

THE OLD ENGLISH *JUDITH* OR VIRTUE REWARDED?

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ABSTRACT

This paper intends to provide an overview on the Anglo-Saxon version of the *Book of Judith*, departing from the premise that she is the only woman in the Anglo-Saxon canon that is endowed with the ability not only to speak but also to act on her own behalf. Thus, the references made to her both as a pious and virtuous lady and as a resolute, powerful woman will be exposed as being inherently problematic for those who insist on a purely religious reading of the poem, elevating *Judith* to the status of dutiful role model. Instead, we will argue that refusing to acknowledge the abundant references to her leadership skills and her daring spirit not only distorts our image of Judith as a true heroine for her people, but also weakens her depiction as a truly empowered female figure.

KEY WORDS: heroic poetry, hagiography, gender and syncretism.

RESUMEN

Este estudio pretende ofrecer una visión panorámica sobre la versión poética anglosajona del *Libro de Judith*, partiendo de la premisa de que Judith es la única mujer en el canon anglosajón que posee no sólo la capacidad de hablar y aconsejar, sino también de actuar por sí misma. Por lo tanto, se ofrecerá un análisis de las distintas referencias a Judith, ya sea calificándola de mujer piadosa y virtuosa o de heroína valiente y resolutiva. Dichas referencias suponen un problema para aquellos que insisten en hacer una lectura estrictamente religiosa de esta pieza, y por ello argumentaremos que obviar las numerosas alusiones a sus dotes de mando, a su coraje o a su espíritu valiente no sólo pone en peligro el papel de Judith como heroína para su pueblo, sino toda su representación como una mujer dueña de su destino.

PALABRAS CLAVE: poesía heroica, hagiografía, género y sincretismo.

PRELIMINARY WORDS

The study of an Old English poem, especially a fragmentary one like *Judith*, requires some attention to be paid to the social and literary context in which it was produced in order to fully understand the potential of such a complex poetic rendering as the story of Judith and Holofernes. The body of criticism which has grown around *Judith* throughout the twentieth century is large, and may be perhaps justified by the poem's appearance in the Nowell Codex and its closeness to *Beowulf*, probably

the most representative piece of Anglo-Saxon literature. What is more, such body of criticism addresses a wide variety of topics, ranging from patristic to religious or postcolonial studies, inevitably inscribing *Judith* in the forefront of scholarly research. Despite the fact that the poem has been traditionally read as an example of Christian poetry with a feminine hero, thus reinforcing the statements of those who claim that feminine heroes were much of a reality in late Anglo-Saxon England, I will strive to highlight the inherent contradiction which lies at the heart of this poem, where the courageous maiden grows well beyond the feminine-Christian-hero stereotype that can be easily associated with poems like *Elene* or *Juliana*. Therefore, I will devote the first part of this essay to providing a brief socio-cultural background to the Anglo-Saxon period which will challenge male-centered preconceptions of the period so as to point out the cultural germs that made such a poem possible. Secondly, in order to develop our argument regarding the importance of reading *Judith* in a syncretic, late Anglo-Saxon context, a short survey of the generic blending present in the poetic composition itself will be offered, delving on those aspects of the piece which pose a problem to primarily Christian interpretations of it. Finally, I will endeavour to prove that the main heroine is indeed presented as a truly heroic figure, one that intermingles qualities traditionally restricted to male heroes in epic poetry with some others which challenge feminine ex-centrism. Such analysis will be headed to proving that restricting *Judith*'s reading to a mere allegorical one, as classical authors have insisted on doing, would certainly undermine the potential that she is endowed with by the Old English poet. What is more, we will stress that the poem's lyric potential lies precisely in its hybrid nature, which amalgamates a Christian story with heroic traits and an essentially pro-feminist disposition that is in the end obscured the poem, probably due to the primarily male audience of the composition. Thus, this article seeks to legitimise *Judith* as a revealing piece, coming from a society which was struggling with its own identity and cultural inheritance.

1. THE TIMES OF *JUDITH*: SAINTS, SINNERS AND SYNCRETISM

The Anglo-Saxon period was a rather contradictory one in the history of the British Isles. On the one hand, it saw the development of a rich culture, where literacy was deeply promoted, but, on the other, it also witnessed the tremendous Viking raids that destabilised a number of reigns and planted terror all over the territory. Thus, it constitutes a highly interesting period for examining issues of identity, treatment of honour and class, gender, religious and native cultural practices and the subsequent Germanic influence, among many others.

It is of common knowledge that literary remains from the period are quite scarce due to the limited amount of them to begin with, the burning of libraries during the raids and the subsequent decay of manuscripts during the Middle Ages, which were sometimes recycled to serve other purposes, sometimes lost and other times simply forgotten. Though Michael Alexander (87) claims that «Anglo-Saxon will never be considered one of the great literatures of the world», he does state that



in the «debris» which remains there are «some very fine things»¹. Wormald² (3) agrees with Alexander that if we value a society by its age of duration, its literacy, and by the quality of art and literature which it produces, the Anglo-Saxon period in England was «not just exceptional but extraordinary». As he notes, the «Kingdom of England» created as a result of Viking invasions in the ninth century has endured within roughly the same boundaries for over a thousand years, thus remaining unrivalled in length by no other European country so far.

