Female Community in the Old English *Judith*

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The growth of women’s studies and feminist and gender theory in the academy at large has been paralleled, if somewhat belatedly, in medieval studies specifically. This recent interest in women has led to a foregrounding of female characters in medieval literary texts, and Old English texts are no exception. Like most female characters in Old English poetry, Judith from the Old English poem of the same name has been subject to much scrutiny in recent years. She has been read as a figure of Mother Church, or as a Germanic warrior, or as a warning against rape.

Yet Judith’s relationship with her maid, the focus of my analysis of *Judith*, has been elided: the maid is often cited only as one of the three characters the Old English poet did not cut from the Old Testament version of the narrative, although her importance as one of only three is not investigated. The maid, I argue, is the key to Judith’s gender performance when both contemporary theory and traditional philology are brought to bear on the section of the text where the maid appears. A reading of Luce Irigaray’s *Sexes and Genealogies* and examination of unusual vocabulary in the poem illuminate the relationship between the two women. The maid and Judith create a cooperative community of women, wherein Judith is a maternal figure; that female community constructs a heroism for Judith that is based on protection and generation rather than aggression and domination.

The Old Testament version of the narrative, specifically from the Latin Vulgate, has long been identified as the source for the poem. However, *Judith*, in the form we have it, relates only the end of the Vulgate narrative, beginning with Holofernes’ feast. As the Old English poem begins, Judith and her maid are already in the Assyrian camp outside the walls of their besieged city, Bethulia. The Assyrian general Holofernes has ordered a feast to celebrate his plans of raping Judith and conquering Bethulia; he becomes so drunk at the feast that he passes out in his tent. Judith decapitates him and leaves for Bethulia with her maid and Holofernes’ head. The sight of the headless body terrifies the Assyrians at the same time that the sight of the head emboldens the Bethulians, who triumph overwhelmingly in the ensuing battle. The poem ends with a song of praise of the greatness of God. The invasion by Nebuchadnezzar, the siege of Bethulia, and Judith’s adornment and journey to Holofernes’ tent have been either cut or lost.

E.K.V. Dobbie and others, notably David Chamberlain, postulate that about 1300 lines of *Judith* have been lost; they rely not only on the length of the Old Testament parts missing from the poem, but also on the fit numbers in the manuscript. There is a “‘X’” at 1.15 of *Judith*, which may indicate nine previous fits, each about 120 lines, that could have included a lost beginning of the poem. Other critics follow Rosemary Woolf, who suggests that “apart from a few lines relating a few details . . . none of the poem is missing.”

This critical fascination with the poem’s “completeness” has been analyzed by Karma Lochrie, who argues that “the reasoning beyond such reconstruction is as self-perpetuating as it is unself-reflecting.” For Lochrie, a focus on the length of the poem sets up a contained system of criticism that occludes “any investigation of the cultural or ideological positioning of the text in the Old English *Judith*.” Following Lochrie, I will deal with the extant text of *Judith*, without entering that self-perpetuating argument that looks at the possible length of the text rather than the text itself. Lochrie’s view of the operation of gender in the text differs substantially from mine, however, since she focuses
on the relationship between Judith and Holofernes, while I will look at the relationship between Judith and her maid.

Lochrie explicitly rejects both allegorical and historical readings of the relationship between Holofernes and Judith. Those readings form the bulk of Judith criticism; allegorical readings tend to see Judith as a figure of chastity and/or the church, overcoming lechery or the devil in the form of Holofernes.7 Lochrie and others point out, however, that nowhere in the text is Judith’s presumed chastity made explicit; the work magd can mean ‘‘maiden’’ or ‘‘virgin’’ but does not always do so.8 Historical readings interpret the poem as a call to action against the Danes in Viking-ravaged Anglo-Saxon England;9 other critics see Judith as a quasi-Germanic heroine.10 Helen Damico’s is the view of Judith that relies most heavily on the vocabulary of pagan Germanic heroism; in Damico’s terms, Judith is a manifestation of a ‘‘conventional stock character – the Germanic warrior woman.’’11

Such explicitly Christian and explicitly Germanic-heroic readings point up what Patricia Belanoff calls a ‘‘poetic ambivalence in her [Judith’s] characterization.’’12 For Belanoff, the construction of gender in the poem is unstable expressly because Judith’s characterization is neither specifically Christian (like Juliana’s) nor Germanic-heroic (like Beowulf’s). Belanoff shows how Judith destabilizes the categories of heroism that most other critics reinforce in their readings of the poem; Judith’s female heroism is not based on her chastity, but she is still a woman.

