Three images of Judith

THREE IMAGES OF JUDITH

La Judith de l'Ancien Testament est un personnage complexe, même ambigu: d'une part elle est une veuve chaste et pieuse, de l'autre elle est une menteuse, une séductrice et, ne l'oublions pas, un assassin. En comparant les diverses paraphrases médiévales avec le texte de la *Vulgata*, on peut constater qu'en soulignant tel ou tel trait de sa personnalité, les auteurs l'ont adaptée à leurs propres traditions, littéraires et autres. Dans cet article je me propose d'étudier la façon dont Judith est caractérisée dans trois paraphrases germaniques: dans le poème en ancien anglais, *Judith*, dans le poème en moyen allemand, *Die ältere Judith*, et dans la «Iudyth» des *Middle English Metrical Paraphrases of the Old Testament*.

The biblical Judith is a virtuous, intelligent and beautiful Jewish widow. Through her hand God slays the Assyrian general Holofernes and thus delivers the beleaguered town Bethulia. So as to gain access to the Assyrian camp Judith makes herself as beautiful as she can, then she and her maid leave the town and pretend to be traitors. After having treated her respectfully for four days, Holofernes invites her to a banquet he gives for his officers and asks her to spend the night with him. Judith replies: *omne quod erit ante oculos eius bonum et optimum faciam* (XII.14), dresses and goes to join him. Seeing her standing before him Holofernes' heart is shaken (*cor ... concussum*) and his desire aroused. He is so pleased that he drinks more than he has ever drunk before, so that when the guests have retired and he is alone with Judith he falls into a drunken stupor: thus Judith can behead him in peace and flee back to Bethulia, carrying his head with her as a trophy.

> Suspectam te habeo; credo nocere venis.
> Lascivi risus, ardentis nutus ocelli
> Et tua garrulitas displicuere mihi. [1]

Apart from being the words of an eleventh-century monk vituperating «woman» and warning his brothers against this

deceitful creature, they might have been those of a distrustful Assyrian soldier on seeing how the saintly woman bewitches his leader. The Old Testament heroine is an ambiguous character with traits both of Mary and Eve. In the writings of exegetes like Ambrose, Jerome, Pseudo-Augustine and Aldhelm, Judith is a type of Mary or *Ecclesia* or, at least, a paragon of such Christian virtues as true faith and chastity[2]. Jerome sees in her both the victory of *Ecclesia* over the devil and of chastity over lust[3]:

> ⟨...⟩ in which she looked forward to the coming of the Bridegroom. I see her hand armed with the sword and stained with blood. I recognize the head of Holofernes which she has carried away from the camp of the enemy. Here a woman vanquishes men, and chastity beheads lust.

In this tradition, her murdering Holofernes is seen in purely allegorical terms and as such, far from being a sin, it is praiseworthy. But, still within the same tradition, those of her traits which might link her with Eve become embarrassing. Aldhelm and Aelfric put great emphasis on her chastity, but at the same time Aldhelm feels he has to explain that she had not made herself beautiful out of vanity[4], and Aelfric tries to laugh away her lies[5]:

> by no means did she believe he would be deceived, nor otherwise did she think he would get killed, unless her own countenance in its native beauty were contained in corporeal ornaments ⟨...⟩.
>
> Judith had told the bloodthirsty prince that she would lead him into (her town), to her people. In fact it had not been untrue at all what she had told him, when she then carried his head into town and showed it to her people.

To align Judith with Mary or *Ecclesia* the Fathers and their successors emphasized some of her traits and played down others. The same was done by authors whose aims and traditions were different: of the six medieval paraphrases which have survived in the English and German vernacular[6], three are practically literal translations of the Vulgate, whereas in the other three the characterization of Judith has been adapted to their own taste and literary traditions. They are the Old English poem *Judith*, probably written in the second half of the tenth century, the early Middle High German *Lied* usually called *Die ältere Judith* dating from the late eleventh or early twelfth century, and the fourteenth-century "Iudyth" from the *Middle English Metrical Paraphrase of the Old Testament*. To establish which traditions of female

characterization influenced the three authors, I shall look at those passages in which the paraphrases differ from either the *Book of Judith* or the patristic literature. Although any change must needs also affect the characterization of Holofernes, for the purpose of the paper I shall have to concentrate on Judith.

