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To Roy and Mary

who made everything possible
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the helpful staff at Strozier Library, Florida State University, for their unfailing courtesy and assistance and for giving me a home away from home. My eternal esteem goes to David Johnson, for setting me on the path and seeing me through to its completion; my heartfelt thanks and appreciation to Kristi, for supporting me every step of the way, and much gratitude to Michelle, for being a primary source of inspiration.
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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the appearances of the character of Judith in the literature of Anglo-Saxon England. Transported from the Apocryphal book of the Old Testament to the Latin Vulgate Bible by St. Jerome, this Hebrew heroine held an enduring fascination for medieval and early modern writers and artists, and her story gained in stature and meaning with each telling. This paper explores the interpretations and implications of the use of the Judith story in Anglo-Saxon times. Focusing on each work in context of the larger tradition, the paper analyzes the impact the literature might have had on its audience, specifically in what it suggests about prevailing attitudes toward women. The exploration will begin with a broad survey of the cultural attitudes concerning women in Anglo-Saxon England and will then proceed to a closer examination of the portrayal of women in various types of literature. Next the paper will examine the tradition of storytelling and interpretation that grew around Judith, beginning during the early years of the Christian Church and flowering in the poetry and prose of Anglo-Saxon England. This paper argues that readings of the Judith story comment revealingly on the place of women in Anglo-Saxon society as well as the possibilities for action and selfhood the Judith stories characterize for the female element of the audience. As a narrative tradition developing into myth, the story of Judith contains and contributes to the culture’s consciousness of women as well as the consciousness of individual women. Ultimately, the analysis shows that that Judith’s incarnations in Anglo-Saxon England bear a curiously modern relevance. She transcends genre, context, and culture, performing a boundary- and barrier-crossing function which even today can serve to liberate and perpetuate healthy perceptions of culture, community, and womanhood which integrate rather than isolate the female element of society.
INTRODUCTION

God has sent me to accomplish with you things which will astonish the whole world whenever people hear about them.
--Judith to Holofernes, *The Book of Judith*

The purpose of this paper is to explore the figure of Judith in Anglo-Saxon literature with an eye toward discovering what her literary appearances might suggest or reflect about prevailing Anglo-Saxon cultural attitudes regarding women. The Judith in question, as the heroine of a remarkable story ing the Hebrew Bible and later the Old Testament of the Christian Bible, has had a lively and enduring appeal for audiences across the ages. Margarita Stocker’s *Judith, Sexual Warrior*, published in 1998, provides a fascinating and highly energetic look at manifestations of Judith from her conception in the ancient Near East to her recent appearances in the character of feminists and killers (the two of which are often confused) in opera, art, and modern films like *Thelma and Louise*. *The Story of Judith in German and English Literature*, a chronological survey by Edna Purdie of adaptations of the Judith story from the 9th century to the 20th, suggests by Judith’s popularity as a figure of art and poetry that something about her fascinated the Germanic spirit, leading not just to early English treatments but several versions of her story on the Continent as well.

In 405 AD a Latin poet named Prudentius adopted Judith’s allegorical capacity and used her in his *Psychomachia*, establishing her for all time as an emblem of Western virtue. Around the same time, St. Jerome translated her story into a compilation that would come to be known as the Vulgate Bible and would be the chief means of her

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1 Translation from the Greek by Carey A. Moore.
2 This survey was published in 1927; the opportunity exists for a modern scholar to fill in the gaps of the last 75 years. It might be even more interesting to see what ways the Judith story has been transmitted to Eastern history and culture, if indeed it has; I have not, in my research, encountered such a survey. Stocker’s focus—also her subtitle—is “Women and Power in Western Culture.”
transmission into Anglo-Saxon England. Now institutionalized as a figure of moral
didacticism, Judith was employed in the work of the distinguished seventh-century
scholar Aldhelm to serve his purposes of spiritual instruction. But her power as a poetic
symbol was not limited to virtue of character, as both a churchman named Ælfric and the
unknown poet of the lyrical Old English fragment used her story as a narrative of national
resistance and an illustration of the triumph of faith. Her popularity seems to have
suffered a bit in the later Middle Ages; the medieval French found her an unpromising
figure for interpretation in their evolving stories of fin d’amor, seeing as how Judith
beheads her admirer. The break-out bestseller of Anglo-Norman times, Geoffrey of
Monmouth’s Historia Regum Britanniae, deals with the doings of kings, not Jewesses.
However, Judith survives in several Middle High German renditions and then, in the
Renaissance, is reborn on the resurging tide of interest in literature and letters, virtually
exploding in the poetry and visual arts as well as onto the stage.

Judith holds as broad a fascination for scholars and critics as she does for general
audiences. Several magnificent studies of the Biblical story exist; this paper will chiefly
consult Moore, Cowley, Enslin and Zeitlin, and Toni Craven. Various editors of
Aldhelm, Ælfric, and particularly the poem fragment deal with the texts both combined
and separately in fine and insightful detail. However, to my knowledge, no critical work
exists that ties together the work of Aldhem, Ælfric, and the anonymous poet in an
attempt to understand Judith in light of attitudes towards and representations of Anglo-
Saxon women. This work will examine Judith as an Anglo-Saxon tradition, tracing her
emergence and evolution in both poetry and prose against the context of the important
historical movements, social trends, and prevailing cultural attitudes which will, I believe,
shed new light on the contested views of the place of women within Anglo-Saxon society.

Chapter 1 commences with an introduction to the Anglo-Saxon era and its
literature in order to establish the character of this historical period. Chapter 2 discusses
the current evidence pertaining to the particular position and the peculiar pressures faced
by Anglo-Saxon women and then reviews the literature concerning the historical,
political, and socio-cultural assessments that have been made of the women of this period.
Chapter 3 examines the women within the literature, with attention to evidence for a
female heroic ideal and valuations of the feminine that appear in prose and poetry of both
a secular and an ecclesiastic nature. Chapter 4 takes up the original story of Judith, assesses its meaning and function within its own time, and then turns to an analysis of Judith’s various representations in certain literature of late antiquity and the Anglo-Saxon age. Chapter 5 undertakes various readings of Judith, broadly applying certain theoretical approaches that reveal the variety and multiplicity of interpretations encoded within the narrative. The conclusion, I hope, establishes what looking at Judith in the Anglo-Saxon literature can tell us about Anglo-Saxon women, and briefly suggests how this knowledge might help us understand the relationship between women, history, and literature in the ages to follow.

**Relevance**

In pursuing various readings of Judith in her Anglo-Saxon incarnations, I hope not only to understand the place of women as they were integrated into Anglo-Saxon society but also lay a foundation for understanding the curious tensions between misogyny and glorification, derision and deification, revulsion and adoration—what Marty Williams and Anne Echols call the “pit and pedestal” mentality—a that has been an earmark of Western philosophy and culture since the classical age and has continuously influenced the literary and legal treatment of women through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and well into the modern age. In fact the women of today still find themselves trying to emerge from under the cultural legacy of this worldview, but the shadow of two millennia of thought has yet proved impossible to fully reverse despite recurring movements for equality in the Anglo world. As both a medieval student and a modern feminist, I ultimately hope to discover, through historical inspiration, a means of re-envisioning modern society that allows both men and women to be fully-realized people and fully functional citizens of the world.

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3 Though their book *Women in The Middle Ages: Between Pit and Pedestal* largely addresses the documented history of attitudes toward women in the later Middle Ages, for which there is more evidence than exists in our period, certain connections and inherited modes of thought clearly exist.

4 I have in mind the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), the Seneca Falls convention with its Declaration of Sentiments (1848), and the Equal Rights Amendment proposed in 1972, all landmarks in the struggle for female emancipation.
It seems a bit curious to think that tales a thousand or two thousand years old, born in places and eras far distant from our own, would have any insight to offer the modern worldview. Nevertheless it is my experience that our current society, as enlightened and civilized as we imagine ourselves to be, still suffers from certain destructive tensions due to gender roles and relations between the sexes. As a female living in a nation hugely influenced by Anglo rituals and customs, I wonder if the key to understanding the tradition of misogyny in our culture may lie in the beginnings of Anglo society. The field of feminist studies has frequently relied on the narratives of triumphant women to provide examples of and perhaps even means of responding to and possibly correcting certain biased and erroneous habits of thought. Likewise, I hope to discover in Judith the means of transcending certain gender stereotypes—in particularly, the stereotypes of woman as nurturing, pious, and completely passive—which persist in Western thought and customs. I first approached Judith as a symbol of triumph over oppression, but have come to view her, as Stocker does, as a deep myth and archetype that has proved to have an enduring impact on Western culture. Sigmund Freud believed *Oedipus Rex* was the foundational myth of the Western mind and used it to explain the underlying battle of the modern psyche, the incessant war between the moderating superego and the primitive id. I suspect that within the Judith story lies a foundational myth for the other, female half of the Western mind which does not find its impulses satisfactorily explained by the desire to kill the father and marry the mother. The tale of Judith could only have transformed into myth if she spoke to a deep need or hope in the spirit of a people, which survived into later ages and caused her story to be resurrected and perpetuated. Though the uses of her story, at least in the first thousand years, seem largely aimed at justifying certain behavioral requirements or restrictions placed on women, and in the next five hundred years as a model of resistance to oppression, ultimately I suspect Judith is a narrative in service of a higher ideal, and her

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5 Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, quoted in Williams and Echols, p. 11, observes that the identification of woman as passive has been the single most debilitating move in the history of gender relations, which Bloch substantiates in his book *Medieval Misogyny*. For my own understanding of modern misogyny, I would like to thank the Florida State University students who participated in ENC1145 “Writing About Heroic & Outrageous Women” in the spring semester of 2003.

6 Stocker’s conclusion is that Judith is a counter-cultural myth, subversive and dangerous, wherein lies her appeal. I do not embrace Stocker’s opinions whole-heartedly, as my understanding of the Judith story is slightly different, but she makes her point quite persuasively.
deepest meanings—as well as her protean ability to adapt to any situation, context, or culture—accounts for the popularity that has made her survive with such style.

**A Few Words of Caution**

It is the assertion of this paper that the representations of Judith in Anglo-Saxon literature say something about that society and, even more specifically, about that society’s attitudes toward its female element. Such a method of inquiry may seem dangerously if not purely speculative, for as Stevie Davies has observed, woman in art is not necessarily the same as woman in life. It is the disposition of this author, however, to view literature as a cultural artifact, different perhaps in methodology but not in fact from interpreting historical evidence such as legal documents or archaeological excavations. Therefore it seems safe to assume that at some level, the literature of a culture reflects the culture as much as it idealizes it. In the ways it both renders and re-imagines its social context, literature can perhaps tell us more about a society’s opinions of itself than any other artifacts or evidence it is possible to unearth.

Fictitious literature, however—as the story of Judith necessarily is—poses a special complexity because it is likely, as Carol Meyers has noted in particular about the women of the Hebrew Bible, that the figures in the stories are exceptional women who rose to prominence by exceptional behavior and are by no means intended as representative of women in general; nor should they serve as models for acceptable behavior. Such assessments may indeed be accurate for villainesses such as Delilah or the later Salome. André LaCoque, however, in his combined treatment of Susanna, Judith, Esther, and Ruth, finds them exemplary indeed, not merely “strange phenomena deserving mention only because of their weirdness,” though he admits there are moments in each of the stories that make pious readers wonder just how strictly these noteworthy women should be emulated. Judith in particular serves as more than an entertaining narrative. Not only was her original story intended to be instructional, but also many of her later treatments are by nature didactic. She was popular among the

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7 Quoted in Frontain and Wojcik’s *Old Testament Women in Western Literature*, p. 3.
8 Ibid., p. 4.
9 See his preface to *The Feminine Unconventional*, particularly p. xiv.
patristic tradition of the early Christian church as a paragon of femininity and widowhood, and as recently as 2001, Pope John Paul II cited Judith as a model for "the mission of woman and her significant role in God's design." This instructional use by her authors gives the reader of Judith permission to examine her as an allegorical symbol and offers some ground for examining the ways her story became not just a teaching tool but a vibrant tradition that helped to define and inform the experience of her audience.

Raymond-Jean Frontain notes in his introduction to *Old Testament Women in Western Literature* that the Judith story is particularly intriguing because so much of it is open to interpretation. Furthermore, Frontain, along with Stocker, classes the Judith story as myth, according to the definition by George Dumezil, which assumes that myth functions to “express dramatically the ideology under which a society lives” and not only catalog “the values [the society] recognizes and the ideals it pursues” but above all, to characterize “its very being and structure, the elements, the connections, the balances, the tensions that constitute it; to justify the rules and traditional practices without which everything within a society would disintegrate.”

This treatment of Judith will assume that her story does indeed resonate at the level of myth and will also explore, in terms of Anglo-Saxon culture, the ways the Judith story expressed certain elements of structure as well as the ways the story served to justify the practices upon which that society was based. Furthermore, the tradition of Judith that evolved over time allows us to identify currents of thought and practice that influenced the Anglo-Saxon world. As myth, the Judith story would not have survived to the extent it did had it not had some relevance or symbolic value for its audience, particularly an audience as far removed from ancient Hebrew society as the first-millennia English. What she touched on in the Anglo-Saxon nature, and how she did it—as both exemplar and an everywoman, a unique individual and a universal type, at once woman, nation, and Jewry itself—are the focus of this study.

Given the distance of Anglo-Saxon culture from our modern times, the mysteries and ambiguities that must perforce remain despite scrutiny, and the breadth of

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11 It seems a tribute to Judith’s fascination that Frontain spends most of the introduction to a book full of enticing heroines discussing the complexities and ambiguities of Judith. See in particular page 13.
12 *The Destiny of the Warrior*, p. 3.
interpretation given to the existing historical, literary, and linguistic evidence, the complexities of interpretation are enough to make the budding student of medieval literature quail in fear. In approaching Judith I face an epic anxiety of influence, given that the study of Anglo-Saxon literature is a field that has had hundreds of years to develop to its current profundity.\textsuperscript{13} Broad and insightful surveys on the history, development, cultural context, and meaning of Old English literature have been conducted by several accomplished scholars. The works of Sisam, Greenfield, Robinson, Wrenn, Godden, and Lapidge come immediately to mind; there are many other worthy tomes treating this area of material and literary history. The role of women in Anglo-Saxon society has been brilliantly explored by such scholars as Helen Damico, Alessandra Olsen, Christine Fell, Sharon Dietrich, Jane Chance, Pauline Stafford, Patricia Belanoff, Henrietta Leyser, and Frank and Doris Stenton, again to name those who have inspired this study in particular. In addition, A.S. Cook, B.J. Timmer, J. Lesslie Hall, Mark Griffith, Marie Nelson, and Bernard Huppé have done particularly fine translations and treatments of the Old English poem fragment \textit{Judith}. Moreover, the field of study on Christian saints and the saints’ lives has an enormous vitality as well as a natural relevance to the life and times of Anglo-Saxon women, and it continues to inform our understanding of the literature and its attitudes towards its heroines. And, doubtless, new information and new interpretations of Judith unfold with each semester Judith is taught to a class of new literary scholars.

This is not to say that all the work has been done; it is only the beginning. It seems the more our own knowledge advances, the broader the opportunity to explore and understand these long-lived texts. Like those mythical vessels of abundance, there is sustenance for all who desire, and each who comes to the table will find that meat and drink which he (or she) likes best. And so I take up the question of Judith, her literature and her myth, her manifestations and meanings, hoping as I venture into ground already admirably surveyed by well-trained and highly-skilled scholars that I too might be granted what Kenneth Sisam asks for in his \textit{Studies in the History of Old English}

\textsuperscript{13} Kenneth Sisam calls Laurence Nowell the “indefatigable pioneer in Anglo-Saxon studies” (62). Nowell inscribed his name along with the date 1563 on what came to be known as the Cotton Vitellius A xv manuscript which preserves the only extant copy of \textit{Beowulf}. Though others may have different perceptions of when the study of Anglo-Saxon literature and society actually began, I have no problem beginning here, particularly since the Nowell Codex also contains the Old English fragment \textit{Judith}.  

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Literature—“the grace that is allowed to amateurs,”¹⁴—keeping in mind that, while I walk in the shadow of giants, whatever discoveries I make—and whatever errors I advance—are my own.

¹⁴ See Preface to the 1953 edition.
CHAPTER 1

ESTABLISHING BOUNDARIES

If in general terms it remains true that the English are stoic, or nostalgic and disposed to melancholy, or have a love of ritual with the innate conservatism which that implies, then these too are characteristics inherited from the Anglo-Saxons.

--Kevin Crossley-Holland

The Anglo-Saxon World

To begin, I would like to establish the vocabulary this study will use. As a field evolves, naturally, the criticism becomes part of the tradition and is just as relevant to our understanding of a work as the work itself. At the same time, terminology evolves to provide more precise meanings and remain current with the newest information. I wish in particular to clarify the terms used in this study to describe the historical and culture period under scrutiny.

Along with what seems to be the majority of scholars treating this period of history, I no longer find the label ‘the Dark Ages’ descriptive unless one is particularly trying to evoke the attitude of the foregoing three hundred years of scholarship on this moment in time. With our modern sensitivity to ‘otherness,’ our understanding of how various forms of oppression and misunderstanding evolve and are perpetuated, and our keen awareness of how living among and communicating with widely diverse groups of people requires a certain flexibility in our evaluative systems, we are able to see and appreciate this span of years as an epoch of surprising vitality and sophistication, ‘dark’ only in terms of its indifference to certain accomplishments of ‘civilized’ Rome. Though Michael Alexander states in The Earliest English Poems that “Anglo-Saxon will never be considered one of the great literatures of the world,” he does state modestly that in the
“debris” which remains there are “some very fine things.”\(^1\) As he puts it, the early English inhabitants “in these islands lived simpler, less comfortable, less 'civilized' lives; but it does not seem to have done their poetry any harm.”\(^2\) He observes a yet-present bias in the field of literary study for the Mediterranean ideals of religion and art and urges for dispensing with the allusions that the term ‘Dark Ages’ implies, the “idea that between the fall of Rome and the revival of learning Europe was a battleground where ignorant German armies clashed by night, and that the darkness of the age was deliberately maintained by Benedictine monks.”\(^3\)

Patrick Wormald agrees with Alexander that if we value a society by its age of duration, by 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.\(^4\) As Wormald 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; no other European state has lasted so long. And the number of other existing European literatures with specimens such as those which survive in Old English is very small.

This is not to make a case for Britain being the jewel of Europe at any point in time. In comparison to surviving texts such as the Sanskrit Vedas of India or the verse of ancient Sumeria, circa 2300 BC, the Old English manuscripts seem quite adolescent. But in terms of what this literature can tell us about the development and advancement of a society, about the way their sciences and philosophies evolved, the way they grappled with ideas, the way they understood their own history, and the way they like any other people on the planet sought to make a better life for themselves and their descendants, there does seem to be something remarkably resilient in the Anglo-Saxon spirit. The period of history named for it I will consider to begin around 450 AD, shortly after the final withdrawal of the Roman legion from Britain, when, pressed by disturbances on the Continent to seek a foothold on the island, the Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Frisians, and other tribes being slowly expelled from their own territory had to fight against fierce resistance on the part of the native Britons to gain so much as an acre of land. Shortly after the

\(^{1}\) Refer to p. 9.
\(^{3}\) Ibid., p. 10.
original eight kingdoms can considered to be established, in the mid-sixth century, a wave of Christian missionaries from the Continent arrived in 597 AD to introduce fundamental changes into the culture and its modes of thought. What appears from the outside as a brief “Golden Age” was marked internally with constant tensions as kings shifted places and power balances swayed. Then, on the heels of increasing encroachment by Danish invaders (known to us as Vikings by the same historians who called it the Dark Ages)—invaders who ate up one Anglo-Saxon kingdom after another in the ninth and tenth centuries—a new wave of religious reform led to stricter ideologies and changed the inward face of the country, causing deep conflicts with certain existing values. Scholars differ as to the extent to which Christian morals really transformed the Anglo-Saxon culture. Some maintain that the older heroic codes of Germanic society were never really fully reconciled with the Christian teachings. On the other hand, Godden and Lapidge, while observing that the conversion was not seamless, do believe that certain thematic parallels helped the Anglo-Saxons adopt the new faith without undergoing a profound revolution in their social values. It may be evidence of deeply-felt beliefs and a Germanic faith in tradition that similar values of conduct persist from the earliest examples of poetry to the latest, as Godden and Lapidge’s study shows. Even at the time of the Norman Conquest and the infusion of the French language, customs, and political structures, the doughty Anglo-Saxons endured again using the same principles they always had: what Wrenn calls their “extraordinary power of creative assimilation,” which succeeded to the point that their language survived and their country remained, then and now, as they had first formed and named it, England.

In this study, then, the term Anglo-Saxon will describe the social structure and culture that prevailed in what is now England beginning with the first marked migrations of the Germanic tribes consisting of the Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Frisians, and others. The Anglo-Saxon period will be assumed to have endured in England up to the point of the Battle of Hastings in 1066 and the subsequent crowning as King of England of William,

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5 Schneider contains a discussion of this, drawing largely on Rosemary Woolf’s scholarship on the subject.
6 The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature, p. 7.
7 The term ‘conquest’ has been equally brought under scrutiny by scholars interested in this period; however, since for general purposes the term offers a useful way to mark the profound cultural and political changes introduced by the new ruling class into England, it will be used here.
8 This exceedingly high-level overview is drawn from a number of sources, among them Godden and Lapidge, Wrenn’s A Study of Anglo-Saxon Culture, and Sharon Turner’s History of the Anglo-Saxons.
Duke of Normandy, after which point it seems suitable to refer to the prevailing culture as Anglo-Norman. During this time it is understood that certain “native” (i.e. Celtic) tribes, social structures, and systems persisted in parts of the island, namely what is now Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, and the Isle of Man. While these societies had their own historical importance and preserved their own literature and practices, the weight of cultural influences seems to lean in favor of the Anglo-Saxon influencing the Celtic rather than the opposite; thus, these societies and their literature will not be addressed in the scope of this study. The term Old English will be understood to refer to the vernacular language used, with regional variations, within the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. This language, it seems, shows almost no influence of the vernacular of the Celtic Britons evolving from its Brythonic roots into the dialects of Welsh, Cornish, Scottish Gaelic, Manx, and others. It need hardly be said that Latin was still, in England as in the rest of Europe, the language of the church and therefore a language familiar to the literate ruling class, a language that continued to be in use, spoken and written, from the time of the first missions. Thus, a proper survey of Anglo-Saxon literature requires examining both the poetry, prose, and legal codifications in the vernacular and the Latin compositions and correspondence written by and for the church.

**Here There Be Lions: The Concept of Woman and the Study of Women’s History**

The study of historical periods must guard against several fallacies, the most obvious being the modern fallacy, or the tendency to evaluate historical evidence in modern terms. Methods of research are often not completely unbiased, and results are directly influenced by what the researcher hopes to find. As Berit Åström observes, “the past is not a given, but something we create through the choices we make.”9 The ‘seek and thou shalt find’ effect seems almost entirely unavoidable when dealing with Anglo-Saxon women, as the evidence allows multiple modes of interpretation. One author writing about the religious communities founded by, established for, and run by women might find this an enormously promising realm of female independence and agency; another might find the cloistered, contemplative life a horrifying prospect, limiting in the

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9 “The Creation of the Anglo-Saxon Woman,” from *Studia Neophilologica* 70, p.25.
extreme. One archaeologist discovering an atypical burial may become convinced of foul play and imagine a story of punishment or ritual sacrifice, while another might interpret the situation as a sort of veneration. Written source material is fragmentary and vulnerable to all types of corruption. Errors can occur at every stage of recovery and dating. Generalizations in themselves are risky assessments, then or now.

Likewise, investigations into the written evidence must be approached with some reservation. As Wendy Davies notes in the case of ecclesiastical transcripts and written laws, it is difficult to determine whether such admonitions reflect real fact or ideal aspiration. Also, as Barbara Ann Gordon-Wise notes in her study of women and story, literature often serves purposes other than a strict reflection of contemporary states of being or reality. Just as dealing with the physical evidence becomes a matter of recovering, dating, and situating a find within its historical context before attempting to hypothesize its implications, dealing with the written evidence is a matter of excavating authorial identities and intentions, cultural contexts, and audience composition. The point of Åström’s article, that we re-examine the assessments which lead us to make certain conclusions, particularly those concerning the roles and status of Anglo-Saxon women, will be useful to keep in mind as we progress.

In its discussion of gender, this paper will assume the traditional binaries of sex as male or female and gender as masculine or feminine. Some could argue that this is a limited viewpoint, leading to models of opposing forces or exclusionary and therefore biased paradigms which modern critical perspectives attempt to resist. Nick Stoodley, for example, makes it clear in his inquiry into early Anglo-Saxon burial rituals that gender in his opinion cannot be limited to a simple binary of biological sex but rather is composed of and influenced by the cultural values ascribed to a certain sex, which then determines the social construction of roles, and relationships, including division of labor. Stoodley goes on to point out that gender is neither a static construct nor an insular one; on the
contrary, gender is closely integrated with other patterns of social behavior such as class, ethnicity, and status, and gender performance is influenced also by lifecycle. He notes, for instance, that different things are expected from children than from adults, and a woman’s role is likely to have differed according to such circumstances as whether she was married, had children, had a surviving spouse, and lived close to or far away from her kin group. Despite the arguable complications, it seems reasonable for purposes of this paper to view sex and gender much the way the people of this time period, given the evidence, seem to have viewed it: by identifying sex as a biological distinction onto which, as Stoodley puts it, “the cultural genders of masculine and feminine are grafted.”

Therefore this study will use the term ‘feminine’ as though describing gender performances that belong exclusively to the female sex, while ‘masculine’ behaviors belong to the males.

I feel obliged to admit to certain authorial biases as they ultimately guide my research and have directed my interest in this topic from the beginning. As a woman approaching Anglo-Saxon literature, I found myself asking at quite an early stage: Where are all the women? Common sense tells us they had to have existed, and in generous numbers, for the population to survive and grow. Archaeological surveys tell us definitively that women did indeed exist in England at this time, comprising roughly half of the population. Although the lingering memory of a female name in certain place names suggests women holding property or leaving their mark on an area, the land charters show only a small percentage of women actually possessing and exercising rights over land and property. Sources allude to scriptoria frequented by women, but instances of writing by women are rare. The one work of literature that can be attributed with any surety to a woman is the *Hodoeporicon of St. Willibald* begun around 778 by Hugeberc, a Wessex nun who followed Boniface to Germany. Two existing

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15 *The Spindle and the Spear*, 2.
16 Of the 811 burial instances covered by Stoodley during the time period from 410-650, 388 or 48% of the graves were positively identified as belonging to females.
18 Finke in *Women’s Writing in English: Medieval England* tells us on page 69 that the existence of the Boniface correspondence tells us that nuns “were as active in book production as monks.” Likewise Aldhelm’s reference to the nuns of Barking suggests they were highly literate as well as avid readers.
19 Finke describes the composition on 106; more will be said of Hugeberc later. Though she lived on the Continent, she had been born in England; she was writing, of course, in Latin.
poems, *Wulf and Eadwacer* and *The Wife’s Lament*—considerably less than half of the extant Anglo-Saxon poetry—adopt the narrative stance of (though they are not always presumed to be authored by) a woman. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle makes mention of women when they do something interesting, such as build defenses, command armies, or cause wars; the ecclesiastical records mention women when they do something useful, acting as patronesses, intercessors, or models of virtuous activity. Records of the doings of ordinary women are scant, though the same might be said of the average man.

Unlike other mythical creatures, however, we need not infer from what might seem to be infrequent mention that the Anglo-Saxon woman did not exist, or that she was a non-participatory member of society. As Fred Robinson points out, the lack of a female name attached to a manuscript does not mean women weren’t writing. As a matter of fact, in the whole corpus of what may be called the secular poetry (i.e. not composed for liturgical purposes), only one poet, Cynewulf, was ever bold enough to give himself credit for his work, and that only using a clever system of runes embedded in the text. Robinson takes this large-scale anonymity as a reasonable indication that it is not only possible but probable that women were involved in literary production, and, he says, “it is perhaps time that our literary histories and our literary interpretations should begin to acknowledge this possibility.”

Whether or not women were actually composing certain poems (and the idea has been proposed, by others besides Robinson, that *Judith* could have been written by a woman), we know for certain that they would have been in the audience. Therefore the scholar in pursuit of the Anglo-Saxon woman must examine the public discourse not only for the places where the information concerning women is explicit but also for the ‘hidden’ transcript that tells us through omission, selection, and inference where the women were, and what they were doing. Analyzing the extent information with an exclusive focus on one segment of the population, however, automatically licenses a selective approach susceptible to its own dangers and fallacies.

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20 J.M. Kemble, writing in the early nineteenth century, is credited with being the first to interpret the runic inscription as the author’s name (c.f. Calder, *Cynewulf*, pp. 12-15); Wrenn translates the key passages on pp. 124-128.

Where Are The Women?: Opening the Other Eye

This study joins a trend in the medieval field that focuses on the documentation for the status and roles of women. It has long been a stance of certain types of historians and scholars that the sophistication or level of civilization of a society can be judged by the way it treats its women. Considering woman’s history as a new and ‘innovative’ approach to a time period seems faintly absurd when it must be obvious that both men and women were working side by side in the formation and maintenance of early societies, partnered by necessity if nothing else. While the trend in feminist scholarship has been to focus on the ‘hidden’ transcript in an attempt to fill in the gaps, omissions, and inconsistencies that the (male-authored) discourse of history has created, these studies fall prey to the one-eyed view of which the male versions of history have been accused.

Rosalind Miles observes in The Women’s History of the World that women’s history has only “just begun to invent itself;” while she dates the beginnings of recorded history to the third millennium BC, she notes that, “for women, this process did not even begin until the ninetieth century.” The work of women’s history, then, is trying to make up for lost time. Feminist historians often use this fact to excuse themselves for over-emphasizing the female aspect, since it has been neglected for so long.

Laurie Finke begins her analysis of women’s writing in medieval England by noting that what she calls the ‘public transcript’ of the period, particularly discourses within religion, medicine, and the legal system, were monopolized by men and the clergy; as a result, many historians who have dealt with women in the Middle Ages conclude that they as a group must have been silenced and oppressed. Operating on the assumptions that such opposition would have produced some form of resistance, and that said resistance was rarely, if ever, bound to take the forms appropriated and controlled by the dominant group, Finke concludes that there must be an active hidden transcript of these times that would explain the contributions of the women to cultural production. Such an observation is not new in the field of feminist scholarship, which founded itself on the opinion that the public and private dominions could often be described using gendered

22 C.f. the five-volume work A History of Women in the West, general eds. George Duby and Michelle Perrot.
23 Preface to The Women’s History of the World, xii.
terms, and that narratives by and about women often took place in areas and modes that lay outside the pale of the popular or the mainstream. In the spirit of Finke, this paper will undertake to examine the evidence keeping in mind what she calls the four different “sets of performances: those of the dominant and subordinate in the public transcript, the hidden transcript of the dominant, and that of the subordinate.” This fuller picture of both author and audience should allow us a more complete understanding of the society as a whole, including the false consciousness that might have been inculcated in one class or sex by the published and actively-defended rhetoric of another.

In all respects, the tendencies toward misogyny in the public transcript of the Middle Ages, and even in Anglo-Saxon England, present some challenges of interpretation. The largest pitfall is that of taking the misogyny at face value, as a declaration of fact or belief, when more often it may serve some rhetorical purpose. A less frequent but no less pernicious danger is that of misogyny in the interpretations of scholars and historians. Åström in “Creation of the Anglo-Saxon Woman” brings under spirited attack three instances which she believes “all present the Anglo-Saxon woman as the helpless victim of an inhumane society, a tyrannized and subjugated creature whose conditions of life and death were of no consequence to the society.” She accuses these treatments of perpetuating a mindset that the “independent and courageous woman was unknown and unthinkable,” that “women were so insignificant that they could not possibly be allowed to speak in the poetry, and that if they had been allowed to, no one would have understood them.” While I agree with Åström that it is indeed impossible to be totally objective, I do hope to find in the public transcript the cues to the hidden ones, which will afford an understanding of the Anglo-Saxon woman in her own context and in her own terms. Though it is the tendency to find what we are looking for, I hope that at least acknowledging the operative biases and fallacies will prohibit their having an unconscious effect upon the findings and evaluations made by this study.