Lochrie’s analysis of the poem is almost exactly contemporary with Belanoff’s and as such the two cannot comment on each other. Lochrie examines ‘‘the alliance between the economies of war and sexual violence in the world of the poem and, by implication, Anglo-Saxon society.’’13 For Lochrie, Judith is not a hero in the way she seems to be for other critics; while Judith succeeds in her quest and saves her people, she does not, in Lochrie’s view, manage to overcome the system of sex and violence that undergirds the culture of the poem.

That system is interpreted psychoanalytically by John Hermann in an analysis to which Lochrie is in part responding. Hermann sees much (often allegorical) violence in Old English religious poetry to be ‘‘complicitous with social violence.’’14 In Judith, where Lochrie is concerned with violence against women, Hermann focuses on the violence of castration/decapitation effected by a woman on a man. His psychoanalytic reading ultimately subsumes and marginalizes the feminine in much the same way that the psychoanalytic theories he uses do. His discussion does begin with Judith, whom he sees as a mother figure, especially in her allegorical guise as Mother Church.15 But Hermann, like Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud before him, cannot help but focus on and ultimately identify with the (male) child Holofernes, whose refusal to accept the Law of the Father and whose incestuous desire for the mother-figure lead to a castration through actual decapitation rather than a metaphorical castration that would enable his possession of the potent phallus.16

Hermann’s marginalization of Judith begins when he identifies her with Mater, just as The Mother becomes object/Other in the theories of Freud and Lacan. The sexuality and gender of the Mother is subservient and enigmatic; a focus on the child elides that subservience and renders it inoperative. But in the terms defined in Irigaray’s Sexes and Genealogies, Judith is a powerful maternal figure. Moreover, in the female and feminine community the text creates between Judith and maid, Judith’s gender performance actually overturns the masculine, patriarchal paradigm of sex and violence that Lochrie and Hermann both describe.

Throughout Sexes and Genealogies, Irigaray advocates woman’s reclamation of maternal, female genealogy and a rejection of a cultural genealogy that separates the mother and daughter to make the daughter into only a mother in her husband’s house. Irigaray analyzes a number of mythic archetypes to show how the mother-daughter bond is routinely severed in Western culture; for her, the primary myth in our culture is not
Oedipus’ patricide but Orestes’ murder of Clytemnestra, the “original matricide” that was condoned by the gods as revenge for the murder of the father, Agamemnon. She invokes numerous “great mother-daughter couples of mythology: Demeter-Kore, Clytemnestra-Iphigenia, Jocasta-Antigone.”

This reclamation of a female genealogy, Irigaray hopes, will lead to a society in which gender difference is accepted rather than subsumed in a hopeless attempt at neutrality that is actually a veiled masculinity. The mother-daughter bond can become a paradigm for women’s relationships with each other as well; rather than a feared phallic mother from whom the daughter needs to separate, the mother should instead be viewed as a source of strength.

Irigaray’s French feminism, with its reference to abortion, nuclear accidents, and advertising, may seem culturally distant from the Old English Judith, whom we left holding her sword a few paragraphs back. But I believe that Irigaray’s descriptions of female bonds and celebrations do speak to the Old English text and realize a new way of viewing it. Irigaray advocates celebration and enunciation of female-female bonds. Judith is unique in Old English poetry not because she wields a sword but because she participates in a bond much like those described by Irigaray. Judith’s unique performance becomes apparent when the reader realizes that Judith is the only female figure in Old English poetry who works with another woman to achieve a common goal.

