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The thesis of Teri Buff Huntley entitled
Struck Down By a Woman's Hand:
Cultural Interpretations of Judith

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Studies in the School
for Summer and Continuing Education of Georgetown University
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Date
Struck Down By A Woman’s Hand:
Cultural Interpretations of Judith

A Thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Studies

By

Buff Huntley

School for Summer and Continuing Education
Georgetown University
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ABSTRACT

Cultural attitudes regarding women, especially women with power, can be identified through the varied images in art and literature of the apocryphal story of Judith. Visual and literary representations of Judith display cultural values from a variety of historical epochs and geographic locations, the set of circumstances described in the Book of Judith having remained a popular story over many centuries, altering as successive generations used it to express their own beliefs and customs. The parts of the story that were emphasized in each era can tell us, if we compare them to the original text, what behaviors were held to be most important. We would expect the story of a particular nation's faith in God and his protection to hold little meaning for people outside that race and religion, yet the story continued in popularity as storytellers changed emphasis or setting to appeal to their audiences.

Jews of the Hellenistic Middle East used motifs from their religious tradition, as well as from the surrounding culture, to create a story inspiring them to faith and patriotism. Casting a courageous, though physically weak, woman as hero in a patriarchal culture strengthened the impact of her deed; her departure from the normal actions of a chaste woman, however, weakened the reception of her story. Twelve hundred years later, Anglo-Saxons found meaning in the story of a woman as defending warrior. Their Christian beliefs and Germanic tradition of active and
authoritative women allowed religious and poetic writers to read and present Judith in a different light from the original composer. By the turn of the nineteenth century, society found meaning in secular life: a sense of stability depended on continuing the social order. The shattering of religious certainty and the concurrent struggle over "the woman question" helped turn a paradigm of piety into a voracious femme fatale.

By examining which values dictated each interpretation of the Judith tale, we are able to name and understand differing situations for women in each culture. Transformations in artistic and literary images signal changes in cultural attitudes: when Judith is presented as an Anglo-Saxon virgin, we can assume that sexual innocence was valued at a higher premium than in the original milieu of the story. When details of the story disappear, as they did for fin de siècle artists, we can infer that the story lost its meaning, but the image of a beautiful woman dealing death remained compelling. In identifying the differences between images, we learn about the cultures in which they were formed, and by tracing the cultural sources, we learn a great deal about the ability of art to mirror and transmit values. Judith has been used to communicate ideas about religious fervor, patriotism, and sexual betrayal. Her value in this thesis is to illustrate how women were believed to participate in these situations.
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INTRODUCTION

Judith has been a popular image for representation among varied cultures through the centuries. I have chosen three areas for examination: early Jewish history and the apocryphal Book of Judith, Anglo-Saxon literature of pre-conquest England, and paintings of Judith by European artists at the turn of the nineteenth century. This thesis examines how each discrete culture understood the story and used it to transmit values, analyzing contemporaneous attitudes that influenced each presentation. The changing images clustered around this story can be used to identify the changing beliefs regarding power and women's holding of it. The gender of the protagonist is consistently the primary focus of the story's presentation: comparable images in each culture—Joshua, Beowulf, or Oscar Wilde—did not convey the same impact when describing Jewish piety, Christian bravery, or sexual depravity. Judith's story is valuable as a tool for analysis as it has endured across a wide range of cultural uses yet continually served as a receptacle for attitudes towards women.

Chapter 1 examines the original biblical story of Judith, comparing it with other heroic stories and analyzing the themes running through the tale. The combination of attributes assigned to Judith make her unique as a woman in the Old Testament.

Chapter 2 deals with the Judith story as portrayed in tenth-century Christian
England. The sequence of events was still appealing to a people quite removed in place, religion and literary tradition. Judith was transformed from an devout Jewish widow to a young Christian virgin. An epic poet added a battle scene conforming to the Germanic literary tradition. Anglo-Saxon gender structures and the parallel respect granted to warriors and mothers made militant actions by childless females a possibility, at least in literature.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the complete perversion of the original message, when turn-of-the-century male artists and art consumers looked to the Judith image to express their perception of active, authoritative women as sexually threatening, decadent and evolutionarily regressive. Though the period before the first World War is often popularly portrayed as a Golden Age, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were the site of extreme struggles over accepted roles. The combination of Darwinian theory, the increasing agitation of feminism, and a shift to a secular society meant that a death-dealing woman with a sword could no longer be viewed as a religious model, much less a positive image for women.
A WIDOW OF BETHULIA

Judith of Bethulia possessed beauty, wealth, and wisdom. She was a personification of the faith in God which Israel considered requisite of its members, and, through faith, she performed a deed of physical bravery and spiritual strength. She is unique among Jewish women of the Bible in that she affords us an opportunity to examine the Israelite image of women at war and to measure their comfort with it.

The Judith story has come down to us in a Greek narrative; the original Hebrew composition no longer exists. Scholars believe the tale was originally composed sometime in the first two centuries B.C.E., during a period of Hellenization among the Jews. The Book of Judith was not included in the Hebrew canon, nor is it found in present-day Protestant Bibles. It is included in the Catholic Bible with other deuterocanonical books.¹

The Bible story begins by describing Nebuchadnezzar as ruler of the Assyrians (in fact, he was King of Babylon) and, at a time when he could no longer have been

¹Verses from Judith were even used in a mass (the liturgy for Saint Joan of Arc). Carey Moore, The Anchor Bible, Volume 40: Judith, A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1985), 140-41.
living\textsuperscript{2}, waging war against nations which did not support him in a recent battle of conquest. He sends his second-in-command, Holofernes, to subdue all those who were not his allies. Holofernes expands upon his orders, requiring subject cities to worship Nebuchadnezzar as a god and crushing all native religions. Upon the army’s reaching the Jewish town of Bethulia, Holofernes’ officer Achior advises him of the history of the Jews and their protection by Yahweh (the history is correctly given from the time of Abraham to the present, showing the author could be accurate when s/he felt it important). Achior warns Holofernes that the Jews can never be defeated while they are faithful to their God. Enraged, Holofernes expels Achior from the camp and proceeds to besiege the walled city of Bethulia by cutting off its supply of water. Achior takes refuge within the city.

At this point, Judith is introduced, whereupon the action quickens its pace and deepens in detail. Judith is a pious widow who has lived quietly since the death of her husband, dressing in sackcloth and observing religious fasts. She is introduced with the longest genealogy of any woman in the Bible: sixteen generations. Her property is in the charge of a maidservant. (A manservant would provide opportunity for impropriety, or at least the appearance of it.) When the elders are on the verge of surrendering the city, Judith summons them to her home and upbraids them for

\textsuperscript{2}The whole presentation of the story is puzzling in its numerous anachronisms and historical and geographical inaccuracies. This may account in part for its lack of canonicity. See Moore, Judith, 78-80, for a discussion of such mistakes, which Moore considers to be intentional and humorously ironic on the part of the author.
lack of faith in the Lord. She requests that they let her leave for the Assyrian camp and says she will, through God, deliver her town. She prays fervently, then bathes and arrays herself in holiday apparel, her appearance transformed so that men are in awe of her. After packing kosher food and dishes, Judith travels with her maidservant to the enemy camp, telling Holofernes that she is ready to betray her people as they have forsaken their religious duties. "Through you God will accomplish a great thing," she promises, the first of a series of Delphic statements which could, had Holofernes been on his guard, have warned him of his danger. During her stay in the camp, Judith establishes a routine of ritual prayer and bathing outside the limits of the camp and partakes only of her own food. On the fourth day of her visit, Holofernes calls her to his tent to debase her: "[I]f we let such a woman go without enjoying her favors . . . she will laugh us to scorn." (Jud. 12:12) Intoxicated by her beauty, Holofernes loses self-control and becomes intoxicated with wine as well. He drinks himself into a stupor, whereupon Judith takes his sword and cuts off his head in two strokes, giving the head to her maidservant to stow in their foodbag and carry back to Bethulia. Accustomed to seeing her leave the camp for evening prayer, the soldiers do not waylay her.

Judith calls to the guards inside Bethulia’s gates—"Open up! Open the gate! God, our God, is with us . . ." (Jud. 13:11) When Judith enters the city, Achior recognizes the head of Holofernes and falls into a faint. The Assyrians, seeing the head of their leader displayed on the city walls, panic and flee; the Israelites spend
the next month looting their camp. Judith leads the women in a hymn to God, dancing with thyrsus and garlands. Her share of the booty is sent to the Temple in Jerusalem. Judith leads a long and virtuous life, never marrying. For the rest of her days (she dies at 105), the city is not threatened again.