As noted, the prevailing bias of contemporary feminist thought seems to be that equality of the sexes is a measure of a society’s enlightenment. In that case, certain Stone

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24 This idea is expressed in Gilbert and Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic*, a foundational literary work of the second-wave feminism movement that found its way into circles of literary criticism in the 1970s.
26 *Studia Neophilologica* 70, p. 32.
27 Ibid, p. 32.
Age societies seem to be far more enlightened than ours. We must first read the treatment of women as testimony to the ideologies that underlie the culture and hint at the practical ways in which all members were usefully integrated into it. Then we must keep in mind the larger context; as noted previously, men and women would have lived and worked side by side in the course of their daily lives, so to document their doings separately reveals slightly less than half of the picture. If we are to have a proper picture we must have a balanced perspective; history must open the other eye.

This study, unfortunately, does not undertake to weave the hidden transcript into the dominant, nor provide a holistic view of the functioning of gender or the relations between the sexes within Anglo-Saxon society. It is, however, guided by the theory that an integrated viewpoint is necessary—a perspective that offers depth-perception—and maintains the hope that Judith, with her unique ability to cross borders and defy stereotypes, may prove a starting point or a beginning to this effort. As Miles puts it: “All future developments from now on must be assessed from the perspective of both sexes, since both men and women are equally important to the making of history. The hope for the future, like the triumph of the past, lies in the co-operation and complementarity of women and men.”

Both the story of Judith and her long literary tradition may ultimately suggest principles that can guide this unifying effort.

Exclusions

As might be expected, a thorough reading of the literature in the Old English corpus or the Latin texts composed during Anglo-Saxon times is a worthy goal for an entire scholarly career, but not for the purposes of a single paper. Therefore the instances of literature that will come under analysis will deal only with Judith, and these instances, it must be admitted, in no way dominate the extant Anglo-Saxon texts. It is not possible to judge with any surety the extent to which the Anglo-Saxon audience would have been intimate with even the bare outlines of her story. Nonetheless, Judith’s uniqueness among the canon of Anglo-Saxon literature, the dynamics at work within her story, and

28 Preface, p. xvi.
the use of her story as a rhetorical device may very well have had a broader impact on the thought and culture of her society than the evidence is able to tell us.

At this point the focus will be limited to the Judith character of the original Old English and Latin texts. The works addressed in this study do not encompass the whole of Judith’s appearances; those texts which have been selected are considered unique or representative of the variety of Judith’s discussions and functions. Other mentions of her, for instance Bede’s use of her in his Martyrology and the treatment of the Book of Judith in the pseudo-Augustine sermons or the Nocturns, are considered duplications or adaptations of the tradition outlined in this study, and not necessarily new material. I have not found it practical for this paper to pursue incarnations of Judith in other artistic forms such as painting or sculpture, though I don’t doubt that, where and when their provenance could be identified with any certainty, these artifacts too would contribute to the scope of and influence the conclusions of this study. I have looked at certain texts preceding the Anglo-Saxon period where I felt they would be familiar to and perhaps even consulted by a literate Anglo-Saxon. At some point it would be interesting and perhaps useful to conduct a fuller study of Judith’s character encompassing all of her appearances in literature and art in the medieval period, but such research must, at this moment, be reserved for future study.

Let us begin modestly, then, with the simple of hope of discovering, in the context of Anglo-Saxon society, what work the narratives of Judith performed for her readers. The story itself is ripe for yet another analysis, being the sort of tale where little is lost in the telling, and much is gained. It must begin with some knowledge not just of the literary tradition in which Judith emerged but of the audience to whom she would have appealed, in particular those segments to which she was intended as a model and a guide.
CHAPTER 2

THE FEMALE FACE OF ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

There is no doubt that Old English society allowed to women, not only private influence, but also the widest liberty of intervention in public affairs.

--Frank Stenton, “The Place of Women in Anglo-Saxon Society”

Examining the Evidence

A study of women in the Anglo-Saxon literature must begin with an understanding of the position of women in Anglo-Saxon society. Searching the incomplete physical and written evidence for roles, customs, and the attitudes towards women is a fascinating quest, as enough pieces exist to yield a distinguishable picture, but by no means a comprehensive one. Again, several cautions must be kept in mind. Finke and others who have studied the position of women of the Middle Ages point out that women’s experiences varied greatly in different contexts, most appreciably across class lines. Just as the historical period cannot be thought of as static in its ideologies, rituals, or other cultural practices, the Anglo-Saxon world cannot be thought of as one unified or centralized realm. Originally composed of a number of small kingdoms, each ruled by different kings, England as a centralized monarchy did not exist until the coronation of Edgar the Peaceable at Bath in 973 AD; dialects of the language varied by region, and so did the specific laws regarding property and the conduct of citizens. Given a common background, some modest generalizations are possible, such as Doris Stenton’s reserved conclusion to her survey of early English women that Anglo-Saxon

1 Women’s Writing in English: Medieval England, p. 22.
men and women lived on terms of “rough equality” with one another. What she meant by ‘rough’ and ‘equality’ have been taken up by later scholars concerned with establishing a more precise (and sometimes not as optimistic) picture.

**Archaeological evidence**

Of all the evidence that exists to inform later ages of the life and times of the Anglo-Saxon woman, one might think that the archaeological remains, particularly burial practices and grave goods, could provide us with the most objective information. However, even this evidence can be tantalizingly unclear. Like many other historians treating the archaeological remains, Henrietta Leyser, in her survey *Medieval Women*, focuses on burial practices and cemetery evidence, which is more available and more easily interpreted than other evidence such as settlement remains. She begins with the warning that burial practices are not merely a “reflection of social reality,” but, like our own practices, may disguise or distort that reality. Nick Stoodley, in his own work on early Anglo-Saxon burial sites, surmises that funerary rituals were a way to articulate the ideal structure of the society, which might have in fact varied from the actual behavior.

Though these cautions may seem to impair the validity of any testimony drawn from burial artifacts, some assumptions do seem safe to make. Stoodley was able to identify two distinct burial assemblages: weapons and sharpening instruments comprised one assemblage, and collections of dress accessories, girdle articles, and weaving tools made up the other. From his observations that the first assemblage usually belonged to graves occupied by identifiable males, while the dress assemblage in almost all cases belonged to females, we might logically speculate that a man’s moveable property consisted of his weaponry, while a woman’s consisted of her jewelry, toiletry items, and household goods. The frequency with which thread boxes, spindle whorls, and weaving batons appear in female graves suggests women were the producers of cloth, and the appearance of cooking vessels indicates an equally pivotal role in feeding the family. Certain items in early Anglo-Saxon graves, however, present mysteries. Leyser

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2 *The English Woman in History*, p. 28.
3 See p. 5, where her discussion of the Anglo-Saxon archaeological evidence begins.
4 *The Spindle and the Spear*, p. 139.
5 Ibid., p. 136.
speculates upon the possible magical or supernatural powers of thread boxes containing herbs or crystal balls which seem to have no practical use; these items are found only in certain graves belonging to women and there is no explanation in the literature.\textsuperscript{7}

Stoodley makes the interesting observation that his evidence does not imply a strong gender hierarchy in the fifth and sixth centuries but, by the seventh century, the balance of power had shifted in favor of the male. In the earlier burials, inequality between the sexes is difficult to identify based on the burial evidence; both male and female remains have equal incidents of hypoplasia (caused by poor diet or periods of starvation), the males show more instances of osteoarthritis (caused by hard labor or involvement in hazardous physical activities), and the shorter life expectancy of the female is probably due to the dangers attendant upon pregnancy and childbirth. Evidence for immigrants and natives living side-by-side as well as epigenetic traits that indicate intermarriage between races and communities indicates to Stoodley that women played an important part in the migration, first by mingling with the colonizers, then moving between communities and kin-groups to establish connections through marriage.

Stoodley suggests that gendered gravesites and burial objects served to elaborate and affirm an ideal social context founded on and reinforced by an ideology where men and women played an equally valued role. However, beginning in the seventh century, he observes a deterioration in the health and wealth of the female remains. As burial monuments with a visible masculine symbolism began to predominate, the females showed a decreasing life expectancy and an increasing incidence of hypoplasia. He notes a coinciding trend in the law codes that define a woman in relation to her menfolk and, in particular, require the obedience of a woman to her husband. Stoodley suggests that, as smaller communities bonded together in the formation of nation states, the construction of a social elite—symbolically defined by the male assemblage of weaponry—contributed to a more pronounced gender hierarchy that favored the man as central to social rule and restricted public opportunities for women.\textsuperscript{8}

\textsuperscript{7} See pp. 15-17 of Leyser’s \textit{Medieval Women}.
\textsuperscript{8} \textit{The Spindle and the Spear}, pp. 136-143.
Several scholars would extend this trend in the devaluation of women into the twelfth century. Dietrich in particular notes that the English woman post-Conquest might have had some cause to be wistful looking back at the status of her Anglo-Saxon ancestresses, whom she would have seen “possessing rights, exercising alternatives, and wielding power that she [herself] could barely attain in the best of circumstances.” Though reluctant to call it a golden age, Dietrich’s assessment seems to concur with Stenton’s view of rough equality and is agreed to by both Fell, who concludes that “the Anglo-Saxon wife was both valued and respected, enjoying economic and marital rights, her independence safe-guarded and her interests protected,” and Liebell, who says of the Anglo-Saxon woman that “[h]er dignity was respected, her ability was acknowledged, and her freedom was unquestioned.” The evidence upon which these scholars base their opinions that the Anglo-Saxon woman had not quite reached the nadir of self-agency and self-determination might indicate that, even within the emergent hierarchy that Stoodley observed, some sort of resistance (or action?) was taking place on the part of women to preserve a sphere of influence or at least find a way to remain active—and valuable—members of the society. To this end, other artifacts such as legal documentation can provide a useful corollary to the archaeological remains.

Legal and Linguistic Evidence

The law codes are often the first place scholars begin when attempting to reach any objective conclusion about the status and roles of women, since these legal promulgations reflect not only the ideal standard in the behavioral requirements they outline, but also suggest actual practice through the punishments they propose to correct those activities not in harmony with the ideal. Cautions must apply here as well, for as Mate observes in her survey of the Anglo-Saxon law codes, it is possible that the codifications were only necessary as corrective actions, and the existing customs which

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9 C.f. Echols and Williams’ Women in the Middle Ages and A History of Women in the West: Silences of the Middle Ages (vol 2). Schictman and Gordon-Wise also address it in their respective studies on the character of Guinevere and literary treatments thereof. Curiously enough, the twelfth century also witnesses the birth of the fin’amor topos and an explosion in the popularity of the cult of Mary.
10 P. 43.
11 Women in Anglo-Saxon England, p. 73.
12 Anglo-Saxon Education of Women, p. 7.
were obviously understood by contemporaries would not have been documented.\textsuperscript{13} As with other evidence from the Anglo-Saxon period, what we do not know sometimes seems to surpass what we do know, and the lack seems to impede all but the roughest conclusions.

Studies of the law codes and other legal evidence seem particularly susceptible to the modern fallacy, which regards our contemporary society as the model for civilized behavior. Often it seems that feminist investigations of equality are based on modern terms, where ability to pursue a career, sharing of household tasks such as child-rearing, ability to own and dispose of property, and freedom of choice of sexual partner are the standard. Looking at Anglo-Saxon womanhood through this lens cannot help but present a very distorted picture. In our modern struggle for equality we tend to measure female rights by the extent that they have the same freedoms given to the males; if a male has the ability to inherit property, and a female does also, we make the claim that inheritance laws are equal and even enlightened. This approach tends to fall into the same trap as that previously attributed to the authoring of history, that of viewing and valuing everything on male terms. First, we can avoid a modern tendency toward anachronism by keeping in mind that Anglo-Saxon gender roles were more often determined according to a distribution of labor which did not have the benefit of our modern technological or mercantile advancements.\textsuperscript{14} Second, we should avoid a wistful, romanticized vision of a valiant society where men and women were equally fierce as much as we should avoid the ‘Dark Age’ assumption that so-called ‘traditional’ gender roles are the primordial slime from which our modern consciousness has evolved. Third, we must understand that the ideologies upon which Anglo-Saxon society were based grew out of a set of contingencies quite different from what we face today.

Alexander points out that just as poetry meant something different to the Anglo-Saxons, relations between the sexes meant something different from how our modern mind understands it. Early English society was formed as a collection of close-knit clans called \textit{cynns} with a strong sense of \textit{communis sententia} expressed in the person of the

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Women in Medieval English Society}, p. 19.
\textsuperscript{14} This viewpoint is in keeping with that expressed by, among others, Rosalind Miles and Keri Sanburn.
clan-chief or leader, who won his position through ability and influence, not just birth.\textsuperscript{15} We live in a society long saturated by Christian rationalizations for the subordination of women, justified by the crime of the first mother, Eve, which formed an ideological groundwork for the legal, emotional, and spiritual subjection of women over centuries.\textsuperscript{16} The worldview underlying the laws and customs of Anglo-Saxon society evolved in a culture initially unassociated with Christian thought and which lacked the leisure for philosophical speculation due to the more pressing concerns of sustenance and defense. Our modern society is based on the autonomy of the individual and the concept of the self, with hugely centralized administration, where political threats are distant and wars are waged overseas. Anglo-Saxon society was based on a hierarchical and interconnected system of relationships formed in response to ever-present and immediate dangers of war, which required a strong sense of community. This context is important when it comes to assessing the law codes and other historical evidence, for it demands that we overcome our modern bias that individual autonomy is the ideal. This bias surfaces in debates over whether the laws can be seen as “protecting women from violence and safeguarding their honor” or must be interpreted as subjecting women to male authority and ignoring their individual identities.\textsuperscript{17} The critical disagreements over whether women were treated as independent beings may lose sight of the nuances of cultural values which defined a self as \textit{through} and not separated from one’s relations. Our modern world stands on divisions between public and private spheres and the formation of a concept of selfhood that were not constructions familiar to Anglo-Saxon society.\textsuperscript{18} Certain habits of tradition reflecting what may perhaps be an expedient division of labor based on the practical concerns of biological capability and mobility should not be confused with a patriarchal ideology that rests on a formulated differentiation in psychology, disposition, and spiritual destiny between men and women.

\textsuperscript{15} See the introductory chapter of \textit{The Earliest English Poems} for his full discussion.
\textsuperscript{16} I do not intend to suggest that Christianity is solely responsible for medieval or modern misogyny; there are plenty of examples in the Old Testament of the subordination of women, and Alcuin Blamires observes in \textit{The Case for Women in Medieval Culture} that Virgil and Ovid contain formulaic jabs at feminine weakness (see the discussion on pages 128-129), hinting at a classic tradition of misogyny as rhetorical device.
\textsuperscript{17} The first opinion is expressed by Doris Stenton in \textit{The English Woman in History} (here quoted in Mate p. 17) and the second by Anne Klinck in “Anglo-Saxon Women and the Law” (Mate 17).
\textsuperscript{18} I am indebted to Keri Sanburn’s thesis “The Indexing of Medieval Women,” where she makes this point.
With that in mind, the exploration of the contemporary transcript for the Anglo-Saxon woman inevitably begins with the first-century work of Tacitus, since his ethnographic survey *On Germania* has for so long been considered as a near-accurate or at least highly informative record of the social customs of the tribes known collectively to the Roman world as the Germani. Since the tribes that migrated to post-Roman Britain belonged to the Germanic branch of the language family, Anglo-Saxon scholars often look to Tacitus as a valuable account of pre-Christian rituals and customs. J.B. Rives, in his recent translation, cautions us to regard the *Germania* as a “mix of accurate observations and unexamined assumptions,” reminding us that while it contains much of interest, it also contains the rhetorical flourishes and commonplaces that were standard fare in the ethnographies of his day.\(^\text{19}\) Once again, we must sift through the rhetoric and the author’s intentions in order to find the particles of truth.

The most-quoted observations are the following: the Germans take their women and children into battle and put them on the sidelines to cheer the troops; they consider that women have a gift of prophecy and consult them for counsel; they have a high opinion of marriage and, except in the cases of the most noble families who practice polygamy, their valuation of marriage is the most praise-worthy part of their culture; it is not the wife who delivers a dowry to her husband, but the husband who acquires a wife through practical gifts; they frown on adultery, but value chastity, and no matter how beautiful or young a woman might be, if she is known to be impure, no husband will have her.\(^\text{20}\) Most relevant to our discussion are the ideas (in §18.3) that a woman is her husband’s partner and “ally” and knowingly agrees to share his fortunes in peace and in war. In fact, her token of giving him a weapon as a marriage gift seems to indicate that she “does not think herself exempt from aspirations of valour and hazards of war.”\(^\text{21}\) Likewise, in §20.2 the idea appears that neither are young men urged into adulthood nor are young women hurried into marriage, but rather, “of identical age and similar height, they match their mates in strength;” a captivating notion, when compared to the Roman customs of marriage where the woman was the lesser in stature, age, and education.

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19 See Tacitus: *Germania*, p. 41; the entire Introduction contains much useful information on the author, the ethnographic tradition, the work’s rhetorical purpose and reliability, and its enormous influence.
20 See §8.1, §8.2, §18.1, §18.2, and §19.1 (pp. 80, 84, and 85 of Rives).
21 Rives, p. 84.
However, when he goes on to note that the offspring of such unions “reflect their parents’ vigour,” Rives suspects Tacitus is calling on a Roman notion that men should wait to have sex until they are at least twenty (and women, of course, must wait until marriage) because the adolescent seed may produce small or deformed children.\textsuperscript{22} Given the visual picture of naked, healthy, blue-eyed babies tumbling merrily about in the dirt and filth (health and stature due to the fact that their own mothers nurse them, and not hired maids, Tacitus would like us to know), the cautious reader must wonder how much of this account reflects the ‘noble savage’ commonplace and how much is based on firsthand observation of actual practice.

In any case, Tacitus’ reflections on a society largely egalitarian in respect to gender (except for his observation in §15.1 that the women and old men have the care of “hearth and home and fields” while the warriors “loll about in a stupor,” which Rives suspects may be another standard ethnographic commonplace\textsuperscript{23}) indicate to historians examining the woman question that the Germanic woman enjoyed a full and participatory citizenship—remarkable in light of the fact that such a circumstance would not return to the Western world for another 1800 years—and, apropos of Anglo-Saxon studies, these attitudes would have migrated to Britain with them.

The law codes of the Anglo-Saxon kings can tell us which of these early customs survived and which ones eventually changed, reflective of evolving concepts of womanhood and wifehood. Finke observes that throughout European cultures in the Middle Ages, marriage was a woman's chief occupation and “the nature of the marriage contract would largely determine her own condition in life.”\textsuperscript{24} Angela Lucas shares the thought that marriage was one of those matters in which Anglo-Saxon women benefited from much more freedom and protection than their later Anglo-Norman sisters.\textsuperscript{25} She goes on to note that to modern readers, the law codes governing marriage practices might shock the sensibilities with their commercial terms, suggesting that the woman was valued as—and treated as—a piece of property,\textsuperscript{26} though Finke reminds us that the basis for an Anglo-Saxon marriage was indeed financial practicality rather than “mutual

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} See Rives, p. 85 and the commentary on 207.
\item \textsuperscript{23} See §15.1 on p. 83 and commentary on p. 189.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Women’s Writing in English, p. 23.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Women in the Middle Ages, p. 82.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Ibid., pp. 63-64.
\end{itemize}
affection and love.” Mate reaches a depressing conclusion: “So long as women had basically only two life choices, to become a nun or to marry, equality was impossible.” However, it does not seem from the evidence that the options available to men were any wider. Both sexes were dictated to by tradition, the good of the community, and the need to form family ties. The other options available to women today—the idea of an independent career, for example—might have seemed ridiculous and possibly suspicious to a culture based on the family unit, needless to say.

The law codes throughout the Anglo-Saxon period continue the Germanic custom of marriage as an alliance struck between two parties, where the bridegroom represented himself and the bride’s party involved both her and her family, who had a vested interest in the transaction, which might explain why the bride’s family was customarily wooed with gifts, as was the bride herself. The earliest records within English borders—that of King Æthelberht of Kent (560-616)—do describe marriage in terms of a sale. Just as the Germani of Tacitus’ time had, a man seeking a bride would render gifts to the woman’s family that equaled her bride-price or *weotuma*. The *morgengifu* or morning-gift was rendered to the bride herself the morning after the nuptials. Typically any property the wife brought to the marriage, including the marriage-portion given to the couple by the bride’s family, was ultimately administered by the husband, a fact which Klinck interprets as proof of “an entirely male world of affairs.” But this arrangement, perhaps, had practical benefits and was not simply instituted because women were supposed to be incompetent or incapable.

Lucas reminds us that the habit of paying the woman directly is a more liberal practice than those known elsewhere, and likewise the customs governing separation are equally practical; if a woman wished to pack up the kids and leave, she was entitled to half the household goods. If she wished to leave the children behind, her share was much less; apparently this was a culture enlightened about child support. In keeping with the perception of marriage as a familial and communal arrangement, there were penalties for

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27 Women’s Writing in English, p. 24.
29 Fell’s Women in Anglo-Saxon England contains a very complete discussion of the custom of the morning-gift.
31 Lucas contains a fuller discussion pp. 65-66.
breaking betrothals, as the laws of Ine of Wessex (688-726) suggest, and the laws of Aethelberht impose penalties on men who steal other peoples’ daughters or fiancées. Wife-capture, Lucas notes, was a custom practiced in all Indo-European societies, but this kind of marriage did not have the benefit of establishing the ties of kinship so important in times of peace as well as war.

Those who wish to debate whether these laws recognized women as full citizens can interpret the evidence either way. Both Doris Stenton and Laura Finke are inclined to soften the business-like connotations of the marriage agreement by pointing out that the terms “buy” and “owner” would have carried slightly different connotations than those that strike the modern eye, implying not a commercial value but a system of guardianship and transference of protection. Lucas reminds us that everyone in the Anglo-Saxon hierarchy had a wergild or man-price, reflective not so much of gender as of place within the social order. Ross holds the belief that the laws neglect to treat women as “full legal persons,” considering that the codes typically specify compensation according to the breach of a man’s guardianship, not precisely an offense directed at a woman. However, the fact that the original marriage contract was an arrangement between families might explain why a loss of faith by one party required recompense to the bride as well as her family. Though neither the laws nor the other literature associate a moral shame with an unsuccessful alliance, the monetary penalty for breach of contract does seem to put marriage in “pay for usage” terms, requiring a man to compensate the first husband for a stolen wife or compensate a family for a deflowered maid being returned to them. Though the same evidence does not suggest that sexual experience was either a commercial or a moral handicap to a woman, chastity in a bride did add to her value; this is seen even in pre-Christian cultures, and Tacitus noted it in his ethnography.

These terms of valuation might be what lead to the implied prejudice, gained from later periods of history, that the terms of a marriage negotiation necessarily ensured that the woman had no voice, was essentially treated like chattel, and was doomed by the commercial circumstances of marriage to a life without respect or mutual affection.

32 See Lucas, *Women in the Middle Ages*, pp. 63-64.
33 *Women in the Middle Ages*, p. 62.
34 See also D. Stenton, p. 7; Finke, pp. 23-34; Lucas, pp. 64-65.
36 See Rives, p. 85.
Bloch’s book *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* addresses romantic love as a concept that gained currency in the literature somewhere around the twelfth century. Wrenn observes that romantic love is a theme alien to the Old English poetry, and, he infers, to the culture as well. Though possessing a strong ethical consciousness marked by a love of moralizing which found expression in the literacy granted by the new religion, the Anglo-Saxon spirit, he concludes, was too practical to accommodate what we in modern terms would call a higher spiritual experience or the basis for marriage. Those who tend to find marriage a cold-hearted arrangement for the Anglo-Saxon maiden may be assuming that the practical terms of marriage, created for purposes of ensuring loyalty between kin groups, precluded the possibilities for a woman’s choice or personal satisfaction in a marital arrangement or the opportunity for her to have a voice in domestic matters. We have nothing to suggest that affection or even passion were alien to the Anglo-Saxon partnership, and in fact the evidence seems to indicate the opposite. True, we have no way of knowing whether the Anglo-Saxon woman felt that her culture’s perceptions towards marriage suited her personal wants or needs. But it is possible, if we believe Wrenn’s conclusions, that as a people the Anglo-Saxons valued marriage on terms other than those of romantic companionship.

During the course of the period, the law codes show the influence of Christianity, and the Christian concept of marriage is slightly at odds with the native Germanic one. Where Tacitus observed that the Germanic female was groomed to be the equal and ally of her husband, St. Paul taught that the man was the head of the household and the woman must be obedient to him. Lucas likewise notes that it was difficult for the Anglo-Saxons to accept the idea of marriage as a lifelong monogamous bond broken only by death. Though Tacitus seems to suggest that the Germanic tribes practiced single marriages and loyal monogamy as a general state of affairs, early Anglo-Saxon laws have an elaborate system of recompense for adultery and allow divorce merely on the basis of incompatibility. Concubinage and serial monogamy were standard practices throughout

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37 See the introduction to *Medieval Misogyny* for an engaging summary of Bloch’s main points.
38 See Wrenn’s discussion on p. 12 in *A Study of Old English Literature*.
39 See p. 68 of *Women in the Middle Ages*.
40 D. Stenton notes how the Germanic custom of divorce is retained in the laws of Æthelbert; see p. 7.
the period, at least for members of the upper classes. Cnut had a legal wife, Emma, and a recognized concubine, Ælfgifu, a liaison which Doris Stenton politely refers to as an “irregular marriage.” Nevertheless Ælfgifu agitated just as strongly as Emma to bring her sons to power, in a sort of political stew which Stafford notes was an attendant danger when powerful men took on more wives than they had the property to accommodate. The practice of concubinage is also reflected in Tacitus, who says it is not on account of lust but rather personal distinction that certain men are “solicited with numerous matches.” According to Ross, the flow of letters between churchmen and various Anglo-Saxon kings indicates that the practice of concubinage, ‘irregular marriages,’ and liaisons with consecrated women extended throughout the Anglo-Saxon period, long after and in flagrant defiance of church edicts which adamantly declared that such unions were illegal as well as immoral and the children of them, being illegitimate, should not be allowed to inherit. What the women in these relationships thought about this state of affairs was either not recorded or has not survived.

Given that her girlhood was spent under the guidance of a father or guardian and her wifehood was spent in dutiful compliance with any reasonable demand of her husband, the only time of her life when an Anglo-Saxon woman approached anything resembling independence and the freedom of self-governance was after both of these stages of her life were behind her. Widows were, through the custom of the bride-gift, provided for; if no portion had been allotted at the time of marriage, she was customarily entitled to one-third of her husband’s estate. Also, her emotional safety was protected under laws such as Cnut’s, as she could not be forced to remarry. (If she remarried too quickly, in fact, she must forfeit her husband’s property; likely this was a tactic to prevent forced remarriages of endowed and newly-available women.) Both Lucas and Rives tend to think that Tacitus’ observation on the one-man-only custom of the Germanic wives is a plea for his Roman contemporaries to reform their dismissive perceptions about marriage

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41 See Ross for a full discussion.
42 The English Woman in History, p. 2.
43 C.f. her article “Sons and Mothers” in Medieval Women, ed. Derek Baker, particularly pp. 81-82.
44 Rives, p. 84.
45 Ross, pp. 254 and 267.
46 Klinck contains a fuller discussion of the benefits (and drawbacks) of widowhood; see pp. 117-118.
and return to the republican ideal.\textsuperscript{47} Practically speaking, a widow was, for the first time in her life, legally recognized as being able to make a decision for herself; she could marry, remain independent, or retire in a nunnery as it pleased her.

The consequences for adultery are likewise contestable in terms of their indications of the attitudes towards women. Klinck assumes that the pre-Christian punishment for a woman’s adultery was death, a brutality mitigated to facial disfigurement and forfeiture of property under the laws of Cnut.\textsuperscript{48} Leyser has the opposite interpretation, perceiving that the laws of Æthelbert, which redress adultery with a system of fines, do not imply the moral offense that is punishable by permanent scarring in the later codes.\textsuperscript{49} Tacitus notes in his \textit{Germania} that the pagan punishment for adultery was that the woman, in full view of all her relations, be stripped naked, shorn of her hair, and chased through the village with a lash.\textsuperscript{50} No specifications are made in Tacitus as to the husband’s fidelity or punishment for a lack thereof.

The opposing interpretations of the amount of freedom and acknowledgement of personhood provided to Anglo-Saxon women by the laws that governed them might suggest conflicting forces at work in the progress of Anglo-Saxon society. One current of thought is that the Christian influence worked to soften the brutality of earlier customs, for instance mediating the gravity of certain punishments by turning the ancient practice of revenge and blood-feuds into a system of monetary compensation based on the \textit{wergild}. At the same time, the Church endeavored to sanctify male-female relations, encouraging a moral viewpoint that seems to be missing from the earlier codes, which are more businesslike in nature.\textsuperscript{51} Leyser believes that the deepening Christian theology and influence led to stricter limits on the autonomy of women. Klinck believes the opposite; she tactfully challenges Stenton’s opinions that women enjoyed a ‘rough equality,’ claiming that “[a]t no point in the Anglo-Saxon age were women anything like the equals of men.”\textsuperscript{52} She contends that, far from lessening or qualifying the pre-Christian and

\textsuperscript{47} Lucas, p. 77; Rives, p. 205.
\textsuperscript{48} See “Anglo-Saxon Women and the Law,” p. 111.
\textsuperscript{49} See \textit{Medieval Women}, p. 44.
\textsuperscript{50} Rives, p. 85.
\textsuperscript{51} One peculiarity is in the laws of King Alfred (871-99), which refers to the bride-price as “the worth of her maidenhood.” This locates the woman’s value not in her familial ties or household wealth but in the fact of her virginity (see Lucas, p. 65).
\textsuperscript{52} “Anglo-Saxon Women and the Law,” p. 118.
egalitarian practices of the traditional Germanic practices, the Christian influence in the Anglo-Saxon period caused a gradual rise in the status, responsibilities, and decision-making power of women. Though at no point in their lives were women ever not subject to the guardianship of men (even widows were ostensibly under the protection of the king), she believes the “acknowledgement of women’s rights over their own persons is to be attributed to the influence of the Church,”\(^5\) citing the cessation of the practice of bride-price, mitigation of the punishment for adultery, and stipulations of consent as some of the basic rights that improved, marking an increased protection against the victimization of women and a dispensation of the brutality of the earliest recorded practices.

In general, the clear indications that (except in cases where she was abducted) a woman was not to be forced into marriage, was allowed to divest herself of an ill-fitting husband, could be exempt from punishment if she had no part in her husband’s crimes, and deserved to be compensated if any man betrayed the betrothal contract or a man not her husband took sexual advantage all support the contention that women were in fact full citizens under the law. Though her male guardian, whether father or husband, was legally responsible for her welfare, these laws presumably support the cohesion and operation of a family unit and are not based on an implicit assumption that women are property, baggage, or auxiliaries to a household. The existing land charters indicate, furthermore, that women were allowed to inherit, possess, and alienate property. It is hard to contradict that this particular sort of evidence reflects actual practice, and certain women in Anglo-Saxon England were the sole possessors of bookright, or land granted to them by authority of the king.\(^5\) Exceptions to the ordinary rule that a woman’s property was subject to her husband, these women were allowed to make sales, bequeath the property to whomever they pleased (daughters as equally as sons), and litigate on their own behalf.\(^5\) And, validating the fact of ownership, the records indicate that a woman’s land could be taken away as punishment for larceny, treason, murder, or practicing

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\(^5\) Though in most of the surviving cases the women testatrixes are presumably widows, there are wills made jointly between husband and wife, indicating that it was at least possible for some women to have and exercise a voice in familial decisions. See Klinck, p. 117.
witchcraft,56 which reinforces that she was personally responsible for her property and her behavior. As with many other periods of history, the possession of property meant the possession of wealth, power, and influence, and thus aristocratic women enjoyed an autonomy not equally available to their lesser-endowed sisters.