Although very little can be known from the period going from 407 until 597, the situation changes with Pope Gregory's decision to send a mission to the Isles so that Christianity was brought to England. With religion, along came literacy and written history. It was probably about this time when Prudentius's *Psychomachia*, written in 405 AD, was first brought to England. This is one of the earliest, and certainly, the most influential, recordings of Judith as a powerful allegorical figure, forever inscribing her as an emblem of Western virtue and piety. Roughly around the same time, St Jerome, probably influenced by the *Psychomachia*, translated her story into what came to be known as the Vulgate Bible, the chief means of transmission of most biblical stories into Anglo-Saxon England. Institutionalised as a figure of moral didacticism and proper behaviour, Judith was to be employed with various purposes throughout the Old English period.

Even though the Danes never openly declared their hostility towards the religious establishment in England, their frequent raids of monasteries, practice of heathen rituals and often brutal behaviour towards their victims led a number of religious men of the time to condemn them, equalling them to devils sent to punish the English for their lax morals. Among many others, Wulfstan and Ælfric are two of the prominent late tenth-, early eleventh-century figures who produced sermons directed to stirring the natives against the heathen assailants. In the well-known *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*, Wulfstan openly blames their countrymen for their inability to protect their land and women from the rape by Viking pillagers at the time of Swein's assault on England (c.1005). In clear connection to the present study's scope we find Ælfric's letter to Sigeward, where after writing a paraphrase of the biblical *Book of Judith*, he invites his correspondent to take such rewriting as an example of behaviour and pride: «Judith seo wuduwe, þe oferwann Holofernen þone Siriscan ealdormann, hæfð hire agene boc betwux þisum bocum be hire agenum siges; seo ys eac on Englisc on ure wisan gesett eow mannum to bysne, þæt ge eowerne eard mid wæmnum bewerian wið onwinnendne here»³.

¹ M. ALEXANDER, *The Earliest English Poems*. London, Penguin Classics, 1996.

² P. WORMALD, «Anglo-Saxon society and its literature», in M. GODDEN and M. LAPIDGE (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986, pp. 1-23.

³ «The widow Judith, who overcame the Assyrian general Holofernes, has her own book among these books about her victory; it is also set down in English in our manner, as an example to you people that you should defend your land against the invading army with weapons.» (Translation by Clayton, p. 215). M. CLAYTON, «Ælfric's Judith: Manipulative or manipulated?». *Anglo-Saxon England*, vol. 23 (1994), pp. 215-227.



Although *Judith* was almost certainly composed prior to Ælfric's likening of the Assyrians to the Vikings of Swein, the feelings of dislike are surely not unique at this time. Sermons with the same message probably existed throughout the whole period of the monastic revival.

By the beginning of the tenth century, the earlier generations of invading Danes had begun to settle down in the lands they had managed to capture from the English. This prompted the cultural and social merging of groups, something which was facilitated by the common Germanic background they shared and the desire for stability after years of fights. The assimilation process was extended to religion, where Christian rituals were inevitably intermingled with pagan practices brought by the Norsemen. This does not mean, however, that contact with Rome was lost during this period; in fact, the annals show us that at the peak of the Danish invasions, Æthelwulf went on pilgrimage to Rome in 855 and came back married to Princess Judith, one of the plausible addressees of the Old English poem. It seems reasonable to assume that hybrid religious practices became so common with time that the Church started to be concerned about such melange and pressed to legislate about the accepted rituals in tenth-century England. The Danish King Cnut, who had embraced Christianity after his invasion of Britain, passed a series of laws regarding religious practices that prove how Christian faith had managed to gain official status as the kingdom's religion on the one hand, but also constitute proof that heathen practices deeply permeated many aspects of the daily life, hence the need to legislate on the subject:

Be hæðenscipe.

We forbeodað eornostlice ælcne hæðenscipe.

þæt bið þæt man idol weorðige, hæþne godas and sunnan oððe monan, fyr oððe flod, wæterwyllas oððe stanas, oððe æniges cynnes wudutreowa, oððe wiccecraft lufie, oððe morðweorc gefremme on ænige wisan, oððe on blote oððe on fyrthe, oððe swylcra gedwimera ænig ðing dreoge.⁴

As Brigatti⁵ acknowledges, it is generally believed that the archbishop Wulfstan was a chief influence behind the composition of Cnut's laws. But even though the political power of the Church may have not been undermined by the Danish invasion and subsequent settling, the scholarly learning associated with the Christian institution did sustain a far heavier loss to the fire of the raiding invaders: many manuscripts of which a single copy was preserved were burned and lost forever. In fact, vernacular literature suffered such a severe decline in the ninth century so that the early poems *Juliana* and *Elene*, as well as the rest commonly ascribed to

⁴ «Concerning heathen practices. We earnestly forbid all heathen practices. Namely the worship of idols, heathen gods, and the sun or the moon, fire or water, springs or stones or any kind of forest trees, or indulgence in witchcraft, or the compassing of death in any way, either by sacrifice or by divination or by the practices of any such delusions» (Translation by Robertson, p. 176). A.J. ROBERTSON, *The Laws of the Kings of England: From Edmund to Henry I*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1925.

⁵ F. BRIGATTI, *The Old English Judith*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Glasgow, 2001, p. 210.

Cynewulf, are considered the last great compositions of the century. Luckily enough, this situation changed under the reign of Alfred, whose personal interest in learning combined with monastic reforms coming from the continent led to what is known as the Benedictine revival in the second half of the tenth century.

