

JUDITH: A RHETORIC OF HYBRIDITY

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ABSTRACT and INTRODUCTION

Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity allows the complicated figure of Judith to inhabit a third space, separate from but containing both Christian and Germanic values and feminine and masculine attributes that have previously been used to categorize her. A study of the adjectives used to describe the heroine highlights the poet's depiction of her as both a woman of God and a brave heroine who possesses "elfin" beauty. The presence of Germanic belief within the dominant Christian discourse (charms, medicinal recipes) prompts a reversal of authority which allows Judith a position of power through her status as a Christian virgin and her actions which follow the Germanic heroic tradition. Bhabha's theory recognizes the merger of these two seemingly contradictory identities within the character of Judith, thus emphasizing the ideological hybridity of the Anglo-Saxon community. Moreover, this poetic dualism which depicts the importance of killing the infidel in the name of God may have been an important precursor to the Crusade rhetoric of the late eleventh century, a mere century after the composition of this late tenth-century poem.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Before I define hybridity, I would like to begin this study of *Judith* with some historical background on postcolonial theory and its applicability to Anglo-Saxon England. Postcolonial theory grew out of the impact that imperial Europe had on colonized lands in the Americas, Africa and Asia. It "seeks to understand the operations – politically, socially, culturally, and psychologically – of colonialist and anti-colonialist ideologies" (Tyson 365). Although by the nineteenth century England was an imperial state, in the tenth century, when *Judith* was written,¹ it in many ways fit the definition of post-colonial. At that time, England, not yet a nation, experienced a shift from Roman rule to Germanic rule. A brief history of the emergence of Christianity in England helps to highlight this shift.

The Roman Empire, of course, was an imperialist power dominating just about all of western Europe, including the island of what is now England, Scotland, and Wales. When Constantine, the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity did so in 312, the Christian Church gained imperial support, thus promoting the spread of Christianity to the empire's vast dominions (Hollister 22-23). Even after the fall of the empire in the early fifth century, the powerful Church headed by the Pope in Rome continued to evangelize surrounding territories. Pope Gregory the Great began the mission to Christianize England in 597 by sending the first Christian missionaries to Britain; this resulted in a successful conversion and establishment of several dioceses (Hollister 78). By the late tenth century, when *Judith* was written, "the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms...became one of Europe's most vigorous Christian societies" (Hollister 79). Although by this time the practice of Christianity was centuries old, it was not the only ideological discourse within Anglo-Saxon society. The movement of Germanic peoples into Anglo-Saxon territory created a pagan Germanic ideological influence which is obvious in the heroic warrior identity of Judith. Tenth-century Anglo-Saxon society evinces mixed beliefs; even with strong Christian doctrine from the East and Rome, the immediate presence of Germanic, pagan peoples still permeated the Anglo-Saxon mindset. Such multiplicity appeared in the presence and widespread belief in "black magic" throughout the society. Anglo-Saxons retained faith in two seemingly contradictory systems of belief. As Clare Lees has remarked, "Charms, medicinal recipes, poetry, and other material artifacts... offer evidence for a more culturally diverse world of belief than the Christian homilies" (246).

JUDITH AS HYBRID

This diverse situation is an ideal test-case for the theory of hybridity. As Homi Bhabha explains: “This partializing process of hybridity is best described as a metonymy of presence...the existence of two contradictory knowledges (multiple beliefs) splits the ego (or the discourse) into two psychical attitudes, and forms of knowledge, towards the external world” (115). While we may consider Christianity the dominant discourse in Anglo-Saxon England, the Germanic native influences “enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority” (Bhabha 114). Bhabha permits the figure of Judith to be analyzed so that her multiplicity becomes not a disjunctive theme in the text, but a unifying one. Hybridity explains the existence of Judith as both Germanic and Christian, both masculine and feminine.

In contrast to the analyses of other critics, Bhabha’s hybridity reconciles the seemingly incompatible roles performed by Judith. Hugh Magennis states that, “In my view...Judith...is essentially a Germanic noblewoman rather than a Christian virgin martyr” who “we are not encouraged to see...as a virgin” (10-11). Ann Astell claims that Judith and Holofernes are “agents of God and Satan” that exist in the poem in “an ethically unambiguous context” (131). Such divergent arguments suggest that the figure of Judith is not cut-and-dry; she is neither fully Germanic or Christian, and the context of the poem is certainly not “unambiguous.” The possibility of a hybrid identity eliminates the need to categorize Judith’s identity. A closer analysis of both her Germanic and Christian attributes will aid in this assessment.

