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Christopher R. Fee  
*Gettysburg College*

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# 'Judith' and the Rhetoric of Heroism in Anglo-Saxon England

## **Abstract**

The Old English *Judith* differs from the *Liber Judith* of the Vulgate at several crucial points, and in one particularly important way. In the Vulgate version of the story, Judith is a heroine in every sense of the word: she is a tropological symbol of Chastity at battle with Licentiousness, an allegorical symbol of the Church in its constant and eventually triumphant battle with Satan, and an inspirational figure who infuses her warriors with much needed courage and confidence; but the Vulgate Judith is also, in a very real sense, the agent by which God's will is executed and the Hebrews are saved. In the Vulgate version, the children of Israel could not possibly defeat the vast and mighty armies of the Assyrians without such divine intervention. Judith is central to the victory of the Jews, not only in a symbolic sense, but also in a practical one: she devises a plan, she implements it, and she, displaying the severed head of Holofernes to her people, explains just how they might achieve the impossible. It is according to her plan that the Assyrian generals discover the headless body of their leader before the battle, and the pandemonium and disarray which ensue as a result of this discovery are central to that plan, and to the Hebrew victory. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Old English, Heroism

## **Disciplines**

English Language and Literature | European History | Literature in English, British Isles

JUDITH AND THE RHETORIC OF HEROISM IN  
ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

The Old English *Judith* differs from the *Liber Iudith* of the Vulgate at several crucial points, and in one particularly important way. In the Vulgate version of the story, Judith is a heroine in every sense of the word: she is a tropological symbol of Chastity at battle with Licentiousness, an allegorical symbol of the Church in its constant and eventually triumphant battle with Satan, and an inspirational figure who infuses her warriors with much needed courage and confidence; but the Vulgate Judith is also, in a very real sense, the agent by which God's will is executed and the Hebrews are saved. In the Vulgate version, the children of Israel could not possibly defeat the vast and mighty armies of the Assyrians without such divine intervention. Judith is central to the victory of the Jews, not only in a symbolic sense, but also in a practical one: she devises a plan, she implements it, and she, displaying the severed head of Holofernes to her people, explains just how they might achieve the impossible. It is according to her plan that the Assyrian generals discover the headless body of their leader before the battle, and the pandemonium and disarray which ensue as a result of this discovery are central to that plan, and to the Hebrew victory.

In the Old English *Judith*, however, this central role is, in effect, marginalized to the detriment of Judith's personal importance to the Hebrew victory, but to the benefit of the valor and ability of her warriors. In contrast to the Vulgate heroine, the Old English Judith acts more in the capacity of a noble figurehead whose audacious behavior shames and inspires her warriors into similar feats of courage, than in the capacity of a war-chief whose daring plan offers a slim chance of survival. Though her role as an intermediary acting on God's behalf is in no way questioned, this role is severely diminished: it is no longer her action which ensures the victory of the Bethulians, but rather the reaction inspired by it. Judith does, in the Old English poem, devise the strategy, she does behead Holofernes, and she does exhort her people to battle; their victory, however, seems entirely possible long before the Assyrians discover the headless body, a discovery which is not made, in this version, until the outcome of the battle is already a foregone conclusion. Judith does display personal heroism and courage in her beheading of Holofernes, but that act of heroism in itself is not, in the Old English text, sufficient to insure the victory of the Hebrews. There is implicit in this poem the distinct probability that the Jews had in them all along the ability to succeed, and that all that they needed was a prod from Judith to overcome their enemies. This is a distinct alteration of the Vulgate.

I find this alteration to be provocative; why, exactly, did the Anglo-Saxon author choose to rearrange the order of the events in his source, and why did he create Bethulian warriors who are so much more competent than their Vulgate counterparts? These are questions of more than a little note. It is appropriate to describe the divergence between this poem and its source in the terms of 'conflict', as different types and representations of violence play such crucial roles in both texts; further, this violence spills over into the actual emendation performed by the Anglo-Saxon poet.

The Old English *Judith* first begins to move significantly away from the Vulgate when, after the decapitation of Holofernes, Judith addresses the Bethulians and hangs the bloody head upon the walls. In the Vulgate version, it is clear that the Israelite attack is a *feint*, and that it will be the discovery of the headless body by the Assyrians which will ensure a Hebrew victory:

Dixit autem Iudith ad omnem populum: audite me fratres suspendite caput hoc super muros nostros.

Et erit cum exierit sol accipiat unusquisque arma sua et exite cum impetu non ut descendatis deorsum sed quasi impetum facientes.

Tunc exploratores necesse erit ut fugiant ad principem suum excitandum ad pugnam.

