual jealousy, and illicit desires. The journey over water is not a foreshadowing of her future glory, nor is it an adventure. She does not control her own actions, any more than she is mistress of her own universe, her home.

The foregoing has been an overall, though by no means exhaustive, survey of the existence within world folklore of the setting adrift motif. As we have seen, the motif plays a significant role in numerous plot lines, and, as the summaries of the various tales demonstrate, setting adrift in folklore serves multi-functional purposes. Thus, when critics such as Margaret Schlauch see it as merely a part of the larger structure of the Crescentia-cycle (39ff), they not only fail to recognize its place within a world context and, more particularly, within tales of male heroes outside the Crescentia-cycle, but they also fail to recognize the importance of the motif for its own sake, regardless of whether or not it is yoked to other motifs such as the Exchanged Letter or the Accusation of Animal Birth.

The study of the motif of victims set afloat allows one to go beyond a specific genre and to move among many genres that ordinarily one might not

assume to share common elements. Indeed, the motif, in its various facets, constitutes an important element in the plots of fairy tales and folktales, myths and legends, tales whose primary characters are heroes, heroines, and children. To ignore or disregard this larger context would be to narrow the scope and significance of the motif.

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NOTES

¹ I recognize that I can never hope to discover the origin—whether it be a country or, much less, a single tale—of the setting adrift motif; the endeavour would be an *ignis fatuus*. My interest in the tales that I choose to discuss is that of a reader delighted with and fascinated by the universal appeal of the setting adrift motif for peoples of different cultures and different times. Therefore, I have taken certain liberties to which I will now confess. I am not a folklorist, and when I summarize or make reference to a tale, I do so with full knowledge that I am using that story as an archetype of a particular legend or folktale. In this essay, also, my concern with the overview of comparative world folktales does not rest in the recording of dates, specific locations, and authors. In short, I intend the first part to be suggestive of the many forms the setting adrift motif assumes in writings across the world. Additionally, I have approached these tales as a mediaeval scholar interested in English romance literature and, therefore, some of my assertions arise from that perspective of a twentieth-century, Anglo reader; they are not intended as blanket statements attesting to the sole function of each tale. Finally, I wish to stress that the following is not an exhaustive catalogue of tales that incorporate some aspect of the motif, because even cursory research of tales touching upon it reveals many more tales than could be reasonably examined, and I leave that task to others.

² My sources include: Margaret Schlauch, *Chaucer's Constance and Accused Queens*; Stith Thompson, *The Motif-Index of Folk-literature*; Lucy Paton, *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance*, 16 n. 1, 35–36; and Gertrude Schoepperle, *Tristan and Isolt: A Study of the Sources of the Romance*, 2:370ff and 374, n. 4. Each of these works list references to additional collections.

³ Reinhard also lists Ovid's account of Acoetes (*Met.* III, 600f); Marie de France's *Lai of Eliduc* (vv. 839, 840, 863); and Scottish ballads such as "Bonnie Annie" and "Brown Robin's Confession" recorded in Child's *Ballads*, nos. 24 and 57. Reinhard further cites as analogues Oehlenschläger's "Valravnen," *Danmarks Gamle Foleviser* (Kjobenhavn, 1856), Pt. II, p. If. nr. 33; and the plight of Reyner in *Chronica Monasterii de Melsa*, ed. E.A. Bond, Rolls Series no. 43, I, 128.

⁴ The role of the mother in such tales of infant abandonment is fascinating, and one encounters several tales devoted to the decision, sometimes adopted in malice and sometimes enacted in grief, of the mother to commit infanticide. In addition to the two tales summarized here, I would draw particular attention to three other tales: the first a Buddhist tale about a child discovered floating down the Ganges, found in Malasekera's *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names*, 1:931; the second a Chinese tale about a mother who, to save her child from bandits, throws him tied to a plank of wood into the river, found in Ferguson's *Chinese Mythology*, 190–93; and the third an Egyptian myth about the

goddess Isis, who fearful of persecution, places Horus in a chest which she lets float down the Nile, found in Muller's *Egyptian Mythology*, 116.

⁵ However, Tom Peete Cross sees some linkage between the story of Arthur's death and the Irish Saga of the *Serglige Conchulainn* ("Sickbed of Cuchulainn") because "in both the Irish saga and the Arthur-Avalon episode, the heroes are the object of attention from fairy women and are conveyed to the other world" (287).

⁶ A slightly more Christianized version of this tale occurs in "The Adventure of St. Columba's Clerics," also edited by Whitley Stokes. Here St Columba, not Snudgus and Mac Riagla, advises the king, and while during the voyage recorded in this tale many of the islands and people are the same as those related in "The Voyage of Snedgus and Mac Riagla," before long the islands become reflective of Christian ideology: the Land of the Saints and the island of the Race of Cain.

⁷ The list is not inclusive. For a more detailed account, refer to Schoepperle, pp. 370-74.

⁸ Note the similarity among the Norwegian fairy tale of the Princess and Lars and the French Missouri tale of "Pieds Sales" and the Irish fairy tale of the half-wit.

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