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The University of Nottingham
School of English Studies

The Participation of Women in the Anglo-Saxon World: *Judith* and *The Wife's Lament*

Jennifer Brookbanks

The 'terrestrial, secular experience of the Anglo-Saxon world' can be interpreted as the heroic society of the Anglo-Saxons, based upon earthly relationships between lords and retainers and governed by heroic codes of behaviour. Whilst the *Judith* poet transforms his poem's biblical source to present a text that is located in the Anglo-Saxon world, he also suggests that it is a patriarchal society in which women are unable to participate fully. This is conveyed as the poet undercuts Judith's warrior role and presents her as dependent upon male agency; he depicts God as responsible for her war-like behaviour and suggests that Holofernes' self-destructive conduct removes the need for Judith to act heroically. Contrastingly, the poet of *The Wife's Lament* portrays female inclusion in the heroic Anglo-Saxon world. Although he presents a woman who is physically excluded from the social structure following male abandonment, the poet portrays a reversal of the female's subservience to her husband as the poem progresses. The female gains power through her authoritative speech, which can be interpreted as a form of revenge on her husband. In independently performing this heroic duty, the female can be considered as achieving liberation from the patriarchal hierarchy and participating fully in heroic society.

In *Judith*, the poet diverges from the biblical source and alters the narrative to convey Judith's inability to act freely in the Anglo-Saxon world. The poet repeatedly refers to his knowledge of the poem's resolution, suggesting that the Assyrian soldiers are 'doomed' (*fǣge*, 19)[1] and that Holofernes does not 'foresee' (*wēnde,* 20) this. He further predicts how Holofernes is to 'lose his life' (*his blǣd forlēosan,* 63) after going to bed for the 'last time' (*nēhstan sīðe*, 73). Whilst this creates what Pringle identifies as a 'strong sense of the steady, inexorable movement of the narrative',[2] the poet's intrusive voice is also suggestive of regulatory male authority, to which Judith will be further subjected as the narrative develops. Furthermore, the poet implies that God also has knowledge of the poem's resolution, in stating that he 'would not…allow' (*ne wolde… geðafian,* 59-60) Holofernes' corruption of Judith. Thus, in suggesting that Holofernes' defeat is predetermined by God, the poet begins to detract from Judith's participation in heroic society.

In contrast to the third-person narrative of *Judith,* which is filtered through the masculine voice of the poet, *The Wife's Lament* is written in the first-person, and conveys a wholly female voice. The poet emphasises the individual nature of the female speaker's experience, by presenting her statement:

1 All Old English Judith quotations are taken from R. Marsden, The Cambridge Old English Reader (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp.149-163 and all Modern English Judith translations are taken from S.A.J. Bradley, Anglo-Saxon Poetry (London: Orion, 1991), pp.496-504.

2 Ian Pringle, Traditio: Studies in Ancient and Medieval History, Thought and Religion (New York: Fordham University Press, 1975), p.17.

IC þis giedd wrece bī mē ful geōmorre,
mīnre sylfre sīð. (1-2) [3]

This tale I put about my most melancholy self,
my personal experiencing.

Not only do the repeated markers of possession in this sentence render the poet 'completely removed from the authority of authorship',[4] the poet can be considered as transferring this authority to the female speaker. She is presented as declaring:

Ic þæt secgan mæg
hwæt ic yrmþa gebād siþþan ic ūp wēox,
nīwes oþþe ealdes. (2-4)

I can tell
what tribulations I have endured since I grew up,
recently or of old.

The poet thus depicts the speaker as able to choose the poem's subject matter and consequently determine the outcome of the narrative. The speaker's involvement in the conveyance of the text can be considered as introducing her ability to participate independently in Anglo-Saxon society, a presentation that will be developed as the poem progresses.

In altering the original apocryphal text to present a poem that is contemporarily resonant, the *Judith* poet also adapts the portrayal of Judith, when depicting her using a wealth of epithets that suggest wisdom. She is described as a 'wise lady' (*snoteran idese,* 55), 'clever woman' (*snotere mægð,* 125), 'shrewd woman' (*searoðoncol mægð*, 145) and as 'wise of purpose' (*glēaw on geðonce,* 13), 'prudent' (*ferhðglēawe,* 41), and 'clever' (*gearoþoncolre*, 341). As Anglo-Saxon women were traditionally presented 'in situations of danger or crisis…contributing through words, of wisdom, incitement and advice',[5] the poet portrays Judith as a recognisable and apparently passive female; this idea is reiterated when Judith must 'urge' (*biddan,* 187) rather than lead the Hebrew army to battle. However, the poet also uses heroic diction to portray Judith, describing her as a 'daring woman' (*ides ellenrōf,* 109 and 146), 'brave woman' (*mægð mōdigre,* 334) and as 'boldly daring' (*ellenþrīste,* 133). Whilst this leads Magennis to assert that the poet's employment of 'male heroic vocabulary'[6] distinguishes Judith from stereotypical Anglo-Saxon women, he does not note that Judith is presented with these characteristics after the poet states:

Hī ðā se hēhsta dēma
ǽdre mid elne onbryrde. (94-95)

Then the supreme Judge
at once inspired her with courage.