Frank Stenton has also noted the existence of certain place-names as indicating a practice by women of owning property or otherwise being remembered in association with a town, field, wood, or stream, which speaks to a certain realm of influence and historical efficacy not likely to be exercised by a social group generally considered less than a full legal person.57 Likewise, other instances of the language give us glimpses into careers and occupations pursued by women; Christine Fell notes instances of feminized words for bards, bakers, and brewmeisters, suggesting that women were also known to pursue trades as well as the arts. Though conclusions about whether the levels of influence and agency on the part of Anglo-Saxon women were fact or illusion can be disputed on the basis of law codes or language alone, a fuller impression emerges when one considers the other historical documentation, particularly the chronicles.

**Writing By and About Women**

Just as the wills and land charters record the doings of propertied women, the annals of history record the doings of powerful women alongside those of the men. Betty Bandel, in “The English Chroniclers’ Attitude Toward Women,” observes that “Anglo-Saxon chroniclers speak of outstanding women in a very casual way;” though most public offices would have been filled by men, there are “a number of rich portraits of women who are not simply lovers, but are also administrators, warriors, or saints,” and Bandel takes the lack of surprise with which these able women are treated as an indication that women were deemed just as capable of being “learned, devout, an able administrator or a brave fighter.”58

Some of these women—a good many of them scheming queens—were noteworthy for the bad publicity they left behind them, but the fact that they first managed to conduct themselves poorly and thereafter be held personally responsible for it

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56 *Women in Medieval English Society*, p. 19.
57 C.f. his discussion in “The Historical Bearing of Place-Name Studies.”
58 See pp. 113-114.
indicates, as Bandel suggests, the capacity for autonomous action and independent judgment, for good or ill. For example, Eadburh, daughter of Offa of Mercia, so outraged the West Saxons by her attempts to wield influence that they refused to crown queens for a long time thereafter—an understandable response considering that Eadburh’s victims of guile and poison included several followers of her husband Beohtric (786-802) and, eventually, Beohtric himself.\(^5^9\) Eadburh had perhaps learned her behavior at her mother’s knee; Cynethryth, Offa’s wife (757-796), had had coins struck with her name and portrait—the only Anglo-Saxon queen to ever have done so—and passed into legend as a tyrannous ruler, though the details of her tyranny, Doris Stenton notes, have vanished.\(^6^0\) Ælfgifu, previously noted as the consort of Cnut, while acting as regent of Norway on behalf of their eldest son, ruled with such a heavy hand that her people rose up and overthrew her.\(^6^1\) Likewise the stories of Eadgifu, wife of Edward the Elder, Ælfthryth wife of Edgar, and Emma, second wife to Cnut as some would have it, all credit these women with ambition, significant influence, and complicated if not downright devious minds—clearly not passive pawns in a game played by men.\(^6^2\)

Not all queens were bad queens, of course, though as always subsequent women suffered for the misconduct of a foremother; not only were several successions of Wessex consorts denied the title of queen, but fairly often widowed royals took refuge in nunneries not because it gave them something to do but because it provided sanctuary from the political machinations of others. Some women did not wait for their husbands to die before opting for the religious life; Æthelthryth, daughter of Anna of East Anglia, kept her virginity intact through two marriages before she finally convinced her husband to allow her to withdraw to the monastery at Ely.\(^6^3\) Likewise some kings abandoned their wives and thrones to pursue spiritual careers. At least among the royals, it appears a woman could do anything a man could do, and did; Æthelflæd, daughter of the Wessex Alfred and wife to Æthelbert of the Mercians, took command of the army when her husband fell ill and, ruling in her own right for seven years after his death, was

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\(^5^9\) Taken from Pauline Stafford, “Sons and Mothers: Family Politics in the Early Middle Ages,” p. 83.
\(^6^0\) See *The English Woman in History*, p. 2.
\(^6^1\) Ibid., pp. 2-3.
\(^6^2\) Stafford suggests in “Sons and Mothers” that the practice of putting highborn daughters and wives in nunneries was often due more to practical concerns than to spiritual ones; it was a way to neutralize political aspirations and control claims to property and titles.
\(^6^3\) Leyser takes this information from Bede, p. 25.
responsible for building defenses and protecting her country from hostile Danish visitors
until her own death in 918. Though we should not imagine her armor-clad and leading
her forces, Boudicca-style, into the fray, her influence should not be underestimated.
Doris Stenton proclaims that this warrior-queen “may fairly be counted among the few
English women who in any period have permanently influenced the course of history.”

The treatment of Æthelflæd’s story is worth mentioning here because it shows
how the conditioning of historiographers influences their frame of reference when
dealing with previous eras. Early studies of the Judith poem propose Æthelflæd as the
inspiration for and perhaps the figure being celebrated by the character of Judith, for both
are fighting women who protect their people. Timmer disagrees; he feels that it is the
Irish Annals of Ulster who enthuse about Æthelflæd, not her native Anglo-Saxon
Chronicle, and he credits Henry of Huntingdon for making her into a famed heroine. Wainwright calls this “a conspiracy of silence;” the West Saxon Chronicle, to which
Timmer refers, would have muted Æthelflæd’s accomplishments for political reasons,
since the ruler of Wessex, Æthelflæd’s brother Edward, was working hard to absorb
Mercia into his kingdom. Wainwright refers to a fragment of the Mercian chronicle,
most of which is lost, which gives Æthelflæd a little more credit. Bandel believes that
Huntingdon’s treatment of Æthelflæd as a “nine days’ wonder” reflects that women in
Norman times, thanks to increasingly restricted influence and the conventions of courtly
love, were already regarded as a special interest group, as they still are today. She feels
strongly that the Chronicle’s casual assessment of Æthelflæd’s accomplishments
indicates “an apparent acceptance on the part of the Saxon chroniclers of an unlimited
range of interests and abilities on the part of women.” Such has been the power of
medieval misogyny that scholars today still regard Æthelflæd as something of a wonder,
celebrating her not because she was a shrewd leader but because she was a woman.

In any society, wealth and birth often equal power and influence; that aristocratic
Anglo-Saxon women possessed and used these advantages does not indicate an arena of
freedom for the Anglo-Saxon woman at large. Likewise the records of women writing in

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64 The English Woman in History, p. 4.
65 See p. 7 of his Judith.
67 Bandel, p. 113-114.
their own hands appear at the hands of women privileged with literacy, which usually, though not always, was accessible only to the well-to-do. Peter Dronke, in his *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*, sees the extant correspondence as evidence of an intellectual life and a psychological perception of self much as we imagine it today, with women engaging in self-awareness and modes of expression that show feelings quite sophisticated and humane. He notes the “keenly emotional tone” and “high-pitched effusiveness” in the spiritual friendship expressed in the eighth-century correspondence between the missionary Boniface and the women who helped him perform his good works. In particular, the letters of Berthgyth to her brother Balthard resonate with the passionate sensitivity and acute longing found in the poetic laments. Leoba (700-780), whose “reputation for learning and for sanctity are remarkable in any age,” was particularly dear to Boniface, so much so that he requested that she be buried in his tomb. The true respect, affection, depth of feeling, and emotional as well as spiritual bonds expressed in this correspondence is of the sort that is only possible between equals in intelligence and education; from these letters we might suspect not only that women were perceived to have and in fact demonstrated intellectual capacities and sensibilities equal to a man’s but also that the Anglo-Saxon temperament was not quite as phlegmatic as certain scholars would have us believe. These poetic expressions belie what is regarded as a characteristic stoicism and must cause us to reject former prejudiced assumptions of dim-witted and savage ignorance.

Rudolf of Fulda’s biography of Leoba is the first Anglo-Saxon biography of a woman; Hugeberc’s *The Hodoeporicon of St. Willibald*, which she began writing in 778, is the first biography written by an Anglo-Saxon woman. Born in Wessex around 740, Hugeberc settled in Germany after 761 and became abbess of Heidenheim. When her kinsman Bishop Willibald, on his deathbed, began telling her about his adventures, it struck her that someone ought to be writing this down. A combination travel guide, biography, and character study, the *Hodoeporicon* is remarkable not for the quality of its

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68 See pp. viii-xi.
69 Dronke, p. 30.
70 Petroff discusses Leoba’s influence on p. 84 of *Medieval Women’s Visionary Literature*.
71 Leyser has more on Leoba, pp. 28-30.
Latin (which, Dronke notes, is so elaborate and tangled as to be quite bizarre) but for the fact that she is in essence, as Petroff says, inventing a new literary form, and also for the fact of her determination to write despite an acknowledged apprehension as to how her words will be received, given that she is a woman. Dronke spends some time studying her preface and the oscillations in tone between “confidence and diffidence;” he wonders if “the elaborate depreciation of herself and her sex” is really “a subtle means of self-assertion.” Ultimately he concludes that Hugeberc, to our knowledge the first published Anglo-Saxon female author, is admitting not just fear of censure but also defiance and the determination “not to be crushed.” It is crucial to note of Hugeberc that, whether or not she assimilated the church-supported anti-feminine attitudes to which, as an abbess, she must be exposed, she clearly makes two points apparently substantiating the superiority of her male cohorts; she points out that men alone have access to the “superior dignity” of the priesthood and she refers to herself as “corruptible through the womanly frail foolishness of my sex.” Her open acknowledgement of possible criticism indicates the rhetoric that was already in wide circulation by her time, though she did not allow it to stop her from writing anyway, a fact for which feminist historians are grateful.

Women in the Church

Hugeberc’s travel book and the Continental correspondence serve as reminders that it was the Christian Church which introduced a new literacy into Anglo-Saxon society and in general caused powerful and permanent changes in the social, cultural, and spiritual way of life. As Wrenn observes, the influence of Christianity is a fundamental part not just of the Anglo-Saxon poetry but the society as a whole. Although Irish missionaries were operating in England even during the time of the first migrations (St. Patrick is perhaps a shining example), the first missionaries from the Continent were sent

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72 See Dronke’s discussion of her, pp. 33-35; his translations faithfully represent the complexities of her language, and his analysis also addresses the paradoxical, almost satirical self-ablation of her tone.
73 Petroff’s treatment of Hugeberc abridges the tangles of her language and speculates only briefly on her sources of literary inspiration; see pp. 86-88.
74 Women Writers of the Middle Ages, p. 34.
75 Ibid., p. 35.
76 Translated by Dronke, p. 34.
77 A Study of Old English Literature, p. 12.
by Pope Gregory and landed in Kent in 597 AD.78 Conversions commenced and the English canon began acquiring saints with all due speed.

The progress of Christianity had a profound impact on the position of and the attitudes towards women; the two major waves of conversion can be located at the beginning of the seventh century and the middle of the tenth. Women played a key role in the early conversion process not only by taking holy orders and participating in the administration of religious houses but also by carrying the faith in a secular fashion to their new husbands and families. When Æthelbert of Kent married a Frankish princess he brought not just Bertha but Christ into his household; their daughter Æthelburh carried the faith to the household of her Northumbrian (and pagan) husband, King Edwin. After their own daughter Eanflæd was born and baptized, Edwin surrendered to the word of Christ and urged many in his household to join him; the widespread ceremony on Easter Day, 627, also included his niece Hild, who was to have a famous destiny and became, thanks to Bede, perhaps the most famous woman of the Anglo-Saxon age.79 Bede’s history, as Leyser points out, abounds with active and even likeable heroines. Christianity opened up a whole new career path to women whose previous options for a life pursuit had been limited to marriage alone. Says Leyser of the women: “They take up its challenges with alacrity and with evident success. They become saints apace, exercising power in life and in death: in life in positions of influence as abbesses, in death through miracles worked at their shrines.”80

While the records largely concern well-born women, it seems that well-born women were particularly suited for the task of overseeing communities of people. In administering the double houses, religious women played important roles as cultural patrons and educators and were called upon to act, as were their secular sisters, as advisors, hostesses, and diplomats.81 During the tenure of Hild, Whitby turned out five bishops, fostered the advancement of Anglo-Saxon theology by hosting important synods, and witnessed the birth (coincidentally, in a stable) of Anglo-Saxon religious poetry

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78 Meyer, “Women and the Tenth Century English Monastic Reform,” p. 34.
79 These names frequently arise in any work dealing with Anglo-Saxon women—particularly that of Hild—but here I draw largely from Leyser, p. 22.
80 Medieval Women, p. 20.
81 Szarmach’s Holy Men and Women: Old English Prose Saints’ Lives and Their Contexts provides a detailed discussion of the atmosphere of the holy houses in both the early and late periods.
thanks to Cædmon, who was greatly encouraged and supported in his literary compositions by Hild herself. These early religious institutions became, in effect, thriving communities which were able to focus on instruction and the creation of literature and art. As Joan Nicholson observes, it was of no use for women to enter a convent to get away from men; they would have to interact with them anyway, and besides, “in an age of violence and endemic warfare,” an isolated community of women “only invited trouble.” The remarkable number of women in this ‘Golden Age’ of early Christianity who traveled, wrote, read, listened, advised, and earned the respect of their male counterparts does indeed suggest an operative equality, not the patronizing encouragement of the poor weak woman in her idle pursuits but rather a vital, vigorous interdependence, bearing the lingering stamp of that Germanic spirit Tacitus observed where women were reared and delivered into marriage fully expecting to be equal partners with men—equally capable, equally gifted, equally committed to the preservation of the community, and equally valued in the eyes of the divine powers.

Though this, in practice, was the state of things, Hugeberc should remind us that the published rhetoric was quite different. While the Anglo-Saxon spirit was quick to embrace the positive effects of literacy, new systems of administration, and spiritual community, the patristic teaching of the evil of woman accompanied these changes, though it was fortunately slow to make an impression on the Anglo-Saxon mind. Nevertheless, through frequent repetition, the idea did take root. Paul, who conveyed the lovely message “[t]here is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus,” also dictated that the husband is the head of the wife and, in his exegesis on Genesis, established that woman is the instrument of the devil. Augustine in De Trinitate offered a picture of harmony in this message: “Human nature itself which is complete [only] in both sexes, was made in the image of God, and it does not separate the woman from the image of God which it signifies . . . The woman together with her own husband is the image of God, so that the whole may be one image,” and then forever damned women by adding that, “while man alone is in the image of God as fully as when joined to woman, woman alone is not to be

82 See her article “Feminae Gloriosae: Women in the Age of Bede” in Baker, pp. 15-29.
regarded as in God's image.”^85 These opinions, reinforced by frequent borrowings from
and allusions to Paul, Jerome, Augustine, Ambrose, and other patristic writers, culminate
in the message that, at least where the Church was concerned, womanhood was such a
vile state that it could only be remediated through union with a man, either secular
marriage or devotion to Christ.

Curiously enough, it seems those early male Anglo-Saxon missionaries who
worked side by side with, instructed, learned from, and benefited enormously from
female advice, energy, and skill were not disposed either to view or treat their
companions as vile, inferior, or somehow unable to achieve God’s grace without them.
Aldhelm’s address to the nuns at Barking, for instance, seems full of genuine praise for
their learning. Boniface’s correspondence with Leoba reads like the affection of a true
sister and brother in spirit. Bede speaks of Hild with the admiration he would accord any
competent, intelligent, good-hearted person; he doesn’t express amazement that she has
accomplished so much given her disability, since she is after all a woman.

Quite simply, the early Anglo-Saxon Christians were seemingly free of the idea
that woman is inferior, a mal-formed male. Leyser suggests that these particular
misogynistic and anti-feminine views of the church fathers can be linked to the second
wave of conversion, in the reforms inspired by St. Benedict and later adopted wholesale
in the tenth-century, when “changed perceptions of women were used to justify a
diminution of their activities and in their role.”^87 Boniface himself, despite his great
reliance on his female companions in his missionary work, cautions in his later letters
against the free travel of women. Hugeberc so anticipated outrage over the idea of a
woman writing that she was quick to point out all her flaws first and thus defuse criticism.

How the misogyny took root is a question that, for our purposes, we must
momentarily consider. As Rosalind Miles notes in her discussion on the creation of
patriarchy, there must be something of substance in an idea for it to be so wholly
integrated into a society; even when evil is perpetuated, it is likely to answer some fear,
ignorance, or need. Were the teachings of the Church not somehow useful to their daily

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^85 Qtd. in Lucas, p. 6.
^86 He also admonishes them on their love of adornment and warns them against vanity; his work is
discussed further in Chapter 4.
^87 Medieval Women, p. 38.
lives, it seems the bulk of the population would manage to simply avoid them, the way kings continued to take concubines or kidnap nuns despite warnings from the priests. As our historical survey shows, women were a substantial part of the population and likely aware of their impact and influence; there must then be some motive that caused a society which trained its women to be the equal of a man to begin instructing its women on their greater weakness, capacity for sin, and the need to be protected. Eve’s convenience as a scapegoat could not be the sole reason.

We might suspect that what aided the spread of this idea was a new threat which did indeed make obvious the lesser physical strength of women. Though Archbishop Theodore had expressed disapproval of the double houses as early as 669 AD, and the movement toward centralization of spiritual and institutional authority in the hands of bishops began in the mid-eighth century, the Danes were responsible for the destruction of a number of double houses which were never rebuilt and, after the reforms of the tenth century, female communities were strictly cloistered. To the Germanic spirit, at least as we read it in Tacitus, it was a great crime of the society to lose their women to slavery or as hostages. In fact Tacitus says the surest way of keeping the tribes quiet is to take their well-born maidens as hostages; they might be prone to sacrifice the lives of men and warriors, but not of their women. The Germani women, if we may trust certain accounts, used their fear and hatred of slavery as a means to rally the men to fight and, if they failed—according to Plutarch’s version—as an excuse to kill the losers and then themselves. Though it is risky to assume that this older attitude prevailed wholesale in the later Anglo-Saxon age, the anxiety to keep women constrained to homes and communities could possibly stem from an interest in protecting them.

Nevertheless, the threat of Danish invasion does not alone justify the elaborate and repeated attention paid by certain patristic writers to documenting and explaining the inferior nature of womankind. For that, Rosalind Miles, in searching for the answer for the excessive hatred and sometimes extravagant claims, comes up with another explanation: fear.

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88 Leyser, p. 37.
89 Szarmach, p. 78.
90 Mate, p. 8.
91 Section §8.1 of the Germania; page 80 in Rives.
92 See Rives’ commentary on p. 152.
Schulenberg agrees that a “heightened fear and suspicion of female sexuality” prevailed in the wake of the Benedictine reforms.\textsuperscript{93} The increasing enclosure, restriction, and control of women was justified by a presumably inferior intelligence and disposition toward sensuality with which women were burdened on account of their anatomy. A woman’s reproductive capabilities connected her to her flesh and gave her an earthly shackle to which men were not subject and which she could only overcome through absolute denial of her sexuality. Where man was reason, woman was unreasoning emotion; where man was resolve, woman was frailty. Condemned to pain and degradation by the sin of Eve, she could only hope to find redemption through another woman, Mary. Man alone was made in God’s image, and the bulk of the patristic writers can’t seem to imagine what men would want to do with women anyway, marriage being the least desirable human condition and complete chastity the epitome of sanctity.\textsuperscript{94} Then again, someone had to carry out their reproductive duties. The inability of the male theologians to delineate a middle ground between the sinfulness of Eve and the purity of Mary within which the ordinary woman could operate earmarks the writings of the early Church. And in the meantime, unconsciously or purposely oblivious to their innate deficiencies, women went on, as they always had, with the duties of their everyday life.

This unintentional resistance was and is perhaps the most effective resistance of all. As Fell observes, throughout the Anglo-Saxon period, these explanations of the evil of woman “seem to have little practical effect.”\textsuperscript{95} The historical records should lead us to suspect that, though widely published, certain dictates of the Christian church did not always prevail over the centuries-old traditions established well before the migrations. We have already observed that Anglo-Saxon attitudes towards marriage did not necessarily mesh with Christian ones. Secondarily, the preaching that woman was inferior to man went against the cultural practice of the Germanic tribes, who had, in the early centuries when Rome was only a distant influence, accorded status, protection, and esteem to their women based on their powers of divination as well as their power to bear

\textsuperscript{93} Quoted in Mate, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{94} Several writers discuss the medieval rhetoric of the church in engaging detail, most notably Lucas in \textit{Women in the Middle Ages: Religion, Marriage, and Letters}, Williams and Echols in \textit{Women in the Middle Ages: Between Pit and Pedestal}, Leyser in \textit{Medieval Women}, and Eileen Power in her \textit{Medieval Women}; Finke in \textit{Women's Writing in English: Medieval England} and Mate in \textit{Women in Medieval English Society} present somewhat briefer but no less useful discussions.
\textsuperscript{95} \textit{Women in Anglo-Saxon England}, p. 13.
children to the clan. The energy needed to establish, govern, and protect the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms did not make it practical for them to deactivate half of their labor force.

**Conclusion: The Anglo-Saxon Everywoman**

By and large, Doris Stenton’s opinion on the “rough equality” between Anglo-Saxon men and women seems, at least from the preceding evidence, to hold true. Though the law codes do appear to treat marriages and relationships in financial terms, our modern society, with its pre-nuptial contracts and the notion that a person can be monetarily compensated for emotional damage and mental distress, has not exactly evolved past this point of view. The evidence seems to support a perception of marriage as a practical alliance between families, secured with gifts of monetary value and provisions for widows and offspring, with options to freely enter and likewise freely leave arrangements that were not mutually beneficial. In this it seems the Anglo-Saxons regarded marriage as a community-building practice and it was not in the best interests of the individuals of the community to force unsuitable unions. I would suggest that women were perhaps not legally autonomous in the modern sense because this was not a society that imagined autonomy, independence, self-reliance as good things; rather, terms of value were built through relationships which afforded both emotional and physical protection, and isolation was viewed as the equivalent of death.

Likewise, the gender roles that evolved within the society seem largely based on practical necessity to an agrarian-based society governed by collections of kin groups. Men, for the most part more mobile and possessing a greater physical strength, were called upon to perform the duties of communal protection and enforcement of laws; as protectors of families, they coordinated property arrangements and negotiated marriages for themselves and for members of the family. Women were expected to form alliances beneficial to the kin-group and, once married and fulfilling their communal obligations to bear and rear children, took charge of the tasks that would logically fall to the less mobile, the crucial and sustaining duties of producing cloth and food. Though legally she was answerable to male guardians, the ordinary Anglo-Saxon woman was, arguably, treated with some respect to her emotional life; she was not obliged to marry where it did not
please her, she was owed recompense when her personal space was infringed upon, and she could represent herself in court as a reasoning citizen. The evidence indicates that a woman’s identity was deeply tied to her family, and since her choices concerning marriage, children, and sexual fidelity had repercussions on the family unit, the family took an active role in her disposal (and her protection). Men were just as closely bound to certain roles, had their own sets of duties and obligations, and were likewise defined by and dictated to by their relationships to kin groups and allegiance to a chieftain or king. Both sexes were tightly bound to a social hierarchy formed for the benefit of the community as a whole. Class lines were the primary determiners of social roles and obligations, and inequality between women of varying classes was probably more pronounced than the gender inequalities that have been observed.

Pauline Stafford effectively closes the question of equality by restating the definition; if power means “the ability to act effectively, to take part in events with some chance of success,” then, she concludes, Anglo-Saxon women were indeed empowered. Klinck, however, warns us against entertaining any notions of a “pristine” age where women enjoyed a primitive liberty. Though it is no great error to conclude that on certain points of law Anglo-Saxon women enjoyed an independence their later feudalistic descendants might have envied, the modern woman, with her easy access to advanced medical care, high-speed communications, and world-wide transportation is not likely to trade places with the Anglo-Saxon woman, who faced an average life span of around thirty, a high risk of disease, and the dangers of childbirth with a seemingly admirable tenacity and a determination to survive.
CHAPTER 3

TOWARDS A NEW FEMININE IDEAL:

THE FEMALE HERO IN SAINTLY AND SECULAR LITERATURE

Although an androcentric control of the materials will often be plain to see in the patristic and medieval evidence . . . it also appears that such control was far from complete. A profeminine energy embarrassing to patriarchy and potentially empowering to women lurked within stubborn details of the legends.

--Alcuin Blamires
The Case for Women in Medieval Culture

Our accomplishments so far have been to gain an understanding of the role of the Anglo-Saxon woman in her historical context, for the purpose of acquainting ourselves with Judith’s audience; next, to fully understand the figure of Judith as she appears in certain texts, it becomes necessary to develop an understanding of the role of the female in the Anglo-Saxon literature. More than any other evidence, the literature seems to speak to a spirit of independence and vitality possessed by the Anglo-Saxon woman. Even if literature, as has been observed, may perform roles far other than the reflection of social reality, it does seem reasonable to assume that writing that did not have any relevance or contain any points of interest for its audience would have not have been retold in song nor recopied into text, in fact would have been abandoned and ultimately lost, the way an unpopular book in our day and age goes out of print and eventually out of circulation entirely. The various appearances of Judith, we have previously assumed, indicate some appeal she held for the popular imagination, and likewise some veracity as a figure for literary interpretation. This chapter will examine the company which Judith kept—other female roles in the poetry and prose—in the interest of understanding the evolution of a female heroic ideal, which will allow us in turn to better understand the
context and tradition into which Judith emerged and, from this, the meaning of her story as both symbol and signifier.

**The Germanic Tradition: Women in the Secular Poetry**

In approaching the literature I follow the tradition of associating the secular poetry with the Germanic spirit or what Hansen calls the “native poetic tradition” because the works which lack the newer Christian associations are, it is generally assumed, more likely to reflect customs and modes of thought inherited from the pre-Christian era.\(^1\) This native spirit reflects an ideal of male-female relations which seems to uphold the Stentons’ conclusions of equality and liberty of action allowed to Anglo-Saxon women as well as Bandel’s assessment that women in pre-Conquest literature “are, in a word, human beings.”\(^2\) The domains and duties of men and women appear to be clearly delineated but not mutually exclusive, for the demarcations between the private and public world were not as clearly drawn as they would be in later ages, and men could possess and exercise an interest in domestic affairs as much as women could exercise influence in the public arena. Two instances of the gnomic poetry, the *Maxims* and *The Fortunes of Men*, discuss the bringing forth, rearing, dressing, training, and rewarding of a child as the joint responsibility of husband and wife together.\(^3\) Just as Tacitus describes the union of men and women as a partnership in fortunes, Bandel cites *The Husband’s Message* as proof that the Anglo-Saxon woman was expected to be a full and active partner in the marriage, for in this poem the husband, having established a home abroad as the result of a feud, sends for his wife asking her to brave the sea voyage to join with him so they may resume their destiny of giving “treasure of gold to trusty liegemen.”\(^4\)

Hansen in “Women in Old English Poetry Reconsidered” also reads the literature as promoting and reaffirming an interdependent dynamic between men and women. She points out that the laws, wills, charters, chronicles, and even place-names (discussed in Chapter 2) “all testify to the status of women as persons having proper, albeit subsidiary,

\(^1\) Chance acknowledges this association in *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature*; Hansen remarks upon it in her article “Women in Old English Poetry Reconsidered,” p. 110.

\(^2\) The observations of both Stentons are included in Chapter 2; Bandel’s statement is on p. 113 of her work.

\(^3\) See Chance, p. 10.

\(^4\) Bandel, p. 114.
privileges and functions in a highly traditional culture."

Her conclusion from the gnomic poetry is that a woman proves and earns her dignity and social worth by fulfilling the contractual obligations of her marriage, upholding the covenant with her husband, and thereby bonding not just the two of them in alliance but binding their family unit into the fabric of the larger society. The references to wives as weavers or pledges of peace echo in a larger sense their traditional responsibility for cloth production and also gives them a central role in enforcing the bonds of loyalty which were the foundation of Anglo-Saxon society.

In this sense women, though not bearers of arms, were still enforcers of peace and thus possessed the capability for heroic action, which helps us understand their function in the heroic poetry. Schrader notes that what he calls the “poetic mythology” serves not to “explain women as much as it uses them to explain ideas.” He notes that the women, particularly in the poetry, are very emblematic, “stylized figures best understood against the background of art and theology responsible for so much of the myth in the first place.” Hill, however, believes that there must be “a fundamental historical reality” for the roles and actions of women reflected in the literature. Though stylized, she admits, the literature reflects the obligations and expectations under which a woman, according to her status, would be expected to operate, and while the images of women are “developed and exploited for a particular purpose,” it is the stereotype as well as the implied purpose that helps illustrate the connections between the literature and everyday life.

As Fell notes, the heroic poetry is largely the arena of aristocratic ladies, and “will not therefore tell us much about ordinary women and their working lives. Only kings’ and chieftains’ daughters, wives and sisters are at home in this context.” Indeed, the duties of the royal wife are given much attention in an oft-quoted passage from the 

Maxims clearly outlining the responsibilities of kings and queens:

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Cyning sceal mid ceape cwene gebicgan,
bunum ond beagum. Bu sceolon aerest
geofum god wesan; guð sceal in eorle,
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5 P. 110.
6 God’s Handiwork, p. 3.
7 Ibid., pp. 3-4.
8 See Hill, pp. 236-240, for a fuller discussion.
9 Women in Anglo-Saxon England, p. 35.
wig geweaxon, ond wif geþeon,
leof mid hyre leodum, leothmod wesan, 85
rune healdan, rumheort beon
mearum ond mæþmum. Meodorædenne
for gesiðmægen symle æghwær
eodor æþelinga ærest gegretan,
forman fulle to frean hond, 90
ricene geræcan, ond him ræd witan
boldagendum bäm ætsomne.

A king must pay, when he obtains a queen, with cups and with rings. It is proper
for both to be generous with gifts. The man of rank is to concentrate on battle,
and the woman to thrive, loved by her people; to be cheerful, to preserve
knowledge, to be open-hearted in the giving of horses and treasures. At the
mead-pouring she will always before a great company first of all greet the ruler
of princes with the first cup, present it to the lord’s hand; and teach him wisdom
for them both together living in that community.10

This, clearly, is the ideal which the women of the heroic poetry will be measured
by, in either achieving or falling short. Marriage, as the law codes suggest, is an alliance
cemented by the giving of gifts, in essence a contract “in which goods are exchanged for
services and privileges.”11 The queen, Hansen says, is valued according to “her noble
conduct towards others; she should be cheerful, munificent, and a giver of discreet
counsel.” Says she: “Her traditional offering of the cup of mead, first to her lord and then
to his retainers, symbolizes both the duties and the merit of the woman who thus
ceremoniously binds society together in hospitality and good cheer.”12

The common woman, though her realm of influence would be smaller, had much the same expectations placed upon her; though kingdoms would not rise and fall on her
delicacy or lack thereof, still her household was traditionally regarded as a model in
miniature of the larger realm, and she and her husband its lord and lady. As Schrader
puts it, “the Anglo-Saxon wife’s relation to her husband . . . is an image of all the
hierarchies in the realm and crucial to social stability.”13 Therefore, while it is fitting for
men to go off to war, “[i]t is fitting for a woman to be at her embroidery; a woman who
walks about everywhere causes talk.”14 The virtue of chastity, noted in Tacitus as an
admirable trait of the Germanic woman, was no less valued in the Anglo-Saxon matron.

10 Translation Fell’s; both passages appear in Women in Anglo-Saxon England on p. 36.
11 Hansen, p. 112.
12 Ibid, p. 111.
13 God’s Handiwork, p. 29.
The mention of the Frisian wife, contained within the *Maxims*, provides an illustration not only of the manners of a proper wife but also of the joy attendant upon a union where both husband and wife harmoniously fulfill their duties; after patiently awaiting her husband’s return, she greets him with loving care, washing his clothes and offering him new ones. As Schrader affirms, the “lay woman, in and out of literature, was expected to be a faithful wife capable of managing the home.”\(^{15}\) In addition to being chaste, she must also be “close-mouthed, loving, loyal, and most of all wise.”\(^{16}\) The paragon, then, was in no small way responsible for fostering the ties that held the larger community together; the perambulating wife, neglecting her home duties and causing gossip and no doubt mischief, was witnessed as rebellious. These two types easily translated into the Christian mythology for it, too, had its paragon and its rebel: Mary and Eve.