The beginning of the Old English *Judith* is missing and it is still a matter of debate whether the remaining fragment covers a major or minor part of the original account[7]. In the majority of recent criticism it is seen as an *exemplum* for the Christian Anglo-Saxons in their wars against the pagan Danish invaders[8].

Our fragment begins with the fourth day of Judith's presence in the Assyrian camp, and therefore we cannot say how the poet had treated her lying so as to gain access to the Assyrian camp, nor how much weight he had attributed to her putting her make-up on and dressing in her best array. He obviously delights, however, in describing the Assyrians' revelling as disorderly and noisy, with none of the ceremony we find in the formal banquets of *Beowulf*. Moreover, Judith is absent. Swanton suggests that this might be due to the poet's polarization of plot-structure and characterization and that, with Judith not there, "Holofernes' drunkenness is entirely attributable to his own immorality"[9], and Timmer wonders whether it is "to stress the sinfulness of excessive drinking, for the drinking habits of the Danes were notorious"[10]. Whatever the poet's reasons for having Judith be absent from the banquet and having Holofernes fetch her straight to his bed, the effect it has on her characterization is impressive: with one stroke any affinity she might have with Eve is wiped out. She is neither responsible for Holofernes' drinking nor his lechery; she has neither agreed to fornication nor lied. To emphasize the fact that Judith is completely innocent, the poet keeps repeating that Holofernes had her fetched to his couch by his soldiers: *het tha* ⟨...⟩ / *dha eadigan mægth ofstum fetigan*/ *to his bedreste* (34b-36a), *lindwiggende lædan ongunnon / dha torhtan mægth* (42b-43a), *hie tha on reste gebronton*/ ⟨sn⟩ude tha snoteran idese (54b-55a), *Dhæt wæs se halige meowle*/ *gebroht on his burgetelde* (56b-57a).

On the basis of unfortunately not much evidence it is said that the Anglo-Saxons did not approve of violent women[11]. Certainly this poet's restructuring of Judith's prayer results in his Judith being less responsible for the slaying of Holofernes than her Biblical counterpart. In the Vulgate she says, *cum lacrimis* (XIII.6) a short prayer:

confirma me Domine Deus Israhel
et respice in hac hora ad opera
     manuum mearum
ut sicut promisisti Hierusalem ci-
     vitatem tuam erigas
et hoc quod credens per te posse
     fieri cogitavi perficiam.   (XIII.7)

After these words she grabs the sword, asks the Lord for strength and cuts Holofernes' head off. In the Old English poem much more weight is given to the prayer: it is all of 23 half-lines long with hypermetrical lines stressing her plight and indecision. It is also completely integrated into plot-structure and characterization, highly dramatized, and divides the fragment into two distinctive parts:

"Ic the frym̃tha God   *ond* frofre Gæst,
Bearn Alwaldan,   biddan wille
miltse dhinre   me dhearfendre,
Thrynesse Thrym.   Dhearle ys me nu tha
heorte onhæted   *ond* hige geomor,
swythe mid sorgum̃ gedrefed.   Forgif me, swegles Ealdor,
sigor *ond* sothne geleafan, dhæt ic mid dhys sweorde mote
geheawan dhysne morthres bryttan.   Gaunne me minra ge
synta,
Dhearlmod Dheoden gumena: naht⟨e⟩ ic dhinre næfre
miltse dhon maran dhearf⟨e⟩.   Gewrec nu, mintig Drynten,
torhtmod tyres Brytta,   dh*æt* me ys dhus torne on mode,
hate on hrethre minum̃."   Hi tha se hehsta Dema
ædre mid elne onbryrde   (83-95a)

"God of the beginnings, Spirit of comfort, Son of the Ruler of everything, I should like to ask you for your mercy, to me in my need, Majesty of the Trinity. Much is now my heart inflamed, my mind sad and much afflicted with sorrows. Give me, Ruler of Heaven, victory and true faith, so that with this sword I may slay this murderous prince. Grant me my salvation, stern Prince of men: never had I more need of your mercy. Avenge now, mighty Lord, splendid Prince of glory, that which so bitterly lies on my mind, so burningly in my breast." Then the supreme Judge quickly instilled courage into her ⟨...⟩

