



The Conversion of Gendered Rhetoric in the Old English *Judith* poem

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In the Latin *Book of Judith*, the eponymous heroine severs the head of the Assyrian General, Holofernes, inspiring victory in war, and is consequently hailed for “doing manfully” (*tu honorificentia populi nostri, quia fecisti viriliter*); yet, in the Anglo-Saxon *Judith* poem, the extant Old English equivalent (*werlice*) of this gendered Latin phrase does not appear, though it is used in reference to women elsewhere in the Old English corpus. How does the omission of this masculine expression reshape our understanding of Judith’s heroics?

In Anglo-Saxon England (c. 450-1066), a time when Latin biblical verse provided much inspiration for poets and distinctions between biological sex and categories of gender had not been made, an attempt at linguistic fidelity on the part of the poet often undermined the accomplishments of women characters in heroic roles. This paper will analyze the anonymous *Judith* poem from a gendered perspective exploring the manner in which the poet, who is thought to have drawn his inspiration from the Latin *Vulgate*, made linguistic changes that deemphasize the masculine traditions associated with heroism.

Through a textual analysis informed by feminist translation theory (Chamberlain, 1988; Simon, 1996; von Flotow, 2001), this paper will show how the *Judith* poet’s manipulation of specific gendered rhetoric builds the heroine’s agency and identity, transforming the female image of secondariness. I argue that while the Anglo-Saxon *Judith* poet, perhaps sensitive to the implications and difficulties inherent in certain words like *werlice* when applied to women, creates a shift of perspective. This shift is of great significance in that it neutralizes contemporary notions regarding biological sex/gender in the Anglo-Saxon poetic version of the story.

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In Anglo-Saxon England (c. 450-1066 CE), a time when Latin biblical scripture provided much inspiration for poets,¹ and distinctions between biological sex and categories of gender² had not been made, an attempt at linguistic fidelity on the part of the poet could undermine the accomplishments of female literary characters in heroic roles. Perhaps certain Old English poets were sensitive to this linguistic concern. For instance, in the Latin *Book of Judith*, the eponymous Hebrew heroine severs the head of the Assyrian General, Holofernes, and is honored for “doing manfully” (*tu honorificentia populi nostril, quia fecisti viriliter*, 15:10-11),³ yet in the Anglo-Saxon *Judith* poem, inspired by the biblical story, the Old English equivalent of the Latin word “manfully” (*werlic*) does not appear. While it is understood, as Paul De Lacy reminds us, that “there was no real endeavor by the Anglo-Saxon translators to render a Scripture faithfully into their native language; rather, the Old English works are adaptations of the originals” (1996, 393),⁴ this particular change begs the question: How does the omission of this masculine expression (re)shape our understanding of Judith’s heroics?

I suggest that a textual analysis informed by modern feminist translation studies⁵ can assist in the investigation and contribute effectively to on-going discussions regarding the enigmatic aspects of the *Judith* poem: Judith’s morally ambiguous behavior in direct conflict with her goodness. Feminist translation, an inclusive term that covers studies of how gender has been translated in already published works, recognizes that gender in literature is a legitimate concern. Without the tools of this interpretive theory, audiences are at risk of overlooking gendered aspects of a text or oversimplifying ambiguities (Eschelmann 2007, 16); for example, considering the *Judith* poet’s Christian agenda without considering the Germanic, male-dominated, heroic tradition. Similarly, since the poet directly engages with issues of gender, as evidenced in the above linguistic example or in “his”⁶ tendency to consistently remind readers that Judith is a “woman” (maiden, *mægð*, 35a; woman, *meowle*, 56b; lady, *ides*, 340b brave lady, *ellenrof*, 146a),⁷ it is important that readers carefully note and consider the (un)gendering of his words, as the linguistic choices made by translators reveal much about attitudes regarding the cultural meaning of gender/sex of the time. By considering gender, this essay engages with an important feature of Old English

¹ The Old Testament was the primary source of inspiration of Anglo-Saxon literary production, comprising approximately one third of the extant Old English poetic corpus.

² Separation of sexual identity from social identity continues to be a central theme in women’s studies. Stacy S. Klein provides a helpful contrast: “The concept of gender as a cultural interpretation of sexed bodies, and sex, as a system of classification grounded in physiological differences between men and women” (2012). See also Butler 1990.

³ The *Vulgate* is the Latin source used in this essay. All Latin and modern English translations of the *Book of Judith* are from this source, edited by Swift 2011.

⁴ Others tend to agree: Zacher 2013, 34; Renoir 1962, 146; and Magennis 1995, 61, who refers to the trend as a “free reworking of the original.”