The text of the poem contains significant evidence which points to Judith’s association with the Germanic warrior identity. She “performs the archetypal heroic act of venturing alone into the lair of the monster and there destroying it” (Magennis 5) when Judith enters Holofernes’ chamber to kill him with her own hands. This poetic scene is taken directly from the Old Testament story, as the lopping off of Holofernes’ head is done with two strokes: “And she smote twice upon his neck with all her might, and she took away his head from him.”² The Old English word “sloh” is used in the manuscript to describe Judith’s action as she beheads Holofernes, and this word can mean to *kill, strike, slay*, or the more popularly used heroic verb, *smite*.³ The word’s connotation suggests the strength and bravery commonly associated with the warrior. Also, after slaying Holofernes, Judith and her handmaiden carry the bloody head back with them into the city of Bethulia. This gruesome gesture comes from Germanic custom, as Judith wishes to display proof of her gory victory to the people, proof that she had succeeded as a warrior defending herself and the people of the city.

Moreover, Judith acts the part of a heroic leader when she summons her people and entreats them to battle the army of Holofernes: “biddan wylle/randwiggendra, þæt ge recene eow/fysan to gefeohte” (lines 187b-189a):⁴ [I ask and desire that you all, armed with shields, hasten to the fight].⁵ She also behaves as a war hero when she receives war-spoils from the soldiers of Bethulia after their victory against Holofernes’ army:

Hi to mede hyre
of ðam siðfate sylfre brohton,
eorlas æscrofe, Holofernes
sweord ond swatigne helm, swylce eac side byrnan
gerenode readum golde; ond eal þæt se rinca baldor
swiðmod sincea ahte oððe sundoryfes,
beaga ond beorhtra maðma, hi þæt þære beorhtan idese
ageafon gearoþoncolre (lines 334b-341a).

[To reward her for her brave battle journey, the warriors brought her Holofernes’ sword and bloody helmet, amply ornamented in red gold; and all that the warriors possessed of the arrogant lord, rings and bright treasures, they delivered to that clever lady.]

Magennis emphasizes Judith's placement in the social structure of the Germanic heroic world: "in the Old English poet's recreation of the story in Germanic terms this widow...[Judith]...is fitted into the aristocratic social structure of the heroic world" (11). Heroic epithets such as "*beahhrodene* (line 138) [adorned with bracelets] and *golde gefrætewod* (line 171) [adorned with gold]" (Magennis 12), distinguished Judith from the Old Testament's description of her as a "respected townswoman" (Magennis 11).

The Germanic heroic description of Judith is doubly problematic since she is supposed to represent a Christian virgin martyr, and because the Germanic war heroes usually are not women. Magennis notes that there "are ways in which Judith might be regarded, in the gender-demarcated world of Old English poetry, as significantly masculinised" (15). Certainly the figure of the Germanic heroic warrior is unarguably masculine; putting a woman into this role has caused confusion for many *Judith* critics: "Female virtue is highly valued in the Old English heroic tradition, and...such women are not normally expected to possess physical courage or prowess" (Magennis 7). The power and prestige which Judith possesses commonly are reserved for Anglo-Saxon men; it is the male who is expected bravely to enter the chamber and slay the enemy, and the male who proudly displays the severed head of his enemy and, above all, it is the male who is seen as the leader of his people and the proper recipient of spoils of war. The fact that Judith performs all of these deeds and accepts the rewards has caused critics to question how this masculine Germanic heroic identity could be present in the body of a Christian woman. The concept of hybridity helps to explain this phenomenon.

