

FEMALE HEROISM AND LEADERSHIP IN THE ANGLO-SAXON *JUDITH*

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I argue that the Anglo-Saxon *Judith* frames its titular character's simultaneous adoption of sacred femininity and masculine heroic violence as the acceptable and necessary response to despair in the face of invasion. Judith undergoes a radical gender transformation from a hyper-feminine saint to something altogether androgynous yet celebrated and thus embodies a complex form of female heroism and leadership. Furthermore, the poem reinforces Judith's righteousness by contrasting her with King Holofernes, whose removal from power becomes an inevitable consequence of poor leadership and character. Finally, to justify Judith's unusual status as a heroic warrior woman, the poet reinforces the message that Judith is not just a lone assassin but a warrior woman who values cooperation. This conclusion forcefully highlights the distinguished status of Judith-the-Anglo-Saxon: warrior woman, saint, and virtuous heroine.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this paper to the memories of my dear friend Morning Dew Lee, my grandfathers; Carl Bartz and Francis “Gib” Gibson, and my beloved grandmother, Corral Gibson.

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FEMALE HEROISM AND LEADERSHIP IN THE ANGLO-SAXON *JUDITH*

Introduction

In the Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf*, the monster-woman Grendel's Mother storms the mead-hall of Heorot to avenge the death of her son. Beowulf pursues her, and she drags him into her underground lake. There, he decapitates her with an enchanted sword.¹ In *Judith*, a neighboring poem to *Beowulf* in *The Nowell Codex*, a 10th-century compendium of prose and poetic tales, the titular character behaves monstrously like Grendel's Mother: she flouts her community leaders' directives, secretly infiltrates the enemy camp, and viciously decapitates their king, only to return to her home Bethulia with his noble head in her commoner hands. Despite Judith's unwomanly behavior and her blatant disobedience to patriarchal authority, the poet calls her "brave woman" (*ides ellenrof*, 106) for her deed.² In the Anglo-Saxon canon more generally, she is regarded as both a saint and a heroine. For example, in a letter prefacing his own prose homily of *Judith*, written around 1000 CE, Ælfric of Eynsham, an English abbot, says her story serves as "an example for [the English nobility], written in English, after our own poetic style, so that you will protect your land with weapons against invaders" (*þeo is eac on English on ure wisan iset eow mannum to bisne, þet ge eower eard mid wæpnum beweriaen wið*

¹ All quotations from *Beowulf* are from Seamus Heaney's *Beowulf* and appear in translation rather than the original Old English (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001).

² All poem citations are from the *Judith* chapter (302-312) in the sixth edition of *A Guide to Old English*, which is based on *MS Cotton Vitellius A.xv* stored in the British Library and a transcript of *Judith* written by a scholar from the seventeenth century stored at the Bodleian Library (Mitchell, Bruce and Fred C. Robinson, Eds. *A Guide to Old English*. 6th Edition. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.: 2001.). The codex that contained *Judith* was heavily damaged by fire in 1731 CE, destroying almost 900 preceding lines. Therefore, this text is derived primarily from the BL *Vitellius* manuscript with the Bodleian transcript used to fill in what the fire destroyed. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own and draw on *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* by Joseph Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller for assistance, available in digital form from The University of Texas at Austin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898).

onwinnende here, Nelson 47). Unlike *Beowulf's* female antihero, Grendel's Mother, who lives at the edge of society and who can only temporarily enter Heorot to avenge her son, Judith is richly rewarded for her initiative and repeatedly referred to as a holy woman (*halige meowle*, 56, 261). Like the male hero Beowulf, she is drawn into the center of authority in public recognition and gratitude for her heroism. Both literary and clerical accounts of the time praise Judith while the *Beowulf* poem condemns Grendel's Mother first to exile and then to death when she takes action against her son's enemies. The Anglo-Saxon *Judith* plays with gender and its role in shaping authority. Judith undergoes a radical gender transformation from a hyper-feminine saint to something altogether androgynous yet celebrated.

Importantly, the *Judith* poet localizes its source material, the Vulgate *Book of Judith*, within the Anglo-Saxon value system by altering her character into a recognizable Anglo-Saxon warrior woman. Judith is a local heroine: she is as Anglo-Saxon as the poem's audience would have been. Indeed, as a matter of comparison, the *Judith* poem alludes to earlier accounts of two queens who are culturally celebrated for their heroism. Judith's story parallels Danish Queen Hildeburh's arranged marriage to King Finn of the Frisians, which is related in song by a storyteller (*scop*) within the epic poem *Beowulf* (1071-1158). Her strength in resisting foreigners is moreover reminiscent of the Norse Queen Olof of Saxland in the *Hrólfs saga kraka*, a Scandinavian saga from the 5th century. Queen Olof "lived like a king" and drugged her royal suitor, shaved his head, smeared him with tar, and sent him back to his ship in a sack (Godfrey 22). However, the level of violence that Judith partakes in draws deeper connections and contrasts with her villainous warrior woman neighbor, Grendel's Mother, while it complicates the cultural comparison offered by these two Scandinavian queens. In what follows, I will argue

that the *Judith* poem frames Judith's simultaneous adoption of sacred femininity and masculine heroic violence as the acceptable and necessary response to despair in the face of invasion.

In the poem named after her, Judith plays along with her role as a helpless female captive of the Assyrians until the opportunity arises where she can subvert gender expectations by throwing off her intentional passivity and assume fully active role in defeating the enemy. The poet lets the reader in on his audience in Judith's play-acting as a prisoner of war: her captors initially treat Judith like an object—she is “hastily fetched” (*ofstum fetigan*, 35) by attendants and “brought to” (*on reste gebrohten*, 54) the bed of Holofernes—until the moment she literally “seizes control” (*genam*, 98) and kills the king in his alcohol-induced sleep (Shaughnessy 1). Judith's proceeding actions of beseeching God for a means to stop the Assyrians followed by heading directly to their camp—intentionally becoming a prisoner of war to become closer to the king—makes her behavior at the camp entirely intentional, even her passivity—a trait typically regarded as feminine. Judith holds out on her intentions and violence until she is alone with the unconscious king. In this way, Judith's passivity at the hands of her captors is a clever, intentional display of femininity in the pursuit of masculine violence.

Judith is a heroic warrior woman and devout religious figure, carefully constructed to contrast with her would-be-rapist Holofernes. While she is described as the “Lord's maid” (*þēodnes mægð*, 165) and continuously offers praise and exhortations to God, Holofernes is described as “wicked” (*inwidda*, 28) and a “hate-filled man” (*laðne mannan*, 101), even “devilish” at one point (*deofulcunda*, 61). The *Judith* poem also reframes the Vulgate's account of Holofernes, the Assyrian invader, as an unfit lord over his warriors; his choice to separate himself from his troops along with his twin vices of wine and women dishonor him by Anglo-Saxon and Christian standards. The poem thus sketches Holofernes' removal from power as an

inevitable consequence of his sins as a leader, while reminding the audience every few lines, with a variety of Anglo-Saxon saintly descriptions, of Judith's righteousness and resolute dependence on God. God even blesses her with "elf-bright" (*ælfscinu*, 165), which, for the poem's Anglo-Saxon audience, serves as a visual reminder of Christian saintliness and benevolent supernatural power.³ Additionally, Holofernes' beheading at his own feast by a holy and chaste woman in the lowly position of prisoner of war is portrayed as a comedic crossing of the sacred and the profane, in which Judith's story serves a parody of the traditional Anglo-Saxon role of women as peace-weavers who marry members of enemy clans to negotiate peace-treatises and weave family ties between warring parties. Finally, to emphasize Judith's unusual status as a heroic warrior woman, the poet describes her collaboration with and trust in her handmaiden in detail, thereby reinforcing the message that Judith is not just as a lone assassin but a warrior woman fighting for her community; unlike Holofernes, she values cooperation and confides in others to achieve a conclusion that benefits the community. The story's ending brings home this comparison: In the Vulgate, the tale ends with the Assyrians fleeing after they find their dead king. In the Anglo-Saxon *Judith*, Judith's triumphant return to Bethulia is described in detail, where she first unites and then motivates her community through the display of Holofernes' head and a speech that inspires them to attack and utterly destroy the Assyrian invader. Her community shows their gratitude to her by laying "Holofernes' sword and gory helm" (*Hōlofernes / sweord ond swātigne helm*, 336-337) at her feet. This conclusion is unique to the Anglo-Saxon *Judith*, and it forcefully highlights the distinguished status of Judith-the-Anglo-Saxon: warrior woman, saint, and virtuous heroine.

³ I go into further detail on the significance of *ælfscinu* and how the use of the word in *Judith* merges pagan and Christian ideas about power and holiness on page 19 and 20.

