



9-2022

Judith: A Literary Analysis of a Female Legend, Contrasting Biblical and Medieval Elements

Celisa Fullmer Young

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/awe>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Young, Celisa Fullmer (2022) "Judith: A Literary Analysis of a Female Legend, Contrasting Biblical and Medieval Elements," *AWE (A Woman's Experience)*: Vol. 9, Article 30.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/awe/vol9/iss1/30>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *AWE (A Woman's Experience)* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Judith

A Literary Analysis of a Female Legend, Contrasting Biblical and Medieval Elements.

IT'S NOT EVERY DAY THAT A YOUTHFULLY BEAUTIFUL MAIDEN commits manslaughter. Then again, it's not every day that an unarmed, outnumbered band of would-be martyrs conquers world-class military threats. And it's not every day that violence promotes peace, or that vice masks the victory of virtue. Yet these are the ageless anachronisms that have shaped both our social reality and our beloved legends, the unanticipated underdogs. "Ic him ealdor oðþrong," Judith said humbly of her malignant captor, "I took his life" (Cooper 9). This eponymous, 10th century war-hero—a seemingly obscure Hebrew woman—turned the tide of a critical battle between the Assyrians and her people by beheading their lustful king in the very tent where he sought to take advantage of her, thereafter concocting and executing the militant strategy that would win her people their freedom. How did she do it? Well, by her being imbued with the poetic elements of German heroism, not to mention the power of God.

Some critics have dubbed Judith as an emblem of manipulative sexuality and defiant feminism, missing the point of the original poem entirely. An unlikely hero, and an even more unlikely icon, Judith exemplifies the influence of literature upon perceptions of both the present and the future. With such sagas cultivating the concept of womanhood throughout the millennia, is it any wonder that our beloved heroines have ranged from Joan of Arc to Mulan to Queen Elizabeth to Wonder Woman? The poem "Judith," alongside a vast repertoire of influential literature, demonstrates the immeasurable influence of a story's birth in a time of exigence, a fantasy in parallel to reality. The preserved segment, drawn from the Nowell Codex alongside "Beowulf" and "Letters from Alexander to Aristotle," displays a masterful medley of paradoxical motifs, syntactical strategy, and metaphorical context to ultimately portray Judith as a symbol of the Christian struggle against and triumph over sin. And yet, as the author so passionately seemed to assert, the greatest story behind it

all was the triumph of Israel over its enemies, of morality over immorality, of good over evil.

Perhaps the most defining characteristic of this poetic piece is the ongoing stream of paradoxical motifs, particularly between roles of gender. Judith's seemingly conflicting actions alone render the analysis of her character a complex subject of debate. "Is she a courageous military heroine to be heralded at the 'mead bench,' or is she a pious example of chastity to be meditated upon in the cloister?" (Cooper 6). Indeed, having flouted her community leaders' direction by sneaking into enemy territory and violently decapitating their king, Judith's behavior is nothing short of unwomanly (Bartz 7). This is an especially stark contrast to Anglo-Saxon culture as it "valued women as peace-weavers, not as warriors" (Cooper 14). Still, the poet reveres this "Shaper's handmaid" as a heroine of virtue, wisdom, and chastity, which is perhaps an authorial way of critiquing the normalized roles of the time period. She becomes practically androgynous as the poem escalates in violence, and "subverts the notion that peace-weaving is the only acceptable method for women to exercise socio-political power" (Bartz 17). Her disobedience to patriarchal authority seems to grant her a necessary advantage as she adopts complementary elements of both masculinity and femininity.

Our undaunted heroine further manipulates the womanhood's traditional trope by utilizing a passive guise to gain advantage over Holofernes's vulnerability. Hereby arises the juxtaposition of peace achieved through violence, chastity defended through seduction, and femininity preserved through masculinity. Can violent, manipulative actions be justified if employed against a malignant adversary? No wonder scholars stumble in comprehending how one can simultaneously exist as "both murdering seductress and virtuous instrument of God" (Cooper 17). Yet Judith is not alone in her convoluted path to heroism.

