

Gender

Stacy S. Klein

The Modern English term “gender” derives from the Middle English *gendre*, an Anglo-Norman loan word derived from the Latin *genus*, meaning “kind,” “type,” or “class.” *Gendre* was used from the late fourteenth century onward to designate masculine and feminine as types or categories of people, as when the narrator in Thomas Usk’s *The Testament of Love* (c.1385–1387) asserts confidently that there are no other genders besides masculine and feminine, and that anything lacking one of these natural genders (e.g., inanimate objects) has no gender, except through the conventions used by grammarians: “no mo genders ben there but masculyn and femenyne, al the remenaunt ben no gendres but of grace in facultie of grammer” (145). The Anglo-Latin term that corresponds most closely to the Middle English *gendre* is *sexus*, as indicated in Ælfric’s late tenth- or early eleventh-century *Glossary*, in which he defines *sexus* as “werhad oððe wifhad” (manhood or womanhood), and describes the sexes as falling into two distinct categories: “*mas t̄ mascula* werhades mann. *femina* wifhades mann” (*mas t̄ mascula*: a person of manhood; *femina*: a person of womanhood; Ælfric’s *Grammatik und Glossar*, 297). The Old English terms that correspond most closely to *sexus* are *had* or *gesceap*, which may be translated, respectively (and loosely), as “condition” or “state of being” and as “form” or “shape.” *Gendre*, *sexus*, *had*, and *gesceap* all accord more closely with our modern sense of sexual difference (as opposed to gender), and although there are many Old English terms, such as *werlic*, “manly,” or *wiflic*, “womanly,” for describing sociocultural roles or behaviors that tend to be assigned to sexed bodies, there is no general, abstract term similar to the modern concept of gender that might serve to distinguish between biologically sexed bodies and the cultural ground which both produces and houses them.

Precisely when the concept of gender, as the cultural interpretation of sexed bodies, and sex, as a system of classification grounded in physiological differences between men and women, began to be understood as distinct entities is a topic of much debate. Building on Thomas Laqueur's influential "one-sex/two-sex" model of sexual difference, which contends that prior to the eighteenth century the female body was considered an underdeveloped version of a unitary male body, with the sexes thus differing in degree rather than in kind (*Making Sex*), Michael McKeon argues that the concept of "sex" as an ontological category (as opposed to a sociological one) did not emerge in England until the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and that prior to this time, biological sexuality was embedded in its sociocultural ground to such a degree that the distinction between sex and gender was largely unintelligible ("Historicizing Patriarchy"; *Secret History*, 269–319). Indeed it was not until 1955 that sexologist and long-time professor of pediatrics and medical psychology at Johns Hopkins University, John Money, coined the term "gender role."

While the chronology charting the separation of sex and gender is notoriously difficult to pin down, it is clear that cultural understandings of sex/gender systems, whether medieval or modern, are deeply embedded in larger social, cultural, and spiritual matrices – so much so that in the past several decades, many poststructuralist and feminist scholars have sought to redefine sex as another product of discourse, with gender designating, as Judith Butler famously put it, "the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established" (*Gender Trouble*, 7). Studies of gender as manifested in particular historical periods are thus potentially powerful political tools as they offer the promise of revealing, in Daniel Boyarin's words, "the praxis and process by which people are interpellated into a two- (or for some cultures more) sex system that is made to seem as if it were nature, that is, something that has always existed" (117).

This essay focuses on a particular cluster of social phenomena that are integrally linked to early medieval understandings of gender and sexual difference: warfare, militancy, and the numerous supportive roles that enabled martial life. Much of my discussion proceeds through a close reading of the anonymous Old English fragmentary poem *Judith*, a ninth- or tenth-century account of the Old Testament heroine whose martial exploits suggest a radical discontinuity between her sexed body and its expected gender iterations. I argue that Judith's success in the traditionally masculine arena of warfare problematizes the seemingly essential link between maleness and militancy assumed throughout much Anglo-Saxon literature. More broadly, I seek to show that the *Judith* poet's depiction of a female warrior whose martial activity does not, and indeed cannot, transform her into a kind of honorary man provides a useful touchstone for investigating how literary characters might both evoke and also exceed historically specific gender identities, and how literature from the past offers a way of not only demystifying long-standing gender norms but also imagining possible alternatives.