When I first read Irigaray’s Sexes and Genealogies, I thought the concept of female genealogy would be inapplicable to Old English studies; while fathers are formulaically included (Beowulf is routinely referred to as Ecgðeows bearn, Edgtheow’s son), mothers are not. The mothers in Old English poetry are defined as mothers of sons: Grendel’s mother, Wealthoe, Hildeburh, the Virgin Mary, (possibly) the narrator of Wulf and Eadwacer, Sara, Hagar. Often mothers are identified only through their husbands’ or sons’ names: Beowulf’s mother, Noah’s wife.

Wealthoe and Lot’s wife are the only two mothers of daughters I have located in Old English poetry. The potential mother-daughter bond of Wealthoe and Freawaru is rendered inoperative by the textual separation of the two figures, however; we never learn of Freawaru’s existence until Beowulf has left Denmark and he comments on her impending marriage to Ingeld after his return to Hygelac’s court (11.2020–231). Lot’s nameless wife, who turns into a pillar of salt, does not interact with her daughters either; her reaction to her husband’s offer of their daughters’ virginity to the mob of sodomites warrants no mention in the text. Even less specific female relationship (“sister-love” in Irigaray’s terms) does not seem to be portrayed in Old English poetry; the interactions between Sara and Hagar seem to be the only other interactions between women in the corpus, and they compete for Abraham’s attention and for his patrimony in their sons’ names. There is no “sister-love” there.

Such a female community as Irigaray describes does seem to be operating in Judith, however. The vocabulary of the poem presents Judith and her unnamed maid acting in a female community that I believe can be seen as a metaphorical mother-daughter bond. They share the bond of similar culture, in that they are both female, Jewish Bethulians. More importantly, their bodily relationship involves food, sexuality, and the physical journey from Bethulia to the Assyrian camp and back. The maid is present at the failed rape and subsequent decapitation; the head goes into the bag that had held their kosher food:

\[\text{pha seo snotere mægð snude gebrohte}
\text{þæs herewæðan heafod swa blodig}
\text{on ðam fætelse þe hyre foregenga,}
\text{blæhloor ides, hyra begea nest,}
\text{ðæwun gebungen, þyder on leide,}
\text{ond hit þæ swa hæolfreg þyre on hond ageaf,}
\text{higedoncolre, ham to beronne,}
\text{judith gingran sinre (11.125–132).}^{19}\]
The shared food creates a physiological community between the women that transcends social class: they do not eat what the Assyrians eat. While the shared food could be interpreted to have eucharistic connotations, it suffices to see it as a means of separation of the women from the Assyrians as well as a means of bonding the women together.

I interpret the class difference between Judith and her maid to impart a maternal–filial temper to their relationship; Judith’s power as mistress makes her the maternal figure in the relationship – she has the power and also the responsibility to protect and to nurture the maid as daughter figure. In the female community they create, especially in the journey back to Bethulia from Holofernes’ tent, maternal power and shared goals work to show that the patriarchal system represented by Holofernes has been subverted. The description of the journey follows directly upon the allusion to the shared food. I quote the passage in full:

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Eodon þa gegnum þanonne
þa ðesæ ba ellenþriste
olðet he becomon, ellenfeorðe,
ædhræðge megð, ut of ðam herige,
þet he sweotollice  geseon mihne
þere wítegan byrøg  weallas bicean,
Bethuliam.  Hie þa beahroðende
leofelste  ford onetan,
od he glæmdmote  gegan herefdon
to ðam wealhtæte (132b–141a)
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(They went then straightaway thence, the noblewomen both courageous, until the maids came, elated, triumphant, out of the army so that they clearly might see the walls of the beautiful city glitter, Bethulia. Then they hastened forth (on) the course, adorned with rings, until they glad in spirit had gone to the wall-gate.)

The bond between the women is made apparent in this passage by the use of plural words to describe the women and their actions (I will discuss some of these below) and especially by the word ba, both (1.132), which creates a category unbounded by social class that describes the women together.