Judith's hesitation and despair find their full expression in this long and intense prayer[12]. Then God intervenes quickly and directly, instils courage into her, she immediately feels relieved and happily kills Holofernes. From then on the majority of epi-

thets refer to her courage, victory, joy and wisdom. While the "sorrow/joy antithesis ⟨...⟩ can ⟨...⟩ be shown to occur in connexion with standard features of the hagiographical plotstructure"[13], it also emphasizes in this context that it was God who killed Holofernes, that Judith was no more than his instrument. Huppé has come to a similar conclusion which he has derived from other evidence: "By reflecting Judith's superhuman glory in the handmaiden, the poets succeeds in the simple narrative of the return to cast into a softer light the barbarous horror of Judith's slaughter of Holofernes"[14]. That the epithets *Nergendes dheowen* (73b-74a), *Scyppendes mægth* (78a), *Dheo⟨d⟩nes mægth* (165a), *Metodes meowle* (261a) stress her non-responsibility, rather than her typology as Pringle says, will be shown in the following paragraph[15].

By elegantly avoiding any possible connection between Judith and Eve and by making Judith less responsible for this murder, the poet has indeed "whitewashed" her as has been said so often. On the other hand he does not align her with the virgin Saints, and some of her features are regal rather than saintly. This needs further elucidation. While, in the didactic part of his homily, Aelfric links Judith's success directly with her *clænness*, the Old English poet connects it equally directly with her true faith in the first lines of the fragment. We have also seen that, when the Old English poet wants to give weight to a matter he does so by repetition or explicit contrast. Although Judith is contrasted to Holofernes and thus implicitly pure, the poet does not attach enough weight to it to make it explicit: more interested in other aspects of her character, he does not use a single epithet that refers to her chastity. When Schrader states that "she is a virgin in the poem and a widow in the Bible"[16], he therefore must have been influenced by the meaning of *mægth* as found in the *vitae* of virgin Saints. That it does not necessarily mean "virgin" in a heroic poem like *Judith* becomes evident when we look at *Beowulf*: that the *Beowulf* poet was more concerned with virgins than with matrons not being able to wear necklaces (3016b-3021a) is conceivable, that the strength of Grendle's mother should be compared to that of a virgin (1282b-87) is more doubtful, but that Beowulf's mother should be a virgin (942b-46a) makes one wonder. It follows that Judith may be pure, but that the poet is more interested in other aspects of her, among others in her beauty. 10 of the 48 epithets he uses for Judith refer to her appearance: *ides ælfscinu* (14a), *beagum gehlæste* (35b), *hringum gehrodene* (36a), *torhte*

mægth (43a) *beorhte ides* (68b), *wundenlocc* (77b), *wundenlocc* (103b), *golde gefrætwod* (171b), *se beorhte mægth* (254b), *beorhte ides* (340b). While epithets of brightness are often to be understood allegorically for spiritual qualities, references to ornament are not a standard feature of hagiography. Certainly the poet's frequent allusions to it are connected with her characterization in the biblical account. The difference between the two though is striking: while the Vulgate alludes to ornaments in terms of eros and seduction (make-up, be-ribboned locks, slippers that attract Holofernes' attention, XVI.10), the Old English poet avoids any such connotation. To begin with, the poet has already purged his paraphrase from all that might allude to Judith's seduction tactics, and the epithets with which he refers to her ornament are the *golde gehroden* formulas which designate heroic queens and princesses. This latter alignment is strengthened by the fact that his queenly Judith, unlike her biblical homologue, accepts her share of the spoils of war. It follows that the Old English Judith is distinguished from the traditional Saint by her ornament, but that this same distinction does not align her so much with Eve, but with the ''well brought up'' queens and princesses of Anglo-Saxon tradition.