Gender and Militancy

In the Old English will of King Alfred (c.880s), Alfred states that his booklands should pass to “stryned on þa wæpnedhealfe” (“offspring on the weaponed half [male side]”), explaining that his own grandfather had bequeathed his land “on þa sperehealfe næs on þa spinlhealfe” (“on the spear side, not on the spindle side”; Harmer 19;¹ trans. on 52).² Alfred’s use of the lexicon of weaponry as a shorthand for delineating male lines of inheritance points, I would argue, to a much broader and more pervasive association between militancy and maleness in Anglo-Saxon literature and culture. Whether we look to Aldhelm’s exhortations in his prose *De Virginitate* that the nuns of Barking ought not to flee from spiritual battle *muliebriter*, “in a womanly fashion” (*Aldhelmi Malmesbiriensis prosa de virginitate*, 131, 133, ll. 29–32); to Asser’s celebration of the battle of Winchester in 860 CE as a time when the English stormed the Vikings *viriliter*, “in a manly fashion,” forcing them to turn tail and run *muliebriter* (*Asser’s Life*, 17–18); or to the anonymous eighth-century account of Saint Perpetua’s dream that “she was in the form of a man and had a sword in her hand and fought strongly with it” (“heo wære on wæres hiwe ond ðæt heo hæfde sweord on handa ond that heo stranglice fuhte mid þy”; Herzfeld 34, trans. on 36), we find masculinity inexorably linked to notions of militancy and martial prowess. The strength of this association is powerfully illustrated in the Old English poem *Maxims I*, in which sexual difference is depicted as a neat boundary for the division of military labor – with warfare demarcated as the domain of men and the numerous supportive roles that enabled it, including the provision of counsel and the distribution of treasure and mead, as that of women:

Guð sceal in eorle,
 wig geweaxan, ond wif geþeon
 lof mid hyre leodum, leohtmod wesan,
 rune healdan, rumheort beon
 mearum ond maþmum, meodorædenne
 for gesiðmægen symle æghwær
 eodor æþelīnga ærest gegretan,
 forman fulle to frean hond
 ricene geræcan, ond him ræd witan
 boldagendum bæm ætsomne. (Krapp and Dobbie 159–160)

(Battle, warfare, shall be strong in the earl, and the wife shall thrive, beloved by her people, be cheerful, keep counsel, be generous with horses and treasure, everywhere at all times before the band of warriors greet first the prince of the nobles with mead and offer promptly the first cup to the hand of the ruler and know counsel for them both, for both hall-owners together.)³

Yet in a world in which masculinity hinges so crucially on martial exploits, what happens when a woman takes up arms and subsequently acquits herself with great élan? What happens when a site so integrally linked to sexual difference is invaded

by an actor hailing from the “wrong” side of the gender continuum? What happens when a woman’s very womanliness is crucial to her military success and when her people’s salvation hangs in the balance?

These questions are posed in a complex and thoughtful way in the Old English verse *Judith*, an Anglo-Saxon account of the Old Testament heroine who vanquishes the Assyrian general Holofernes, thus saving her people from certain death. While the Old English poetic corpus contains several images of female militancy, *Judith* is unusual in that it is the only Old English poem in which female militancy is presented both as crucial to communal salvation and as sustainable over a period of time. For it is not only when Judith beheads Holofernes that she effectively engages the tools of military life. *Judith* ends with an arresting image of female militancy, when the eponymous heroine receives Holofernes’ gleaming sword, gory helmet, and golden mailcoat as tokens of her people’s heartfelt gratitude for saving them. The Latin sources for the poem move on – to new hostilities, renewed prayers, and Judith’s ultimate renouncing of the “contaminated” war booty as “anathema oblivionis” (an anathema of oblivion; Judith 16:23)⁴ – but the Anglo-Saxon reader is left to linger at the site of a battle-decorated female body, an image that adumbrates, though never fully indexes, the triumph of a militant *Mater Ecclesia*, the long-standing Christian tradition of the female virago “made male” by her spiritual prowess, and the transition in rulership signified in early Germanic culture by the passing of a former leader’s war gear.⁵

That final image in *Judith* serves as a useful point of departure for reflecting on the central argument of this essay: that for the Anglo-Saxons, sexual difference was powerfully imbricated in the acts, behaviors, customs, and dress associated with an ethos of militancy – an ethos that finds its fullest expression in heroic poetry. My interest lies in understanding *Judith* as a critique of heroic culture and woman’s place within it, as well as an Anglo-Saxon meditation on the possibility of decoupling militancy and maleness, thereby destabilizing one of the crucial conceptual foundations on which Anglo-Saxon understandings of sexual difference were built. By creating a female warrior who is able to assume social roles hailing from both ends of the gender continuum, the *Judith* poet underscores the constructed nature of that continuum, inviting readers to imagine alternative ways of situating themselves within it. The fact that this seemingly incongruous joining of women and warfare is depicted as a product of divine will lends further legitimacy to the decoupling of maleness and militancy, creating a space for readers to question the automatic determinism of social roles by biological gender. As the poem celebrates the female body’s ability to participate – and indeed to triumph – in the traditionally masculine arena of war, it ultimately asks readers to rethink the role of any body, male or female, in cultures dominated by militancy, suggesting that wars are won not by physical strength but by transforming the physical body into a spiritual vessel for God’s work. As the poem redefines the criteria necessary for martial success, the very nature of militancy itself begins to shift, reminding us that militancy in Anglo-Saxon culture was not a stable or fixed entity but a fluid set of concepts open to constant negotiation. Militancy may well have been the bedrock

on which Anglo-Saxon understandings of sexual difference were built. Yet *Judith* reveals that this seemingly fixed foundation was in fact merely precarious scaffolding – scaffolding that relied heavily on textual representations to maintain cultural confidence in its stability.