Judith's feminine, Christian attributes complement her Germanic, masculine ones. While Magennis asserted that the *Judith* poet used epithets such as "gold and bracelet-adorned" to depict Judith as a powerful Germanic noblewoman, other critics have claimed that the poet altered the original biblical account to represent her as more holy and virtuous than the biblical Judith. For example, the biblical Judith is present at the feast scene, encouraging Holofernes to drink so that he becomes intoxicated. But Magennis, making his case for Judith as noblewoman, points out that

The poet deliberately disassociates the noble Judith from this scene. Unlike in the biblical account, in which she consciously uses the feast as part of her seduction of Holofernes and also to get him as drunk and incapacitated as possible, Judith is not even present at the feast scene in the poem (15).

The poet's decision to exclude Judith from the feast scene reflects his emphasis on Judith's sexual purity, not her eroticism. Mary Clayton illustrates Ælfric's troubled reaction to the sexual nature of the biblical Judith: "the degree to which Holofernes is led on by Judith and her lies could hardly be viewed as desirable by Ælfric" (220). She also observes that Ælfric emphasizes that Judith succeeds because of her trust in God, not because of her "seductive manipulations" (218). Although the biblical Judith uses her sexuality to persuade Holofernes to drink, the Old English Judith prays to God for the courage to slay Holofernes:

'Ic ðe, frymða God ond frofre Gæst,
 Bearn Alwaldan, biddan wylle
 miltse þinre me þearfendre,
 Ðrynesse Ðrym. (83-86a)

[Help me, creator God, almighty spirit. I, your needy child, ask for your
 compassion, mighty Trinity.]

Judith's prayers emphasize her Christian faithfulness. One can see this both as typical female dependency on a male and typical Christian dependency on the benevolence of her Creator. Judith refers to herself as "þearfendre" [needy] in the face of the threat of Holofernes. She asks for God's "miltse" [compassion] to help her to overcome the enemy. This poetic account differs from the biblical source by emphasizing Judith's reliance on God for courage, whereas the biblical Judith relies on the intoxicating

power of wine: “While the sapience of the biblical Judith manifests itself in calculating cleverness, the wisdom of the poem’s heroine shows itself in blind trust and the courage to confront one’s enemies, relying on the aid of the Almighty” (Astell 133). Judith’s prayer reflects both her conscious weakness as a woman and her dependency on God – two attributes that support the image of the poetic Judith as a virtuous female vessel empowered by God.

This revision of the scene assures the reader not only of her virtuous Christianity, but of her pure femininity, as well. The poet’s “consciousness of the heroine’s femaleness is consistently maintained” (Magennis 15), as Judith is referred to as “mægð” [maiden] ten times⁶ and “ides” [lady] eight times.⁷ Interestingly, the adjectives used to describe her physical beauty, “*torht* (line 157), ‘radiant, illustrious’, and *beorht* (lines 58, 254 and 340), ‘bright, fair’...are used elsewhere in Old English poetry [to] describ[e] God, paradise and Christianity” (Magennis 14). Thus, the poet associates Judith’s outward beauty with her inner spiritual piety. Magennis contends that these adjectives do not imply that Judith was outwardly beautiful.⁸ Patricia Belanoff asserts that the biblical Judith relies on her physical beauty to achieve her ends: “Thus, in the Apocrypha, Judith in a sense ‘arms’ herself with beauty, and it is her beauty that feeds the lust of her enemy and lures him to destruction. The conclusion that Judith is deliberately seductive is inescapable” (250). The Old English poet, in his depiction of Judith, avoids any mention of her vanity or methods of seduction to protect the sanctity of Judith’s image. However, the inclusion of “*ælfscinu*” (line 14) [elf-like beauty], would suggest “a sense of the beguiling power of female beauty” (Magennis 14). The fact that Holofernes lusts after Judith implies that she is outwardly beautiful, since his desire is largely sexual and probably would not be directed at an unattractive woman. Here, the poet’s diction illustrates the hybrid mindset of tenth-century society. Belanoff admits that “the word becomes both Christian and pagan in its connotations,” suggesting the combination of ideologies present within the poem (251). “*Ælfscinu*,” one can argue, is free of Christian connotation, and instead refers to elves, which are Germanic, mythical, magical creatures. Like the Anglo-Saxon belief in charms and medicinal potions, elves symbolize pagan magic and witchery. Although the poet seeks to emphasize Judith’s holy virtue and inner spirit, his diction reveals his belief in sorcery and the bewitching quality of female beauty.