The poet's inconsistent description of Judith in heroic terms, allowing her to overthrow the advisory female role allocated to Anglo-Saxon women and attain heroic status only after

3 All Old English The Wife's Lament quotations are taken from Marsden, The Cambridge Old English Reader, pp.341-344 and all The Wife's Lament Modern English translations are taken from Bradley, Anglo-Saxon Poetry, pp.384-385.
4 Marilynn Desmond, 'The Voice of Exile: Feminist Literary History and the Anonymous Anglo-Saxon Elegy', Critical Inquiry 16 (1990): 572-590.
5 Hugh Magennis, 'Gender and Heroism in the Old English Judith' in Writing Gender and Genre in Medieval Literature: Approaches to Old and Middle English Texts, ed Elaine Treharne (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002), pp.5-19.
6 Magennis, Writing Gender and Genre, p.5.

divine inspiration, suggests that Judith is unable to participate in the warrior culture without justification, as an instrument of God.

Rather than employing conventional Anglo-Saxon epithets to describe the speaker in *The Wife's Lament,* the poet conveys the female's social identity only in relation to that of the male persona. The speaker is portrayed identifying her husband as 'my lord' (*mīn hlāford,* 6 and *hlāford mīn*, 15), 'lord' (*frēan,* 33), and 'my people-leader' (*mīn lēodfruma,* 8), each term suggesting his power over her. Such labels suggest that a woman's subordinate role in relation to her husband is comparable to a retainer's subordinate position under his lord. This idea is developed, as the speaker expresses her betrayal in terms suggestive of a heroic vow:

> Ful oft wit bēotedan
> þæt unc ne gedǣlde nemne dēað āna,
> ōwiht elles. (21-23)
>
> *Full often we two would vow*
> *that nothing other than death alone should come between us.*

Contrasting with Lucas' assertion that 'there is not one reference in the poem to suggest a warrior/overlord relationship',[7] the poet uses these masculine terms to convey the speaker's ability to express herself in a vocabulary from which she is traditionally excluded. The speaker's verbal insertion into the heroic culture emphasises her command of speech, which will later be considered as allowing her to fulfil a heroic duty.

The *Judith* poet also employs heroic diction to present the male figures Holofernes and God. Interestingly, the poet's depiction of Holofernes, as an Anglo-Saxon lord, is comparable to his depiction of God. The poet's labelling of Holofernes as a 'stern-minded prince over men' (*þearlmōd ðēoden gumena,* 66) is also applied to God in Judith's prayer to him (*þearlmōd þēoden gumena,* 91). The poet makes further comparisons between the two, presenting Holofernes as a 'lord of warriors' (*eorla dryhten,* 22) and as 'famous' (*brēma,* 57) and describing God as 'Lord of hosts (*weroda Dryhtne,* 342) and as a 'famous ruler' (*mǣran pēodne,* 3). Greenfield's interpretation of this as a 'contrasting of Good and Evil'[8] can be extended, and the poet can be considered as creating a contrast between Holofernes' bad lordship and God's good lordship. This interpretation is supported by the poet's depiction of the relationship between Holofernes and his men. He states:

> Næs ðēah eorla nān
> þe ðone wiggend āweccan dorste.(257-261)
>
> *However, there was not one of the nobles*
> *who dared awaken the warrior.*

In inspiring fear in his retainers, Holofernes can be contrasted with God, who provokes 'courage' (*elne,* 95) in Judith. Thus, in likening God to an Anglo-Saxon lord whilst accentuating his benevolence, the poet further suggests that Judith would be unable to participate in heroic society and achieve warrior status without the guidance of a skilful and powerful male leader.

After inserting his female speaker into the Anglo-Saxon heroic culture through her comparison to a retainer, the composer of *The Wife's Lament* uses this association to explore her subservient position. The poet presents the speaker as stating:

7 Angela M. Lucas, 'The Narrator of The Wife's Lament Reconsidered', Neuphilologische Mitteilungen 70 (1969): 282–97.

8 Stanley B. Greenfield and Daniel G. Calder, A New Critical History of Old English Literature (New York: New York University Press, 1986), p.222.

Ǣrest mīn hlāford gewāt heonan of
lēodum
ofer ȳ þa gelāc (6-7).

First my lord went hence away from
his people
beyond the jostling of the waves.