Such plurality would seem to necessitate critical examination of both women, but Judith’s maid is routinely passed over in criticism of the poem, as I noted above; the fact that the maid was very specifically not cut from the Old English poem has attracted little critical attention. Only Bernard Huppé and Helen Damico have examined the maid and analyzed the possible reasons for her inclusion. Huppé uses the handmaid as a tool to describe Judith in stereotypically feminine terms.

For Huppé, the handmaiden serves to brush away any vestiges of what he views as proto-masculine heroism that might still be clinging to Judith.

Damico’s argument about the maid is intended to strengthen her argument that the character of Judith is a type “of ‘valkyrie-bride’ or ‘Germanic warrior-woman.’” As such, Damico translates the maid’s designation of forsegän (1.127) as ‘‘one who goes before’, evoking the image of a standard-bearer.” Damico’s focus is on one of the plural adjectives describing both Judith and the maid, beahroðen; because of the martial and glittering aspects of the return to Bethulia, Damico translates beahroðen as “shield-adorned” rather than the usual “ring-adorned,” so it alludes to what she views as “warrior dress.”

Damico and Huppé both comment on the plural adjectives describing Judith and the maid on the return to Bethulia, though not on the plural nouns that also link the two female figures (þeawum, handmaids, 1.129; ðesæ, noblewomen, 1.133; megð, maidens, 1.135). While Huppé interprets the maid’s presence to lessen the heroic effect of the scene, Damico interprets the maid as an intensifier of the glory of the scene and, as I do, sees a
breakdown in the class distinction between the two, saying that they act "not as servant and mistress, but as victors in a campaign against the enemy." Both critics, with their seemingly opposite views, see the maid as an enlargement of an aspect of Judith's characterization (her traditional femininity, her heroism). For Damico and Huppe, the class barriers between the two women break down because the maid is merely an extension of Judith's heroism, not because Judith and the maid have a relationship unbounded by patriarchal class distinctions.

I maintain that, in the return to Bethulia, Judith and the maid have just such a relationship. The diction of these lines, with its plural nouns, verbs, and adjectives, presents a female community in the bond between Judith and the maid. The nouns that describe both the maid and Judith elide the class distinction between them; idesa connotes nobility, peawum holiness ("handmaiden of the Lord"), and mægð purity. The two women together are ellenpriste, beahhrodenæ, and glædmode, plural adjectives that bond them grammatically. The other two plural adjectives, eadhredige and collenenferhðæ, not only bond the women grammatically but point up the unique nature of their cooperative, active feminine community.

Eadhredige literally means "rich in victory," and is usually translated as "triumphant." It occurs only in poetry, and only three times, to refer to the three prominent heroines in Old English: Judith, Juliana, and Elene. Belanoff cites eadhredige in her discussion of Judith's heroism:

... eadhredig (triumphant), unique in its being used to describe only Judith, Elene, and Juliana in the Old English poetic canon. Elene is eadhredige as she leaves on her sea voyage (line 266); the devil addresses Juliana as eadhredig mægð in his attempt to convince her to worship pagan gods (line 257); and Judith is eadhredige as she passes safely out through the drunken Assyrian army (line 135). Thus, eadhredig evokes a quality possessed in common by the three female saints of Old English poetry, but only in Judith is the work used after the heroine's physical defeat of her enemy.

Not only does the Judith usage occur after the confrontation with the enemy, it is the only one of the three usages that is plural. While Belanoff does not remark on the grammatical difference, it is crucial. Elene and Juliana, like most of the women in the Old English corpus, are isolated among men. Elene is on a ship with part of her son's army, and no maids or female companions are ever mentioned. When she is called eadhredige, Juliana has been thrown into prison (where a male devil appears to torment her) because she has refused to marry a government official as her father ordered. Juliana's mother is conspicuous in her absence; Juliana's isolation in a male world is absolute.

Thus, the plurality of eadhredige in Judith is striking. The women are together and triumphant, their task achieved. They are rich in victory not only because Holofernes is dead, but because they achieved the victory together. As they move through the politically neutral space between the city and the camp, they make that space a female space through their specifically shared achievement.