Schrader warns us again that the portraits in the heroic poetry “do not necessarily provide pictures of actual behavior” but rather “express the aristocratic conception of good.”\(^{17}\) The ideal regarded the feminine as “a civilizing, ordering force;” the other side of the coin, the shadow side, was the vulnerability of women to breakdowns in the society, which then led to “her perhaps even greater share in human suffering and anguish.”\(^{18}\) Hill, Damico, and Hansen all point out the pervasiveness of the *geomurru ides*, the sad lady, in the Germanic heroic poetry. Doris Stenton draws a romantic portrait of the lady of the hall, best symbolized by the figure of Wealhþeow:

> In their natural setting of the great hall, which was the centre of early social life, these ladies appear as figures of grace and dignity, overseeing the entertainment of the guests, or rewarding a poet who had recited acceptable verses before the company. They met tragedy with courage, and bore an honourable part in the conflict of loyalties which might arise at any time within the circle of their kinsmen. They stand for an ideal of civilized behaviour in a violent age.\(^{19}\)

As this portrait suggests, the woman’s duties, by their very nature, contained at all times the possibility of failure. Her celebrated function as peace-weaver depended on her abilities as wife and mother; in marrying, she formed new bonds of loyalty between possibly warring clans, and in bearing children she cemented the alliance. This role,

\(^{15}\) *God’s Handiwork*, p. 29.
\(^{16}\) Chance, p. 1.
\(^{17}\) *God’s Handiwork*, p. 31.
\(^{18}\) Hansen, pp. 111-113.
\(^{19}\) *The English Woman in History*, p. 2.
performed by several of the women in *Beowulf*, reflects the real political necessity for allegiance, often accomplished through arranged marriages. Hill believes that a woman’s sphere of activity was limited to her family or blood-ties, and as she could operate only through or on behalf of her men, she was restricted to a necessarily passive role.\textsuperscript{20} It fell to the men to be the actors or aggressors, to wage war and acquire treasure, the true measure of success in the heroic field. As Chance observes, the women deployed as peace-makers in the literature “are usually depicted as doomed and tragic figures, frequently seen as weeping or suffering . . . It appears that the very passivity of the bride and peace pledge leads inexorably to disaster.”\textsuperscript{21}

Damico, however, does not view the traits of the heroic female as passive ones. The lady of the hall must possess excellence of mind, circumspection of speech, a courtly manner, generosity, and domestic authority. She is treasure-giver, counselor, and hostess, all roles requiring active participation.\textsuperscript{22} Heroines in the poetry display “profundity and quickness of mind, sagacity of speech, thoughtful intent toward duty, and a shining physical appearance.”\textsuperscript{23} Belanoff corroborates that wisdom is a prized quality in the Germanic woman, and Kaske in “The Prescient Woman in Old English Literature” cites the tradition, from Tacitus on, that prizes the ability of the woman to “rune healdan . . . ond him ræd witan / bolagendum baem” (keep counsel . . . and have advice for the two masters of the home, i.e. husband and wife).\textsuperscript{24} The radiance of the Germanic heroine, and the frequency with which she is described as gold-adorned, shining, and a source of light, are manifestations not just of physical beauty or aristocratic wealth but are poetic indications of wisdom and mental acuity. As Taylor suggests, this brightness is not only a display of interior virtue but also becomes a source of power in itself: “Women of beauty and boldness of character have preternatural strength.”\textsuperscript{25}

Belanoff and Damico both suggest that the manifestations of radiance in the person of the Germanic heroine may also be allusions to armor or battle-dress. The martial associations of these women are inherited, they believe, from the older tradition

\textsuperscript{20} See pp. 239-240.
\textsuperscript{21} *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature*, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{22} *Beowulf’s Wealthow*, p. 22.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p. 31.
\textsuperscript{24} Kaske quoting *Maxims* lines 86-92 (see p. 157 of his work, or p. 49 above); for Belanoff see pp. 822-823.
\textsuperscript{25} See “The Old English Poetic Vocabulary of Beauty” in *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, p. 217.
of the Valkyrie or battle-maid. This too works against the perception of the Anglo-Saxon woman as passive, for it implies that she could step onto the battlefield if she needed to (and, as Tacitus would have us believe, she was often there on the sidelines, inspiring her men with courage and later patching up their wounds). When barred from physical participation, the Germanic heroine acted through speech, using her wisdom to advise her menfolk and, in some cases, using her powers of divination to prophesy the outcome of battles. In effect, her weapons were words, and in this she had access to the same tools used by kings to create policy and by the scop who possessed and passed on the histories and legends of the people in his songs.

As a poetic convention, the Germanic heroine was wise and radiant, using her wisdom in thought and speech to benefit her community and acting as wife and mother to promote peace and enforce the bonds of the comitatus. Most often she was well-born, her station marked by her braided hair, her gold adornments, and the wealth which she distributed to those bound to her by loyalty. She upheld her people through good cheer, dispensed praise and advice, and in the ritual gatherings of the war-band, she orchestrated the ceremonial displays of loyalty using the communal mead-cup. Though highly stylized in their formulaic presentation in the poetry, the idealized virtues of the heroic woman reflected the requirements put on females in actual practice. For ladies of all stations, for example, fidelity to the bonds of marriage marked their dedication to upholding the social fabric, reinforcing the bonds which were so important to the preservation and perpetuation of the community.

The evidence suggests, moreover, that fidelity in marriage did not preclude full participation in marital relations. Edith Williams in her essay “What’s so New About the Sexual Revolution?” reminds readers that some of the more licentious riddles in the Exeter Book “deal with sexuality in a frankly enthusiastic and descriptive manner,” and that, in particular, the attribution of sexual desire and enjoyment to women without the implications of degradation or exploitation reveal “a number of wholesome and spontaneous attitudes” which were definitely not celebrated in later periods of English history. Williams adduces from this evidence that the Anglo-Saxon woman was “a

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26 See Belanoff’s discussion on p. 824; Damico on pp. 36-37.
psychological entity” and sees “a picture of her as a spirited individual, fully capable of physical and emotional gratification in this most important area of human life.”

Despite the gnomic references to fidelity, the record however shows that not all women were as strictly faithful as protocol demanded, nor was marriage quite as sacred as perhaps Tacitus would have us believe. It is unlikely that the law codes would contain punishments for adultery if the act was unknown in the larger society. Likewise, one of the two laments in the Old English corpus which deals particularly with the female experience of women, *Wulf and Eadwacer*, refers to an adulterous liaison. It would appear that the Anglo-Saxons were no strangers to sexual pleasure or passionate love. Likewise, the spirit of melancholy that is found so often as a theme in the secular poetry does not encompass their total range of emotion, for quite clearly they also celebrated the earthly pleasures of fellowship, hearty feasting, acquiring treasure, and giving gifts.

One final observation supports the idea of relative equality between Anglo-Saxon men and women, or at least justifies the view that women, far from being a special interest group, were full and participatory members of society. Though gender roles and requirements differed, the values which marked the heroic personality (or stereotype, if you will) were not so different for women than for men. For the Anglo-Saxon spirit as a whole, destiny or *wyrd* was the chief organizer of events, and there was no option outside submission, graceful or otherwise. Every man must of course die; therefore it was how he lived that distinguished him. Crossley-Holland finds in *Beowulf* the fullest expression of the values and attitudes that marked the native spirit; the poem is, he says, “a celebration of fortitude, loyalty, social obligation, generosity and decorum.” That both men and women in the heroic poetry were equally subject to fate—the men to death in battle, the women to mourning—and that, off the battlefield, both were held to the standards of loyalty, fortitude, and decorum implies a more vital and equitable mode of gender relations than has heretofore been understood, and these virtues enabled the individual, man or woman, to hold value for their society to the extent that their virtuous conduct reinforced social bonds and was beneficial to the community as a whole.

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27 This article first appears in *The Texas Quarterly*, 18.2 (1975): 46-55.
28 See his introduction to *The Anglo-Saxon World*, p. iv.
The Christian Tradition

Just as in the Germanic tradition, the women in the Christian texts are rarely average; they are vivid, outstanding, exemplary, astonishing, provoking, disturbing, and often impossible for any woman to imitate, even if she wanted to. The Christianized model of Anglo-Saxon womanhood borrowed from what we are calling the “native” ideals; as mentioned, the two conventional types of Germanic womanhood, the faithful wife and the rebellious one, translated easily to the dual typology of the Christian woman, Mary and Eve. In the older tradition, a woman’s finest attributes were her radiance of being and her wisdom of mind, with virtuous conduct and good cheer as accompaniments; for the idealized Christian females, chastity came to be prized above all. The existence of Germanic heroic imagery in the religious narrative poetry (the portraits of the three fighting saints, Juliana, Judith, and Elene are all examples) shows how the newer values were often treated as extensions or reformulations of the older types. The Christian tradition gave new license to what Damico calls the “omnipresent female figure” of the warrior-maid, a type not as aggressively active in the secular Anglo-Saxon poetry as in some of the Old Norse or Old Icelandic sagas. 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 every bit as bloody as those their fathers, husbands, and sons fought against physical enemies.

But, in other respects, the two traditions meshed as uneasily in the poetry as they did in actual practice. On the face of it, as Chance puts is, the demands of “Germanic valor—comitatus values” conflicted with “Christian virtue.” Bede’s story of the East Anglican Sigeberht is perhaps the most famous real-life example of a king who found it impossible to reconcile the demands of his office with the demands of a faith that preached goodwill to the poor and meek and even exhorted princes to love thine enemy. When he tried to devote himself to a spiritual career, his men literally dragged him out of the monastery and onto the battlefield, where, refusing to bear arms, he was promptly

29 Belanoff refers to the older sources that proves that “the generalized portrait of women in Old English literature lies deep in Germanic tradition” (824).  
30 Woman as Hero in Old English Literature, p. 11.
slaughtered by the still-pagan Mercians. Bede sees this as an example of misplaced piety. In time, however, the self-sacrifice of martyrs became a practice much celebrated in the Christian literature, far more noble than such earthly pursuits as defense of land and home, as the abundance of stories about saints, martyrs, and other doomed warriors would suggest. It is in the religious narratives of the vernacular where we see attempts by the poet to fabricate a heroic ideal that embodies the values of the older tradition without offending too deeply the customs of the new faith.

Where women were concerned, the conflict was fundamentally the same: the deepest tenets of the new faith defied what they had been traditionally taught to value, believe, and be. For the Christian model of womanhood, as discussed in Chapter 2, was founded on the innate inferiority of woman. In the hands of the early church writers, the account of human beginnings, the book of Genesis, became a story not so much about the creation of the world as proof of the inadequacy of woman. Rosalind Miles, in The Women’s History of the World, calls “the Adam and Eve myth. . . the single most effective piece of enemy propaganda in the long history of the sex war.” The native tradition, we will recall, was to view women as equal partners with men, to celebrate their innate capacities for wisdom and prophecy, and to see them, if not as divine, as next to divine in their power to allot life and death. The Christian typology separated these two functions, giving Mary the power of life and making Eve the instrument of death, effectively splintering the feminine psyche in order to disarm and control female power.

The Old English retelling of the Genesis story—particularly the innovative addition known as Genesis B—offers an example of an Old English poet struggling to reconcile the two belief systems. Addressing particularly the rebellion of Satan and the Fall of man, this portion of the tale is what Wrenn calls a “true Germanic heroic poem,” and lends the character of Eve a “human interest” that other treatments lack. Reflecting what was likely the true state of affairs in everyday life, “the Biblical and religious poetry of the Anglo-Saxons presents Eve as the full partner of Adam from the moment of her creation, just as her daughters are portrayed as near equivalents of men.”

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31 Leyser discusses this story in Medieval Women, p. 20.
32 P. 70.
33 See A Study of Old English Literature, p. 99.
34 Shrader, God’s Handiwork, p. 4.
the poet is trying to equalize blame; rather than taking moral error as his theme and emphasizing Adam’s mistake in listening to his supposedly subordinate spouse, he focuses, as Kaske says, on the tragic inevitability of events, for his audience would fully expect that Adam would take the counsel of his wife. Belanoff points out that Eve does not intend to deceive but is herself deceived, all the while believing she is acting in the greater good. The Devil has only succeeded in tempting her, where he failed to tempt Adam, because of what the poet calls her “wacran hige,” her “weaker mind.” The implications of this epithet, Belanoff says, are “explicit and inescapable.” It is, according to her, the sole instance in Old English poetry that condemns a woman as having an inferior mind.

The Latin treatments of Eve were not so circumspect; the dominant discourse in the patristic writings of the early Church is deeply and virulently anti-female. Both the Hebrew societies of the Old Testament and the Roman society of the classical era were full-blown patriarchal systems, and Christian ideology bore the stamp of both cultures. Early concessions to the help and value of females were lost in the grinding tradition that harped mercilessly on women’s subordinate stature and lesser worth. Exegeses of the Book of Genesis provided the basis for what Lucas calls the “opposite of flesh and spirit, sensuality and reason” which postulated that if “man and woman are to each other as intelligence is to sensibility, then the subjection of woman to man is to be regarded as proper and natural, for reason governs the senses and the soul governs the body.” Some writers used this theme as a basis for outright vilification; woman, Jerome claimed, was the origin of all evil, for it was through her that death entered the world.

Mary provided the means of redemption; specifically, Mary’s purity redeemed Eve. Mary was the ideal for all aspects of womanhood: she was maiden, mother, and wise-woman all together, “the perfection of all womanhood (impossible for other women to attain) but also the fulfillment of all womanly roles,” as Chance observes. Lucas notes, however, that despite the worship of Mary, living women, the doomed daughters

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35 For Lucas’s discussion see p. 11 of Women in the Middle Ages; for Kaske, see p. 159.
36 See “The Fall(?) of the Old English Female Poetic Image,” beginning p. 824.
37 Ibid., p. 826.
38 Women in the Middle Ages, pp. 4-5.
39 Ibid., p. 10.
40 Woman as Hero in Old English Literature, p. 18.
of Eve, continued to occupy an inferior position in both secular and ecclesiastical writings throughout the Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{41} "Praise for Mary," Finke says, "did not necessarily translate into praise for women;" in fact, the opposite occurred, as it was impossible for the average woman to imitate Mary. Able thanks to divine intervention to occupy a unique paradox not otherwise found in nature, to conceive a child as a virgin and remain virgin after the birth, Mary is "alone without parallel . . . she is hardly a model that actual women could hope to emulate successfully."\textsuperscript{42}

The casting of Eve as the rebellious woman and Mary the redeeming paragon, Eve the deceiver and Mary the blameless, Eve the sensual and Mary the pure, has at its core the key distinction between the Germanic heroine and the Christian heroine: virtue, which, as Chance observes, "pervades the various definitions and descriptions of the Anglo-Saxon woman."\textsuperscript{43} But virtue, in the Germanic and secular sense, was closely allied to sagacity, soundness of advice and elevation of mind, and fidelity to the bonds of marriage and community. Virtue in the Christian sense was explicitly defined as abstinence from sex. It was only by denying her fundamentally sensual nature and disciplining her weaker mind that the Christian woman could begin to redeem herself from the curse of her biology. "By practicing chastity," Chance notes, "a woman relinquishes that which makes her female."\textsuperscript{44} Denying her tendency toward passion meant, in whole, denying her ability to bear children and abstaining from sexual congress altogether; this alone granted her a sort of "masculine rationality" that increased her spiritual devotion and redeemed her of the burden of her biology.\textsuperscript{45}

"Nothing in prior tradition," Bloch says, "rivals the asceticism of early Christianity, according to which only the renunciation of the flesh holds the promise of salvation."\textsuperscript{46} Lucas’s work traces the rise of the cult of virginity, of which Aldhelm’s tract \textit{De Laudibus Virginitatis} is only one contribution to a long tradition. Tertullian, Cyprian, Ambrose, and Jerome wrote works which became models for other writers to follow; though they varied on the degree to which they approved of continent marriage,
all aimed in different words to praise the state of virginity as being closest to God’s grace.\(^{47}\) By the time Ambrose wrote his *De Virginibus* in 377, the virginity treatise was a genre all its own. Coincidentally, the women who are targeted by these treatises are also urged to avoid personal adornment, since it seems an inevitable consequence is, not vanity, but the stirring of lust in onlooking men. Adornment, Tertullian put it, was a direct gateway to “immoderate living and ambition.”\(^{48}\) Therefore purity of mind and body also required, as an ancillary, modesty in dress.

A second genre of literature introduced by the spread of Christianity, and which had enormous appeal to the Anglo-Saxon audience, was the saint’s life. Leslie Donovan, in her work on the lives of women saints, calls these colorful and sometimes extravagant biographies “possibly the most popular literary genre of medieval Europe.” They were, she says, “not accurate reflections of historical truth” but rather “highly fictionalized and heavily patterned accounts. . . intended to validate contemporary spiritual experience.”\(^{49}\) Much as the Germanic heroic poetry used formulaic descriptions and conventional themes, the saints’ life centered around temptation and triumph over evil. The standard caution issued at the reading of these tales, Blamires reminds us, is that they were “to be admired, not imitated;” though written to be narratives of exemplars “by which the medieval church sought to shape popular understanding of women’s roles within Christian culture,” as Donovan observes, the behavior of these saints is very often “extremist, even revolutionary and sometimes antisocial,” in short “conduct Christian authorities would not have considered conducive to the harmonious integration of Christian principles into medieval society.”\(^{50}\) The lives were often written for and performed as instructional literature for private contemplation or public performance, and, at least for the women in the audience, Donovan suspects that tales of women saints would “represent genuine concerns medieval women had about their own bodies, their physical vulnerability, their power in the world, and over their own selves.”\(^{51}\)

Just as women had played key roles in the early conversion, the prolixity of women saints’ lives showcased women of daring, courage, boldness, dedication, and

\(^{47}\) Lucas’s excellent discussion is contained mainly on pp. 19-29.  
\(^{48}\) Lucas, p. 22.  
\(^{49}\) Women Saints Lives in Old English Prose, p. 4.  
\(^{50}\) See Blamires, p. 184, and the discussion in Donovan, pp. 8-12.  
\(^{51}\) Women Saints Lives, p. 2.
fearlessness, proving these qualities did not exclusively belong to men. McNamara in her study *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, where she refers to the monastic life as leaving women “free to invent their own way of life through the application and interpretation of rules written by men,” sees the saint’s life as acting as a powerful means of disciplining and training new recruits, “peculiarly suited” to bridging “the gaps between classes and races.”52 Not only would the reading of these stories help shape a spirit of community, maternal responsibility, and discipline within which these women lived, but the stories themselves are vivid examples of active and accomplished women, exemplars who “from the peril and suffering of their lives . . . shaped themselves as models of womanly power, womanly achievement, and womanly voices.”53

The warning to venerate but not imitate might specifically apply to that most popular subgenre of the saint’s life, the tale of the virgin martyr. Winstead remarks that these hundreds of stories, all with the same plot, were “patterns of holiness” and “not obviously propitious to women's earthly well-being.”54 If all the young women preferred death to losing their virginity, clearly, medieval society would be on the fast track to extinction. Feminist scholars cannot agree as to whether these doomed heroines are “valiant rebels against an oppressive patriarchy” or “thinly disguised pornography that provides men an acceptable outlet for their hostility toward women.”55 No doubt the answer lies in the individual response of each member of the audience.

To Winstead, this spectrum of possible interpretation accounts for the genre’s success. “Sexuality (especially virginity), violence, and conflicts between the sexes, among family members, and, more generally, between material and spiritual values were topics of abiding interest to medieval audiences," she points out, but the true explanation for their popularity lay in “the inconsistencies and ambiguities that allowed the virgin martyr legend, more than any other hagiographical genre, to mean different things to different people. If we look carefully, virgin martyr legends are rarely definitive about anything . . . Rather, contradictory messages coexist, ready to be exploited to different

52 See pp. 11-12.
55 Ibid., p. 3.
Sometimes, but not always, written for and read by women, these tales explore the tensions and contradictions at the heart of medieval culture. Like the poem *Judith*, these tales made social, economic, and political statements that could be construed “in radically different ways.”

Within the canon of Old English poetry, *Juliana* is an oft-discussed example of the virgin martyr story. Menaced first by an earthly predator and then taunted by the devil himself, the noble Juliana responds with a magnificent discourse of defiance and faces her torture with dignity and holy grace. Juliana’s disruptive boldness and refusal to comply with male authority, however, hint at the subversive vein that Donovan sees running through many, if not all, of the women saints’ lives. These women, she says, were essentially “cultural rebels” rejecting “the circumscribed options for female fulfillment;” transgressors twice over, “they breach marriage customs, sexual responsibilities, familial authority, and political status” and "they transgress against their nature as women . . . they insist on the supremacy of their own will as a vehicle of their faith.”

On the surface level, McInerney notes, passivity, that Christian ideal of womanhood, was at the root of the martyr’s experience; the subtext, however, advocated female agency, celebrated boldness in speech and action, and had as its center the insistence of the maiden to determine her own destiny—though admittedly, that destiny was either to submit to her ravisher or face certain death. Nevertheless, the fact that these stories flourished side-by-side with the standard rhetoric on the subordinate and substandard nature of woman should suggest to us that the Anglo-Saxon audience was not one who found it impossible to imagine courage, holiness, and agency in its women, and might even imply that the careful listener could have found in these stories a means of facing and perhaps resolving the contradictions in the messages aimed at her by her own culture.

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56 Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs*, p. 5.
57 Ibid., p. 12.
59 See her discussion in *Menacing Virgins*, pp. 50-58.
**Conclusion: The Female Heroic Ideal**

In short, the theme of the Christian literature held chastity as the means of redeeming imperfect woman from her inherited curse, and the measure of the Christian heroine was her virginity and her devotion to God. The more extreme her act, the more laudable her devotion. The essence of the clash between the Christian and Germanic or “native” ideologies in the Anglo-Saxon culture might very well be explained by the essential incompatibility between the material and the spiritual. In the Germanic terms, the highest function of a woman was as peace-weaver, mother, and faithful wife, all activities that served to reinforce community. The monastic and ascetic bent of Christianity, inherited from the East in the early centuries, idealized individuality and abstinence from earthly pursuits. In the pagan German society, to be alone and outcast, separated from lord and kin, was a fate worse than death, as poems such as *The Wanderer*, *The Sea-Farer*, and *The Wife’s Lament* immediately suggest. While the Christian tradition celebrated isolation, the secular poetry celebrates the breadth of human experience: *comitatus*, eating and drinking, the stimulation of battle, and the stimulation of sex, all very physical exercises. The tension between these two modes of thought are demonstrated in tensions in the literature such as that generated by the treatment of Eve in *Genesis B* and, later, in the figure of Judith.

There are points at which the ideologies cohere. In both the pre-Christian and Christian stages of the Anglo-Saxon era, women’s relationship to property remained the same. Well-born or well-off women could hold property and alienate property. Though in the spiritual sense widows were classified as among the poor and the weak who needed protection, in actuality they exercised a certain degree of financial independence and political autonomy by the very fact that they were the head of their own household. Free from the control of both father and husband, the widow was answerable really only to lord and king. She was free to choose whether to marry again, or to keep to her own devices. In fact the patristic writers praised chaste widowhood as the next best thing to being a virgin in the first place; in some ways it was even better, as the woman had already discharged her social obligations to marry and have children, and could now devote the balance of her life to devotion and prayer.
The Germanic poetry valued modesty. Likewise the Christians valued modesty, though on slightly different terms, and the emphasis on decorum in the religious heroines (again, Juliana, Judith, and Elene are the best examples) resonates with the older heroic archetype. While the Germanic poetry regarded its women as seers and sources of wisdom, the Christians had their own traditions of prophetesses, though they discouraged contemporary women from declaiming in public and certainly would not ordain them for spiritual office. In effect, the misogynistic vein of the patristic writers was never wholly adopted or absorbed into the Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition. A rhetoric that survived only by repetition, it was neither uniformly held nor consistently exercised. As Finke points out, it was “very much a performance in the public transcript” and “was often directed less toward disciplining and reforming women than toward enforcing clerical celibacy by making women seem less attractive, less a temptation.”

The purposes and justifications of the misogynistic rhetoric is a deeply tangled one, and perhaps had its beginnings as a strategy to appropriate and partially erase those parts of the host culture that didn’t fit the Church’s ideology. So, for instance, where women were seen as having an influential and therefore potentially subversive power, the authorities had to act to safely contain and control this power. Women beautifully dressed up and adorned with jewelry could inflame desire in men and thereby sway their reason; therefore (desire being a bad thing, because it was aspiritual, associated only with the body) adornment must be discouraged. (I look forward to discovering a writer who exhorts male voyeurs to discipline their reactions to attractively-adorned women.) The practice of women influencing politics through their speech and being consulted for their wisdom disrupted the hierarchy that subordinated woman to man; therefore, women were discouraged from public performance and silence was celebrated as a virtue.

Most of all, female sexuality is a destabilizing influence; Blamires describes the story in Esdras 3 and 4 (omitted by Jerome in his translation into the Latin) where three men, challenged by King Darius to name the most powerful thing in the world, have three answers: wine, king, and woman. Wine, of course, can influence a man to excess, thus listeners understand the first suggestion; the man naming the king is obviously attempting to flatter his ruler. But the third man proves the wisest, for he, indicating the concubine

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60 See Women’s Writing in English, p. 14.
at the king’s right hand, who during the course of the story is toying with his crown, makes the point that there is nothing the king would not do to win her favor. Blamires observes that the claim that women dominate men through sexual attraction is one of the standard misogynistic mantras; it served largely as a justification to veil and quiet women, and while the story of Esdras might be read as an acknowledgement of a woman’s power, we might also perceive that “women, as usual, constitute the absent object in a competitive masculine discussion, and that the terms in which their strength is defined are stereotypes of procreation, nourishment, commodity, and sexual captivation.”

In response, the advocates of medieval misogyny strove ceaselessly to neutralize women’s sexuality, probably so that they ceased to be distracting and enticing and risk making the patriarch look like a fool. The safest way to defuse a woman’s sexual allure was to make her asexual; thus virginity became the holy grail of spiritual perfection.

Early and late we can see this trend working in the Christian literature. The fact that the discourse was not universally uniform leaves room for an alternate, if less pervasive and more hidden discourse where women aren’t quite as fearsome or problematic as the so-called ‘dominant’ discourse imagines them to be. The dominant discourse so far has earned that appellation because it happens to be the most public. To take it as truth, or even as a successful mud-slinging campaign, we require proof that the women themselves believed it. To this end we must recall Hugeberc and the excessive humility in her preface, where she catalogs all the reasons that she, being a woman, is likely unfit for this task. But we must also recall that she resolved to take it upon herself anyway, and, in fact, felt pressed—spurred—emboldened to write. We might suspect she is using what Schrader calls “the affected modesty topos,” which can, as he says, work “ironic wonders.”

Irony, we will see later, pervades the Judith story. The clash between the Germanic and Christian ideals and the subversive elements in the saints’

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61 *The Case for Women in Medieval Culture*, pp. 50-58.

62 It is interesting to observe how often the church fathers disagreed on certain points. Can a woman divorce her husband if he is vicious or unfaithful? Can she then remarry? Can he? How long should a man who refuses to put aside his adulterous liaisons be barred from taking communion? What if he happens to be a deacon in the church? These questions continually surface up at the church synods and show just what a project the church fathers had before them in safely controlling and coordinating the production and reproduction of the society.

lives should lead us to suspect that the women did not in fact accept the conventional medieval arguments wholesale—and neither did all the men.

The vitality of Judith is the subversiveness she shares with other religious women in the Anglo-Saxon poetry as well as the ways she is unique all on her own. It is time to turn to Judith’s appearances in this ‘dominant’ discourse and the analysis of her supposed meaning. Judith—just as she is defiant in other respects—defies the general caution about using women in the literature as an example to real women; examinations of her textual appearances will show that she is indeed meant to be an exemplar. This is clear in her use by the church fathers. But at the same time that she was broadcast as a paragon, Judith (multi-layered, sneaky as always, deceptively appealing and in reality deadly) was performing an alternative discourse, recording a ‘hidden’ transcript, providing an alternative reality and example to her listeners. We see this most obviously in her poetic appearances, first in her original story and then in the Old English poem fragment. The poem in particular reflects, extends, and changes not only the tradition which has been established around Judith but also reissues her as a champion of her people; in the first case, she was an example of Hebrew faith and heroism, and in the poem, she is a model of how the Anglo-Saxon woman might reconcile both of the traditions informing her society and come to peace with the gender-role pressures put on her. Judith is, in fact, a new form of the feminine heroic ideal; tracing her progress through the literature shows how this ideal evolved and, as will be seen, marks turning points in Anglo-Saxon thought and ideology regarding women in history and life. Chapter 4 will examine Judith in the literature and Chapter 5 will examine the hidden transcript, explore the deeper meanings, and discover the complexity, the paradox, the impossibilities, and the triumph that is Judith.
The special genius of this story is that it survived and grew in popularity despite its treatment at the hands of the establishment.

--Toni Craven
Artistry and Faith in the Book of Judith

In his discussion of the Old English poem Judith in The Web of Words, Bernard Huppé argues that the key to understanding the thematic design of the poem lies in understanding the background of Judith and the context of her other appearances in Anglo-Saxon literature and culture.1 Following his example, I will attempt to place the Anglo-Saxon tradition of Judith within the context of the larger tradition, which takes written form in the second century BC and continues to evolve into tenth-century England. The assumption guiding this endeavor is that understanding what Judith might have signified to the Anglo-Saxon world requires acquainting ourselves with the origins of her story and the means by which it would have reached Anglo-Saxon England. Placing her appearances in their historical as well as literary context will help us discover the intertextual influences and commonalities in theme that may prove useful in determining what meaning this tradition held for its audience.

The Original Judith

Unfortunately, the real Judith, if there ever was such a woman, has been lost to the passage of time. What remains to us is a narrative, a stylized legend, essentially a work of historical fiction, about a Jewish woman who single-handedly slays the fearsome

1 See pages 136-189 for a full discussion; he makes this point on page 147.
general besieging her city by tricking him, chopping off his head, and using her trophy to exhort her army to attack, thus delivering her home and her nation from the onslaught of a pagan king who challenged the power of the Hebrew God and intended to make slaves of His chosen people.

Cowley, in his discussion of the book, entertains the idea that it is based on a popular tradition, either real or imagined. In several respects, Judith is not the only woman of her kind. Cowley puts her in the family tree belonging to Jael, Esther, and Joan of Arc. The Old Testament abounds with stories of women who play extraordinary roles: Deborah, Ruth, Miriam, Sarah, Rachel, and Rebekah, to name a few.  

As a historically authentic narrative, the factual veracity of Judith cannot stand. Like many other successful writers of historical fiction, the author has arranged real personages, periods of time, and even geographical spaces in order to suit his purposes. For instance, the city of Bethulia in the poem occupies a narrow pass that guards access to Jerusalem. While highly reminiscent of the pass of Thermopylae which Herodotus describes, no such passage restricted passage to ancient Judea; Jerusalem sat on a plain which an actual general, if he did indeed find the northern passage barred by resistance, would no doubt have attempted to approach from the southwest. Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Babylonians from 605 to 562 BC, ransacked the city of Jerusalem in 586, destroyed the Temple, and carried most of the people off into a captivity from which they did not return until 516 BC; thus, he lends himself as a ready villain to any tale where the existence of the Israelites is imperiled. In any case the capital of the Assyrian empire, Nineveh, had been destroyed in 612 BC, making it unlikely that any king would have reigned from it either at the time of the story’s setting or the time of its composition.

These relatively minor artistic liberties can be forgiven as sacrifices that were made in the interest of a good story; as stories go, Judith’s touches on the timeless themes of art, sex and death. In fact all the evidence indicates that, ahistorical as she may be,
Judith was originally composed as an allegory for the Hebrews. Moore believes that the tale was composed in the Hasmodean period, after the adventures of Judas Maccabeus, probably some time between 138 and 98 BC. The time reflected in the poem is ostensibly pre-exilic, though the text anachronistically includes elements of post-exilic life, though not to the detriment of the story; Toni Craven’s Artistry and Faith in the Book of Judith engages in a detailed discussion about the ways the book manifests an internal wholeness and narrative skill for which the historical and geographical inaccuracies must be forgiven. This was not chronicle in our modern understanding, but rather art, and Judith’s story proved popular almost from the beginning; it became associated with the Hanukkah tradition, not unlikely as it seems to reflect certain currents of thought and doctrines of orthodoxy popular in the time of the Macabbees, and the proliferation of recensions and translations in Greek, Latin, Syriac, Sahidic, and Ethiopic suggests the story was told and told again. Despite her similarities in both personality and deed to other Old Testament heroines, the fact that Judith was never accepted into the Hebrew canon has been for some of her scholars a point of irony.