2. *JUDITH'S* CONTEMPORARIES: FEMININE STATUS IN ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

Linguistic evidence points to the fact that *Judith* was very likely composed in the first half of the tenth century, hence falling out of the Benedictine revival phenomenon. Connecting the poem to the Cynewulfian school of composition, Cook⁶ had dated the poem in 856, hinting that the poem might be addressed to Alfred's stepmother, Æthelwulf's wife Judith. Such theory was dismantled by Foster⁷, who devoted a whole chapter to the «examination and rejection of Prof. Cook's historic theory»⁸ and directed the dedication to Alfred's daughter, Æthelflæd, who reigned over Mercia after Æthelred's death in 910. He recalled how she is referred to in the Anglo Saxon Chronicle as «Myrcena hlæfdige», highlighting her ability to direct her people after the Danes' invasions. However, both Cook's and Foster's suggestions are dismantled by Timmer's edition of the text, who claims that the linguistic and metrical features of *Judith* point to a much later date of composition than 856, thus rejecting Cook's tentative dating of the poem. What is more, by specifying that «the religious strength of the heroines in these poems [Judith, Juliana and Elene] makes it very unlikely that a religious heroine like Judith would represent a secular queen, like Æthelflæd»⁹, Timmer plainly rejects Foster's theory about the identity of the addressee of the Old English piece. However, it is significant to point out that all of the plausible addressees of the poetic composition are powerful women who were forced to stand up for themselves at one point of their lives, ultimately reinforcing our hypothesis that the character portrayed in the Old English piece must necessarily be a powerful, resolute heroine and not a pious female, subjected to her male counterparts.

Since the composition of *Judith* reflects a desire to celebrate the ideal of Anglo-Saxon femininity, no accurate exploration of her times would be complete without a brief mention to the position of women in the Anglo-Saxon world. Women's position at the time has been a matter of wide criticism and one must be cautious when dealing with society's attitudes towards its female element. As Frontain and Wojcik¹⁰ have pointed out, «woman in art is not necessarily the same as woman in

⁶ A.S. COOK, (ed.) *Judith. An Old English Epic Fragment*. Boston, D.C. Heath & Co. Publishers, 1888.

⁷ T.G. FOSTER, *Judith. Styles in Metre, Language and Style*. Strassbürg, K.J. Trübner, 1892.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 90.

⁹ B.J. TIMMER (ed.), *Judith*. London, Methuen, 1952, p. 7.

¹⁰ R.J. FRONTAIN and J. WOJCIK, *Old Testament Women in Western Literature*. Arkansas, UCA Press, 1991, p. 3.





life». It is the disposition of us authors and readers to view literature as a cultural artefact, thus endowing literary representations with a degree of reliability that they might not possess. However, all literature stems from the representation of, or is at least framed within, a set of cultural conventions that shape its referents, thus making it safe for us to assume that, at some level, the literature of a culture actually *reflects* that culture as much as it might idealise it.

Urban¹¹ has explored the controversial nature of feminine biblical figures, claiming that they pose a special complexity due to their status as exceptional women who rose to prominence by exceptional behaviour and are by no means intended as representative of women in general, nor should they serve as models for acceptable behaviour. Even though such a claim is fairly reasonable, the examples given by Urban, Delilah and Salome, are radically different from Judith. What is more, it is clear that although the original story of Judith in the Bible did not intend to be instructional, there are many elements in its later treatments, even in our *Judith*, which can be considered by nature didactic.

Scholars as Helen Damico, Alessandra Olsen, Christine Fell and Patricia Belanoff¹², among many others, have explored the role and position of women in Anglo-Saxon England, reaching the conclusion that they were in many ways better off than their Roman contemporaries or their later medieval counterparts. A traditional guide to determine women's status in a society has been the amount of laws devoted to their protection, and in this respect, Anglo-Saxon women seem to have fared quite well, as Fell¹³ acknowledges. The wills and charters record the doings of propertied women, as well as a number of queens who had to take control over their country and ruled successfully. However, we must bear in mind that in any society, birth and wealth often equal power and influence, so that the fact that aristocratic Anglo-Saxon women possessed and used these advantages does not mean that the whole female community enjoyed equal freedom.

Along with social class, marital status was perhaps the main factor in determining the extent of legal protection to women. In fact, widows are particularly prominent in the laws, their status and rights being equated to those of nuns, as the two following laws of Æthelred indicate: «Sy ælc wydewe, þe hy sylfe mid rithte gehealde, on Godes griðe and on þæs cynges. Gif hwa nunnan gewemme oþþe wydewan nydnæme, gebete þæt deope for Gode and for worolde»¹⁴.

¹¹ M. URBAN, *The Figure of Judith in Anglo-Saxon England*. Unpublished MA thesis, The Florida State University, 2003, p. 9.

¹² H. DAMICO and A. OLSEN (eds.), *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*. Bloomington, University of Indiana Press, 1990; C. FELL, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*. London, British Museum Publications, 1984; and P. BELANOFF, «The fall (?) of the Old English female poetic image». *PMLA*, vol. 104 (1989), pp. 822-831.

¹³ *Op. cit.*, p. 39.

¹⁴ «All widows who lead a respectable life shall enjoy the especial protection of God and of the King. If anyone injures a nun or does violence to a widow, he shall make amends to the outmost of his ability both towards Church and State» (Translation by Robertson, *op. cit.*, p. 98).

Apart from protection, legal evidence also shows that Anglo-Saxon widows were also blessed with a high degree of financial independence, thanks to many laws which insured that the husbands' property would remain with the wife after his demise. Of course, there were a number of restrictions, like the fact that the wife needed to maintain a twelve-month period of celibacy in order to qualify for the application of the abovementioned laws.

It is quite noteworthy that the poet of the Old English *Judith* glossed over any reference to the heroine's widowhood status, given the respect with which both Church and society treated widows. By doing it, he would have possibly enhanced her admiration by a contemporary audience, so the fact that no reference is made to her condition might suggest that the lost part of the poem contained some information regarding this matter. In this respect, it is also interesting to remark the omission made at the end of the poem, when the biblical text elaborates on Judith continuing to remain celibate after her success against Holofernes even though many suitors were attracted by her fame.