⁵ Feminist Translation Theory gained popularity in the 1970s-80s largely through the works of Canadian translators, such as Barbara Godard and Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood, and as a result of two significant works on the subject: Sherry Simon (*Gender In Translation: Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission*, 1996) and Luise von Flotow (*Translation and Gender*, 1997). “It initially was developed as “a method of translating the focus on and critique of ‘patriarchal language’ by feminist writers in Quebec” (von Flotow 1991, 72).

⁶ “The scholarly community assumes, with good reason, that the authors of the anonymous Old English and Anglo-Latin texts are male” (Dockray-Miller 2008, 10).

⁷ All modern English translations of the Old English *Judith* are those of Stephen O. Glosecki, in R. M. Liuzza 2014, 229-242. The Old English *Judith* version used is located in vol. 4 of *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, ed. 1953.

poetry, the “free reworking,” to borrow a phrase from Hugh Magennis, of the gendered rhetoric present in Old Testament narrative.

This essay examines how the *Judith* poet, perhaps sensitive to the implications and difficulties inherent in certain words like *werlice* when applied to women, facilitates a shift of perspective with his version of Judith’s story. I argue that the poet’s “conversion” of specific gendered rhetoric serves to build the heroine’s agency and identity. This shift is of great significance in that it neutralizes contemporary notions regarding sex and femaleness, converting the female image of “secondariness.”

Judith’s story is one of self-sacrifice: when her community does not rally to protect themselves from Assyrian military aggression, a Hebrew widow from Bethulia places herself in harm’s way by devising and executing a plan to protect herself and liberate her village currently under siege. Described as a holy and virtuous woman, Judith removes her widow garb, dresses up, and seduces her way into enemy camp. During a banquet, after the lusty and evil leader of the enemy army, Holofernes, gets inebriated and passes out in his tent, Judith decapitates him with his own sword and carries his head back to her village as a means of motivating the starving weakened population to war. Is she a premeditated killer or a pious woman without alternatives? This is one question that has drawn so many to her character.

Judith appears three times in the Old English corpus, as the fearless heroine of the anonymous poem under discussion here, as the subject of a homily stressing cleanliness and chastity written by a tenth-century abbot, Ælfric (955-1010 CE), and also in his letter to a nobleman called Sigeweard, where the heroine is touted for her military prowess and ingenuity.⁸ However, her reputation precedes her: Judith’s story originates in the Hebrew Bible – as well as in a variety of commentaries and explications of the biblical text – centuries before she appears in Anglo-Saxon England. One of the earliest known references is located in The First Epistle of Clement of Rome to the Corinthians, where she is noted for heroics undertaken “by the hand of a woman” (Clement, LV. I-LVI. I.).⁹ Because of Judith’s long written and oral history, contemporary audiences would likely have been familiar with her story before the poet wrote his Old English account.¹⁰

⁸ Ælfric of Eynsham, prolific writer in Old English of hagiography, homilies, biblical commentaries, and other genres, delivered his *Homily on Judith* to a group of nuns at Barking monastery in the late tenth-century. See S. D. Lee, 1999. It is extant in two fragmented manuscripts: Corpus Christi College Cambridge MS 303, and in the British Library MS Cotton Otho B.x, which came from the Cotton Library. The letter, also known as the “Treatise on the Old and New Testament,” is considered the earliest extended discussion of the Bible as a whole. See Magennis 2005.

⁹ The unknown author of the written biblical account is believed, by Carey Moore, to have been a Palestinian Jew writing around 135-104 B.C.E. who traces the tale itself to the Hasmonean period at the end of the reign of John Hyrcanus or the beginning of the reign of Alexander Jannaeus. See Moore 1985, 67. For a summary of various points of view, see Bruns 1967, 44-5.

Most patristic commentaries treat the *Book of Judith* as a spiritual allegory where her piety is emphasized: as a figure for Chastity (Jerome, Aldhelm, Ælfric), Humility (Fulgentius), or the Church (Isidore of Seville, Prudentius, Hrabanus Maurus).

¹⁰ In 1998, Griffith published a detailed comparison of the *Judith* poem with the *Vulgate* version, which, in addition to the omission of a large portion of the storyline, revealed a reduction in the number of characters and less speeches. He suggests that because of the extensive modification of the biblical text, the poet may not have worked from written sources basing his account on what he may have heard in church (1998).