The Female Warrior, Past and Present

The *Judith* poet's portrayal of female militancy as a source of communal salvation has posed serious difficulties for modern and medieval readers. Difficulties stem in the first place from the fact that Anglo-Saxon poetry offers very little context for understanding female militancy in a positive light. The two best-known female warriors in the Old English poetic corpus, Modthryth and Grendel's mother, generate deep anxiety for the *Beowulf* poet, resulting in verbal castigation and the ultimate "taming" of the former and the speedy death of the latter. In both cases female militancy is depicted as an unnatural phenomenon that entails the transgression of either social custom or the boundaries of humanity.⁶ The *Beowulf* poet's representation of the female warrior as an aberration is echoed in the twelfth-century historian Saxo Grammaticus's description of the legendary Danish warrior women. Saxo laments that "by pursuing military fame . . . courting conflict rather than kisses . . . and fitting weapons to hands which should have been weaving," women "forget" their "natural [feminine] estates . . . to the extent that one might have thought they had unsexed themselves" (1: 212).

The idea that militancy might allow women to "unsex" themselves takes on a more positive valence in the *miles Christi* tradition of Old English hagiography, in which figures such as Perpetua, Eugenia, and Euphrosyne don masculine attire and are depicted as capable of transcending biological femaleness through spiritual fortitude and membership in Christ's "army." Although rooted in biblical and patristic thought, the *miles Christi* tradition played an important role in pre-Conquest literature – arguably more important than in subsequent centuries, when the feminization of religious language and increasing belief that inferiority might provide special access to the divine transformed "womanly weakness" into an asset to be coveted rather than a liability to be transcended. To be sure, Old English narratives that feature the female *miles Christi* encode a complex set of anxieties generated by women's adoption of masculine dress and comportment. Nevertheless, on the whole Anglo-Saxon writers tend to portray these female soldiers of Christ as sympathetic figures and their assumption of militant masculinity as a laudable achievement.⁷ As Ælfric puts it in his homily for Midlent Sunday: "þeah gif wifman bið werlice geworht 7 strang to godes willan, heo bið þonne geteald to ðam werum þe æt godes mysan sittað" ("Although if a woman is made manfully and strong in accordance with God's will, she will be counted among the men who sit at God's table"; Ælfric's *Catholic Homilies*, 279, ll. 115–117). It is thus tempting to explain the *Judith* poet's celebration of female militancy within this tradition of transvestite sanctity – and to read Judith's assumption of Holofernes' arms as a



literalization of faith's masculinizing powers and a sign of Judith's "true" spiritual gender. Indeed it is precisely this reading that is suggested in the Vulgate Judith, in which the people praise Judith "quia fecisti viriliter" ("for thou hast done manfully"; 15:11) and subsequently award her the war spoils of their recent pillage.

Upon closer inspection, however, the Old English Judith appears ill-suited for the role of transvestite saint. The female *miles Christi* tends to engage in metaphorical rather than literal acts of violence. Her weapons are not actual swords but the "sword of the Holy Word," the "iron-tipped spears of the virtues," and the "breastplate of faith" (*Aldhelm*, 68). Her foes are not flesh and blood but rather such internal vices as pride, avarice, and lust. And her conquests do not usually take place on foreign campgrounds but in the innermost reaches of the saint's heart or in the nebulous space of dreams. Moreover transvestite saints' lives tend to portray spiritual maleness as a temporary state: the narratives typically end with the saint jettisoning masculine clothing, unveiling her "real" female body, and dying shortly thereafter. *Judith*, by contrast, reverses this narrative trajectory, concluding, as we have seen, with the ceremonious veiling of Judith's female body with the masculine accoutrements of battle, which she is never shown relinquishing. Perhaps more to the point, if the poet had wanted to locate Judith within the tradition of transvestite sanctity, it is odd that he chose to ignore the very clear explanation of the gender dynamics of female militancy provided by his sources – that in fighting, Judith had "acted manfully" – instead, leaving his readers to interpret for themselves the poem's depiction of a war hero in a female body.

