

SCRIPTURAL TYPES AND ANGLO-SAXON HEROES

REMAKING THE MOULD:
SCRIPTURAL TYPES AND ANGLO-SAXON HEROES IN
THE DREAM OF THE ROOD, ELENE, AND JUDITH

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Lay Abstract:

This thesis aims to discuss the process and purposes of “remaking” the Anglo-Saxon hero in three Anglo-Saxon poems: *The Dream of the Rood*, *Elene*, and *Judith*. I examine how the poets blend various monastic and secular influences within Christianized Anglo-Saxon culture in order to establish a new and ideal literary hero, one who often resembles spiritual archetypes such as Christ or the Virgin Mary. I also explore the complex gender dynamics that emerge in these poems, and in particular how the protagonist — the hero or heroine — navigates a diverse range of both masculine and feminine performances in order to succeed.

Abstract:

My thesis explores the cultural and gender syncretic processes of Old English literature in three Anglo-Saxon poems: *The Dream of the Rood*, *Elene*, and *Judith*. Throughout my research I attempt to answer the question of syncretism as it is applied to Anglo-Saxon concepts of heroes and heroism in literature. While Old English scholars (including John M. Hill, Hugh Magennis, and Jane Chance) have developed this line of inquiry previously, my work pushes back on several assumptions that hinder their analyses. In particular, I resist the tendency of late 20th-century criticism to dichotomize the Germanic and Christian aspects of the texts, contending that since Latin Christianity was completely indigenized over a hundred years prior to the writing of these poems, it is impossible to discern a pre-Christian set of values and social norms. Instead, I discuss the converging influences of monastic and secular aspects of Anglo-Saxon in relation to the literary hero.

I also examine the complex gender dynamics and performances that manifest in these three poems, arguing that the triumphant hero or heroine is able to succeed through a wide-ranging set of both masculine and feminine performances. Here I incorporate a subtle commentary of gender theory — especially Judith Butler's theory of performativity — to complement my own textual criticism. As this sort of gender syncretism meets with the culturally syncretic writings of the Anglo-Saxon poets, a new and idealized type of hero emerges, one who accomplishes victory through both spiritual and secular, as well as masculine and feminine performances.

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ƿæs sy ðam leofan drytne wuldor to widan aldre, þe gesceop wind ond lyfte, roderas ond rume grundas, swylce eac reðe streamas ond swegles dreamas, ðurh his sylfes miltse.

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Introduction:

Old English Literature and the Question of Syncretism

How do assimilated Christian traditions impact pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon conceptions of the divine, and vice versa? The question of who exactly is doing the assimilating troubled the scholarship surrounding Old English literature until the late twentieth century as medievalists attempted to distinguish between the Latin and Germanic particulars of those texts particularly concerned with religious figures and the hand of God in their narratives. Is it the Latin world that claims the Anglo-Saxon culture for its own, or do the Anglo-Saxon writers remake Roman ecclesiastical ideals in their own image? During the golden age of medieval studies, prompted by Tolkien's revolutionary criticism of *Beowulf* in "The Monsters and the Critics," scholars turned from their treatment of Old English texts as an archaeological dig for historical data and instead began to examine the poetic narratives as artistic works born of a blend of cultures. Early analysts developed complex hypotheses regarding Germanic religious beliefs, narrative structure, and heroic codes as they manifested themselves within the alliterative metre poems, endeavouring to extract these "pagan" elements from the Latinate Christian presence in order to determine the dominant literary influence. Tolkien, for example, argues for a pagan *Beowulf* with an interpolated dash of Christianity thrown in for good measure; Roberta Frank's treatment of *The Battle of Maldon* counters this contention, as she suggests that Old English heroes "seem ill at ease in a desacralized world" (200). The tug-of-war nature of such criticism has often resulted in a polarized perception of the interaction of secular and monastic dialogues in Old English literature.

More recent scholarship, however, asserts the impossibility of knowing pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon texts at all, given that a written body of literature was non-existent before the sixth-

century Gregorian mission. What remains of Old English literature is inextricably bound up in the framework of the larger Christian narrative, and so any attempt to reconstruct a purely “pagan” conceptualization of Germanic literature becomes meaningless. This is especially true of those poems rooted in religious or biblical themes, as I will explore in the three chapters of this thesis—but it is also true of the iconic Anglo-Saxon texts that were probably told and re-told around the warm fire of the mead-hall. Even the rugged and rough-hewn worlds of *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon* acknowledge a divine presence, the Prime Mover, God the Creator who perpetually and subtly directs the course of events. So the question of assimilation and its agency is less of a “who?” and more of a “how?” The majority of present-day medieval scholars, including Joyce Tally Lionarons, Heidi Estes, and Stacy S. Klein, denounce the assumption that pre-Christian and Christian literary elements antagonize and conflict with one another within a given text; instead, their research acknowledges that the Anglo-Saxon poets, from Cædmon to Cynewulf, necessarily write from a position of cultural syncretism, a unique coming-together of secular and ecclesiastical. Contemporary scholars thus emphasize the inseparable nature of “pre-Christian” and “Christian” narrative traditions in Anglo-Saxon poetry, and how they effectively act upon one another within the body of Old English literature.

The problem of vocabulary, however, still persists; even amongst the scholarly texts which I employ in the following chapters, distinctions are made between “Germanic” and “Latin” or “Christian” elements of Anglo-Saxon culture. This is a false dichotomy, since Latin Christianity was thoroughly and completely naturalized by the time that the Anglo-Saxon poets record their first oral or written narratives. The concept of “Germanic heroism” is a particularly problematic creation of 20th-century scholarship — a sort of short-hand, catch-all phrase for a complex construction that needs to be further unpacked. Even attempts to separate the “pre-

Christian” from the “Christian” in the available texts essentially clutter what we can and do know about the Christianized Anglo-Saxon world through literature with unsubstantiated frameworks and gratuitous theories. Throughout the pages of this thesis, I therefore make a conscious effort to resist this pervasive desire to complete that which is incomplete or to compartmentalize that which is desegregated. The following chapters acknowledge a degree of unknowability in regards to the life and values of Anglo-Saxon England prior to the scribing of the poems I examine. To this end, I resist distinguishing between Latin and Germanic, pre-Christian and Christian; at certain points where clarification is required, however, I do differentiate between “monastic” (institutionally religious) and “secular” (culturally normative) aspects of Anglo-Saxon life and society.

Eventually we will see that this concept of cultural syncretism paves the way for a sort of gender syncretism. The term “gender syncretism” generally applies to linguistic pronoun patterns, which I briefly discuss throughout my examination of some gendered aspects of the Old English vocabulary. However, I also use this phrase in a much more comprehensive sense to refer to a simultaneous navigation of masculine- and feminine-coded performances as a result of the convergence of monastic and secular ideals within Anglo-Saxon culture. The ease with which female characters are able to assume masculine roles, or male characters feminine traits and actions, is a fascinating characteristic of these oldest texts in the English literary canon, and one that I argue arises from this merger of the religious-oriented monastic lifestyle with the secular dynamics of the Anglo-Saxon world. The poets’ complex and surprisingly fluid conceptions of gender roles have attracted an ever-increasing rate of scholarly interest, not only from the medieval studies community, but also from those of the feminist and gender studies inclination. That this intersection of contemporary gender studies can be applied productively

and effectively to these very old, very removed texts continues to engage my interest and animate my own critical studies of Old English literature. It is a transcendent moment when we are able to read *Judith* alongside the theories of Freud and Lacan, or *Elene* alongside Butlerian principles of performance and performativity—when we join a dialogue that converses across a thousand years of literature.

At the same time, we must be cautious as we enter into such a conversation. The Anglo-Saxon world is far removed from our own perceptions of culture and gender, and few commentaries on the life and times of these people remain accessible to the modern reader. So although the application of contemporary gender theory can be productive, we must also recognize that such material can also bring with it a certain amount of social and historical baggage, as well as a number of unfounded assumptions, into a cultural context that is quite unfamiliar. Literary hypotheses regarding the political, social, religious, and narrative frameworks of the Anglo-Saxon realm are certainly productive, allowing the reader to follow a multiplicity of white rabbits down the rabbit hole in order to encounter an alternative community. Nevertheless, the nature of such work will remain largely speculative, and some rabbit holes will lead the curious reader nowhere in particular. When working critically with Old English literature, therefore, we should take great care not to overemphasize the value of a theoretical approach — despite its popularity in the current academic community — and instead meet the text on its own terms. Taking this into account, the direction of my thesis is primarily focused on detailed textual analysis and the critical work of the relevant literary community, while still allowing a subtle commentary of gender theory to permeate my examination of cultural and gender syncretism in Anglo-Saxon poetry.

In my first chapter I will discuss this syncretic practice, which is perhaps best exemplified by the *Dream of the Rood* poet who seeks to reinvent Christ on the cross as the ideal Anglo-Saxon lord, hastening with all courage to imminent death for the salvation of his thanes. The dramatic retelling shuns the physically weakened Christ of the New Testament Gospels in favor of a hero much more readily accessible to the poet's audience. An Anglo-Saxon hero, John M. Hill notes, must demonstrate a "fame-assuring battle courage, especially if a successful outcome—battlefield victory—seems impossible" (Hill 2). And so we find the Christ of *The Dream of the Rood* enacting his own crucifixion, mounting the cross of his own will and fortitude. *The Dream of the Rood* envisions Christ as the paradigmatic Anglo-Saxon hero in his manifestation of the scriptural Saviour of humanity. This is the conqueror of death itself—*Christus triumphans* in the very flesh.

Gender dynamics further complicate this syncretic corpus, as I observe in the latter portion of my thesis other Old English texts such as *Elene* and *Judith*, where women's traditional roles as peace-weavers are challenged. Within these particular pieces, however, we confront a further layer of interpretation; while *Dream of the Rood* directly reworks the Christ figure, *Elene* and *Judith* present a more indirect revision. These poems very intentionally ascribe Mary-like qualities to their female protagonists; at the same time, such designations are reminiscent of the *Dream of the Rood's* strategy in translating the heroine of the spiritual state into one victorious in the physical realm. Jane Chance, in her book *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature*, argues that the traditional Anglo-Saxon role of women is one of passivity and peace-weaving, of which Mary poses the ideal representative (xiv). In my second and third chapters I will contend with this proposal of passivity; furthermore, I will suggest that it is not merely their degree of chastity, but more so their spiritual fortitude and devotion that enables Elene and Judith to break out of the

traditional mould and into the role of the heroine. If Old English literature transforms Christ into the paradigmatic Anglo-Saxon hero, then it also remodels the feminine exemplar of Mary the Virgin (*virgo*) into a female warrior (*virago*) ideal. Here, in particular, I will make use of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity in order to contextualize my discussion of these two poems: to which dominant discourse(s) do the heroines respond?

My second chapter will examine Cynewulf's portrayal of Elene, who distinctly recalls a Mary figure as the mother of Constantine, champion of Christianity. The text clearly establishes the emperor as a type of Christ through various appellations. Cynewulf refers to him as both a "consolation" and a "scourge" to the nations, the first evoking Luke 2:25 (Simeon anticipating the birth of Christ) and the latter recalling both Jesus's cleansing of the temple and his crucifixion. More explicitly, Christ and Constantine both accomplish victory by means of the cross. If Constantine acts as a figure of Christ, we can extrapolate that Elene as the emperor's mother is a representation of Mary. Elene reacts with the same immediate willingness as her biblical counterpart to serve her lord as an agent of Christian conversion; her quest to find the remains of the cross leads her to bring the gospel to the Jews and eventually establish a church among them. At the same time, Joyce Tally Lionarons emphasizes Elene's actions as categorically masculine, such that the mediatrix evolves into *guðcwen* and *sigecwen*, the war- and victory-queen (59). This idea is furthered by Stacy Klein's discussion of Elene's aggressive tactics of conversion, which certainly move beyond peaceful religious negotiations and into a ruthless military campaign. Cynewulf justifies Elene's threats and tortures as a sort of refining fire through which the blind Jews are brought to truth and faith, speaking of Judas's relenting to the queen's demands after suffering starvation as his purification. Though contemporary Old English scholars rightly criticize the poem for its anti-Semitic prejudices, it is clear that

Cynewulf finds no fault in Elene, to whom he continuously refers as the “noble” or “blessed” queen. In fact, the heroine of the poem embodies lordly success on multiple levels; in the spiritual war she wins numerous converts to Christianity, but it is on the physical battlefield that victory is guaranteed through Elene’s discovery of the cross and the nails. These tokens confirm success for Constantine in all his endeavours and thus prosperity for the people under his rule. It is Elene, then, who secures the safety of her people—the primary responsibility of an Anglo-Saxon leader.

As I will examine in my third chapter, *Judith*’s heroine is similarly victorious in her vanquishing of the warlord Holofernes, enabled by God to physically defeat the heathen Assyrian. That this Anglo-Saxon poetic retelling of the Vulgate *Liber Iudith* places such a clear value on Judith’s chastity, her purity untainted by the debauched Holofernes, offers a clear connection between the Bethulian woman and the Virgin Mary; in both cases, God intervenes to bring about a saviour without corrupting the female body. Judith’s decapitating Holofernes signals the key transition from a more submissive Virgin Mary figure to the active Anglo-Saxon woman-as-hero; nevertheless, the degree of her heroism has become in more recent critiques a point of some contestation. Christopher Fee, for example, in comparing the Vulgate with the poetic version, argues that the Old English *Judith* diminishes the protagonist’s role to that of a mere figurehead who must rely on her men to see her act of heroism through (405-406). While Fee’s comparison offers a helpful analysis of the male/female roles in the latter half of the poem, I believe that he neglects the crucial moment of battle — the death of Holofernes at the hands of Judith — to which the poet himself devotes so much attention. Here I find Olsen’s “Inversion and Political Purpose in the Old English *Judith*” of import, as she discusses Judith’s ringletted garb and prayer of supplication as a donning of both physical and spiritual armour (291).

Ivan Herbison echoes this idea by proposing that Judith's spiritual devotion contributes to her physical strength and culminates in both earthly and celestial reward (Herbison 21).

My thesis thus aims to discuss the concept of “remaking” in Old English poetry, the various means by which both scriptural archetypes and Anglo-Saxon heroes work upon each other to produce a unique literary ideal — and in particular, how this amalgamation of secular and monastic aspects of Anglo-Saxon culture contributes to a movement in Old English female protagonists from peace-weavers to warriors.