Benevolent deeds performed in defense against evil are often the very deeds which would be considered malevolent under normal circumstances. For instance, Judith's poetic peer, Beowulf, doomed the demonic Grendel to a prolonged delivery to death by wrenching his arm out of its socket and allowing agony to slowly overwhelm the body of his avowed nemesis. True, Grendel was nothing less than the cannibalistic culprit of nightly horrors in King Hrothgar's haunted mead-hall, and Holofernes was nothing less than a warring whoremonger. These authors and others seem to boldly assert that methods of conquering evil, however distorted or inhumane circumstances may necessitate, may ultimately be considered moral if employed in defense of the greater good. Thus, as she performs the will of God with both deliber-

ation and personality, Judith, though virtuous, is by no means innocent, and remains a character as complex as the debate which encircles her.

The complexity of this poem's characters heightens its effectiveness as a parallel to the history of Israel; they develop as the poem progresses, just as God's chosen people cycle through the decision-determined trial of identity. Holofernes, having been introduced as the "heroes' gold-friend" and "the fierce warlord," slips further into depravity with each hypermetric stanza ("Judith" 118). With increasing drunkenness, Holofernes stoops to the role of an "arrogant ring-breaker" and a "treacherous schemer" (199), demonstrating not only a carelessness toward the fate of his armies, but toward Christian morality in its fundamental honor. He falls from being a substantial warlord to a groveling fool. Believing himself capable of both succumbing to the pleasures of the flesh and conquering the battles he came to win, it is no surprise that Holofernes' intoxication only catalyzes his ultimate demise. Much like the Israelites whose moments of weakness betimes lost them the blessings of a birthright, Holofernes sought to enjoy easy wickedness at the risk of his armies' lives and success. Pottage for the price of patrimony, licentiousness for the price of life.

To further disgrace the wretched antagonist, Judith acts in symbolic contempt and defiance. She grasps the hair of Holofernes' head—no doubt to stabilize it prior to her fatal blows, but also as a cultural gesture of insult. "Feax-feng," or touching the hair of one's aggressor, demonstrated contempt prior to the adversary's execution (Cooper 12). "She took that heathen man / by the hair fast then and with her fists tugging / stretched him deftly in deep disgrace" ("Judith" 120). Holofernes's beheading was not merely a physical end to his life, but a symbolic end to his ability to speak and think, a revocation of his right to human intelligence. Along the same lines of cultural customs, a woman revealing her hair in Anglo-Saxon times committed "a defiantly sexual act," which our braided Hebrew maiden seems to intentionally flaunt prior to her captor's ironic fate (121). In parallel to authors' and religious leaders' laments of England's disconnected peoples and wandering ways, "That braided maiden" would not only revoke Holofernes's privileges of political leadership and social deference but would assume them herself.

It was exactly this crisis of shifting identity that often cost Christian England its peace and prosperity. Indeed, among the misinterpretations of Judith lies the analysis of her character as a Hebrew commoner, while syntactical elements of the original poem conversely allow the development of this God-fearing woman to reveal that she held a much higher rank. "She and her young helper—high-born ladies, / boldly daring, brave in spirit, / blessed

with triumph” enter the enemy camp (“Judith” 121). Judging by the myriad of saintly names ascribed to Judith throughout the piece, these ladies were not only high-born in terms of the royal court, but in terms of fidelity to God. Upon their return, Judith and her handmaiden enter the city through the front gate, passing guards who had been posted there at Judith’s order: “Warriors sat there / holding watch then, wakeful guardsmen / at the mighty fort—just as, with mournful heart, / but good judgment, Judith had ordered / before setting forth filled with courage” (121). Her departure and return through the front of the city are official passages, symbolic of honor, shifting Judith into a regal light as a “hero to her homelands” (Cooper 9). She cared enough for her people to risk her life. Plunging herself into the perilous depths of enemy territory, Judith sought a selfless victory recognizable to every Christian heart. Perhaps her remarkable influence draws from the symbiotic symbolism she embodies; the dangers of the enemy whom the Hebrews faced, and the virtues of the Deity whom they worshipped.