Irony is, in fact, as Carey Moore has noted in his studies, the chief appeal of Judith’s story. Moore finds it amusing that Holofernes, the terrifying general and the plague of the ancient Near East, cannot defeat the tiny little town of Bethulia. The pagan Achior, advisor to Holofernes, has more faith in the Hebrew god than do the Bethulians, who give themselves up to despair. Not only does he see irony as the key to understanding some of the historical, geographic, and moral problems of the story, but he believes it helps explain why the story has been so often misinterpreted. Additionally, Judith herself is a quintessentially ironic figure. As Moore observes:

Although shapely, beautiful, and wealthy, she lived an abstemious and celibate existence, one filled with prayer and self-denial. Childless, she gave new life to her people. She not only prayed for a deceitful tongue, but actually begged Israel's merciful God for strength to cut off a defenseless man's head. The ultimate irony, of course, is that a deeply religious woman became revered, not for her piety but her murderous act.

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7 Judith, p. 51.
8 Enslin and Zeitlin deal with these translations as well as the orthodoxy in The Book of Judith.
9 Moore addresses this point aptly in “Why Wasn’t the Book of Judith Included in the Hebrew Bible,” compiled in “No One Spoke Ill of Her,” pp. 61-71.
10 Ibid., pp. 65-66.
Moore speculates that it is this controversy and paradox that account for the story’s popularity. LaCocque enjoys the irony in the likelihood that a male author was glorifying a conquering female, which merely complements what he sees as the polemical, even subversive, nature of the work. Certainly these paradoxes account for the different interpretations given to Judith and the widely various meanings of her story. Moore believes largely that she is provided as a Jewish example of “courage, Pharisaic piety, ardent nationalism, and confidence in God.” Stocker refers to her as “a national myth of resistance.” Enslin believes the poet is “concerned with picturing once again the nature and attempts of world powers hostile to the people of God who are saved by their covenant with God from all assaults so long as they keep the law inviolate.” Craven, though she acknowledges the patriotic elements in the book, sees it primarily as a “call for a radical reorientation of religious sensibilities,” since Judith essentially breaks tradition, and in effect breaks the law, in order to preserve the higher principle for which that law stands.

From her very beginnings, Judith meant different things to different people; savior to her own kind, death to the Assyrians, she remained open to interpretations by those who came after. Though meant as a model for her own time and her own people, Judith stood out enough to make her a candidate for easy transferal to other times and places, keeping her allegorical and instructional abilities intact along with her deepest complexities. Little wonder then that she made her way to Anglo-Saxon England, where she proved an energetic way to rewrite the female heroic ideal; how she made her way there is almost as interesting a story as the original.

**Judith in Late Antiquity**

**The Latin Bible**

The Biblical scholars cited previously were working from the standard Greek text referred to as the Septuagint (LXX), which exists in three main forms. It is unlikely that

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12 *Judith*, 62.
14 *The Book of Judith*, p. 38.
any of the Anglo-Saxon churchmen or scholars were fluent in Greek or, for that matter, Hebrew; their sources would have been the Latin, either the Vulgate version or the *Vetus Latina* (OL). The Latin text known to the medieval world as the Vulgate Bible had its source in a Roman theologian, later sainted, named Jerome (AD 345 – 420). Composing a Latin text of Judith in Bethlehem in 398 AD, Jerome prefixed his version of the book with this declaration:

**INCIPIT PROLOGUS IUDITH.** The book of Judith is situated in the works of the Hebrews among the Agiografa, whose validity, by the strength of those which come into comparison, is judged to be less fit. Nevertheless this book composed in the Chaldean speech is counted among the histories. But because the Nicene Synod is said to have counted this book among the Sacred Scripture, I agreed to your requests, nay rather your demands, and having laid aside the occupations which were vigorously constraining me, I gave to this book one small night of study by lamplight, transferring it more from sense than word for word. I have dispensed with the most defective variations in the many manuscripts; only those ideas which I was able to find uncorrupted in the Chaldean words did I express in the Latin.

Hear then of the widow Judith, an exemplar of chastity, and make her known with triumphal praise and perpetual laudations. Truly God gave not only to women but also as a model to men this woman on whom God, rewarding her chastity, bestowed virtue of such kind that she might conquer the unconquered and overcome that which no other could overcome. **EXPLICIT PROLOGUS**

Jerome’s account raises some questions about his source materials. Moore has little doubt that Jerome is indeed working from some Aramaic text, now lost to us. His own words suggest that he was working from many manuscripts, at least in so far as he corrected the faults of “multorum codicum;” Voigt points out that while the sense of the story has not changed from the Greek, at the level of precise detail the Vulgate Latin text is so different as to suggest that Jerome was indeed following some other text. If, as Craven has suggested, there is no original Hebrew text and the original Greek text was consciously hebraicized in order to add a flavor of authenticity, one is forced to question even further this ‘Chaldean’ text of Jerome’s, and wonder too if the Vulgate’s changes and transpositions were entirely his own manufacture, caused perhaps by the dim light and his rushing on account of other waiting duties. Moore finds it unlikely that Jerome

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16 Moore, p. 96.
17 See the Book of Judith in the *Biblio Sacra Vulgata*, eds. Fischer et al, p. 691, for the original passage. Translation my own, with the help of Richard Apostol of Florida State University.
18 See Moore, p. 96.
19 Quoted in Moore, p. 95.
would have engaged in any flights of fancy, but Jerome’s other treatments of the story, particularly in his letters, do show an element of imagination.

A word about the translation is of particular interest. *Virtus*, in the Latin usage, could mean ‘courage’ or ‘excellence’ as well as ‘virtue’ in our modern understanding, which is inherited from the Christian tradition and equivalent to chastity. To the Latin speaker it could also indicate value, as in ‘character’ or ‘worth.’ It might, in some instances, indicate what we would refer to as ‘manliness.’ This gendered interpretation has particular implications in light of the nature of Judith’s act. Our notions, as handed down to us from the classical and medieval world, are that swords are a man’s tool; a woman carrying out an execution is more likely to use poison or employ an agent acting on her behalf. Judith explicitly violates this narrative tradition, which is part of what makes her so surprising. If beauty was her weapon, she could have used it in any number of ways; she could have beguiled one of Holofernes’ drunken friends, for instance, into attacking the general. She could have smothered him with a pillow, strangled him with her scarf, or plunged a dagger into his heart. The masculine imagery of the sword, and the symbolic act of beheading, which implies a legally-sanctioned execution, puts her action in the light of righteous judgment and reward, a power usually granted to a magistrate or king. Additionally, the suggestion that Judith, despite being female, was acting in a masculine capacity becomes important to later interpretations.

Side by side with the Vulgate version, the Old Latin version of the Bible was itself recopied and is known to have circulated through Anglo-Saxon England. Analysis of both Bede and Ælfric, for instance, has suggested they worked from an assortment of Vulgate and Old Latin versions. While Moore notes that the OL versions of Judith are a close transliteration of the Greek or Septuagint text, and free of the

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20 Moore, p. 99. Voigt and Dubarle have both conducted intensive studies on the various translations of the Judith story.
21 Wheelock in particular glosses all of these meanings for the word (see p. 488).
23 Griffith, p. 47; other scholars on the Old English bible would no doubt agree.
particular modifications made by Jerome,\textsuperscript{24} Weber, in his edition of the Vulgate, substantiates that this was the version in common use by the Western church from the seventh century.\textsuperscript{25} The fact that primary sources existed in varying forms to scholars of the Anglo-Saxon era should serve to remind us how little we can say for certain about the transmission, sources, popularity, and impact of any of the Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, the Judith story included. However, just as similarities between the stories and treatments may suggest an attribution or influence among the poets, the existence of the story in the texts that follow gives us basis enough for certain conclusions about what the story was intended to teach—and actually taught, perhaps not one and the same thing—to its audience.

The Attitude Toward Judith in the Early Christian Church

It will be useful to our discussion of the Anglo-Saxon appearances of Judith to examine the Latin patristic tradition of Judith as a forerunner to the Anglo-Saxon treatment. Though the transmission of certain letters and texts cannot be assumed to be fully known to every literate man and woman in Anglo-Saxon England, the similarity between the treatments does in fact suggest a standard view or reception of the Judith story as a model for the congregation of the new church. While in the context of the known corpus of patristic writings from the early church fathers the use of Judith as an exemplar is not employed with quite the frequency that Huppé would suggest,\textsuperscript{26} her story is subject to common interpretation. Clement of Rome, in a letter dated to somewhere between 90 and 97 AD,\textsuperscript{27} refers to the story with an ease that suggests it was already familiar to his Greek readers.\textsuperscript{28} In his first Epistle to the Corinthians (following in the footsteps of his mentor and hero, St. Paul), he seems largely to be trying to praise them

\textsuperscript{24} See his discussion on page 94; on pages 97-100 he offers a side-by-side transcription of the Old Latin and Vulgate versions of Chapter 1 of Judith.
\textsuperscript{25} See the English preface to the \textit{Biblia Sacra: Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem}, 1969 ed.
\textsuperscript{26} Given that in the 10 volumes of the \textit{Ante-Nicene Fathers} series by Roberts and Donaldson, and in the 14 volumes of the second series of the \textit{Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers} compiled by Schaff and Wace, Judith only appears in the references noted here, Huppé’s statement that the patristic writers made “frequent exemplary use of Judith” (139) might not strictly apply. However his interpretations of those treatments, which we will turn to in a moment, are insightful and enormously interesting.
\textsuperscript{27} Cowley dates the letter at 90 AD; Roberts and Donaldson believe Clement wrote it in the reign of Domitian, after the persecutions of the Christians by Nero, probably 97 AD (see the \textit{Ante-Nicene Fathers}, Vol. 1, p. 1).
\textsuperscript{28} Cowley, p. 245.
for surviving their recent misfortunes and to remind them of a few redemptive Christian policies, namely the virtues of clean living, good works, humility, brotherly love, and the belief that Christ will come again. He peppers the letter with allusions to Old Testament heroes, and nearing the end, in making a point about maintaining noble-mindedness and a spirit of sacrifice, he notes that kings and princes have given themselves up to death, men have suffered exile or given themselves up to slavery, and:

Many women also, being strengthened by the grace of God, have performed numerous manly exploits. The blessed Judith, when her city was besieged, asked of the elders permission to go forth into the camp of the strangers; and, exposing herself to danger, she went out for the love which she bare to her country and people then besieged; and the Lord delivered Holofernes into the hands of a woman. 29

What we will save for further discussion is the translator’s choice to refer to a woman’s sacrifice as “manly.” We should note also that Clement’s brief justification for Judith’s behavior is the “love which she bare to her country and people.” And it should perhaps strike us that Clement has managed, in his interpretation, to completely mute the question of Judith’s agency; in his account, she begs permission from the elders and it is the Lord who “delivers” Holofernes into her hands. There is no suggestion of seduction, deceit, or even outright murder. God and the elders do all the work, and all Judith must do is expose herself to danger, like the sacrificial lamb or Isaac upon the altar. Such is the virtue of sacrifice; such is the behavior of the noble-minded; such is the role of a woman. Immediately following the account of Judith our author praises Esther for her “humility” and for being “perfect in faith;” she too is merely an axis around which the doings of men and God are accomplished.

Clement’s epistle, esteemed by the early Christian church and almost as widely read as the canonical writings, 30 may have inspired the treatments by later authors. Ambrose of Milas (AD 339-97) devotes chapter XIII of his De officis to Judith; she is “worthy of admiration” as one who “follows the call of virtue,” “willing to encounter danger on behalf of all, so as to deliver all from danger,” but lest we laud her too greatly for her intrepidity, he reminds us:

30 Ibid., p. 2.
How great must have been the power of her virtue, that she, a woman, should claim to give counsel on the chiefest matters and not leave it in the hands of the leaders of the people! How great, again, the power of her virtue to reckon for certain upon God to help her! How great her grace to find His help!  

Ambrose goes deeper into the story than Clement, daring to remind his reader that Judith first made an impression on Holofernes “by the grace of her form and the beauty of her countenance. Then she entraps him by the refinement of her speech.” But those were not her true accomplishments: “Her first triumph was that she returned from the tent of the enemy with her purity unspotted. Her second, that she gained a victory over a man, and put to flight the people by her counsel.”32 Ambrose’s awe of her revolves around the fact that a mere woman accomplished all this, which is only proof, he goes on to assume, of the greatness of God, who could do so much with an unworthy instrument. Like the stories of virgin martyrs, Judith’s feat is all the more moving because of her greater weakness.33

Ambrose calls upon Judith again in his tract “Concerning Widows” to emphasize once more her bravery, “which surpasses the usual nature and the weakness of the sex by the devotion of the mind.”34 We should observe here that Ambrose is convinced that bravery is a masculine quality; once again we are given the impression that femininity is incompatible with courage but is in fact so fully synonymous with passivity that a woman must somehow overcome her feminine nature—which requires the aid of a divine power—in order to act. He piously emphasizes Judith’s sobriety, abstinence, and temperance, and then refers to her “bridal ornaments” as the “arms of chastity,” suggesting that, in effect, her chastity is the weapon she used to disarm Holofernes. Her will is not the weapon, nor her beauty, nor the actual sword with which she cuts off his head; indeed, all she had to do was “put forth her hand,” and the rest took care of itself. Ambrose describes the whole event as though it is chastity which triumphs over Holofernes, and the act of national deliverance is just the modest glory that accompanies the larger spectacle. He says, “this was not so much a work of her hands, as much more a

31 St. Ambrose, Vol. 10 of Schaff and Wace, p. 81.
32 Schaff and Wace, p. 81.
33 McInerney expresses this idea on p. 50.
34 Schaff and Wace, Vol. 10, p. 397.
trophy of her wisdom,” turning Judith merely into the tool which God uses to perform his work. There seems to be a minor tension between the terms stressed in each of these accounts: how miraculous that she triumphs, considering she is a woman, but then again her bravery is that of a man’s; it is her modesty and chastity that defeated the evil general and his army, virtues of her disciplined and contained womanhood. Yet for all their sacrifices and pleas to God, the Bethulians had not been delivered by their piousness; it took one woman, “who of herself alone was able to rouse up from utter prostration,” to venture outside the gates and lay her hands on a weapon of substance.

We should note one of Ambrose’s closing statements which echoes his earlier sentiment: “And so the temperance and sobriety of one widow not only subdued her own nature, but, which is far more, even made men more brave.” Not only does he say this with the utter belief that womanhood is innately a weak, degraded, and intemperate state, but he turns Judith into the pinnacle of passive womanhood, one closely bounded by every Christian doctrine of restraint and therefore worthy of being manipulated by the will of the holy.

Jerome elaborates on this allegorical notion of Judith as chastity defeating the unchristian sin of lust. Aside from the Vulgate translation, he refers to Judith in two other key places, which prove to add strength and weight to the evolving patristic tradition. In his letter to Eustochium dated 384 AD, perhaps the most famous of all his letters, within which he declares: “I praise wedlock, I praise marriage, but it is because they give me virgins,” he also elaborates on the miracle of Mary as breaking the curse of Eve—“Death came through Eve, but life has come from Mary”—and writes: “As soon as the Son of God set foot upon the earth, He formed for Himself a new household there; that, as He was adored by angels in heaven, angels might serve Him also on earth. Then chaste Judith once more cut off the head of Holofernes.” Though it seems a non sequitur, his statement indicates strongly that Jerome perceives her story not in terms of a military or even moral battle but a highly allegorical, symbolically spiritual act. He repeats this idea in the letter to Furia, dated 394, where he provides guidance on how she might best preserve her widowhood and offers her the conventional catalogue of

36 Ibid., p 398.
admirable widows. But in the case of Judith, he first anachronistically treats the issue of her attire as an indication that she wears her mourning garb as an sign that she will not rejoice until her “Bridegroom,” i.e. Christ, comes again. He lingers a moment on the violent moment of confrontation, saying, in terms that seem to place him at the scene, as well as the reader, “I see her hand armed with the sword and stained with blood. I recognize the head of Holofernes which she has carried away from the camp of the enemy. Here a woman vanquishes men,” he notes boldly, perhaps himself carried away by the passion of narration, but then he quickly gives it the appropriate context: here “chastity beheads lust.”38 Jerome, Huppé concludes, sees Judith largely as a type of the Church, a prefiguration of the conquest of Christ over the devil, the Old Testament heroine anticipating the New,39 where the emasculating nature of her act and the sanguine details of her story are safely contained within the symbolism of holy good triumphing over demonic evil.

Isidore of Seville, who also sees Judith (along with Esther) as a type of the church, notes her bravery and says “her triumph was a victory for her people,”40 but the third-century Methodius of Tyre, taking Ambrose’s other view, praises her chastity.41 Origen uses her in service of his admonitions about abstinence.42 Her name also surfaces in the De virginibus velandis of Tertullian (160-230?), a furious response to a third century group of Carthaginian Christians who decided they didn’t need to wear veils in church since they were already pure, having dedicated themselves to Christ.43 We can see, as Huppé does, a “thread of consistency” among the Latin patristic and poetic treatments of the Book of Judith from the time of Jerome to the 8th century,44 mainly focused on her service to God, her chastity, and the paradox that she accomplishes so much given the obvious handicap of her womanhood. These uses fixate upon her story as an exemplar or allegory and largely ignore the context, including the Hebrew or patriotic elements, in order to imagine her as “a heroic example of Christian virtue.”45

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38 Ibid., p. 108.
40 Ibid., p. 156.
41 Moore, p. 64.
42 McInerney, p. 59; Huppé, p. 138.
43 McInerney, p. 60; Moore, p. 64.
44 Huppé, p. 138.
45 Ibid., p. 139.
more fully upon her purity and sanctity in order to shadow the less tasteful implications of her story, for instance the tactics she used or the acts she was called upon, in her unparalleled purity of being, to accomplish in the name of God.

Moore believes these Latin writers considered her a true historical account. He sees as Judith’s foundation the seemingly incompatible models of Faithful Wife and Female Warrior, which puts a paradox at her core, but also, given her literary and theological purpose, makes for an “interesting and well-crafted story.”

It might be useful to note here that the similarities in these paraphrases of the story show how—despite or because of disagreements on certain matters of policy and doctrine—each writer was trying hard to enforce a certain tradition and quality of faith. In sounding the same notes over and over, they hoped to drive home their point and give their faith the strength it needed to overcome resistance and obstacles from the ‘infidels.’ But it must be noted that this monotonic method of composition and transmission is what allows for dangerous blanket assessments, like the idea that womanhood is evil, to perpetuate themselves unvaryingly over such a surprising stretch of time.

There is little variation in the repetition which characterizes not just the statements about women but the treatment of Judith as well. The ironies already noted in the Judith story, however, indicate a hidden transcript—a sort of code, if you will—being carried along inside of the public discourse. This suggests to us—and indeed other sources corroborate it—that the paradoxes of the Church’s antifeminine discourse were just as obvious to sensitive listeners of their own age as they are to sensitive readers today.

The Latin Poets

Two poetic treatments of Judith bear closer examination because they not only build on the allegorical treatment of Judith by Jerome but also show imagination in the context of their retelling, which may have certain significances that bear on both the intended and the unintended meanings of the story.

Dracontius. This Christian poet is an example of how Judith lends herself to list-making or gallerization; as we will see, Prudentius enlarges on her allegorical

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46 Moore, p. 78.
47 Finke provides an able discussion of this tradition on pp. 11-13.
capabilities, but Dracontius—a classical rhetorician by training and a lawyer by trade—uses her as a simple symbol, one of a collection of characters he uses to make his point. Judith is featured in book III of Dracontius’ major work, *De Laudibus Dei*, which he is thought to have written while he was in prison at the will of the Vandal king Guntamund, sometime at the end of the fifth century. As the title suggests, the work as a whole is a paean to the might and greatness of God; Book I paraphrases the story of creation as accounted for in Genesis, Book II is an account of man’s sinfulness, and Book III demonstrates how one might demonstrate their devotion to God through sacrifice, where he uses as his support examples of heroes from legend and history.\(^{48}\) Book III opens with the conventional address to God as fixer of the heavens, who knows every star of the constellations, and maker of the seas, having then domain over both heaven and earth.\(^{49}\) The poet commences with speculation on the cupidity and avarice of men, supporting his points with examples drawn from pagan legends as well as the Old and New Testament. The last quarter is a hymn of praise offered with the hope that God, in all his greatness and goodness, might deliver this poor poet from the torments of captivity and restore him to his former prosperity, as he expresses every confidence in the mercy of God and ends with a great deal more flattery.

After his examination of such pagan heroes as Leonidas, Brutus, and Manlius Torquatus, Dracontius observes that his audience should not believe his words apply solely to men or that women, with their lack of vigor and their frailty of persons, fear to carry the weight of glory. On the contrary, they are just as likely to refuse God his eternal gifts of praise and seek earthly fame (“*laudis mala femina summae materiem retinere potest*,” or, as Moussy translates with his own flourish: “*Une mauvaise femme peut posséder un fonds de gloire immense*”).\(^{50}\) A reader is obliged to feel awe at the fearsomeness of such women who, despite their physical disposition to be weaker in frame and spirit, are just as able as a man to pour their energies into the same crimes (“*elles puisent leur énergie dans leur crime même*”) and engage in the most violent

\(^{48}\) This according to Carolinne White, *Early Christian Latin Poets*, p. 143-144.
\(^{49}\) *Dracontius*, lines 1-10, page 16.
\(^{50}\) Ibid., lines 472-473, p. 39.
behavior ("se livrer à de trop violents emportements"). Of course, the poet notes, this same power which makes them capable of atrocities may also cause to be born in their hearts great surges of kindness; it is indeed possible for them to behave in conformance with the rules of honor, according to that which demands their virtuous reputation and assures them eternal glory. So far, despite his continual reminders of their essential inferiority, his account basically serves to reinforce that women are capable of the same activities and emotions as men.

He then proceeds to catalog six fearsome females who do indeed demonstrate as much violence and passion as a man, and who, in some cases, visit this violence on men. Judith leads the group, with the most elaborate attention paid to her story (fifteen lines); the others merit cursory glances, five or six lines each devoted to, in the following order: Semiramis of Egypt; Tamyris of Scythia who defeats Cyrus, king of Persia; Evadne, wife of Capanaus; and Dido of Carthage, whose love for Aeneas and the doom of her city are described in fiery terms. Lucretia the suicide is the last portrait in the gallery. As Moussy notes, Judith is the only Old Testament heroine among them. He finds in the original Latin allusions to Horace, Cicero, and Ovid, all of which are not only in keeping with the conventions of early Christian Latin poetry but also serve to highlight the valor of the heroine and the epic-worthy nature of her act.

Dracontius begins and ends Judith’s description with her chastity, calling her castissima, most pure (line 480). She merited her glory through the enactment of a crime, true ("mérita sa gloire en simulant un crime,” in the translation of line 481); the poet doesn’t deny it. But he describes how she advanced into the midst of the cruel mêlée with only her virtue as her armor, and that which a host of men had not been able to accomplish, this woman did on her own in the darkness of night ("nocte sub obscura perfecit femina sola,” line 487). She plunged the camp of the king into grief and carried the head of the general back to the chiefs of her city (line 489); she gave the citizens liberty and victory (490). The editor uses glaive, in French "two-edged sword" to describe Judith, and he ends stressing that while the general had every intention of

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51 Ibid., lines 476-479, p. 39; I am using here Moussy’s translation, as it adds considerable color to the Latin.
52 Dracontius., p. 102-104.
53 See White’s introduction to Early Christian Latin Poets for a discussion of the ways these poets inherit the form and style of classical antiquity.
debauching her, she was exempt from stain and he did not consummate his infamy (lines 491-495).

As if then fearing that his readers will draw the wrong conclusions, given his glorification of these pre-Christian character of all of his women, Dracontius then goes on to observe that there are thousands of women who are examples of crimes and deceits and whose stories are fables of the love of false glory and vain idols. Though exalted into legend, these tales were only told to sustain the lives of the wretched and help them endure life's miseries; there is, he concludes, no other god but our own God who inspires awe and dread (“cum sit nemo deus nisi noster ubique tremendus,” line 530) and ought to be worshipped with fear; as Moussy puts it, "qu'il n'existe aucun autre dieu que notre Dieu qu'on doit partout révéler avec crainte."\(^5^4\)

Within Dracontius’s treatment we see once again that Judith’s murderous bent, while fully acknowledged, is fully sanctioned. Like Tamyris, she was defending her people; because Holofernes did not succeed in his evil desires, she is able to return safely to her city and is not required to murder herself, according to those afore-mentioned rules of honor, as is poor Lucretia.

The Psychomachia. Prudentius, born in Spain around 348 AD, decided to devote himself to Christ after spending the major portion of his life pursuing a career in public administration. Like Ovid, he gave all his works Greek titles; of them, the Psychomachia (translated as “the battle for the soul,” or, sometimes, “in the soul”) is the most famous and influential.\(^5^5\) Macklin Smith calls the Psychomachia “revolutionary in its impact, being the major source of a rich allegorical tradition extending through the Middle Ages and into the eighteenth century.”\(^5^6\) Prudentius is important to our discussion not only because he gives a poetic and not a strictly liturgical interpretation of Judith, but also, because he is credited as being the father of Christian allegory, he therefore serves as a vehicle that delivers Judith in her allegorical and interpretative capabilities to a new Christian audience. His contribution to the tradition is important because his poetic treatment focuses on the same aspect which most fascinated the patristic writers: her chastity. Interestingly, Judith would have made an equally able example concerning the

\(^{5^4}\) Dracontius, p. 42.

\(^{5^5}\) White provides this information in Early Christian Latin Poets, p. 77.

\(^{5^6}\) Smith, p. 6.
dangers of lust: trust an alluring woman, so Holofernes would tell it, and you stand to lose your manhood and your life. However, her story sticks at the point that God used her as part of his purpose; therefore Judith must be good, not bad.

Prudentius then pushes the point on which Judith is most easily made an exemplar: she is undeniably, inarguably chaste. Through this, she becomes not just powerful but sacrosanct. Judith premeditates her deed, coyly refuses to tell the city fathers what she plans to do, and deliberately and carefully sets up Holofernes, to the point where she not only has her own food and drink with which to supply herself at the feast, and thus guard against having anything slipped into her wine, but uses her food bag as a handy place to stow her trophy and carry it back to the gates of Bethulia. This is a dangerous woman indeed, even without taking into account the fact that she flirts with him, waits till he gets her alone, and then strikes her blow for God and country. The Christian audience of Prudentius, though not isolated from their own perils, is a fair remove from the more raw and immediate dangers that confronted the always-turbulent ancient Near East, which might make Judith’s behavior a little more permissible in light of the imperative nature of her quest. But Prudentius’s audience has a different standard of sin and redemption, not to mention a different concept of womanhood, one rather more docile and frail, where value is built in terms of resistance and denial (i.e. resistance against temptation and denial of the urges of the flesh) and not on the sort of agency that the sultry, dark-haired and gold-bangled, surpassingly beautiful Judith exercises.

Perhaps borrowing from earlier sources, the maiden Chastity portrayed in the Psychomachia (or, as Thomson translates it, “The Fight for Mansoul”) wears “beauteous armour.” Her opponent is Lust, who thrusts a torch into her face, attempting to blind her as lust conventionally blinds the better impulses. With a sword thrust she pierces his throat, and “hot fumes with clots of foul blood” spew forth. Having dispatched her adversary that quickly, the maiden now has plenty of time for her victory speech, where she refers to the episode in which “the unbending Judith, spurning the lecherous captain’s jewelled couch, checked his unclean passion with the sword.”57 Her speech casts the conflict, according to the poet’s purpose, as a private battle waged in the bedroom over the possession of Judith’s person; Prudentius has no stake in reminding the reader of the

57 All translations from the Latin are Thomson’s. The excerpt used here begins on p. 283.
larger crisis, or that Judith has been plotting a way to bring about the downfall of this enemy of her people. Chastity then says, interestingly, that Judith “prefigured our times, in which the real power has passed into earthly bodies to sever the great head by the hands of feeble agents.”\textsuperscript{58} This language seems to share with Jerome the image of decapitated Lust. Chastity next proceeds to explain how Mary, a virgin pure, bore a holy child, forever elevating the flesh since the immortal had deigned to reincarnate. Lust must be vanquished, the battle maiden explains, because it “dost stain our bodies and plunge our souls in hell,” a place which is described as “grim pit,” “dark depths of night,” “waves of fire,” “black rivers and the eddying sulphur.”\textsuperscript{59} We should take note of this detail as the descent of Holofernes’s soul into hell is described in similar absorbing terms in the Old English poem fragment. Her speech completed, the “conqueress deftly cleanses the conquering blade by bathing it in the stream” and then dedicates it to a nearby Catholic temple where it may flash with splendor for all to witness and remember (“\textit{aeterna splendens ubi luce coruscet},” line 108).\textsuperscript{60}

Stocker sees Prudentius’s work as associating Judith not just with Chastity but also with Temperance, Justice, Fortitude, Wisdom, and Humility, all of which have been emphasized in the brief cameos in the patristic writings. Through these associations, she says, Judith “became an image of fundamental Christian principles . . . because—uniquely—she represented so many of them.”\textsuperscript{61} As a psychomachia is an “allegorical representation of conflicting impulses in a single human personality,” Judith is an example of how these interdependent virtues may be harmonized into a single figure.\textsuperscript{62}

Despite the sulfurous and bloody language, Prudentius is in a way the first to seriously sanitize Judith, even if he is not the first to Christianize her. Clement might have omitted the gory details but he was dealing with the story; Prudentius has elevated Judith to a type, an icon. In putting Judith to work in the service of a greater ideal, Prudentius is remaining true to the original poet’s vision for Judith as a tale. In classifying Judith as a type, however, he follows a trend that continues with churchmen

\textsuperscript{58} Thomson, pp. 283-285.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., p. 285.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., p. 287.
\textsuperscript{61} \textit{Judith, Sexual Warrior}, p. 24.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., p. 25.
of the Anglo-Saxon period in compressing the story of Judith, polarizing the forces at work, and typifying the characters.\textsuperscript{63}

However, as the analysis up to this point should suggest, no matter how carefully the author tried to control the meaning of Judith, her story maintained the paradoxes and ironies at its core, delivering an unintended message encoded within the larger one. This we will keep in mind as we turn to our analysis of the Anglo-Saxon treatments of Judith, because these messages and their hidden meanings are suggestive of the real cultural attitudes towards women, and give us further insight into the differences between the ideology maintained by the early Catholic Church and the actual women living out their lives within its domain.

**Judith in Anglo-Saxon England**

The following of Judith’s textual appearances within the borders of Anglo-Saxon England are not in strict chronological order but rather are organized by the breadth of criticism available for each, which seems to correlate to the artistry of the interpretation. Once again we must remember that the figure of Judith does not by any means dominate the period. Though there is no real evidence to make claims that she was more or less popular than other fighting saints or virgin martyrs, the fact that her story appears in the corpus, speaks, to some extent, for itself.

There are two Judiths documented in history during this time, both of them, as befitting their name, distinguished in will and reputation. One Judith was the second wife of Louis the Pious and a Carolingian empress, whom Rabanus Maurus praises for her wit, her learning, and her imitation of holy women. Rabanus dedicated two works to her, his commentaries on the books of Esther and Judith (it is the destiny of these women, it seems, to always be paired) and, to clarify his choice of subjects, praises the biblical women as “one your equal in name, the other in dignity.”\textsuperscript{64} Rabanus’ commentary treats the story as entirely allegorical (in direct contrast to Enslin and Zeitlin’s reading of it) and he has precise interpretations for each symbol in the narrative, all of which center around

\textsuperscript{63} Griffith deals with this in depth in his edition of the Old English poem.  
\textsuperscript{64} Quoted in McCash, Cultural Patronage, p. 78.
Judith as identified as the Holy Church. In equating Judith as the daughter of affliction (for so he translates Merari, the name of her father given in the Greek text) he seems to be acknowledging the empress’s own difficulties; she was, for a time, consigned to a nunnery when the sons of Louis’s first wife succeeded in deposing him.\(^\text{65}\) Huppé goes on to suggest that Rabanus’ tactic of dedication, with its “flattering reference” and “special sense of contemporary relevance,” could have been what led the Old English poet to think “that a poem on Judith might have direct relevance to the situation of his own country.”\(^\text{66}\) Whether or not the poem was composed as a song of praise for any contemporary woman is open to interpretation, for, as the previous chapter shows us, it was not entirely unheard of for queens to be active in both political and military life; then again, the poem could have been, as other scholars believe, a national call to arms.

