



12th Century Figures Tristan and
Isolde

Norse Women Cast Adrift

A Christian Literary Trope in
the Sagas of Iceland

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Thesis

A female Icelandic saga figure, Gudrid of the Vinland Sagas, predates three prominent versions of the Christian literary trope “the woman cast adrift,” yet follows the trope’s traditional motifs.

Keywords:

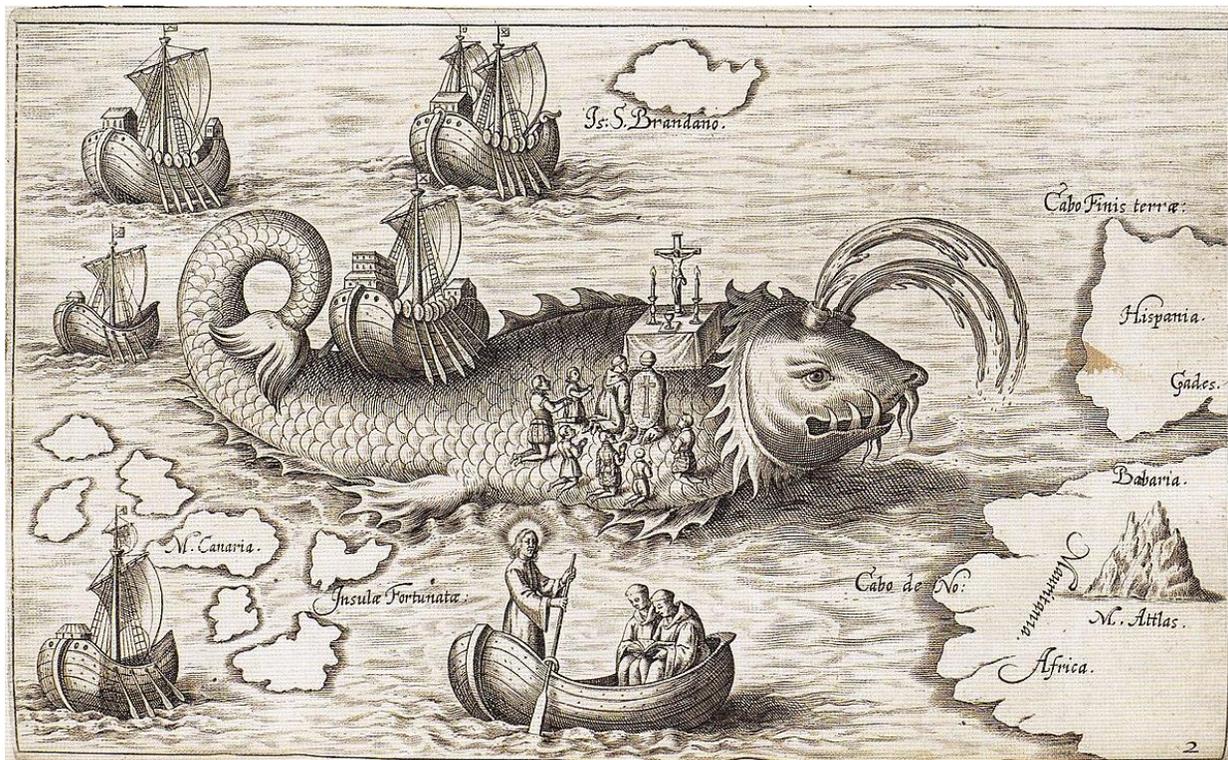
- Icelandic Saga: Old Norse tale of heroics, usually dated to the 13th-14th century
- “The Woman Cast Adrift:” a Romance/Christian story trope appearing in western Europe during the 14th-15th centuries



1470 Miniature of Tristan and Iseult

Early Male Influence of the Trope

Honorius Philoponus' Brendan and Jasconius, 1621



Voyage of St. Brendan the Navigator

- Recounts St. Brendan of Ireland's mythical pilgrimage to "the Promised Land of the Saints"
- Dated to AD 512 - 530, first written in AD 900
- Sailed past an iceberg and volcano, possibly indicative of Iceland
- Encountered an island of "grapes," also a feature of Vinland and Christian iconography

Three Western European Examples



Custance

Each follows “the basic medieval plot that begins with a good woman of high birth being cast adrift or sent overseas by or because of a close relative, usually her father. She comes ashore and perhaps marries [and] is set adrift again” (Osborn 7)

Custance

- by Chaucer “between 1390 and 1394–95 [based on] Trevet’s Anglo-Norman chronicle” from the early 1300s (13)