The connected strands of the story can be separated into several themes: the traditional tale of a folk hero, the demonstration of faith's efficacy, a model for feminine piety, and the influence from Hellenic tales and customs.

Scholars believe the story to have been composed in the late second or early first century B.C.E., after the destruction of the Temple and the dispersion of the Jews, which resulted in their increased assimilation into other cultures. After the Persian kings Darius and Xerxes successively had been defeated by the Greeks, areas once ruled by them were subject to a growing Hellenic influence, culminating under Alexander the Great's rule and strong even into the Roman Empire. It is an interesting feature of the tale that a story set in the past glory of Israel shows conspicuous modelling after the Greek historian Herodotus. In addition, the narrow pass mentioned at Judith 4:7 echoes the crucial pass at Thermopylae, and the story anachronistically shows the heroine leading women in dance with thyrsus and garlands, as the Bacchae did, and crowning themselves with olive leaves. The history of the diasporic Jews has shown how important acts of faith and heroic tales were to their sense of identity, so it is no surprise that this sort of tale would have been composed. It is fascinating to see, though, that while reaching back in the past for
events in which a Jewish audience could take pride, the author used storytelling techniques their present experience could help them understand.

Many aspects of Judith’s story are reminiscent of Herodotus’ Histories, both in event and in technique. The primary detail of the story, the beheading of an invading general by a woman, is similar to the tale of Cyrus and Tomyris (Her. II. 201-216). The structure of the stories are similar, too: Herodotus portrayed Cyrus as a powerful and wealthy Oriental ruler, who fell due to his overweening pride (hubris). This theme of overreaching hubris is used throughout the book’s composition, repeated again and again until the climactic defeat of the Persian Empire by the Greeks. Cyrus, as with all Herodotus’ tyrants, is provided with a close associate who operates as an instrument of warning (in this case, Croesus). Holofernes has Achior, who provides a warning by outlining the history of the Jews, and Judith herself does so through her ambiguous pronouncements. Holofernes, like Cyrus, is blinded by his ambition (the Greek idea of dazzling "ate") and follows his pride to a destructive end. The very essence of hubris is shown in Holofernes’ demanding his sovereign be worshipped as a god. The story also echoes Herodotus in the examples of Holofernes’ and Nebuchadnezzar’s Oriental luxury (huge armies, a golden canopy, silver lamps, and the like), and in the contrast drawn between governments (Herodotus showed the Great King versus democracy, Judith has a great

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3 Judith repeatedly addresses Holofernes in a manner reminiscent of the Delphic oracle (e.g., the oracle’s double-edged message to Croesus that if he attacked the Persians, he would "bring down a mighty empire" (Her. I.68)).
king versus a people ruled by God's word).

In telling Judith's story, the Hebrew poet borrowed Hellenic technique, but followed universal heroic tradition. Judith follows the pattern of many Old Testament folk heroes, male and female. Her story is almost identical to the story of David and Goliath in its basic outline: an unlikely hero defending his city against overwhelming odds, with a resulting decapitation. Heroes like Moses and Joshua led defensive actions against vastly larger numbers; Esther and Deborah acted the role of female savior; and Jael, though not a Jewish heroine, supported Israel by assassinating the enemy general Sisera. The Judith story, in fact, is closer to a heroic tale than a religious exemplum. The action, in a nutshell, resembles the stories of Perseus, Theseus, Gilgamesh, and other folk heroes. Like Odysseus, Coyote (the native American trickster God), and Hermes, Judith uses deceptive words or actions to attain her ends. Like Hercules, Perseus, and David, Judith subdues her enemy and deprives him of his head, the locus of bodily and spiritual power. Even though in these stories, the hero acts with God's help, or at least on God's side, we feel that the successful outcome of the battle depends on the purity of intent and his/her skill and quick thought. There is no signalling of supernatural involvement such as is found in the story of Moses or Joshua. Neither charisma (the gift of the spirit of the Lord, shown in earlier Hebrew leaders), or the announced presence of God, is here. The story includes a hint of divine intervention when we are told (Jud. 10:7) that Judith's appearance was transformed almost beyond her compatriots' recognition. However,
the presence of the Lord is never explicit (as it is not in the stories of David, Esther, or Jael). Judith prays before leaving Bethulia and before she slays Holofernes, but we are not told if she receives direction or is acting entirely on faith.

The reliance on faith alone, if this is the reading the author intended, was an important aspect of Judaism. The Jews' deliverance from Egypt, the fulfillment of their Covenant with Yahweh, was the central event of Jewish history. This Covenant, similar to a relationship between lord and vassal, supposed an endowment of benefits from the superior party and loyalty, or faith, from the inferior. Again and again in crises Israel is told that if it is faithful to God, he will protect it. This is articulated by Judith's speech to the elders in chapter eight. The Exodus is reenacted in miniature when the city of Bethulia is delivered from the besieging army of a powerful monarch.

There are many points in which Judith's foray upon the Assyrians resembles not only the Exodus, but "holy war" in general as it was waged in the Old Testament. An encapsulation of the progression of holy war can be found in Judges 4:14-16:

Deborah said to Barak, "Up! This day the Lord is to give Sisera into your hands. See, the Lord has marched out at your head!" Barak came down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand men at his back, and the Lord threw Sisera and all his chariots and army into panic-stricken rout before Barak's onslaught; Sisera himself dismounted

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from his chariot and fled on foot. Barak pursued the chariots and the troops as far as Harosheth, and the whole army was put to the sword; not a man was left alive.

The leader (here Barak) mustered men to fight. The judge or prophet gave the call to fight by crying that the Lord had delivered (perfect tense) into Israel’s hand. The Lord was understood to go before them as they marched to war. The army fought in ambush, from hilly country, and the enemy was struck by a "divine terror." The Hebrew army would pursue the troops; no prisoners were taken, and pillage was taken and dedicated to the Temple in Jerusalem. Not included in the above quote is the requirement that men take vows and keep themselves and their camp ritually pure: Yahweh was imagined to abide with them during this time. In outline, Judith’s own campaign resembles that of a holy war; thus, her story not only demonstrates the efficacy of faith in the Lord, but operates in the Deutoronomic tradition, helping to keep alive motives and actions from the honored past of Israel.

The most significant aspect of Judith’s heroism, however, is her sex, not only in terms of this paper’s thesis, but in terms of the restrictions it placed on Judith’s behavior. The Judith author adapted the heroine’s action to the primary characteristics of women as perceived in a patriarchal culture: their sexual nature and their

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6 The modelling of Judith’s action on a campaign of holy war may have been one of the author’s communications of Judith’s virtue: as she was successful, she must by definition have remained chaste to retain the protection of the Lord.
inferiority to men in physical strength. Unlike David, Judith was not able to face Holofernes in single combat; Goliath precipitated the duel by his challenge, at any rate, something not likely to happen in this situation. She was not a military leader like Deborah, so Judith could not lead men against the Assyrian army. Her only avenue was through sexual allure and deliberation, like Esther, focussed towards a particular individual. Not having the benefit of an established relationship as Queen Esther did, Judith had to risk life and reputation by venturing into enemy territory.

Israelite custom did not preclude women from inhabiting roles of wisdom; though men and women had segregated activities, it has been argued (by Carol Meyers, for example\textsuperscript{7}) that women held important cultic roles and led household worship, as well as acting as prophets or wisewomen. Evidence of this can be read in the stories of Rebecca's stealing of her father's household Gods, Miriam and Moses, and Huldah and Josiah (\textit{2 Kings} 22:14-21). It may be this type of function to which Bethulian elder Ozias refers when he says, "This is not the first time you have given proof of your wisdom." (\textit{Jud.} 8:29) There was also precedent for women winning desired favors through their beauty: Esther and Ruth did this, as, arguably, did Sarah (\textit{Gen.} 12:14-16) and Rebecca (\textit{Gen.} 26:9-11). Judith, however, combined these traits and added to them an act of physical assault, which was unique in the Old Testament (except for Jael who, as noted above, was a member of a neutral nation,

not an Israelite). Jael’s story shows striking similarities: an enemy general is deceived into unguarded intimacy by a foreign woman, who then murders him (Jael by driving a tent peg through Sisera’s temples). Judith’s announcement to her city—"The Lord has struck him down by a woman’s hand!"—also echoes Deborah’s prophecy that "the Lord will leave Sisera to fall into the hands of a woman." (Judg. 4:9)\(^8\)

Judith’s gender, while determining the path her heroism would take, also set up a tension between her required behavior as a Jewish hero and a Jewish woman. The line she had to walk was a fine one: while tempting Holofernes to his destruction, she behaved in a way no pious widow ordinarily would and ran the danger of rape, separation from God’s people through ritual impurity, and/or death. The hazards she ran covered a wider and more frightening range than David’s. Judith was mindful of all these dangers; she referred to them obliquely in her reference to the Shechemites, and Simeon’s revenge for the rape of his sister Dinah, as she prayed to God before leaving Bethulia.