At any rate, a second historical Judith breached the Anglo-Saxon shore shortly after 856, when Æthelwulf, the king of Wessex, returning from a pilgrimage to Rome, met and became infatuated with the daughter of Charles the Bald, king of the West Franks, in what Pauline Stafford calls “a classic case of a middle-aged king, away from the restraints of home, taking a final fling with a princess less than half his age.”\(^\text{67}\) He married the girl and brought her home to England, whereupon events progressed in startling parallel to those witnessed by her grandmother and namesake: Æthelbald, son of the first marriage, succeeded in forcing his father off the throne and into Kent. Shortly after his father’s death two years later, Æthelbald made an offer of marriage to his stepmother which she quickly accepted, as a way, Stafford suggests, of “avoiding the fate which befell most princesses, incarceration in a nunnery.”\(^\text{68}\)

It is impossible that Aldhelm would have had these Judiths in mind as he was composing in the seventh century, but they have some significance in the minds of our later authors, for we will recall that another of Æthelwulf’s sons was named Alfred, and he in turn would have a daughter named Æthelflæd, whom we might consider an inheritor of the Judith spirit, just as she descends from women of that name.

\(^{66}\) Ibid., p. 145.
\(^{67}\) See her article on family politics in Anglo-Saxon England, p. 85.
\(^{68}\) Ibid., p. 85.
Aldhelm’s De Virginitate

Aldhelm’s work belongs to the popular genre of early Christian literature known as the virginity tract. As noted earlier, both Tertullian and Ambrose composed treatises that specifically mention Judith; Aldhelm is being true to tradition when he invokes her in his own versions of the virginity tract, in both a prose and song version.

His summation of Judith in the prose version encapsulates two of the main themes of the work: chastity is good, and adornment of the body is bad. Judith, number 57 in the catalog of chaste women, actually seems meant to make Aldhelm’s point about ornamentation: “You see,” he crows, “it is not by my assertion but by the statement of Scripture that the adornment of women is called the depredation of men!”69 Judith’s chastity is put in terms of her lack of display; she takes up “the weeds of widowhood” and rejects “a wedding dress.”70 Such an aesthetic choice then enhances her natural grace, for, “[f]lowering like a bright lily in her devout chastity and hiding from the public gaze she lived a pure life in an upstairs solar,” intimating to her readers that purity lies as much in freedom from ostentation as it does abstinence from sex. This Judith uses “the innate beauty of her face” and also “her bodily adornment” to “overthrow the dreadful leader” Holofernes; nowhere does our author belabor the fact that she used a sword to cut off his head, preferring this more delicate phrasing: “modesty intact, she brought back a renowned trophy . . . in the form of the tyrant’s head and its canopy.” Her crime—and it is by no means clear whether the antecedent is her overthrowing of the general or her adornment with “bracelets, and lilies, and earlets, and rings, and . . . all her ornaments”—is excused in light of the fact that “she is known to have done this during the close siege of Bethulia, grieving for her kinsfolk with the affection of compassion and not through any disaffection from chastity.”71

That Aldhelm next proceeds to observe the case of the “insolent woman in Proverbs” who bedecked herself in “the trappings of a harlot” and “is described as having enticed a foolish young man”72 suggests all the more that his point about Judith was not so much her unspoiled widowhood or her military prowess as her selective use of beauty

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70 Ibid., p. 126.
71 Ibid, p. 127 for all.
72 Ibid., p. 127.
and ostentation (i.e., tools of evil) in the service of God. The pitfalls of such dress, he assumes with gentle prodding, should be apparent to his readers who are in every respect as modestly-behaved—and, it is hoped, modestly garbed—as the famed widow herself.

The range and impact of Aldhlem’s works—for the number of existing manuscripts attest to its popularity and breadth of distribution⁷³—open an interesting point of speculation at the moment. How far might Judith have gone under his sanction? Though the tract is addressed to the Barking nuns, how likely is it that they would have made copies of the manuscript or Aldhelm himself would have sent copies in response to other requests? Perhaps, somewhat in the manner of the chieftain’s hall, the nuns entertained visitors or distinguished guests with his songs, if not the prose stories. It is difficult to say with certainty if the structure and content of Aldhelm’s reference should lead us to suspect that, once again, he is referring to a figure with which his audience would have been familiar, or if, in conveying the main point(s) of her story and lending it his own interpretation, he is introducing Judith to those who would have had no knowledge of her. Considering that Judith was at this point still considered a canonical part of the Roman Catholic Bible, it is likely that the nuns, in their contemplation, would have come across the story in their own study time, even if they had somehow not managed to hear it read during their devotions or in sermon.

The question that concerns us then is, what would Judith have meant? What parallels in her story might have spoken to these women and given them insight into their own situation, beyond the overt reading that Aldhlem gives? Would the cloistered woman have identified with Judith’s vows of chastity, her withdrawal to her rooftop, and her perpetual mourning for her husband? Would she have been secretly thrilled by Judith’s defiance in dressing up and confronting alone the fearsome Holofernes, and would she ever have imagined herself the one cutting off the head of evil in order to preserve either her community or the sanctity of the Christian church? These responses are perhaps too personal to either invite or justify commentary. If we consider that the purpose of literature—and quite obviously the Judith story in particular—is to edify as well as entertain, we can certainly imagine Aldhelm’s spirited sisters, those flowers of modesty and chastity, silently applauding when a sister in faith strikes a blow for

⁷³ Lucas makes this point on p. 29.
righteousness. Though they may have made the choice to live lives of simple seclusion and dedication to contemplation, it might cheer them to think that their service was in its own way important, for if God would use a woman to deliver and protect his chosen, then he was certainly taking notice of them; and, however much they might be secluded, and however much their other readings attempted to enforce modesty, piety, silence, and the other passive traits that the Christian brotherhood prized in its women, each of them had, in the hearing of this story, the permission to acknowledge the Judith inside her who might very well be put to such a test someday, and experience the glory of triumph.

Ælfric’s Homily

Ælfric continues the tradition of Judith as exemplar, but unlike Aldhelm, he is interested in her military skill. Since he was writing several years after the composition of the Old English poem, it can be argued that the doings of Æthelflæd lingered in the memory of his readers, though we should keep in mind that the warrior queen died in 918 AD, and Ælfric died in 1010. At any rate, Ælfric fully recognized the story’s efficacy as a call to arms, for in his letter to Sigeweard that prefaces his version of the Heptateuch, he notes that:

Judith þeo wudewe, þe oferwan Holofernes ðone Syriscan ealdormon, hæfð hire agene boc betwyx ðissum bocum be hire agene sige; þeo is eac on Englisc on ure wisan iset ewo monnum to bisne, þet ge eower eard mid wæpnum bewerien wið onwinnende here.74

The particulars of Judith’s placement refer to her coming between Ælfric’s discussion of the books of Esther and the book of Maccabees, which is in keeping with the Vulgate translation. In this brief account Ælfric, we can see, is making some allowances for his audience; ‘Syrian’ was sufficient to indicate a foreigner, with no need to elaborate on racial groups; the word ‘ealdormon’ gives the sense that Holofernes was a

chief leader, second in office only to the king.\textsuperscript{75} In many cases this word was also used to indicate a nobleman of highest rank, but that interpretation is unlikely here as Holofernes in any version of the story is never given high birth. (It would have been too much in conflict with his inherent evil, for high birth predisposed one to goodness and in fact helped one be incapable of evil, at least in the conventional literature; though Christ was born in a stable to parents of humble trades, the motif of the hero’s obscure birth does not appear with any frequency in the Anglo-Saxon stories.) Note that Judith’s reputation as referenced here lies in her widowhood and her act of bearing arms in defense of her country; her chastity, or her virtue in other terms, is not an issue. She is a warrior, and despite being female, such a warrior that the men in Ælfric’s audience might very well take example from her courage.

Debate rages over whether Ælfric, in the expressions “besides” and “in our manner” is referring to his own translation or to another work, possibly the epic poem. What is useful to our discussion is that Ælfric remains faithful to the standard tradition in its “selective concentration on the significance of Judith’s virtue as the slayer of Holofernes.”\textsuperscript{76} His homily, Huppé affirms, is largely a paraphrase of the Vulgate version, with some additions to clarify historical points, substantiating his insistence that the story is based on historical fact. Though he adds that Judith “is an example of Christ's saying that the exalted shall be humbled and the humbled shall be exalted,” for him, because it appears in the Vulgate, it actually happened.\textsuperscript{77}

Though Ælfric may not have had access to the same historical records that we have, which would have challenged his cherished view, his use of the story is the first to remain true to what is presumably the function of the story in its original setting: the tale of an oppressed people responding to a crisis of faith as well as a crisis of survival by putting themselves in the hands of God and God’s instruments, who indeed work in mysterious ways. Ælfric respects and himself employs the nationalistic elements of the story’s setting, resurrecting Judith as patriot and warrior, defender of her country, winner of physical battles as well as spiritual ones. For this reason his insistence on the story’s

\textsuperscript{75} I am drawing on Bosworth and Toller’s discussion of the word in \textit{An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary}.  
\textsuperscript{76} Huppé, \textit{The Web of Words}, p. 143.  
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., p. 139.
veracity is endearing, for it is testimony to his faith; if God could protect the Judeans from pagan invaders in this instance, surely he could do something for the English.

Crossley-Holland says of Ælfric that his “writing is stylish, sincere and tender. He was the most humane of men, riding the turbulent tides of his time, racked by renewal of conflict with the Vikings, full of religious doubt.” Like Bede discussing the achievements of Hild, Ælfric does not appear profoundly amazed that so much was accomplishment by, or through, a woman. To him she is not an inaccessible type, impossible for real people to emulate; rather, she is a historical model and a call to arms, a reminder of what is possible given faith and a properly inspired army. His Judith, like no other in the long gallery of Judiths, truly is a battle-maid, a Valkyrie, a chooser of the slain, and he infuses this symbolic figure with an agency and a relevance which no other author since the first has been willing to give her.

Before turning his attention to the Old English poem, Huppé summarizes the Judith tradition as a history of her use as an exemplar, saying of each author:

The interest of each in the Book of Judith is in the climactic episode of the beheading of Holofernes, as it provided edifying example. They show no interest in the historical purpose of the Book of Judith as a work of Hebrew patriotism. Concentrating their attention on Judith and Holofernes, and ignoring the other main characters, like Nebuchadnezzar and Bagao, they celebrate Judith as the chaste widow, wise through her faith in God, whose triumph over Holofernes is the triumph of virtue. The hypothesis suggests itself that what they saw in Judith was a heroic example of Christian virtue.

Huppé’s allusions to Judith’s chastity and wisdom alone qualify her as a subject for heroic poetry, given what we know about the Anglo-Saxon tradition. Yet Huppé sees her use in the poem as that of an “emblematic heroine,” by definition lacking in personality, individuality, identity, or psychological depth. Belanoff reminds us that the simplest and most formulaic images of heroic poetry encoded a significant amount of the “shared cultural knowledge” which would have been obvious to the audience and needed no further description. Even the simplest riddles, as Williams notes, were packed with layers of meaning; therefore we should be wary of singular or generalized readings and should be observant instead of the story to be found in each moment of the poem. Armed

78 *The Anglo-Saxon World*, p. v.
79 Ibid., p. 139.
80 *The Web of Words*, p. 143.
81 See “The Fall(?) of the Old English Female Poetic Image,” p. 822.
with our own cultural knowledge, we may be able to decode these emblems and at least approximate the connotations which this splendid story would have conveyed to its listeners.

The Old English Poem

In his examination of the poem, Burton Raffel concludes: “There are perhaps too many uncertainties, some of them probably unresolvable, for us to know the full truth about Judith.” Nevertheless this has not stopped scholars and critics from pursuing these uncertainties, indeed, it may be her mystery that makes her such a continually lively subject for investigation. Huppé, as previously mentioned, admirably surveys the Judith tradition, and in addition offers a fine translation of the Old English poem which remains very true to the original sense as well as the original language. However, he considers Judith’s other appearances as “background reading” that offers a means of understanding the thematic design and conceptual purposes of the poem. Chamberlain reviews her other appearances in order to support his arguments that the fragment is only a small piece of what was originally a much larger work.

I would like to suggest that the Judith tradition has more significance than a simple culmination of poetic achievement. Understanding the tradition specifically helps us understand the ways the poet has recast her as a modern heroine, for in choosing this character in particular, whether intentionally or otherwise he gives a silent nod to the weight of tradition and the conventions of interpretation that had accrued around her legend up to this point. In addition, what he chooses to emphasize about Judith suggests that he, like Ælfric, views her as both relevant and real, at least in the sense that she embodied current concerns facing Anglo-Saxon womanhood. In what he chooses to select, amplify, and omit from his discussion, the poet shows a sensitivity to the paradoxes of both the Judith story and the position of the Anglo-Saxon woman in society. And, ultimately, his Judith’s triumph can be read as the suggestion for a solution of these paradoxes. The poem is indeed a culmination of sorts, and not just in its contributions to

82 In Anglo-Saxon Poetry, p. 134.
83 The Web of Words, p. 148.
84 See his “Judith: A Fragmentary and Political Poem” in Anglo-Saxon Poetry, pp. 135-159. He concludes that the Vulgate was the probable source.
the art of Old English poetry; for, in transforming the typical, repetitive, and reductive representations of Judith as evidenced elsewhere in the tradition, he offers a means of transforming the repetitive, reductive discourse of medieval misogyny into a viable mode for the Anglo-Saxon women of his audience to live and operate in the present world.

Huppé believes that the poet, like the previously mentioned Christian authors, chooses the character of Judith for her typological and spiritual significance as well as appropriateness to his secular purposes. He is not interested in a fully developed, psychologically layered character, nor even interested in analyzing the psyche of or deeds performed by an exceptional woman, but rather treats her as a “romanesque statue,” not a character but an absence of characterization, a symbol devoid of personal expression who only comes alive due to her thematic relevance, which concerns the triumph of faith.⁸⁵

Many stories could describe the triumph of faith, if that were the poet’s only aim; each of the saints’ stories and any of the salacious virgin martyr tales could bear witness to the same theme. What concerns us is why the poet would have used, particularly, Judith. Cook suggested early on that the poem could have been composed to honor the Continental Judith or celebrate the occasion of Æthelwulf’s wedding; Foster, believing that the absence of early West Saxon forms suggested a later date of composition, suggested Æthelflaed as a more likely contemporary model.⁸⁶ Timmer puts the poem’s composition at about 930 AD and feels that the religious overtones and the absence in the canon of other examples where religious figures are used to represent historical figures make it “very unlikely that a religious heroine like Judith would represent a secular queen.”⁸⁷

While these linguistic and genre evaluations are perfectly valid, I feel unwilling to accept the linguistic dating of the dialect of our extant manuscript as the de facto date of the poem’s actual composition. It was the habit for manuscripts to be copied as they circulated, and the opinions of other scholars that Judith could have been originally composed in an Anglican or Northumbrian dialect would suggest that this poem circulated in much the same way. The condition of the manuscript as we have it (with the last page practically illegible, and the beginning pages entirely missing) should remind us

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⁸⁵ The Web of Words, p. 157.
⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 145.
⁸⁷ See his work on Judith, p. 7.
of the delicate nature of these texts and their extreme susceptibility to decay, which makes it possible that the poem existed, in Anglo-Saxon times, in more copies and variations than have descended to us. I find little reason to suspect that the outline of the poem could not have been composed at any time and passed from hall to hall and harp to harp before it finally made its way to the page. The second scribe of the Beowulf manuscript, known to posterity as scribe B, has also been identified, at least by Kenneth Sisam, as the hand that copied Judith, which suggests that the existing manuscripts were copied at the same location, if not bound there. Though the written language of Beowulf has been dated to the tenth century, it is widely accepted that the period being written about is much older, which suggests that the poem circulated in oral format before it reached the poet’s pen.\textsuperscript{88} It would be unproveable and altogether unimaginative to assume that Judith could only have been composed on the page and only by a scribe keeping an eye out for the usefulness of her story as an ecclesiastic tool. Sisam himself believes the manuscript is a copy and would have a previous manuscript history,\textsuperscript{89} which invites the question of when the poem was actually composed, and by whom, and how long it circulated before it reached the hands of our scribe. Though literacy was, throughout the Anglo-Saxon era, the provenance of a privileged few, given the Anglo-Saxon love of tradition in other respects it is possible that modes of poetic composition had not changed all that much from the time of Cædmon, when even a shepherd was perfectly capable of and indeed expected to deliver a song or two over a pint (or two) of mead.

On the whole, scholars can agree that the language of the extant manuscript dates to a West Saxon dialect from the first half of the tenth century. This also suggests the possibility that the memory of Æthelflæd would still be alive in the popular imagination, and though Timmer may indeed feel a secular heroine is an unpromising inspiration for religious poetry, the genre rules of the Old English canon are not so strict as to make it impossible that a religiously-minded song about a woman who delivers her nation from evil could have been in some way a tribute to a militant and protecting queen.

\textsuperscript{88} Sisam, \textit{Studies in the History of Old English Literature}, p. 61.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., p. 68.
Perhaps debate ranges so freely over the *Judith* manuscript precisely because the lack of definite information is so provocative. Additionally, the poem is tantalizing for two more reasons: first, it occupies a distinguished place in the Nowell Codex, known to the British Museum as Cotton Vitellius A xv, where it immediately follows the first extant edition of *Beowulf*, widely held to be the epic of Anglo-Saxon literature. This alone provokes consideration; Judith, as it were, is playing with the big boys. It would be impulsive to assume a statement on *Judith*’s poetic merit in the fact that does indeed reach us bound next to *Beowulf*. Upon closer examination, however, at least in terms of heroic language, some parallels between the two stories are clear, suggesting that *Judith* is as much a meditation on heroism as is *Beowulf*. Kenneth Sisam, in his study on the place of *Judith* in the *Beowulf* manuscript, entertains some interesting speculations as to how, exactly, the Nowell Codex came to be bound in this fashion, since the second volume also contains (i) the *Christophorus* fragment, or *The Passion of St. Christopher*, (ii) *The Wonders of the East*, (iii) *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*, (iv) *Beowulf*, and (v) *Judith*.90 Was our book-binder pursuing the theme of monsters? Sisam doesn’t think so. If not an afterthought, or a decision made purely on the basis of available space, he presumes Judith would most likely have been relevant on the basis of her national symbolism, seeing as how, at the time of writing, England was struggling against Danish invaders.91

The compiler of the codex, at any rate, got to the existing manuscript after something else had gotten to it first. This is the second point that leads to no end of contention: the manuscript, regrettably, exists in only three and a half chapters or *fitts*, and the numbering of the *fitts* (the first intact one begins at ten) suggests that at one time there were more of them. Scholars find they simply cannot agree on the extent to which the poem is intact. Certain thematic parallels in the first and last lines lead some to believe the poem is almost whole as we know it; Huppé follows Cook in believing this, while Rosemary Woolf uses evidence from other numbering sequences and an analysis of the poet’s treatment of the Vulgate source to conclude that the poem is nearly complete.92 Others take literally the *fitt* numbering in the manuscript as well as the sixteen chapters of

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91 Ibid., p. 67.
the Vulgate source and lament that eight whole chapters along with half of the ninth would seem to be missing, and who knows what lost jewels may have existed there? Most agree on the unlikelihood that the poet undertook to treat the whole story, noting the absence of certain secondary characters who figure in the Vulgate version, taking the generally seat-gripping action of the extant part as proof that he was not one to keep the boring parts, and agreeing that he is following the tradition of subtracting Judith from her national significance in order to concentrate on the trial of her chastity, although Moore, Craven, and certain other students of the original story would be quick to protest the automatic assumption that the first eight chapters of the Greek text are excisable introduction or useless preface.

Marie Nelson, in her study of the poem, reminds us of one point that modern scholars are often able to forget in their quest through the literature: *Judith* was meant to be read aloud. Just as the Hebrew or Greek story would have been recited at feast days celebrating Hanukkah, the Old English poem, like other Anglo-Saxon poetry, would have been orally performed for an audience (much like the saints’ lives we might assume?) while Ælfric’s homily would have been delivered from the pulpit and no doubt the Barking nuns would have read Aldhlem’s poetry or prose to each other. Nelson pursues her own translation of the poem with an interest in understanding what in the original Latin sources might have cued the poet to use certain terms where and when he did. Nelson agrees that, though described in terms that inherited the traditions of the Germanic heroic tradition, Judith is clearly designed to be a secular sort of saint.

Huppé and Astell both note the repetition and contrast in symbol, language, and structure that mark the Old English poetic fragment, retaining what Craven and others have noted as the duplication and contrast of characters, language, and structure that characterize the original story. Huppé believes the poet’s intention is to recount a spiritual battle; he does not believe the epic poem is, as is Ælfric’s message, also designed as a call to arms and a rousing of nationalistic spirit. But Woolf notes that “the Anglo-Saxon poet, almost certainly influenced by patristic tradition and by saint’s lives

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94 See Alexander’s discussion of Old English poetry on pp. 9-21 or Wrenn’s discussion on pp. 35-47; Wrenn notes that, like the Latin *carmen*, the Old English *leodl* does not distinguish between poem and song.  
95 For more see *Judith, Juliana, Elene: Three Fighting Saints*, particularly pp. 32-50.
in both English and Latin, has radically altered the original theme of the story as the deliverance of God’s chosen people. Says she:

The issue is no longer between countries, or even armies, between Judith the representative of her people, and Holofernes, who deserves death because of his office as leader of the force seeking to destroy the Jews, but between two individuals, the chaste and virtuous Judith and the evil and dissolute Holofernes, who deserves to die because there is nothing but the brutish in him.96

This helps us understand the poet’s intentions as well as the extent to which he is drawing upon previous incarnations of Judith and perhaps even relying on his audience’s familiarity with them to serve his purpose. He is no doubt familiar with the previous treatments that employ her either as a model of chaste conduct or an illustration of how God uses the weakest instruments to accomplish the greatest good, and he chooses to stress both of these elements in his poem. Woolf believes he never attempted a full treatment of the Vulgate story because, for him, Judith’s battle was not of national significance; the issue at stake is her performance during the personal test of her chastity and her individual trial of faith. For this reason he made the choice to leave out the secondary characters which appear in the original story, for his attention is not on the broader significance but on this concentrated, allegorical event; as Astell envisions it, “the corporate conflict between two heads and their members.”97

Regardless of the poet’s intentions, Astell maintains that in actual performance the poem fragment conveys two messages at the same time, a militaristic call to arms as well as a Christian allegory of the conflict between good and evil, Christ and the devil; she believes that the patriotic topos both enhances and succeeds with the underlying allegorical message because it was likely that the audience perceived the Danish invaders as instruments of the devil, tokens of the coming apocalypse.98 Astell notes that the poet pays attention to the mental and emotional states of his characters, which the other translations of the story (including the original Greek) overlook. This enhances the pathetic appeal of the prima facie story, sympathy for the bravery of Judith. Likewise the poet’s other additions, for instance the descent of Holofernes’s soul into hell, clarifies his

96 See “The Lost Opening to the Judith,” p. 171.
97 “Holofernes’s head,” p. 122.
98 Ibid., 122.
connection with the Christian allegorical tradition of corporeal embodiment of evil, for we may immediately observe similarities with the imagery in Prudentius’s retelling of the tale. Astell’s observation of the dual purpose supports the contention put forth in this study, that Judith does indeed contain a double message, a public transcript as well as a hidden one. Keeping in mind, as Astell makes clear, the allegorical techniques being put to use, and also the poet’s overt intentions, we may yet see the ways in which Judith not only encodes the Christian teachings and rings the patriotic bells but also, on a deeper level, suggests a new model of Christian Anglo-Saxon womanhood and hints that such a model is different from what has been popularly perceived.

Leyser would leave us with one last caution about literal interpretations of literature: “What we cannot, of course, know is how far lives are shaped by such tales, whether 'fact' or 'fiction'; or how far models are taken from lives, or lives from models.” 99 We will do well to remember what shifting margins we are dealing with as we attempt to discover the meanings embedded in the Judith story. But, as Leyser suggests, it is the intertextuality between literary device and historical actuality that allows the fullest, most imaginative, and most balanced picture of Anglo-Saxon womanhood to emerge. As she says of narrative and life: “The interplay is the point.” 100

99 Medieval Women, p. 65.
100 Ibid., p. 65.
CHAPTER 5

READING JUDITH

It has all of the ingredients of a thrilling story—sex, blood, gore, the triumph of virtue over vice—but besides all these the protagonist is a woman.

--James VanderKam

“No One Spoke Ill of Her:” Essays on Judith

Zeitlin has this to say about the tale of Judith:

[Judith is] a fine short story of the period of the Second Jewish Commonwealth. It was very well constructed by a vivid imagination, characteristic of the best Jewish stories. The author was a good novelist and composed a popular Jewish novelette. . . We seek in vain to identify the names mentioned in the book with kings and generals of the Persian period or with the rulers during the Hellenistic period. The author had no intention to write history; he wrote a charming story.¹

I hope to show through the following analysis that, whatever their conscious intentions in using the character of this woman, the authors who compose, adapt, and contribute to the myth of Judith have done far more than pass along a pretty, charming story. Stocker elevates Judith to the level of myth, saying: “All myths are necessarily narratives first, although powerful myths also tend to centre on a narrative moment of dense symbolic value.”² Judith’s act of beheading Holofernes, as we have already seen, certainly fits this requirement. As Stocker warns, “Narratives are constructed not only by what they say, what they represent, but also by their significant silences; and by what they explicitly deny.”³ By extension, both the amplifications and the omissions in the representations of Judith as handed down to the Anglo-Saxon world may hint to the public as well as the hidden discourse that the story performed for its audience. As

¹ The Book of Judith, p. 1.
³ Ibid., p. 81.
Stocker’s book-length study on the figure of Judith proves, there is a great deal to be said about this woman and her story. Stocker identifies her allure as her ambiguity:

The story's polysemousness—politics, religion, sexual politics—is at once necessary to it, and explodes its coherence. Its strategies for the production of meaning produce uncontrollable signification; correspondence slides into ambiguity, replication turns upon itself. Where does right end and oppression begin? When is murder sanctified assassination? When is sexual guile chastity?

The previous survey of Judith’s appearances in the literature show us that the most popular reading was Judith as a triumph of faith. As Zeitlin puts it in his introduction to Enslin’s translation of the original Greek, “Judith is primarily a religious book, emphasizing that righteousness will ultimately triumph.” To her original audience, righteousness meant conformance to God’s laws, as Moore observes. He notes Judith’s key heroic strengths as her piety and her strict adherence to the “outward forms that piety took,” which to him proves that the poet intended for his heroine to be “an inspirational example to his readers.” Despite Judith’s strict piety, however, her story was never granted canonicity. Superficial reasons were given: the character of Achior, though circumcised at the time of his conversion, was never baptized, which stands in defiance to other elements of the Mosaic law. Craven suspects that Judith was simply “too radical a woman for the tradition to memorialize” and the “ancient sages” would have deemed it dangerous to encourage her as an exemplar. “Imagine what life would be like,” Craven says, “if women were free to chastise the leading men of their communities, if they refused to marry, and if they had money and servants of their own.” LaCocque discusses the ways in which Judith’s notions of God and her rituals, along with other details in the book such as sacrifices at the Temple, were at odds with the prevailing notions of Jewish orthodoxy.

The Christian church fathers, as we have seen, embraced Judith, but took pains to cast the story in certain lights. In their hands she becomes not so much an allegory of faith as an allegory of Christian virtue, particularly that most fascinating of virtues, chastity. The paradox of Judith is that the weak defeats the strong. This is a dangerous

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5 The Book of Judith, p. 33.
6 Judith, p. 62.
7 Artistry and Faith, p. 117.
8 See The Feminine Unconventional, pp. 43-47.
conflict to put in gendered terms and disseminate to a society largely founded on male lineage and patriarchal rule. The obsession with virginity during this time also rests on a paradox. The early church fathers had convinced themselves that, as proven by the sin of Eve, woman was imperfect and irrational, and thus ought to be subject to the control of man. Yet at the same time, female virginity, as a physically intact state, a corporeal entity with unpermeated borders, formed woman into a vessel, and a vessel for what?—why, the grace of God. Therefore, female virginity, as an “apparently absolutely state,” caused anxiety to many writers of the early church—so McInerney puts it—because “it appeared to posit an access to the divine that was inaccessible to men.”

McInerney speculates that this anxiety, far more than audience demand, accounts for the continued return to the theme of the imperiled virgin in the Christian narratives. For our purposes, we may note that this anxiety about chastity and the virgin state also signals the wife/virgin tensions between the valuation of the Anglo-Saxon female in the pre-Christian Germanic society and the later Christian ideals. These conflicts continue to underlie the liturgical and poetic interpretations of the Judith story in the Anglo-Saxon period, providing a texture into which many levels of meaning could be intertwined.

Judith as Socio-Cultural Evidence

As a literary artifact, we may observe that the Judith story, in all of the noted instances save two, reflects what the author values in women. In the case of the original story and the heroic poem in Old English, Judith properly reflects what the audience values in its women. The key perhaps lies in the intention; in the hands of the patristic scholars and poets, she was a didactic tool, an epic of moral instruction and of personal faith. The two poets of the heroic narrative face that requirement put upon all composers of popular fiction: to entertain their audience, and not necessarily for their moral good.

In some respects there are marked similarities between the Jewish audience and the converted Anglo-Saxons, due to the ways the Christian faith was an extension of, an enlargement—in many ways, a retelling—of the Judaic tradition. These similarities are perhaps more political than cultural. Both were, at the time of the story’s composition,

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9 Menacing Virgins, p. 58.
historically tribal societies merging or attempting to merge into a nation-state, and both the original story and the Old English epic appear at a time when national resistance was very much a current concern. For both, Judith serves as a champion of faith, proof positive that God will protect the people He has chosen. By the fact of her womanhood, Judith embodies and perpetuates ancient associations of land as feminine, a symbolic trope inherited from the extremely ancient traditions of the Mother Goddess and worship of the Earth as mother of all. In the original story Judith’s feminine personification of the national character is explicit; her very name means “Jewry.” The Anglo-Saxons, however, did not appear to conceive of their national identity in a female persona—indeed, one must doubt there was ever a self-realized “national identity” at all, for the term Anglo-Saxon itself is the creation of scholars who need some common language with which to discuss the time period. As Astell has observed, furthermore, Judith’s function as political allegory cannot logically be separated from her function as spiritual allegory; she represents the “kind of historical thinking which understands the temporal conflicts of nations and individuals to be a participation in the eternal warfare waged between God and Satan.”

Interestingly, the idea observed by the prophets that the slavery of the Hebrews was due to punishment for their sinfulness is an idea that also appears in the early writings in Britain. Gildas, a churchman writing in the mid-sixth century, expresses the idea in his De Excidio Britonum that the invasion of the Germanic tribes was retribution visited on the Britons by God for their sins in refusing to abide by His laws. The Venerable Bede also publishes this idea in his important Historia, maintaining that the conquest by the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes was allowed by God as punishment for misbehavior. The original Judith’s narrative situation in what is ostensibly pre-exilic times, but with a post-exilic cultural flavor, emphasizes the common theme that triumph is the reward for valor, worth, or good behavior, and defeat is the direct result of debauchery. As Enslin notes, the story pictures, not history, but an ahistorical assault on

10 Miles discusses this idea in depth in The Woman’s History of the World, and LaCocque remarks on it briefly in The Feminine Unconventional.
11 Astell p. 119.
12 See the introduction to The Feminine Unconventional; LaCocque postulates that all of the heroines he deals with—Susanna, Esther, and Ruth as well as Judith—are part of a literary movement to “restore a pristine conception of sacred Israel, before it had been damaged or eventually destroyed” (2).
the people of God, who are destined to be saved as long as they keep their covenant with God inviolate.\textsuperscript{13} In this way, the threat of the Assyrian army is not so much a punishment as it is a test of the power of faith. The Anglo-Saxon kingdoms suffered a similar test of faith due to the menace of the invading Danes, viewed by contemporaries as “a Satanic entering into time and space through a body of unbelievers.”\textsuperscript{14} What the Judith tale suggests, Ælfric’s letter to Sigewead corroborates; prompt military response is obviously required. The audience of his homily as well as the Old English poem would naturally identify with the Bethulians and, regarding themselves as God’s chosen, could see a thematic link to their current situation. If they themselves keep faith with God, the story of Judith suggests, He will likewise deliver them, accomplishing the mightiest works even through the weakest of instruments.