Localizing *Judith*

The *Judith* poem can be found within *The Nowell Codex*, a collection of texts including *Beowulf*, *The Wonders of the East*, and *Letters of Alexander to Aristotle*. Due to residual attrition on select endleaves in the manuscript, it is believed the codex was bound together from two separate manuscripts in the seventeenth century around the theme of monsters and the marvelous, hence its colloquial name, *The Book of Monsters* (Powell 2).⁴ Throughout the texts there are a variety of strange creatures: a supernatural monster-woman in *Beowulf*; phoenixes and a variety of human-animal hybrids in *The Wonders of the East*; and in *Judith*, a conquering king who is beheaded by a woman in his sleep (Momma 59).⁵ While perhaps not as exciting as the creatures in adjacent texts, most critics agree that Holofernes' anti-social behavior and Judith's eventual display of his head as proof of her bravery cast Holofernes as a wild beast and thus as the poem's monster.⁶ Mary Flavia Godfrey additionally reasons that since *Judith* is set in a time long ago and far away from medieval Britain "it would still have that element of the exotic to the assembler" that is often synonymous with the marvelous and the monstrous (5).⁷

Judith's placement within *The Nowell Codex* might shed light on the cultural milieu at the time of its composition. Like many Anglo-Saxon poems, *Judith* is anonymous and undated

⁴ I discuss *Beowulf* and *Judith* from *The Nowell Codex* primarily, but will mention *The Wonders of the East* briefly on page 27.

⁵ Some scholars disagree with monsters as a centralizing theme of *The Nowell Codex*, marking *Judith's* "lack of overtly supernatural monsters and classic heroes" as evidence that monsters do not tie the texts together (Godfrey 5). For alternative theories on the centralizing theme of the codex, see "Mediating on Men and Monsters: A Reconsideration of the Thematic Unity of the *Beowulf* Manuscript" by Kathryn Powell (in *The Review of English Studies* 57.228 [2006]: 1-15) and "*Beowulf* and *Judith*: Thematizing Decapitation in Old English Poetry" by Mary Flavia Godfrey (in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 1.35 [1993]: 1-43).

⁶ Importantly, this scene also mirrors the display of Grendel's head as a hunting trophy in the poem *Beowulf* (1646-1650).

⁷ This is also true for *The Wonders of the East* and *Letters of Alexander to Aristotle*, which are both prose works set along the Silk Road. See *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf Manuscript* by Andy Orchard, esp. pp. 116-139 (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1995).

although irregularities in alliteration, the “fondness for end-rhyme,” and the use of hypermetric verse⁸ suggest that it was written in the latter half of England’s Anglo-Saxon period, some time between 925 - 1025 CE, when English kings were consolidating their reach across the Isles (Mitchell 301). Frequent and heavy Viking raids from Scandinavia were causing unrest, while the Normans were beginning to emerge as a threat from the European continent. From a socio-historical perspective, the poem furthermore exemplifies the transition in Anglo-Saxon culture and social order brought about by the arrival and steady encroachment of Christianity across the Isles. The Anglo-Saxons gradually absorbed Christianity into their own culture, and women—in their various roles as family members, community leaders, and clerical office holders—were active participants in this process. Notably, the early Anglo-Saxon Church was unique for its near-equal patronage of holy orders for men and women. The rise of powerful abbesses such as Saint Hilda, described in Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (731 CE), might serve as an example here.⁹ Saint Hilda was a sister-in-law of the King of East Anglia and the founder of *Streoneshalh*, now called Whitby Abbey (Fell 13). Anglo-Saxon women were essential agents who assisted in England’s transition to Christianity and who helped reshape Christianity in the process by adapting paganism into its practices and preserving crucial elements of the old religion. For example, rather than destroy all symbols of paganism, Anglo-Saxons continued to use their pre-Christian deity Wōden in the genealogies of their ruling

⁸ Hypermetric verse denotes a line with three accented syllables rather than just the normal two in each half-line (Harmon 242). For an Anglo-Saxon explanation of the use of hypermetric verse or how it was used by scholars to date the poem, see pp. 166 and 301 of Bruce Mitchell’s *A Guide to Old English* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.: 2001).

⁹ Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* pre-dates *Judith* and his conspicuous mention of a domestic female saint wielding ecclesiastical leadership is particularly interesting in a text that mainly credits the Conversion of the British Isles to the efforts of foreign missionaries. See also “Bede’s Creation of a Nation in his *Ecclesiastical History*” by Diane Speed (in *Parergon* 10.2 [1992]: 139-154).

houses, appropriating his royal status by making him a descendent of Noah and a passenger on the Ark (Chaney 200-203). Similarly, the term *ælfscinu* (literally, “elf-bright”, implying “saintliness”), with its roots in “elf” combine the Anglo-Saxons’ Norse understanding of elves with Christian understanding of sainthood and holiness (*An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*). Of course, the kings of Britain had to forbid the old religion in law but archaeological evidence shows that the populace openly practiced paganism and indiscriminately adapted elements of the old religion into Christian service. This is apparent in exhumed burial sites, which reveal a mixture of pagan and Christian rites (Arnold 163). This gradual and, in many ways, internal and domestic integration of paganism during the transformation of Christianity continued until the Norman Conquest when Gregorian reform took away many Anglo-Saxon women’s social and political rights and reduced their involvement in the public arena.

In the *Judith* poem, we see this shift reflected in Judith’s perceived loss of agency, her captivity under the Assyrian invaders, and her role as Holofernes’ intended rape victim. Judith’s initial loss of agency is at the hands of her own leaders who command the Bethulians to take no action against their invaders. It is this abrupt silencing of her that forces Judith to take physical action against her oppressors. Her actions shame her Bethulian leaders for their inaction and the invaders for their arrogance, allowing her to emerge as what Elizabeth Shaughnessy describes as an androgynous heroine:

[Judith’s] violent beheading of Holofernes contrasts so starkly with her femininity that, rather than preserving it, the poet constructs an image of Judith that encompasses each gender. The moment she violently usurps Holofernes’ power and his head, Judith undergoes an androgynous transformation... Rather than a blatant transformation from woman to man, Judith’s transference of power is

fluid; her innate femininity and addition of masculine representations of power are intrinsically linked in her androgyny. (1)

To Shaughnessy, Judith is an ideal model of femininity because she successfully negotiates her androgyny: She is a woman whose femininity remains emphasized even when she performs such conventionally masculine deeds as murder and the oratory or commandeering soldiers and ordering military retaliation against the enemy. Like the Norse queens of old, Judith enacts violence and uses cunning to deceive her enemy by meeting their expectations for her gender but, like a Christian saint, she relies absolutely on God, making her an acceptable and, indeed, admirable heroine to Anglo-Saxon Christians.

Models of Femininity

In *Judith*, our eponymous heroine violently interrupts the prescribed Anglo-Saxon peace-weaving narrative, a form of arranged marriage where highborn women tie warring clans together by offering their bodies and using matrimony as a weapon to end a war. In Anglo-Saxon society, peace-weaving was essential in the economy of war to mark the formal ends of hostilities with a wedding feast. The way in which Judith is ushered to Holofernes' bed during the Assyrian's celebration feast alludes to and challenges this traditional Anglo-Saxon narrative of peace-weaving. First, as a prisoner of war, her union with Holofernes is forced; it is not an arranged union. Second, the imagery in the feast and tent scene are clear demonstrations of enemy conquest, not an attempt to create solidarity through common relatives. The Bethulians are absent at this feast, save as prisoners of war. The text states that "with malice / the holy maiden was hastily fetched" (*Hēt ða niða geblonden / þā ēadigan mægð ofstum fetigan*, 34-35), emphasizing the unwillingness of the prisoner's participation and the lack of negotiation and

planning involved. Finally, Judith subverts the notion that peace-weaving is the only acceptable method for women to exercise socio-political power: she goes willingly to the camp to become a prisoner of war and when forced to offer her body, she seizes control, wields a sword against her aggressor, and severs the head of the enemy king from his body. By killing Holofernes, she reverses their power dynamic and rises to power in Bethulia, as its military and spiritual leader. In Holofernes' murder scene, we see this transfer of power when Judith, the prisoner of war, sends Holofernes "to be strongly shackled in hellfire" (*hearde gehæfted in hellebryne*, 116) and escapes back home with his head in her satchel.

In the tradition of the narrative, peace-weaving often failed to keep the peace for long. Gender expectations prescribed that men tear each other apart in war and that women support the men by cooperating and accepting their role as makers of peace. Peace-weaving narratives often leave the peace-weaver stoically accepting her fate and ignoring the fact that war will begin again and that relatives will inevitably abandon her as new conflicts arise. For example, in the *Beowulf* poem, we hear of Queen Hildeburh of the Danes who marries King Finn of the Frisians in order to solidify peace between the clans. Less than a year later, Hildeburh's husband, brother, and son all perish in another conflict, and she is shipped back to the Danes to live in solitary widowhood (1071-1158). In the poem, her story is framed as admirable because of her willingness to accept the expectations of her gender and her stoicism in the face of such violence, not because of her marriage's ability to temporarily delay violence. Stacy Klein states that because of the cyclical nature of war and the superior role men take in the lives of their kinswomen "the female peace-weaver can only symbolize a peace that has been effected through the actions of men" (100). Judith challenges the traditional narrative about how women can produce temporary social order by going along with the narrative—to a point—she subverts their

narrative by reacting violently against the actions of men. She takes power in a situation where she is traditionally viewed by the dominant gender as the most powerless and she uses their assumptions to her advantage.