Chapter 1:

Gendered Representations of Christ and the Cross in *The Dream of the Rood*

Compelling in its simplicity and effective in its imagistic artistry, the Anglo-Saxon poem *The Dream of the Rood* represents one of the most important focal points of medieval scholarship, particularly in its navigation of the cultural syncretism working within this dramatic retelling of the crucifixion of Christ. It is only in more recent decades, however, that the burgeoning field of gender studies has directed its attention over a thousand years back in time in order to examine the poet's representations of masculinity and femininity throughout this fundamental text. Much of the research conducted with these concerns in mind emphasizes the gendered nature of either the figure of Christ, the primary actor in the performance of the passion, or the cross, the secondary narrator in the visionary poem. More often than not, these two characters have been examined separately, and critics have chosen to focus on one or the other in an attempt to simplify their exploration of the poet's interactions with both secular and monastic conceptions of gender within Anglo-Saxon culture.

Unfortunately, this process has led to rather polarizing conclusions that raise more questions than answers. Is the poet's portrayal of Christ as an Anglo-Saxon war hero an attempt at hyper-masculinity to counter the scriptural accounts of his physical weakness? Or does Christ's "surrendering" himself to a cruel death contradict that same heroic mould, resulting in a more feminized saviour? Similarly, does the cross represent the loyal thane who remains steadfast at his lord's bleeding side throughout this physical and spiritual battle? Or is the more explicitly submissive nature of the cross indicative of a powerless femininity? Such dichotomies, of course, seem irreconcilable, and — I believe — fail to comprehend the Anglo-Saxon poet's far more complex ideas of gender. In this chapter, then, I will examine the figures

of Christ and the cross alongside one another — intertwined, working within and upon each other — in precisely the same manner as the poet’s own depiction. In doing so, I hope to establish an understanding of gender within *The Dream of the Rood* as a fluid conception, in that the poet in his treatment of the biblical narrative moves continuously from the masculine to the feminine with familiar rather than transgressive intention.

That the *DOTR* poet’s incarnate Christ contrasts quite sharply with his scriptural counterpart during the hours of crucifixion has long been a matter of great interest for medievalists; nevertheless, a discussion of the nature of this deviation bears repeating in order to establish the key aspects of cultural — and eventually gender — syncretic strategies at work here. In order to begin to understand the poet’s modification of the Christ figure, then, we must return to his own primary textual resource: the Bible, and especially the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These four accounts contribute both to the narrative chronology and to the inspired vision of the *DOTR* poet, and provide a solid basis for my own textual comparison. While each Gospel differs somewhat in the perspective, details, and emphases of their various testimonials, they all seem to share a rather factual tone in their conveyance of Christ’s suffering, both before and during the execution. Even John suspends his otherwise figurative style in favour of a more “historical” telling of this particular event in the life of Jesus, as if to emphasize the accuracy of the information provided. Together, the four Gospels offer us an attempt at an unembellished crucifixion story that highlights Christ’s human nature, which is certainly not immune to the agony of a Roman crucifixion. Though the cross holds a much more symbolic quality for the contemporary reader — a domesticated emblem of the Christian religion — the shock value of this instrument of defamation and torture would still have resonated strongly with a medieval audience (McPherson 167). This was by no means a humane sort of penalty — hence

the term *excruciating*, derived from the Latin *excruciare*, “to crucify.” In their “History and Pathology of Crucifixion,” Retief and Cilliers remark that even before being nailed to the cross, the condemned person was to be stripped naked and scourged using a stake or whip embedded with bone fragments; if one survived the preliminaries (the Romans had no limit on the number of lashings), a slow death from blood loss, asphyxiation, and organ failure awaited (Retief and Cillier 938). The Gospels of Matthew and Mark present a Christ who, anticipating such a painful death, balks in the moments before his arrest—and understandably so: “He began to be troubled and deeply distressed. Then he said to them, ‘My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death’” (Mark 14:33-34 NKJV). Luke records that Jesus’s anguish is so great that he begins to sweat drops of blood (Luke 22:44). Though Christ understands the inevitability of his passion, he appears to experience a moment of weakness and pleads that he might be spared (whether from the physical pain of crucifixion or the spiritual agony of being forsaken by God the Father is a matter for the theologians to debate): “Oh my Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me!” (Matthew 26: 39) A bitter cup to be sure, as following his arrest and trial the Roman soldiers whip him, strike him, twist a thorny crown into his head, and mock him. Too weak to carry his own instrument of torture, the shamed, fainting, and dehydrated Christ crawls his way to Golgotha where soldiers stretch his flayed body out and nail him through his hands to the cross. Nearly dead already, he hangs there for six hours (some convicts suffered for days) before uttering a final cry and “breathing his last” (Mark 15:16-39). Though we wince at the horrific biblical narrative, at the same time we understand and acknowledge that these accounts resonate with historical records of the practice of crucifixion. Here is a physically realistic portrayal of Christ on the cross, emotionally and spiritually distraught at the prospect of facing crucifixion as well as bodily faint throughout the torturous process itself.

The *Dream of the Rood* poet, however, offers a vividly different alternative Christ, describing an active war hero rather than a pathetic sufferer, a Christ who appears remarkably like an Anglo-Saxon lord in strength and will. Here is a Lord who practically runs to his fate, “hastening with much fortitude” (Bradley 161). The scriptural story presents a half-gone man whom the Romans strip and roll, deadweight, onto the tree. But this Christ strips himself and climbs his own cross with all courage, reminiscent of the Roman martyr Perpetua’s dream self who, waiting to be killed in the arena, strips and finds herself with a man’s body, prepared to fend off any and all attackers (Perkins 843). It is not that the crucifixion is any less terrible; the cross recalls his “grievous torment” and “great struggle” as Christ is “violently racked” (Bradley 161-162). The poet insists on the reality of the immense suffering of crucifixion, particularly in the cross’s description of the malicious bodily harm and the many wounds that the body of Christ endures. It is this particular Christ’s reaction to such torment that deviates so drastically from the scriptural narrative: this is a very different interpretation of the passion of the Christ — not a pathetic passion, but a powerful one. Where the Gospels portray a Christ that, however briefly, shrinks from the cross, the *DOTR*’s hero never falters and is almost eager to meet his mortality. Where the biblical Jesus is all inactive, allowing himself to be ushered to his death, the Anglo-Saxonized version is entirely action, as the verb tenses indicate again and again. No Roman soldier can touch him—he enacts his own crucifixion.

Initially, this poetic manipulation of this central narrative within the Christian mythology seems to pave the way for a hyper-masculinized Christ that would perhaps serve to counteract the perceived femininity of the weaker biblical figure. After all, as Emma B. Hawkins comments, any admission of fear or physical weakness or utterance of complaint would have indicated cowardice and entirely undermined the leadership of an Anglo-Saxon lord (35). As

such, the Christ who balks at the prospect of his doom, who stands silent before the accusations of his tormentors, and who famously decries God the Father for forsaking him (“*Eli, eli, lama sabachthani!*”) loses much of his salvific potential in the perception of the Anglo-Saxon audience (Matthew 27:46). In contrast, the *DOTR* Christ is immovable — *stiðmod*— in his mounting of the cross. Hawkins relates the significance of this term to the equally undaunted Byrhtnoth and his men in the Old English poem “The Battle of Maldon.”

Comprised of two elements *stið*, meaning “stiff, hard, rigid,” and *mod*, “mind, heart, spirit, resolve,” the compound adjective *stiðmod* emphasizes that Christ's mind or heart is rigidly set. He is unrelenting in his resolve, “Bravely” *modig*, Christ mounts the gallows in the sight of many (l. 41). We find a similar play on *stið* in “The Battle of Maldon.” After a band of fierce Vikings comes ashore to plunder the English countryside, one swaggering Viking warrior stands on the shore and “sternly shouts” *stiðlice clypode* (l. 25) the terms of peace. The *stið*- adverb can be interpreted, “with a rigid, hard, unyielding body; sternly.” (Hawkins 34)

The term *stiðmod* emphasizes an internal quality of masculinity, as the above examples demonstrate. And so the language deployed by the poet of the *DOTR* suggests a Christ who possesses a certain hyper-masculinity — or at the very least, a superior masculinity — that bolsters his courage and renders him almost entirely impervious to the torments of his crucifixion.

However, the idea that the poet's manipulation of the scriptural account in order to hyper-masculinize the figure of Christ is problematic on two levels. First, the term “hyper-masculinity” is entirely anachronistic, a psychological term not established until the 1980s with the studies of Mosher and Sirkin. While such attitudes as emotional indifference and an appreciation of competitive violence are now widely regarded in contemporary Western culture as exaggerated traits, these represented part of the traditional coded masculine in Old English literature and Anglo-Saxon culture (Hawkins 34-35). The portrait of the hyper-masculine male today would have borne some similarities to the average able-bodied Anglo-Saxon thane during the time

period when the *DOTR* was written. Secondly, I argue that the poet's depiction does not strive for *hyper* — a term that inherently implies a negative excess — but *ideal*. Within the Christian *mythos*, Christ is the archetypal hero: he is the King of kings and the Lord of lords, the Saviour of all humankind. In his retelling of the passion of the Christ, then, the poet must convey the supreme lordship of his poetic subject. His work is, in fact, one of translation, of interpreting the biblical figure into a language of heroism that would have been much more readily accessible to an Anglo-Saxon audience. And here the concept of cultural syncretism becomes of great use in an understanding of the gendered Christ, for the poet's concern is clearly not psychological (as an attempt at hyper-masculinity might suggest), but spiritual. How does one demonstrate the spiritual power of this man-God in his most physical moment, and in such a way that his readership will be able to grasp the enormous weight of this burden, this figure, this death? The poet resolves this issue by rendering the Christ as another archetype: that of the heroic Anglo-Saxon lord.

In his book *The Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic: Reconstructing Lordship in Early English Literature*, John M. Hill describes several of the key characteristics of a good Anglo-Saxon lord, including courage in battle — especially when victory seems impossible — proper gift-giving in order to cement the relationship between lord and retainer, and ultimately the defense of one's thanes even unto death (Hill 2). I have already discussed at some length Christ's fulfillment of the first requirement of Anglo-Saxon lordship as he literally embraces his death on a cross. This portrayal is not unlike Byrhtnoth's continued battle with the Vikings in "The Battle of Maldon" even after the majority of his men unwittingly desert him and his demise seems certain, or Beowulf's confrontation of the dragon that also results in his defeat. In each of these texts, the narrator understands and reveals to the reader that the outcome of the battle will be inevitably

tragic; nevertheless, these men are depicted as heroes rather than fools, and their deaths are accounted to them as honour. Such is the case with the Christ of the *DOTR*, who does not shy away from his fate but rushes to meet it, “strong and unflinching,” “courageous under the scrutiny of many” (Bradley 161). And just as Beowulf is greatly mourned by his people, so too is Christ’s death bewailed; as Bradley translates, “All creation wept; they lamented the King’s death: Christ was on the cross” (161). Furthermore, while the Christian narrative privileges burial over the Germanic pyre for a proper funeral, the poet assures his audience that every honour is accorded the deceased lord: his loyal followers gently retrieve him from the instrument of his torture, lay him to rest in a beautifully carved stone tomb, and mourn him throughout the rest of the evening (Bradley 161-162).

Even throughout and after his death, however, Christ continues to meet the obligations of an Anglo-Saxon hero in the act of gift-giving. This ritual, as exemplified in other Old English texts such as *Beowulf* and the *Maxims*, represents a crucial exchange between lord and retainer; a good lord is a generous lord, and gifts (often gold) function as both recognition of and reward for the loyal service of the thane. This, in turn, inspires the thane to reciprocate the gift with further fealty, and so ensures the continuity of social structures and stability (Thieme 108). Adelheid Thieme addresses this important tradition as it manifests itself in the *DOTR* poem, especially in the relationship between Christ and his retainer, the cross:

The *Rood* poet incorporates concepts of proper gift exchange, which are a vital ingredient of Anglo-Saxon secular life, into his poem when he portrays the relationship between Christ and the cross not only as one between a Germanic hero and his retainer, but also as one between donor and recipient in a gift giving relationship. The cross prides itself that Christ's servants, at their lord's behest, “gyredon me / golde ond seolfre” (1.1.7.7) [adorned me with gold and with silver]. Elevated to its high position, which is visibly expressed by its precious ornaments (1.1.5 b-9a; 23b), the cross is empowered to act as a lord itself. (Thieme 111)

As I will discuss in greater detail in the second half of this chapter, the cross is generously rewarded for its unwavering loyalty, suffering the physical wounds and humiliation associated with crucifixion alongside his lord. But, as Thieme points out, Christ's gift-giving extends beyond the cross to all of humankind. The *DOTR* poet works from this well-established cultural tradition in order to direct his audience to the greater gift that is being offered here: redemption. For all those who will honour Christ through their worship of the cross, and who like the cross will remain loyal to their lord even in the face of death, their reward will be eternal. They will be the honoured guests at the great feast in the celestial hall, "where there is great happiness, joy in heaven, where the Lord's people are placed at the banquet, where there is unceasing happiness" (Bradley 163). The poet employs the theme of gift-giving not only as a means of establishing the reciprocal nature of the relationship between human and the divine, but also to emphasize Christ as the superlative giver, who offers up his own life in order to secure an everlasting reward for his thanes. The magnitude of such a gift, Thieme contends, presents Christ as the singularly most powerful lord of all (Thieme 109).

All of these elements contribute to a Christ figure that resembles more the burly war hero of Anglo-Saxon legend than the pathetic Jesus of the Bible. The poet thus solidifies the masculinity of Christ in his fulfillment of the obligations of an Anglo-Saxon leader; the repeated heroic epithets highlight this: "similar to the heroes in *Beowulf*, Christ is called a young man ("geong hæleð" [l. 39]), a powerful king ("ricne Cyning" [l. 44]), a prince ("æðelinge" [l. 58]), and a glorious prince ("mæran þeodne" [l. 69])" (Thieme 113). We could, perhaps, point out that the biblical narrative appears far more realistic, and even argue that Christ's understandable weakness allows readers to sympathize with his character and better comprehend the cost of humanity's redemption. However, the Anglo-Saxon poet's intention is not to make a friend of

Christ, but a leader—and while moments of fragility might be tolerated of a friend (especially if beaten and nailed up on a tree), a true leader must rise above. And so the *DOTR*'s Christ does. Here is a lord to whom thanes may willingly swear fealty, his own loyalty already paid out in blood sacrifice upon the cross. Here is a lord that they may follow into battle, his steadfast courage proven in the direst of circumstances. Here is their hero, *Christus triumphans*, a conqueror of the cross and — eventually — of death.