There are other reasons, too, why the poet might have chosen not to efface Judith's feminine nature. Transforming Judith into a kind of honorary man would have raised considerable problems, in that the heroine's biological gender is crucial to the text's topological message: that anyone, even the weakest of women, might triumph against his or her enemies if sufficiently armed with the weapons of faith. As patristic and early medieval writers knew well, Judith had to remain marked as female if the poem's didactic message was to retain any real import. Thus early writers made much of Judith's femininity, reading her ability to defeat Holofernes as a woman as undeniable proof of God's power. As the fifth-century Christian poet Dracontius of Carthage asserts: "what the great hand of man would not undertake, a woman accomplished alone, under the dark of night" and "by a feminine sword, there perished a leader strong and bold."⁸

In light of the problems presented by the pairing of women and war, it is perhaps not surprising that readers across the centuries have turned to various forms of allegory to explain Judith's successful wielding of arms. Numerous patristic and early medieval writers, including Jerome, pseudo-Augustine, Isidore, and Ælfric, saw Judith as a figure for *Ecclesia* triumphing over carnal desire – a reading that held sway in *Judith* criticism throughout much of the 1970s (see Griffith 70–82). Yet the surge in historicist inquiry during the 1980s brought with it new readings of *Judith* as historical-political allegory, in which Judith's sexual vulnerability at the hands of Holofernes was seen as a thinly veiled reference to the potential fate of English women at the hands of the Vikings, and as a call to English men to defend their nation.⁹ In this

reading, the Old English *Judith* becomes a sort of whetting woman in its own right, a mechanism for male shaming that relies on the common trope of woman as always and ever rapable in order to recruit men to arms, a reading that was given additional weight by Ælfric's famous remark in his *Letter to Sigeweard* (c.1005) that the Book of Judith has been "on Englisc on ure wisan gesett eow mannum to bysne, þæt ge eowerne eard mid wæmnum [sic] bewerian wið onwinnendne here" ("set in English in our way as an example for you people that you might defend your country with weapons against the invading army"; Crawford 48).¹⁰

In the final analysis, the drive toward allegory in *Judith* criticism points to a more serious challenge than that of situating the female warrior within a corpus of literature in which martial exploits tend to appear as the prerogative of men. As Helen Solterer has shown, although allegory seeks to erase woman as both a historical and a corporeal being, in the end it does neither, merely catering to the desire to dwell on the female body even while converting it into something else. This fascination and ultimate unease with representing the female body is powerfully felt in the various allegorical readings of *Judith*: while the typological reading of Judith as *Ecclesia* entails transforming her into an institutional body, capacious enough to hold all continent bodies regardless of gender, historical-political readings of *Judith* insist on seeing woman as little else save a rapable body to inspire male heroism. Although the two forms of allegory differ in their respective treatments of the female body, both modes of reading nevertheless reveal a profound interest in seeing that body while signaling the real difficulties involved in locating it within heroic poetry – a set of texts in which the body has proven notoriously difficult to find. Tracing the signs that point back toward the female body in *Judith* offers a powerful means of viewing one poet's efforts to dramatize and to refigure the role of the female body, and ultimately the role of all bodies, in heroic culture.

Finding the Female Body

Throughout the Middle Ages, women were strongly associated with the material body, a complex symbol that writers used as a figure for secular life, as well as a vehicle for imagining and effecting social and spiritual continuities between this life and the one to come. Yet the body in *Judith* is not depicted as a viable means of achieving either eternal salvation or even its secular equivalent: immortalization through heroic legend. Indeed, for all of the blood and gore exhibited in Judith's memorable severing of Holofernes' head, the material body in *Judith* is strikingly elusive – a body that is subsumed under the weight of linked chain-mail or that all but disappears when it is asked to serve as a figure for something else.

The elusiveness of the body is further felt in the poet's apparent lack of interest in Judith's sexuality. While the Latin sources frequently refer to Judith as a widow (Judith 8:1, 8:4, 9:3), the Old English poet never mentions Judith's marital status. And unlike the biblical Judith who thanks God both for enabling her to kill

Holofernes *and* for preserving her chastity, the Old English *Judith* thanks God solely for his role in ensuring the safety of her people. Nor does the Old English poet discuss Judith's seduction of Holofernes, a scene that figures prominently in the biblical story – so much so that Aldhelm, writing approximately two centuries earlier, had felt it necessary to explain Judith's seduction as an act of desperation that in no way tarnished her reputation for chastity:

And when . . . she undertook to overthrow the dreadful leader of the Assyrians . . . she did not think he could be deceived in any other way, nor think he could be killed otherwise, than by ensnaring him by means of the innate beauty of her face and also by her bodily adornment. . . . But because she is known to have done this during the close siege of Bethulia . . . and not through any disaffection for chastity . . . she brought back a renowned trophy to her fearful fellow citizens. (*Aldhelm*, 126)