In any case, the story makes Judith not only an instrument of faith but also shows the power of the judgment of God and reaffirms that God protects and aids the just. It seems that the Hebrew culture and the Anglo-Saxon culture are linked, at least in terms of this story, by a tendency to look with nostalgia to the past and to valorize the ancient heroes, like Judith and Beowulf, who resisted oppression and fought valiantly but still could not escape that doom of all heroes, their inescapable mortality. We may speculate the Anglo-Saxons suffered from their own feelings of modernity as they witnessed clashes in certain ideals and an ever-larger threat to their own way of life by the encroachment of the Danes. But it is more likely that the element of tragedy and doom had its own appeal. Other Anglo-Saxon poetry is written in a elegiac mode, showing strong traces of the \textit{ubi sunt} motif, the lament for what is lost.\textsuperscript{15} Using Judith as a call to arms evokes a spectacular sort of melancholy, for she comes from an ancient land long lost. Judith and her staunch piety, as noted above, seem prescriptions for ways in which the people can reclaim the favor of and ensure the protection of God, and yet her resistance is ultimately useless, as would be clear to any scholar who knew of the final destruction of the Temple by Tiberius in the first century AD. Perhaps adopting Judith as a tenth-century hero suited the more melancholy tendencies in the Anglo-Saxon character, which Wrenn has noted is expressed in certain poems, such as \textit{The Battle of}

\textsuperscript{13} See \textit{The Book of Judith}, p. 38.
\textsuperscript{14} See Astell, p. 121.
\textsuperscript{15} Wrenn contains a discussion of this on p. 139.
The nostalgia for past ages seems to be the mark of a conservative society, which the Anglo-Saxon culture certainly was. Perhaps the epic poet, in choosing Judith as his theme, understood the true valor of her act—as in the case of the resistance of the Britons to the Germanic tribes—as only delaying the inevitable, and found in this tragic element a correspondence to his native culture’s innate understanding of destiny or *wyrd* and the inevitable fate that awaited all mortals.

In addition to her functions as political emblem, spiritual allegory, and entertaining story, however, Judith served the practical purpose of encapsulating current notions of womanhood and femininity. God’s means of operation—using a woman, and moreover using that woman’s sexuality—are problematic in the Anglo-Saxon treatment. Despite being Christianized, Anglicized, and sanitized for her contemporary audience, the representations of Judith in Anglo-Saxon times not only substantiate what other evidence has indicated about published perceptions towards women but also fill in some of those gaps (and answers some of the debates) about what sort of equality, gender relations, valuative practices, and cultural assumptions were in place.

As Timmer and others have noted, Judith in the Anglo-Saxon poem has specifically inherited the cultural values that marked the traditional female in the heroic poetry. Says Timmer: “The poet has given Judith the features of an Anglo-Saxon woman, with everything the Anglo-Saxons admired in their women. She is white and shining, with curly hair; she is noble and holy, but courageous and above all wise.” Both Belanoff and Kaske agree with the claim that wisdom is the most prevalent among Judith’s virtues. Kaske, extending the work where he examines *sapientia et fortitudo* as the heroic theme in *Beowulf*, concludes that “so far as this rather formulaic heroic ideal is concerned, Old English poets take the essential quality of the hero to be a combination of wisdom and courage/prowess and that of the heroine to be simply wisdom.” Courage, he says, comes to women through outside supplication or divine intervention, which is what happens in *Judith*.

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16 Crossley-Holland notes this strain in the Anglo-Saxon spirit, and links it to their notions of fate (iv).
17 Both Wrenn (3) and Crossley-Holland (2) remark on the conservative bent of Anglo-Saxon society.
18 *Judith*, p. 13.
19 See Belanoff, p. 823.
20 See “*Sapientia et Fortitudo* in the Old English *Judith*,” p. 15.
Reinforcing her role as the female heroine, the signifiers within the Old English poem that attest to her physical beauty and shining appearance uphold the convention that her inward grace is reflected in her outward radiance. “Curly-locked,” “bracelet-adorned,” and “radiant,” she thus meets the expectations of the audience as to the appearance of an Anglo-Saxon noblewoman. The descriptions of her as *beaghroden* or *goldhroden* suggest, as Damico has established, militaristic attire in addition to a display of bejeweled wealth. Judith’s radiance is described in a third, unique fashion; she is called *ælfscienu*, a word it does not do justice to simply gloss as “elf-bright.” As Taylor says in his study of Old English beauty, this is a word with magical implications and is only reserved for the most powerful women. Though variations appear in a small number of other contexts in the corpus, the only use of the word in this form is in this particular reference to Judith. Likewise, Judith is referred to as *ides ellenrof*, an unusual pairing with powerful connotations. Not only does the word *ides* mean, in the Anglo-Saxon context, noble lady, but it harks back to Old Icelandic usages of the term to describe sacred and possibly divine women. In using *ellenrof*, which customarily connotes courage in battle, paired with *ides*, the epithet carries the implications that Judith is a warrior in the best Valkyrie tradition, a woman invested by divine will with the power to deal out death.

Unlike other women in the secular poetry, as we see, Judith is not the peace-weaver doomed to sorrow when her efforts at alliance-building fail. Some still read her as a pawn of the divine will; scholars like to focus on the emotional tension of the crucial moment in the Old English poem—when Judith prays to the Holy Trinity for aid, and then, in two difficult strokes, manages to sever the evil general’s head—as evidence that she is in fact only an instrument; in much the same way as God, in Ambrose’s account, did all the dirty work, Judith here is only the vessel for holy inspiration.

Conflicting with this passive reading of Judith’s deed, however, is her very clear influence in inspiring the Hebrew army to battle. This corresponds with other instances in the poetry where woman use advice and rhetoric to influence events, for instance

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21 Chance says this on p. 39.
22 See Bosworth and Toller’s gloss of the word.
23 See Damico pp. 69-72; Belanoff, p. 824.
Wealhtheow’s giving of advice in *Beowulf*. Another close example appears in *Elene*, where, it has been suggested, Cynewulf purposely extends and elaborates the speeches of his heroine from the original source precisely because his audience would have expected this in any heroine worth the mention.\(^{25}\) Alone among the women of the Anglo-Saxon canon, Judith is empowered with the ability to both speak and act on her own behalf. As Belanoff says, “Judith relies more on strength of arm than on strength of speech.”\(^{26}\) Magennis supports the idea that Judith is an exception to the traditional heroine and reinforces the impression of Judith’s agency, saying that in the act of “killing Holofernes and inspiring her people, Judith takes on the role of the male hero of traditional poetry.” However, he notes, 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."\(^{27}\) In effect, Judith selectively appropriates both male and female activities in the heroic pattern, without managing to be cast in entirely one mold or the other.

It has been suggested that the Anglo-Saxon poet’s particular rhetorical choices in his retelling reflect the desire to not offend his audience. He removes Judith from the feast, Chamberlain says, because the noblewomen among his audience would have found it “a long and degrading experience” to endure the drunken debauchery and the personal humiliation of Holofernes’s lecherous gaze.\(^{28}\) Chamberlain notes that Judith commands her maid to carry the grisly head—unlike in the original story, where she herself, at the gates of Bethulia, hoists her trophy aloft for all to see—because the fastidious aristocratic woman wouldn’t have dirtied her hands in such a way. Likewise the poet avoids the detail in the earlier story where Holofernes’ head is mounted on the city walls, since the Anglo-Saxons did not follow this practice. He also leaves out the character of Ozias, the city father whom Judith reprimands, because it would not suit the warriors in the audience to hear of a woman having more courage than an *ealdorman*.\(^{29}\) And, ultimately, he fabricates a rousing battle between the Hebrews and the Assyrians because that is

\(^{24}\) Belanoff addresses this idea in “The Fall(?) of the Old English Female Poetic Image,” p. 823.
\(^{25}\) See Calder for more on Cynewulf, the signed poems, and the Cynewulf tradition.
\(^{26}\) See p. 823.
\(^{27}\) See “Gender and Heroism in the Old English Judith,” p. 9.
\(^{29}\) Ibid., pp.157-158.
precisely what his audience would have expected and enjoyed.\textsuperscript{30} These small emendations suggest the poet is attempting to reconcile Judith’s primary narrative purposes with the Anglo-Saxon conventions demanded by the genre he has employed.

We must not forget the last of Judith’s virtues, however, for it is in no way the least important source of her power: her chastity. Indeed, the patristic tradition would have us believe that Judith is only powerful \textit{because} she is chaste, and her other virtues are the customary accessorites to this primary jewel. In a way, the Old English poet is loading Judith’s arsenal with every available weapon: wisdom and beauty, wealth and noble birth to please the native tradition, along with chastity of person and devotion to God to please the Christian one. In this we can see him cannily navigating the two archetypes available to him, the peace-weaver of the Germanic literature and the fighting saint of the Christian canon, emphasizing each trait where it best serves the story.

In the same fashion, however, we can see him struggling to balance the places where the original story resists his purposes. He must elide the references to Judith’s plotting to deceive Holofernes, her talking back to the city elders, and her outright lies to the general, as those would abuse Christian notions of modesty in speech. Likewise he attempts to connect her radiance of person with her virtue, so as not to offend edicts on the modesty of dress. He stresses her wisdom because this, as Griffith says, is the common denominator between the religious and heroic ideals; wisdom “may take the form of the faith of the Christian saint as well as the prescience of the Germanic woman.”\textsuperscript{31} But even this clever poet is still baffled by the paradox at Judith’s core. He attempts to highlight her relative female weakness in order to remain consistent with the Christian readings of the story, that she exemplifies “the overwhelming power of the divinity which may wreak vengeance on his enemies even through the hand of a woman.”\textsuperscript{32} Likewise, as Magennis says, he attempts to edit out her “sexual allure and manipulativeness,” instead accounting for Holofernes’ downfall as caused by his own lust and drunkenness and emphasizing Judith’s qualities of radiance, wisdom, and courage.\textsuperscript{33} But even if he attempts to sidestep what Stocker calls Judith’s “vampishness” as well as

\textsuperscript{30} Timmer, p. 14.
\textsuperscript{31} Griffith, \textit{Judith}, p. 70.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., p. 67.
\textsuperscript{33} “Gender and Heroism in the Old English Judith,” p. 9.
her deceit, which “defy all the normal canons of received Christian morality,”
he still cannot avoid her act of murder.

This he describes in terms of a sanctioned assassination, where it is very nearly the hand of God and not Judith’s own which performs the deed; nevertheless the act, though highly anticipated, is a shocking moment in the poem. Magennis believes the poem’s appeal rests in the fact that a mere woman, clearly unsuited to such a task and by no means possessing the physical strength or patterned heroic nature which would predispose her to violence, takes on a duty which it is obviously a struggle for her to perform. Her unsuitability as a muderess magnifies her faith and achievement. In the end, however, the poet is unable to satisfactorily resolve 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.” In fact, by removing her from her larger significance, where her act is an act of national resistance, the poet, in attempting to tell a story of Christian virtue, has concentrated his full attention upon the most subversive element of all: Judith, frail woman, has murdered a male authority, “the reversal of male tyranny by female weakness.”

**Judith as Feminist Manifesto**

Stocker’s overall point about Judith is that “her meaning cannot be stabilized.” As we have seen, employing Judith as an allegorical tool or an exemplar of Christian virtue only captures the surface level of her narrative. Craven reads the Book of Judith with a feminist appreciation for “a mentality within ancient Israel that from time to time broke with patriarchy.” As Craven says, Judith makes her own decisions within a world typically ordered and controlled by men. Even within the Old Testament, known for its enterprising heroines, only Ruth offers such a parallel.

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34 *Judith, Sexual Warrior*, p. 4.
35 “Gender and Heroism in the Old English *Judith*, p. 18.
36 *Judith*, p. 55.
38 Ibid., p. 95.
39 *Artistry and Faith in the Book of Judith*, p. 121.
40 Ibid., 121.
The problematic nature of Judith, as Stocker sees it, is that her feminine resistance, her preservation of self, and her insistence on her own will seem to suggest that “instrumental violence” is “the necessary term in a feminist revolution” and a woman’s coming to power.\(^{41}\) The Judith story carries the implication that female agency is dangerous and destructive to the persons of men as well as to the higher social order; after all, Judith topples the greatest empire in her known world by vanquishing its champion in single combat. The suggestion in the original story is that Judith devised her plan and carried out its execution entirely by herself, praying only that God, in the appropriate moments, would endow her with the tools she needed; first, to enhance her beauty so she might dazzle the enemy, and second, to fortify her physical strength so she might make a clean kill. As White puts it, “salvation is achieved by human initiative,” specifically through the hand of a woman,\(^{42}\) affirming that though her strength comes from her faith in God, the action is entirely Judith’s.

But, as Craven has observed, the patriarchal community cannot contain many women like Judith, who are able to defy convention. Levine notes in her study that Judith is something of a free radical within Israelite society. She is financially independent, thanks to the wealth presumably left her by her husband; she is self-governing, thanks to the death of said husband; and she, despite her seclusion for mourning, is a powerful presence in her community due to her widespread reputation for wisdom. Judith, “being a woman who nonetheless speaks and acts in the world of Israelite patriarchy,” threatens the status quo.\(^{43}\) In consequence, as Stocker and Levine both seek to demonstrate, the Judith story in its entirety shows her being safely reabsorbed into the patriarchy once she has completed her necessary and God-commissioned act. This safely defuses her disturbing autonomy and contains her neatly within the will of the highest male authority of all. Judith’s act, as Stocker puts it, challenges the patriarchy, but rule by God is the ultimate sort of patriarchy, and Judith cannot be seen to defy God; therefore, her action must be put at the direction of God, and her will must be made subordinate to His. “Seducer, deceiver, and murderer,” Stocker

\(^{41}\) *Judith, Sexual Warrior*, p. 247.

\(^{42}\) See “In the Steps of Jael and Deborah: Judith as Heroine,” pp. 7-12.

\(^{43}\) “Sacrifice and Salvation: Otherness and Domestication in the Book of Judith,” p. 17.
says, “she only transcends moral values if she is indeed God's instrument, in which case her crimes become heroic.”

In an attempt to neutralize these subtexts, particularly the suggestion that “Judith's courage is feminine mockery of male might,” later redactors of the Judith story have chosen to deal with her as a type or a symbol, and, like the Christian saints’ lives, to account for her as a *non pareil* who can be admired, but not imitated. Even these symbolic readings, however, have gendered implications. Judith is protecting her country from symbolic rape; in this way her personal chastity is guarantor of her public and private mission. But, as others have noted, chastity is a way of becoming more like a man, as it demands denying woman’s reproductive power and woman’s consuming/passionate/emotionally-grounded/hysterical nature. In this way, Judith is a gender transgressor, as Donovan noted about other saints’ lives, because she turns received notions of gender roles on their head. Judith uses a man’s weapons on a man’s turf but, at the same time, she employs the traditional the female weapons, seductive beauty and a lying tongue.

Prevalent in the existing critical discourse on both the original Judith story and the Anglo-Saxon literature is the point that each society was, in its own way, patriarchal. Thus Judith is subversive in both cases because she shows woman overthrowing man, not just man but a powerful man, a man of authority, the right-hand of a king, the terror and the bane of all of the ancient Near East. The power of her femininity—her wit, her beauty, her personal charms—are correspondingly great. LaCoque makes the point that Judith and the stories of other Old Testament heroines are innately subversive because they challenge the idea that women are lower-class citizens or, worse, disposable goods. The story, he says, contains “the idea that women can indeed become God’s instruments, even when they use the most controversial resources of their femininity.” In some lights Judith justifies all the patriarchal fears about allowing autonomy to women: she uses her sexuality as a weapon, and when Holofernes’s self-control and indeed his very senses abandon him, Judith cruelly strikes. In that moment, and in the blow later duplicated *en masse* on the Assyrian army by the Hebrews, Judith is not simply striking a

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44 *Judith, Sexual Warrior*, p. 8.
46 *The Feminine Unconventional*, p. 2.
blow for equality; she wants to dismantle the patriarchy, not to subject but in fact to utterly annihilate it. As Craven wryly asks, what council of sages or scholars—all men in an age where maleness *ipso facto* equaled superiority—could comfortably agree that such a story is authoritative and holy, and vote to let such a woman range freely through the canon of sacred texts? What Christian pillar of the church could sanction public reprimand, adornment for purposes of personal beauty, deceitful speech, murderous behavior, and a combative spirit on the part of a woman, particularly when, in all the other stories, such activities are the work of the devil?

As others have suggested, the ironies and subversions in the Judith story are what account for its appeal, particularly in the instances where Judith’s story is not strictly instructive. As imagined space, a poem can allow a freedom to its characters unadvised or utterly inconceivable in terms of viable social behavior. The very existence of the Judith story in Anglo-Saxon times reinforces our previous conclusion that this was a society that could conceive of the agency, independent action, and worth of a woman in both secular terms as well as in the eyes of God. Of course it is possible that some would have viewed her act as fantastic and utterly impossible; note that her story, in the existing manuscript, comes right after a story about a hero who fights a lake monster and then defeats a treasure-hoarding dragon. But if the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle does not record the appearance of dragons, it does record Æthelflæd as well as the doings of other intrepid queens and abbesses—so the idea of a woman wielding political influence, military power, and personal wisdom could not have been such a stretch.

Levine’s reading, however, brings up an important question. Can Judith be seen as serving the patriarchy? Certainly her repeated appearances in late antiquity reinforce the dearly-held ideals of wisdom, fortitude, temperance, modesty, and chastity. Rosalind Miles advances the claim in *The Women’s History of the World* that God, specifically the image of God the Father, was a figure created and perpetrated by men to advance and justify patriarchal systems. Stocker also observes in *Judith, Sexual Warrior* that Judith’s complete service to God does, in fact, safely limit and control her power in terms of a

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47 Donovan has noted this about the saint’s lives; see Chapter 3.
male-favored social order. Even Moore observes that Judith is not strictly acting alone; “Judith is the heroine of the tale,” he affirms, but “God is the hero.”

Stocker in “Biblical Story and the Heroine” suggests that Judith only has power because she is speaking as the champion of God; in any other terms, she views it an “improbability” that the council of city elders would listen to the word of woman. Judith’s status, she surmises, comes from her husband, since she possesses his property and therefore his wealth; her reputation and integrity come from her fame as an agent of faith. In the original text, Judith’s wisdom is described in terms of her fear of God, and thus no one would speak ill of her. Her righteousness as God’s servant is, as Stocker views it, Judith’s platform for authority in addressing the city elders as she does; if they question her, they would not be submitting to God’s purpose. Therefore they acquiesce to her demands because of he in whose name she is acting; in short, “the elders resubmit themselves to the patriarchy of God.”

The rest of the story does not, however, support the reading that Judith embraces or supports patriarchal ideals. For instance, the mark of submission in that the elders come to Judith, at the bidding of her maid, reverses the position of power that would prevail if Judith were following the social order we imagine. What I find improbable is that Judith and her maid are allowed to venture alone into the massed camp of the attacking army. Patriarchy, as the word is used to refer to the social structures in which Judith appears, rests on the idea of women as property. Just as the cows are kept penned, a valuable woman wouldn’t be allowed to venture into certain death; she could not so easily be replaced. A society structured on the inherent weakness of a woman typically valorizes its men to the degree to which they are able to protect and guard the weaker sex. How poorly would it reflect on the men of the city if they allowed Judith, rich, beautiful, wise, and so upright that not even the basest can think of an insult for her, to put herself in a position of danger? If it is inconceivable that she act on her own, clearly

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49 See p. 87.
50 See p. 87 in *The Bible as Rhetoric* for the full discussion.
51 This calls to mind the reference in Tacitus to the Germanic warrior’s increased courage in battle as a direct response to the threat that their women would be made hostages or slaves. The account he next invokes, however, that of the women slaying their own men who have failed at this task, and then destroying themselves as an alternative to being taken captive, seems to reinforce an idea of female independence rather than the opposite.
it is the men who will be responsible for what happens to her. The fact that Judith exercises her own agency—she gathers the council to her, she reprimands them for their lack of faith, she tells them she has a plan but instructs them only to open the gate for her, and not to ask questions—all this is proof of a society that can imagine the autonomous, self-governing woman. This says a great deal not only about the original story but also about its reincarnation in the Anglo-Saxon poem. There, while the lost portion leaves it a mystery how exactly Judith arrived at the camp, it still retains the key elements: she is surpassingly beautiful in soul and conduct, she is on the lookout for a way to vanquish Holofernes, she strikes at the first opportunity, and once she returns to Bethulia having executed the bloody deed, she behaves just as would any hero who had triumphantly fulfilled what she set out to do in the first place: she brandishes the tyrant’s head for all to see, and exhorts the once-spiritless Hebrew army to fight, inspiring them with the token of their promised triumph.

Judith’s ability to act on her own terms and be valued for her own worth are what lead me to read her story as a truly feminist document. She does not come to her position of power through sexual service to a man in the form of marriage or otherwise; she is valued for her wisdom, which is entirely her own possession and cannot be seen as the gift of any except her Creator. Judith is not serving God as patriarch but God as protector of her people and giver of all that is good; she is, therefore, enforcing not the existing social order but the idea of justice and right; she is the weapon by which evil is defeated, routed, and destroyed. She defies the perceptions of femininity as passive force or the Other identified only in contrast to the male, for she is proof that woman, for all her frailty, can find the resources to perform mighty deeds. An additional irony of the story, if she truly is a feminist icon, is that she is most likely created by the pen of a male. This alone is a fact, as LaCocque says, that should be celebrated; “The best advocates for a cause,” he says, “are those who are not self-serving.” \(^{52}\) Likewise there is not even the suggestion that the Anglo-Saxon poet was other than male, which is another blow against misogyny. A male author was able to imagine a woman who acts independently, who is valiant, who is able to perform a heroic deed, and who still retains her femininity and independence during and after the event. This alone speaks loudly in opposition to the

\(^{52}\) *The Feminine Unconventional*, p. 39.
later antifeminine rhetoric of the Church. Alongside the selective interpretations emphasized by the church fathers, the Vulgate Bible preserved the story almost entirely in its original form. The difficult details existed, even into Anglo-Saxon England, providing an alternative discourse regarding Judith which perhaps made poetically clear what historical women in the annals managed to prove: that woman was not the vile, inept, worthless creature that she was sometimes made out to be.

This makes it all the more interesting that Judith would have been used in that same discourse which attempted to justify the particular Christian ideals that denied independence, autonomy, and personal worth to its females. Here she is, that most horrifying of images, the outspoken, resolute, richly-garbed, sword-toting woman, and she is the heroine of a sacred text. No wonder the church fathers seized on her chastity as the one attribute that could be used to redeem her. The fact that she plays the harlot in order to get her way must, of course, not be mentioned. To the writers of the virginity tract, purity of body was not simply an indicator but actually was purity of soul. LaCocque notes that, in terms of the covenant between God and his chosen people, their purity, i.e. their devotion to His rules, ensured God’s protection.53

Likewise, the patriarchal interpretation of the story views Judith’s choices as demands made by male authority and not options selected by her own will. Her chastity, for instance, is what defines her worth and is the overt signifier of her devotion. No reader ever considers Judith’s chaste widowhood as a reflection of personal choice rather than an externally-imposed requisite of her state and status. Judith is, first and always, read as an exemplar, not a character with psychological depth; her every private act has public and typological significance. However, to assume that perpetual singlehood is a sacrifice made by the devout widow is to buy into the medieval commonplace of the enormous and uncontrollable sexual appetites of women, for which the levels of chastity were designed as a remediation. We are told that Judith refuses all offers of marriage; we’re not told why. Stocker and Levine see this as the symbolic surety that Judith continues to belong to her people, whom she represents, and which keeps her—for, after all, she embodies Jewry itself—from going out and establishing a new line of succession. No one ever wonders if Judith still cherished the memory of her husband. Perhaps none

53 Ibid., p. 4.
of her suitors pleased her; as Levine observes, the “only fit male companion for Judith is the deity.”

Maybe she enjoyed her independence, her autonomy, and her unique position as benefactress to her people. None of the reviewers treat Judith as a woman who exercises a measure of choice over her sexuality; all of the patristic writers explicitly (and the poets implicitly so) render her chastity as a bargain she makes, a service she exchanges for the love and protection of God. This, however, is the public transcript. Privately, the listening widow could have seen in Judith’s choice an endorsement of the option of independence, and the average woman might have interpreted in Judith’s glory, reputation, and enduring fame a celebration of a woman’s power and freedom to act independently, and not suffer for it.

The same attribute which typifies her act in the Christian accounts is what validates Judith courage, for the central nature of the crisis in the patristic tradition is that her precious chastity is imperiled. Judith is neither wanton nor harlot, in no wise one of those rebellious or insatiable types; therefore, her risk in placing herself so near to Holofernes, in clear danger of ravishment, is the measure of her daring. Her possible willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice (and certain pictorial depictions of her during the Renaissance—without a stitch of clothing on her—suggest she had) merely demonstrates her courage and valor of spirit. It’s true we’re not given much insight into Judith’s psychology; the Old English poem comes closest to giving her anything resembling psychological depth in portraying her mental and emotional states.

But, regardless of her motivations or inner compulsions, the fact that Judith governs her own sex life sustains her standing as a feminist icon; she holds, and exercises, the freedom of choice.

Ultimately, Judith strikes a blow against the narrow definition of gender roles and narrow systems of classification. She does not conform to the standard rules of behavior applied to women during the periods in which her story appears. In the Old English poem especially, her influence is remarkable. She is praised in particular for her boldness of spirit. In the original story the Hebrews merely surprise the quailing Assyrian host and chase them away, but the Old English fragment shows Judith commanding and

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54 P. 21.
55 Hugh Magennis explores these poetic moments in “Gender and Heroism in the Old English Judith.”
instructing a triumphant army. Moreover, whereas in the original poem she takes all her loot to Jerusalem and delivers it to the high priest, the suggestion in the epic poem is that the plunder is rendered to her as the tribute that would have been the victor’s right. 

Modest as ever, Judith gives credit for the glory to God, as the poet says, but in return she earns the supreme victory: “mede on heofonum / sigorlean in swegles wuldre” (line 344). This is not so much an example of Judith being reabsorbed back into the patriarchy as it is a reaffirmation of Judith’s worth as a person, not in male terms, not even in mortal terms, but on her own terms. The Old English poem does not use (as the Greek text does) the word ‘death’; it is as though she ascends directly to heaven on the basis of her superlative value and her dearness to God.

In this respect, the epic poem most fully retains the original meanings of Judith: she is a warrior for universal justice and upholder of the highest ideals. That she accomplishes all this as a woman—and is, in fact, chosen for the task because she is a woman—is female redemption from the curse of Eve. Here female worth is reaffirmed, female agency is sanctioned, and woman has an important and in fact respected place in the social order. Faced with this evidence, the antifeminine rhetoric cannot stand. Judith has demolished tyrannical misogyny as neatly as though she had chopped off its head.

Judith as Castrating Female

If Judith’s femininity is not necessarily read as subversive, the fact of her murder still is. “Symbolically and traditionally,” Stocker says, “the head is the seat of selfhood, rationality and control – the ‘king’ of the body. Of course, Judith is the obverse image of those biblical villainesses, the female as castrator. The hair and the head are displaced signifiers of phallic power, a power she appropriates the moment she uses Holofernes’ own sword to kill him.”

Stocker observes how many pictorial renderings show the after-moment, Judith holding the head up by the hair, very reminiscent of David’s flourishing of the head of Goliath.

Levine and Stocker use castrating terms to describe Judith in order to illustrate their basic theories that Judith’s actions are inherently

disruptive and troublesome to the normal flow of events. In essence, they subscribe to
the school of thought that sees Judith as Freud’s worst nightmare, phallic power
appropriated by a destructive female who, in revenge for what has been denied her,
inflicts horrors upon any male who threatens her. This school of criticism perceives the
paradoxes in Judith as the result of the patriarchal values clashing with the antisocial
suggestions of female agency, where the poetic infusions of heroic praise imperil the
standard functioning of society and culture, and in effect the war between the sexes can
only end in violence and bloodshed.

As an effort to establish my own reading of Judith, which I believe explains her
paradoxes and which I have not yet seen dealt with in the work of others, I will deal first
with another reading of Judith that is not strictly Freudian, but neither is it pro-feminist,
though it may seem proto-feminist at first. It has to do with the idea expressed by Miles,
though not original to her, that the most ancient unit of civilization was the matriarchy.
In *The Woman’s History of the World*, Miles traces the evidence around the globe for a
universal worship of the Mother Goddess. LaCocque, working with this idea, speaks of
death as the final return to the womb, the eternal return. He perhaps is speaking of
death as burial in the earth, inside the mother, but his language expresses rebirth. The
idea of cycles and seasons were, understandably, the crucial way that ancient societies
mapped their understanding of the natural world, and though humans participated in
certain cycles without gendered distinctions—birth, maturation, aging, death—women in
particular participated in an obvious physical cycle that showed harmony with the phases
of the moon. Miles discusses certain evidence we have that the worship of this Goddess
figure, which venerated her for her ability to give birth and bring life to the world,
entailed sexual congress with and then the ritual killing of a symbolic king. Though
society by Judith’s time had evolved into the patriarchal structure which has persisted
unto our own age, the story of Judith seems to encode this older ritual.

To begin with, she is the woman who belongs to no man. In fact, Levine notes
that the description of her husband’s death is put in castrating terms, as though to affirm
that no male power is equal to the figure of Judith. Manasses falls dead of sunstroke in

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58 See his discussion in *The Feminine Unconventional*, p. 8.
59 P. 19.
a field, a highly suggestive place since the killing of the king was, it is supposed, conducted as a type of fertility ritual. We can therefore read Manasses as a ritual sacrifice, the symbolic king whose death is required to ensure order in the cosmos and secure the cycle of the seasons which allow for planting and harvesting of the necessary food. The note on the period of time for which Judith has secluded herself in mourning—forty months (and it doesn’t take a Biblical scholar to know that the number forty had peculiar significance in many stories of the Old Testament)—suggests a ritual observance; the thinking is that there was some regularity with which this ancient ritual was observed (often thought to be seven years). She lives on a rooftop, so in tropological terms, she is above everyone else, both spatially and because of her reputation (no one dares speak ill of her, remember). The men in power travel to her and defer to her, with no question; it is as though they are her servants or agents, not her superiors.

Just as no one would question the divinity, no one questions Judith. In fact, in the story, Judith is only one remove from the divinity. Her person is sacrosanct. Even the enemy troops, whom she encounters outside the gates, respect her and deliver her safely to the general’s tent; this in itself suggests a sort of ritual bodyguard. The event we’ve all been waiting for is the occasion of a great feast, the reasons for which are obscure, since Holofernes has nothing to celebrate in terms of warfare; Bethulia hasn’t fallen yet. But certainly an all-inclusive celebration would have been part of a sacred ritual. The poet has elaborated the setting and the historical situation in order to make the story applicable to his audience, but the fact of the matter is that Judith has killed for the good of her country and her murder is a sacred act. The fact that she is not punished for any of this suggests she is beyond the pale of normal human jurisdiction and can trespass the laws when she deems fit; in fact, in killing Holofernes, she has not only satisfied the demands of the ritual observance and ensured the safety and continued prosperity of her people, which is a holy power in itself. The Jewish poet ends his tale by burying Judith next to her husband, returning Judith effectively to the womb of the earth, reuniting the Goddess again with the God.