While I have rejected the argument for a hyper-masculine Christ in favour of an ideally masculine Anglo-Saxon lord archetype, there are several aspects of the poetic text that complicate—if not entirely contradict—this depiction, moments when the warrior ethic is reversed. The concept of self-sacrifice is particularly problematic in that it would have been regarded as a much more feminine demonstration of heroism. To meet death on the battlefield is the most honourable death for an Anglo-Saxon warrior; this is why it is so critical that the poet emphasizes Christ as the bold and valiant lord who becomes the primary actor in his own crucifixion. This also explains the poet's abrupt turn to the compunction of the cross rather than Christ in the final moments of his torture. It is the cross who is pierced through with the nails, the cross who is drenched in blood (Bradley 161). The focus is drawn away from Christ in order to avoid what the Gospels reveal as his most physically and emotionally vulnerable moments. One particular passage of interest that three of the four Gospels record but that the poet entirely disregards is that of the onlookers who taunt Jesus by demanding that he save himself in order to demonstrate his divine power.

And those who passed by blasphemed him, wagging their heads and saying, "Aha! You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!" Likewise the chief priests also, mocking among themselves with the scribes, said, "He saved others; himself he cannot save. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe." Even those who were crucified with Him reviled Him. (Mark 15:29-32)

Should the *DOTR* poet — quite obviously intimately familiar with the scriptural accounts — have chosen to include a similar incident, his audience would have certainly equated such a taunt with a challenge of combat, one which they no doubt would have expected Christ to answer. After all, Jesus had earlier proved his ability to raise the dead on several different occasions. But in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus makes no response but to cry out to God the Father and commend to him his spirit. The challenge is not answered. Christ does not come down from the cross to meet his challengers in physical combat; he remains on the cross, bleeding to death, as a convicted criminal.

Of course, the poet brushes over this and several other biblical plot points (Christ's admittance of thirst in John 19:28, for example) that might defame the masculinity of Christ; nevertheless, his subtle glosses cannot truly disguise the martyrological nature of Christ's passion. Christ's death is one of self-sacrifice, a death that the Anglo-Saxon audience would have coded as feminine. In the event of war, or if a hostile army captured and pillaged an Anglo-Saxon village, death as a martyr — especially in the defense of one's children and elders — would have been considered a viable and honourable alternative to the rape, mutilation, and enslavement that would have been inflicted upon the members of the losing side of the battle (Hawkins 35). Similarly, even though Christ's fortitude is certain and his intentions noble as he "wills to redeem mankind," he effectively allows himself to be killed in order to secure the salvation of his people. As the cross laments, the lord does not even permit his thane to fight on his behalf:

Ðær ic þa ne dorste ofer Dryhtnes word
bugan oððe berstan, þa ic bifian geseah
eorðan sceatas. Ealle ic mihte
feondas gefyllan, hwæðre ic fæste stod.

.

Purhdrifan hi me mid deorcan næglum; on me syndon þa dolg gesiene,
opene inwidhlemmas. Ne dorste ic hira ænigum sceððan. (33-38, 46-47)

Or, as Burton Raffel translates:

...I saw the Lord of the world
Boldly rushing to climb upon me
And I could neither bend nor break
The word of God. I saw the ground
Trembling. I could have crushed them all,
And yet I kept myself erect.
.
They pierced me with vicious nails. I bear the scars
Of malicious gashes. But I dared not injure any of them. (33-38, 46-47)

For a male warrior, then, this is a feminine death, and therefore less than honourable. In fact, it is humiliating, as line 48 indicates: “*Bysmeredon hie unc butu ætgædere*” (“They reviled us both together”). Christ’s position here is the reversal of the warrior mode, a defensive rather than offensive stance that accepts the inevitability of death but does not maintain his fight until the bitter end.

Neither the Gospel writers nor the *DOTR* poet leave Christ in this disgraced state for long, however; a mere three days later, he rises victorious from the dead: “He suffered for a time...he tasted death” writes the poet, but only for a short while, as he declares that “the Lord rose again with his mighty power, to the benefit of men” (Bradley 162). Hawkins, who interprets the poet’s shifting from masculine- to feminine-coded language and back as a means of demonstrating transitions of power, argues that Christ’s rising from the dead brings him back into a position of superior masculinity and therefore true sovereignty (Hawkins 35).

Masculine-coded traits which traditionally verified the possession of power were honor, mastery, aggression, victory, bravery, independence, martial prowess, physical strength, assertiveness, verbal acuteness, hardness or firmness, and respect from others. Traits coded feminine (non-masculine) which suggested powerlessness were dishonor, subservience, passivity, defeat, cowardice, dependence, defenselessness, weakness, lack of volition, verbal ineptness, softness or indecisiveness, and lack of respect. (Hawkins 33)

Hawkins recognizes a shift in the language deployed by the *DOTR* poet, from his portrayal of a defamed corpse to a lord who gains the victory over the ultimate enemy: death itself. However, she fails to distinguish between the time of Christ's entombment and that of his resurrection; it is not only *after* Christ rises from the dead that the poet's tone alters, but while he lies yet in the grave. Even as his followers prepare his broken body for burial, the poet — through the voice of the cross — ascribes to Christ the title of *ælmihigne God* ("almighty God"), *heofenes Dryhten* ("heaven's Lord"), and most importantly *sigora wealdend* ("Lord of victories") (60, 63, 67). With these designations, the poet signals to the reader that Christ retains his position of power in spite of and throughout the ordeal of the feminine-coded death of self-sacrifice.

This surprising depiction of Christ as triumphant even in the presumed defeat of death is partially a result of the anticipatory nature of the poem. After all, the *DOTR* is a vision, a time-transcending glimpse at the collision of past, present, and future. The rood, who has already beheld the culmination of the passion of the Christ, extends the same foresight to the dreamer. Realizing that victory over death will be paradoxically achieved through the crucifixion, the poet's portrayal of a *Christus triumphans* becomes an eager expectancy of redemption accomplished. In the Gospel of Luke, the risen Jesus rebukes his disciples for their failure to understand the true nature of the war he had waged and the victory he had achieved; though they had expected a Messiah to overcome the Roman rule, Christ hints throughout his time on earth that he fights for redemption from death, and not merely from Caesar.

Then He said to them, "These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning me." And he opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures. Then he said to them, "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And you are witnesses of these things. (Luke 24:44-48)

Even so does the poet remind his audience that though the death blow has been dealt, the enemy has not gained the upper hand; we are not intended to lament with those who weep over Christ's cold body, but to await with eager anticipation the fulfillment of his victory. While they believe him dead, we understand that he is merely "weary of limb" and "resting for a while" (Bradley 161-162). It is the seemingly contradictory nature of the already/not yet: the dream sequence represents a performance of transcendence during which the dreamer experiences his vision outside of time. It is only in eternity that a specific chronology of events and details manifests itself so that the dreamer may piece together the narrative. So he is able to embrace the Lord's defeat and victory in death simultaneously. Christ's ascendancy is as inevitable as his death, and so he becomes the almighty Lord of victories even before his resurrection.

More importantly, in terms of gendering the actions of the Christ, we begin to understand that the *DOTR* poet is paving the way for a new archetypal masculinity, one that blends the heroism of secular Anglo-Saxon battle courage with self-sacrificial Christian piety. While Hawkins contends that Christ remains in a state of feminine powerlessness after his martyrdom until he again achieves sovereignty through the act of resurrecting himself, the text assures the reader that Christ maintains his status of power even in his death on the cross. We observe that from the grave he continues to fulfill the obligations of the successful warrior lord, especially the traditional gift-giving that would normally follow a great victory; he ensures that the cross, his most loyal thane, is finely ornamented, and that his faithful followers are guaranteed redemption (Bradley 162). That Christ emerges from the grave as Almighty God only further emphasizes that his devotion to the ethics of Anglo-Saxon heroism remains as strong and steadfast as when he first ran to embrace his fate upon the cross, despite an eventually more passive act of giving himself up to death. Though we might, as Hawkins does, tend to distinguish between the

masculine and the feminine Christ, the poet insists that such a division is unnecessary. The man and the martyr are one and the same saviour. Cultural syncretism, here the blending of secular and monastic Anglo-Saxon narrative traditions, lends itself to a similar gender syncretism, where the battle for the redemption of humankind is not won exclusively through active fortitude or passive sacrifice, but through both. Thus a new hero begins to manifest himself in this poem, and while the poet takes care to preserve the Anglo-Saxon heroic standard, he also allows the more feminine heroic act of self-sacrifice to bleed into a remade paradigmatic Christ figure.

The secondary narrator of the *DOTR*, the cross, also represents a hybridized masculinity and femininity. The dual nature of the poet's gendering of the cross is evident even in the dreamer's first visionary assessment:

Geseah ic wuldres treow
wædum geweorðod wynnum scinan,
gegyred mid golde; gimmas hæfdon
bewrigen weorðlice Wealdendes treow.
Hwæðre ic þurh þæt gold ongytan meahte
earnraergewin, þæt hit ærest ongan
swætan on þa swiðran healfe. Eall ic wæs mid sorgum gedrefed.
Forht ic wæs for þære fægran gesyhðe. Geseah ic þæt fuse beacen
wendan wædum bleom: hwilum hit wæs mid wætan bestemed,
beswyled mid swates gange, Hwilum mid since gegyrwed. (14b-23)

...And yet I saw it—
Shining with joy, clothed, adorned,
Covered with gold, the tree of the Lord
Gloriously wrapped in gleaming stones.
And through the gold I saw the stains
Of its ancient agony when blood spilled out
On its right-hand side. I was troubled and afraid
Of the shining sight. Then its garments changed,
And its color; for a moment it was moist with blood,
Dripping and stained; then it shone like silver. (Raffel 14-23)

The dreamer's initial perception of the cross echoes the anticipatory nature of the vision earlier discussed in that it foretells the victory of the Lord; the brilliant adornment of the cross suggests

the noble gifts of a triumphal king, which Hawkins codes as masculine (Hawkins 34). At the same time, however, the repeated emphasis on the covering of the cross hints at a more feminine *sigebeam*. The fact that the cross is *gegyred* (“adorned”), and *bewrigen* (“covered”) does not necessarily indicate specifically feminine or ornamental dress — similar terminology can be applied to a warrior or monarch’s attire (16a, 17a). However, as I begin to relate the gendered cross with the gendered Christ, this act of clothing becomes a masculine/feminine relational move whereby the cross is covered — protected and provided for — by the Lord. The description of the cross’s glorious attire also rings true with the language of the eschatological book of Revelation: brilliant or shining clothing adorns the Church, the bride of Christ, and the celestial city of Jerusalem is similarly bedecked with gold and numerous precious stones (Revelation 19:6-8, 21:9-21). In such portrayals, that which is so ornamentally clothed is always feminine, and so from a position of cultural syncretism I contend with Hawkins’s argument that the cross is coded entirely masculine — and therefore in a position of power — from the very beginning of the poem. Nevertheless, the dreamer is able to perceive through this glamour a masculinized cross, a rood that is stained with *earmra ærgewin*— “ancient agony,” as Raffel translates, but literally “the former strife of wretched ones” in reference to the crucifixion of past criminals (19a). The bloodied cross implies battle wounds, from which we can infer a subtle hint at the portrayal of the retainer-cross that is yet to be fleshed out. The vision of the cross shifts fluidly from shining with blood to shining with silver, as lines 22-23 suggest; however, that the dreamer comprehends the wounded cross *þurhor* “through” the victorious cross indicates that these two roods — which differ greatly in the visual sense — are the same cross. There is a temporal disparity between the two — the bloodied cross precedes the triumphal cross — although the still-dripping blood proposes that the wounds remain fresh, vivid. Yet the gendered

nature of the cross is simultaneously masculine and feminine, in a manner similar to what I have attempted to demonstrate in my discussion of the representation of the archetypal Christ.

The scholarship regarding the figure of the cross generally contends that this particular rood is poetically construed as a retainer; if Christ represents the ideal Anglo-Saxon lord, then the cross becomes the thane who remains at his side throughout the struggle in which he is engaged. Though the scriptural cross acts as the primary instrument of Christ's torture, a weapon in the hands of the Romans, it is clear that the cross presented in the *DOTR* does not render its services to such men but to Christ. Not only does the cross repeatedly acknowledge Christ as its *Drhytne* or "Lord" (35), it also condemns those men who cut it down for the purpose of raising up criminals as *feondas*—"enemies", or as Raffel translates "ruthless enemies" (29, 33, 38). Even before Christ encounters the cross in line 33 of the poem, the rood-tree asserts that its devotion is to him alone; any who oppose this lord the cross counts as foe. The word of Christ is binding ("I dared not bend or break against the lord's word") as indicated in line 35 of the poem, such that the utmost loyalty of the cross to Christ emerges as an essential — even legal — element of their relationship, just as it would be in the contract between retainer and lord in the traditional Anglo-Saxon system of honour. Before the introduction of Christianity — and thus literacy — to the region, the Anglo-Saxon community probably depended on verbal contracts to guarantee a proper course of action. By refusing to break this verbal contract, then, the cross upholds its end and remains loyal to its lord, even unto death. Though it quickly becomes apparent that the cross is more than capable of engaging Christ's enemies in physical battle, obedience to its lord — who commands that it remain steadfastly upright — supersedes the directive to wreak violence upon his crucifiers. "All the enemies I could have felled;

nonetheless I stood firm” translates Bradley from the Old English: *Ealle ic mihte feondas gefyllan, hƿæðre ic fæste stod* (38).

Despite the cross’s apparent fulfillment of its duties as retainer toward Christ, Hawkins argues that there is a decidedly feminine quality to the cross’s actions — or lack thereof. She writes:

Faithful and loyal, the masculine-coded retainer-cross experiences an internal power struggle. He must reconcile his manly obligation to use physical strength and martial prowess to protect lord and self in times of peril with the duty to obey the leader’s command to remain passive and powerless... Characterized as a faithful male “retainer” *hilderinca* (1.72) ... the retainer-cross is obligated to do as his sovereign commands, to voluntarily refrain from violent resistance (1.47) instead of overwhelming the enemy with superior force. By not fighting to the death to protect his lord, the retainer-cross violates the heroic code and becomes an object of “shame” *wommum* (1.14). Helpless and unable to act on his own volition, the cross must perform according to the dictates of his captors. He is forced to lift up his “powerful king” *ricne cyning* to die (1.44). (Hawkins 34, 35)

If Christ’s turn to a death of self-sacrifice indicates a shift to a more feminine-coded figure then, as Hawkins contends, his retainer’s “passivity” — even if in obedience to its lord — similarly “exhibits womanly traits” (Hawkins 34). Clair W. McPherson describes the role of the cross as one of absorption, such that it receives all the action without any resistance: the cross is raised up, the cross is pierced through with nails, the cross is bled upon (McPherson 122).