The Anglo-Saxon poet's main source is believed to be some version of the biblical *Liber Judith*, most likely Jerome's Latin *Vulgate* or the *Vetus Latina*,¹¹ or some combination thereof. As we have it, the Old English *Judith* exists as the last of five texts bound into the famed *Beowulf* Manuscript, or Nowell Codex.¹² With questions still unresolved regarding the completeness of the poem, scholarship has placed heavy attention on the language used by the poet to look for answers. The conflicting perspectives are twofold: either the poem is complete as it is and the poet deliberately downplayed Judith's striking behavior, or it is a fragment of the original and how much is missing remains a mystery.¹³ In latter discussions, there has been some attention given to Holofernes' licentiousness which has led to the speculation of a missing seduction scene. However, to date, no textual evidence has been produced to prove either point of view.

Yet, it is worth considering that it is the ambiguities and narrative gaps found in *Judith* that call for a feminist translation reading of the poem, as well as other Old English texts where women appear, ones that rely on the enterprise of female characters. In his version, the *Judith* poet reframes certain traditional qualities of the female biblical heroine, problematizing conventional views of women in Old English poetry and maybe in society. Like many heroic women of the Bible, Judith relies on her wit, guile, and determination, all metaphorical "weapons" of the defenceless and powerless woman to achieve liberation. These traditional weapons of "women's warfare" may not appear exceptional; however, they act in direct conflict with established male authority. In addition to metaphorical weapons, biblical heroines tend to fit a paradigm, typically depicted as charming, beautiful, users of men, tricksters, doing man's work, and as morally ambiguous.¹⁴ Judith, who also physically and aggressively engages her male enemy, fits neatly into most categories of this model; however, we shall see how the model is disrupted in the Old English version. Feminist translation theory, according to Luis von Flotow, is less concerned with the final product and its fidelity than with the processes of reading and rereading (1997). Thus, another close reading of specific gendered terms associated with Judith has the potential to influence the conventional model of contemporary female heroism and, therefore, the male/female dichotomy. It is this process, then, that may help us to see women in history more clearly.

¹¹ Various translations of the Bible circulated in late antiquity. The earliest of these translations are collectively known as the *Vetus Latina*, or "Old Latin." In the fourth-century Jerome retranslated the Hebrew and Greek texts into the vernacular Latin of the day creating a "common version" (*Vulgate*), which gradually replaced most of the older Latin texts. See Lampe, 1994.

¹² Nowell Codex. Cotton Vitellius A. xv. London: British Library. It should be noted that the dating of Old English texts is speculative and based on educated assumptions regarding dialect, grammar, contentual markers, etc. Generally, it is believed that Old English works date from about the mid seventh-century to the Norman Conquest of 1066. Because of the *Judith* poem's unusual meter, it is thought to have been composed and written down in the late Anglo-Saxon period. See R. M. Liuzza 2014, 229 and Neil Ripley Ker 1957, 281.

¹³ There is good reason to question how much of the original poem is missing, if any. Because the extant text is written in three consecutive numbered sections (X, XI, XII), it seems reasonable to speculate that initial sections I through IX may be missing. Additionally, the first line of the poem begins mid-sentence. It has also been a contention that the last six lines of the poem were added at a later date, perhaps by an early modern hand.

¹⁴ For a more complete list of heroic females and their deeds in biblical scripture, and further discussion, see Collins, 2012.

Interpretations of the Old English *Judith* are generous and complex. In addition to her “manly” performance, she has been read as “seductress” (Cooper 2010, 170), “female warrior” (Klein 2012, 40, 42), “warrior of Christ” (Timmer 1966, 7), “femme fatale,” “gorgeous gorgon,” and a “good bad woman” (Margarita Stoker 1998, 24). As a consequence, Judith remains a temptress who uses feminine charms to overcome the enemy, as well as a chaste widow acting as a “fighting saint.”¹⁵ To show how the poet impacts this imagery, I focus on three recurring aspects that are historically and inextricably linked with women in literature, especially heroic women in biblical narratives: beauty, brightness, and manliness. I start with beauty.

“Beauty”

For decades, *Judith* scholarship has placed “beauty” on the traditional list of “women’s weapons” mentioned above. As Stacy S. Klein asserts, “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” (2012, 47). Female beauty in heroic poetry and hagiography is often portrayed as the destructive force that leads to the downfall of a warrior. What follows is a discussion of how the poet converts Judith’s physical beauty, often perceived as a negative quality when closely associated with women, to luminosity, a more positive, gender-neutral feature.