Summarizing, we can say that the characterization of the Old English Judith differs from that in the Vulgate mainly in her having no traits of Eve and in accepting her part of the spoils of war. From patristic tradition she differs in that her chastity is not emphasized and her responsibility for the slaying of Holofernes played down. On the other hand she is aligned partly with the Old English Saints, and partly with the secular, heroic queens: with both she shares emphasis on her wisdom, intelligence and her relative non-violence; with the former she shares her brightness, true faith, her victory over the pagans and her closeness to God; with the latter she has in common that her chastity has no primordial importance, that she is ring-adorned and that she accepts the gifts offered to her. By aligning her with both the religious and secular women of his tradition, the paraphraser has been able to make her unambiguous while maintaining the mixture of secular and religious traits which characterize her in the Vulgate.

The early Middle High German *Ältere Judith* is also a fragment, of which in this case the end is missing. What has been preserved is a short poem of 114 lines, if we do not take into account the last, very probably added, stanza in which an angel tells Judith how to go about killing Holofernes and to flee. Written in

the so-called "Spielmannsstil" it is a sequence of images much in the style of the *chansons de geste* or the *Elder Edda*. It begins with Holofernes' beleaguering of the town, which this poet calls Bathania, and ends with Judith's prayer. Holofernes' first meeting with Judith occurs after 68 lines, which leaves a mere 46 lines for the feast and killing. Holofernes sees her arrive from afar and, immediately struck by her beauty, he knows that he cannot live without her. His servants hurry to carry her into his tent and Judith instantly agrees to marry him, under the condition that he prepare a sumptuous wedding banquet to which his officers are invited. He accepts gladly. At the banquet Judith and her maid Ava pour the wine so generously that Holofernes has to be carried to bed. After which the heroine steals his weapon and prays: "Now help me all-ruling God, who have commanded that I deliver these miserable Christians from the heathens".

Judith is no more of a temptress in this *Lied* than she was in the Old English poem, as the poet makes Holofernes fall in love from a distance. She does not have to lie so as to get access to the Assyrian camp and general but is carried right into Holofernes' tent, nor is there any question of fornicating, but Holofernes wants to marry her. But, if she is not an Eve, she is not a Saint either, there is no mention whatsoever of either her virginity or chaste widowhood. Moreover, she alone is responsible for the party and Holofernes' drinking:

> dô schancti duv gûti iûdith,
> duv zi goti woli digiti.
> su und iri wîb âvâ
> di schanctin wol zi wâri.
> der zenti saz ûf der banc,
> der hêtti din win an dir hant.
> dô dranc holoferni,
> di burc di habit er gerni,
> durch des wîbis ⟨clûgi⟩
> er wart des wînis mûdi
>   Den cunic drûc min slâffin,
> iûdith duv stal im daz wâffin ⟨...⟩.[19]　　　　　　(182-193)

Then the good Judith, who much entreated God, she and her woman Ava poured to drink in truth. The one sitting at the end of the bench had the wine within his reach. Then Holofernes drank, the town he would have liked to have, through the wit of the woman he became tired with wine. The king was carried to sleep, Judith who stole his weapon ⟨...⟩.

Ehrismann had already noticed the striking similarity between this banquet and that of the *Atlakvitha*[17], in which Guthrún avenges the death of her two brothers at her husband Atli's hand[18]:

> Óvarr Atli—   móthan haftni hann sik drukkit,
> vápn hafthi hann ekki,   varnathit hann vith Guthrúno:
> opt var sá leikr betri,   dhá er thau lint skyldo
> optarr um fathmaz   fyr çthlingom.
>
> Hon beth broddi   gaf blóth at drekka,
> hendi helfússi,   (40-41.3)

Unaware was Atli, he had drunk himself tired, he had no weapon, no defense against Guthrún. Often the game was better when the two very often embraced in front of the noble warriors. She gave the bed blood to drink with the sharp weapon, with her hel-eager hand.

That the German *Nibelungenlied*, which treats of the same matter, has survived in so many copies, shows that the "avenging woman" was also a much appreciated figure in German speaking countries. The poet of the *Ältere Judith* must have been acquainted with this tradition and adapted his biblical matter to it. Seen in this context, Judith's deliberately organizing the party and getting Holofernes drunk becomes less disturbing: in Nordic literature references to an enemy being killed when asleep after a wild party abound, and nowhere is it considered to be immoral. Thus her deceit forms not part of the "deceitfulness of woman", but of the complicated and cruel but "honest" pattern of blood-feud. Nor is her slaying of Holofernes a "moralisch bedenkliche Tat" as Schröder thinks[19]. Although she is not God's instrument as in the Old English poem, nor a Saint as in the patristic writings, she nevertheless carries out what God had commanded her to do as unquestioningly and unerringly as Abraham had done. Moreover, she is aligned with Guthrun. Guthrun, even if called "terrible", is never blamed for having killed her husband, and in the last stanza of the *Atlakvitha* her avenging her brothers is mentioned with admiration. What she did, she was obliged to do (*nauthug*, 35.5), as was Judith (*der mir ... gibôt*, 197). The law of blood-feud and the command of God are equally binding.