Judith’s depiction as both a pious maiden and a tempting beauty raises questions about the Old English poet’s description of her as a virgin. The Anglo-Saxon concept of virginity differs from our modern definition. The biblical Judith is a widow, which would immediately disqualify her from the modern definition of physical virginity. However, the Anglo-Saxon notion of virginity was not so categorical. Magennis claims that “The existing text of the poem has nothing inconsistent with the idea of Judith as a widow and certainly we are not obviously encouraged to see her as a virgin” (11). But Victoria Ortenberg’s discussion of virginity offers an illuminating alternative: “Virginity’ is... linked to a woman who has put relationships with men behind her in order to devote herself exclusively to the god – which is not the same as having never known men” (62). In her widowed state, Judith becomes newly “virginized” in her decision to remain chaste. This point is supported by the diction of the poem. Although the poet was aware of Judith’s widowhood from the biblical passage, he denotes her chastity by using adjectives such as “*halig*” [holy]⁹ and “*eadig*” [blessed] (line 35) and by asserting that God wanted to protect Judith from Holofernes’ defilement, “*ac he him þæs ðinges gestyrde*” [because of that reason he restrained him] (line 60b). That Judith is considered holy and blessed and possesses something that God wishes to protect identifies her as a virgin. If Judith, after being widowed, had decided to devote her life to another man instead of to God, she would not have been given His divine protection. Her virginal status is what enables her to receive God’s holy blessing.

Recognizing Judith as a virgin is vital to understanding her position of power in a hybrid state. Ortenberg comments on the powerful roles of women “virgins” in Anglo-Saxon society:

the Scandinavian tradition...[celebrates] women heroines who were left alone in the world to defend the honour of their kin, without a man to protect them – virgins in the mould of Hervör, Gundrun, and other saga ‘maiden warriors’, or indeed of the Valkyries Brunhild and Sigrun, all forceful fighters on the battlefield. (64)

These Germanic women, “without a man to protect them,” were still honorable “fighters.” The image of the poetic Judith nicely fits this description of the pagan woman warrior, as she is widowed and without a man, heroically fighting to protect her own and the Bethulians’ honor. In addition to being a Germanic hero, Judith is also a Christian virgin. The association with virginity is what allows Judith to enjoy her masculine, warrior power in the eyes of Anglo-Saxon society. But how can the widowed Judith be a virgin? Ortenberg explains that widows and unmarried women “had, in effect, finished doing their job as women (namely to marry and have children) and...placed themselves outside the scope of that which made them women...[and] were no longer regarded as specifically female” (60). For example, abbesses of the era, who “were arguably no longer specifically female, acquired some of the functions of men in society” (61). Their “acceptance as active members in the world of male authority and politics was based...on their ability to act as men, because they were ‘virgins’ and not women” (67). Such socially-structured power is reflected in the diction of the poem, which:

uses the words *mægð* and *ides*...referring to the divinely inspired wisdom, nobility, and bravery of the virgin Judith...The transition from courtesan to virgin is significant: military power and political wisdom are clearly acceptable in the second, but not in the first (Ortenberg 65).

The identity of Judith as a virgin in a Christian society therefore enables her to possess the heroic attributes which normally applied only to Anglo-Saxon males. The Old English Judith perfectly illustrates the hybrid state of Christian and pagan, female and male.

Judith’s Christian virginity grants her authority within a heroic pagan context. To return to Bhabha’s definition of hybridity, it now becomes evident that Judith does indeed embody a “metonymy of presence,” and that the existence of these “two contradictory knowledges” (or multiple beliefs) “splits the discourse into two psychical attitudes.” The two seemingly contradictory knowledges are her Christian adherence to God and chastity and her fierce Germanic heroism. The duality is obvious in her physical description, as the poet’s adjectives describe both the inner beauty of her pious spirit and a beguiling, elfin beauty which she uses to defeat her foe. She prays to God for help before her confrontation with Holofernes and trusts in His protection; immediately afterwards she savagely slays her enemy, displays his head, rallies her people to battle, and receives martial plunder. Her virginal character reflects her female sanctity to the Christian community and accords her the masculine power of a pagan chieftain.