Unlike other metaphorical armaments, beauty, in particular, makes a curious weapon in that it can only destroy if someone is responsive to it. In both the biblical and Old English versions of the story, Holofernes is drawn to Judith. In the *Vulgate*, it is clear that beauty plays a major role in his initial attraction. When she first encounters Holofernes he is “caught by his eyes” (*Captus est in suis oculis Holofernis*, 10:17), one of his officers stating “Who can despise the people of the Hebrews who have such beautiful women” (*Quis contemnat populum Hebraeorum qui tam decoras mulieres*, 10:18). The language of beauty is prevalent throughout the text: men find Judith “incomparably lovely” (*incomparabili decore omnium oculis*, 10:4), “admire her beauty” (*mirati sunt nimis pulchritudinem*, 10:7), and “wonder exceedingly at her beauty” (*quoniam mirabantur pulchritudinem eius nimis*, 10:14). Holofernes publicly declares that there is “not such another woman upon earth in look and beauty” (*Non est talis mulier super terram in aspect, in pulchritudine*, 11:19). Moreover, in Chapter 16, known as the canticle of Judith, we are told that Judith “weakened him with the beauty of her face” (*in specie faciei suae dissolvit eum*, 16:8). Holofernes, then, weakened and defenseless like the Bethulians, is completely under her beautiful spell. By contrast, I would argue, in the Anglo-Saxon poem the initial reason for Holofernes’ attraction to Judith is obscured.

The poem begins when Judith is brought to the rowdy banquet given by Holofernes on the fourth day of her stay in the Assyrian camp (chapter 12 in the *Vulgate*). All we can discern from the depiction is that Judith is present, somewhere near, and Holofernes is “sunk in wine joy” (*goldwine gumena*, 22a) and “drunk as death” (*deade geslegene*, 31b). Soon, Holofernes gives orders that Judith be “fetched and brought to his bedstead” (*ofstum fetigan to his bedreste*, 35b-36a). It can be inferred from Holofernes’ request that his intentions are to have sex with her, yet, there is no textual

¹⁵ B.J. Timmer observes Judith performing the deeds of “a fighting saint” (*miles Christi*; warrior of Christ) and refers to her as “a religious heroine” (1966, 7).

evidence to suggest that his attraction to Judith is due to her physical beauty: the poet provides no definitive clues as to why Holofernes selects Judith as a bedmate. Could she have been the only woman in attendance? We know of no other but her slave. The poet does tell us that Judith is well ornamented “circlets rich all ring-adorned” (*beagum gehlæste hringum gehrodene*, 33b-34c), perhaps implying she was dressed to attract attention, still, there is no perceptible language to warrant further inference.

One potential exception may be identified in line 14, where the poet employs the adjective *ælfscinu* (*ides ælfscinu* (14a) in reference to Judith. Bosworth and Toller translate this term as “shining like an elf or fairy, elfin-bright, or elfin beauty.” Liuzza translates it as “elf-lovely” (15a), noting that the word appears in one other Old English text where it is used in reference to Sarah, a woman of high rank and dangerous beauty, in *Genesis A* (Liuzza 2014, 232). Aaron K. Hostetter translates the word as “elf-brilliant” (Rutger’s on-line). The Dictionary of Old English (on-line, University of Toronto) translates it as “radiant or fair as an elf, beautiful; has also been understood as delusive as an elf (taking *scyne* as flickering) or divinely inspired.” Given that the poet uses no other terminology in an attempt to specifically affirm Judith’s beauty, and, therefore, as an instrument of warfare, I am inclined to agree with the latter translation. The poet’s application of a term meaning “divinely inspired,” seems more in line with the poet’s overall treatment of Judith; that is, as the “Shaper’s handmaid” (*scypendes mægð*, 82a), not necessarily a beautiful seductress.

“Brightness”

While it is true that gender plays a role that leads to Holofernes’ destruction, the poet downplays the female “seductive force” of beauty neutralizing it with adjectives indicative of a bright and shiny aura: she is “radiant” (*torht*, 43a), “bright” (*beorht*, 58b, 254b, 340b), “fair-faced” or “shining-cheek” (*blachleor*, 128a). Naturally associated with substances or objects like the sun and fire, bright light is also linked with Christianity and those “touched” by God and the Holy Spirit: “Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God” (Exodus 34:29). The contrast of light and darkness between metaphysical good and evil is common in both the Old and New Testaments. Light signifies God’s presence and favor: God made light (Genesis 1:3-4), God is light, and light also symbolizes God. Clarification is found in 1 John 1:5: “God is light and in him is no darkness at all” (RSV). Elsewhere in biblical narrative light is a metaphorical image of divine glory: “His brightness was like the light” (Habakkuk 3:4) and “the light dwells with Him” (Daniel 2:22), and so on. Objects associated with God also take on a fine sheen: Ezekiel’s vision of the divine chariot is a riot of brightness, flashing fire, shining jewels and gleaming metals, a description suggestive of the shimmering “ornaments” worn by Judith: she is “laden with bracelets” (*beagum gehlæste*: 36b), “covered with rings” (*hringum hehrodene*, 37a), and “adorned with gold” (*golde gefræterwod*, 171b).