To sum up, we could say that women in Anglo-Saxon England enjoyed a rough equality to men in a society which perceived marriage as a community-building practice, designed to form alliances beneficial to the kin-group. Although legally answerable to male guardians, the Anglo-Saxon woman was, as Urban¹⁵ explains, not obliged to marry where it did not please her, owed recompense when her personal space was infringed upon and she could represent herself in court as a reasoning citizen. It is true that, as it has been the case in most societies, the woman's identity was deeply tied to her family, and since her choices and decisions did affect the social status of the family unit, the family took an active role in her disposal and protection. In the same way, men were closely bound by a set of duties and obligations so that we could affirm that inequality between women of varying classes was probably more pronounced than gender inequalities themselves. As Stafford¹⁶ claims «if power is the ability to act effectively, to take part in events with some chance of success, then Anglo-Saxon women were indeed empowered».

3. WHAT DOES JUDITH STAND FOR? CHRISTIAN AND GERMANIC TRADITIONS REVISITED

When examining the elements that facilitate the generic identification of the poem, the forms of the homily and hagiography, so popular during the period, immediately come to mind. Even though their being prose works might appear to make them less closely connected to our poem given the different genre conventions existing between prose and poetry, one must remember that such distinctions were

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 44.

¹⁶ P. STAFFORD, *Queens, Concubines and Dowagers*. Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1983, p. 34.



less marked in Anglo-Saxon times, when stylistic forms such as alliterative prose attest to the interaction between prose and verse.

The poem weaves around the biblical plot found in the *Liber Judith*, sometimes perfectly coinciding with it; other times, diverging substantially as it is the case with the banquet scene, the omitted conversion of Achior, the battle against the Assyrians or the fact that, after Judith killed Holofernes, it is her maid who carries his head to present to the people, not Judith herself as in the biblical rendering. Gone are also most of the geographical references and key Jewish figures like Joachim, Jerusalem's High Priest. Conversely, the Old English poet seems to endow apparently insignificant details with a high degree of relevance in the story, such as the double blow which is necessary to fully decapitate Holofernes, the despair of the guards in front of Holofernes's tent on the morning of the attack or the fact that Judith had resided in General Holofernes's camp for four days before the night of the murder. Such treatment of the biblical source betrays the poet's predilection for those details that would appeal to his contemporary audience, hence the introduction of warfare instruments, some pagan references and the alterations in the plot.

Two important interpretations of the *Liber Judith* which are worth highlighting for our purposes are Aldhem's *De Virginitate* and Ælfric's *Homily on Judith*. The first work dates from the seventh century and belongs to a popular genre in early Christian literature known as the virginity tract. Aldhem's portrayal of Judith encapsulates two of the main themes of the work: on the one hand, the advisability of chastity and the nocive effects of adorning the female body. Aldhem's Judith, in the eyes of Urban¹⁷ is characterised by her lack of display and her ability to use the sole beauty of her face to defeat the enemy. Such an aesthetic choice enhances her natural grace, intimating to her readers that purity lies as much in freedom from ostentation as it does abstinence from sex. Moreover, the Judith present in *De Virginitate* is not mentioned to having used a sword to kill Holofernes, her action described by the delicate «modesty intact, she brought back a renowned trophy... in the form of the tirant's head and its canopy.» Her crime is excused by Aldhem in light of the fact that «she is known to have done thus during the close siege of Bethulia, grieving for her kinsfolk with the affection of compassion and not through any disaffection from chastity». The range and impact of Aldhem's work opens an interesting question: up to what point is he introducing a new figure (*i.e.* Judith) to the audience, or up to what extent is he merely elaborating on a figure already familiar to his audience?

Ælfric's homily continues the tradition of Judith as exemplar, but, unlike Aldhem, he seems interested in her military potential. Ælfric's letter to Sygeward, already mentioned in this paper, supports this military connection within the wider context of the Danish raids. Though he remains faithful to the ideal of chastity in «selectively concentrating on the significance of Judith's virtue as the slayer of

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 84.



Holofernes»¹⁸, Ælfric's use of the story is the first to remain true to the presumed function of the story in its original setting: the tale of an oppressed people responding to a crisis in faith as well as to a crisis in survival, by putting themselves in the hands of God's chosen ones. He employs a number of the nationalistic elements of the story's setting embedded within the Christian terminology, a feature shared by the Anglo-Saxon poem. Before turning our attention to the analysis of Judith's characterisation, it is worth commenting on Magennis' exploration of the reception of the story of Judith for a ninth-/tenth-century audience, who reaches the conclusion that: «The differing response to the biblical material, both between Ælfric and the *Judith* poet, and within Ælfric's own writing, reveals a sense of the variety of possible interpretations and uses of the biblical text in the Anglo-Saxon world»¹⁹.

Clayton (1994) encourages such a view when she suggests that by means of offering two possible interpretations of the story, Ælfric was trying to pin down a text in which he had found it hard to reconcile the literal heroine with the typological figure prescribed by the Church Fathers. And, indeed, this is one of the main problems when it comes to analysing the Old English fragment, where elements from both the Christian and Germanic traditions intermingle in a unique rendering of the figure of *Judith*, one where the religious role model is taken over by the resolute heroine.