Because the strong religious aspects of her characterization and her description as a commoner and not a queen make Judith a poor candidate for peace-weaving, she is instead treated like an enemy conquest and war prize at a feast meant to mark the end of the Assyrian-Bethulian conflict. At our initial encounter with her, Judith takes intentional action to put herself in a position of helplessness. In the hands of the Assyrians, she has no control or agency over her own body, first being “found,” then “fetched” (*fundon, fetigan*, 41), and finally “led forward” (*lædan*, 42) by attendants and warriors, rather than moving through the feast at her own volition. The attendants “gild her with jewelry and adorn [her] with rings” (*bēagum gehlæste / hringum gehrodene*, 36-37) and present her to Holofernes for his use. The presentation of the bride as a prize is reminiscent of the peace-weaving narrative but her additional adornments simultaneously highlights her lower class status: Judith, the common woman, is embellished with jewelry to make her look queen-like. Because she is not Holofernes’ equal, their retreat to his bed tent cannot be read as a consummation of marriage. Shaughnessy surmises that the jewels serve as “visual representations of [Holofernes’] power so that when he rapes her, he has visual confirmation of conquering her and taking whatever power she has” (6).¹⁰

The peace-weaving narrative is thus transformed into a rape narrative and marked as a violent conquest, not as a narrative of cooperation. To the Anglo-Saxons, this tale of female agency under threat would be familiar. The Anglo-Saxons viewed rape not just as a violation of a

¹⁰ Later, this scene is turned on its head when Judith’s warriors place the Assyrian’s plunder at her feet, confirming her rise to power, upending her earlier humiliation, and reclaiming what was taken from her (335-340).

woman's right to bodily protection and honor, a right safeguarded by her kin and guaranteed to her by her government, but also as a failure of the community who is unable to protect the most vulnerable amongst them. The Anglo-Saxons, who experienced frequent raids from foreign invaders especially during the late Anglo-Saxon period, the period during which the *Judith* poem was written, recognized rape as a form of warfare (Powell 6). They recorded their experiences and the rape of their women by the Vikings in texts such as Wulfstan's *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* (ca. 1014 CE), in which Wulfstan writes "And often ten or twelve, each after the other, insult disgracefully the thegn's wife, and sometimes his daughter or near-kinswoman while he looks on" (Whitelock 59).¹¹ Additionally, from the perspective of gendered resistance to colonial power, the Anglo-Saxons had at least one historical cultural symbol that viewed women of authority taking violent action against war rape (rape as an expression of power and humiliation), as unusual but heroic and justifiable form of leadership: Boudica, the Iceni queen who raised an army and burnt Londinium to the ground when the Romans flogged her and raped her daughters. Boudica's rape [of her children]-revenge story, despite it being recorded by three Roman writers, is irresistibly remembered as heroic and just, her speeches coached with the same honor and stoicism as a Roman senator (194). The three Roman writers who recorded Boudica's uprising and eventual defeat noted that she had the moral high ground because her daughters were raped (Adler 175-176).

In the case of *Judith*, although she enters the enemy camp willingly and with some semblance of strategic foresight, it is clear that the reason she does so is that her community has failed to protect itself against Assyrian invasion and left her unprotected. Judith's active intervention in her rape thus serves as an inspiration to the Anglo-Saxons—like Boudica's story

¹¹ This quotation is from lines 116-118 of Dorothy Whitelock's translation of *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* (Exeter: U of Exeter P, 1976).

serves to the critics of Roman expansionism. Godfrey argues that Judith's story is "aimed directly at an English audience that would have included women who are potential or actual victims of rape" (28). Unlike the peace-weaving narrative whose focus is to weave interpersonal relationships between warring parties and bind clans in peace, Judith's lower status leaves no room for such an interpretation. Rather, because she is brought to the marriage bed for the violation of her body and the plundering of the adornments that were bestowed upon her; her defilement is intended to function as a demonstration of the Assyrians' power over her and the Bethulians. By creating a recognizable situation of peace-weaving deteriorating into rape, the poet creates a space for Judith to exploit and interrupt the narrative for the good of her people.

It is important to note here that by interrupting the peace-weaving narrative, Judith takes on fully on the role of aggressor and avenger. She was moving in that direction since she beseeched God for aid in stopping Holofernes and the Assyrians and chose to enter the Assyrian camp. We see Judith fully embrace her active role in killing Holofernes and the change in power through her control of Holofernes' body once he is in a prone and weakened state of drunken unconsciousness. While Holofernes lays "in a swoon" (*þæt hē on swīman læg*, 106), she grasps him "fast by his [long] hair" (*fæste be feaxe sīnum*, 99) before decapitating him. To the modern eye, this act is utilitarian and serves to stabilize the head for the stroke of the sword. However, to the Anglo-Saxons, grasping the hair and, by extension, the head is a gesture of insult and contempt called *feaxfeng* (*An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*).¹² This gesture shows that she has fully accepted her role as assassin of the king and the power dynamic she now embodies. Anglo-Saxon texts furthermore take a special interest in the head, seeing it as a "wellspring of inspired

¹² See Ivan Herbison's discussion of this occurring in both *Beowulf* and *Judith* on page 12 of "Heroism and Comic Subversion in *Judith*" (in *English Studies* 91.1 [2010]: 1-25). For further explanation on *feaxfeng*, see "Did Beowulf Commit *Feaxfeng* Against Grendel's Mother?" by E.G. Stanley (in *Notes and Queries* 221.23 [1976]: 339-340).

speech;” as trophies, “heads evoke recollection of the source of the heroes’ own speech” (Godfrey 6). For example, in *Beowulf*, the hero beheads both Grendel and his mother and takes the head of Grendel back to Heorot as proof of his deeds. To have one’s head severed and set on display is a great humiliation, especially for a warrior king and the troops he used to command. With her actions, Judith thus humiliates him in his death and shames his people in the process. When she claims his head, the seat of his mind, she also symbolically usurps his wisdom and knowledge—not that she needed to because the poet highlights this by contrasting their two mental states in the tent, with Judith being “wise in mind” (*ferhðglēawe*, 41) and “the cunning woman” (*snoteran idese*, 55), while Holofernes “cannot take any counsel / within his witless place” (*swā hē nyste ræde nānne / on gewitlocan*, 67-68). Thus, as Judith takes Holofernes’ power as a general and king by taking his head, she also insults his intelligence and position in the hegemony; her power usurps his and all that he represents. The conqueror is utterly conquered.

Judith demonstrates the Anglo-Saxons’ complicated and mutable understanding of gender and power by interrupting the traditional power dynamic between male and female. In a discussion on the instability of expectations concerning gender in *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler states, “‘Female’ no longer appears to be a stable notion, its meaning is as troubled and unfixed as ‘women,’ and because both terms gain their troubled significations only as relational terms” (2541). Judith’s violent action is relative to her male leaders’ inactivity against external masculine oppression and her gender and the expectations attached to it drives the narrative because she exploits the expectations of her femininity by hegemonic male powers that deny her protection and justice. Judith chooses to take on an active role in the narrative despite of her status as a commoner, war bounty, and a prisoner. Defiantly, she commits deeds considered

masculine. The Anglo-Saxons, like the early Scandinavians, saw a “crucial distinction between ‘male’ and ‘female’ [that] was not grounded in the body but in power” (Clover 363). By creating a feminine female saint, a woman “with such all-encompassing traditional or stereotypical feminine attributes, the poet [preserves] her status as a woman; however, the poet effectively creates a starker contrast with her later [masculine] violence” (Shaughnessy 1). Thus, in the *Judith* poem, male and female attributes coincide and perhaps, one might argue, collaborate in Holofernes’ destruction. That the act of murdering Holofernes is culturally masculine cannot be denied: Judith wields a sword, a phallic object, and uses it to penetrate Holofernes’ body. The Anglo-Saxon *Judith* revels in this scene of viciousness as a sexual, political, and social statement on female agency at work and characterizes her in this moment as “clever” or “cunning” (*snoteran*, 55) so the audience recognizes that Judith is aware of the role she is playing. Yet her exhortation to God in that moment is also, and paradoxically, undeniably feminine: She asks for forgiveness for her deed and for protection, pleading with God to “grant to me too, my safety” (*þæt ic þys sweorde mote*, 89). She “refers to God sixteen times in fourteen different ways in the thirty-nine lines leading up to” Holofernes’ execution (Shaughnessy 2), and at the very moment of her first strike, she calls on God for strength: “Grant me victory and fearless faith, so that I will, with this sword, be / able to cut down this murderer, Grant to me, my safety” (*sigor ond soðne gelēafan, þæt ic mid þys sweorde mote / gehēawan þysne morðres bryttan; geunne mē mīnra gesynta*, 88-89). The jewelry, her prayers, and her poor beheading skills stand in contrast to her wielding of a masculine sword that has been “hardened in the storms of many battles” (*scūrum heardne*, 79) and cast her as a heroine in flux, transformed from what Shaughnessy describes as a “hyper-feminine” and holy woman into an “androgynous” warrior, a woman who, with permission from God, does masculine deeds. Importantly, she reverses Holofernes’

objectives in drawing her to his tent: he thinks she is being forcibly led to his tent to be raped but she goes willingly, with the hidden intent of his murder. His decapitation by Judith may be read as a metaphoric castration and ritualized rape, a “violation that triumphantly reverses and undoes his planned violation” (Godfrey 22).