Like Moses, Judith’s radiance is a symbol of her goodness and relationship with God. Her brightness is further intensified when compared with the rhetoric representing the evil Holofernes who is “lost in darkness” (*æfter hinside*, 117a). The heroine is described in glowing terms (*torht*, *beorht*, *blachleor*, *ælfscinu*). “Intensely with heart inflamed” (*pearle ys me nu ða heorte onhated*, 87a), Judith must travel into darkness to complete her task: Holofernes kept drinking until the “dark of night” (*nealæhte niht seo þystre*, 34a), when she severs his head sending him to “that darkest home” (*heolstran ham*, 121a) where he dwells forever.

Judith's glistening presence calls to mind images of spiritual ecstasy found in biblical stories of conversion and in Roman art. In the monotheistic tradition, Robert R. Wilson explains, that "in ecstasy the prophet becomes dissociated from his normal state and enters some sort of supra-normal relationship with God" (1979, 324); a process by which communication between the human and divine takes place. Early in the poem, Judith directly communicates with God through prayer: Judith prays: "inflare my heart!" (*hate on hreðre minum*, 94a); that is, with the fire of the Holy Spirit, so that she might "cleave the murder monger!" (*gehearwan þysne morðres bryttan*, 90a) and "promptly the Lord filled her with strength and zeal" (*þe hyne him to helpe secæð mid ræde ond mid rihte geleafan*, 96b-97a). To confirm for us her oneness with God, her sanctified status, the poet employs adjectives such as "holy" (*halig*, 56b, 260a) and "blessed" (*eadigan*, 35a), and refers to her as "God's handmaid" (*metode meowlan*, 261a). Hence, Judith's special, "supra-normal," relationship with God is indisputable.

The early Church Fathers spoke of spiritual ecstasy in association with conversion. Colleen Shantz's study of St. Paul's experience on the road to Damascus, points to the "details of light as a known component of religious ecstasy" (2009, 126). Act 9:3 describes Paul enveloped by a "heavenly light" (CCD).¹⁶ Given Judith's luminescence and her communion with God, it seems reasonable to speculate on Holofernes' attraction to Judith: perhaps one conclusion rests with the inability to turn away from a vision of God. This would confirm Judith's most formidable weapon as one of divine power, rather than earthly beauty. I might also suggest that the image of an ecstatic experience could help believers comprehend a single woman's slaughter of a highly skilled and experienced warrior general surrounded by an army. Moreover, it speaks to how we are able to reconcile her sin of murder and her good nature.

"Manliness"

Linguistic archetypes of the "manly" woman can be identified throughout the literary history of female warriors such as the Amazons of antiquity whose description in Old English appears in Orosius (I.x.29.14ff).¹⁷ Virgil's Camilla and Tacitus' account of the Celtic queen Boudica (c. 30–61 CE)¹⁸ can be viewed as reimagined examples of this literary construct. Virgil tells us that Camilla is "fearless on foot and armed like [a man] with a naked sword" (IX.839). Jóhanna Katrín Friðprikisdóttir describes the warrior woman and Swedish princess who prefers to be called *þornbjörg* (a masculine name) of the thirteenth-century *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* ("The Saga of Hrolf

¹⁶ The Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD), sometimes referred to as the "Douay-Confraternity Bible," owns the copyright on the *New American Bible, revised edition* translation.

¹⁷ Paulus Orosius (ca. 375–418 CE), student of Augustine of Hippo, was a Chalcedonian priest, historian, and theologian, wrote three books in his lifetime, the most important of which is considered the *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans (Historiarum Adversum Paganos Libri VII)*, which is a historical narration focusing on the pagan peoples from the earliest time up until Orosius' lifetime. King Alfred the Great (894–899 CE) produced an Old English version of the text. See Batley, 1980.

¹⁸ Boudica was married to Prasutagus, ruler of the Iceni tribe of East Anglia. As an independent ally of Rome, upon his death he left his kingdom jointly to his daughters and the Roman emperor who ignored his wishes and annexed the kingdom. During a show of force, Boudica is flogged and her daughters are raped. In retaliation, Boudica led a major rebellion that is rumored to have led to the deaths of an estimated seventy thousand Romans. She disappears from history shortly thereafter. Tacitus wrote of Boudica's vengeance. (Church and Brodribb 2009, 14.31, 35, 37).