Brigatti²⁰ explains how the tenth century saw the emergence of a number of religious poems, such as *Exodus*, which extensively combined Germanic elements with the biblical story. What he seems to overlook is that this period also witnessed the appearance of a number of poems dealing with female characters, such as our own *Judith*, *Juliana* and *Elene*, which some critics have taken to stand for women's resistance against misogyny in the public transcript of the Anglo-Saxon period. This Christianised model of womanhood incorporated native Germanic ideals of womanhood, where a woman's finest attributes were her radiance of being and her wisdom of mind, thus attesting to the cultural merging of the period. What is significant about these female figures is that they come to embody what Damico²¹ has referred to as «the omnipresent female figure» of the warrior maid, or as Urban explains: «Just as Christianity offered a new career for the everyday woman, women in the heroic poetry now had the opportunity to become spiritual warriors and engage in battles against evil [...] as those their fathers, husbands and sons fought against physical enemies»²².

Whereas I agree with Urban that this new kind of heroines do push women's possibility to act forward, she does still ascribe a metaphorical value to these women's

¹⁸ B.F. HUPPÉ, *The Web of Words: Structural Analyses of the Old English Poems Vainglory, The Wonder of Creation, The Dream of the Rood and Judith*. Albany, State of New York University Press, 1970, p. 143.

¹⁹ H. MAGENNIS, «Contrasting narrative emphases in the Old English poem *Judith* and Ælfric's paraphrase of the *Book of Judith*». *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, vol. 96 (1995), pp. 61-65, p. 63.

²⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 107.

²¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 23.

²² *Op. cit.*, p. 54.

endeavours, hence missing an important part regarding their interpretation, at least as far as Judith is concerned. Hers is not a metaphorical fight with temptation or other spiritual struggle, but a real fight involving physical resistance and personal danger.

Nevertheless, the connection between the three poems is undoubtedly present, and it seems likely that the author of Judith may have been influenced by the life of one (among the many existing) Christian heroines, not only because they represent triumphant females, but also due to their tendency to focus on one key episode of the Saint's Life, of their using little or no introductory material at all and because of their utilising a rather limited set of character, features which can all be applied to the Old English poem. In fact, the richness in dramatic elements present in the poem make it perfect for its conversion into a play, something which profusely took place in the sixteenth century, probably stemming from the moralising message of the story²³. Virginity is a key element in these narrations, where heroines are often presented as persecuted by a corrupted heathen or nobleman who is determined to corrupt women and bend them to the worship of false gods. Judith, however, is never specifically addressed as a Virgin in the Bible²⁴ and the Old English poet chooses to underplay her sexuality, consequently attributing her success to wisdom rather than chastity. Thus, he is again diverting from a specific genre and, by not focusing on the topic of the heroine's sexuality, he succeeds in presenting his audience with an independent female protagonist whose strength lies in faith and wisdom, ultimately detaching Judith from the minimising role of involuntary temptress suggested by the religious texts²⁵.

In close connection with the treatment of virginity and the toning down of women's sexuality, irony plays a fundamental role in the poem. In fact, we could consider that a good part of the poem's vitality lies in the subversiveness of Judith's presentation by the Old English poet. Just as she is defiant in the battlefield as she exhorts her people, Judith defies the general caution about using woman in literature as an example to real women. Scholars like Hill²⁶ and Hansen²⁷ have pointed out the pervasiveness of the *geomuru ides*, the sad lady, in Germanic poetry, a stereotype

²³ For a well-documented classical overview of the different renderings and interpretations of the story of Judith in English literature, see E. PURDIE, *The Story of Judith in German and English Literature*. Paris, Honoré Champion, 1927.

²⁴ The Bible does tell that Judith spent her widowhood in chastity, an attribute often considered by the Church fathers as a second virginity. By not focusing on Judith's chastity, the poet does not have to abide by the literary conventions marked by the saint's life genre and is consequently freer to present her as hero of wisdom and faith.

²⁵ Faith and wisdom are two of the archetypal characteristics of epic poetry, consequently reinforcing our syncretic reading of the poem. Bearing this in mind, it seems much easier to relate *Judith* to a hybrid tradition, one where traditional hagiography has undergone a process of assimilation whereby not only pagan elements, but also pagan conventions, are introduced in order to provide a depiction of the heroine that will stand out as distinctively unique in the whole Anglo-Saxon canon.

²⁶ J. HILL, «Pæt wæs Geomuru Ides! A female stereotype explained», in H. DAMICO and A. OLSEN (eds.), *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*. Bloomington, University of Indiana Press, 1990, pp. 235-247.

²⁷ E.T. HANSEN, «Women in Old English poetry reconsidered». *Michigan Academician*, vol. 9 (1976), pp. 109-117.

which relied on the visceral nature of women as opposed to men. Schrader²⁸ (29) warns us that the portraits of women in heroic poetry «do not necessarily provide pictures of actual behaviour» but rather what he considers as «standing out for a civilized behaviour in a violent age», thus suggesting that the woman's duties contained at all times the inherent possibility of failure. Our heroine refuses to adjust to this stereotype, and is instead presented as an active woman of both beauty and boldness of character.

4. THE PROBLEMATIC CHARACTERISATION OF JUDITH: PIOUS ROLE MODEL OR RESOLUTE PALADIN?

When approaching *Judith*, one should not forget that we are dealing, at least in practice, with a religious poem. It is precisely this tension between religious conventions and the actual content of the piece what makes Judith's depiction a problematic one, one which can only be understood in syncretic terms to fully acknowledge her representation as a meaningful heroine. While Germanic poetry valued women as seers and sources of wisdom, Christianity had its own tradition of prophetesses, women who would pour on what they knew to more experienced men, who in turn would act to protect them. The practice of women influencing men through their speech and being consulted for their wisdom, which is precisely what happens in *Judith*, was certainly a challenge for the period and that may be the reason behind many of the apparently opposite references to Judith, praised for her beauty and resolution in one line, celebrated for her virtue in the next. We must read these crossed references, so to speak, as the poet's attempt to quiet the religious establishment's conscience regarding the production of a poem which was, if not anything else, daring in disposition.