The feminine position of the cross is further emphasized by its repeated complaints about the torments and wounds it endures throughout the passion of the Christ. As Mitchell and Robinson note, the obligations of a warrior allow for neither wailing nor weeping even under the most agonizing of circumstances: “a suffering man must bear up silently” (Mitchell and Robinson 245). Similarly, Hawkins cites the exiled Anglo-Saxon of *The Wanderer* and Beowulf in his advising Hrothgar to cease his mourning of Aeschere as further evidence that any honourable thane must eschew voicing his miseries and instead assume the unyielding courage

of a true Anglo-Saxon warrior. Complaining signals idleness; “a man should not grieve or mourn too much when action is called for” (Hawkins 35). That the cross dwells upon its fear and pain in the description of its torture, as opposed to actively defending its lord from his ruthless enemies, represents another breach of the warrior ethic; this behaviour “is no more virtuous than that of the cowardly retainers who failed to protect Beowulf during his battle with the dragon” (Hawkins 35). Even after Christ’s death and entombment, the cross fails to demonstrate emotional restraint.

Hpæðere pe ðær greotende gode hpile
Stodon on staðole, syððan stefn up gepat
hilderinca. (70-71)

Bradley translates these lines as: “But we were standing in position, weeping, for a good while after the sound of the valiant men had ceased” (Bradley 162). The mournful funeral dirge has faded into the background, along with those *hilderinca* or warriors who have done their duty by their lord. Still the cross remains behind as the woman in *The Wife’s Lament* does, continuing to cry out (Hawkins 35). Of course, the cross is rooted in the ground, physically incapable of moving until it is cut down in line 74. And its mourning is not merely the sound of weeping, but also verbal and recollective. As Tacitus writes in *Germania*, “It is thought becoming for women to mourn, for men to remember” (Tacitus 88). Even so does the cross remember its lord with words of honour, as do Beowulf’s thanes after his death. Nevertheless, to indulge in what might be considered excessive emotion on the part of a retainer — to linger when other warriors have departed — seems to imply a rather unmanly weakness.

The poet’s description of the cross in direct relation to Christ also indicates a feminine rood as a counterpart to the masculine Lord. Hawkins points out that while the *DOTR* poet seems to disregard the more biblical comparison of Christ as bridegroom and the Church as

bride, he nevertheless establishes another male-female metaphor in the relationship between Christ and the cross. The language employed as Christ ascends the cross belies a certain intimacy (if not an explicitly sexual action) between the two figures that imitates a masculine-feminine rapport.

Christ hurries with great zeal “to climb, mount” *gestigan* (II.34, 40) and “embrace” *ymbclypte* (I.42) the cross who holds the feminine-coded position. Twice, the cross reminds the dreamer that the young warrior-lord climbed or mounted him. Without question, Christ has become the actor; the cross is the passive recipient of action. (Hawkins 34)

Having stripped himself of his garments, Christ stretches himself upon the cross in a gesture that is at once barefacedly courageous and profoundly intimate. The two figures cling to each other as they face death, the cross trembling in Christ’s embrace. They are both of them exposed to the violence and mockery of their enemies: “They humiliated us both together” (Bradley 161). Nevertheless, they will not be separated as long as the lord still lives; the cross will not fall to the ground even as Christ refuses to descend. The image deployed here is clearly relational in its designation of Christ as the masculine actor and the cross as the feminine receiver.

What is curious about the poet’s depiction of the cross, however, is that despite its breach of traditional warrior values on several occasions and its clearly feminine-coded position, the risen and victorious Christ still richly rewards the cross for what Hawkins might deem “insufficient service.” That is to say, while the cross has at least partially failed to uphold the various duties of a retainer, the victorious Christ treats it as if every aspect of the warrior ethic has been fulfilled. As I have previously noted, those who discover the cross in its prostrated position, felled to the ground, adorn the bloodied rood with a generous amount of gold and silver; this act not only fulfills the obligation of a triumphal lord to compensate his thane for

services rendered, but also marks the cross with great honour — the highest honour, in fact, as the following lines declare:

Nu ðu miht gehyran, hæleð min se leofa,
þæt ic bealuwara weorc gebiden hæbbe,
sarra sorga. Is nu sæl cumen
þæt me weorðiað wide side
menn ofer moldan eall þeos mære gesceaft,
gebiddaþ him to þyssum beacne. On me Bearn Godes
þrowode hwile; forþan ic þrymfæst nu
hlifige under heofenum, ic hælæn mæg
æghwylcne anra, þara þe him bið egesa to me
Iu ic wæs geworden wita heardost,
Rihtne gerymde, reordberendum. (78-89)

Only now can you hear, oh Heaven-blessed man,
How evil men have brought me pain
And sorrow. For now a season has come
When the men of all the world, and all creation,
Shall honour and worship me far and wide,
Pray to this symbol. The Son of God
Suffered on me, and made me glorious,
Towering on earth, so that every man
Who holds me in awe can be healed at my touch.
I was made to be a bitter punishment,
Loathed by men until I led them
To the road of life, and opened its gates. (Raffel 78-89)

The cross openly admits the shame of its former position; not only did it serve as an instrument of *wita heardost* or severe (physical) torture, it was also a reviled object, hated (*laðost*) by many (87-88). But through Christ it has become a symbol of glory and victory, a cross that inspires awe and healing in those who behold it, a cross that represents the gateway to the eternal life secured by Christ's sacrifice: "Through that cross every soul which purposes to dwell with the Ruler shall find its way from the earthly path into the kingdom" (Bradley 163).

Hawkins argues that is only through Christ's regaining of power post-resurrection that the cross is also able to transition from a feminine figure to a masculine one, and thus from a mode of powerlessness to restored power (Hawkins 35). And I affirm her contention to a certain

extent, insofar as the cross is certainly dependent upon Christ's benevolent rewarding in order to "secure its majesty," as Bradley translates (Bradley 162). At the same time, I continue to find her correlation of femininity with powerlessness and masculinity with power problematic, particularly in a poem which time and again seems to complicate such gendered divisions. As I concluded in the first half of this chapter, the feminine-coded act of self-sacrifice does not seem to indicate a moment of powerlessness on the part of Christ, but a blending of secular and monastic Anglo-Saxon values in order to establish a new hero, forged of cultural and gender syncretism. Indeed, the self-sacrifice of both Christ and the cross is in some respects not so different from Beowulf's diving into the lake to battle Grendel's mother alone; his descent is prefaced by a verbal will passed along to Hrothgar in case of his death (1473-1491). Beowulf understands that he might die; he also understands that his death might be required of him as lord and hero in order to secure the safety of his people. In such a manner do Christ and the cross give themselves up with the full comprehension that their sacrifice is just and necessary for the salvation of humanity—and not weak or cowardly at all. In the same vein, I believe that Hawkins' representation of the cross as a weak version of the Anglo-Saxon retainer is too simplistic, and falls short of the poet's own project. That the cross chooses submissive obedience as opposed to active resistance in defense of its lord might violate certain aspects of an Anglo-Saxon's masculine honour; however, it should be apparent by this point that the *DOTR* poet is not interested in merely maintaining one ethical paradigm, but in unifying two seemingly contradictory ideals. There is no condemnation in the poet's depiction of the cross during its most agonizing moments; while Hawkins emphasizes the cross's lack of action as weakness, the poet appears to recognize this refusal to resist as a sign of resolute strength. Indeed, though the

tree quakes, it never bends or breaks, but remains as *stiðor* unyielding as Christ in his climbing onto the cross.

Interestingly, this strength is not related to physical combat or violent action — which is perhaps why Hawkins disregards the cross as weak and powerless — but to obedience. The cross states that it dare not engage in such aggression because such an act would go against the word of the Lord, and variations of the phrase *ic þa ne dorste* (“I dared not”) occur four times in the space of 23 lines as if to assert that though numerous opportunities for physical combat present themselves, the cross privileges a strict adherence to the word of his lord above all else. Hawkins notes that to abstain from a fight in defense of one’s lord, even if commanded to do so, is to neglect the Anglo-Saxon warrior ethic, and for such we may condemn the cowardice of Beowulf’s retainers who flee the fight with the dragon (Hawkins 35). But, as is the case with the heroic Christ, we must understand that there is another layer to this set of principles, a spiritual ethic, which inspires the poet of the *DOTR*. Within the Christian mythos, obedience to the Lord and his commands takes precedence over all other obligations, even the typically honourable rights of a warrior. This is acutely exemplified in the Old Testament story of King Saul’s battle with the Amalekites; though God commands Saul to utterly destroy the Amalekite nation — every man, woman, child, and animal — Saul spares the king, as well as the best of the livestock, in the traditional manner of plundering and under the pretence of making sacrifices to please God. Though the taking of such spoils was an acceptable and common practice even for the Israelite nation, in this instance Saul’s attempt to maintain this particular right of a warrior represents an act of disobedience, and ultimately costs Saul his kingship.

“Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he also has rejected you from being king.”

(1 Samuel 15:22-23)

This brief narrative is only one of numerous Old Testament stories whose shared moral is that obedience figures as the primary component of the Christian ethic. The value of obedience above all else is also critical to Jesus's own instructing of his disciples in the New Testament scriptures: "He who has my commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him" (John 14:21). This latter mandate is precisely what the *DOTR* poet attempts to display through the cross's unorthodox display of retainer loyalty: because Christ commands that it not crush his enemies, the cross's steadfast endurance of the torturous crucifixion figures as a sign of his unwavering devotion or loyalty. As such, Christ necessarily rewards his thane with immense generosity, bestowing upon it great honour and fine adornment.

Thus, while the cross's obedient submission may potentially be construed as feminine in the perception of the Anglo-Saxon audience, I do not agree that this necessarily indicates an absence of power or, indeed, a shameful or cowardly disregard for the Anglo-Saxon warrior ethic. Instead, as I have argued in my examination of the figure of Christ, the poet works within the contexts of both secular and monastic Anglo-Saxon values in order to introduce his audience to a new type of warrior, one who fulfills all obligations to his lord not merely in spite of, but even through a more feminine-coded course of action. This erasing of traditional gender distinctions is particularly apparent in a rather unexpected and striking segment of the poem, in which the cross compares itself to the figure of the Virgin Mary.

Hwæt, me þa geweorðode wuldres Ealdor
ofer holmwudu, heofonrices Weard,
swylce swa he his modor eac, Marian sylfe,
æلميhtig God, for ealle menn
geweorðode ofer eall wifa cynn. (90-94)

Bradley translates these lines thus: “You see! The Lord of glory, Guardian of heaven-kingdom, then honoured me above the trees of the forest, just as he, the almighty God, in the sight of all men, also honoured his mother, Mary herself, above all womankind” (Bradley 162).

In light of this particular section, scholars have attempted to re-examine the entirety of the poem in order to ascertain the significance of such an analogy. B.F. Huppé, for example, refers back to the cross’ description of its first felling at its *stefne* or root in an effort to connect this origin story with that of Mary, who descends from the “root” of Jesse in the Christological genealogy (Breeze 55-56). Ó Carragáin links the *DOTR*’s telling of the crucifixion with the Annunciation in the poem’s echoing of Gabriel’s words of blessing in Luke 1:28: “Rejoice, highly favoured one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!” (Ó Carragáin 487-505) Indeed, Simeon’s prophetic words to Mary that “a sword will pierce through your own soul also” (Luke 2:35) seem to be fulfilled in the figure of the cross as well, who also shares in Christ’s torture as it is pierced with the same nails and drenched with the same blood (46-49). And, though Andrew Breeze criticizes those who have observed that the divine selection of both the cross and Mary is an “arbitrary” process (neither figure bearing any striking or qualifying characteristic in and of themselves), both figures share a narrative of humble beginnings and glorious endings (Breeze 56).

Despite the many speculations concerning this unlikely pairing, the comparison remains a puzzling one. Not because an association between the cross and Mary is entirely anomalous; in fact, Andrew Breeze traces the literary and theological juxtaposition of these two figures from the period of early Christianity through the Middle Ages, remarking that “the idea of Virgin and Cross as agents in Man’s salvation, contrasted with Eve and the Tree of Knowledge as agents in Man’s fall, has a continuous history from the second century onwards” (Breeze 56). No, the fact

that the poet chooses to position the cross alongside the mother of Christ is startling in the context of gendered representations within the poem. If, as Hawkins proposes, this is the moment when the resurrected Christ enables the cross to “regain its masculine-coded position of power,” then this comparison with the Virgin Mary seems somewhat out of place — unless the poet is assigning a distinctly female figure a power status equal to that of an honoured thane (Hawkins 35). That Mary is able to assume such a position is indeed a plausible concept, and one that I hope to further develop in the following chapters concerning the texts of *Elene* and *Judith*. Nevertheless, such a claim would once again complicate, if not contradict, Hawkins’s contention that the cross recovers a sort of masculine hold on power. First, as I have already argued in relation to both Christ and the cross, the poet does not seem to indicate an explicit loss of power within the poem. And secondly, I would argue that the primary commonality between the cross and the Virgin Mary, their role as vessel (of redemption), implies a continued feminine performance — though not necessarily one of weakness.