Gautreksson”), who is proficient in military combat as well as domestic skills (2010).¹⁹ The inspiration for her character has been traced to “early Germanic peoples on the continent as well as to their Nordic relatives whose poetry and mythology presents divine female figures and identifies four images of human women: the warrior, the prophetess/sorceress, the revenger, and the inciter” (Jochens 1996, 3). Some of the notable attributes of these character types – independent, athletic, self-sufficient, and battle-skilled, adjectives traditionally ascribed to male heroes – can indeed be located in Judith. As a model of strength in the Anglo-Saxon world, Judith, is not a “manly” figure; rather she is afforded certain qualities of a heroic ideal, like Camilla and Boudica, which can mask her femininity but not change her biological sex.

Certain virgin saints too have been viewed as “manly.” Scholars have argued the “manliness” of a handful of literary females based on the comments of patristic and ecclesiastical authors, such as Ælfric, who is noted for writing: “If a woman is manly by nature and strong to God’s will, she will be counted among the men who sit at the table of God” (Clemoes 1997, 279).²⁰ Roy Gopa writes about the gendered traits of the protagonist in both Ælfric’s Anglo-Saxon *Life of St. Eugenia* as well as the Latin versions of her story. In the narrative, Eugenia assumes a masculine disguise in an effort to protect her chastity (an act that is not uncommon in the genre of saints’ lives).²¹ In the Latin *Eugenia*, the word *viriliter* is employed and is often translated into modern English as “manfully.”²² However, here the term is used metaphorically in the sense of “courageously,” not implying “manliness” (Gopa 1992, 5). As noted earlier in this essay, the *Book of Judith* also contains the word *viriliter*, which in some translated versions gets assigned the word “manfully. In the Old English poem, however, Judith is called brave and courageous several times, but never “manly.” Gopa also observes that in Ecclesiasticus the word *vir* is applied to both males and females who are “strong and discerning” (1992, 5).

Anglo-Saxon poets manipulate literary conceptions of female virtue and vice by reworking their biblical texts. While female characters pictured in these earlier works are largely founded on misogynistic views of women, as the originators and cause of all human sin, or “manly” views of women, the Old English *Judith* poet deliberately looks for ways to address and redefine Judith’s heroism. Chapter 15 of the *Vulgate* not only tells us that Judith “has done manfully” (*quia fecisti viriliter*, 15:11) but that Holofernes was slain “by the hand of a woman” (*per manum feminae*, 13:19), both loaded phrases that speak to certain acts of female heroism as the exception rather than the norm. As we have seen, however, the poet liberates Judith from this type of charged gendered rhetoric. The Old English *Judith* clearly remains a woman (*mægð*, *meowle*, *ides*), but the traditional, less desirable traits of her woman-ness are “translated” or “converted” to the more neutral vocabulary of heroics, which serves to elevate Judith

¹⁹ In the shorter version of the story, she is called Princess *þorbjörg* (Thorbjorg) which is not a masculine name.

²⁰ *Deah gif wifmann bið werlice geworht, and strang to Godes willan, heo bið þonne geteald to ðam werum þe at Godes mysan sittað* (ll.115-117).

²¹ For examples see Kitchen 1998; Brown 1988; and Schulenberg 1998.

²² Cassell’s Latin Dictionary, 5th ed., translates the adverb *viriliter* (*viriliter*, *virilius*, *virilissime*): “manfully, courageously, vigorously: Cic., Ov.”

from merely a female heroine to part of an emerging national identity, characterized by Christianity.²³

Anglo-Saxon poets saw Old Testament verse as an “influential basis for literary expression of nation building and self-identification” (Zacher 2013, 5). In the heroic literary tradition, men wield weaponry on the battlefield as a way of building self-worth and a reputation. It is during war that the hero demonstrates fealty to community and kingdom and earns legendary status. Anglo-Saxon men fight so poets will celebrate their exploits ensuring their eternal glory. Women, too, participate in the heroic tradition in a sort of “feminized” version of the custom, finding glory through a trove of metaphorical weapons – beauty, sexuality, wisdom, cunning.²⁴ However, by extensively curbing the language of Judith’s loveliness and sensuality, the poet places greater stress on her qualities accepted by contemporary audiences as heroic action – bravery, resolve, loyalty – not heroic action as performed by a woman or a man, but valiant behavior admired of both sexes in the secular and Christian worlds. Thus, in certain ways, the *Judith* poet’s intentional departure from literary conventions serves as an important mechanism for the cultural, political, and religious prefiguring of the present and future. The implication is that a new heroic ethos materializes, represented by Christianity and also by women.