Despite this iconic encapsulation, Judith is not inhuman; her weakness emphasizes the need for reliance upon God. For instance, the fact that beheading Holofernes required two blows of her sword suggests that “she is not really the Valkyrie-like protagonist that one might expect, but rather she is more of a pious and passive instrument empowered and directed by God” (Cooper 17). Her struggle with the heavy weaponry renders the bloody deed far more courageous and realistic, and her preparatory plea to the Holy Trinity for power and courage proved the enhanced capability of any being who relied upon Heavenly powers to accomplish righteous desires. Judith’s relatable human nature and admirable will to serve the Lord were exactly what Britons—particularly women—needed, and her literary influence rallied courses of action that had hitherto been lost in the social tides of a developing United Kingdom.

At the turn of the millennium, Viking raids shook the people out of their “golden age” and into a time when pre-Christian Israel had to turn inward for a source of hope (19). Due to the immense casualties of battles against the Vikings, many noblewomen had no choice but to rise and represent “good lordship” in the place of their husbands, exhibiting fairness, wisdom, loyalty and protective leadership (21). These tumultuous times allowed the story of Judith to parallel the lives of women throughout the country, and to extend to influence feminine sagas of neighboring countries, such as Danish Queen Hildeburh’s brazen escape of an arranged marriage, and Norse Queen Olof’s legendary spurning of her royal Scandinavian suitor (Bartz 9). Judith even became a literary subject of study and emulation for nuns, as rendered by the well-known homilist Ælfric (Cooper 24). A manipulative hypocrite would

have no such influence. The author clearly saw a contemporary exigence for a heroine of hope.

In beautiful similitude of Israel's nuptial allegory, this poem allowed Anglo-Saxons to discern their circumstances in a new light. A chance for redemption and victory over their formidable adversaries became not only desirable but plausible. If Judith—one woman fighting against all sociopolitical and statistical odds—could prevail against the Assyrians with the blessing of Deity, surely the Anglo-Saxons could prevail against the Vikings with divine aid as well. As captured in Jerome's poetic reflection, the tale of Judith is one in which "chastity beheads lust," "the Church beheads the Devil," or "Christianity conquers paganism" (3). Authors of the time commonly lamented the populace's departure from spirituality, and many wrote in the hopes of promoting the message that "it is the lack of righteousness that has brought the current calamities down on the Anglo-Saxons and that things will not improve until they mend their ways and are once more pleasing to God" (27). It was exactly this literary theme of morality that seemed a "call to arms," rallying Britons in the Christian cause against their attackers, and leading them to the ultimate victory.

Though the literary world may never fully unravel the imbricated elements of "Judith," the poem's enduring influence is as undeniable as its complexity. Not only did the literature of the time period help turn the tides of England's political crises; it also helped shape the social elements necessary to unite and recommit a Christian people. Judith, a young woman who seemed the powerless victim of a merciless warlord, symbolized Israel in its seemingly unconquerable situation. Yet because "She doubted not [God's] gifts in this wide earth / she readily found there / protection from the famous Lord" (Hostetter 1). By so doing, she provided a plausible escape for her people as well as the people of England. The author saw a clear need to portray England's situation from both sides—hence the paradoxical motifs surrounding enemy and hero, man and woman, Assyria and the Hebrews, chastity and lust, virtue and vice—and to allow the syntactical development of the characters to suggest parallel paths of development for the country itself. Ultimately, the metaphor of a flawed yet courageous woman is a timeless tale, an allegory forever describing humanity's standing with its Creator. She was a woman in a war, a saint with a sword, a "murdering seductress" on the Lord's errand.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bartz, Emily N. "Female Heroism and Leadership in the Anglo-Saxon Judith." North Dakota State University of Agriculture & Applied Science. North Dakota State University, 2014.
- Cooper, Tracey-Anne. "Judith in Late Anglo-Saxon England." *The Sword of Judith*. Open Book Publishers, 2010, pp. 169-196.
- Hostetter, Aaron K. "Judith." Anglo Saxon Narrative Poetry Project. Old English Homilium, Sept 24, 2016.
- "Judith." *Broadview Anthology of British Literature*, vol. 1, no. 3, Broadview Press, 2015.