The chronological marker, 'first' (*Ǣrest*, 6), portrays the male's departure as a catalytic event, contrasting with Belanoff's suggestion that 'narrative is irrelevant to poems that express such potent present feeling; emotional memory is rarely chronological'.[9] Following her husband's exile, suggested in the sea imagery also found in the exilic poems *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer,* the speaker faces similar social exclusion. She says:

Đā ic mē fēran gewāt folgað sēcan,
winelēas wræcca, for mīnre
wēaþearfe. (9-11)

I went travelling to find a following,
a friendless exile, because of my
woeful plight.

Hall suggests that as 'following' (*folgað,* 9) was 'a legal term in Old English, denoting the service due by a retainer to his lord', it 'would be a very odd element to introduce unless in allusion to a known event'.[10] However, it can be suggested that the poet uses this term to suggest that, like a lordless retainer's possible exclusion from the social hierarchy, the speaker is also negatively affected by her husband's absence. Having presented the speaker's unquestioning acceptance of her husband's influence on her behaviour, the poet perhaps suggests that the speaker's ensuing reflection on her subordinate role and desire to become empowered is not unreasonable.

Whilst the poet of *The Wife's Lament* can be considered as alluding to the heroic social structure in order to promote female participation in the Anglo-Saxon world, the *Judith* poet refers to heroic codes in order to heighten his portrayal of Judith's exclusion from this. If, as many critics have asserted, Holofernes is presented as 'destroying *himself:* it is his own excess, which brings about his downfall',[11] it can be suggested that the poet intensifies the negative biblical portrayal of Holofernes in order to reduce the importance of Judith's warrior-like actions. The poet depicts Holofernes as removing himself from the protection of his retainers:

Swā se inwidda ofer ealne dæg
dryhtguman sīne drencte mid wīne,
swīðmōd sinces brytta, oðþæt hīe on
swīman lāgon,
oferdrencte his duguðe ealle, swylce hīe wǽron dēaðe geslegene,
āgotene gōda gewylces. (28-32)

So the whole day long the villain
plied his retainers with wine,
the arrogant dispenser of treasure, until they

9 Patricia A. Belanoff, 'Women's Songs, Women's Language: Wulf and Eadwacer and The Wife's Lament' in New Readings on Women in Old English Literature, eds Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp.193-204.
10 Alaric Hall, 'The Images and Structure of The Wife's Lament', Leeds Studies in English 33 (2002): 1-29.
11 Hugh Magennis, 'Adaptation of Biblical Detail in the Old English Judith: The Feast Scene', Neuphilologische Mitteilungen 84 (1983): 331-37.

lay unconscious,
the whole of his retinue drunk, as though they had been struck dead,
drained of every faculty.

The poet's variation emphasises the retainers' inability to act; they are 'unconscious' (*on swīman,* 30), 'struck dead' (*dēaðe geslegene*, 31) and 'drained of every faculty' (*āgotene gōda gewylces,* 32). Whilst this renders Holofernes unprotected and possibly contributes to his death, Holofernes' actions also result in the men being 'mead-weary' (*medowērigum,* 245), which perhaps reduces their capability to fight in battle. In presenting Holofernes' violation of heroic codes of good lordship as contributing significantly to Judith's victory, the poet thus adds to the presentation of her limited role in the Anglo-Saxon world.

Whilst Judith's partial participation in the heroic Anglo-Saxon world highlights her dependence upon the actions of God and Holofernes, the poet of *The Wife's Lament* presents the female speaker as becoming able to participate in heroic society and achieve independence. The poet portrays the speaker as adhering to what her husband has 'commanded' (*hēt,* 15 and *heht,* 27), through her physical assent to his directives, 'there I must sit' (*þǽr ic sittan mōt,* 37). Yet, after having physically obeyed him, the speaker is portrayed as recognising her ability to act against her husband and partake in the Anglo-Saxon 'duty to vengeance' which was 'an imperative'[12] in heroic culture. She is presented as doing so through her powerful speech:

Ā scyle geong mon wesan gēomormōd,
heard heortan geþōht; swylce habban sceal
blīþe gebǣro, ēac þon brēostceare,
sinsorgna gedreag. (42-45)

Forever that young man shall remain melancholy of mind,
and painful the brooding of his heart; he shall sustain, as well as his
benign demeanour, anxiety too in his breast, and
the welter of incessant griefs.

Rissanen's suggestion, that 'a reference to the virtue of suppressing one's sad thoughts in the presence of other people can perhaps be read in the poem',[13] is inaccurate. The poet instead contrasts the speaker's ability to verbally express her sorrow with her husband's internal torment. In highlighting this, the poem itself can be considered a form of vengeance, which leads the speaker to consider herself as an equal to her husband. This is reflected in the terms of decreased power she uses to describe him towards the end of the poem: 'young man' (*geong mon,* 42), 'my friend' (*mīn frēond,* 47), 'evil-minded comrade' (*wine wērigmōd,* 49), and 'this comrade of mine' (*se mīn wine,* 50).