Lord, the God of my forefather Simeon, you put a sword in Simeon’s hand for him to take vengeance on those foreigners who had stripped off a virgin’s veil to defile her, uncovered her thighs to shame her, and violated her womb to dishonour her. Though you said, "Such a thing shall not be done," yet they did so. That was why you gave up their rulers to be slain, and the bed they had disgraced with their treachery to be stained with blood; beneath your stroke both slaves

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\(^8\) The implication is one of humiliation. See Judges 9:50-57 for the story of Abimelech. When he was mortally wounded by a woman, he asked his armour-bearer to slay him "or it will be said of me: A woman killed him."
and princes fell, even princes upon their thrones. *Jud.* 9:2-3.

Though Judith obviously saw herself as Simeon, there was the danger she would play the role of Dinah. The author increases the tension between the expected behavior of a Jewish hero and of a Jewish woman by continually holding up signals of sexual involvement and, just as frequently, signalling Judith's continence and steadfastness. Her moral strength is accented by contrast with the leaders of the town, who are not only male, but older and more experienced.9

When Judith prepares herself for her wondrous deed, she bathes (despite a critical shortage of water!), wears clothes she used to wear for her husband and ties her hair with a ribbon (it is not worn loose like a maiden's or covered like a respectable wife's or widow's, but arranged and decorated like a courtesan's). The men of her town and the Assyrian guards are equally struck by her beauty, seemingly brighter than an ordinary woman's, and are robbed of speech by the impression she makes on them. On her final night in camp, she is alone with Holofernes in his tent (her maidservant stands outside), the sexual action expected of her stated in Bagoas' words: "Behave today like one of the Assyrian women in attendance at Nebuchadnezzar's palace." Judith has been in the camp three days, bathing every

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9Carey Moore surmises that Judith would probably have been a young woman in her late teens. Marriage in the Biblical world took place upon a girl's menarche. Judith's husband Manasseh died presumably only a few years after their marriage; any longer marriage without children (and no children are mentioned) would have drawn comment and, at that time, have signified the curse of God upon the wife. As a respected woman revered for her piety, we can assume that Judith was not believed to be out of favor with God. *Moore, Judith,* 233.
day. Her bathing could be a reference to ritual cleansing after menstruation, a further indicator inserted to mark in the listener’s mind Judith’s purity\(^\text{10}\) (Jewish law prohibiting sexual activity during the menstrual period). As a parallel and supplement to Judith’s sexual purity, references to eating and food are woven throughout the narrative. Judith’s importation of kosher food and dishes not only supplies a bag whereby to smuggle the general’s head to Bethulia, but provides an opportunity to show her strict adherence to Jewish law, by implication extending to laws regulating sexual behavior. Her refusal to partake of forbidden foods strengthens her image of chastity twofold: by showing her strict adherence to kashrut prescription, and by underscoring her refusal to accept forbidden pleasures. On the evening of her arrival, Judith is invited to a banquet in Holofernes’ tent, where she is offered special delicacies of the Assyrian court, and conspicuously refuses them "for fear I should be breaking our law." On the climactic evening, Judith is invited to a second banquet; Holofernes drinks "more than he had ever drunk on any single day in his whole life," while Judith eats and drinks only what was brought with her.

Food and eating in the Old Testament symbolically represented physical relations:

The way of an unfaithful wife is this: she eats, then wipes her mouth and says, "I have done nothing wrong." Prov. 30:20.

Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved

\(^{10}\) A later Midrash story has Judith make use of ritual bathing for just this purpose of putting off Holofernes’ advances.
among young men. To sit in his shadow is my delight, and his fruit is sweet to my taste. *Song of Songs* 2:3.

We can compare the situation of Judith and Holofernes to that of Jael and Sisera, where Sisera requested water and was given butter (or curds) in a "lordly dish." The symbolism of food for sex allows us to read this event as the granting of sexual favors to the general, an interpretation which is supported by the fact that the original Hebrew of the story tells us that Sisera fell dead "between her legs" rather than the standard translation of "at her feet."\(^{11}\) (Uncovered feet or legs, additionally, were euphemisms for sexual parts or action. Cf. *Ruth* 7:9.) While Jael was a foreign woman, albeit a heroine, Judith was, as her name suggests (Hebrew יְהוֹדְיָה יְהוּדַית "Jewess"), an embodiment of the Jewish nation and, as such, could brook no association with improper action. Thus, while constantly signalling her existence as a sexual being, her behavior had, just as constantly, to belie any such implications. Her repeated refusal of food from Holofernes' hands serves this purpose.

Judith's words, quasi-prophetic behavior, kosher observation, ritual prayer and bathing, and, the definitive proof, the slaying of a supreme enemy, negated any appearance of sexual looseness. The very beheading of Holofernes, while it served the purposes of execution of an enemy and his symbolic castration, also provided proof Judith could carry with her of her chastity. A woman returning from an enemy camp after an absence of several days and nights ordinarily would be marked as a

traitor and prostitute. With the head of an enemy in possession (his identity confirmed by Achior), Judith could vouch for her virtuous intent and character. This function is more overt in later Midrash\textsuperscript{12} stories of Judith, where she is scorned and refused admittance by sentries upon her return. "Is it not enough for you that you have played the whore and acted corruptly, that you also come among us with guile?" they ask. Upon her showing the head, their disdain turns to admiration and she is admitted with praise and celebration.\textsuperscript{13}

Judith's story borrows from those of many Old Testament heroines: she has the beauty and skilful speech of Esther, the praiseful song and dance of Miriam, Deborah's success as a strategist, and Jael's physical courage. She is unique as a woman in providing such a close parallel to David or Samson. The later Midrash stories, by moving further away from Judith's figure as one of untaimed virtue, showed an increasing discomfort in religious storytellers, and possibly their audiences, with her uniqueness. The Hebrew fathers did not include her book in their canon, although it became very popular in Christian patristic writing. The story had meaning in its original place and time for an audience which, we can infer, needed an emphasis on Jewish bravery, faith and shrewdness. While the particular role Judith

\textsuperscript{12} From the Hebrew word meaning "exposition," stories for the purpose of illustrating a religious meaning.

\textsuperscript{13} This shift in story emphasis, from undoubting male belief in Judith's motives to their assumption of her harlotry, is an interesting one. In at least one Midrash, it is stated explicitly that Judith has sexual relations with Holofernes before his assassination. Moore, Judith, 105-06.
played, the seducer and underminer of Assyrian strength, called for a female protagonist, this same identification weakened her chances for continuing popularity. Later rabbinical commentary on Judith becomes harsher and more suspicious of her activity. Girl babies were rarely given the name "Judith" until closer in time to our own age. The special needs of Hellenistic Jews accommodated the intersection of violence and the female gender, but the strain of accommodation was too great for it to continue.

It is important to note that Judith's figure is not that of Woman, but an individual who was a Jew first, a woman second. She represented weak Israel dominated by stronger nations, as a woman was inferior to the men around her. It is not until late Victorian times that we see Judith displayed as representative of her sex. Judith's own uniqueness worked against her becoming a popular image of Jewish heroism. Ultimately, religious teachers preferred patriarchal figures such as Abraham and David.

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JUDITH AS HOLY MAIDEN

The Anglo-Saxons of pre-Conquest England shared many societal traits with the pastoral Hebrew culture of biblical Palestine: collective identity centered on the tribal unit, recurrent invasions by warring tribes of a different religion, government by custom rather than royal prerogative. It should come as no surprise, then, that the Book of Judith, along with other heroic Old Testament stories, was popular with the medieval English people. It is interesting to note the differences in their presentation of the story, however, and to see that Judith was a primary model for Anglo-Saxons, men as well as women.\(^{15}\) We can, by untangling the reasons for these differences, learn much about the Anglo-Saxon way of life and how women were regarded.