Scholars have been quick to point to the Anglo-Saxons' general reticence around issues related to the body and sexuality as one explanation for the *Judith* poet's apparent lack of interest in Judith as either a corporeal or a sexual being.¹¹ Others have seen the elusiveness of the material body in *Judith* as very much in keeping with the poem's general tendency toward typology, a hermeneutical strategy that is adopted by all of the characters in the poem. Indeed Judith herself urges her people to read Holofernes' decapitated head and dismembered body as symbolizing the loss of the Assyrians' social head and the fragmentation of their military body, and to interpret her own body as a sign of God's works and of the Assyrians' impending defeat.¹²

Yet if the body in *Judith* insistently points away from itself, functioning as a kind of barometer of communal, military, or spiritual fortune, so, too, do these externals point back, asking readers to recognize the body as both signified and constructed through the things that surround it. While the poet never discusses Judith's body directly, we are given obsessively detailed descriptions of the bright, tightly fortified city of Bethulia, whose glittering towers and high walls evoke Judith's own radiant and chaste body, closed off and ever vigilant against the heathen general's drunken advances. And while we hear little about Judith's own appearance, we hear much about that of her retainer, a "blachleor ides . . . ðeawum geðungen" ("pale-cheeked woman, well accomplished in customs"; 128a, 129a), whose bright face and excellence in conduct are clearly intended to reflect qualities shared by her female warlord. Closer inspection, then, reveals that *Judith* does not so much stage the disappearance as it does the externalization of the body, relying on the body's habits of dress, comportment, and spatial and communal location as vehicles for representing and refiguring the gendered self and its role in heroic culture.

The externalization of the gendered self is perhaps most vividly felt in the epithets used to describe Judith. While the poet never remarks on Judith's beauty directly, he repeatedly describes both Judith and her people with adjectives connoting a sense of light or brightness: she is *torht* ("radiant"; 43a); *beorht* ("bright"; 58b, 254b, 340b); and *ides ælfscinu* ("woman shining like an elf"; 14a). Judith's bright appearance is

heightened by her golden jewels and shining armor: she is *beagum gehlæste* (“laden with bracelets”; 36b); *hringum gehrodene* (“covered with rings”; 37a), and *golde gefrætewod* (“adorned with gold”; 171b), and she is decorated by *scire helmas* (“shining helmets”; 193a), and *fagum sweordum* (“bright swords”; 194b).¹³ The poet’s glowing praise for Judith’s bright appearance, shining jewels, and gleaming weapons works to conflate the bright *ides* and her bright accessories – to the point where the two begin to merge and to become virtually indistinguishable from one another.

By using the same terms to describe Judith’s physical appearance, her feminine adornments, and her people’s weaponry, the poet reminds us that Judith’s female beauty is not only reminiscent of weaponry but in fact *is* a kind of weaponry, in that it is Judith’s physical beauty that will tempt Holofernes and ultimately lead to his destruction. While Judith’s bright appearance is surely intended to emphasize her inner purity, it also points to a more dangerous and sexualized beauty that finds a ready context in the manuscript in which the poem appears: the Nowell Codex, whose five texts share a thematic interest in monstrosity and otherness. While scholars have been quick to designate Holofernes as the figure of the “dangerous other” that qualifies *Judith* for inclusion in this “monster codex,” the poet’s description of Judith as an *ides ælfscinu*, “woman shining like an elf,” suggests that Judith herself may well be seen as a viable candidate for this role: Judith shares numerous traits with the other dangerous, and dubiously gendered, female figures who appear in the codex, including Grendel’s mother, the bearded female hunters of *Wonders of the East*, and the boar-tusked females who threaten Alexander. Indeed the term *ælfscinu* appears in only one other context in Old English poetry: the Old English verse Genesis, in which it refers to the dangerous beauty of Abraham’s wife Sarah, whose beauty leads Pharaoh to take her as his concubine, with the result that God visited a plague upon Pharaoh and his people.

Female beauty in *Judith* does indeed dramatize many of the old misogynist adages bequeathed to the Anglo-Saxons through patristic writings, and expounded in such heroic literature as *Cynewulf and Cyneheard*, that depict desire for women as a grave danger that might ultimately lead to the downfall of a warrior and his troops. Nevertheless, by depicting female beauty as both a seductive force that will lead to Holofernes’ destruction *and* a powerful weapon that will lead to the Bethulians’ salvation, the *Judith* poet invites readers to rethink the “innate dangers” of female beauty and sexual allure. While the female body is indeed shown to provoke male desire, that provocation is figured not as a sign of woman’s descent from Eve but rather as a sign of her connection to God.