The poet’s comparison of the cross to the Virgin Mary relies heavily on the idea of the vessel, particularly in the latter half of the poem. Mary’s role as vessel is a fairly straightforward, though utterly essential, component of Christian tradition and doctrine: she is the mother of the Messiah, her womb the literal vessel for the incarnation of Jesus. As such, she is venerated by the Christian Church as the central *mediatrix* or intercessor between man and God, a role with which even the earlier Anglo-Saxon poems (such as *The Advent Lyrics*) demonstrate a familiarity. Thus she holds a dual participatory role in the fulfillment of the divine plan of redemption, carrying the Saviour into the world and commending Christian believers to the grace of God. The *DOTR*’s portrayal of the cross as redemptive vessel is pointedly similar, serving both as a physical vehicle by which Christ and Christians are transported to heaven and

as an object of worship that is able to advocate on behalf of those who honour it: “No one there at that time need be frightened who beforehand carries in his bosom the noblest of signs, but through that Cross every soul which purposes to dwell with the Ruler shall find its way from the earthly path into the kingdom” (Bradley 163). Heather Maring argues that the rhetorical image employed is that of the cross as a ship, as in the Old English Sea Voyage type scene, that transports first Christ and then his followers from mortality to the immortal life. In such a type scene, the hero “navigates the seas toward or away from a potentially mortal confrontation” (Maring 244). The cross thus figures in line 91 as the *holmwudu*, the sea-wood, rather than the *holtwudu* or forest-wood that later translations have frequently adopted, since it so closely resembles the wooden vessel commanded by the hero (in this instance, Christ) to bear his thanes to safety (Maring 241-242). Recognizing the cross as sea-vessel, the dreamer in the poem worships the cross and confesses his longing for the day when the cross will bear him also to that celestial hall:

Ond ic wene me
daga gehwylcehwænne me Dryhtnes rod,
þe ic her on eorðan ær sceawode,
on þyssan lænan life gefetige
ond me þonne gebringe þær is blis mycel,
dream on heofonum, þær is Dryhtnes folc
geseted to symle, þær is singal blis;
ond he þonne asette þær ic syððan mot
wunian on wuldre, well mid þam halgum
dreames brucan. (135b–144a)

These lines Maring translates as such:

And I have hope each day for the time when the Lord’s rood, which I here on earth earlier examined, in this fleeting life will fetch me and then bring me where there is great bliss, communal joy in the heavens, where the Lord’s people are placed at a feast, where there is bliss everlasting; and then it will bear me, where afterwards I will be allowed to dwell in glory, amid those holy ones, to partake fully of communal joy. (Maring 243)

The ultimate role of both the cross and the Virgin Mary, then, is salvific in nature, translating souls from the earthly world to the heavenly realm.

Of course, the vessel is by nature a passive image. As Hawkins notes, the cross and Mary must be filled with the power of Christ in order to carry out their vocation, thereby coding their performance as feminine (Hawkins 35). However, we must remember that the Christian mythos does not limit this calling to one gender; on the contrary, the apostle Paul's command to be filled with the power or the spirit of Christ is gender-inclusive and extends to all Christians, male and female alike (Ephesians 5:18). And even if we were to limit our understanding of the cross as vessel to a secular interpretation (in which the vessel holds a feminine-coded position), Hawkins's analysis would still contradict itself, because the performance of the cross as vessel eventually culminates in an increase rather than decrease of power. The cross shares in Christ's triumph and title, pronounced by the dreamer to be the tree of victory (128). Christ promotes his loyal retainer to a position of the highest honour: as Christ is positioned above all mankind and Mary over all other women, then the cross is also honoured above all other trees. Once a rood like any other in an immense forest, the cross is refashioned into a beautiful vessel adorned with gold and silver, an integral vehicle of Christ's redemptive purpose. The poet's use of superlatives in his description of the cross further emphasizes the glory and power accorded to the figure: the cross is the "best" (*selesta*), the "brightest" (*beorhtost*), and "noblest" (*selest*) (6, 27, 128). Such an exalted figure inspires the utmost devotion in the heart of the dreamer. As Raffel translates:

...My spirit was eager
To start on a journey for which it has suffered
Endless longing. My hope in life
Is now that I shall see and reverence
That cross of triumph more than other
Men. (Raffel 124-129)

In spite of the poet's clearly feminine designations of the role of the cross, particularly as a Mary-like vessel, there can be no doubt as to the honour and power ascribed to this figure, Christ's superlative retainer.

Power, then, is not directly correlated to gender-coded actions, but to a unique syncretism of secular and monastic Anglo-Saxon ideals. The Christianization of Anglo-Saxon society precedes the tenth-century *DOTR* manuscript by several hundred years — more than enough time for the Anglo-Saxon poets to indigenize the cultural ideals of the Latin ecclesiastical world and establish a new poetic norm (“Colonization of the Promised Land” 39). Through the figures of both Christ and the cross, we find the poet working from a literary framework that successfully amalgamates the secular and monastic, each with differing gender signifiers, in an attempt to propose to his Anglo-Saxon audience a different — though not altogether unrecognizable — type of hero. The poem's Christ, categorically masculine in his ascension and feminine in his descent, becomes the new ideal lord and king in his fulfillment of both the warrior's obligation of unflinching courage and religious values of self-sacrifice. The cross, entirely loyal to his lord until the bitter end, presents for the reader a model of the exemplary retainer, one who privileges obedience over violent action and is richly rewarded for the services rendered. From this poem emerges a new heroic paradigm that transitions smoothly between the masculine and the feminine; the employment of gendered representations of the figures of Christ and the cross suggests a freedom of movement between gender-coded positions. This fluidity is the result of the poet's successful merging of the honourable conduct and values of secular and monastic Anglo-Saxon culture.

Chapter 2:

The Warrior Queen of Cynewulf's *Elene*

If, as I have argued in Chapter 1, the Anglo-Saxon poet works out of an amalgamation of secular and monastic Anglo-Saxon ethics in order to establish a unique form of masculinity in the figure of Christ, it follows that a similar process of remaking would be applied to the feminine archetype of Christianity: the Virgin Mary. Although the cult of the Virgin Mary did not gain prominence until the 12th century, scholars such as Mary Clayton, Andrew Breeze, and Jane Chance note that from the second century on, apocryphal writings and religious tradition emphasized the role of Mary as integral to the salvific work of Christ; thus it is unsurprising that the writings of various Anglo-Saxon poets reveal a strong sense of familiarity with this archetypal figure, and especially those written from a specifically Christian mythos (such as the *Advent Lyrics*, *Juliana*, and — as I will further discuss in this and the following chapter — *Elene* and *Judith*). Chance, in fact, suggests that throughout such texts it is Mary who represents the ideal after whom their literary heroines are patterned, posing as the exemplary peace-weaver and mother. Her argument is rooted in the concept of passive heroism; Chance maintains that “the primary conventional secular role of Anglo-Saxon woman demanded her passivity and peace-making talent, an ideal perfectly fulfilled in the social and religious archetype of the Virgin Mary” (Chance xvi).

As the direction of my thesis shifts from the male archetype of Christ to the female archetype of the Virgin Mary as exemplified in *Elene* and *Judith*, it is necessary to caution against the assumptions that too many gender-oriented treatments of Old English literature, including those of Chance, unwittingly allow to overshadow their critical attention. As I have observed in the earliest — and perhaps most paradigmatic — of the three texts that I examine,

the borders and boundaries of gender are significantly less strict than the contemporary scholar might expect. Hawkins's work, for example, forces a Freudian correlation between masculinity and power upon the *DOTR*, which the poem actually resists time and again. Similarly, Chance, whose work has proved integral to the body of Old English scholarship, examines the female characters of a variety of Anglo-Saxon poems under the assumption that the social structure (and thus the literary efforts) of the Anglo-Saxon people is resolutely and inextricably patriarchal, and so the female position is restricted to that of a passive pawn. While her work remains foundational to much of the gender criticism and theory surrounding contemporary Old English scholarship, and justifiably so, I contend with her application of the term "passivity" to the Anglo-Saxon heroine type as I examine it in two poems: *Elene* and *Judith*. The term is an unfortunate leftover from the gender scholarship of the twentieth century that has since lost much of its meaning, especially in conversations about Anglo-Saxon culture. As I have observed in my examination of the cross in *The Dream of the Rood*, the act of submissive obedience is not at all the same as passivity, or doing nothing at all, and so I resist Chance's terminology in this and the following chapter. Instead, extrapolating from my argument concerning scriptural types in the *DOTR*, I propose that both Cynewulf and the anonymous author of *Judith*, much like the *DOTR* poet, attempt to remake the ideal Anglo-Saxon heroine through a process of cultural and gender syncretism. Thus the female protagonist need not succeed or fail, or achieve glory or dishonour, based on her ability to quietly and subtly promote peace, as Chance suggests (Chance 11). Instead, she may adopt a categorically feminine or masculine performance as peace-weaver or warrior, in accordance with both secular and monastic values within Anglo-Saxon culture, in order to achieve the status of triumphant heroine. In these next two chapters, then, I observe that while the poets of *Elene* and *Judith* ascribe distinctly Mary-like qualities to their female

protagonists, this designation does not necessarily confine them to a strictly feminine or peace-weaving role; just as Christ and the cross in the *DOTR* transition fluidly between the masculine and feminine position without a correlative decrease in their status of power, so Elene and Judith perform both masculinity and femininity in order to fulfill the qualifications for a social and religious victor.

Elene, much like *The Dream of the Rood*, is inherently a work of translation, of retelling — though not of the biblical narrative. Instead, this rather lengthy poem signed by Cynewulf appropriates the Latin *Acta Cyriaci* in this poetic rendering of the *inventio* or discovery of the cross upon which Christ was crucified. The narrative is itself an act of cultural syncretism: as John P. Hermann writes, “the invention legend is poured from the Latin of Cynewulf’s source into the mould of the Old English heroic poetic” in order to “merge the heroic ethos of Anglo-Saxon poetry with the biblical and patristic notion of spiritual combat” (Hermann 115). Because the poet works from traditional rather than canonical sources, however, we must confront a further layer of interpretation in applying such syncretic observations to an exploration of the scriptural types present within the text. While the *DOTR* directly reworks the person of Christ, *Elene* (and eventually *Judith*) presents a more indirect revision. The archetypal figures of Christ and the Virgin Mary do not themselves make an appearance in the poem; instead, the two primary characters of the narrative emerge as embodied reflections of their scriptural counterparts. Through the poet’s diction and depiction of Constantine, then, the Roman emperor figures as a sort of Christ, and this designation further anticipates Constantine’s mother Elene as a figure of Mary. Having established this scriptural association, the poet then goes on to rework his protagonists — Elene in particular — as heroes in both the spiritual and the social sense. Furthermore, as I will argue throughout this chapter, it is Cynewulf’s adept integration of secular

and monastic ideals that allows for a similar gender syncretism, with the result that Elene moves easily from her role as saintly mother and mediatrix to *guðcwen* and *sigecwen*, war- and victory-queen (254, 260).

The Anglo-Saxon poet, however, does not introduce his readers to Elene until the third section of the poem; instead, he devotes the first two hundred lines to the person of Constantine and the divinely-inspired vision that assures his victory in the battle with the heathen Huns (20a). This preliminary poetic sequence, while certainly secondary to the quest for the cross, nevertheless serves as a critical foundation for the development of Elene's own character and role within the tale. Cynewulf's designation is subtle, and in order for the audience to recognize the queen as a Mary-like figure, Constantine must first prove himself a type of Christ. Central to this first section chronicling Constantine's military endeavours is the eucatastrophic appearance of the angelic messenger in a vision to the emperor. This envoy, at once masculine in physicality and feminine in his role as peace-weaver, establishes a precedent of gender syncretism for Elene's own performance as warring queen.

My own reading of this poem asserts that Cynewulf attempts to make a definitive connection between Christ and Constantine; this is apparent even within the first few lines of the poem. The poet opens with an explication of the setting, specifically the time. In accordance with the Gregorian calendar, it is the year 233 *Anno Domini*. This designation is highly significant to Cynewulf's project, whose elaboration upon the incarnation and sovereignty of God serves to align Constantine's own rule with this divine authority. Note how the poetic structure of the description of God's kingship parallels that of Constantine:

þa wæs agangen	gears hwyrtum
tu hund ond þreo	geteled rimes,
swylceþrittig eac	þinggemearces,
wintra for worulde,	þæs þe wealdend god

acenned wearð, cyninga wuldor,
in middangeard þurh mennisc heo,
soðfæstra leoht. Ða wæs sixt gear
Constantines caserdomes,
Ðæt he Romwara in rice wearð
ahæfen, hildfruma, to hereteman. (1-10)

When, with the passing of the years, two hundred and three winters, tallied by number, and thirty more, chronologically counted, had gone by in worldly terms since God the Ruler, the Glory of kings, was born upon earth in human form, the Light of those steadfast in truth, it was then the sixth year of the imperial reign of Constantine, after he, a war-leader, had been elevated to military ruler in the Roman empire. (Bradley 165)

In line 1-7a, Cynewulf establishes the calendar year as the 233rd year since Christ came to *middangeard* in human form and set up his incarnational rule on earth as *wealdend god* (“God the Ruler”), *cyninga wuldor* (“Glory of Kings”), and *soðfæstra leoht* (“Light to the Righteous”). Immediately following this list of epithets, Cynewulf highlights this as the sixth year of another’s reign — that of Emperor Constantine of Rome (7b-10). The grammatical and poetic structure of these opening lines suggests succession, such that the poet’s audience would comprehend the transition from Christ to Constantine as a transfer of kingship. Christ, having ascended into heaven to reign at the right hand of God the Father (1 Peter 3:22), now leaves Constantine to carry on his earthly rule in his stead. Cynewulf thus aligns the figures of Christ and Constantine from the very beginning of the narrative of *Elene*.

The various and layered titles that Cynewulf applies to the characters of his narrative continue to be of critical importance to the social- and gender-coded identity of the protagonists, as the reader may observe in lines 11-17. Here Cynewulf takes great care to present Constantine in terms that suggest to his audience both warrior and Christ-figure.

Ðæs se leodhwata lindgeborga
eorlum arfæst, æðelnges weox
rice under roderum; he waes riht cyning,
guðpearð gumena. Hine God trymede
mærdum mihtum þæt he manegum wearð

geond middangeard mannum to hroðer
werþeodum to wræce syððan wæpen ahóf
pið hetendum. (11-17a)

This public-spirited warrior-protector was good to his men; the prince's empire increased beneath the skies. He was a just king, his people's defence in war. In excellences and abilities God made him strong so that throughout the earth he was to many men a consolation, to many nations a scourge, when he took up arms against his enemies. (Bradley 165-166)

As a *leodhwata lindgeborga* ("courageous warrior") and an *eorlum arfæst* ("honourable man"), Constantine already seems to subscribe to the heroic honour ethic. He is also a *riht cyning* ("true or just king") who, as Bradley translates, serves as "his people's defence in war" (Bradley 165). From this description we recognize Constantine as an already successful lord, battle-tested and noble in his service to those under his kingship. Cynewulf adds to his list of accomplishments in noting in lines 12b-13a that Constantine commands a powerful kingdom under heaven; not only does this further support the emperor's right to rule as a capable king who provides safety and shelter for his people, but also indicates his divinely authorized leadership. He rules this earthly kingdom even as God rules a celestial one, and his success is a direct result of celestial favour: "In excellence and abilities God made him strong...when he took up arms against his enemies" (Bradley 165-166). God's benevolence, though, is not enough to explicitly typify Constantine as a Christ-figure, though Cynewulf's portrayal certainly seeks to promote the emperor's divine legitimacy alongside his heroic qualities.