Although this characterization of Judith follows a different literary tradition from that of the Old English poem, one that makes her fierce instead of mild, the two paraphrases have some traits in common. Neither follows patristic tradition, which emphasizes her chastity, and both replace any trait she might have

in common with Eve by others that link her with a heroic queen.
As a religious counterpart to Guthrun, Judith is as non-ambi-
guous as her Old English homologue.

The fourteenth-century *Middle English Metrical Paraphrase
of the Old Testament* renders the Vulgate very faithfully; here
and there the author expands a little, very rarely he adds a new
element. The part of "Iudyth" we are comparing (from the ban-
quet of Holofernes on), differs from the biblical story only six
times. Except once, where she exhorts the Hebrew soldiers not to
start plundering before victory is assured, all changes affect the
characterization of Judith. As in the biblical version, the words of
the Middle English Judith make believe that she is prepared to do
whatever Holofernes wants her to, she also dresses for the party,
but here the poet adds that she dressed to *seme fayr in dher syht*
(1458), thus emphasizing the fact that she was out to seduce.
Moreover, when this Judith notices that he is drinking more than
is good for him, she is pleased and immediately engages him in a
conversation the content of which we can only guess from its
result:

> sho made talkying be twyx dhem two
>   tyll he wyst not (wele) what he sayd.
> he bad all men to bed suld go.   (1460)

After everybody has left and Holofernes asks her to come to
bed, she says that she wants to go to her room first:

> Sho sayd *"ser*, I sall be redy
>   wi*th* word *and* werke to wyrke dhi will.
> Bot to my chamber wend will I,
>   and full sone sall I come dhe tyll."   (1461)

After having made Holofernes dismiss his guests, she then
retires to her room with the promise to be back soon. The para-
phraser only later explains that she retired to pray, and thus
makes it look like a case of female delaying tactics. Neither is this
the only passage in which he emphasizes her scheming: when
Holofernes asks her to be merry she accepts the cup of wine
offered to her, but *made semland* and *dranke ryht noyht* (1459).
The paraphraser obviously enjoyed the passages where she sedu-
ces and deceives, to the point of being inspired enough to under-
score this feature of the Vulgate. Only in one more instance does
he change the biblical story: while the biblical Judith offers her
spoils of war to "anathema", his Judith asks the Hebrews to

adorn the temple with them and admonishes them to divide the rest equally among the people. This makes one think of eminently Christian virtues: to give to the Church and be concerned with the welfare of the people is one of the standard formulas in the *vitae* of sanctified queens such as Balthilde, Radegunde, Mathilde and many others[20].

Thus this poet neither tries to smoothe out the ambiguities inherent in the biblical Judith as the Old English and Middle High German poets had done, nor does he follow patristic tradition by aligning her with Mary while explaining away her traits of Eve. On the contrary, in the passage we have looked at it is just her ambiguity he delights in, and predominantly her lying, deceiving and seducing: his heroine has all the taints that have ever been attributed to Eve. In another context I hope to show the significance of the fact that, of the three Germanic paraphrasers of the *Book of Judith*, it is the latest who echoes the opinion of "woman" as given by the eleventh-century French monk quoted at the beginning of this paper[21].

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NOTES

[1] Roger de Caen, in Yves Lefèvre, "La Femme au moyen âge en France dans la vie littéraire et spirituelle", *Histoire mondiale de la Femme*, éd. P. Grimal, vol. I, Paris, 1966, p. 82.

[2] Surveys of patristic literature on Judith are given in B.F. Huppé, *The Web of Words*, Albany, 1970, and I. Pringle, "'Judith': the Homily and the Poem", *Traditio*, vol. XXXI (1975), pp. 83-97.