Cumque duces eorum cucurrerint ad tabernaculum Holofernis et invenerint eum truncum in suo sanguine volutatum decidet super eos timor.

Cumque cognoveritis fugere illos ite post illos securi quoniam Dominus conteret eos sub pedibus vestris. 14:1-5<sup>1</sup>

[Judith said to all the people: Hear me brothers, hang this head from our walls. And as soon as the sun rises, take up your arms and rush out impetuously, not as going out beneath, but as making an assault. Then the guards must rush to their prince and wake him for the battle. And when the leaders of them run to the tent of Holofernes, and find his body floating in his blood, fear will fall over them. Then you shall know they are fleeing; go after them securely, for the Lord will destroy them under your feet.]

The plan here is quite clear, as is who is responsible for any chance which the Bethulians might have for victory. Knowing that her people stand no chance at all in outright battle against the army led by Holofernes, Judith has devised and implemented a daring plan designed to leave that army shocked and dismayed. It is only in such a situation that the Bethulians might hope to 'mop up' the disorganized and despairing remnants of the enemy army.<sup>2</sup> Judith, then, is most certainly responsible for the Bethulian victory in the Vulgate: if she had not beheaded Holofernes, if she had not instructed her townsmen in the role which they were to play, and if the headless corpse of Holofernes had not been found by the Assyrian generals *before* the battle, the Bethulians would certainly have been destroyed; they could never have hoped to defeat the overwhelming Assyrian host without the action of Judith. In the Vulgate version Judith is an inspiration to her people, to be sure; but she also plays the active role through which victory may be won.

It is clear that in the Old English *Judith* this role of hero is modified from an active one to one largely inspirational in nature; Judith's own words are most telling in their shift from those of a wily leader imparted with a conspiratorial air, to those of a chaste virgin saint, meant to inspire with much-needed courage otherwise competent warriors:

(Beginning from where her speech diverges, after she has displayed the head)

bord for breostum	...berað linde forð,
scire helmas	ond byrnhomas,
fyllan folctogan	in sceaðena gemong,
fæge frumgaras.	fagum sweordum,
gedemed to deaðe,	Fynd syndon eowere
tir æt tohtan,	ond ge dom agon,
mihtig dryhten	swa eow getacnod hafað
	purh mine hand (lines 191-8) <sup>3</sup> (ll. 191-198)

[Bear forth, among the enemy, shields before breasts, coats of mail and shining helms; fell the leaders, the doomed chieftains, with bloodstained swords. Your enemies are deemed as dead, and, as the mighty Lord has shown you through my hand, you may gain renown, glory through battle.]

Here Judith underscores her role as a vessel of God's might through which the Bethulian warriors are given a sign that they may go forth and 'gain renown' through victory in battle. It seems clear that such a victory is a realistic goal for them, even if the discovery of Holofernes's body does not take place until the battle is already won. Judith's mission is simply to instill the Israelites with the proper zeal.

'Zeal' would not be enough to spur the Bethulians of the Vulgate to victory, however. In the Vulgate version, the Bethulians are not only incapable of defeating the Assyrians in battle – they are held in utter contempt by their enemies, who refer to them as 'mice':

Intrate et excitate illum quoniam egressi mures de cavernis suis ausi sunt provocare ad proelium. (14:12)

[Enter and wake him, for the mice coming out of their holes have dared to challenge us to battle.]

In conjunction with the reordering of events which effectively limits Judith's heroic role, we see a pronounced alteration in the Old English version of the Assyrian perception of the Bethulian *warriors*: here they are a force to be reckoned with, enemies worthy of respect who have finally risen in wrath. Clearly, they are not the timid 'rodents' of the Vulgate:

(Both the Vulgate and Old English passages are taken from the point in the narrative just prior to the discovery of Holofernes's headless body.)

	Hogedon aninga
hyra hlaford	hilde bodian,
ærðon ðe him se egesa	on ufan sæte
mægen Ebreal (lines 250-3)	(ll. 250-253)

[They intended at once to make the battle known to their lord, before the terror, the might of the Hebrews, oppressed them from without.]

This passage occurs later in the Old English narrative than the analogous one does in the Vulgate source, because in the Old English *Judith* the rout of the Assyrians begins before the discovery of the body; this alteration in timing serves to make manifest the distinction between the Vulgate portrayal of inept Bethu-

lian warriors and the Old English portrayal of competent ones.