Emaré

- “composed in East Yorkshire within fifty years of 1400 C.E.” (10)

Florence

- “composed in much the same area of England as *Emaré* but possibly half a century later, in the early fifteenth century” (11)

Timeline

900: Voyage of St. Brendan

=

970–1030: Vinland Sagas Take Place (Gudrid)

=

1220 & 1280: Vinland Sagas Written (Christian Gudrid)

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“about 1328-1334” (Barefield 21): Trevet’s *Chronicle* (Source of Custance)

=

1350–1450: *Emaré* (Emaré)

=

1390–95: “Man of Law’s Tale” (Custance)

=

Early 1400s: *Le Bone Florence of Rome* (Florence)



Mandeville in the Indian Ocean from
The Book of Wonders, 1410-12

A Few Norse Examples

Helga Bardardottir of Bardar's Saga

- “dates from the first part of the 14th century” (Hermannsson 4). Floats adrift on an iceberg:

“Rauðfeldr [her half-cousin] pushed Helga out along to sea on an ice floe [which] drifted away from the land and out to sea. She stayed with the ice, and it drifted so fast that seven days later she arrived in Greenland” (Ewing 50)

“Mogthrasir's Girls”

- mentioned by the giant Vafthrudnir in *The Poetic Edda*

“Bibrau the Blue Maiden”

- possibly a mythological figure, described on a rune stick found in Greenland

“Gudveig”

- woman who was buried at sea, gravesite found in Greenland



Icebergs

A Viking Woman Adrift

Gudrid Thorbjarnardottir of the Vinland Sagas

- Travels to Vinland around 1000, **two versions** written down some 200 years later

In the 1st version, *Saga of the Greenlanders*,

“Leif then invited Thorir to spend the winter with him there, along with Thorir’s wife Gudrid . . . Leif rescued fifteen men [and Gudrid] from the skerry” (Sigurðsson 9)

Thorstein, “taking with him twenty-five men and his [new] wife, Gudrid[,] set sail and were out of sight of land. They were tossed about at sea all summer and did not know where they were [, until] they made land in Lysufjord (12)



Replica Viking Ship Draken Harald Hårfagre



A Viking Woman in Vinland

In the 2nd version, *Eirik the Red's Saga*,

Gudrid first voyages to Greenland at the behest of her father, who wishes to join Eirik's new colony

Replica Viking Ship Draken Harald Hårfagre

“they set sail but the weather, which had been favourable when they set out, changed. The favourable wind dropped and they were beset by storms . . . despite many other hardships, they made land in Greenland at Herjolfsnes” (Sigurðsson 30)

In both versions, Gudrid travels to Vinland with her third husband Thorfinn Karlsefni.

Gudrid is therefore

- cast adrift due to her father
- cast adrift multiple times
- marries several times

as per Osborn's description of “a woman cast adrift”

A Viking Woman of Faith

“generally speaking, the purpose of written sagas is linked with the interests of the patrons of the writers. The emphasis on Gudrid’s devout Christianity, which she takes to the end of the known world and back, is connected with the naming of the bishops in the closing chapters” (Sigurðsson xi)

Gudrid is therefore seen as a Christian figure “cast adrift”



Early 1100s Friedrich II Treatise on Falconry

Significance



- In both Vinland sagas, Gudrid is very active and retains her agency throughout, more so than Custance/Florence/Emaré
- Ships are symbolic in Christian faith, called “The Ship of the Church” – a person’s body/life is the ship, guided by Christ at the helm
- In “cast adrift” narratives, “Women’s power, or the lack of it, is at issue . . . events in the young woman’s life initiated mainly by men [seek to] disempower her, but her spirit and dignity never falter and she regains control at the end” (Osborn 6)

The Ship of the Church – an icon by Deacon Matthew Garrett

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Images Cited

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https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tristan_and_Isolde_29_-_2.svg

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<http://inromaunce.blogspot.com/2012/05/trip-to-zoo-or-is-it-still-called.html>

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<http://expositions.bnf.fr/lamer/grand/020.htm>

Slide 6 - Icebergs

<https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/news/view/93684-iceberg-armadas-not-the-cause-of-north-atlantic-cooling>

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<https://www.drakenhh.com/news-1/2017/7/8/draken-harald-hrfagre-crossed-the-north-atlantic-ocean>

Slide 9 - Early 1100s Friedrich II Treatise on Falconry

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Slide 10 – The Ship of the Church – an icon by Deacon Matthew Garrett

<https://blogs.ancientfaith.com/morningoffering/2018/08/the-ship-4/>