The discourse here is certainly split between Christian morality and Germanic heroism, but it is also split into the binary of masculine and feminine which merge within the hybrid identity of Judith. Ortenberg refers to virginal women who are “no longer regarded as specifically female” as “asexual beings” (60). Judith, too, may be regarded as an “asexual being,” since her combination of feminine and masculine qualities paradoxically makes her neither female nor male. Ortenberg claims that the “association of virginity and maleness” coincides with the phrase the “female Man of God” (66). Judith stands out as an “exception to the norm...a female who...engage[s] in violence and...takes upon [her] a heroic task” (Magennis 8). Judith is non-gendered, neither male nor female. Hybridity makes it possible to reject the categories of the “norm” and to place Judith in a space separate from that of her two “contradictory knowledges” of Christian female and Germanic male. Judith’s absorption and display of *both* of these knowledges is hybrid, and reflects the values of a society which was also ideologically hybrid.

Ideological hybridity, according to Bhabha, “estrang[es] the basis of the authority of the dominant discourse.” If Christianity is the dominant discourse of late tenth-century Anglo-Saxon England, then it has been infiltrated and estranged by the influence of Germanic pagan ideals, much as the country itself was invaded by pagan tribes. The Germanic heroic pagan virtues displayed by Judith enter the dominant discourse of her Christian virginity and cause a reversal of authority. It is not her virginity that gives her power, but it is what *allows* her to have power as a Germanic warrior-maiden. Authority is estranged here, and given to a woman who does not fit the traditional passive Christian female role. Her pagan masculine warrior identity merges with her virtuous Christian female identity to produce a hybrid being.

To Belanoff, Judith is neither Germanic nor Christian: “[She] is a strong and interesting character because she is *not* unified and coherent in relation to the old models.... To some degree she escapes the poet’s ability to place her into these old models” (260). My study takes Belanoff’s argument a step further by providing an answer to the seemingly split identity of Judith. Perhaps the poet could not place Judith in either realm because she belongs to a third category. She possesses too much Germanic heroic virtue to be a saintly Christian and too much female sanctity to be a masculine Germanic war hero. The hybrid portrayal of Judith is a product of its time. The anonymous poet was undoubtedly a Christian ecclesiastical figure. However, the poet’s version of the biblical story of Judith resonates with Germanic heroic undertones. Judith’s dual identity embodies the dual ideologies of a Christian community influenced by pagan beliefs, itself an ideologically hybrid society.

THE CRUSADES

The duality of belief present in *Judith* suggests an interesting connection to an historical event which followed only a century after. The Crusades were a series of holy wars prompted by the Pope and waged by western Crusaders in the eastern Levant against the “infidels” (i.e., non-Christians) who retained power over the Holy Land of Jerusalem and surrounding territories. By the close of the era, which included the sack of Constantinople in 1204 and ended in 1291, the Crusaders had ravaged communities and plundered treasuries. Despite the excuse of waging a “Holy War,” the western Crusaders acted as Germanic barbarians as they “wantonly destroyed churches, icons, buildings, and statues,” not to mention the massacre of thousands of innocent people (Hollister 235). The sack of Constantinople, a Christian city, was done out of pure envy and greed for the city’s riches. While the Crusaders kept the “Christian martyr” mindset, their actions qualified them as heathen Germanic warriors.

The first Crusade began in the year 1095, when Pope Urban II gave his infamous speech at the great Council of Clermont in France to entreat Christians to go to war. Steven Runciman has summarized Urban’s call: “Let western Christendom march to the rescue of the East. Rich and poor alike should go. They should leave off slaying each other and fight instead a righteous war, doing the work of God; and God would lead them” (42-43). This plea, from the mouth of the leading ecclesiastical figure of the western Church, entreats the people of Europe to leave their homes and travel halfway across the known world to a hostile territory and fight for the Church. Urban asks that these westerners “slay” (keeping in mind the Germanic heroic connotation of the Old English “sloh” used in *Judith*) the inhabitants of the Holy Land because they are “evil,” that is, non-Christians. He asks that Christians kill in the name of God, and to trust that “God would lead them.” The Christian warriors, however, did not join the crusading movement solely for reasons of religious zeal, although it certainly was a contributing factor. Westerners who flocked to the banner of the Pope had other things in mind besides a holy war:

The crusades fused three characteristic medieval impulses: piety, pugnacity, and greed. All three were essential. Without Christian idealism, the crusades would have been inconceivable, yet the dream of liberating Jerusalem from ‘the infidel’ and re-opening it to Christian pilgrims was reinforced mightily by the lure of new lands and vast wealth. The crusaders were provided a superb opportunity to employ their knightly skills in God’s service—and to make their fortunes in the bargain (Hollister 227).