That the Old English poem diverges at points from its Vulgate source is certain; why it diverges has been the subject of some debate. For Guy Bourquin this divergence is representative of 'a distinctive mark of the treatment of heroism in Old English Biblical and religious poetry';<sup>4</sup> he claims that heroism is always 'shared' in these poems.<sup>5</sup> According to John P. Hermann, this alteration is designed to facilitate an allegorical reading of the poem. Hermann is [primarily] concerned with the debate surrounding the *Liber Iudith* at the time of the writing of the Old English poem, and feels that there was a general shift from a tropological interpretation of the poem to an allegorical one.<sup>6</sup> Both David Chamberlain and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen agree with Hermann that the poem was changed to suit its times. Chamberlain, however, suggests that this change actually renders the poem less allegorical and more political in nature.<sup>7</sup> Olsen agrees with Chamberlain that the poem's battle imagery was meant both to mirror the military conditions of the time and to inspire the English to rise to the challenge of the marauding Danes.<sup>8</sup> Hermann, Chamberlain and Olsen all agree that the poet deliberately and systematically modified the text in order to provide Judith with a more inspirational, and consequently less active, role.

Each of these perspectives may be of some value in its own way. They all seem to me, however, to problematize this conflict somewhat; there could be a fairly straightforward issue at stake. It is significant that Judith, who is one of only two characters called by name in the Old English poem, is treated almost universally simply as a feminine heroic figurehead, rather than as an actual hero who happens to be a woman. Even in a political and feminist reading such as Olsen's, Olsen states that 'Judith is a hero, and like all heroes serves as an example to inspire action';<sup>9</sup> but does that really explain why Judith's heroism is relegated to a *strictly* inspirational role in the Old English version? Is Judith any less of a hero in the Vulgate? On the contrary, she is more central to the victory of the Hebrews in the *Liber Iudith*, and perhaps that is precisely why she is marginalized in *Judith*: she is put on a pedestal, dehumanized – or reified, as it were – and neatly extracted from her position as the active agent of triumph and rightful recipient of glory.

The reasons for this radical shift in the way Judith is characterized may be as much cultural as they are theological or political: Anglo-Saxon noblemen might indeed, as Olsen claims, have been shamed by Judith's heroism in the face of their own cowardice; but they might have been more than shamed if the story had not been modified to allow for masculine heroism to eclipse Judith's glory – they might have been threatened. Judith is, after all, a woman, and as Jane Chance has made clear, 'Anglo-Saxon queens and aristocratic women rarely assumed politically active roles in society'.<sup>10</sup> They were expected to be even less active militarily, except, as Chance points out, in a symbolic sense, displaying 'martial spirit conceived as a spiritual weapon against vices, the Devil, or Synagogue and the heathen'.<sup>11</sup> The marginalization of Judith's heroism, and the corresponding implementation of warlike prowess in the Jewish men, may be indicative of the limitations imposed by gender in Anglo-Saxon society.

Anglo-Saxon men were willing to be led spiritually by a saintly woman (who

was perhaps reminiscent of the Virgin Mary), and saw such women as chaste and holy; such spiritual leadership, in Chance's words, 'marked their intentions as socially and spiritually acceptable, (and thus) their political power within the community increased'.<sup>12</sup> Generally speaking, however, Anglo-Saxon men were by no means as willing to be led by a woman in a more temporal sense – and women with such ambitions were considered (and here again I quote Chance) 'highly incontinent and immoral creatures whose excessive sexuality, when linked with warlike or masculine behavior, became a metaphor for unnatural and heathen or devilish proclivities'.<sup>13</sup> The Vulgate Judith may have been simply too masculine a woman to fit smoothly into the rhetoric of heroism in Anglo-Saxon literary culture. This is not, of course, to claim that women never held positions of temporal authority in Anglo-Saxon society; it is most certain that they did. What I am attempting to describe is a cultural *ideal* embedded in this and other documents of Anglo-Saxon culture. This ideal is made manifest by the violent contortions performed on his source by the Anglo-Saxon author.

In the Old English poem, then, Judith serves as an inspirational figure, a leader in a spiritual sense – and yet, in the temporal realm, she, like any 'ideal' Anglo-Saxon noblewoman, must in the end rely upon the agency of masculine military might in order to validate her right to rule. Jane Chance has looked extensively at the poetic conventions surrounding the 'ideal' Anglo-Saxon noblewoman, and her antitype, as well as the legal traditions associated with actual women of the times; her findings lend support to my suggestions:

Only when masculine support was obtained either through a literal male intermediary or more figuratively through the masculine trait of reason, or through God's help, was a woman permitted to govern men and control wealth.... However, even when they involve themselves in land disputes or litigation, they must rely upon a man's help.<sup>14</sup>