The Judith story presented Jews with proof of their specialness to God and the superiority of God’s power while providing a model for nationalist fervor, womanly virtue, and religious devotion, all in one. Judith as a warrior-maiden served the same purpose in tenth-century England but acquired some new embellishments in the process of adaptation. The story had enough familiar elements—a nation besieged by enemies of God, a battlefield locale, and identity as tribal members rather than individual citizens—to make it appealing to a land far removed in place.

\(^{15}\) Judith was one of the three role models most used for women of the time; the other two were Mary and Eve. Jane Chance, *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 110.
and time from the original author's. Besides the tenth-century poem, Judith was
often found as an example in homilies and written literature. The noted eighth-
century cleric Aelfric wrote, for example:

The widow Judith, who overcame Holofernes, the Assyrian lord, has,
among these [gospel] books, her own book concerning her own
victory; this was also written in English in our fashion as an example
to you men that you with weapons should protect your land against
the attacking enemy.16

The poem Judith has come down to us in fragmentary form of some 350
lines. We do not know how long the poem was originally; the surviving verse starts
with Holofernes inviting his thanes to a feast on the day of his murder (Judith herself
is not invited in this version). The banquet is held in a mead-hall. Holofernes leads
his men in drink for the whole day, after which he summons Judith to his tent.

A beautiful curtain all woven of gold
hung round the bed of Holofernes.
This curtain allowed the wicked man
to peer through it, see anyone who came
into the tent; but no one could see him
unless Holofernes wished to be seen
and asked him—or her—to come close. Judith, 46-51.17

The canopy mentioned in Scripture is given new emphasis in this version.
The obligations of responsibility, openness, and caring that a lord had to his thanes
had been violated as Holofernes urged his men in drinking to excess and is

16Aelfric, The Book of Judith, quoted in Bernard Huppé, The Web of Words

17Lines quoted are from Marie Nelson's translation of Judith in her book Judith,
underscored by his mistrustful use of a bedcurtain. The Anglo-Saxons enjoyed irony in their poetry, and the image of a mighty warrior draping his bed with curtains as protection, and even so being murdered, "los[ing] his honor in his own gold-curtained bed" (line 63) was an appealing one. Judith drew Holofernes’ sword from its sheath, prayed to a Triune God—"Avenge, Mighty God, bright Giver of glory, this tyrant’s cruel deeds, my people’s grief, the sorrow I feel as a fire in my heart."—and, before Holofernes awoke, cut off his head.

The poem describes in detail her actions. First, the Lord gave her courage, opened her mind, renewed her hope. Then Judith took Holofernes by the hair, "pulled him toward her as if to perform a shameful act," and struck with her sword, cutting halfway through the neck. The general lay unconscious, and Judith struck a second time so that his head rolled onto the floor. The poet informs us that his spirit traveled to hell, where it was bound forever in torment. Judith and her servant carried the head homeward, in a basket, where the people met her rejoicing "in groups and crowds, in troops and torrents." Judith asked each warrior to don helmet and byrnie and slay their enemies in battle.

They had long endured the foreigners’ insolence, the insult of their heathen presence. Now the Hebrews would march out under battle standards, repay the invaders with the play of spears. They marched, carried their battle-banners into the enemy camp, boldly let showers of arrows, strong arrows, battle-adders, fly from their bows. The fierce fighters raged, threw hard spears into the heart of the enemy host. Judith, 216-25.
There follow almost a hundred lines describing the battle scenes, the discovery of Holofernes' body, and the ensuing pillage. The treasure that had belonged to Holofernes is presented to Judith (traditional reward for a successful warrior). Judith sings of the glory of the Lord, looking forward to her heavenly reward at the time of her death.

Judith's character was adapted by English writers to personify virtues valued in both men and women in their time—Christian fervor, bravery in war, strength, and wisdom—as she had embodied widowly devotion, obedience to God's law, and a zealous patriotism in pre-Christian Palestine. In the story told in the mead-hall and church, Judith was transformed from a pious widow to a holy maid. Her depiction with braided tresses, shining with gold, and adorned with bracelets and twisted rings, copied the appearance of Anglo-Saxon aristocratic ladies. She possessed warlike qualities prized by a Germanic culture. She was accompanied by the eagle, the raven and the wolf, animals associated with war and slaughter and present in pagan war literature as companions of Odin. Her devotion was to God rather than to Jewish law (which we saw in the Jewish Judith's observance of dietary rules, fasting, and prayer). The appropriation of the Old Testament story was facilitated by three components: a strong female presence in the Anglo-Saxon experience, the primary role of Warrior in society, and the reverence Christianity held appropriate for women who pursued celibacy for religious reasons.

Contrary to the interpretation of most nineteenth-century scholars, who
filtered material through their own Victorian expectations of women, there was a
strong female presence in Anglo-Saxon society. Women were not universally
subordinate. Recent feminist scholarship has re-examined the surviving literature
and found female points-of-view and portrayal of women’s values in, for example,
Beowulf, the poems narrated (and perhaps composed) by women (e.g., Wulf and
Fadwacer, The Wife’s Lament), and the riddles in the Exeter Book which depend on
double entendres yet affix no shame or degradation to women with sexual
experience. The remnants of pre-Christian belief that can be found point to
goddesses as well as gods in the English pantheon. We can infer from the
representation of women in literature and historical tales, and in the references in

18See, for example, Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, editors, New
Readings on Women in Old English Literature (Bloomington: Indiana University

19 I’m told a certain object grows/
in the corner, rises and expands, throws up/
a crust. A proud wife grasped/
that boneless wonder, the daughter of a king/
covered that swollen thing with her garment.
(Answer: dough)
Kevin Crossley-Holland, The Anglo-Saxon World (Oxford: Oxford University Press,
1988), 246-47.

20Bede mentions . . . that the name Easter . . . derives from the goddess Eostre,
for whom the English named the fourth month, Fosturmonath. Bede also states that
the preceding month, Hredmonath, corresponding to our March, took its name from
festivities honouring a goddess Hreda, while the eve of 25 December was celebrated
as Modranect, or ‘night of the Mothers.’ John Niles, "Pagan Survivals and Popular
Belief," in The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature, ed. Malcolm
pagan charms and prayers to female deities, that an Anglo-Saxon woman of this period, while her role was not valued comparably to that of a man, was at least far ahead of her granddaughters' social position some ten or more centuries later. Frank Stenton's writings are a benchmark in Anglo-Saxon scholarship; his study of medieval place-names in England revealed a high occurrence of female ownership and/or government. Examination of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles reveal rulers such as Scæburh and Aethelflaed: women who ruled in their own right, fortified cities and commanded armies. Even setting aside these examples of women acting "like men," the alternate female role of freoduwebbe, or "peaceweaver," was a valued one. Eve and Mary were both portrayed in this manner. Women could unite families and peoples in kinship through marriage; when we remember the importance laid on family relationships, we can see that a marriage was more than an economic or political alliance.

As a manufacturer of peace and transmitter of culture, the lady (original meaning: loaf-maker) was a counterpart to the lord (original: loaf-giver). The two roles were regarded more as complementary ones than as one necessary function and its optional auxiliary. The lord had obligations as a giftgiver; he was titled "gold-friend," "ring-" or "treasure-giver." The lady would bestow these gifts ceremonially, as we see Wealtheow do in Beowulf, and even would create many of the richly

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embroidered gifts presented to bishops, nobles and other kings. Pauline Stafford reminds us that in these times the relegation of household tasks to women did not denigrate the role or the person. The household was the model for government, as well as its center, and the wife handled family resources and presided over their use.22 Judith encompasses both these roles as she provides resources to the besieged Bethulians (access to water) and bears gifts to her people, the war trophies of Holofernes’ head and canopy.

The arrival of Christian missionaries in the sixth century put an end to pagan practices such as polygamy and female infanticide; Christian beliefs reinforced the existing strength of women’s position. The perceived ensoulment of women made them, at least theoretically, the equals of men before god, and the founding of religious communities provided opportunities for learning and service for women as well as men. Monasteries were often founded in pairs—male and female—with government frequently given to an abbess who wielded appreciable secular as well as spiritual power.23 We can consider in this context Caedmon’s Vision: Caedmon worked as a stableman; upon receiving his miraculous ability to compose song, he was taken to the abbess "who ordered him to give an account of his dream." (Note the authority of the abbess.)