For this role and gender reversal to work, the poet must first establish Judith’s femininity—a state that is already complicated by her deliberate actions of putting herself in the position of prisoner of war. However, despite Judith’s beauty and femininity described in the beginning of the poem, contrasting her with the masculine warrior king Holofernes, the varying descriptors the poet uses complicate our understanding of Judith’s gender. Judith’s marital status, while fairly certain in other adaptations of *Judith*,¹³ is never clearly defined in the Anglo-Saxon *Judith*. First, the poet describes Judith as a *mægð*, which can mean “maiden,” “girl,” “wife,” or “woman” (35, 43, 78, 125, 135, 145, 254, 260, 334), and then calls her *meowle*, which can mean “virgin,” “maiden,” or “woman” (56, 261). Even the most common descriptor, *ides*, can mean anything from “virgin” to “wife” to “queen,” depending on the context (14, 55, 58, 109, 128, 133, 146, 340). When to adjectives like (*blāchlēor*, 128), saintly (*ælfscinu*, 14 and *torhtan* 43), and smart (*snoteran*, 55) she is made to appear youthfully beautiful, which complicates our understanding of both her age and marital status. This leads to some controversy about whether the Anglo-Saxon is a virgin or a widow. In “Adaptation of Biblical Detail in the Old English

¹³ Theodore Ziolkowski and Jane Davidson Reid note that due to the violence and eroticism of the tent scene, Judith has embodied nearly every age and social rank in the literary and artistic canon, stretching from a widowed virgin (i.e. childless) in the Apocrypha to a mature noble virgin by Michelangelo to a coquettish teenager with a knowing gleam in her eye by Rubens to a spry old peasant in Goya (see Ziolkowski, “Re-Visions: Fictionalizations, and Postfigurations: The Myth of Judith in the Twentieth Century,” in *The Modern Language Review* 104.2 [2009]: 311-332). Reid also observes that depictions in art create conflicting visual cues to Greek goddesses and the Virgin Mary, further complicating the reading of Judith’s age (in “The True Judith.” *Art Journal* 28.4 [1969]: 376-387)

Judith: The Feast Scene,” Hugh Magennis insists that Judith is exclusively a widow and claims that the audience is “not obviously encouraged to see her as a virgin” because of her characterization as a wise woman (331). However, if one just looks at the variety of terms the poet uses to describe Judith (see above), we can see that the descriptors are less certain than Magennis would have us believe. Instead, we are more likely to agree with Alcuin Blamires, who suggests that the modifiers portray Judith as encompassing all “three tiers of perfection thought to be attainable for women [during this time period]: with faithful wifeness at the bottom, and chaste widowhood and virginity higher up the scale” (13). The poet’s use of language that casts Judith as young and as a virgin might then be read as a gesture toward her sexual vulnerability to the older Holofernes. In contrast, when the poet characterizes her as a widow, her maturity and wisdom are highlighted, and the audience is reminded of the cleverness of her plan to manipulate those around her. Furthermore, as a chaste widow, she also becomes a symbol of the Church, with God as her holy husband in heaven (Campbell 162). Her intimate bond with God thus serves to make her confrontation with Holofernes metaphorical, with Judith as a “figure of chastity and/or the church, overcoming lechery... in the form of Holofernes” (Dockray-Miller 166). Either way, Judith goes to the place of her attempted rape with her femininity not only on display, but crucially emphasized through the cunning use of her femininity. Once inside the tent, Judith’s subterfuge ends as the murder draws close but her femininity and spirituality remain stylistically foregrounded. The text explicitly refers to her as “God’s handmaiden” (*Scyppendes mægð*, 77) and “servant of the Lord” (*wæs Nergendes / þeowen*, 73-74) thus reminding the audience of her womanhood and her subordination to God even as she commits murder with a phallic weapon.

Along with subverting our ideas about gender, the titular character in *Judith* complicates the heroic tradition in her merging of pagan and Christian heroism. Because the Anglo-Saxons habitually translated Christian stories into their culture, Judith is not the only hero in the Anglo-Saxon canon that combines pagan and Christian heroic imagery. She just comes to that position from a different angle. For example, in *Beowulf*, a Christian poem based on a pre-Christian legend, the hero is a pagan, loyal to his lord and fierce in battle, but he also prays to God in moments of crisis: when he is about to die, he credits the Christian God with the glory of his successes saying,

To the everlasting Lord of All
To the King of Glory, I give thanks
That I beheld this treasure here in front of me
That I have been allowed to leave my people (2794-2799)

Judith, a Christian poem adapted for the Christian-pagan Anglo-Saxons, contains a Jewish-Christian heroine appropriating pagan and Christian heroic characteristics.¹⁴

In creating this Christian-pagan heroine, the Anglo-Saxon *Judith* references two types of female militancy: the pagan warrior woman of Grendel's Mother and the female warrior-saint of the Anglo-Saxon tradition, the *miles Christi* saint. Judith's story of violent resistance contrasts her with the warrior woman, Grendel's Mother. Grendel's Mother is portrayed as a descendent of Cain, the first murderer, who is exiled from the rest of society because of his sin (*Beowulf* 109, 104, 1261). Grendel and his mother demonstrate supernatural strength over the humans of Heorot. In particular, Grendel's Mother is dependent on the evil power that comes from her

¹⁴ I label Judith a Jewish-Christian heroine because the heroine is Jewish and her story is set in the Middle East and against the background of Assyrian invaders. However, in this Anglo-Saxon adaptation, her story is Christianized and Anglo-Saxonized to a point that it barely resembles its alleged Jewish origins.

supernatural inheritance to protect herself from authoritative heroes such as Beowulf when they enter her lair (*Beowulf* 1265). As a result, Beowulf cannot use normal blades against her. Rather, he has to steal one of the magic swords in her own lair in order to conquer her (*Beowulf* 1657-1663). Like Grendel's Mother, Judith relies heavily on the supernatural in order to conduct violence but her source of strength is not from an evil line of human ancestry but directly derived from God. When we first meet her, she is praying for guidance asking that he "shield her against the terror" she feels (*þæt hē wið þæs hēhstan brogan*, 4). In the murder scene, after initially praying to God for the skill to dispatch Holofernes swiftly, she hacks off Holofernes' head only halfway in the first strike and must strike again, drawing attention to God's active intervention in keeping Holofernes from awakening. Once she has done the deed, the poet reminds us again that God played a direct role in her success. The text celebrates her accomplishment, "the King of Heaven gave her victory" (*swegles Ealdor, þe hyre sigores onlēah*, 124). Jennifer Brookbanks notes that the poet "undercuts Judith's warrior role and presents her as dependent upon male agency; he depicts God as responsible for her war-like behavior" (25). However, critics tend to forget that Judith's actions are initiated by the failure of her patriarchal community's ability to act in her defense and that while she asks for courage quite frequently, she travels to the Assyrian's camp in rebellion against such patriarchal mismanagement. God actively intervenes by keeping Holofernes in an unresponsive state so that Judith may take control of the situation, but it was the initial failure of the earth-bound patriarchy that led Judith to take action in the first place. Thus, Judith is courageous but she is carefully framed to fit the patriarchy's expectations on how that courage can be wielded by a woman: as a supplement when patriarchy fails.

Because of the failure of the patriarchy in Bethulia, Judith is forced to rely on a higher patriarchy, that of God, for assistance and justification. In the Anglo-Saxon *Judith*, Judith

becomes a “brave woman” (*ellenrof*, 206) because of God’s direct intervention in the narrative. Ivan Herbison notes “*ellenrof* is nowhere else applied to women in the Old English poetic corpus... The uniqueness of the collocation is an attestation of God’s miraculous power in conferring heroic courage on a woman” and demonstrates the unique place Judith’s type of heroism has in the Anglo-Saxon canon: she is specifically sanctioned by God to commit violence which crucially makes the violence she perpetrates permissible (6). Even when the troops return and acknowledge their view that Judith is a conqueror by laying “Holofernes’ sword and gory helm” at her feet (*Hōlofernes / sweord ond swātigne helm*, 336-337), the poet reframes the tributes to her as evidence of Judith’s “true faith in the Almighty” (*sōðne gelēafan / ā tō Æmihtigan*, 344-345) and reminds the audience of her gender by calling her “fair lady” (*beorhtan idese*, 340). Thus, Judith functions as God’s instrument; her status as a warrior woman is dependent on God’s active manipulation of the villainous Holofernes. Judith is able to slay Holofernes not only because of the courage God bestowed upon her but also because God suspends Holofernes’ power; he sleeps as he is slain.