Whether or not this was a universal reality in early England is beside my point; it seems to me clear that, in the literary culture of *Judith*, the active heroism of a woman is appropriated by men, and she is relegated to the status of a figurehead. I would suggest that the Old English *Judith* was altered to conform with specific cultural ideals and expectations. Such expectations may have guided the poet as he, in Hermann's words, diminished 'Judith's contribution to the Jewish cause while magnifying the might of her townspeople'.<sup>15</sup> The poet 'diminished' Judith's role, it is true; he did so with a violence that both resonates with and recalls that with which Judith 'diminished' the Assyrian army.<sup>16</sup>

University of Glasgow

CHRISTOPHER FEE

- 1 B. Fischer, ed., *Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem*, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart, 1983), 2 vol. All Vulgate citations are from Fischer; all translations are the author's.
- 2 John P. Hermann, *Allegories of War: Language and Violence in Old English Poetry* (Ann Arbor, 1989), p. 178.
- 3 Elliot van Kirk Dobbie, ed., *Beowulf and Judith*, ASPR vol. 4, (New York, 1953). All OE citations are from Dobbie; all translations are the author's.
- 4 Guy Bourquin, 'The Lexis and Deixis of the Hero in Old English Poetry', in *Heroes and Heroines in Medieval English Literature: A Festschrift presented to Andre Crepin on the occasion of his sixty-fifth birthday*, ed. Leo Carruthers (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 1-18.
- 5 Ibid., p. 10: 'The core quality of divine truth is its being shareable – a corollary of selflessness. Divine truth has to be actively passed on. Hence, the glorification of the heroic chain whose every new link generates the next one. Judith is an interesting case in point...[she] acts as a mere link in the heroic chain: what virtues of valiance she receives from God she selflessly instills into her own people'.
- 6 *Allegories of War*, pp. 178-179. Such a shift in exegetical analysis would warrant, Hermann feels, a parallel restructuring in the heroic focus of the poem: in such an allegorical reading, each member of the audience, as a member of the Church, should see in Judith an example to follow in the battle against Satan.
- 7 David Chamberlain, 'Judith: A Fragmentary and Political Poem', in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Essays in Appreciation*, eds. Lewis E. Nicholson and Dolores Warwick Frese (Notre Dame, 1975), pp. 135-159. Chamberlain sees the Assyrians as representative of the Danish raiders terrorizing England at about the time of the writing of this 'strongly religious but mainly non-allegorical poem' (p. 144).
- 8 Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, 'Inversion and Political Purpose in the Old English *Judith*', *ENGLISH STUDIES*, 63 (1982), 289-293. Further, however, Olsen sees the decapitation of Holofernes as an inversion of the rape of English women by viking raiders (p. 292).
- 9 Ibid., p. 293.
- 10 Jane Chance Nitzsche, 'The Anglo-Saxon Woman as Hero: The Chaste Queen and the Masculine Saint', *Allegorica*, 5 (1980), 139-147. This essay later evolved into the fourth chapter of *Woman as Hero* (see below); it does not much resemble its descendent, however, and is certainly more concise. Especially pertinent is the historical information which offers insight into the legal position of Aristocratic Anglo-Saxon women.
- 11 Jane Chance, *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature*, (Syracuse, NY, 1986). Chance addresses the roles of aristocratic women in Old English poetry and prose; the breadth of the roles with which she deals range from those of the peace-weaver, the secular and ecclesiastical feminine ideal, and the allegorical figure of the Church, to their anti-types. It is notable (for the purposes of my discussion) that Chance devotes a chapter to *Judith* and the lives of the two female saints (chapter three, which is sub-titled 'Allegorical Figures of the Soul, Christ and the Church'), and that she echoes Timmer's thought that '*Judith* belongs to the type of poetry to which *Juliana* and *Elene* belong, the religious epic describing the deeds of a fighting saint'.
- 12 'The Anglo-Saxon Woman as Hero', p. 140.
- 13 Ibid., pp. 139-140.
- 14 Ibid., pp. 140-141.
- 15 *Allegories of War*, p. 174.
- 16 Ibid., p. 189. I can't help but see a profusion of inverted and reasserted gender roles here. Hermann himself points out that, in Freudian terms, decapitation is to be equated with castration (he cites Freud and Cixous). It seems that the poet has 'emasculated' Judith in much the same way that she did the Assyrian army through her decapitation of its head. Gender roles are clearly significant in the context of this poem; although it has been argued, and sometimes with cause – that modern political and philosophical concerns often are intrusive paradigms thrust upon unsuspecting medieval texts, in this case the violence wrought upon the text is itself medieval, and a modern perspective of gender roles may illuminate the basis for such a radical emendation.

Hermann, pp. 178-179

Nitzsche, p. 140

Hermann, p. 174