[3] Jerome, Epistle 54 *To Furia*, quoted in Huppé, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

[4] Aldhelm, prose *De Virginitate*, quoted in Huppé, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

[5] "Aelfric's Homilie über das Buch Judith", *Angelsächsische Homilien und Heiligenleben*, ed. B. Assmann, Bibl. angel. Prosa III, Kassel, 1889, pp. 103-116.

[6] *Judith*, ed. B.J. Timmer, rev. ed., Exeter, 1978; "Aelfric's Homilie über das Buch Judith", *op. cit.*; "Iudyth", *a Middle English Metrical Paraphrase of the Old Testament*, vol. IV, ed. U. Ohlander, Acta Universitatis Gothoburgiensis, 1963, Gothenburg Studies in English No. 16, pp. 89-110; "Die Aeltere Judith", *Die Geistliche Dichtung des Mittelalters*, ed. P. Piper, re-ed. Zürich, 1986, pp. 215-222; *Die Jüngere Judith*, ed. H. Monecke, Altdeutsche Textbibliothek Nr. 61, Tübingen, 1964; *Judith, aus der Stuttgarter HS HB XIII 11*, ed. R. Palgen, Altdeutsche Textbibliothek Nr. 18, 2. Ausgabe, Tübingen, 1969.

[7] That little is lost is the opinion of e.g. R.E. Woolf, "The Lost Opening to the Judith", *Modern Language Review*, 50 (1955), pp. 168-172, and S. Greenfield, *Critical History of Old English Literature*, New York, 1965, p. 165. Two opinions that the majority has been lost are Timmer, *op. cit.*, p. 2, and A. Renoir, "Judith and the Limits of Poetry", *English Studies*, 43 (1962), p. 146.

[8] E.g. D. Chamberlain, "Judith: a Fragmentary and Political Poem", *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Essays in Appreciation*, ed. L.E. Nicholson and D.W. Frese, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1975, pp. 135-159, and I. Pringle, *op. cit.*

[9] M.J. Swanton, "The Old English Judith: Female Hero or Feminine Heroine?", forthcoming in German transl. in *Heldensage und Heldendichtung im Germanischen*, Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde, Bd. 2, Stuttgart, 1987.

[10] B.J. Timmer, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

[11] See the characterization of Thryth in *Beowulf*, ed. C.L. Wrenn, rev. 3rd ed., London, 1983, 11.1931b-62, and Swanton's comments in *op. cit.*, fn. 23.

[12] The opposite view: that OE Saints and Judith were too stereotyped to know fear or to hesitate, see A.L. Klinck, *Female Characterization in Old English Poetry*, Diss., British Columbia, 1976, pp. 132, 152.

[13] M.E. Bridges, *Generic Contrast in Old English Hagiographical Poetry*, Copenhague, 1984, p. 20.

[14] Huppé, *op. cit.*, pp. 170-171.

[15] I. Pringle, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

[16] R.J. Schrader, *God's Handiwork: Images of Women in Early Germanic Literature*, Contributions in Women's Studies, No. 41, Westport and London, 1983.

[17] "Atlakvitha in grœnlenzka", *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, ed. G. Neckel, Germanische Bibliothek, Bd. 9, Heidelberg, 1936.

[18] G. Ehrismann, *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur bis zum Ausgang des Mittelalters*, zweiter Teil, München, 1954.

[19] W. Schröder, *Die drei Jünglinge im Feuerofen; Die Aeltere Judith, Ueberlieferung, Stoff, Form*, Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, Abhandlungen der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse, Nr. 5 (1976), p. 27. In his ed. of the poem (pp. 42-46) he changes Piper's emendation to *vruti*, thereby respecting sense and end-rhyme.

[20] M.L. Portmann, *Die Darstellung der Frau in der Geschichtsschreibung des frühen Mittelalters*, Basler Beiträge zur Geschichtswissenschaft, Bd. 69, Basel, 1958, p. 43ff.

[21] A.M. Rapetti, *The Image of Woman in Early Medieval Germanic Epic*, work in progress, doctoral dissertation to be published by the University of Lausanne.

A. R.