Judith’s narrative also alludes to and significantly alters the Anglo-Saxons’ vision of the Christian *miles Christi* allegory, which metaphorically describes the disciplined development of a soldier of Christ from devout follower of Christianity to warrior saint, a Christian militant who is structurally poised against a figure of vice (Kostick 20).¹⁵ According to Klein, in Anglo-Saxon

¹⁵ The *miles Christi* allegory derives mainly from two Vulgate verses, Job 7:1 “*militia est vita hominis super terram et sicut dies mercennarii dies eius*” (see KJV: Is there not an appointed time to man upon earth? Are not his days also like the days of an hireling?) and Ephesians 6:14-17 “*state ergo succincti lumbos vestros in veritate et induti lorica[m] iustitiae et calciati pedes in praeparatione evangelii pacis in omnibus sumentes scutum fidei in quo possitis omnia tela nequissimi ignea extinguere et galeam salutis adsumite et gladium Spiritus quod est verbum Dei*” (see KJV: Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; and your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; Above all,

religious texts, this devotion could be taken to the extreme, and a woman, if devoted enough, could “become male” for the service of God (107). Klein cites the *Life of Perpetua* in the *Old English Martyrology*¹⁶ as an example:

Perpetua dreamed that when she was in her girlhood she had the appearance of a man and that she had a sword in her hand and that she fought with it strongly... completely fulfilling her martyrdom when she overcame the devil and heathen persecutors with manly thoughts. (107)

Therefore, for Anglo-Saxons, a woman could become a pious soldier of Christ if their foe was devilish enough to require a masculine means of resistance. An integral part of the *miles Christi* transformation for women is that the female saint is introduced in a state of “extreme piety” and that “the great respect they command in these communities suggest the mimicry of maleness has the capacity to result in... spiritual maleness” (Klein 107). Judith’s piety is demonstrated through her devotion to God’s will during the assassination, lexical markers such as “Lord’s maid” (*þēodnes mægð*, 165), and a heavenly light from God that serves as a visual marking of her holiness. Interestingly this light and the words used to describe it, *ælfscinu* (14) and *torhtan* (43) which mean “elf-bright” and “bright” respectively,¹⁷ connect the *miles Christi* saint with the pagan elven realm, once again emphasizing the merging of the pagan and Christian traditions in the narrative. But while “*torhtan*” suggests a halo, giving Judith a saint-like appearance and thus visually confirming God’s sanctioning of her violent beheading of Holofernes and seizure of power, *ælfscinu* serves as a reminder of the danger Judith poses as a woman imbued with

taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God).

¹⁶ See also *Life of Perpetua* in *An Old English Martyrology*, edited by George Herzfeld (London: Keegan Paul, 1900. 34-36)

¹⁷ I previously defined *ælfscinu* as “saintly”. See page 3 and 14. Maybe revise this footnote as per my note above on page 3.

potentially supernatural powers.¹⁸ In both Anglo-Saxon lore and Scandinavian lore, elves are “beautiful and alluring” creatures that manifest the dangers of the supernatural for humans, in that they are capable of kidnapping, harming, and stealing from humans who do not show them proper deference (Briggs 122). That danger manifests itself when Judith beheads Holofernes and takes control of the troops of Bethulia. The allusion to the *miles Christi* saint in Judith’s character and the gender instability of her person as she takes on the male enemy demonstrate the Anglo-Saxons’ “openness to envisioning sexual difference as a fluid spectrum across which women... could move” (Klein 107). However, Judith is only an allusion to the *miles Christi* saint. Judith does not experience a full gender conversion into a masculine saint with “manly thoughts” like Perpetua because “the poet continually draws attention to her femininity” and her gender remains continually foregrounded as a driving force in her success as a hero and a leader (Herbison 12). Herbison emphasizes that “this appropriation effectively subverts the role of hero, which is conventionally dependent on male dominance and female subordination” (12). The Anglo-Saxon Judith is raised by God to the highest position of authority—a seat generally held by a masculine figure—while retaining the holier aspects of her femininity. As a “wise maid” (*aroðoncol mægð*, 145) and an androgynous heroine, she reminds the audience of vengeful and aggressive warrior women but finds her actions justified by her holy connection with God.

Judith serves as a model of femininity and female heroism because she violently interrupts the peace-weaving narrative, a traditional role for Anglo-Saxon women, by behaving like a warrior woman. She transforms from a hyper-feminine holy woman and docile prisoner of war to an androgynous warrior saint wielding a sword, subverting the expectations of her gender on behalf of God. The poet allows her to achieve the status of heroic warrior woman without

¹⁸ This word also alludes to Grendel’s Mother and her supernatural inheritance from Cain, mentioned in *Beowulf* 107.

becoming a monster like Grendel's Mother by sketching her as a warrior saint: a pagan avenger who is raised up from the weakest of society by the Christian God to serve as his soldier. Judith is limited, however, in the arena in which she may perform warrior tasks. She may wield a masculine weapon, such as a sword, but only in the intimate realm of a sleeping tent and only because there is an absence of heroic male warriors willing to do the task themselves. Her acceptance back into Bethulia as the "Lord's maid" (*pēodnes mægð*, 165) "with veneration" (*hīe mid ēaðmēdum*, 170) confirms her status as a religious and military head of state. She wields power but only because God has blessed her as his chosen one and her main purpose is to serve as God's prophet to the people, promoting cooperation and collaboration as a means of defending their society against invaders.

Models of Leadership

In the *Judith* poem, the poet makes space for Judith's precipitous ascent to power by framing the heroine's style of holy androgynous leadership, with submission to God and cooperation with others, as superior to Holofernes. In contrast to her, Holofernes conducts a failing form of masculine leadership, in which he isolates himself from his thanes, appropriates the divine, and overindulges in his vices. While Holofernes seeks to separate himself from his thanes and sets himself above all others, Judith collaborates with her handmaiden to assassinate the enemy's highest leader and uses his severed head to unite the Bethulians under God and to restore hope through her saintly military leadership. Furthermore, the *Judith* poet places the titular character within the acceptable limits of Anglo-Saxon female heroic leadership by framing

Judith's return to Bethulia in the "Hero on the Beach"-scenario¹⁹ and by creating a crisis of leadership known as *aldorlēase* (leaderlessness)²⁰ to justify Judith's appropriation of power in Bethulia.

In order to establish Judith as the superior leader in the poem, despite her sex's perceived inferiority, the poet frames the antagonist, King Holofernes of the Assyrians, as an unfit leader whose removal from power is inevitable. His rejection of group solidarity, his appropriation of divine imagery, his physical and social isolation from his thanes, his overindulgence in wine, and his lust for women perpetuate his demise and indeed mark it as imminent to the reader. The poet signals to the audience the level of King Holofernes' incompetence by noting that "a thin veil of gold" (*fleohnet*, 47) is hung around his bed. This *fleohnet* serves as a physical, social, and spiritual barricade that Holofernes has erected to protect and distance himself from his thanes. The veil conceals Holofernes from his thanes and reveals their secrets to him, as he hides behind it and spies on them. As such, it defies kinship bonds, elevates Holofernes to spectator status, and allows him to carry on as he pleases behind the veil: spying, drinking, and womanizing. Culturally, the *fleohnet* creates a ripple effect that ultimately leads to both Holofernes' demise and the Assyrians' defeat.

Holofernes is a recognizably bad king because he rejects the conventional norms of social behavior during the feast, a prescribed practice for strengthening kinship bonds. In the Anglo-Saxon canon, feasts are an integral part of community-building. In *Beowulf*, feasts are occasions for thanes to find strength in their leader through shared feasting and physical closeness.

¹⁹ For a detailed explanation on the use of the "Hero on the Beach"-scene in the Anglo-Saxon canon, see "The Hero on the Beach: An Example of Composition by Theme in Anglo-Saxon Poetry" by D. K. Crowne (in *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 61 [1960], 371)

²⁰ *Aldorlēase* explicitly means "without a *male* leader." Thus, to the Anglo-Saxons, Judith does not usurp the patriarchy, but fills an important power vacuum.

Violations and interruptions of such intimate events, such as Grendel's attacks, are tragic and disrespectful (*Beowulf* 115-125).²¹ Holofernes' veil limits his thanes' access to their king at an occasion where establishing intimacy through shared fellowship is paramount. His divergence from the established ritual of feasting negates the noble purpose of the feast: to remind those present that they are one warrior unit and that together they are safe and can conquer others. Instead, Holofernes and his *fleohnet* send the message to the thanes that their leader is skeptical of their loyalty and has thus limited his physical proximity to them. This physical and social distance between Holofernes and his thanes creates distrust and spreads unease at the feast.

Holofernes' physical and social isolation furthermore intensifies the consequences of his intemperance with alcohol and women and limits his thanes' ability to physical protect him. After he falls asleep in the presence of Judith, the thanes "beat a hasty retreat" (*Wiggend stōpen*, 69), leaving a woman alone with their king's unconscious body. While it is understandable that they would underestimate a woman like Judith, a mere prisoner of war, the culture of fear Holofernes fosters prevents his thanes from monitoring the situation from a close enough proximity to tell if their king is in distress and from responding in a timely manner after his murder. The poet describes the thanes as "temperamental/moody and mead-drunken" (*mōðig ond medugāl*, 26) and Holofernes as "wicked" (*inwidda*, 28). Despite their military success, the conquering Assyrians are unhappy; their celebration feast is moody and mournful: The Assyrians are a collection of individuals sadly drinking alone. When Holofernes allows his thanes to bring Judith to his bed, the poem pauses to remind the audience of his fracturing relationship with his followers, describing Holofernes as "oath-breaker" (*ðone wærlogan*, 71). Even in the morning, as the thanes assemble outside Holofernes' tent, they are "filled with dark thoughts"

²¹ See, for example, the level of sorrow in Heorot due to their inability to celebrate without bringing on Grendel's wrath in *Beowulf* 147-150.