For the depiction of Judith, the poet uses what Campbell²⁹ has described as «the barest modes of characterisation». The epithets applied to her are sometimes the standard formulas which the *scopgereord* granted to virtually any female character in the poetic corpus, making more references to her inner nature rather than to her appearance: *gleaw on gedonce*, *ferhðgleawe*, *searodoncol*, *halige*, *eadig þrymful* and *snotere mæg*. She is beautiful, gold-adorned, blessed, holy and, above all, wise. In striking contrast with the Vulgate, the Old English poet does not make any reference at all to her chastity, and chooses to focus on her wisdom as the defining feature of her character. It seems that the poet, making use of the *sapientia et fortitudo*³⁰ topos so

²⁸ R.J. SCHRADER, *God's Handiwork: Images of Women in Early Germanic Literature*. Westport, Greenwood Press, 1983, p. 29.

²⁹ J. CAMPBELL, «Schematic technique in *Judith*». *English Literary History*, vol. 38 (1971), pp. 155-172, p. 156.

³⁰ Although it seems clear that the poet is familiarised with the *sapientia et fortitudo* topos and exploits it consciously in the poem, the two virtues are only paired once in the whole poetic narration: *gleawe lare/ mæg modigre* (*wise in learning, courageous woman*, ll. 333b-334a).



typical of religious poetry, has abstracted the *sapientia* from Judith's speeches in the Vulgate, but leaving the chastity aside, clearly relating such a virtue from her wisdom and inner strength, and converting these in her chief characteristics throughout the poem. She is an *ides ellenrof* («courageous woman», ll. 104 and 146), *ellenbriste* and *collenferhð* («bold», ll.133-134) and again *modigre* («courageous», l. 334). Thus, as an image of perfect and sensible behaviour, she is very properly defined as *scypþendes mæg and nergendes þeowen* («handmaiden of God»). In line with the envelope pattern of the poem, she is identified both at the beginning and at the end of the fragment by her two basic character traits: she is *gleaw* («wise») and has *trumne geleafan* («firm faith»), as Chickering (125) points out.

Such descriptions should not trick us into believing that Judith is depicted as a straightforward character; such a plain drawing of the heroine's character would not match the rest of the poem's like for contrast and ambiguity. In ll. 77 and 103, Judith is referred to using the rather unusual descriptor *wundenlocc* («curly-haired»), a descriptor which is also applied to the Hebrews in l. 325, thus being considered a marker of their Jewish racial origin. Nonetheless, and despite the poet's infrequent sexual references, we cannot disregard the fact that the very same word is used in Riddle 25 referring to a woman's pubic hair, thus establishing a highly interest, if not anything else, connection with *Judith*.

The most controversial of the epithets dealing with Judith is that of *ides elfscinu* (l. 14). The difficulty of an appropriate interpretation of the term was recognised by Cook³¹ (13), who commented on the fact that, apart from two instances of *mæg elfscieno* (*Genesis A*, ll. 1827, 2730), the term does not occur elsewhere. It has been analysed from a number of perspectives by different scholars. Some, among which we can count Chamberlain³², Pringle³³ and Chickering³⁴, argue that it refers to her spiritual beauty, which shines out like a halo, thus depriving the title of any positive aesthetic connotation. Taking this consideration a little further, Häcker³⁵ (9) claims that the term may have undergone a Christian reinterpretation in the tenth century, its meaning coming closer to «angel» and thus, describing our Judith as «beautiful and holy» rather than «beautiful as a nymph». ³⁶ This last author is rebated by Hall³⁷ (89), who claims that:

³¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 13.

³² D. CHAMBERLAIN, «*Judith*: A fragmentary and political poem», in L.E. NICHOLSON and D.W. FREESE (eds.), *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Essays in Appreciation for John C. McGalliard*. Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1975, pp. 135-159.

³³ I. PRINGLE, «*Judith*: The homily and the poem». *Traditio*, vol. 31(1975), pp. 83-97.

³⁴ H. CHICKERING, «Poetic exuberance in the Old English *Judith*». *Studies in Philology*, vol. 106 (2009), pp. 119-136.

³⁵ M. HÄCKER, «The original length of the Old English *Judith*: More doubt(s) on the missing text». *Leeds Studies in English*, vol. 27(1996), pp. 1-18, p. 9.

³⁶ For further comment on this semantic and pragmatic evolution, see Häcker (1996) and Mitterauer (1993).

³⁷ A. HALL, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England: Matters of Belief, Health, Gender and Identity*. New York, Boydell and Brewer, 2007.

Stuart's 1976 article argued for the meaning «inspired by God» but, though tacitly reported by the *Dictionary of Old English* (s.v. *ælfscyne*), this interpretation bears little resemblance either to the word's literal meaning or to its contextual usage. We may also dispense Häcker's argument that, taking *ælf* to have become semantically associated with *engel* on the basis of German personal names and the similarity of Snorri Sturluson's *ljósálfar* to angels, *Ælfscynu* may then describe Judith as angelic, i.e. «Beautiful and holy», rather than «beautiful as an elf», which would be more consistent with the character assigned to her by the Old English poet.