Just as the plurality of the exclusively feminine eadhredige is unique to Judith, so the feminine reference of collenenferhðæ is as well. Collenenferhðæ, like eadhredige, occurs only in poetry, never in prose. Its literal meaning is unclear; ferhð means "spirit, mind" and J. R. Clark-Hall suggests cwellan, "to swell," as a possible root. Collenenferhðæ is usually translated "elated" or "bold" and it refers only to men, alone or in groups, except when it refers to Judith and her maid.

Men who are collenenferhðæ are celebrated except on two occasions when the word seems to be used as a form of mockery. More straightforward uses of collenenferhðæ praise a man or men who are engaged in great deeds; two examples will suffice. During Wiglaf's final service to Beowulf, Wiglaf is described as collenenferhðæ:

hyne fywert bræc,
hwæðer collenenferhð cwicmetic gemetit
in ðam wongestede Wedra þoden
ellensiocene, þær he hune ær toflet (2784b–2787)
The only one of the Geats to fulfill his vow of loyalty and fight with Beowulf during his last battle, Wiglaf is *collenferð* in action and intention. He follows orders to the last, bringing treasure so Beowulf can look upon the spoils of victory one last time before he dies. Wiglaf’s honor, in this scene, is irrefutable.

Similarly, the heroism of the soldiers at the beginning of the sea voyage in *Elene* illustrates a group of men who are unequivocally *collenferðes*: *Wigan weron bliðe, collenferðes, cwen sídes gefað*. (The solders were happy, bold-spirited, the queen exulting in the journey 246b–247). The men are following the orders of the newly converted, victorious emperor Constantine; they are on a holy mission to recover the True Cross at Jerusalem. Their bold spirits stem from their assurance that they are on the side of righteousness.

Judith and her maid are the only *collenferðe* women in the corpus. Their unique status here is in their gender, not in their number, as was the case with *eadhreōgige*. It seems that the connotations of the two words work together: Judith and the maid share a feminine victory and co-opt, in one sense, the presumed masculinity of solitary heroic elation. Elation, in success or purpose, is exclusively male except for this one instance when women share food, make plans, work together and create a successful female community.

The extraordinary nature of the vocabulary of this female journey is made apparent with comparison to the Vulgate and to Ælfric’s homily on the *Liber Judith*. In Ælfric’s text, the maid is referred to only as *pinene* and she seems more like a chaperone than an assistant. Judith orders the maid to hold the door, *het hire pinene healdan pa duru* (1.303), but Judith does all the work, taking the head herself after cutting it from the body, *Heo nam pa bæt heafod* (1.307). The return to Bethulia from Holofernes’ camp is accomplished in one line, *op bæt buta becomon to þan burhgeate* (1.310).

In the Vulgate, the maid is repeatedly called *abra*; Judith refers to herself as *ancilla* when she speaks of her relationship to God or her supposed relationship with Holofernes. While both *abra* and *ancilla* mean “female servant,” the consistency of their use in regards to the two women respectively shows the connotations: to be a handmaid of the lord (ancilla) provides much more status than to be a servant (abra). The only deviation from these terms is Vagao’s reference to Judith as a *bona puella*, a good girl, as he acts in his role of procurer for Holofernes. A comparison with the vocabularies of both Ælfric’s text and the Vulgate narrative shows the unusual nature of the plural descriptions in the Old English *Judith*.

In that community, Judith and the maid present an Irigarayan ideal female bond. They are agents, walking together toward their destination after saving their people. They are successful in cooperation; Judith has beheaded Holofernes while the maid is carrying the head in the bag in which she *hyra begea nest...pyder on laedde* (thither had brought provisions for them both, 11.128b, 129b). And finally, they are a mother-daughter “couple,” to use Irigaray’s term. In this scene, Judith wields power to protect her people from Holofernes and end the siege that was killing the Bethulians with hunger and thirst. The maid as daughter assists, resists, and imitates the maternal figure of Judith until the vocabulary blends them. Their purpose is preservation; they kill Holofernes to save their home, not to cover themselves in glory (though that was a secondary effect). Judith is not a figure of chaste *eclesia*, or a masculine hero in a dress; she participates in a heroic community constituted by maternal performance and female cooperation.