However, in lines 16-17, the poet's terminology distinctly recalls language specifically employed by the Gospels of Luke and John in the characterization of Christ — an allusion which has been largely overlooked by Old English scholars. Bradley translates these lines thus: "Throughout the earth he was to many men a consolation, to many nations a scourge, when he took up arms against his enemies" (Bradley 166). These appellations (*hroðer* or "consolation"

and *wræce* or “avenger”) recall similar scriptural designations of Christ. In Luke 2:25, the devout Jew Simeon refers to the incarnate Christ child as the “Consolation of Israel,” recognizing the infant as the long-awaited Messiah of the Jewish remnant and Saviour of humankind (Luke 2:25 NKJV). The title of “avenger” (or “scourge”, as Bradley translates”) is equally reminiscent of Christ, who creates a scourge and drives out corrupt merchandisers in his cleansing of the temple in anticipation of his own body whipped by Roman soldiers in the hours before his crucifixion (John 2:13-22). The paradoxical nature of Christ, at once saviour and scourge, is echoed by the Apostle Paul in the first chapter of his letter to the Corinthians, in which he remarks that

...the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God...but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Corinthians 1:18, 23-24)

In his application of these appellations to Constantine, then, Cynewulf establishes the emperor as a figure of Christ, chosen by God to drive out the heathens — here the Huns — from his kingdom on earth and to secure salvation for his own people. Like Christ, Constantine represents comfort, a source of hope, to his army and empire, but confusion to those who defy his (and by extension, God’s) rule.

Constantine’s military success is guaranteed by a celestial envoy who appears to the emperor in a vision, counselling him to conquer with the symbol of the cross. Despite his brief role in the events of the narrative, this figure has recently garnered much scholarly attention, particularly in regards to gender criticism. This is primarily due to the fact that in spite of the poet’s frequent employment of masculine adjectives to describe the character, Cynewulf also ascribes to him the title and role of peace-weaver, a distinctly feminine position. Joyce Tally Lionarons asserts this striking designation as the first example of cultural and gender syncretism

within the poem (Lionarons 53). Even a brief observation of the initial portrayal of the messenger reveals both a grammatical and physical masculinity:

ƿuhte him wlitescyne on weres hade
hwit ond hiwbeorht hæleða nathwylc
gesege under swegle. He of slæpe onbrægd
eofurcumble beþeaht; him se ár hraðe
wlitig wuldres boda wiðþingode
be naman nemde... (72-78)

It seemed to him a handsome man being in human form, some unknown man, radiant and bright-gleaming, appeared, more singular than he had seen, early or late, under the sun. He started up from his sleep, canopied by the boar-adorned standard. Immediately the messenger, heaven's handsome envoy, addressed him and called him by name... (Bradley 167)

Wlitescyne (“beautiful”), *hwit* (“white”), and *hiwbeorht* (“radiant”) are neutral adjectives, as is the pronoun *nathwylc* (“someone”) in line 73b. Cynewulf’s account is strikingly similar to Bede’s description of the angelic messenger (*sum monor* “some man”) who appears to the poet Cædmon in a dream and directs him to sing “verses to the praise of God”; Bede’s vocabulary assigns a spiritual and mysterious quality to the figure, much like Cynewulf’s own depiction (Bede 342). At the same time, line 72b — *on weres hade* (“in the shape of a man”) — clarifies the celestial figure as masculine. Lionarons notes that the portrayal of an angel as masculine would certainly have seemed appropriate, particularly as the Latin *angelus* is also masculine (Lionarons 53). This is complicated, however, by Cynewulf’s use of the term *friðowebbe* or “peace-weaver” in line 88. Within Anglo-Saxon culture, the peace-weaver is a woman who seeks to establish a peaceful relationship between otherwise hostile nations through marriage (Fitzgerald 192). While the application of a feminine-coded role to a masculine figure seems surprising, we must recognize that Cynewulf manipulates this cultural and gender syncretism deliberately. As Lionarons so aptly remarks,

The masculine messenger's simultaneous performance of the Latinate, angelic role of the Christian God's emissary and the Germanic, feminine functions of peace-weaving and egging on to battle combine in *Elene* to present a complex, multilayered figure which is variably comprehensible in each context, but which need not be reduced to a single, univocalic interpretation. (Lionarons 55)

Here we find that the Anglo-Saxon poet resists a fixed set of predetermined gender performances, instead allowing the angelic envoy to perform both masculinity and femininity — and not merely consecutively, but concurrently. Though the messenger's part in the poem is short-lived, his affirmation of the cultural and gender syncretism at work within the text “foreshadows Elene's equally paradoxical roles as woman and warrior, saint and tyrant, life-giving mother and death-threatening torturer”(Lionarons 55).

Constantine, having received this triumphal vision of the masculine peace-weaver, immediately commands that an emblem in the shape of the cross of Christ be forged on the eve of battle to precede the emperor's army in the war against the Huns. Here the emphasis turns from the physical struggle to the spiritual battle, as the standard of the holy cross inspires the Romans to victory against the *hæðene* or “heathens” (126). “It was apparent then that in that day's action the almighty King had granted Constantine victory, glory, and power here beneath the skies, through his rood tree” (Bradley 169). Again, Constantine's success signifies not only divine favour, but his designation as a figure of Christ. Both Christ and Constantine achieve victory in the face of certain death by means of the cross, securing the life and safety of their people. Furthermore, Cynewulf marks this as a spiritual accomplishment over and above a bodily win; it is during this final battle that the Huns are first described as heathens and not merely *gramum guðgelæcan* (“fierce warriors”) or *elþeodige* (“foreign”) or *feonda* (“enemies”) (43, 57, 68). Just as Christ's sacrifice on the cross represents a conquest of spiritual foes — sin, death, Satan — so Constantine's defeat of the godless Huns also figures as a spiritual triumph for

God and not man. In this respect we might further read Constantine as a sort of Christ, since he redeems the cross from its function as an object of torture for criminals and transforms it into an emblem of glory and victory. The emperor's devotion to the almighty God of heaven is cemented by his baptism in lines 189-193; at this point Constantine declares himself loyal to the service of the Lord and prepares to commence his ministry in a manner that recalls Christ's own baptism in the four Gospel accounts. Of course, the chronology of these events is reversed in *Elene*: where Christ's earthly ministry begins with his baptism and concludes with his crucifixion, Constantine succeeds through the cross first before being baptized. Nevertheless, the parallels are striking, such that Constantine emerges as a definitive successor of Christ.

If Cynewulf takes such care to align Constantine with the figure of Christ, then the poet's second protagonist, Elene, bears examining as a type as well — specifically of the Virgin Mary. As the mother of Constantine, Elene immediately recalls a Mary-like presence within the text. According to Lionarons, however, this is where the resemblance ends: "Because she is the sainted mother of the first Christian emperor, Elene could easily be interpreted as a type of the Virgin Mary, but Cynewulf does not choose to develop this association explicitly or at length" (Lionarons 55). While I agree with Lionarons's argument that earlier interpretations of the *inventio* tradition (such as that of Ambrose in 395) draw more explicit connections between these two literary figures, I contest that Cynewulf's poem — though certainly more subtle — nevertheless depends heavily upon Elene as a figure of Mary in his remaking of the female heroic warrior. Jane Chance proposes that there existed for the Anglo-Saxon woman two primary biblical models which Anglo-Saxon writers wove within their literature: Eve and the Virgin Mary (and later the apocryphal character of Judith). Eve, however, read more often than not as a "what not to do" exemplar: indicted as she was for initiating the Fall of humankind, her

literary presence became one of “frail resolution” as Bradley translates from the Old English *Genesis*, deceived by the devil into disobedience (Bradley 29). Mary, in contrast, evolved into a redemptive figure, a “second Eve” even as Christ represented the “second Adam.” As the paradigmatic peace-weaver and chaste mother, Mary often serves as the feminine ideal upon which nearly all Anglo-Saxon literary heroines are based, including Judith, Juliana, and Elene (Chance 13-15).

That Cynewulf ascribes Mary-like qualities to his female protagonist is especially important to a tenth-century audience’s reception of a noble, heroic version of Elene. As Stacy Klein notes, numerous legends and myths surrounded the *inventio* narrative and the mother of Constantine at this time — not all of them entirely favourable. In fact, various writers claimed that Queen Helena was a low-born woman amounting to little more than a prostitute:

Overt references to Helena as a concubine include the anonymous early-fifth-century *Origo Constantini*, in which the writer refers to Helena as *asvilissima* (cheapest or most common) of women; the mid-fifth-century writer Philostorgius who claims that Constantine “had emanated from Helena, a common woman not different from strumpets”; and the late-fifth-century Zosimus who refers to Constantine as “the son of the illegal intercourse of a low woman with the Emperor Constantius” and “the son of a harlot.” (Klein 65-66)

Given her social status, it seems highly unlikely that Helena’s marriage to Constantine’s father was legally binding; that her illegitimacy was apparently common knowledge at the time of Cynewulf’s writing would have proved problematic to his heroic narrative. While it certainly was not unusual for Roman emperors to take concubines and even claim the offspring of such unions as heirs, eighth-century Anglo-Saxon clergymen began to vehemently condemn such practices as illegal and immoral, so that by the tenth century the position was both socially degraded and legally prohibited. “Given the rather frenzied pitch surrounding the topic of royal

concubinage during the tenth century,” Klein remarks, “Helena’s historical status as concubine had the potential to be particularly inflammatory for contemporary readers” (Klein 65-67).

In order for Cynewulf to establish such a marginalized figure as the female protagonist of this heroic poem (especially given the inherently religious nature of the narrative), every effort must be made to redeem Elene as a noble woman. This is precisely why the poet’s efforts to promote Elene’s social status cannot be as brief and inconsequential as Lionarons makes them out to be; on the contrary, Cynewulf makes deliberate use of the tradition of the Virgin Mary in order to transform Elene from a loose and low-born woman to a divinely chosen and chaste queen. Ambrose, in his funeral oration for Theodosius I, writes of Helena that “Christ raised her from dung to power” (qtd. in Klein 66). This commentary echoes the theme of the annunciation of the Virgin Mary, who humbly recognizes her own lowliness even as the angel Gabriel declares her to be the chosen mother of the Christ child. She sings in response to the heavenly proclamation:

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour.
For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant;
For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed.
For He who is mighty has done great things for me,
And holy is His name.
And His mercy is on those who fear Him
From generation to generation.
He has shown strength with His arm;
He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
He has put down the mighty from their thrones,
And exalted the lowly.” (Luke 1:46-52)

While Cynewulf does not openly acknowledge the claims of his literary predecessors as to Elene’s less-than-reputable past, he nevertheless works to recover her nobility by aligning her translation — from alleged prostitute to definitive queenship — with the exaltation of a similarly ignoble Jewish girl who became the blessed Virgin Mother. Again the poet chooses his initial

epithets for Elene with careful consideration, referring to her on several occasions as *eadhreðig* (“blessed”) and the *æðelan cwen* (“noble queen”) (266, 275). The first recalls the angel Gabriel’s hailing words to Mary — “blessed are you among women” — which are directly repeated by Mary’s cousin Elizabeth in her own greeting, thus signalling Elene as divinely favoured and a figure of the Virgin Mary (Luke 1:28, 42). The latter doubly emphasizes her royal status: she is queen not only by title, but by nature. Additionally, Klein argues that Cynewulf’s persistent use of such generic titles (most commonly *cwen* and various adjectival modifications) as opposed to Elene’s proper name contributes to this project of typifying her person; this movement from the personal to the generic not only enables the poet’s Anglo-Saxon audience to locate the Roman queen within their own culture, but also establishes Elene as an exemplary queen in the same way that Mary serves as the model female (Klein 56).

We can also recognize Elene as a figure of Mary in her service to Constantine and his Christian mission to discover the true cross. Elene responds with the same immediate and unquestioning willingness to carry out her divinely-inspired work as her biblical counterpart; just as Mary does not hesitate to declare herself the maidservant of the Lord, so Elene proves eager to obey the word of Constantine:

Elene ne wolde
þæs siðfates sæne weorðan
neðæs wilgifan word gehyrwan,
hiere sylfre suna ac wæs sona gearu,
wif on willsið swa hire weoruda helm,
byrnwiggendra, beboden hæfde. (219b-224)

Marie Nelson’s translation of these lines further highlights Elene’s prompt obedience: “Elene was not reluctant to set forth, did not hesitate to heed the word of her son, the emperor Constantine. She was ready at once, a woman eager to obey the command of the protector and leader of warriors” (Nelson 127). The word of the Emperor is binding, ensuring complete

obedience in a manner not unlike Christ's command to the cross in *The Dream of the Rood*; the language deployed by Cynewulf in these brief lines positions Elene not only as a willing servant to her master but also suggests a retainer-lord relationship that allows for her eventual transition from queen mother to warring saint.

Her initial role figures as necessarily feminine while Cynewulf works to establish Mary-like status; we first encounter Elene as mother and vessel, and these two functions seem to support Jane Chance's argument for the peace-weaving woman of Anglo-Saxon poetry. Elene's motherhood spans the three segments of the poem, and as such promotes literary unity. She first appears as the literal *modor* of Constantine, while in the second section she acts as the spiritual mother of Judas, disciplining his waywardness in order to direct him to the right way of the Christian faith. Finally, in the epilogue of the poem, Elene becomes the "mother-muse" of the aging Cynewulf (Chance 47). In her transcendent motherhood she further reflects the figure of Mary, whose motherhood (first of Christ, then of all who participate in the Christian faith) is central to her religious, literary, and cultural status. Both serve as vessels which, as I have established in the previous chapter, signals a feminine performance. Elene does not herself discover the remnants of the cross and nails; nevertheless, it is *through* her speech and actions that the relics are found, Judas converted, and a church established — just as it is *through* Mary that the Saviour is born and the Christian faith and church are formed. The idea of the *mater ecclesia* ("mother of the church") is therefore critical to Cynewulf's depiction of Elene, and although he does not himself employ such terminology, his Anglo-Saxon audience would have been quite familiar with the concept (Klein 53). By the time of Cynewulf's writing, Anglo-Saxon England had already undergone a two-hundred year process of conversion; in many cases, the newly-baptized king would initiate the Christianization of his entire populace by sending his

queen to set up a church or churches in key regions (Lionarons 56-57). Cynewulf's readers would be long accustomed to the image of the "proselytizing queen" and would have perceived such actions as coded feminine.