22 Pauline Stafford, Queens, Concubines and Dowagers: The King’s Wife in the Middle Ages (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1983), 28.

The Abbess was delighted that God had given such grace to the man, and advised him to abandon secular life and adopt the monastic state. And when she had admitted him into the Community as a brother, she ordered him to be instructed in the events of sacred history.\textsuperscript{24}

The Christian Judith was presented as a holy virgin, rather than a Jewish widow. Her identification as God’s handmaiden paralleled the spiritual marriage nuns had with Christ. In a culture stressing the importance of family bonds, the identification as a bride of Christ added special resonance to the life of a nun. Outside the convent women were wives and mothers. As wives they participated in marriage as a religious covenant, which implied responsibilities from as well as to a husband. Nancy Huston has suggested that in a warrior society, the roles of Warrior and Mother were prized equally, in such a manner that the qualities required for each were assumed to be the same. The roles of Warrior and Mother were equivalent but mutually exclusive. Huston suggests that as mothers (life-givers) women were excluded from death-dealing activities. She notes that as virgins they were not. In literature at least, childless women were permitted action of heroic deeds. She cites the fights between maidens at the Libyan festival of Auses (Her. IV.180) and the Nibelungen episode where Gunther robs Brunhilde of her strength by deflowering her.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{24}Crossley-Holland, \textit{The Anglo-Saxon World}, 162.

Male or female, the Warrior persona was a familiar and beloved staple in Germanic stories, even after the christianizing of English society. Anglo-Saxons identified strongly with their Germanic forbears; they took pride in culture shared in common with the Vikings and even assimilated Christianity in a manner in keeping with their pagan culture.\textsuperscript{26} The Dream of the Rood portrays Christ as a young warrior, stripped for action and wrestling with evil for supremacy; the cross played the role of retainer familiar from heroic tales. Andreas speaks of the twelve apostles as "thanes" who supported their lord and went in search of glory. Judith can be viewed as part of a Christian tradition, the miles Dei who fought for Christ and against evil as incarnated in heathen soldiers. In The Battle of Maldon, a historical poem based on a true event, the English earl Byrthnoth makes a speech symbolic of the country's heroic code, while referring to religious differences with the enemies.

Then Byrthnoth spoke . . . /
break the bitter news to your people/
that a noble earl and his troop stand over here—/
guardians of the people and of the country, the home/
of Ethelred, my prince—who will defend this land/
to the last ditch. We'll sever the heathens' heads/
from their shoulders. We would be shamed greatly/
if you took our tribute and embarked without battle/
since you've barged so far and brazenly into this country.\textsuperscript{27}

The proud defiance towards a heathen invader, the refusal against

\textsuperscript{26}In early English religious books, for example, artistic decoration mimics that used by smiths on armor and jewelry made for warriors. Patrick Wormald, "Anglo-Saxon Society and Its Literature," in The Cambridge Companion, 4.

\textsuperscript{27}Crossley, The Anglo-Saxon World, 12-13.
tremendous odds to surrender, and the punishment threatened against the Danish enemy all parallel the circumstances of Judith and the Assyrians. *Maldon* was composed within a few decades of the *Judith* poem, in which Holofernes was referred to frequently as a heathen: "heathen man" (line 986), "heathen dog" (line 111a), "hated heathen warrior" (lines 178b-179a). The inference of the Anglo-Saxons that their case paralleled that of the Chosen People of Israel was not a new one, as we saw in Aelfric's homily above. In a letter from the religious leader Alcuin to Ethelred, King of Northumbria, sent in 793, the writer had observed:

> Lo, it is nearly 350 years that we and our fathers have inhabited this most lovely land, and never before has such terror appeared in Britain as we now have suffered from a pagan race . . . . Foxes pillage the chosen vine, the heritage of the Lord has been given to a people not his own, and where there was the praise of God, are now the games of the Gentiles; the holy festivity has been turned to mourning.\(^{28}\)

It was all the easier to portray a woman as a defender of folk and family because of the traditional Germanic trope of Valkyrie-like women. Helen Damico calls this tendency by Old English poets to present strong, death-carrying women the "Valkyrie Reflex."\(^{29}\) Saints Elena and Juliana, as well as Judith, were portrayed in poetry with the cluster of attributes associated with Valkyries: beauty, radiant appearance (either brilliant with beauty, or with shining golden ornaments, or both),

\(^{28}\)Ibid., 186.

\(^{29}\)Helen Damico, "The Valkyrie Reflex in Old English Literature," *New Readings on Women*, 176.
strength, and wisdom. Except for the first, these were all found in the heroes’ tales as well.30

Anglo-Saxons could, and did, use war and battle within a Christian perspective as a metaphor for the struggle of virtue against vice. The scene of a woman battling against a seemingly invincible male was especially fitting as a moral example of what faith could do: the triumph of a woman in a male milieu made manifest the superior power of a Christian god. This aspect of Christianity was cherished in the besieged centuries from the mid-700s well into the eleventh century. The repeated invasion of heathen tribes from the north made possible the justification of war by placing it in terms of fighting for God’s glory. In this way, the nonviolent religion of Christ and the lives of "peaceweaving" women could be portrayed as compatible with scenes of slaughter and violence. This struggle between virtue and vice was thrown into greater relief when embodied in opposite genders and in a virginal Judith and the drunken and lecherous Holofernes.

The setting of the Judith story was especially attractive to a warrior society. The Bible story was set in a field of battle; however, the Bible version contained no battle scenes. The city walls protected Bethulia from attack; the Assyrians besieged the city, and they fled when Holofernes’ head was displayed on its walls. In the Anglo-Saxon poem Judith, on the other hand, the dénouement of the tale (i.e., the discovery of Holofernes’ murder) was delayed till both Judith and her male comrades

30Ibid., 180.
had demonstrated their courage. The poem included a detailed and loving
description of combat, with its blows, battle-cries, and the Anglo-Saxon
accompaniment of raven, eagle and wolf.

Besides Judith's embodiment of English womanhood and her display of
martial traits, as a chaste maiden she was able to supply a model not possible through
male heroes. The ideal of celibate women, whom Jerome describes as having
attained spiritual "manhood" by denial of their biological identities, was brought to
England with other Christian beliefs. Literature of homilies and saints' lives
contributed to a tradition of stories with female protagonists, and their choice of
chastity or even dedication of virginity to Christ often played a significant role in
miraculous feats of endurance or strength. As the Jewish heroine was favored in part
because of her continued identification with her dead husband, the Christian Judith
found favor through her role as handmaiden of the Lord and in her likeness, through
chastity, to the Virgin Mary.

Judith, in fact, was grouped with Mary and Eve as the three major Biblical
heroines. All three were depicted with martial energy and speech. The role of Mary
in defeating evil (in a battle metaphor) and of Eve as a retainer/thane of God were
important ones. Mary was shown in a lyric for Advent service speaking to Joseph as
a caring and equal partner:

Why are you mourning,
why are you so sad? I have never found/
fault in you, nor thought you guilty/
of the least offence, and yet you speak/
as if you were full of every sin/
and of crimes.\textsuperscript{31}

while the Anglo-Saxon representation of Eve was a more sympathetic and rational
one than usually found; Eve was tempted to the fruit of the tree of knowledge by the
wish to become a more worthy thane to God. It seems likely that the Germanic
perception of women and their roles contributed to these portrayals. We also see,
in medieval Germany and England, a strengthening iconography of Mary as Queen
of Heaven. By the tenth century, she is presented in art and song with scepter and
crown, retainers, and obligations of loyalty to God and from her worshippers.\textsuperscript{32}

There seems to be no inherent societal fear at this time, as would appear
later, of women as snares of Satan and blocks to man’s salvation. The religious writer
Aldhelm, in his prose work \textit{De Virginitate}, located the danger to men from women
in the men’s own attraction to evil. He makes a point of Judith’s use of jewelled
ornaments and beautiful clothes; his interpretation was that Judith \textit{in herself} was no
danger to Holofernes. It was his heathen lust and attraction to material wealth and
power that made him vulnerable.\textsuperscript{33}

With these three factors—a heroic action by a woman, its situation in a battle
setting with trappings of war, and the illustration of strength available through faith

\textsuperscript{31}Crossley-Holland, \textit{The Anglo-Saxon World}, 199.

\textsuperscript{32}Stafford, \textit{Queens, Concubines and Dowagers}, 27.