Heroic Bodies in Distress

Judith’s decapitation of Holofernes is often interpreted as a kind of reverse rape, in which a woman penetrates the male body rather than allowing a man to penetrate her own. Scholars have thus questioned whether this representation of female militancy merely dramatizes the inversion rather than the overturning of social



norms and thus may in fact affirm rather than challenge normative structures of gender and power (see Lochrie 14). To be sure, existing power structures can never be overturned or embraced fully, but only and ever negotiated. Nevertheless, by dramatizing the female body's ability to participate successfully in acts of militancy, *Judith* calls those structures into question, redefining the nature of militancy and the body's role in its performance – a redefinition that is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the decapitation scene, in which the “lytel and unstrang” (“little and weak”) woman vanquishes the Assyrian general.¹⁴

As many scholars have noted, the *Judith* poet expands significantly the biblical account of Judith's slaying of Holofernes. The resulting scene is remarkable for many reasons, not least for the intense focus that the poet places on Judith's hands: immediately before Judith decapitates Holofernes, we hear that she “Genam ða . . . scarpne mece,/ scurum heardne . . . swiðran folme” (“seized a sharp battle-hardened sword . . . with her right hand”; 77b–80a); we are then told that she drew Holofernes toward her “folmum” (“with her hands”; 99b); and finally we hear Judith's interpretation of her hand as a sign of God's power betokening the Bethulians' upcoming victory: “Your enemies are doomed to death and you shall gain glory, fame in the fight, as God has shown you through my hand [purh mine hand]”; 195b–198). We recall that in the Nowell Codex, *Judith* follows immediately after *Beowulf*, another poem that emphasizes the power of the hero's hand, which allegedly encapsulates the handgrip of thirty men. Yet Judith kills Holofernes with a hand whose power derives not from its ability to channel the strength of thirty men but from its ability to channel the power of God. The manuscript context for *Judith* thus asks readers to contrast these two uses of the hand – the one, in *Beowulf*, very much reliant on physical strength, and the other, in *Judith*, wholly reliant on spiritual fortitude. As *Judith* quite clearly suggests, it is not physical strength that will prevail in battle but rather strength of mind and virility of faith.

As the poem progresses, physical strength is revealed as something of an afterthought in the quest for martial success. Instead, a set of qualities that are not gender-specific, such as linguistic prowess, sobriety, and availability to one's comitatus, emerge as crucial for military victory. These personal characteristics are ones that Judith possesses in abundance. Judith speaks boldly before the Bethulian people (152b–158, 177–185a), she avoids drink throughout the poem (a notable departure from the biblical account), and she is frequently depicted as accessible to her people or as watching over her city from afar (“hie sweotollice geseon mihten/ bære wlitegan byrig weallas blican”; “they [Judith and her maid] could clearly see the beautiful, shining walls of the city”; 136–137).

Holofernes, by contrast, is depicted as lacking the personal qualities that signify Judith's triumph. Unlike Judith's clear, convincing speech, his verbiage is characterized by excess and a general loss of linguistic control: we hear that he “laughed and made noise, roared and raged . . . until the children of men were able to hear from afar how the fierce-minded one stormed and yelled” (“hloh ond hlydde, hlynede ond dynede/ þæt mihten fira bearn feorran gehyran/ hu se stiðmoda styrnde ond gylede”; 23–25). And unlike Judith, who is never shown accepting alcohol, the poet repeatedly

stresses Holofernes' commitment to drunkenness: he is described as being *on gytesalum* ("joyous at wine-pouring"; 22b) and as *wine swa druncen* ("completely drunk with wine"; 67b), and is often depicted urging his retainers to join him in his merriment. Finally, while Judith is frequently shown providing counsel for her people, Holofernes distances himself from his troops, sequestering himself behind an all-golden flynet that hangs around his bedchambers – a kind of one-way screen that permits him to look out but prevents others from looking in – forcing his retainers to stand outside his tent, gnashing their teeth in the hope of attracting their leader's attention.

Where the difference between the two leaders is perhaps most apparent, however, is in their respective abilities to control their own minds and wills. Like numerous women in Old English heroic poetry, Judith is repeatedly and indeed almost obsessively praised for her clear thought and wise mind: she is *gleaw on gedonce* ("wise in thought"; 13b), *ferhðgleaw* ("wise-minded"; 41a), *snotor* ("wise"; 55a, 125a), *pearle gemyndig* ("strong-minded"; 74b), *gleawhydig wif* ("wise-minded woman"; 148a), and *gearoþoncol* ("ready-witted"; 341a). Holofernes, by contrast, is frequently described as either mentally confused – he is *niða geblonden* ("confused by wickedness"; 34) and *medugal* ("mead-excited"; 26a) – or as possessing a fixed and unyielding mind – he is *stiðmod* ("stubborn-minded"; 25a) – mental qualities that are presented both as a direct result of Holofernes' proclivities for mead and as symptomatic of his rebellion against God. Significantly, Holofernes appears least in control of his own will and most at odds with the Lord immediately before attempting to rape Judith, the *nergendes þeowen* ("servant of the Savior"; 73b–74a). We hear how the *deofolcunda* ("the diabolical one"; 62b) was *galferð* ("lustfully minded"; 62a) and *pearlmod*, ("stern-minded"; 91a) to the point where he stumbles off to find his bed and then passes out, so drunk and deranged with lust that he "nyste ræda nanne/ on gewitlocan" ("did not know any sense in his mind"; 68b–69a). Although Holofernes "intended to violate the bright woman with defilement and sin," God "refused to consent to that" and he thus "attained his violent end on earth just as he had previously deserved since he had dwelled under the roof of clouds in this world." Thus for all that the poem purports to recount how "the woman with braided locks destroyed the evil general," in the end it is not so much Judith's sword or even Holofernes' desire for Judith but his own lack of emotional control and his contention with the Savior that lead to his death.