So Elene's function within the narrative as the primary agent of Christian conversion is neither surprising nor outside the realm of traditional gender roles. What is startling, however, is the manner in which she conducts her mission: Cynewulf's characterization of Elene throughout her journey to Jerusalem and her efforts to discover the cross of Christ there signal a distinctly masculine set of performances. This is revealed through the narrative structure of the sea voyage, Elene's bold speech to the Jewish leaders, and her aggressive militaristic conversion tactics. Lionarons proposes that Elene's "citation" of masculinity represents a necessary complement to Constantine's temporarily feminine-coded position; while the emperor remains in Rome, passively waiting for his mother's return throughout the remainder of the poem, Elene assumes a masculine position of leadership and commands all of the events that follow her acceptance of Constantine's directive. We find, then, that Cynewulf resists exclusive lines of gender demarcation as his female protagonist performs masculinity and femininity simultaneously. "As empress, Elene likewise mediates between her son and the Jewish residents of Jerusalem, but her actions cite the "masculine" categories of battle-leader and field commander even as they reiterate the "feminine" category of mediatrix" (Lionarons 56-57). Furthermore, as I hope to demonstrate in the latter half of this chapter, Elene's capacity to navigate both masculine and feminine performances enables her to succeed as the true hero(ine) of the poem, fulfilling a syncretic Anglo-Saxon system of honour similar to that revealed in *The Dream of the Rood*.

Cynewulf's depiction of Elene's voyage across the sea to Jerusalem represents a significant introduction to her performance of categorically masculine actions. The Sea Voyage is a common type-scene in the Anglo-Saxon oral and literary formulaic; other examples include Beowulf's travelling from his homeland to Heorot in defense of King Hrothgar, as well as another poem in the Vercelli book, *Andreas*, in which St. Andrew saves Matthew at sea (Hermann 122). I have also noted in Chapter 1 that the *DOTR* poem displays hints of that same Sea Voyage rhetoric; however, *DOTR* differs from *Elene* in that the cross participates in the type scene only as a vessel, bearing mortal Christians to eternal life. In Cynewulf's poem, however, Elene stands at the helm. The account of her expedition is coloured with militaristic language: Elene's *eorla mengu* (literally a "multitude of warriors") load the ships with armour, shields, and spears as if in preparation for a fierce physical combat (Hermann 123). In like manner Cynewulf designates Elene's status as the battle-ready leader of these proud warriors. Commanding her fleet of ships, Elene is no longer simply the emperor's *modor* and a common queen or *cwen*. Instead, she transforms into a *gudcwen* and *sigecwen* — war- and victory-queen (254a, 260a) — titles which combine her gender with her military status and which emphasize the simultaneity of her feminine queenship and her masculine lordship (Lionarons 57). Cynewulf even deigns to insert his own commentary at this point to underscore Elene's extraordinary command of the sea voyage as a woman:

Ne hyrde ic sið ne ær
on egstreame idese lædan,
on merestræte mægen fægerre. (240-42)

Or, as Bradley translates: "Never before nor since have I heard of a woman leading a finer looking force on the ocean tide on the sea-road" (Bradley 171). John Hermann observes this characterization of Elene as a movement from Church Mother to Church Militant, noting that the

“war” for which the queen and her company prepare is spiritual in nature: Elene neither orders nor participates in a physical battle against the Jews of Jerusalem (Hermann 123-124).

Nevertheless, this does not diminish Elene’s masculine performance. Cynewulf’s employment of the Sea Voyage type scene and overtly masculine-coded designations clearly position his female protagonist as the hero of this narrative, fully capable of commanding a host of seasoned warriors.

Elene’s obligation to perform masculinity continues in her encounters with the Jews, particularly the resistant Judas. Lionarons notes that here again, as with Constantine, she must transition from mother to master in light of Judas’ feminine-coded actions. Because Judas denies Elene’s spiritual mothering, refusing both conversion and her demands for the location of the cross, the queen necessarily adopts a position of masculinity in order to counteract his stubborn opposition. As Lionarons observes, the writings of various Church fathers indicate a direct correlation between religious belief and the construction of gender identity:

Jerome argues that “[s]in autem Christo magis voluerit servire quam saeculo, mulier esse cessebit, et dicetur vir,” “If [a woman] wishes to serve Christ more than the world, she will cease to be a woman and will be called a man,” while Ambrose states categorically that “quae non credit, muher est,” “whoever does not believe is a woman.” [...] Therefore, Judas’s status as an unbeliever and a Jew would inevitably mark him as in some way “feminized” in relation to the spiritually “masculinized” female. (Lionarons 62)

In order to accomplish her divinely-inspired mission, then, Elene must “play the man,” assuming the masculinity of the Christian religion so as to force the unwilling Judas’s hand in the discovery of the cross. This she achieves in two ways: first, through her imperious speech to the Jewish leaders, and second, through her physical torturing of Judas.

Elene initially seeks to persuade the Jews to divulge the location of the cross through a bold and scornful speech in which she rebukes the Jewish people for their ignorant condemnation and crucifixion of Christ. This does not at first seem to suggest a citation of masculine

performance; after all, words are the weapons of a woman, especially a peace-weaver.

Nevertheless, Robert Bjork's analysis of the rhetorical strategies employed by Cynewulf reveal that Elene's speech is rather unlike the tactful and courteous words of Wealhtheow to Beowulf. On the contrary, Elene speaks openly; that is: "each speech is unified and moves unmistakably forward or outward. Elene seeks the truth, and the syntax, rhythm, grammatical mood, and rhetorical structure—the economy—of her dialogue reflect her search" (Bjork 73). Much like the authoritative Constantine, she addresses her audience plainly (*undearninga*), loudly and clearly (*hlude*) (404-406). The masculine-coded nature of her speech becomes all the more apparent when contrasted with the Jewish leaders' and particularly Judas's response. His words are "closed," manipulative and deceitful in an attempt to conceal any knowledge of the location of the cross from the queen. The text notes that the man is *wordes cræftig* ("skillful with words"); he speaks carefully and cunningly (419a). Elene herself draws attention to this dichotomy of rhetoric when she declares,

“Ic eow to soðe secgan wille
ondþæs in life lige ne wyrðeð,
gif ge þissum lease leng gefylgað
mid fæcne gefice, þe me fore standað,
þæt eow in beorge bælc forðimeð,
hattost heaðowelma, ond eower hra bryttað,
lacende lig, þæt eow sceal þæt leas
apundrad weorðan to woruldgedale.
Ne magon geða word geseðan þe ge hwile nu on unriht
wrigon under womma sceatum, ne magon ge þa wyrd bemiðan,
bedyrnanþa deopan mihte.” (574-584a)

These lines Bradley translates thus:

“I mean to tell you plainly—and upon my life it shall not prove a lie—that if you who stand before me continue in this deceit for long with your fraudulent lying, a blaze of hottest billowing ferocity will do away with you upon the hill and leaping flames destroy your corpses, for that deceit shall be deemed in you a matter for death. Even though you may not affirm those sayings—which you have for some time now wrongfully cloaked

beneath the garments of your shameful deeds—you will not be able to conceal the event nor keep secret that profound miracle.” (Bradley 179)

Bradley’s translation emphasizes a discursive separation between Elene’s masculine Christianity (plain speech and honesty) and Judas’s feminine Judaism (deceit and fraud). Lionarons argues that eventually, after his conversion, Judas’s speech shifts from “closed” to “open” in its resemblance to Elene’s own discourse (Lionarons 62-63). At this point in the text, however, Elene’s masculine-coded address places her in a position of power — both political and religious—over the crafty Judas: “he wæs on þære cwene gewealdum” or “he was in the queen’s power” (610b).

Despite Elene’s verbal coercion, however, Judas continues to deny any knowledge of the cross or its whereabouts, and it is at this point that the queen turns to a more physical method of persuasion: torture. At her command, the stubborn Judas is chained and imprisoned at the bottom of a dry well without food or company until he either confesses or perishes. This segment of the narrative is perhaps the most conflicting portion of the text, both for the modern day reader and the Old English scholar. The flagrant anti-Semitism demonstrated by the queen is certainly enough to make one cringe, given the long and brutal history of such cruel practices. It is difficult to determine where the reader’s sympathies must lie: Cynewulf clearly constructs Elene as the protagonist and not the antagonist of the poem, who will by its conclusion fulfill all the requirements of an honourable hero. At the same time, her tyrannical actions conflict with contemporary notions of what is just and noble, inciting the reader to sympathize with the afflicted Judas. Lionarons proposes that “no resolution seems possible” for the modern reader (Lionarons 64). However, she also points out that Cynewulf’s audience would likely have been much more receptive to Elene’s militaristic tactics, even suggesting that the story of Helena and her quest for the cross gained in popularity because of its explicitly anti-Semitic sentiments.

A medieval reader conditioned by the norms of response to hagiographic texts might well have found it difficult to avoid sympathizing with Judas the tormented rather than with Elene the tormenter, but any crisis of conscience would be resolved in the relief of Judas's conversion. The radical shift in Judas's identity from Jewish to Christian moves him simultaneously from the feminine to the masculine side of the gender binary as well, as Elene ends her reiteration of the role of tyrant. (Lionarons 64)

As Andrew Scheil notes, there are no records of any Jewish communities existing in Anglo-Saxon England; any references to Jews or Judaism in the pre-Conquest world are “manifest only in the distorted shadow cast by the Christian tradition” (Scheil 3). Having no physical contact with Jews, the Anglo-Saxons tended to categorically villainize them based on scriptural and evangelical indictment of Jews as those who refused and crucified the Christ (Scheil 8). Cynewulf himself does not recognize Elene’s resorting to aggressive behaviour towards Judas as incongruous with either her character (as a woman performing masculinity) or her faith (as a warring saint). On the contrary, he continues to emphasize the legitimacy of her actions as the “glorious queen” (*tireadig cwen*), the “noble queen” (*aeðele cwen*), and the “emperor’s kinswoman” (*caseres mæg*) — terms which underscore her gendered role as well as the virtue of her actions (605, 662, 669).

By reading *Elene* as a work of cultural and gender syncretism, we can better understand Cynewulf’s process of transforming Elene as a figure of the Virgin (*virgo*) Mary into a heroic warrior queen (*virago*). The poet’s amalgamation of the Latin ecclesiastical concept of the *miles Christi* and the Anglo-Saxon *freoðuwebbe* figure enables the female exemplar to simultaneously perform as saint and soldier. The Apostle Paul’s command to “put on the full armour of God” resists gendered limitations: every Christian — male or female — is called to actively participate in ongoing spiritual warfare against the enemies of God (Ephesians 6:13-18). At the same time, Elene proves reminiscent of the traditional *freoðuwebbe*, or even the Scandinavian “whetting women” who make an appearance in Tacitus’s *Germania* (Tacitus 80); it is these female figures

(both of which share an honoured role in the typically male-dominated battle sequence) who allow Cynewulf's heroine to transition from the leader of a spiritual battle to the commander of a physical battle in which violence and aggressive tactics must be condoned. Thus, Elene's torture of the resistant Judas can be observed not as a breach of any code — either cultural or gendered — but as an acceptable militaristic strategy in the queen's efforts to retrieve the cross and convert the wayward Jews. The successful outcome of her actions resolves any stain upon her conscience: her torturous methods become the refining fire by which Judas is purged of his errant beliefs and the true cross of Christ — the *sigorbeacen* or "sign of victory" — discovered.

The finding of the cross — and eventually the nails as well — by the newly-baptized/masculinized Judas signals the end of Elene's own performance of masculinity. Upon her return to Rome, she adopts once more her normative feminine role as the queen mother. Likewise, Constantine assumes an actively masculine position as he re-enters the narrative, commanding Elene to establish a church; again, Elene is quick to obey and perform this feminine-coded task. According to Lionarons, this transition demonstrates Cynewulf's conception of gender as a "relationally constructed category" that allows Elene to move fluidly between performances of femininity and masculinity, as she observes the amalgamated cultural virtues of the Christianized Anglo-Saxon realm (Lionarons 68). However, we must recognize that Elene's return to a feminine role does not necessarily indicate a lapse into passivity and/or powerlessness. On the contrary, Cynewulf goes to great lengths in order to assert the queen's continued influence and capability and confirm her as the emblematic heroine of the narrative. This can be observed especially in the eighth and ninth segments of the poem; here Constantine again fades into the background of the story, while Elene emerges anew as the commander of the concluding events. Although the queen's actions do not suggest a performance of masculinity in

these final lines, Cynewulf nevertheless works diligently to assure his audience that she is fully capable and finally successful in fulfilling both the secular and monastic values of Anglo-Saxon culture.

The poet identifies Elene as a traditional Anglo-Saxon hero in her observation of the gift-giving ritual. As I previously observed in Chapter 1, gift-giving not only suggests a position of power (the lord actively gives while his retainers passively receive) but also confirms the honour of the gift-giver — a good lord is a generous lord. It is therefore significant that Cynewulf highlights Elene's gift-giving on two separate occasions: in her rewarding of Cyriacus (formerly Judas) and also in her offering of the bridle to her son Constantine. In the first instance, Cyriacus has proved his post-conversion loyalty to the queen by diligently carrying out her orders to discover the cross and then the nails; for this Elene *forgeaf / sincweorðunga* — “gave [him] costly gifts” (1217b-1218a). Despite Cyriacus's obtaining a masculine-coded position as a bishop devoted to the Christian faith, Elene still sustains power over him in this demonstration of generosity. His obedience necessitates reward, whereby the victorious queen showcases her success and power through the giving of gifts. The implications of such a ceremony are further amplified in the second instance of gift-giving, during which Elene commands a bridle to be fashioned out of the crucifixion nails and sent overseas to her son Constantine.