(*sweorcendferðe*, 269) and in sorrow even before they find Holofernes' corpse. The poet notes that they are "gnashing their teeth" (*ond grīstbitian*, 271) while they wait outside his tent, hesitant to disturb him:

Holofernes: they were only thinking
To their own lord to make known the fight
Ere terror on him should take its seat...
They all imagined that the prince of men and the handsome maid
In the beautiful tent were together
[Hōlofernus. Hogedon āninga
hyra hlāforde, hilde bodian
Āer ðon ðe him se egesa, on ufan sæte,
mægen Ebrēa. Mynton ealle
þæt se beorna brego, ond sēo beorhte mægð] (250-255)

Herbison notes, "in place of an organized assembly for battle under the instructions of their commander, there is a disorderly congregation of drunken, dispirited, and leaderless warriors" (16-17). Importantly, the thanes' unwillingness to wake Holofernes after a night of drinking and carousing allows Judith and her handmaiden to escape. It is apparent that Holofernes' active isolation has rendered his thanes incapable of protecting the man they swore to protect. Their leader's breach of the *comitatus* in turn leads to the thanes failing to keep their vows of *comitatus* and Holofernes is slain.²²

²² *Comitatus* is a Germanic term for both a lord's followers and the deep social bond of reliance between warriors and their lords. See "The Wife's Lament" in Bruce Mitchell's *A Guide to Old English* for an example of how this Greek origin term works in Germanic societies (264).

The poet uses Holofernes' vices of wine and women and his thanes' overindulgence in alcohol to point out how the effects of vices increase when those in sensitive positions of authority are self-indulgent. According to Magennis, some contemporary Anglo-Saxon religious texts vilify the consumption of alcohol, but overall, evidence from other texts shows that the Anglo-Saxons did not view alcoholic consumption as fundamentally sinful, but rather "symbolic of good communal life" (167). Anglo-Saxon texts, when they do condemn the overconsumption of alcohol, consistently cite alcohol for its effects on lessening the mind's capacity to reason. The Anglo-Saxon *Judith*, a religious text, offers no condemnation of alcohol. However, the Anglo-Saxons did recognize that overindulgence in vices, especially by those in sensitive leadership positions, could lead to a collapse of social order. Haruko Momma notes that Holofernes' weaknesses, wine and women, are not overtly fatal but that "these [particular] character flaws are all the more troublesome when they are found in kings and princes because they are likely to interfere with public affairs" (61). Thus, Holofernes' problem is not that he has ordinary vices but that his extraordinary position exposes those beneath him to the consequences of his vices. Godfrey notes that the *Judith* poem is obsessed with "intellect and reasoning" as building blocks for harmony and community preservation. The Assyrians, with their insensible king and "brave but drunk comrades" (*ealle his wēagesiðas*, 16), embody the greatest fears of Anglo-Saxon civilization: "men whose minds and judgments are clouded by emotion, desire, drink, or simply by the trappings of civilization, to their detriment and disaster" (12). Thus, the poet uses the Assyrians' overindulgence and unhappiness to contrast with the Bethulians' sober joy when they discipline themselves under Judith's warrior saint authority and are able to "cut through [the Assyrian's] *phalanx*" (*scildburh scæron*, 304). The use of an Anglo-Saxon equivalent to *phalanx* is telling of the Assyrian's disunity. The *phalanx* is a mass military formation dating back to the

Greeks that requires immense troop cooperation and precision to work effectively.²³ The failure of the *phalanx* demonstrates the extent of disunity amongst the Assyrians: they cannot unite even when their lives are at risk.

Holofernes' overindulgence in women is complicated by Judith's absence at the feast. The Vulgate Holofernes is encouraged to "imbibe more than his wont because of Judith's encouraging words and her alluring beauty" (Momma 61-62). The Vulgate Judith thus takes an active role in delivering Holofernes into a state of unconsciousness. By contrast, the Anglo-Saxon Judith is absent from the feast; she is still in sitting in a tent somewhere in the camp. In the Anglo-Saxon *Judith*, Holofernes' intemperance is thus trivialized from a masculine need to impress a beautiful woman to plain overindulgence: "he is simply, and consistently, a bad king" because he allows his vices to get the best of him, and, to add insult to injury, through his encouragement, his followers overindulge in his vices as well (Garner 175). Behind his *fleohnet*, Holofernes has no one to temper his desire for drink as he becomes more "full of wine-joy" (*goldwine gumena*, 22). Godfrey comments, "it is intellectual suicide that is Holofernes' real tragedy, rather than the sword's edge" (15). Thus, the *Judith* poet places his drunkenness and its consequences firmly upon his own shoulders: Holofernes' intemperance and unconsciousness serve to give Judith the opportunity to seize power in the tent.

Holofernes' overindulgence of wine already makes him a bad leader by clouding his reason but it also serves to incapacitate him and unhinge his gender role at the time of his death. Alcohol, a form of poison, renders Holofernes impotent as a man, unable to rape Judith. Unconscious, he provides Judith the opportunity to strike him down and to take his power. The

²³ The phalanx, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is "a line or array of battle; specifically, a body of heavy-armed infantry drawn up in close order, with shields touching and long spears overlapping. Now also more widely: any compact body of troops, police, etc."

tension within the bedroom scene, Judith's absolute fear that he will awaken, reminds us of the importance of alcohol in Holofernes' demise. After praying, Judith enters a state of mental tranquility and becomes "roomy in mind" (*hyre rūme on mode*, 97), while Holofernes "cannot take any counsel / within his witless place" (*swā hē nyste ræde nānne / on gewitlocan*, 67-68) and rests "in a swoon" (*on swīman læg*, 69). Reading alcohol as a poison furthermore suggests a revision in our reading of the assassination scene, with poison as a woman's preferred weapon for murder, we now see the irony: the weapons she uses to dispatch Holofernes are both feminine (poison) and masculine (sword). Judith symbolically drugs and rapes him, appropriating his power and effectively reversing the power dynamic (Godfrey 22). Thus, the overconsumption of alcohol at Holofernes' camp is framed by the *Judith* poet as a caution to the Anglo-Saxons "to define themselves and their cultural ideals in contrast with [Holofernes]: not drunken and carousing, not violent and untrustworthy, ... and most importantly, not foolish" (Powell 6). Judith's ability to kill Holofernes shows that the position of greater power is not occupied by the physically stronger male king, but by the weaker, sober prisoner of war. In order to have that power and keep it, one must fulfill the requirements for good leadership and actively guard that position of power. If not, that power will be violently taken away.

The language of the poem highlights and contrasts Judith and Holofernes' gendered leadership styles: "the repetition of *mannan* and the use of feminine pronouns [*hyre*, 128, 149 and *hēo*, 75, 105] draw [the audience's] attention to the male/female contrast" as the poem progresses (Herbison 12). The lesson of Judith's usurpation of Holofernes is that it is not enough to be a conquering male king; Holofernes' poor character and the Assyrians' estrangement from each other leave them vulnerable to a common woman endowed with faith and good leadership skills. In "Meditating on Men and Monsters: A Reconsideration of the Thematic Unity of the *Beowulf*

Manuscript,” Kathryn Powell argues that the true conflict going on in *Beowulf* and *Judith* that binds them together in *The Nowell Codex* is leadership: Beowulf and Judith’s good leadership of men and their opponent’s isolation from men. By placing himself on a “bed suspended” (*bed āhongen*, 48) overlooking his thanes, Holofernes appropriates the “gaze of... God, who is unseen but views,” and alludes to the monstrous imagery of the *panotii*, magical creatures who hide their faces with their ears that were “like fans” and “flee from the gaze of men” in a text from the same codex called *The Wonders of the East* (Powell 13). His creation of a panoptic structure within the feast tent also suggests that Holofernes sees himself as above men, but in a diabolical way. The poet strengthens this image by calling Holofernes “the devilish one” (*deofulcunda*, 61) and notes that in death he is “heavily chained in the fire of hell” (*hearde gehæfted, in hellebyrne*, 116). While Holofernes seeks an almost physical equivalence to God, Judith’s model of leadership is informed by her role as a woman, by her membership to the Bethulian community, and by her spiritual closeness to God. She holds no claim to the divine like Holofernes; instead, her constant exhortations to God for aid and her willingness to ask her compatriots for their consent indicate that “unlike Holofernes... [she] demonstrates no wish to achieve power by appropriating the divine gaze and no need to hide herself from view” (Powell 14). Thus, while Judith is limited by the rules of female leadership, she transcends an invisible *fleohnet* set up by her community by restoring their closeness to God. In *Beowulf*, Grendel’s Mother and Thryth, the Queen of Offa are both condemned by their authors for their community-destroying actions. Thryth, who attacks any man below her who look at her directly, is particularly important in connection to the effects of Judith’s rebellion against Bethulian authority:

In the case Thryth, female insurrection leads to even more direct assertions of its undesirability: her attempts to counter the unsolicited attentions of men with

violence give rise to the narrator's condemnatory remark that... such is not a queenly custom for a woman to perform'... [She is not] permitted to persist in her transgression of gender boundaries. Thryth is repatriated into conventional femininity by her marriage to Offa. (Klein 108)

Thryth is taken down by peace-weaving and Judith escapes a twisted form of it: rather than condemn Judith for her violence, the poet allows her to escape this "repatriation" by coaching her violence in community building. Judith's violence, while it does bring her warrior king-like fame, is secondary to the unity she reignites in Bethulia. Thus, she escapes condemnation by the poet and the audience.

It could be argued that Holofernes' inept leadership in the *Judith* poem is illuminated so intensely that it diminishes Judith's heroism. In her article "The Participation of Women in the Anglo-Saxon World," Brookbanks admits that Judith's "warrior position is subverted as God is presented as ultimately responsible for her behavior and as Holofernes' self-destructive conduct allows Judith to kill him less than heroically" (31). However, Holofernes' inept leadership only diminishes Judith's heroism if one ignores the diabolical level of evil he reaches in his position in the hierarchy. He appropriates the sacred image of God and hides from society behind a *fleohnet* so adeptly that a common woman like Judith is able to take advantage of the panoptical structure he created, using it to conceal her actions from his *comitatus*.