\textsuperscript{33}Huppé, \textit{The Web of Words}, 140.
in God—the apocryphal story of Judith was exceptionally amenable to appropriation by Germanic Christians besieged by pagan tribes. They could understand the heroism, combat, and chastity in terms of their own experiences and of traditional secular stories and religious images. In *Judith*, we see all the elements of popular Anglo-Saxon epic come together: stoic behavior, national heroism, bravery in combat, devotion to God, and female virtue. Judith’s accomplishment spoke of religious fervor and national pride. Homilies and letters for public consumption presented her as an ideal of faith and courage. Anglo-Saxons used her story to foster love of country and God in both men and women; their borrowing was facilitated by the ability women had then to occupy many roles in society. Studying the differing versions of Judith enlightens us to a cultural situation in a way which, as Sheila Dietrich notes,34 makes our labelling of the "Dark Ages" seem inappropriate and uninformed.

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JUDITH AS FEMME FATALE

Throughout the following centuries, Judith remained popular as a representation of good over evil. Her image was sculpted, painted, represented in poetry and song, even displayed in needlework. Dante placed her in the white rose of his Paradiso—the only woman named who was not there simply as mother, wife or martyr. In the Renaissance, almost every artist painted or sculpted her story, some of them several times. Fifteenth-century Florence’s emblem of civic virtue was Donatello’s statue of Judith slaying Holofernes. Protestants of the Reformation found her story useful as they searched the Bible for moral tales to be used in lieu of priestly teaching. Artistic representations of Judith were not as frequent in the Age of Reason, when classical images and rational behavior became more popular themes, but the story remained a familiar one, and Judith had the name of a heroine.

As the end of the nineteenth century approached, changes in society effected changes in representations of Judith. She still appeared in paintings, illustrations and poetry, but from a position of exceptional virtue and courage, she moved to an example of exceptional viciousness and even perversity. Hermann Halm created a sculpture of Judith with a bleeding head in her lap. Carl Schwalbach painted a nude, low-browed Judith with a scimitar in one hand and the head of Holofernes in the other. The battlefield, maidservant, Jewish and Assyrian armies, and, significantly,
God himself, disappeared from the story. Almost all details identifying her as an individual were gone, except the sword used to slay the general and, sometimes, Holofernes himself. Holofernes was usually placed in a corner of a picture (or in the background of the tale) or was present only as a decapitated head which was the focus of Judith’s attention. Judith’s figure was static and commanding, imperious and threatening in its isolation. In paintings she stood alone, usually naked or only partially clothed, hair unbound, and assuming postures of triumph or sensual pleasure. Many artists highlighted her racial identity, giving her Semitic features and brunette coloring.\textsuperscript{35} Her beauty became voluptuous and almost animal-like. It would be hard to find a greater contrast in images of the same character. Earlier Judiths were heroic and self-contained widows, whether as Botticelli’s widow returning home with Holofernes’ head in her maidservant’s basket and a sad expression on her face, or Caravaggio’s determined and competent executioner, steeling herself to an ugly deed. The late nineteenth-century Judiths were shown free from links to God or people, larger than life, with a beauty that was threatening in its voluptuosity.

Joseph Kestner identifies six factors involved in the mythical conception of women and its presentation: 1) the myth chosen, 2) the particular episode of the myth depicted, 3) elements which are implied by the representation, 4) use of typological detail, 5) repetition of a certain myth, and 6) omission of narrative

\textsuperscript{35}A dark complexion and hair color conveniently followed the convention that fairness denoted a fair heart, while dark beauty covered darkness of soul.
elements.\textsuperscript{36} We can use these factors to analyze mythic presentations of Judith in fin-de-siècle Europe.

The character of Judith, rather than being depicted to teach or remind us of a story, was one in a series of beautiful, headhunting women (#1, the myth chosen). The Book of Judith was twelve chapters long. While earlier artists omitted most of the Bible story, still their depictions included or implied Judith's presence in an Assyrian camp and her identity with Bethulia (by means of her accompanying maidservant).\textsuperscript{37} Her act was placed in a context of war and danger; it was one of preservation, of nation as well as chastity. Modern painters stripped her image of narrative detail, generally portraying her simply with a sword and a decapitated head (#2, particular episode of the myth depicted). Some paintings included the blood

\textsuperscript{36}Joseph A. Kestner, \textit{Mythology and misogyny: the social discourse of nineteenth-century British classical-subject painting} (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 68. His illustrative example is the story of Ariadne and Theseus and its use in nineteenth-century classical art. Artists repeatedly chose Ariadne as a representational figure, rather than, say, Atalanta or Demeter. She was portrayed at the time of her abandonment by Theseus, not as a Cretan princess or the consort of Dionysus. Their paintings conveyed the message of a woman abandoned running mad or desperate, and typological detail, such as unbound hair or wild and flying drapery underlined this message. The story was repeated until Ariadne became a figure for the archetypal abandoned woman, much as Ophelia was, and narrative elements, such as Ariadne's assisting Theseus in the labyrinth, were left out.

\textsuperscript{37}In view of the fact that the Bible story places the maidservant outside the tent during Holofernes' murder, her presence in paintings deserves attention. The presence of the maidservant, shown with varying ages, postures, and emotions, served several purposes, one being the reminder, through coordination of efforts between her and Judith, of the community of Bethulia they were serving.
"JUDITH"

Benjamin Constant
flowing from the head, some showed her naked and/or in bed with the corpse. Implied by their representations was Judith's sexual activity with the enemy general\(^{38}\) and the danger of sexually active women\(^{39}\) (#3, elements implied by the representation). Typological detail (#4) included unbound hair, partial or total nudity, Semitic features, and Oriental luxury in dress and jewels. The repetition of this image (#5) and its reinforcement in similar portrayals of Delilah and, especially, Salome, obscured the role played by Judith as savior of her people and moved identification of the helpless and profaned corpse of Holofernes towards those of heroes like Samson or John the Baptist. Judith/Salome became the archetypal castrating woman. (The identification of brains with semen from primitive times\(^{40}\) persisted into Victorian times; even scientific thought embraced such beliefs about

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\(^{38}\) Jean Lahor articulated this belief in his 1886 poem:

> Judith has chosen to devote her body to her country;
> She has prepared her breasts to tempt her dreadful lover...
> In the arms of her triumphant master, suddenly
> She has cried out, closing her eyes as if she were a child.
> Afterward the man, relaxed, descends into a bestial slumber.


\(^{39}\) "The sexual instinct in the civilized woman is, I believe, tending to atrophy." (Emphasis added.) Harry Campbell, a London pathologist, from his book Differences in the Nervous Organization of Man and Woman (1891), in Dijkstra, 119.

male and female physiological differences. Narrative points such as Judith’s prayer to the Lord, consultation with the elders, and her triumphal song with the Hebrews were ignored and, eventually, unknown (#6). Audiences were left solely with an image of murderous beauty. Fin-de-siècle Judiths were almost uniformly portrayed in their threatening aspects, aspects shared with other favorite subjects such as Salome, Turandot and Delilah. Conflated with these women, her character was narrowed down like theirs to that of a viraginous and dangerous persona. Arthur Symons expressed the perceived ubiquity of Judith/Salome figures in his 1897 poem "The Dance of the Daughters of Herodias:"

They dance, the daughters of Herodias/
With their eternal, white, unfauling feet/
And always, when they dance, for their delight/

41 The "vital fluids theory" espoused by many scientists and doctors held that the vital, or life, energy in any human was finite. The menstrual and reproductive cycles in women drained energy that was used in men for imaginative and intellectual activity, who in turn could be depleted by excessive sexual activity. By this theory, any woman tempting man into physical relations replicated, though in a lesser degree, the acts of Judith and Salome. For a fuller explanation, see Dijkstra, Idols of Perversity, 169-73.

42 The glittering, dangerous, larger-than-life evil women of literature and art may have filled the same need that resurgent adventure novels did, which came to new life during this same period of the 1880s and -90s. Andrew Lang could have been speaking of the function of art as he wrote of the adventure novel, "As the visible world is measured, mapped, tested, weighted, we seem to hope more and more that a world of invisible romance may not be far from us. . . . I can believe that an impossible romance . . . might still win us from the newspapers, and the stories of shabby love, and cheap remorses, and commonplace failures." Quoted in Karl Beckson, London in the 1890s: A Cultural History (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 357.
Always a man's head falls because of them.\textsuperscript{43}

Why was this theme so popular, being painted again and again with little variation? In an 1892 book, \textit{Some Jewish Women}, the author tells us that pictures of Judith "fairly jostle one another" in European galleries.