In contrast to the speaker's verbal attacking of her husband in *The Wife's Lament,* Judith is presented as taking physical vengeance upon a man. After appearing physically subservient to Holofernes, being 'fetched' (*fetigan*, 35) and 'brought' (*gebrōhton,* 54 and *gebrōht,* 57) to him, the poet presents a startling reversal of Judith's passivity as she uses a sword to behead the leader of the Assyrian army. However, unlike the speaker in *The Wife's Lament*, Judith is presented as unwilling to be fully accountable for her act of vengeance, transferring the agency for killing Holofernes to God, in saying 'avenge now, mighty Lord' (*gewrec nū mihtig Dryhten,* 92). Yet, Lucas' interpretation of this as evidence that Judith 'is not a warrior woman',[14] is incorrect; the poet does present Judith as a warrior woman but

12 R. D. Fulk and Christopher M. Cain, *A History of Old English Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p.4.
13 Matti Rissanen, 'The Theme of Exile in The Wife's Lament', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 70 (1969): 98-104.
14 Peter J. Lucas 'Judith and the Woman Hero', *Yearbook of English Studies* 22 (1992):17-27.

emphasises her unsuitability to fulfilling the role. Her less than heroic desire to kill Holofernes before he 'awoke', (*onwōce,* 77) and her inaccurate sword stroke that slices through 'half his neck' (*healfne…þone swēoran him,* 105-106), also highlights Judith's inability to participate fully in heroic society.

In further contrast to Judith's incompatibility with a traditionally masculine position of power, the speaker in *The Wife's Lament* is portrayed as reversing the power relations between herself and her husband and attaining the same level of authority that he had previously enjoyed. After being abandoned, the female speaker is presented as describing her surroundings using the pathetic fallacy:

> sindon dena dimme, dūna ūphēa,
> bitre burgtūnas, brērum beweaxne,
> wīc wynna lēas. (29-32)
>
> *the dales are dark, the hills high,*
> *the bastioned towns grievously overgrown with briars,*
> *their habitations void of pleasures.*

However, as her power increases, she invokes this convention to condemn her husband to a fate worse than hers, the repetition of 'let' (*sȳ*, 45 and 46) suggestive of a 'curse'.[15] The speaker is presented as saying:

> sȳ ful wīde fāh
> feorres folclondes, þæt mīn frēond siteð
> under stānhliþe storme behrīmed,
> wine wērigmod, wætre beflōwen
> on drēorsele. Drēogeð se mīn wine
> micle mōdceare; hē gemon tō oft
> wynlicran wīc. (47-52)
>
> *let him be an outcast far afield*
> *in a distant land, so that my friend may sit*
> *under a stony pile, rime-encrusted by the storm,*
> *my evil-minded comrade, drenched in water*
> *in a drear dwelling. This comrade of mine will endure*
> *great anxiousness of mind; too often he will think upon*
> *a more agreeable habitation.*

This does not only 'represent the wife's wish that her husband…may come to understand emotionally the misery and suffering he has caused her'.[16] In having been forced to mimic her husband's social exclusion, the speaker now suggests that his fate will mirror hers, and he will inhabit an undesirable environment. The poet further emphasises the speaker's ability to assume the power previously held by her husband, in presenting her as causing of his future suffering. Although the male 'will think about' (*gemon,* 51) the places that they had inhabited together, suggesting his remorse and possible desire for reconciliation, the speaker has rejected her husband and condemns him to 'woe' (*wā,* 52).

In conclusion, the 'terrestrial' and 'secular' elements of the Anglo-Saxon world can be interpreted as its patriarchal foundations, in which earthly lordship and heroic codes of conduct are paramount. Although the composer of *Judith* inserts his female character into the heroic Anglo-Saxon culture through her role as a warrior, he suggests that women are unable

15 Marsden, *The Cambridge Old English Reader,* p.344.
16 Stanley B. Greenfield, 'The Wife's Lament Reconsidered', *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 68 (1953): 907-912.

to participate fully in this aspect of society through Judith's restricted actions. Her warrior position is subverted as God is presented as ultimately responsible for her behaviour and as Holofernes' self-destructive conduct allows Judith to kill him less than heroically. Contrastingly, the poet of *The Wife's Lament* presents the inclusion of a female speaker in the patriarchal heroic world. Although depicting her as expelled from society following male abandonment, the poet portrays the speaker as reversing her subservience to her husband and autonomously participating in the heroic duty of revenge through her powerful speech, which leads to her empowerment.

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