It is Judith's wisdom, her devotion to God, and her willingness to accept the limits of her own courage to take on a role she is clearly uncomfortable appropriating. The poet reminds the audience of Judith's heroism by noting that she does not want to become a warrior because that means she must murder, an unwomanly act; her "greatest terror" (*hēhstan brogan*, 4) is that of a wine-soaked Holofernes: the personification of bad masculine warrior leadership. Judith is a

frightened woman in a dangerous and unfamiliar situation, and she is fully aware of it. Judith's prayers highlight her anxiety:

My heart is inflamed, and my mind is sad
I am filled with oppressing sorrow; Forgive me, Lord of Heaven
And grant me victory and fearless faith, so that I will with this sword be
Able to cut down this murderer, Grant to me, my safety
[heorte onhæted ond hige geōmer
swyðe mid sorgum gedrēfed. Forgif mē, swegles Ealdor,
sigor ond soðne gelēafan, þæt ic mid þys sweorde mōte
gehēawan þysne morðres bryttan; geunne mē mīnra gesynta] (87-90)

Her prayers become more passionate as she draws the sword over Holofernes' bed and God imbues her with the courage to complete the act. "Avenge now, mighty Lord... I am so angry in mind / So heated in my breast" (*Gewrec nū, mihtig Dryhten ... þæt mē ys þus torne on mode / hate on hreðre mīnum... ædre mid elne onbryrde*, 92-94), she prays to God right before she strikes. Judith's prayers highlight the level of danger she is in, the need for courage from God, and her complete trust in God to follow through with the murder.

While Holofernes demonstrates poor masculine leadership by pushing away his *comitatus* with a *fleohnet*, Judith demonstrates strong feminine leadership by calling on God for assistance, collaborating with her "handmaiden" (*sīnra*, 132), and finally extending that spirit of cooperation to her fellow Bethulians. This reinforces the message that Judith's actions, while rebellious, are good for the community by re-establishing unity and cohesion amongst a society broken by invasion and crippled by *aldorlēase*. Anglo-Saxon heroes cannot be lone assassins; they must collaborate with another in service to the community. The heroic collaboration generally

includes a male superior and his male subordinate. For example, in *Beowulf*, the titular character travels to Heorot in a boat filled with allies, and later a young Wiglaf comes to his aid in his final battle with the dragon (*Beowulf* 2602- 2668). Anglo-Saxon characters that choose to isolate themselves like Grendel, Grendel's Mother, and Holofernes are monstrous, and their actions are seen as tests of a community's ability to unite and collaborate. By leaving Bethulia and killing Holofernes at God's orders, Judith is as violent, disobedient, and reliant on supernatural power as Grendel's Mother but she uses her power to fulfill a heroic female responsibility of collaboration and community-building. The emphasis on collaboration is particularly important because of the primary role women serve in Anglo-Saxon literature as peace-weavers destined to build community for a common goal. In "The Madwoman in the Attic", while speaking on the subject of agency in a patriarchal society, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar state that a woman who rebels too much against society's wishes is no longer an angel but a monster (1932).

Judith escapes becoming a monster like Grendel's Mother by collaborating with her handmaiden and creating an intimate connection with her that later extends to the other Bethulians. This collaboration between the two women is unique in the Anglo-Saxon canon. In "Female Community in the Old English *Judith*," Mary Dockray-Miller notes the importance of this collaboration: Judith is "the only female figure in Old English poetry that works with another women to achieve a common goal" (167). Judith carries the sword and commits the murder, but her handmaiden carries Holofernes' severed head back to Bethulia and displays it to the Bethulian community (124-128). Because Judith and her handmaiden are in a tense situation charged with the threat of sex and violence, they cast themselves into roles relative to one another that are free of patriarchal paradigms. The text reads:

The cunning maid, [Judith] quickly put

The general's head, covered in blood
In the [very] vessel that her handmaiden
The fair-face woman, had brought with food for them.
Now with renowned virtues, they left and returned home
The head, so gory when it was given in hand
For the thoughtful-in-mind to bear home,
Judith gave it to her maid and they went out from that place

Both as women of bold courage

[þā sēo snotere mægð snūde gebrohte

þæs herewædeðan hēafod swā blōdig

on ðām fætelse þe hyre foregenga

blāchlēor ides, hyra bēgea nest

ðēawum geðungen, þyder on lædde

ond hit þā swā heolfrig hyre on hond āgeaf

higeðoncolre, hām tō berenne

Iūdith gingran sīnre. Eodon ðā gegnum þanone] (125-134)

The poet does not describe the handmaiden's character as thoroughly as Judith's or bask the handmaiden in the same supernatural light of *ælfscinu*, but the handmaiden is, at least, "fair-faced" (*blāchlēor ides*, 129) and "thoughtful-in-mind" (*þancolmōde*, 131) and delegated such important responsibilities as carrying Holofernes' head during their escape. Dockray-Miller emphasizes the strength of Judith and her handmaiden's bond, stating that "in the female and feminine community the text creates between Judith and her maid, Judith's gender performance actually overturns the masculine, patriarchal paradigm of sex and violence" (166). Despite

overcoming patriarchal paradigms, the community Judith creates with her handmaiden still has a hierarchy and resembles the patriarchal model of heroic partnership between a male subordinate and his superior officer but it additionally highlights their similitude: they “went out from that place / Both as women of bold courage” (*higeðoncolre, hām tō berenne / Iūðith gingran sīnre. Ēodon ðā gegnum þanone*, 133-134). The Anglo-Saxons see community-building and cooperation as a feminine duty. Judith fulfills this by bringing her handmaiden into the action and entrusting her with Holofernes’ decapitated head, making her into an improvised standard-bearer upon their return.

Along with the Anglo-Saxon peace-weaving narrative and the heroic collaboration narrative, the *Judith* poet reinterprets, as mentioned above, the traditional Anglo-Saxon scene of the “Hero on the Beach.” D. K. Crowne usefully describes this scene in which the male hero returns at the end of his mission to his supporters on the shore with a bright light behind him to live out the remainder of his days in peace (371). In the Anglo-Saxon *Judith*, the heroine’s return fits into this scene: she arrives at dawn, accompanied by the light of morning, and the walls of Bethulia “fairly shine” (*weallas blīcan*, 137). However, unlike the traditional Hero on the Beach, Judith is portrayed not on an open shore but knocking at her own city’s gate where she must first beckon to the people of Bethulia and ask them to accept her back into the fold. Her rebellion and murder of Holofernes make such acceptance necessary. Thus, Judith waits at the gate until the people of Bethulia have assembled. She then bids her handmaiden to show Holofernes’ head to the crowd. It is important to note here that her audience is not the Bethulian high leadership, but her soon-to-be *comitatus*, her fellow Bethulian people. The text reads

Together, men and women, in flocks and heaps,
As a mass and throng, they hurried and ran

To meet the Lord's maid, by the thousands and thousands

The old and young both

[*weras wīf somod, wornum on hēapum*

ōrēatum on ðryrmum þrungon ond urnon

ongēan ða þēodnes mægð þūsendmælum

ealde ge geonge] (163-165)

The display of Holofernes' head convinces the Bethulians to accept her as their leader and follow her command to go and rout the Assyrians.

In *Beowulf*, Grendel and Grendel's Mother's heads are both displayed as trophies reminding those present of the act of valor performed and as "humiliations of the supernaturally evil creature it came from" (Klein 97). Judith uses the head to symbolize a change of fortunes, a demonstration of God's defeat of the invincible invader, Holofernes. The text describes Judith as encouraging the Bethulians to look "upon the most hateful / heathen hero's head, look on / Holofernes, now deprived of life" (*on ðæs lāðestan / hæðenes heaðorinces hēafod starian / Hōlofernus unlyfigendes*, 178-180). Holofernes' severed head restores the Bethulians' faith in God and revises Judith's rebel status, establishing her as the new leader of Bethulia. A key detail here is that Judith does not do anymore direct fighting. By staying behind and only verbally initiating the next journey—her troops' mission to rout the Assyrians—Judith fulfills the crucial last step of the "Hero on the Beach"-scene. Judith is able to promote both action and community through her speech. Bethulia is her final destination.