Augustine's account of sexual desire in *The City of God* – an account that would take center stage in Foucault's 1980 lecture "Sexuality and Solitude" – reminds us that sexual desire, emotional control, and rebellion against God were closely intertwined in early Christian thought.¹⁵ For Augustine, sexual desire is less a problem of the self's relationship with another than a problem of the body's relationship with the self – namely, a rebellious will that refuses to be subordinated to God: "The main fact is that we are suffering the just retribution of the omnipotent God. It is because it was to Him that we refused our obedience and our service that our body, which used to be obedient, now troubles us by its insubordination" (386). Libido is thus experienced as a "lust that takes complete and passionate possession

of the whole man [so that it] practically paralyzes all power of deliberate thought," resulting in a kind of epileptic bodily spasm that finds fullest expression in one's sexual members (388). Adam and Eve, then, sewed themselves fig leaves and aprons, as Augustine tells it, not simply to conceal their genitals but rather to conceal the fact that their genitals were moving of their own accord: "Rebellion of the flesh was a witness and reproach to the rebellion of man against his Maker" (389).

This explanation of lust as a loss of control over the will, which ultimately references a more profound rebellion against the divine, may help us to understand the *Judith* poet's depiction of the aborted rape scene as a battle of wills between Holofernes and God—a battle played out on the woman's body. To read the scene in this way is not to diminish the importance of sexual identity and gender in the struggle. While the female body is not itself the primary object of desire—what Holofernes really wants is to defile the purity of that body as a means of rebelling against God—sexual difference is crucial here in that the war between divine and demonic forces is not only played out on the female body but is also depicted as a battle of the sexes, with God favoring the feminine.

The Assyrian camp is depicted as a man's world—the world of the mead hall, delineated by boasting, battle, and the desire to use foreign women as proof of military conquest. Holofernes is introduced as a *goldwine gumena* ("gold-friend of men"; 22a) and later described as a *gumena aldor* ("prince of men"; 32) and a *dryhtguma* ("lord of men"; 29a). Not surprisingly, this very male leader rules over a very male retinue: the Assyrians are described as the *fira bearnum* ("children of men"; 34b) and the *hæleða bearna* ("sons of men"; 51). These manly epithets are surely intended to emphasize the Assyrians' intense humanity and distance from the divine. However, they also effectively construct the Assyrian camp as a kind of hypermasculine warrior society, presenting the conflict between the divinely inspired Bethulians and the demonically inspired Assyrians as a battle of the sexes.

If Holofernes is depicted as a paragon of hypertrophied masculinity, Judith does not fail to hold up the other end of the gender continuum. Although she does indeed wield a large sword, she also encapsulates the stock tropes of Anglo-Saxon heroic femininity: she serves as a whetting woman, inciting the Bethulians to action; she is associated with thought and mental prowess; she provides wise counsel; she makes her central appearance as a lone woman at a banquet; and she is encased in jewels. Not surprisingly, this very feminine leader rules over a community that is similarly marked by its strong association with the feminine. Judith is accompanied on her mission by a woman who assists her in battle, a feminine rewriting of the brothers-in-arms found in heroic poetry. Moreover, while the Assyrians are typically referred to as *veras*, "men," the Bethulians are more often referred to by such gender-neutral terms as *leod*, "people" (147, 178) or *folc*, "folk" (162), and their community includes "*veras wif somod*" ("men and women together"; 163). Hugh Magennis argues that the poet's stereotyping of Judith according to gender roles traditionally assigned to women in heroic poetry has the effect of tempering the "potentially transgressive Judith . . . [and] rewriting [her] as in key respects an unthreatening model of female virtue" ("Gender and Heroism," 9). Yet I would

urge us to recognize that Judith's ability to assume social roles spanning both ends of the gender continuum holds much potential for revisionist reading in that it highlights the fluidity of that continuum, suggesting that biological gender need not determine the place one occupies within it. Moreover, by depicting the conflict between the demonic and the divine as a battle of the sexes in which God's preferences clearly lie on the side of the female leader and her female-coded community, the poem effectively constructs femininity as coextensive with divine love and martial success.