The bond between the two women shows Judith as a maternal leader. The maid’s class inferiority to Judith becomes translated into a type of childhood; her lesser status becomes a source of a bond with Judith rather than a source of contempt or marginalization. The vocabulary shows the women as a unit; the text transforms Judith’s superior social status into the responsibility of the maternal. Because of this responsibility, Judith must care for
and protect her "children," including the maid as daughter. A figure like Judith derives power and satisfaction of desire through such a bond. Judith's gender performance contains an erotics that is devoted to preservation (of her home, her figurative daughter, and all the Bethulians who could not protect themselves) rather than satisfaction of masculine desire.

Judith is not described as wife or widow (or even, technically, virgin) because her sexuality is not limited to a heterosexuality defined by her relationship with a man. Judith demonstrates a sexuality and satisfaction of desire that goes beyond the paradigm of two lovers, heterosexual or homosexual, to encompass different generations and a multiplicity of bonds, with men, with women, with mothers, with children, whether or not related by blood. An assumption of limited heterosexuality was Holofernes' mistake. He perceived Judith only as an object of rape; he did not see that her sexuality necessitated the protection of herself and her "children."

This moment of female community fades after Judith and the maid re-enter the city. The neutral space of the field between the camp and the city seems to be liminal in that such a female bond can thrive to the point where it becomes apparent even in the vocabulary and grammatical structure of the text. That very vocabulary shows that the Irigarayan community ceases to exist upon reaching Bethulia; the only reference to the maid within the gates is a singular noun, and, no longer ides or magd, she is merely pinenne (a servant, I.172).

In Judith, Judith is a hero, but not because she appropriates male power and uses it to her own ends. She is heroic because as a maternal figure she creates a bond with her metaphorical daughter, her maid, and they work together to achieve a common purpose. The text of the return to Bethulia shows this mother-daughter "couple," to return to Irigaray's terms, working for preservation and protection, rather than for individual, isolated glory. The figure of Judith shows us a subjectivity that has gone beyond a one-to-one relationship with a man in conventional heterosexuality. Holofernes' intentions turn out to be merely delusions as the patriarchy and heterosexuality he represents are quashed by the two women, working together, producing a distinctly communal, female heroism that ultimately benefits an entire society.

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NOTES
4 Ibid.
5 For example, see Bernard Huppé's analysis in The Web of Words, 136–148. Similarly exegetical readings can


9 Belanoff, 248.
10 Lochoire, 2.
11 Hermann, 1–2.
12 Ibid., 194.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 189.
18 Ibid., 11.2466-2475.
19 Text throughout from Doublet, op. cit. Translations are my own.
20 Huppé, 170–171.
21 Damico, 186.
22 Ibid., 183.
23 Ibid., 185.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 For discussions of iæx and meæg in this context, see Belanoff, 257–259. Belanoff's discussion, however, focuses on Judith and does not mention that these words describe Judith's maid as well.
28 Belanoff, 249.
29 Healey and Venezky, fiche C006.
31 The first of these refers to one of the canniabals that Andreas encounters; the man has been picked to be the next meal and is described as cælænferð when in his fear he offers his son to the cook-pot instead of a grotesque parody of God's offer of his Son to mankind (1.1108). The second mocking reference is to the cælænferðe Jews following Elleæ's orders only under duress (1.377).
32 Other references to individual men are to Andreas (at 1.538 and 1.1578), Beowulf (1.806). St. Thomas (Fates of the Apostles 1.54), and an undifferentiated man in the Wonderer's gnomic wisdom (1.171). Other references to groups of men are to the converted Jews in Elleæ (1.848), the men camping on the whale in The Whale (1.17), and Andreas' companions (1.349).