Alluring as these considerations on *ides ælfscinu* may be, the view held by most scholars is that of Huppé³⁸, Campbell, and Griffith who consider it a standard formula to refer to female beauty. Griffith³⁹ relates such an epithet with the Vulgate's remark that, because of the virtue of her purpose, her beauty was miraculously increased and concludes that «if meaningful in this context, it must have a complimentary sense». Hall himself exposes how it is tempting to infer that a female denotation of *ælf* was a prerequisite for the formation of *ælfscynu*, assuming that an *ælf*'s beauty would be a motivating factor for the use of the word *ælf* in glosses on words for nymphs, and for the subsequent extension of *ælf* itself to include a female denotation. However, an interesting turn is taken by North, who has insisted on relating such epithet with the pre-Christian cult of Ingui, arguing that:

Ælf probably means «demon» rather than «elf», its whimsical modern reflex. [...] In one set of glosses a feminine form is used for nymphs (*Ælfinni*), oreads (*duun. ælfinni*), dryads (*uudu. ælfinne*), hammadriads (*uater. ælfinne*), maiads (*feld. ælfinne*) and naiads (*sae. ælfinne*). The feminine beauty of ylfe is apparent in *ælfscinu*, (bewitchingly bright). In Judith [...], *Judith* dresses up as *ides ælfscinu* (a lady bewitchingly bright) to lure the drunken Holofernes to his death⁴⁰.

Despite North's statements being of a highly controversial nature, they certainly endow Judith with an aura of ambiguity that serves the purpose of this paper. Whether *ides ælfscinu* carries an evil connotation or merely an aesthetic one remains merely anecdotic, the important thing about the epithet being the poet's emphasis on the hybrid nature of the protagonist, something which is achieved through the use of such an epithet, one largely detached from the Christian tradition of hagiography. What is more, Belanoff and Damico suggest that the manifestations of radiance in relation to female heroines may also be allusions to armours or battle-dress, hence establishing the connection between the martial associations of these women and the older tradition of the Valkyrie or battle-maid⁴¹. This in-

³⁸ B.F. HUPPÉ, *op. cit.*

³⁹ M. GRIFFITH, *Judith*. Exeter, Exeter University Press, 1997, p. 110.

⁴⁰ R. NORTH, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997. If interested in the debate around OE *ælf*, see R.A. PETERS, «OE *ælf*, -*ælf*, *ælfen*, -*ælfen*». *Philological Quarterly*, vol. 42 (1963), pp. 250-257. It may also be interesting to check H. STUART, «The Anglo-Saxon elf». *Studia Neophilologica*, vol. 48 (1976), pp. 313-320, p. 53.

⁴¹ P. BELANOFF, *op. cit.*, p. 824.



terpretation reinforces our view that the feminine role model embodied by Judith is not a passive one, for her wearing a battle-dress implies that she could step onto the battlefield if she needed to, ultimately challenging the Christian stereotype of feminine «peaceful resistance».

My arguments regarding heroic elements and epithet use as applied to Judith in this work should not lead us to believe that the main character is treated as a fully-fledged heroic figure, because she is not. In slaying Holofernes and winning the battle, it is the help from God what balances the scale towards the Bethulians and our heroine. Therefore, we may theorise that the poet is using a female heroine to illustrate the potential of the power of faith in a story which stands for the battle of good versus evil, represented by Judith and Holofernes, respectively. In this context, the final lines, where victory is presented as a reward for Judith on her having kept her faith on the Almighty, are more easily understood. As Lucas⁴² (471) acknowledges, a male hero helped by God would be perceived as unfair by Anglo-Saxon audiences. By having a female who exhorts the army to battle, the poet avoids the inconsistency of presenting soldiers under the direct protection of God, as it was the case in other contemporary poems, such as *Genesis A*.

The use of the *sapientia et fortitudo* topos, typically applied to female protagonists in medieval poetry, together with the poet's emphasis on Judith's loyalty towards her people, wisdom and leadership skills, do typify her as a stereotypical Germanic heroine. The poet's emphasis on Judith's *gleawe lare* («wise teaching», l.333b), in conjunction with epithets such as *seo ædele* («the noble woman», l. 176), *ellenpriste* («courageous», l. 133), *collenferhð* (brave, l. 134) and *eadhbrædig* («triumphant», l. 135) clearly exemplifies the heroic character ascribed to the Bethulian leader. It may be true that she lacks the physical strength typically associated with epic heroes, but the poet compensates such a deficiency by means of endowing her with strength of character and wisdom, i.e., *sapientia et fortitudo*. These features, also traditionally associated to Germanic leaders, complement her spiritual strength and defy contemporary presentations of women as passive and ex-centric. In our poem, Judith stands at the centre of the action, though we may consider that the poet, conscious of the underlying problems in offering such a straightforward depiction at the time, may have tried to soften *Judith's* impact by ascribing part of her brave deeds to the influence of the Lord. This is what scholars such as Finke⁴³ have referred to as «a tension between the public and the hidden transcript» of texts, thus referring to a possible dual message in some of the works that have reached our days. Indeed, we can very well read Judith both as an inspiration for nationalistic purposes whilst, at a deeper level, considering her an alternative model for Christian Anglo-Saxon womanhood.

The tension between the public and hidden transcripts of the text operates at its most at the end of the poem, when we see that Judith acquires two of the most

⁴² P.J. LUCAS, «The Place of *Judith* in the *Beowulf* manuscript». *Review of English Studies*, vol. 41(1990), pp. 463-478.

⁴³ L. FINKE, *Women's Writing in English: Medieval England*. New York, Longman, 1999, p. 14.

important things for a warrior: glory in this world and the next, together with a compensation for her bravery. Of course, such an ending is imbued with Christian doctrine, relating Judith's final rewards to *soðne geleafan / to ðam Ælmihtigan Ælmihtigan*. («her true faith in the Almighty», ll. 344b-345a).