As the poem progresses, the gender continuum is shown to be even more fluid than it initially appears. If Judith occupies both masculine and feminine roles, so too do the Assyrians. Even as they perform many of the behaviors associated with heroic masculinity, as soon as they are confronted by the loss of their male leader and reduced to a body of headless warriors, they engage in mourning and flight, two behaviors that were undeniably coded as feminine in Anglo-Saxon culture. The feminization of the Assyrians effectively works to suggest that a hypermasculine warrior society that sees no other role for women save that of sexual object is not only a society distanced from God but one whose claims to masculinity are built on very shaky ground.

The Nature of Militancy

To argue that *Judith* is a straightforward celebration of female militancy and an invitation to Anglo-Saxon readers to view traditional gender roles as a set of playful possibilities that might be taken up or discarded at will would be utopian and naïve. Indeed, far from offering unconditional endorsement for the role of female warrior, the poem dramatizes a profound ambivalence about women's place in the traditionally masculine arena of battle. By figuring Judith's martial success as a testament to God's supreme power, the poem contests women's "natural" place in combat. Thus, even as the poem celebrates the female warrior's ability to overcome her natural feminine weakness through the powers of faith, it simultaneously underscores the profound incompatibility of women and war. Female militancy is strongly endorsed by God but that very endorsement serves to suggest that the female warrior is a superhuman phenomenon, made possible only through God's incomprehensible might. Yet if God's endorsement contests women's natural place on the battlefield, it also invites readers to weigh the relative merits of natural versus spiritual gender. The warrior woman may not be a "natural" phenomenon, but she is certainly a spiritual one – a product of God's supreme power and a figure of his love. By creating a fault line between the natural and the spiritual, *Judith* creates a space for readers to consider the possibility that social roles ensuing directly from natural biological states may not in fact accord fully with God's will.

What is perhaps most challenging about *Judith*, however, is that it redefines not only gender but also militancy – by presenting militancy not as a fixed entity but as a fluid and ever shifting set of values. By highlighting spiritual fortitude and personal

control rather than physical strength as the crucial qualities for martial success, the poet reveals that militancy was itself a mode of social inscription, a discursive construct open to change and contestation. If the poem depicts gender and sexual difference as fluid constructs, so too it dramatizes the constellation of behaviors, values, and ideas responsible for producing these phenomena as open to change.

Notes

- 1 I have emended Harmer's "spinlehealfe" to "spinhealfe," following the *Dictionary of Old English Corpus* 2009 release.
- 2 "Bookland" was land that was vested by a "book" or charter. Such lands were exempt from customary fiscal burdens and could be alienated (i.e., disposed of) at will.
- 3 Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Old English are my own.
- 4 The question of precisely which Latin text(s) served as source material for *Judith* is a vexed issue. See Griffith 47–61. In this essay, I have focused mainly on differences between the Vulgate and *Judith*, checking those differences against the Old Latin version of *Judith* contained in *Bibliorum sacrorum Latinae versiones antiquae* (Sabatier I: 746–790). References to the Vulgate are to "Liber *Judith*," in *Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem* (Weber I: 691–711); unless indicated otherwise, translations are from the Douay-Rheims Bible.
- 5 Whether or not *Judith*'s reception of Holofernes' war gear would have signified a transfer of rule for Anglo-Saxon readers is a vexed issue.
- 6 I have here greatly simplified the complex gender dynamics at work in the *Beowulf* poet's treatment of these two female characters. For a fuller discussion, see Klein, *Ruling Women*, 105–111.
- 7 The transvestite saints' lives have generated extensive debate. Viewed generously, these legends endorse both gender fluidity and women's capacity for spiritual success; viewed less generously, they devalue womanhood and reify maleness. More recent studies have begun to consider how these texts may also construct social ideals of masculinity. See Scheil and also Frantzen 72–89.
- 8 "et quod tanta manus non est adgressa virorum,/nocte sub obscura perfecit femina sola"; "femineo mucrone perit dux fortis et audax": Dracontius 3: 486–487, 491.
- 9 David Chamberlain's 1975 "*Judith*: A Fragmentary and Political Poem," was the first reading of *Judith* as a historical-political allegory and prefigures a surge of readings in this same vein.
- 10 Ælfric is not referring here to the Old English verse *Judith* but to his own prose homily on *Judith*, brilliantly explicated by Clayton.
- 11 See Hugh Magennis's classic essay, "No Sex Please, We're Anglo-Saxons?"
- 12 See Kim's valuable reading.
- 13 All citations from *Judith* are by line number and refer to Griffith's edition.
- 14 The anonymous Old English *Judith* does not apply these adjectives to *Judith*; they appear in Ælfric's prose *Judith*. Nevertheless, the anonymous poem makes similar points about *Judith*'s lack of physical strength, describing in detail the two cuts she must make in order to sever Holofernes' head completely and also the difficulties that she encounters in trying to move his unconscious body.
- 15 Relevant discussions are found in Augustine xiv. 15–18; 384–392.

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