“Conversion”

Feminist literary theory works to identify the sexism of a text in an effort to liberate women from the implied misogyny within the text and later by translators/interpreters that, whether inadvertently or purposefully, reproduce those prejudices. Translators, as Sherry Simon explains, “can [also] use language as cultural intervention, as part of an effort to alter expressions of domination, whether at the level of concepts, of syntax or of terminology” (1996, 8). Through a feminist translation reading of *Judith*, it has been established that the Old English poet “altered” certain gendered expressions associated with heroic women appearing in Latin and Anglo-Saxon texts. Thus far, I have used a variety of terms in an effort to accurately capture this activity – translation, adaptation, reworking, interpretation, conversion – in an effort to more effectively describe the process of “recasting,” to borrow a term from Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, the original text (2001, 17). Jacques Derrida, a major influence on the field of Translation Studies and translation theory in the twentieth-century, wrote about the term “translation,” defining it as the process by which a thing (i.e., meaning) is moved from one context to another without being changed, and argued for the term “conversion” as the process by which one thing is changed into another. In certain contexts, in the English language and perhaps in Latin, translation and conversion can be considered synonymous. Derrida writes that “all translation is a conversion: *vertere, transvertere, convertere*, as Cicero said” (2001, 184).²⁵ Because Anglo-

²³ In her 2004 essay, Janet Thormann argues that “representations of Jews and Judaism in Old English narrative poetry promoted the formation of an Anglo-Saxon national cultural identity” and points to other scholars who share her viewpoint (Niles 1993; O’Keefe 1990; Richardson 1999).

²⁴ Typically females were honored for attributes like wise counsel, bravery, and giving out treasure to loyal subjects, as opposed to physical strength during battle which is a key feature of male heroism for Anglo-Saxon poets. For example, in the *Beowulf* epic, Hrothgar’s wife, Wealhtheow, is remembered for giving Beowulf a neck-ring for his bravery (Dobbie 1953, 1215a-1216b), and Widsith honors Queen Ealhild in his poem (also known as *Widsith*) for passing out treasure; after Eormanric gives the poet a ring, she bestows upon him another (Krapp and Dobbie 1966, 88–98).

²⁵ For an interesting discussion of Derrida’s lecture, see Herzog 2014.

Saxon England was a time and place in history that was in the midst of transformation, when the Church was actively converting pagans, Derrida's term seems especially appealing.

Relating the image of religious conversion to both the *Judith* text and Judith the literary figure, marking Latin versions of Judith as the originals and "more gender-biased," and the Old English poem Christian and "less gender-biased,"²⁶ I offer the following brief examples to demonstrate some of the ways in which the poet converts Judith's ambiguous nature to that of faith and belief, core essentials of Christianity, which serves to build her agency in support of the new heroic ethos.

First, the text itself undergoes a conversion, from biblical Hebrew text(s) to a Christian text. As Zacher points out, "the poet systematically downplays the role of specific Jewish rituals and practices" (2013, 126).²⁷ For example, the poet replaces the name of the city and pilgrimage site of Jerusalem with the name Bethulia, calling it "their shining city" (*ðære beorhtan byrig*, 100:326a).²⁸

Second, the character of Judith makes a spiritual conversion from Judaism to Christianity. Her new chosen doctrine is expressly apparent when she declares her devotion to the "son of the Almighty" (*bearn alwaldan*, 84a), which is totally opposed to the theology of Judaism. Like Achior in the biblical story, who converts from paganism to Judaism,²⁹ Judith submits to the power of God and longs for her reward in heaven.

Third, Judith's act of murder, a so-labelled "manly" act, is converted to one of mercy. The people of Bethulia are ultimately saved by Judith's questionable behavior, the plotting against and slaying of Holofernes. For the Old English poet, as De Lacy notes, "the important thing is not the physical acts, but the mental state of having faith in God" (1996, 397). Judith states that "God in his might through this hand of mine" (*míhtig dryhten þurh mine hand*, 198a) murdered Holofernes. Therefore, Judith is carrying out God's will. This is telling. Although Judith appears the initiator of the exploit, praying and calling upon God for the potency and will to commit murder, we later find God is pleased and rewards her for the successful completion of the task and for her part in rallying the Hebrews to war and ultimate victory ("In the end there would be no doubt about the reward she's cherished so long"; *heohte soðne geleafan a to ðam ælmygtigan*, 344b-345a). Thus, it seems that it was not only Judith's plan to destroy the Assyrians and liberate the Bethulians but God's, whose recognition and appreciation of Judith serves to shift the onus and gravity of the "act" from Judith to Him, which under no condition can be fallible. Judith is therefore neither a murderous female, nor are her actions "manly," as God's messenger, Judith performs a selfless act to save others.