In effect, then, the original tale of Judith may itself be a retelling of a myth already ancient by the time of the restoration of the Jewish Temple. This could explain why there is no factual historical analogue for the figure of Judith as she was passed into
literate tradition. It is highly debatable whether the Anglo-Saxon poet treating the Judith material would have been conscious of or comfortable with this strain of what would have been considered the most outrageously pagan and barbaric of customs. We have moreover no evidence that the early Germans practiced the killing of the king, though Tacitus notes certain tribes who worship a female mother-goddess. Early historians do, however, describe certain rituals performed by the Celts in Britain and Ireland that may be construed as a memory of this practice. The idea of the valkyries as the choosers of the slain might very well be a modern persistence of a more ancient ceremony where the woman not only selects who she is to mate with but also who is to die.

I find it useful to speculate for a moment if indeed these supposedly ancient practices would have lingered in the ancestral memory of the comparatively modern Anglo-Saxon people. Such memories, however distantly preserved, would have formed what Finke refers to as one of those hidden transcripts for women; such a story would serve to affirm female power not just in life but in death. We have the suggestion in certain tidbits of surviving literature—the metrical charms are an oft-quoted example—that certain observances and rituals tied to the older religion persisted even during the conversion, and in some cases even later; this might imply that, while Anglo-Saxon queens and abbesses were busy doing God’s work, those whose professions tied them more closely to the earth might have yet conceived of the ruling powers in their more feminine—and possibly more original—forms. It may not be entirely impossible that certain terms in the Judith story, especially as they survive in the Anglo-Saxon poem—Judith as garbed in ceremonial adornment, her careful placing of the body as for sacrifice, and her prayer to the divinity before she raises the sword—suggested to the mind of some readers a ritual older than Christianity. And this, moreover, was a ritual that honored an interaction between the sexes that was not strictly built on the subjugation of one to another, but rather on the idea of harmony and the understanding that each person had their place and their own sacred role to fulfill. In these terms, Judith’s killing casts her in the person of the Goddess, who demands the life of the best partner—the mightiest warrior, the most imposing male, the man standing in for the God—as testimony to her

60 See the translation by Rives, §40, p. 93.
61 Turner’s History of the Anglo-Saxons, Vol. I, deals with these accounts.
own power and the importance of the ritual she performs in order to sanctify and preserve the land. It was key to the success of the ceremony that the candidate be the best specimen available, for the virility of the sacrifice was tribute to the power of the divinity.\textsuperscript{62} The interesting turn in the Old English poem is that, at the moment of his death, Holofernes’ soul goes straight to hell. Wherever possible the idea of ritual sacrifice and paganism in general was demonized by the church, so the terms of the confrontation are somewhat distanced from their original connotations—Judith, as Good, defeats Holofernes, the embodiment of Evil—but still, things return to their proper place, and order is restored. In this sense the Judith story satisfies the idea of the ritual in theme, if not as a strict parallel.

To follow this reading in its particulars, we can see an interesting point of tension in the sexuality of the female character. In the Greek version, and later, it is important to the current ideology that Judith’s sexuality be restricted, even neutralized. But in the ritual of the kingly sacrifice, sexual union was part of the ceremony. Interestingly enough, the suggestive nature of the surroundings during the confrontation—the bedroom, and Holofernes’ blatant declaration that he means to have her—persist even to the renditions of our own time. In the Greek version, Judith’s sexuality is not quite as bridled as in the later Christian adaptations. It’s quite clear, in her first conversation with God which takes place shortly after the city elders leave her house, that she is asking him specifically to lend deceit to her tongue and beauty to her face so that she might deceive the wicked general. That evening, when she appears before the city elders with her widow’s sackcloth cast off and her richest festival garments in their place, the men are speechless; the poet suggests that God himself has given her beauty a divine boost, and what mortal, understandably, could resist God’s own idea of sex appeal? The Assyrians conducting her to Holofernes’ tent whisper among themselves that these Jews are more dangerous than they thought; if all their women are bombshells like this one, the males must be destroyed and the women enslaved before they take over the world with their wiles alone. Five days later, when she returns to Bethulia with her gory prize in hand,

\textsuperscript{62} In Mayan civilization, for example, after the performance of the ceremonial games, the captain of the winning team was sacrificed—the winning team, not the losing—because only the highest courage and greatest strength were worthy of the gods. It was a matter of extreme honor to the victim’s family that he would be chosen to return to the gods in full glory. Coincidentally, the customary mode of sacrifice was decapitation.
Judith is allowed to brag about her conquest in a neat reversal of Holofernes’ locker-room boast about having her; she knocked him over with her sexual charisma, she essentially says, and then chopped off his head, while he never laid so much as a lecherous finger on her. The Christian tradition, not surprisingly, is uncomfortable with this idea of Judith as willfully wanton, and readily stresses her chastity, modesty, and moral purity in order to even the balance between the behavior that would otherwise have branded her a harlot. God has sanctified Judith’s act, the Old English poet is quick to point out, therefore the audience—like Bethulia—is in no position to judge her.

Given these elements—her sexuality, the sanctity of her person, her supra-social status, and the ceremonial as well as symbolic nature of her act—it seems possible that what we call the original Hebrew Judith was a recasting—an adaptation, if you will—of a much older narrative. And though she has never been traced to an actual person, if she did indeed evolve from these ancient rituals, then she was already, by the time her story was modernized in the ancient Near East, a historical truth; she was already an archetype, already myth, already part of the collective unconscious.

**Judith as Jungian Archetype**

Perhaps the best way to resolve the tensions within the Judith story that arise around the points of female agency and murderous sexuality is to understand Judith not as symbol or didactic narrative but as an archetype in the Jungian sense. In *The Reclamation of a Queen*, her analysis of how the figure of Guinevere has been treated in Western literature, Barbara Ann Gordon-Wise offers a model for examining this feminine myth that proves quite useful in examining Judith. Gordon-Wise admits to moments of androcentrism in Jungian theory, but she points out that his basic principles—that the feminine is an essential part of the psyche and the anima should be valued equally with, if differently from, the animus—reconcile him with a feminist approach. Jung originated a model of womanhood which, as developed by later theorists, provides a

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63 See Chapter 2, “Jung and the Feminine;” she draws a great deal from the work of Demaris Wehr (*Jung and Feminism*). Several schools of current feminism place dubious value on the “separate but equal” approach, but some scholars—such as Carol Gilligan in *In Her Own Voice*—find it a productive discourse.
broader and more liberating scope for understanding Judith than previous interpretations of her as either dangerous seductress or sacrosant Christian widow have offered us.

The archetype model also explains how Judith lends herself so well to reinterpretation and adaptation. As noted in chapter 4, each author had a slightly different viewpoint on what she represented, and furthermore each critic who deals with her finds in her a different meaning. The reason Judith shows so many faces to her inquisitors is because she in facts encodes and carries multiple meanings. She is such a potent figure because she compresses several readings into one highly-charged symbol. Extending Jung’s concept of the feminine, Toni Wolff imagined that the female archetypes could be embodied or described by a quaternity of Mother-Hetaera-Medial Woman-Amazon, which Gordon-Wise modifies to Mother, Warrior, Maiden, and Wise Woman.64 This is the paradigm Gordon-Wise uses to investigate Guinevere and which we can use to investigate Judith with a new understanding for the unique tensions within and meanings of her story.

The Warrior is perhaps the most immediately obvious aspect of her character, and the easiest to manifest. Though not a trained soldier in the traditional sense, Judith approaches the enemy camp, cuts off the head of the general, and then uses her trophy to excite her army to attack. The Maiden element surfaces in the emphasis placed upon her chastity. Though not unfamiliar to the marital embrace, Judith’s preservation of celibacy is a key part of her triumph. Additionally, in representing not just Bethulia but eponymously her nation as a whole, she is the Great Mother in action: she is protector, nurturer, benefactress, disciplinarian, and, like any mother, she is fiercest when protecting her young. And, not least, she is also the Wise Woman; the blush of youth and the passion of love are behind her; she is in lifelong mourning and ritual seclusion; like the Oracle of Delphi, her suppliants must come to her for advice and prophecy, and her withdrawal from the currents of the world have served to bring her closer to the divine. In this sense, Judith is offering a model of womanhood that integrates, balances, and makes use of widely different female abilities and roles. It is not just one aspect of her personality or character that accounts for her triumph but rather the interconnection between all her resources, and all parts of her character, that enables her to accomplish so

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64 Gordon-Wise, pp. 34-5.
much. Judith’s power of representation and multiplicities of meaning, in short, lie in the fact that she incorporates all the quadrants of this paradigm and embodies what is most powerful about each aspect. Instead of being a two-dimensional type, with only one reading available depending on point of view, she is a multivalent being in action.

The number of faces that describe her should suggest also that Judith is not safely contained in any single one. As such she becomes a model for balancing and integrating all parts of Jung’s psyche, including the shadow. Rather than seeing her battle in terms of Good pitted against Evil, where one must be triumphant and one vanquished, casting Judith in light of the confrontation with the Jungian shadow offers an explanation for the deep appeal of her story. Says Gordon-Wise:

The shadow archetype represents man’s basic animal nature and, as such, it is seen by Jung as the archetype with the greatest potential for power and danger. Yet, even with its primal power, the shadow may not be excluded from the successfully individuated personality, for it is not only the fount of all primal urges, it is also the wellspring of creativity, spontaneity, emotion, and insight.65

The key application of Jungian theory here is the idea of integration between all the four-fold energies: the shadow, the persona, the anima, and the animus. Psychic wholeness is only achieved, Jung says, when these archetypes are balanced. In this he departs significantly from Freud’s definition, which views femininity as the lack of a phallus which becomes the point of all anxiety for both male and female. Jung’s model of the balanced psyche gives us a new way of looking at the Judith story. As the one named female in a town controlled by patriarchal structures, Judith represents the anima, or the feminine aspect of the masculine psyche; in going forth alone to meet Holofernes as one champion to another, and defeating him with a sword as though in a private enactment of a public battles, she can be seen as the animus or the male aspect of the feminine psyche. The rhetoric of the city fathers, their ritual sacrifices, their desperate prayers, and their flimsy faith all constitute the persona, the mask or façade that the individual presents to its audience. But unlike the conflict between Freud’s ego and the unconscious id, disorder and contention in the Jungian model are described in terms of suppression of the shadow. Judith’s symbolic confrontation of Holofernes can be translated as a witnessing of the shadow, for, once confronted, the shadow loses its power

65 The Reclamation of a Queen, p. 33.
to control. Judith has essentially neutralized the awesomely evil and destructive power of Holofernes and, beyond that, clears his armies from the land; in effect, she restores the town of Bethulia and in fact all of Judea, but in a renewed form: freshened in faith, enriched in treasures, ecstatic in victory, and reaffirmed in faith in God. Her act has led to health and wholeness for the whole community, a security they enjoy for an extended period of time. Read in this way, Judith is a testimony of wholeness and restoration, proof of the necessity for balance and the need for the shadow in effecting a transformation, and evidence also of how existing challenges must be imaginatively confronted in order to envision a new order. In the original story, life does not return to “business as usual” after Judith’s act; rather, a new order has been established. Her seclusion over, Judith retires to her estates, frees her faithful handmaiden, and lives long and benevolently; peace, a rare state of affairs for the ancient Hebrews, has been established. This reading changes the dynamics of her story from resistance to integration, from preservation to transcendence. It turns Judith from a simple model of feminine independence or testament of unswerving faith into an icon of universal relevance with enormous transformative power.

Judith as Border Crosser

Both Stocker and Levine rest their readings of Judith on her as a myth of Otherness, a dangerous and potentially subversive marginal figure, who, in the space of her story, is given an extraordinary license in response to a threatening circumstance, and then—safely containing the Other, and safely neutralizing all her subversive implications—is reconstituted into the social order upon completion of her act.66 I however tend to read Judith as a narrative of liberation and empowerment, since I believe her imaginative combination and use of her resources opens up a new space. Ultimately she is—just as the church fathers imagined her to be—an instructive character, but most exemplary is her ability to transcend binaries, upset the dialectic, and transform convention into something new. I believe that a real reabsorption into the patriarchy would have been signaled by a transferring or dissolution of Judith’s power. In

66 Stocker explores this in depth in her book; Levine’s article is contained in “‘No One Spoke Ill of Her’”.

patriarchal terms, the only safe way to defuse a free radical like Judith would have been to firmly reattach her to male-authored structures, or, as in the case of Lucretia defending her honor, to require her death. One might contend that Judith’s death is not demanded as reparation for her deed because her chastity has not been violated; still, a reader might expect that, to answer anxiety over her lethal agency, Judith would have either been remarried or returned to the seclusion of her private rooftop. In the original story, however, Judith introduces, however briefly, a new order that turns patriarchy on its head. Here a nation once terminally at war is now safe and peaceful. Here, in celebration, the women of the town, with Judith at their head, lead a triumphant procession to Jerusalem in order to give thanks and gifts at the temple, and it is the men who follow behind; just as the women made way for the men in council, the men make way for the women in the ceremonial dance. Judith retains her personal and financial independence; though besieged with offers of marriage, she declines all suitors to take up the administration of her estate, and at her death liberates her maid, the conspirator who helped her vanquish Holofernes. The lack of punishing consequence for her act, and her ability to retain her own agency and control her own fate—resting on her laurels as it were—indicates to this reader that Judith’s action is, in larger terms, neither dangerous nor subversive and requires neither that she be contained nor controlled; rather, she is rewarded for the success of her action and in both the personal and the symbolic sense (for after all, Judith represents, acts on behalf of, in short is her nation) is left in peace. Judith has transcended all human authority and control; she belongs now to herself and to God. Judith obeys the will of God, not man, and she acts to protect what God, not man, has consecrated as true and right and holy. If Holofernes is the champion of the kingdom of men, acting to establish and enforce the dominion of man as represented by one man, Nebuchadnezzar, Judith acts to preserve and maintain the dominion of God. She proves herself, in the spirit of those ancient Germanic women reverenced by their tribes, the instrument of the divine.

As a model for womanhood, she is a celebration of independence and the ability of a woman to exercise rational thought and risk her personal safety in protection of a greater good. As myth Judith provides a blueprint for how the feminine force can function to balance opposites, resist silence, integrate capabilities, and cross the man-
made borders between gender roles and nations. Judith as Otherness, as mystery, provides a means for bridging gaps and creating balance and harmonizing, like a psychomachia, several conflicting things. Is she a resistance narrative for overcoming oppression? Is she a validation of the rightness of defending traditional ideals? Is she about subversive tactics in dealing with a colonizing or oppressive force? She is indeed all of these things. Like the Christian saints, Judith subverts the social order to prove that it is the spiritual, not the man-made, which should be our highest calling. Judith trespasses the received boundaries of gender and morality to sanctify as well as transform. In crossing the borders between the military and private world, the political and the domestic world, the gendered behaviors of men and the gendered behaviors of women—and, beyond that, in crossing the borders of the Hebrew world into the Greek, and the Roman, and the Anglo-Saxon, and beyond—Judith proves what permeable and transparent things borders really are. She upsets all the categorizations and insists on new definitions, new ways of seeing, and new ways of being.
CONCLUSION

JUDITH AS WEAVER OF PEACE

If number and variety of versions, widespread and enduring popularity, can be any criterion of greatness, the tale of Judith, it must be conceded, is one of the great stories of the world's literature.

--Edna Purdie
The Story of Judith in German and English Literature

Judith’s original story is one in which all elements have their natural moment and their appointed place: men and women, warriors and children, high priests and servants. Later artists who attempt to excise certain characters or elements of the story do so at the peril of reducing Judith from her true complexity and, after a fashion, separating her from her true nature and the symbolism of her act. She is not simply a narrative of woman overcoming man, or woman servicing God. She is not simply an amusing parable of faith or a patriotic call to arms, nor a lesson in chastity, the dangers of drunkenness, or a warning about self-adornment and pride. Judith is an example of the highest spiritual ideals alive in human form. She is about the triumph of order and the rewards of pure faith and clean living. She is about overcoming fear and defeating the forces that destroy using the forces that maintain and preserve. She is an example of what any one person can do with courage alone. She is about devotion and duty and the nobility of sacrifice. She is about facing the darkness, integrating the shadow, and finding and claiming the self; she is about resisting oppression, definition, manipulation, and physical danger to fulfill one’s destiny, preserve community, and serve a higher good. The very fact that it is impossible to say in general terms who ‘wins’ (knowing what we do about the fate of the Jewish nation after the Assyrian defeat), the fact that she combats murder with murder, and that she uses the very instruments of the attacker to defeat him at his own
game are what deepen Judith past the symbolic level and make her more than a narrative of opposition. She has layers of complexity. In fact, it would be impossible to exhaust her meaning, as equally as it would be impossible to fix it to one thing. And in this regenerative power—her limitlessness, her ability to be flexible, her protean skill at adapting herself and her story again and again—we can understand what in her myth has appealed to her audiences across the ages, and what she can teach us even today.

**Judith as the New Female Heroic Ideal**

We must return for a moment to Leyser’s caution about pursuing literary interpretation in terms of the reality behind it, in which she reminds us that we can never definitively know the extent to which lives are shaped by the tales, or how far the tales shape lives.¹ It is entertaining, however, to suppose that medieval audiences would have developed the personal relationships to stories that modern lovers of fiction do, and these stories would have provided them not just with moments of entertainment but with an imaginative free space which might even allow them to reconsider or think about their own lives.

As a prototype of a female hero, Judith could have been uniquely inspiring to the Anglo-Saxon woman. It is safe to say that Judith mirrors certain realities, opportunities and terrors which would have corresponded to the life of an early English dame. As a widow, Judith has already discharged what is considered her primary career, that of wife. Notice the customary companion career—that of mother—has no part in the Judith story. This domestic arrangement is what allows her her particular degree of freedom. As a widow she is allowed to possess her own property and has license to direct her own actions. Her isolation after her husband’s death mimics the queen-widow’s withdrawal into the cloistered life; likewise the property left her by her husband, and the spoils of war given to her after her victory, become hers to dispose of. Her ability to possess and alienate property would have appropriately echoed the abilities of Anglo-Saxon female landholders, particularly the wealthy or well-born.

¹ *Medieval Women*, p. 65.
Judith’s personal resistance to the rape threatened by Holofernes might have had very real significance to her Anglo-Saxon listeners. Wife-capture, Lucas reminds us, was a practice in all Indo-European cultures, and stories abound of women being abducted, from nunneries or even from their own homes.² Judith and her ability to exercise sexual choice would have been an inspiration to the average woman not in a circumstance to possess or exercise such freedom. In her success at defending herself and keeping her body inviolate, Judith likewise would have been a heroine who spoke to those women who found themselves preyed upon because of their sex. Most importantly, Judith uses a combination of traditionally female weapons (her beauty and her body, lying and seduction) and traditionally male weapons (the suggestion of armor in the description of her “ring-bedecked,” but most obviously the sword), which defies the conventions of a society attempting to impose traditional notions or limits upon the roles attributed to its women. For Judith, who determines national events in the most private and enclosed of domestic spheres, the bedroom, does not just upset the gender binaries; she explodes them altogether, tearing them down and packing them up the same way she relieves Holofernes of both head and the canopy under which it rested.

Judith defies the Eve-inheritance rhetoric that woman, because female, is automatically weaker, inferior, or victim to her own imperfect nature and easily influenced to evil. In fact, her story undermines the very ideology that attempts to justify the subjugation of women. Nothing about her suggests that she is weak or inferior in any way. Her seclusion is not shameful; whether attributed to true emotional devastation over the loss of her husband, or in keeping with her private beliefs of piety and decorum, either way it indicates a personal choice. Her keeping company with her maid suggests a supportive and peaceful domestic arrangement as well as the benefits of female community, which would still have been an important value in the yet-tribal structure of Anglo-Saxon society. Judith’s reputation for wisdom reflects the ancient and not-entirely-obsolete belief of the older Germanic society that women can serve as oracles or prophetesses. Judith’s power resonates with the image of the valkyrie or warrior-maiden, another symbol still familiar to the Germanic spirit despite exposure to Christianity; in

² See her *Women in the Middle Ages*, p. 62.
many ways, Judith is the valkyrie made fresh, the battle maiden sanitized and sanctified for Christian consumption.

In addition to the ways original elements of the Judith story naturally resonate with a Germanic audience, certain touches added by her Anglo-Saxon storytellers make her even more relevant as a female heroic ideal and not just an inspiring figure in a story. In particular, she might have shown the way for an average, non-sainted woman to integrate into her personal life the teachings of the Christian faith. Judith’s reward for her devotion validates the rituals of religion and spirituality that Anglo-Saxon maidens would have been taught to observe. Diligent in her observations of ritual, custom, and law, Judith obeys in spirit and with zeal. She finds through her faith her means of being of service to her society, for it is her very piety that distinguishes her from all others; just as the virgin Mary was chosen for her task because she was most pure, Judith’s sanctity fits her for this enormous task. Therefore even the humblest listener could have found her own faith reaffirmed by Judith’s example.

Moreover, though her town is indeed under siege, a reader of the original story gets the impression that Judith is not suffering, perhaps due to her frugal lifestyle; she has water enough to bathe in and food enough to pack for a five-day trip, and when she shows up at the town gates dressed in her finest, the stir over her beauty precludes any thought that she is starving, emaciated, or on the brink of despair as her fellows are portrayed. Therefore she is a practical example of the virtues of clean living and canny housekeeping skills, which no doubt the Anglo-Saxon wife and matron employed daily.

Judith is also an example of female agency. Driven to action on behalf of her people and also from a sense of outrage, in taking matters into her own hands she illustrates for her female listeners the full power of action and range of influence available to a woman. Judith is not anybody’s property, servant, concubine, or slave. She is entirely self-possessed. She has a public influence as well as a private one; the city fathers come when she calls them, suggesting that women can be reasoning creatures and as vocal in public affairs as men. Judith proves that beauty comes from character and quality of mind, not from physical appearance; dressed in her widow’s weeds, she is still an imposing and respected figure. Yet she likewise dispenses the idea that physically alluring beauty is automatically bad or evil and that adornment is sinful conduct. Judith’s
beauty and sensuality are gifts from God and therefore cannot be evil. Her freedom to follow her own desires in accepting or declining the offers of her suitors validates the desire of any woman to exercise the power of choice in the selection of a sexual partner. In fact, not only does Judith not have a guardian or husband to dictate her actions, but there is no one in a position to advise her, not even the council of elders of her own city; she proves that a woman is indeed capable of independence and autonomy and moreover, when left on her own, she can still be trusted to make productive decisions.

Judith defeats the notion expressed elsewhere that woman is the gateway to sin or one step away from the devil. Judith is God’s own instrument, preserved, rewarded, and blessed in her fame and reputation. Her counseling of the city fathers justifies the esteem in which she is held and demonstrates the capacity of a female to give advice, thus giving license for other women to feel free to speak up or act when called to do so. Judith discourages and defies the accepted Christian notions of passivity and silence. By her actions, both in speech and in physical deed, she redeems her people from the outside threat that faces them as well as their own inner fear. She is an inspiring example of keeping faith in adversity, a reminder that many of her listeners, both male and female, may have needed. She offers hope that evil will be conquered and the enemy will be kept at bay; no doubt this hope proved some comfort to those praying to be kept safe from Danish raiders.

The specific treatments of Judith by the religious-minded, particularly those within the patristic tradition of late antiquity, understandably elide those details in the story that make her troubling: the fact that she uses the power of words to deceive Holofernes, or that she uses her powers of seduction to influence him, through his own lust, to aid her in his destruction. They attempt instead to highlight the safer elements: her service to God, her modesty of character, her purity of mind and chastity of body. Undoubtedly these elements are more socially constructive than the problematic and perhaps unthinkable act of condoning of personal adornment, sexual license, and uninhibited impulses, which is not even something our modern culture encourages wholesale (though certain commercial segments certainly do their best). Nevertheless, all the retellings of the story center around the scene where Judith successfully beheads Holofernes and saves her town, a confrontation where oppression and evil (symbolized in
this case by a male figure) are defeated and unmanned by goodness and righteousness (in
the figure of a female). Each author may hasten to explain or validate this is in own way,
but the fact remains: the woman is destroyer and restorer, judge and protectress, actor,
servant, and sacred. This fact alone deconstructs the gender polarizations that have
previously been treated as accepted fact. The very existence of the narrative contradicts
the formulaic patristic preaching of woman as the passive, the malformed, the
subordinate, the dangerous element that must be neutralized, guided, and controlled by
the wiser and more rational man. Moreover, she proves the occasional necessity of
violating the received notions of genteel conduct or prescribed behavior in service of a
greater purpose.

If the true Judith stands in defiance to the traditional medieval misogyny, then
how is it that she was used so often as a model of true Christian piety and female restraint?
As a narrative on the dangers of sin and an admonition on personal discipline and purity,
the patristic teachings certainly have a certain attraction as well as an undisputed logic in
using Judith as a valorous example of how to resist oppression, confront and dismantle
tyranny, and preserve what is just and holy. Nevertheless all the Christian interpretations
must eventually encounter the paradox that this woman, in her weaker and supposedly
humbler state, executes an enemy of her people but cutting off his head with a sword.

The literary interpretations, as suggested by the Old English poem, serve a
slightly different rhetorical purpose. But in both discourses, Judith, as we have observed,
is loaded with meaning and layers of complexity. What her author purports to deliver,
the *prima facie* or surface meaning, never encompasses what Judith, as a whole, signifies.
The reduction to one binary or the isolation of one symbol or type is never quite
successful, for the weight of tradition stands behind every illustration, unable to be
entirely separated from it; like Jung’s shadow or Freud’s unconscious, it lurks it in the
background, gathering power the longer it is repressed. It is only in attempting to
examine Judith in all her layers of meaning and all of her complexities that we begin to
understand the true power of her story.

Judith, I believe this study shows, signified for the Anglo-Saxons a deep cultural
myth, one that perhaps ran counter to certain public discourses but which offered, as
myth should, a way of understanding the elements that formed that society and the
structures upon which it stood. Not only could Judith speak to the contemporary concerns of Anglo-Saxon women, but she also served to reinforce the idea that God, in whatever guise, is the ultimate authority for human life. In her story, God is not a distant watcher or controller of events; He is an active and immediate presence, represented by his agent on earth. And Judith herself needs no operator on the spiritual switchboard; she has a hotline to God. Saints are distinguished by and sainted for this kind of personal interaction with the divinity, which helps them serve as intercessors for the earthly and more flawed; Judith, never sainted, signifies that humans, even women, can come directly under divine protection. Those of pure faith, like Judith, need no mediator; they get their instructions from the source. Indeed, this presents a powerful opportunity for any of the humble, weak, dispirited, or oppressed in the audience of the tale.

The beauty of the Judith story is that she yields to whichever interpretation her author wishes to give her. In this way she reminds us of the toils of feminist scholarship on Anglo-Saxon women; that evidence, too, yields to whichever interpretation the researcher hopes to find. In one respect it seems we will always be baffled by our own biases in perspective; on the other hand, we are given the freedom to creatively re-imagine new possibilities for the story, in effect adding to the tradition with each new retelling as well as reinforcing Judith even more firmly as myth by her very ability to speak to varied audiences across the ages.

**Judith as Modern-Day Heroine**

A thousand years later, Judith still serves as a myth in our own culture. Stocker’s survey identifies her still-frequent appearances in popular culture; she is part, it seems, of our universal unconscious. And while Stocker sees every incarnation of a devouring mother or murderous vamp as a reincarnation of Judith, we should remember the reading given here, that Judith’s ultimate service is upsetting the received order and making new rules to make way for a greater good. In this sense, it would seem we need a Judith now as much as ever.

The purpose of myth, as established earlier, is that it carries cultural information and also helps us understand our current experiences. Women in modern America live in
a world where the power of choice is more available—and more encouraged—than at any other time in history. At the same time, the two thousand years of tradition into which Judith is incorporated still bears significant weights upon our modes of thoughts. This is where the Anglo-Saxon version of Judith may be redemptive. To the Anglo-Saxons, if we agree with Bandel’s reading, women were not a special-interest group; they were fully functional members of society and had value and worth within the social hierarchy. Men as well as women had duties to perform in service to the preservation and maintenance of ties within the community. The idea of a valiant woman did not surprise the Anglo-Saxons; if anything, the philosophy that woman was subordinate to man and must be guarded, her actions controlled, her dress subdued, and her speech restrained, proved alien to the Anglo-Saxons and difficult to absorb into daily practice. Our society still reacts with special recognition when a woman proves herself capable in any position of leadership. Perhaps we ourselves will be enlightened when the idea of treating women as a special interest group strikes us as a quaint and antiquated notion, unnecessarily sexist and a partial solution at best.

We may also learn from Judith’s adaptability as a narrative figure. Though her meaning is in essence about breaking boundaries where needed, as a story Judith crosses cultures subtly, not with violence. Though they initially were the colonizers of once-Roman Britain, history tells us that the Anglo-Saxons were themselves later harassed, invaded, and colonized by other forces. Women have undergone centuries of colonization thanks to the evolution of systems of thought that rested on seemingly opposite tenets—the vilification of Eve, and the sanctification of Mary—which served to flatten representations of women and limit the historical concept of Woman to definition by opposition. And yet, from Judith on, the narratives of resistance have flourished, proving that the limited lens did not fully describe the subject being analyzed. Judith can serve once again to liberate us from short-sighted thinking and give license to those who need to upset a social contract that is in danger of leading the society, or at least certain segments of it, to sure death. I would not like to claim that violence is called for in this respect, merely to apply the broader theme of righteous action in response to oppression. The story of Judith allows us to imagine a playing field where each individual in the society has a value and a purpose, and each, even the supposedly weakest, can be, like
Judith, an instrument of the divine. Judith shows us that it is not the strongest that triumph but the *right* that triumph. As an individual, she is testimony to what can be accomplished when given the power to act and the freedom to choose paired with human wisdom. As a symbol, she proves that identity is a confluence of consciousnesses, and as a narrative, she proves that adaptability is the requirement to survive. We could all perhaps benefit from incorporating this into our daily lives.

**Judith as Myth**

Judith and her survival demonstrate effectively the power of story and the power of myth in describing personal experience and connecting us to the universal. The Judith myth, a clue to what Stocker calls “an alternative history of Western culture,” is a valuable insight into that holy grail of feminist scholarship, a history of culture and thought that features both men and women as active and participating characters. Each reinterpretation of her story, in what it chooses to highlight and what it chooses to ignore, exposes the values and foundational tenets of its audience. As a narrative, the Judith story connects us to all the cultures which have contributed to the building of her tradition, providing a vehicle for cultural transmission and at the same time the very means by which to dismantle and reshape the ideologies which are no longer serviceable in favor of building a new model.

Judith’s ultimate message is in her power of multiplicity. She deconstructs a one-dimensional or even two-dimensional perspective and demands a holistic, integrated view. Like the Phoenix, Judith is at one and the same time of a force for destruction and a force for renewal. In its deepest sense, the original story shows us a woman who destroys in the interests of liberation. Her story has the same message for readers today. As Stocker says in the conclusion of *Judith, Sexual Warrior*, Judith “is an image of the autonomy that is constantly being wrested from us all, and an icon of the way to recover it.”

Judith, in her very destructive capacity, is a sort of spiritual warrior whose highest aim is preservation and unity, who assassinates in order to protect, who destroys in order to

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3 *Judith, Sexual Warrior*, p. 251.
4 See p. 252.
restore, who defies in order to overcome, and who ultimately proves a figure of
transcendence of binaries, establishment of harmony, and a means of union with the
divine. Judith’s alternative offering to the male-authored version of the world—just as
she offers an alternative transcript to male-authored history—is a model not based on the
exhausting struggle between reason and imagination nor on the endless cycle of desire
and suffering; Judith is a model of hope, of belief in peace and deliverance, a figure
within which the binaries are absorbed and transcended. She is the space within which
all things are possible, the universe where there is a steadfast higher power that guides us
and a higher purpose to which we all belong.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Following careers as a management consultant and bookstore manager, Misty Urban came to Florida State University to study creative writing in modern English and discovered Old English instead. Following her MA in English from FSU, she hopes to receive an MFA in Fiction Writing and a PhD in English Literature and Medieval Studies from Cornell University. She will always remember Tallahassee as the place where she was first exposed to Judith and learned to overcome her objections to air conditioning.