Indeed, at every turn you are sure to behold this beautiful, terrible woman, with her purple sandals, her diadem, her golden bracelets, her eyes that draw forth your very soul, and, hanging at her side, not the beaded purse and \textit{bonbonnière}, but—O how horrible!—the bloody Gorgon head of the enemy.\textsuperscript{44}

The story of Judith, since it was quickly abandoned, obviously had little meaning for the painters and consumers of art. Her menacing image, however, struck a chord with the audience of this time. The nineteenth-century public, under the assault of scientific theory and the industrial revolution, was experiencing a loss of faith and rapidly moving towards a purely secular world. Values taught in Bible stories were not seen as central to the functioning of society, nor were story-pictures themselves valued as before. The Aesthetic movement decried the use of a picture or novel to tell a story and wanted instead evocation of moods or emotion, much as music could do. Decadents believed all experience was beneficial, especially forbidden ones, and portrayed such experiences in art and literature. As religion's influence faded from the lives of men and women, the vacuum was filled by dependence on science and

\textsuperscript{43}\textit{Ibid.}, 151.

\textsuperscript{44}Zirndorf, \textit{Some Jewish Women}, 13-14. Tellingly, Zirndorf, a Jew writing for a Jewish audience, states his aversion for this particular character and her representations.
art. Victorian times saw the advent of the steam engine, rail travel, telegraph, telephone, photography, widespread use of gaslight and electricity, and the birth of modern medicine. They also included evolutionary theory, social Darwinism, suffragism, the anarchist movement and the rupture of existing societal and economic order by the Industrial Revolution. The approach of a new century seemed to underscore the coming end of a known order. "Fin de siècle, fin du globe," ran the saying. "Victorian" became a synonym for "old-fashioned" while Victoria was still on the throne (Queen Victoria was in her 70s during the 1890s, and people knew an era was quickly approaching its end); progressive Englishmen and women preferred to be called "modern." Values once held—the Biblical truths of pre-Darwinian times—were no longer meaningful, and the pivot on which the Victorian world rotated—the ideal of the Angel in the House—was being undermined by the "New Woman" of the 1890s. In England, especially, feminism was militant in form, culminating in attacks on government and private property, including, significantly, the slashing of paintings depicting women in traditional erotic manner. The New Woman's ideas and actions were perceived as being of a piece with those of anarchists, socialists, and other hazards to established order, and, demonized on canvas, she could receive the anger of the reactionary.

Richard von Krafft-Ebing associated social problems with sexual morality in his *Psycopathia Sexualis* (1886, English translation 1892):

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45 Beckson, *London in the 1890s*, xii.
Periods of moral decadence in the life of a people are always contemporaneous with times of effeminacy, sensuality, and luxury. These conditions can only be conceived as occurring with increasing demands upon the nervous system, which must meet these requirements. As a result of increase of nervousness, there is an increase of sensuality, and since this leads to excesses among the masses, it undermines the foundations of society—the morality and purity of family life.  

Judith, in her image as death-dealing temptress, was easily accommodated to this misogynistic conception of women.

The latter part of the century was the time when relations between man and woman became popularly known as the "Battle of the Sexes." Art was increasingly created by men for male enjoyment, rather than as didactic tools of religion or morality. These men had grown up under a Cult of Femininity, with strict division of abilities and activities. Social tumult of the latter half of the century awakened them to the fact that, once women were given the ability to create and color men's emotional and moral lives, they also had the power to withhold or destroy them. Appropriation of male duties by the other sex threatened social order, and even mankind's evolutionary status. Scientists of the time had "proven" that women were incapable of intellectual effort, originality of thought, or higher moral decisions. While medieval England may have believed women to be inferior, it at least did not doubt their humanity. Scientists of the last century spoke of men and women as different species; Charles Darwin himself taught that women were lower on the

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evolutionary scale (as were savages and inferior races such as Jews and Africans).
While Aelfric and Alcuin spoke of humans as male and female, scientific writers Cesare Lombroso and Darwin (and later Sigmund Freud) represented them as male versus female—an image that was distinctly illustrated in the art of the epoch. Judith seemed tailor-made for exploitation of this theme.

Artists dipped into mythology and came up with sirens, harpies, and nymphs with which to portray the dangers of female domination: individuals such as Clytemnestra, Medusa, and Helen of Troy were bywords for sexual betrayal. Arthurian myth provided Guinevere and Morgan le Fay. From the Bible came the stories of Delilah, Herodias, Salome and, of course, Judith: opportunities to show beautiful women’s wantonness and deception. At the same time, Lombroso and his disciple Max Nordau wrote instructive descriptions of the appearance and behavior of these women. Criminal or deviant women were deficient in civilized behaviors and could be spotted by their masculine appearance and manners.

In general the moral physiognomy of the born female criminal approximates strongly to that of the male. The atavistic diminution of secondary sexual characteristics which is to be observed in the anthropology of the subject, shows itself once again in the psychology of the female criminal, who is excessively erotic, weak in maternal feeling, inclined to dissipation, astute and audacious, and dominates weaker beings sometimes by suggestion, at others by muscular force; while her love of violent exercise, her vices, and even her dress, increase her resemblance to the sterner sex.47

Franz von Stuck painted Judith as if using Lombroso as a text. A muscular, small-

47Cesare Lombroso, from The Female Offender, in West, Fin de Siècle, 88.
"JUDITH"

Franz von Stuck
breasted woman looms, smiling, over a supine Holofernes, hosting the massive shaft of a two-handed sword like a giant erection. Her low brow and feral smile attest her atavism. Other artists dutifully painted Judith as a criminal type, portraying strong and imposing figures with muscular arms and unwomanly faces. Benjamin Constant showed her naked to the waist, holding a sword behind her back the better to display both her breasts and her strong arms and shoulders. F. Humphry Woolrych painted Judith clothed, but in a strapless gown showing her substantial torso, with a sword resting across her loins like a substitute phallus. Judith was almost invariably shown alone, or with a head or dead body, at most. (Victorian taste in photographs or paintings from life were for family portraits or groups of friends, especially for women subjects, who were painted with their children to the point of cliché.)

Shearer West illustrates the power of the prevailing images of intimidating womanhood by means of the John Singer Sargent portrait of Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth (1889). The Sargent portrait shows Terry as Lady Macbeth crowning herself, laden with the earlier noted characteristics of imposing size, flowing hair and clothing, and Oriental luxury (the robe she wore was covered with thousands of cochineal beetle wings). According to an article in Punch and an earlier oil study by Sargent, however, the Terry interpretation of Lady MacBeth had instead focused on her devotion and domesticity. Sargent originally showed the Lady greeting her husband as he arrived home; Punch remarked:
Miss Ellen Terry's reasoning about her impersonation of Lady Macbeth seems to have been this—"The grim Tragedy Queen with whom we have been accustomed to associate Lady Macbeth, could never have been the woman to whom Macbeth was so devoted that he writes to her whenever he has a moment's leisure." 48

Later it became fashionable for women of the upper classes to be painted as femmes fatales, as in Sargent's "Madame X" or Albert von Keller's "Baronesse B." The term "femme fatale" itself was coined in this time period (1880-1900). Although eventually debased to the point of meaninglessness, becoming a stereotypical figure in early twentieth century melodrama and film, the femme fatale was born in high art such as opera (Carmen, Turandot), poetry (Laus Veneris, La Belle Dame Sans Merci), and Royal Academy art. Artists depicting women in this way showed familiarity with modern thought and an understanding of the most recent scientific principles. In view of these depictions, the common assumption that women were unindividuated creatures, finding their identity in the male—"If you know one, you know them all, with but few exceptions" 49—was far from reassuring, though it explained their constant search for personality and intellect through man, even by destructive means. "'Each of us in the end is a Samson,' I thought, 'and in the end, willingly or not, is betrayed by the woman he loves . . . .','" wrote Leopold von Sacher-Masoch in 1870. (Sacher-Masoch was widely read by intellectuals and admired by Emile Zola, Camille Saint-Saëns, and Victor Hugo, among others.)