²⁶ I thank Lori Chamberlain ("Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation," 1988) for the phraseology.

²⁷ See also De Lacy (1996) for elaboration.

²⁸ See Marcus Jastrow and Frants Buhl's entry in the 1906 Jewish Encyclopedia: "The name 'Bethulia' is presumed allegorical, meaning perhaps 'Beth-el' (house of God), or it may be a word compounded of 'betulah' and 'Ja'" ("Yhwh's virgin"). Bethulia is, moreover, spoken of in a way to distinguish it decidedly from Jerusalem." *Jewish Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Bethulia," (JewishEncyclopedia.com, 2002-2011.)

²⁹ An Ammonite chief captain, who after giving a favorable report on the Israelites to Holofernes, was left bound in Israelite territory. When Judith later shows Achior the severed head of Holofernes, he "leaves the religion of the Gentiles he believed God and circumcised the flesh of his foreskin and was jointed to the people of Israel with all the succession of his kindred until this present day" (*Judith* 14:6-10).

Fourth, as Old English Old Testament poetry was largely created for didactic and spiritual purposes, the *Judith* text, then, may have served as a means of conversion for audiences of the Anglo-Saxon world. As mentioned above, the poem appears when the Church was still energetically converting pagans in Britain. Thus, poets likely understood the power of their work on Christianizing efforts. Of great importance is that men and women both were actively and equally welcomed to the new faith.³⁰ Women have also historically played a role in converting early pagans in Britain.³¹ Moreover, let us also remember the women in Anglo-Saxon audiences. Armed with a new, more gender-neutral image, the Old English *Judith* would have made a proper and powerful role model.

A final word on Judith's power. The extent to which Judith's influence moves outside of the Anglo-Saxon text is unknown. To be sure, the poet's vision of female behavior and what constitutes heroism cannot be read as a reflection of Anglo-Saxon society. As Stacy S. Klein observes, "Both hagiographic narratives and heroic poems are comprised of characters who do not encode the complexities of Anglo-Saxon people or their lives but rather the most entrenched stereotypes and social values. These texts were designed to convey spiritual, rather than literal truths, heroic ideals rather than realistic experiences, and they were probably meant to foster fervent inspiration rather than direct emulation." (2005, 162). The authority and lasting power of such texts has yet to be determined.

The *Judith* poem is clearly a "conversion," not an Old English "translation." Gendered aspects discussed in this essay are not the only gendered perceptions the poet removes from the text: matters of marriage, reproduction, children, caring for the home, all personal female issues, are also missing. Judith, therefore, is valorized not for her femaleness but rather for her actions on behalf of the community, a trope belonging to stories of national heroism. Judith's narrative exemplifies sacrifice and the power of one, a mere woman who overcomes a far superior enemy, not by fighting "like a woman," but by bravery and a willingness to step out of the crowd.

The significance of *Judith*/Judith's conversion warrants further consideration. The poet's attention to gender speaks to his role in the evolution of woman's place in literature and reminds us that, through these efforts, women had a positive impact on the great epic story of the Anglo-Saxons. *Judith*, as hero, assists in creating a new identity and belief about who and what Anglo-Saxons are.

As our feminist translation reading has shown, the neutralization of contemporary notions regarding sex and gender in the Old English *Judith* transforms the Anglo-Saxon female image of "secondariness" and helps us locate a female heroic that deeply enriches our appreciation of historical narratives. Examining the gendered rhetoric associated with Judith through this lens frees our interpretation from the ideological notions of what the text claims as woman-ness. It gives Judith a new identity, audiences a fresh vision of heroism, and another method for reading women's narratives together.

³⁰ "From the time that Christianity came to England men and women shared equally, not only in conversion to the new faith, but in the learning that accompanied it" (Fell 1984, 109).

³¹ In 595 C.E., when Pope Gregory I decided to send a mission to Britain to convert the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity, the Kingdom of Kent was ruled by the pagan, King Æthelberht, who marries a Christian princess, Bertha. One of Bertha's biographers states that Æthelberht, influenced by his wife, requested the Pope send missionaries (Stenton 1971).

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