The western mind that contemplated becoming a Crusader reflects the Germanic and Christian dualism apparent in *Judith*. Like the poetic heroine, the Crusaders went to battle with the assurance that God was on their side, and would guide them to victory against the heathen enemy because their cause was righteous. The parallelism between the image of the evil infidels and Holofernes is obvious. Judith fights with God on her side because of her faith in Him and Holofernes is destined to be conquered and sent to hell because of his association with the ways of Satan. Ann Astell points out that “God himself opposes Holofernes, but he does so through Judith whom he inspires with valour” (128) and “Hrabanus, St. Jerome and Ælfric all draw a parallel between Judith’s decapitation of Holofernes and the church’s triumph over the devil” (126).

Pope Urban's rallying speech given to the Council argued that God would lead the Crusaders to victory against the heathen armies because of their faith in Him and because of their righteousness in the face of the enemy's unholiness. This argument justified killing because it was the will of God, as the members of the Council responded enthusiastically shouting, "Deus le volt--God wills it!" (Runciman 43). Judith's speech given to the citizens of Bethulia rallying the soldiers to battle rings with the same justification:

Fynd syndon eowere
gedemed to deaðe, ond ge dom agon
tir æt tohtan, swa eow getacnod hafað
mihtig Dryhten purh mine hand (lines 195b-198).

[Your enemy will be condemned to death, and you will have glory in battle because the Almighty Lord has shown this through me]

Judith assures her people that God supports their battle because Holofernes and his men are evil, or "infidels," and therefore they have been condemned to death. Judith's warriors, like the Crusaders, go to battle with the confidence that killing like a Germanic warrior is justified because God is on their side. Such seemingly contradictory rhetoric is fascinating when viewed as a means of creating history. The Crusades would not have existed without this dual mindset of the Crusading armies which allowed them, like Judith, to kill like Germanic heroes yet retain confidence that it was the will of God.

The notion of hybridity present in the text of *Judith* is a crucial concept because it provides a theoretical reconciliation of two seemingly incompatible ideals. Christian virtue and Germanic heroism appear as contradictory, yet both the poetic Judith and the historical Crusaders clearly represent their merger. To regard Judith as a purely female Christian virgin would be equivalent to regarding the Crusading armies as meek, pious pilgrims of God. Both Judith and the Crusaders possessed the bravery and barbarity of a Germanic hero, and the presence of these two ideals is what makes early medieval society ideologically hybrid.

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ENDNOTES

¹ According to Astell, "[*Judith*'s] recent editors, Elliot Van Kirk Dobbie and B. J. Timmer, both assign a late tenth-century date to the poem on linguistic and metrical grounds" (117). Faust also affirms that it was written "not earlier than about 825 nor later than 937" (116).

² From Bible, King James. Judith, from The holy Bible, King James version (Apocrypha)

Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/KjvJudi.html>

³ In this scene, the Bradley translation uses "struck," the Hall translation edited by Faust uses "smote," and the Gordon translation uses "struck" and "smote." All translation editions recorded in Works Cited.

⁴ This and all poetic excerpts are taken from Baker's edition, as listed in Works Cited.

⁵ This and all following translations from the Old English are my own.

⁶ "Mægð" appears in lines 34, 37, 77, 125, 132, 141, 162, 253, 257, and 331, as listed in the Old English Corpus. <http://ezproxy.tcnj.edu:2100/oec/>

⁷ "Ides" appears in lines 12, 54, 57, 107, 125, 123, 141, and 334, as listed in the Old English Corpus.

⁸ Hugh Magennis states that "I would still argue that their [the adjectives'] emphasis is not specifically on Judith's sexual attractiveness but on the beauty of her whole being" (15).

⁹ "Halig" appears in lines 54, 97, 159, and 200 as listed in the Old English Corpus.