The absence of current leadership in Bethulia in the Anglo-Saxon *Judith* facilitates Judith's rise to power. It is no accident that in the *Judith* poem, admirable male characters such as Ozias, the ruler of Bethulia, and Nebuchadnezzar, the king of the Assyrians, are absent from

the narrative. Not only does their absence intensify the male-female conflict between Judith and Holofernes—one a common but righteous woman, the other an arrogant member of the Assyrian nobility—but it also highlights the crisis of *aldorlēase*. The removal of Ozias is especially important because it creates a power vacuum in Bethulia. However, the absence of Nebuchadnezzar should likewise be noted as it elevates Holofernes' position of power and leaves him as the sole, and, as mentioned above, unfit ruler amongst his warrior thanes. *Aldorlēase* in the *Judith* poem furthermore allows Judith to take political and social control over the Bethulians without her behavior appearing unnatural. In her examination of gendered language in Anglo-Saxon literature, Carol Clover finds that “early Scandinavians viewed sexual difference less as a biological given than as a product of cultural assumptions about the body based on social rank and gendered social roles” (363). Thus, when Judith returns to the gates of Bethulia with Holofernes' head, she is greeted like a conquering hero by the “men and women... the old and the young” (*weras wīf somod... ealde ge geonge*, 163, 165) who accept her as the heir apparent to the leadership of Bethulia. Kelly Guenther adds that the Bethulian army of whom Judith takes control is “an army of warriors, apparently devoid of any male leadership, who do need her direction” (9). That Judith, a woman, speaks, in portions from lines 152 to 197, to an assembled body of mixed genders and classes is notable in a poem where, as Godfrey notes “besides the narrator, Judith, and Holofernes, the only other speaker in the poem is the unfortunate Assyrian who discovers Holofernes' headless corpse” (12). Judith's command over all those present is seen in lines 186-196:

With God's help, Now I and every man
Who dwells in this city will earnestly pray
Of shield-bearing warriors, that you will quickly

Hasten to fight...

Your foes are now

Condemned to death.

[*þurh Godes fultum. Nū ic gumena gehwæne*

þyssa burglēoda bidden wylle,

randwiggendra, þæt gē recene ēowe...

Fynd syndon ēowere

Gedēmed to dēaðe] (186-188, 195-196)

Judith promises to the troops that if they become a “band of the brave” (*þā wearð snelra werod*, 199) and serve as “men and comrades” (*secgas ond gesīðas*, 201), they will defeat Assyrians. She assures them, with the head as proof, that God has not abandoned the Bethulians if they reunite as one, like she and her handmaiden did. There is no hope for the Assyrians since their “head,” both literally and figuratively, is no more. Judith’s actions and words upon her return are the “catalyst for the subsequent action” (Guenther 10). The Assyrians must fight leaderless against a united army. The power of a band of warriors under female leadership over a band of warriors with none is apparent. When faced with the Bethulian warriors, the Assyrians “throw down their weapons and retreat in sorrow” (*on flēam sceacan. Him mon feaht on last*, 291), breaking the communal *comitatus* for good by “fleeing in all directions” (*sigore geweorðod*, 298). This conclusion is unique to the Anglo-Saxon *Judith*. In the Vulgate *Judith*, the Assyrians flee back to their own lands after discovering that their king is dead; they never engage in battle with the Bethulian forces.

Judith’s swift ascent from prisoner of war to assassin to military leader is made possible by her femininity. Judith demonstrates no military prowess: her clumsiness with the blade

demonstrates both her lack of skill and the divine miracle of Holofernes' silent execution. The poet's description of Judith's handiwork indicates she is neither strong nor skilled enough to wield the "sharp-edged sword / hardened by war-strokes" (*scearpne mēce / scūrum heardne*, 78-79) to deftly sever Holofernes' neck in one blow. Using the *Maxims*, a collection of Anglo-Saxon aphorisms similar to those found in the Book of Psalms and Proverbs, as a measurement of ideal Anglo-Saxon womanhood, Guenther notes that Judith never "loses her essential femininity... but follows them to the letter" by extending her advice to the Bethulian warriors in the same way an Anglo-Saxon woman would be expected to extend advice to her kinsmen (12). While killing Holofernes marks her active entrance into war, Judith's speech to the dismayed inhabitants of Bethulia becomes an oral manifestation of God's divine will. As she ascends, the poet emphasizes her gender by describing her in martial terms as "Judith in war" (*Iūdiþ æt gūðe*, 123) and in religious terms as the "Lord's maid" (*þēodnes mægð*, 165). As a military leader, Judith serves as motivating voice for the troops by reminding them that "your Creator is kind ... to you, is success / glorious at hand" (*Ēow ys Metod bliðe... þæt ēow ys wuldorblæd / torhtlic tōweard*, 154-156). She willingly abandons her status as a soldier of the Lord to become his orator. Once more she occupies the role of spectator. In "*Judith and the Rhetoric of Heroism in Anglo-Saxon England*," Christopher Fee argues that because Judith defeats and decapitates Holofernes, "she is relegated to the status of a figure-head," able to use her femininity to unite the people and inspire the troops (406). Fee notes that Judith ascends quickly from a dynamic youthful female to an androgynous mix of warrior and saintly "inspirational" leader, marked with wisdom and age: "Judith's own words are most telling in their shift from those of a wily leader imparted with a conspirational air [in the enemy camp], to those of a chaste virgin saint, meant to inspire with much-needed courage otherwise competent warriors" (402). Judith's

retrieval of Holofernes' head and the display of it, in turn, inspire the Bethulians to move from inactive to active, even as her own role is reversed and she remains behind in Bethulia with the rest of the women and children.

Conclusion

In his analysis of the *Judith* poem, Herbison notes that the poet's emphasis of the religious element in her struggle casts her as an "instrument rather than agent;" he remarks that "although she wins a victory over a powerful military leader, God is the heroic power behind Judith, and it is to God that epithets of rulership are applied" (13). Several references to God as a "Judge" (*Dema*, 83) "Lord" (*Dryhten*, 59), "Savior" (*Nergend*, 94), "Creator" (*Scyppend*, 61), and "Almighty Son" (*Bearn Alwadan*, 92) serve to reinforce Judith's holiness and her bond with God as his servant. Brookbanks thinks Judith's deep connection to God and her modesty at her accomplishments implies that as a woman, she "would be unable to participate in heroic society and achieve warrior status without the guidance of a skillful and powerful male leader," in this case, God (27). Thus, the poet calls into question whether Judith ever holds any real power as she thrives only under a dominant male hegemonic leadership and operates throughout in a patriarchal society.

I see Judith's modesty as a way for the poet to emphasize the difference between Judith's good feminine leadership and Holofernes' badly broken masculine leadership. While Holofernes appropriates divine imagery through his high bed and *fleohnet*, Judith is specifically named a "servant of the Lord" (*wæs Nergendes / þeowen*, 73-74). And whenever the Bethulians suggest that she is venerable, she turns their gestures around and frames them as gifts to her as a thane to her lord, God:

Treasure, rings, and jewels, to the fair lady
The wise gave to her. Yet Judith said,
“Glory to the Lord of Hosts,” who honored her with
Fame in heaven and earth too
Reward in the glory of Heaven, because she held on to the true faith
In the Almighty
[bēaga ond beorhtra maðma, hī þæt þære beorhtan idese
āgēafon gearoþnocolre. Ealles ðæs Iūdith sægde
wuldor weroda Dryhtne þe hyre weorðmynde geaf
mærðe on modan rīce, swylce ēac mēde on heofonum
sigorlēan in swegles wuldre, þæs þe heo āhte sōðne gelēfan
ā tō ðam Ælmihtigan] (339-346)

Even when the Bethulians lay treasure at her feet, she insists that it is God who deserves all the praise for their collective success. Thus, as a holy leader, Judith continues to turn masculine signs of power into symbols of feminine gratitude. Judith took on the rhetoric of a battlefield warrior by acting violently, but because her gender played a key role in her success, that violence occurred in private. In the public arena, she instead plays the role of warrior saint, redirecting her people’s tributes toward God, noting how her gender took a role in her deeds but second to the happy coincidences created by God. The Anglo-Saxon *Judith* thus tests the acceptable limits of both female heroism and female leadership. Judith’s behavior raises fundamental questions about the limits the poet sets for women to operate within the Anglo-Saxon patriarchy. The poet’s careful lexical choices frame Judith and the violence she enacts as acceptable because she is a holy servant of God, obediently acting out his orders. And Judith meets Anglo-Saxon

expectations of women leaders by promoting goodness with her speech and by promoting unity through collaboration and cooperation. Because the violence she commits is for the greater good of her community, she is ultimately accepted back into the fold and elevated even to a position of power. Judith might behave monstrously like the villainous warrior woman Grendel's Mother, but her intimate relationship with God and his sanctioning of her behavior justify her actions. It furthermore allows her to interrupt the traditional peace-weaving narrative, to highlight its inherent shortcomings, and to revise her own story into a rape narrative, thus demonstrating the Anglo-Saxon's ability to accept a woman who acts monstrously against a man and rises to power if both the situation and the woman fulfill certain requirements. A woman may take power over a man if he has failed in his duties. And, if that woman does not usurp another man with her heroism but instead fills an already existing power vacuum and she furthermore promotes Anglo-Saxon values of cooperation and unity, then she may have dominion over both men and women. Finally, if that female leader continues to wrap herself in feminine modesty, continually framing herself as a servant of God, then she may keep that power. The poet inscribes these necessary circumstances onto the *Judith* poem so that Judith can justifiably commit murder and assume leadership in Bethulia. The Anglo-Saxon *Judith* poem exemplifies the complicated dance between the sacred and the profane, the violent and the peaceful, the active and the docile, and the public and the private that Anglo-Saxon women must perform if they are to attain prominence. Judith could easily be a villain in this story and, like Grendel's Mother, be exiled for her actions. It is her intimate relationship with God and deference to his will that save both her and Bethulia. Thus, in the Anglo-Saxon *Judith*, Judith is androgynous, a virgin and a widow, a pagan and a Christian, a creator of violence and an instigator of peace: she is a warrior saint.

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