48 Ibid., p. 87.

49 Max Nordau, Paradoxes (1885), quoted by Dijkstra, Idols of Perversity, 129.
In a broader context, the shift from understanding Judith as a paradigm to that of perceiving her as a threat reflected the shift in contemporary mores regarding war. The Crimean War in 1851 started the transformation of war in the popular mind from a patriotic challenge to a faceless and monstrous force. War, like social progress and economic functions, was explained in biological terms as an organic failure in the societal make-up. In this sense, war and violence were signs of a breakdown in the individual nation or race.\textsuperscript{50} Additionally, a country’s primary war victims were fixed in the mind as young men. No longer was it probable, as in earlier times, that any particular community would have to defend its homes or suffer invasion from foreign soldiers. Governments now regimented young men and sent them to foreign parts, often to other continents, to meet similar regiments from other nations. Women were home and safe. War therefore threatened men; at this time we see artists personifying death as female, as well as the traditional elderly man or skeleton with a scythe.\textsuperscript{51} The idea of a woman-warrior defending hearth and home, even through inspiration from God, was far removed from popular experience, and the presentation of such a heroine would have had no meaning for the masses. A woman, especially a beautiful woman, with an instrument of war obviously had her own agenda, one that would be suspect due to woman’s moral deficits.

\textsuperscript{50} West, \textit{Art and Society}. 24-25.

\textsuperscript{51} Arnold Bocklin, Felicien Rops, and Oskar Kokoschka were among artists of the time who portrayed death in this way.
Man is a very fit person to exercise physical force, because he is also a morally perceptive being, and combines the two forces, at their highest in combination, in his own personality. If he has produced Samsons and Sandows, he has also produced Platos and Tolstoys—moral giants as well as physical giants.\textsuperscript{52}

A woman, prone as she was to fits of impulse and emotion and morally undeveloped, was not to be trusted with physical force.

Judith embodied a genetic threat as well as the danger of physical injury. Her images at this time often portrayed her ethnicity and "foreignness." As a result of widespread action against Jews in eastern Europe and Russia during the 1880s, a rising tide of Jewish immigrants fled to the West. In western countries the popular image of Jewish populations became that of foreign, regressive beings. Both Bram Stoker's Dracula and George du Maurier's Svengali (from Trilby), were described as having Semitic features; additionally, they both came from the East (symbolic of the past and the threat of degeneration). The sexual threat posed by Jewish women was reflected in art, e.g., in Gustav Klimt's Judith I/Salome, with her 19th-century hairstyle and Sephardic coloring and features, coupled with an orgasmic clutching of a decapitated head.\textsuperscript{53}

Women and Jews, or, in fact, any inhabitants outside of Northern Europe,


embodied the threat of degeneration or "devolution." It was a scientific and popular tenet that man, northern European man at any rate, symbolized the apex of evolution, while females were lower on the scale, on a level with the less-evolved savage and nonwhite races. Increased immigration and the dangers of intermarriage imperiled the position of Anglo-Saxon males. Once the idea of a hierarchy of creatures having God at its apex lost its hold and an understanding of humanity at the mercy of an impersonal, unstoppable process won supremacy, the human progress made through the ages could not be taken as certain to continue. The immigration of lower races and the static evolutionary position of women, whose separation from men widened as time increased, created a threat to the security of the status quo. In Woman Adrift, a 1912 compilation of arguments against suffragism, Harold Owen wrote:

A race of men born of several generations of mothers competing with men and each other in the struggle for life . . . and a race of men, moreover, who are no longer the protectors of women, but their rivals and "equals," is not likely to be a race of men that has altered for the better . . . .

This period saw the rise of eugenics societies and widespread belief in Malthusian scenarios. Judith became an icon of the threat to future humanity and a focus for the fear of contemporary men.

Judith's image had thus traveled along a parabola: from representing a small embattled minority surrounded by outside threats, to her epitome of hero embodying

\[^{54}\text{Owen, Woman Adrift, 54.}\]
civic, religious, and womanly virtues, she became an incarnation of the threat to
civilization from within its ranks. Her sword turned from a symbol of defense and
justice to an instrument of degradation. The image had traversed the possibilities of
use, then its popularity sputtered and virtually disappeared in the first quarter of this
century. Though her story has been used sporadically in the twentieth century as a
symbol of virtue and strength (for example, in dance by Martha Graham or opera by
Sigfried Matthias), the iconic stature of Judith has never been recaptured. Whether
due to changing tastes, modern societal fragmentation or the impact of feminism,
Judith has lost her former stature as an image bespeaking feminine power.
CONCLUSION

The story of a woman as assassin elicited responses varying according to the perspective of its audience. Exploring attitudes towards women in each generating culture to explain the variety of images has proved successful. A strongly patriarchal society, which supported its segregation of gender roles with religion, used religious explanations to justify Judith's action. In a culture with a long tradition of active women (Tacitus described Germanic tribes as having a high regard for their women), Anglo-Saxon writers spoke of Judith with unadulterated admiration and used her as a pattern of behavior for both sexes. In Victorian Europe, where the sexes were believed to be opposed to each other in evolutionary struggle, and in a milieu controlled by males, an armed woman was painted in a purely condemnatory light. There is consistent correspondence between the light in which an aggressive woman is shown and the actual position of women in each period.

Judith the Jewess was created in a time needing Jewish heroes. She did not have any foretypes in prediasporic Jewish literature (with the possible exception of Jael, who can be discounted as a gentile) and quickly fell out of favor. The patriarchal milieu which constructed her story created a female hero to render greater the humiliation of their enemy and demonstrate more effectively the power of God. They also needed to include layer on layer of reassurance that Judith was
a fit representative by emphasizing her chastity, favor with God and loyalty to Bethulia. Even with the accretions of virtuous behavior, the character of Judith supported scrutiny for only a short time. Any surprise at finding a resourceful and courageous woman in Israel's tradition is lessened by the brevity of her popular success. Her behavior could be excused by pleading favor in the service of the Lord, but it required too much apology to remain an effective example.

Early Christians had witnessed for themselves the strong will and physical courage of female martyrs. There was a tradition in the young Church of circulating written and oral histories of their sufferings and death. Combined with this experience was the Christian reverence for sexual abstinence: Jerome, among other church fathers, taught that women could, by abjuring sexual activity, empower themselves both in the flesh and in the spirit. When these beliefs were carried to England and joined with the Germanic respect for women, the story of Judith could meet with approval and even enthusiasm. The first Christians of England had grandparents who turned to wise women for advice and prophecy and expected their fallen warriors to be borne away by fierce Valkyries; they did not have the distaste felt by Hellenistic Jews at the thought of a lone woman facing an enemy with a sword. Almost every element found in the Judith tale could be found in female characters from Germanic sagas and myths, while her original, the Judith of the Biblical Middle East, flirted dangerously with behavior of the ungodly, and her actions in adornment and interaction with a male outside her kinship circle was similar to the
"temple prostitutes" (qudishtu) vehemently criticized in the Old Testament for their sexual worship of Ishtar.

At least the Jewish Judith could be credited with a clearly pure motivation—her town was under threat of the most powerful army in Asia, which had shown intent to destroy all alien religions. Both the Jewish and Christian versions of the story found popularity because of their depiction of a small embattled minority protected by God: both audiences were familiar with this circumstance and drew inspiration from Judith's victory. When social dividing lines were drawn between sexes, rather than between battling armies, the target Judith threatened was perceived as male rather than an invading general. In the nineteenth century, art was created mostly by men, and certainly the controlling arbiters of artistic taste were men. The portrayal of Judith was read in the context of the "Battle of the Sexes," and a well-read individual of the time knew this state was the natural order of things. In this reading, Judith was not satisfied by the death of Holofernes (who was moved to the sidelines in nineteenth-century representation) but acted as a woman searching for the death of a man. The sexual situation, ambiguous to a secularized culture, permitted titillation of the imagination, and Judith remained popular, although to the ultimate perversion of her story.

An investigation of the differences in these representations of a woman who struck down an enemy by her own hand has expanded our understanding of the different attitudes by which the lives, and artistic representations, of women were
shaped. Closely reading the text or painting has elicited details of how women lived and how they were expected to live. Sometimes inspiring, and sometimes a warning, Judith invariably elicited strong reactions from her audiences. Her wide-ranging use among cultures simplifies the decoding of her images. Scripture spoke of her as pious widow, rabbinic commentary accused her of whoredom, Anglo-Saxon homily called her virtuous maiden, and fin-de-siècle artists turned her into a degenerate murderess. All interpretations hinged on her measurement against prevalent sexual behavior, standards not required of male characters. In bringing the bewildering variety of Judiths into a predictable pattern, studying cultural expectations for female behavior has been an instructive method.
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