Bearing these issues into account, I consider it safe to assume that whereas Judith could be interpreted as a mere example of Ecclesia, fighting against Evil on Earth, the poet is primarily interested in her interpretation as a woman, hence the numerous references to her status as such and her detachment from being a mere allegorical reading of Christian example. This explains many of the apparent inconsistencies in the text, such as the evolution of Judith from *ides alfscinu* at the beginning, an epithet which clearly stresses her feminine appeal, to *Nergendes þeowen* at the end, a depiction which focuses on her Christian value as servant of the Lord.

Eventually, we could say that *Judith* complicates both our idea of the Anglo-Saxon female and the concept of heroism itself, since we are offered a multi-layered portrayal of events which places a female heroine in a traditionally masculine setting without denigrating either. In order to clarify my argument, I consider it useful to analyse some of the major divergences between the Vulgate version and the Anglo-Saxon piece: in the Vulgate version, the children of Israel could not have defeated their foes without divine intervention. Consequently, Judith is central to the biblical plot insofar as she devises the plan, implements it and explains to her people, when showing them the severed head of Holofernes, that the Assyrians need to find out about his slaying before the battle so as to produce a dismantling effect that will help them win the battle. Therefore, she is presented as an active part in the Bethulians' triumph. In the Old English version, the role of Judith is, as Fee⁴⁴ has perhaps excessively pointed out «marginalised to the detriment of Judith's personal importance to the Hebrew victory and to the benefit of the valor and ability of her warriors».

While I agree with Fee that Judith's influence by the end of the poem is quite diminished, I still consider it noteworthy that she is the one who devises the plan and beheads Holofernes, delivers a brilliant speech to her troops and finally achieves victory. It is true, nonetheless, that some of the Anglo-Saxon poet's rhetorical choices reflect his desire to not offend his audience. Chamberlain⁴⁵ explains that he removes Judith from the feast scene because the noblewomen among his audience would have found it «a long and degrading experience» to witness Holofernes's drunken depravity. Similarly, the poet relegates Judith to a secondary role when presenting Holofernes's head to the people: unlike the Vulgate version, where it is Judith who presents the fallen leader's head to the Bethulians, in the Old English, it is Judith's maid who offers the head to the men. Likewise, as Urban⁴⁶ has noted, the

⁴⁴ C. FEE, «*Judith* and the rhetoric of heroism in Anglo-Saxon England». *English Studies*, vol. 78 (1997), pp. 401-406, p. 401.

⁴⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 157.

⁴⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 103.



poet avoids the detail where Holofernes's head is mounted on the city walls, since the Anglo Saxons did not follow this practice.

5. FINAL CONCLUSIONS

Regardless of the abovementioned minor re-arrangements of plot, Judith stands alone among the women in the Anglo-Saxon canon as the only one who is empowered with the ability to both speak and act on her own behalf. Hence, on the one hand, she is re-interpreted as an inspiring figure in the triumph of the Bethulians: whereas in the Bible the feeling of indeterminacy over who will win the battle remains until the Assyrians find the body of their leader, in the Old English version, lines such as *þæt eow ys wuldorblæd / torhtlic toweard* («that glorious and triumphant success is approaching», ll.156b-157a) give the impression of the battle being already won by Judith's protégés. On the other hand, her slaying of Holofernes allows her to take on the role of the male hero and adapt it to an essentially feminine context. As Magennis (2002: 9)⁴⁷ claims, the poet presents the action in such a way that Judith «may take on the heroic role without losing her femaleness, without becoming either monstrous or some kind of honorary male».

The reasons for the shift in focus in the way in which the Judith story is characterised and presented may be as much cultural as they are theological or political. Anglo-Saxon noblemen might indeed, as Fee⁴⁸ explains, have been shamed by Judith's heroism in the face of male cowardice, but they would have felt even more shame, even threat, if God's help wasn't called for as the main source of such female triumph. Taking into account all the aforementioned manipulations of the original story we might argue that even though the poet starts the poetic piece presenting a clearly resolute heroine, by the end of the story, he is ultimately unable to reconcile what Griffith calls «the discordance between her religiosity and her mendacity, between her holiness and her murderousness, and the social interest in the reversal of normal gender roles».

As I have been striving to present, the Old English Judith is a controversial figure insofar as she represents a type of feminine resistance which is at times magnified, and at times diminished, by the poet. Conscious of her potential as a symbol for national resistance, an example of virtuous chastity and a role-model for Anglo-Saxon women, he presents the audience with a complex character that refuses to fit a single stereotype, evolving from *ides aelfscinu* to *nergendes peowen*, and proving that alternative configurations of power and agency were clearly possible in the Middle Ages. However, as I have already mentioned, it seems safe to assume that the poet is well aware of the subversiveness inherent to Judith's power in killing

⁴⁷ H. MAGENNIS, «Gender and heroism in the Old English *Judith*» in E. TREHARNE (ed.), *Essays and Studies 2002. Writing Gender and Genre in Medieval Literature*, Cambridge, Boydell and Brewer, 2002, pp. 5-18.

⁴⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 405.



Holofernes and standing out for herself, and thus softens the potential impact of her story by adscribing part of her victory to her *trumne geleafan* (true faith) in the Lord. Despite this obvious manipulation, motivated by the male-centered context of the poem's production, the Anglo-Saxon poetic piece constitutes a unique manifesto where Christian and Germanic elements intermingle to produce a feminine heroine which remains unrivalled in the corpus of Old English poetry.