Ða þæt ofstlice eall gelæste
Elene for eorlum, æðelinges heht,
beorna beaggifan, bridels frætpan,
hire selfre suna sende to lace
ofer geofenes stream gife unscynde. (1196-1201)

Cynewulf's deployment of Old English terminology is critical in this passage, and Bradley translates it thus: “Then all that Helen speedily carried out in her men's presence; she commanded a bridle for the prince, the ring-giving lord of warriors, to be embellished and she

sent the flawless gift over the ocean tide as an offering to her own son” (Bradley 194). These few lines reveal a particularly fascinating exchange of power through the gift-giving ceremony. We note that Constantine himself is a ring-giver, a generous and mighty lord of warriors, thus establishing his own claim to authority. And the poet reveals that Elene’s gift of the bridle will only increase his power: “He shall have success in war, victory in combat and everywhere immunity and protection in the fighting, who bears this emblem, the bridle, upon a steed, when renowned warriors, proved men, carry shield and javelin into the storm of spears” (Bradley 194). Elene, however, is also a gift-giver in these lines, and her gift to Constantine suggests that she is still able to maintain her own position of power even as she acknowledges the lordship of her son. It is important to note, then, that the gift of the bridle does not indicate Elene’s relinquishing of all power to Constantine; rather, she “quite literally hands the reins of *masculine martial power* back to her son” (Lionarons 59, emphasis mine). Having returned to her position as queen mother, Elene is content to leave future (physical) battles to her son. But the symbolic nature of the gift might also be read as a cautious reminder to Constantine that it is necessary to rein in or control his passions. An illustrated Anglo-Saxon manuscript of the fourth-century writer Prudentius’s *Psychomachia*, for example, depicts the vice of Pride riding a horse without a bridle (Cobley). So the bridle serves to warn Constantine of the pitfalls of power while underscoring Elene’s own wise rule. Thus her giving of rich gifts displays a continued leadership that is undiminished by her reclamation of feminine-coded performances and that supports her status as the great heroine of the narrative.

Not only does Cynewulf emphasize Elene’s heroism in regards to her observance of the Anglo-Saxon honour system, he further stresses her success as a Christian saint through repeated notations of God bestowing favour upon the victorious queen. Such passages seem initially a

curiosity since, as Klein notes, Elene is one of the few characters in the poem who does not herself convert (i.e., undergo the ritual of baptism as evidence of her faith in Christ) despite the fact that she enables the conversion of others, including Judas (Klein 61). Nevertheless, Cynewulf's writing clearly implies that Elene's mission to discover the cross and the nails of Christ's crucifixion has the full support of the divine:

Gode þancode,
sigora dryhtne þæs þe hio soð gecneow
andweardliceþæt wæs oft bodod
feorær beforan fram fruman worulde
folcum to frofre; heo gefylled wæs
wisdomes gife þa wic behold
halig heofonlic gast, hreðer weardode,
sigebearn Godes, sioððan freoðode. (1138b-1146)

She thanked God, the Lord of victories, because she knew at first hand the truth which had often been proclaimed long previously, from the beginning of the world, as a comfort to the people. She was filled with the gift of wisdom, and the holy heavenly Spirit occupied that dwelling and took custody of her mind and noble heart. Thus the almighty and victorious Son of God henceforth protected her. (Bradley 193)

At first glance, this passage seems to suggest a religion-enforced gendered hierarchy: the male God actively occupies the female body as his *wic* or dwelling-place and must therefore guard or protect her as the weaker subject. However, I argue that such an interpretation would constitute a grievous misreading of Cynewulf's poetics, who throughout the narrative seeks to empower rather than subjugate Elene. In order to properly understand his rhetoric, we must recall the syncretic framework of the poem; within the Christian mythos, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit signals the transfer of divine wisdom and power to mortal man. "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you," Christ declares to his disciples, "and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Thus Elene may lay claim to eternal and transcendent knowledge, truth established *æf beforan fram fruman worulde*—before the beginning of the world (1141). Furthermore, the

gift of the Holy Spirit does not connote a male-female hierarchical relationship; the Holy Spirit is indiscriminate, and the Apostle Paul calls every Christian to be so filled (Ephesians 5:18, 1 Corinthians 12:13). In fact, Christ's (exclusively male) disciples were the first people to receive such power, by which the Christian church was established. In this passage, then, Cynewulf depicts Elene as one who has achieved favour in the eyes of God, and who is therefore guaranteed success in her endeavours as indicated later in lines 1147-1154. Elene thus succeeds as the victorious heroine in keeping with both the values of Anglo-Saxon heroism and the obligation of the Christian saint to don the weapons of the Holy Spirit in spiritual battle.

Though the argument can and has been made that Elene's agency as a female figure is limited (even when citing masculinity) due to her subservience to Emperor Constantine, I concur with Stacy Klein's rebuttal that the poet's "narrative emphasis and poetic investment...mark the queen as a clear victor in the contest for Cynewulf's imaginative energy" — as well as the triumphant heroine of the poem (Klein 76). While Cynewulf might attempt to bookend his retelling of the *inventio* with acclamations of Constantine's glory, he continues to return time and again to his true muse, Elene. The emperor fades quickly into the background as soon as the poet focuses his literary spotlight on the queen; it is she alone who emerges as the heroine of the poem, having "conquered" (converted) the heathen Jewish leaders on the spiritual battlefield and assured the future safety of the people of Rome through the discovery of the effective symbols of the cross, emblems which guarantee victory in physical warfare. In this way Elene accomplishes both spiritual and social protection for her people, vital elements of the syncretic Anglo-Saxon culture and marks of her heroism. Though Constantine initiates the actions of the narrative at the urging of the angelic messenger in order to promote the well-being of his kingdom, it is his

mother's successful obedience that finally secures the acknowledgement and admiration of God, the people, and the poet himself.

As with *The Dream of the Rood*, then, Cynewulf's *Elene* works from a position of cultural and gender syncretism in order to create a new and ideal representative of the Anglo-Saxon hero(ine). The poet establishes Elene as a Mary-like figure in order to assure his audience of her saintly qualifications and emblematic status before remaking the Virgin Mother figure in the mould of the secular Anglo-Saxon hero. From the amalgamation of these two cultural frameworks emerges a female protagonist who has at her disposal a full array of gender performances, and who may throughout the text assume either a masculine- or feminine-coded position (or both simultaneously) as the situation arises without a correlative shift in power. Elene claims success on all fronts. She fulfills the obligations of an Anglo-Saxon leader, assuring the protection of her people and richly rewarding the loyal service of her retainers. She acquires the good will of the divine and establishes her reputation as a sainted queen. She cites femininity in her obedient establishment of a Christian church and masculinity in her aggressive tactics of conversion; neither performance overpowers the other and both contribute to her status as victory-queen. Cynewulf's exemplar therefore resists Jane Chance's argument that the heroine of Old English literature exists only as a passive, peace-weaving figure. On the contrary, Elene proves that peace — or unity, both literally and literarily — can and must be achieved through physical efforts as well as non-violent persuasion. The woman who quietly whispers words of peace in the ear of her husband is not necessarily successful; indeed, the urgings of Hildeburh in *Beowulf* or even the woman in *The Wife's Lament* seem to fall on deaf ears. Elene speaks loudly and effectively, and it is by her warrior-like attempts at uniting the people — Romans and Jews alike — under the banner of the Christian cross that peace is achieved.

Chapter 3:

Judith: The Holy and Heroic

The third and final poem that I will discuss here is the anonymously authored *Judith*, whose compact artistry demands as much academic attention and praise as its companion within the Nowell Codex, the more substantial and well-known *Beowulf*. As with the *DOTR*, *Judith* offers a dramatic retelling of a biblical narrative (in this instance, the apocryphal book of the same name), deftly infusing the religious character with traditional heroic qualities. At the same time, the *Judith* poet mirrors Cynewulf's efforts to present his female protagonist as a figure of the Virgin Mary, reflected not merely in her chastity but also in her utter commitment to God, a devotion that inspires physical action rather than passive piety. In fact, as I shall observe, Judith in some ways participates to a greater extent in masculine-coded performances; while Elene commands the torture of the Jewish Judas from afar, Judith delivers justice to the heathen Holofernes with her own hands. Thus the three poems, while written at presumably different times by different authors, dialogue with each other particularly on points of cultural and gender syncretism, a conversation which I hope to bring full circle with this final chapter on *Judith*.

The schools of thought surrounding the poem represent a diverse field of criticism and commentators whose theories concerning *Judith*'s historical context and thematic content range widely. This mixed bag of analyses reflects the fragmented nature of the poem itself; *Judith* opens *in medias res* to recount only the final scenes of the religious narrative. Preliminary work on the text seems to suggest that the remnants of the poem comprise a relatively small portion of the original length.

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 fitt numbers in the manuscript. There is an "X" at 1.15 of

Judith, which may indicate nine previous fitts, each about 120 lines, that could have included a lost beginning of the poem. (Dockray-Miller 165)

More recent scholarship, however, proposes that the surviving lines represent the majority of the poet's work. Rosemary Woolf, for example, argues that the poem remains mostly intact, apart from a few introductory lines, to which translator S.A.J. Bradley assents in suggesting that the poet purposively lifts two key scenes from the religious narrative — the beheading of Holofernes and the victory of the Hebrews — to detail and dramatize (Dockray-Miller 165, Bradley 495). Both theories warrant further literary attention; for my part, however, I tend to side with Dockray-Miller and Karma Lochrie, who shun attempts to reconstruct the poem as it once was and instead comprehend its ideological and cultural completeness as it is now. As Lochrie comments, “the reasoning beyond such reconstruction is as self-perpetuating as it is unself-reflecting [*sic*]” (qtd. in Dockray-Miller 165).

Contemporary scholars generally acknowledge the Latin *Liber Iudith* as the anonymous poet's primary source; however, as with the length of the poem, we must be cautious about our assumptions concerning the poet's process and purpose in his Old English adaptation. It is unclear whether the poet was intimately familiar with the story of Judith or if he simply heard the story in a church service, nor can we assume that a written copy of the narrative even existed for the poet to read and re-write. In any case, as I will later observe, the Anglo-Saxon author does not share the same poetic intentions as his Latin inspiration. On this point, Lori Ann Garner advises resistance to viewing the Old English poem as mere translation, which would “unnecessarily limit our understanding of what takes place at the interface of Christian and Germanic cultures in this powerful retelling of Judith's story” (Garner 171). Garner instead suggests Foley's concept of the “indexed translation” as an alternative method of comparison, through which one understands that the “verbal artist uses a given register not for its expediency

but for its unique significative capabilities: namely, because it indexes the context in which he or she wants the communication to be received” (qtd. in Garner 171). If we thus employ Foley’s literary approach and read *Judith* as an “indexed translation,” two particular readings of the poem emerge as less effective than expedient. Allegorical readings interpreting the heroine as a symbol of the Christian Church in her struggle against the devil Holofernes, and historical readings of the poem as inciting the Anglo-Saxon people against their Danish enemies comprise the majority of *Judith* criticism (Dockray-Miller 166). Thankfully, these two strands of criticism have fallen out of fashion in the last decade or so, as more and more scholars have opted to address the text on its own terms, so to speak. As such, much academic attention has been devoted to the poet’s exquisitely complex characterization of the titular heroine and her role within this relatively brief narrative. Here again, the scholarship divides itself. Christopher Fee, for example, argues that the Old English Judith is a diminished version of her Latin counterpart, whose role is that of an inspiring figurehead only. Others, including Heidi Estes and Alexandra Olsen, observe that the Anglo-Saxon poet’s deliberate expansion of the scene in which Judith beheads Holofernes offers a much more active female protagonist. In this chapter I will attempt to reconcile these divergent claims, demonstrating that the poet works from a syncretic standpoint, to present Judith as a spiritual type of the Virgin Mary in a manner similar to Elene; as a result of the poet’s merging of the Latin apocryphal and the Anglo-Saxon heroic, Judith emerges as a new kind of heroine whose victory is accomplished through both feminine and masculine performances in her devotion to God.

While medieval scholars have laboured long over the significance of chastity within the text, there exist surprisingly few commentaries on what I believe to be a deliberate connection between the poem’s heroine and the literary archetype of the Virgin Mary. Even Jane Chance,

who has written considerably on the role of the Virgin Mother within the Old English corpus, notes only in passing Judith's shining beauty as a reflection of Mary's appearance in *Christ I* (Chance 39). Instead, the emphasis placed on Judith's chastity has served predominantly as a platform for an allegorical reading of the text. Judith's aggressive protection of her chastity despite the advances of the lecherous Holofernes parallels the struggle of the Christian Church to maintain the purity purchased for her by Christ on the cross, even as the devil seeks to corrupt her. Thus Judith becomes a type of Ecclesia—literally and literarily: “virtue battling with vice”, as Chance suggests. The problem with such an allegorical reading, besides limiting the scope of the poet's creative work, is that it is primarily a Latin-based model of critical interpretation; it is unlikely that any Anglo-Saxon would have access to such a model, and even less likely that such a method would have superseded the poet's own cultural poetic models. Additionally, the relegation of Judith to a purely symbolic role as the Church overlooks the poem's subtle but conscious forging of a rapport between its female protagonist and an equally dominant type — that of the Virgin Mary. Of course, I do not mean to simply alter the allegorical reading so that Judith represents Mary rather than representing the Church (a reading that proves indefensible when one tries to establish Holofernes as...Joseph? Herod? Satan again?) On the contrary, I propose that, as with Cynewulf's *Elene*, the *Judith* poet presents his female protagonist as a figure of Mary at the same time as he assigns her the role of Germanic hero in order to forge a new heroic ideal out of two converging cultures.

Judith firstly and obviously figures as a type of Mary in their shared virtue of chastity, and the Anglo-Saxon poet repeatedly contrasts Judith the *halige meowle* (“holy girl”) and *eadigan mægð* (“blessed girl”) with the *galferhð* (“licentious”) Holofernes (56, 35, 62). According to Jane Chance, the patristic writings of early Christendom mark chastity as the

“highest feminine theological virtue,” since the virginity of Mary—which brought forth life through Christ—rectifies the doom originating from Eve (Chance 14-15). As I have discussed in the previous chapter on Elene, the Virgin Mary came to occupy a significant place in the writings of Christianized Anglo-Saxon England as an exemplar of chaste behaviour after which women were to model themselves. Aldhelm’s well-known *De virginitate*, for example, extols the merits of virginity at great length and highlights chastity as the primary ingredient in his recommendations for a good saint. Ironically, the Judith from the Latin *Liber Iudith* did not make Aldhelm’s list of holy virgins—and with good reason. As Heidi Estes notes, the Latin scholar seems to find Judith’s seductive tactics problematic, though the Old English version of the poem (written over a hundred years after Aldhelm’s death) conveniently omits that particular scene such that we are left with a Judith who, though still beautiful, possesses a chastity that is uncomplicated by manipulative appearance or dress (Estes 328-329). Aldhelm’s rejection of the apocryphal Judith’s candidacy, however, is more likely explained by the fact that Judith, quite simply, was not a virgin at all. In fact, the traditional narrative makes it quite clear that Judith was indeed married, since she is a widow at the time of her capture at the hands of Holofernes.

Unfortunately, this information has not stopped a number of medieval scholars from attempting to “reclaim” Judith’s virginity in order to further her connection with the Virgin Mary. In particular, their translations of several key terms describing Judith as woman — such as *mægð* and *meowle*—have instigated a vicious cycle of misinterpretation in regards to Judith’s sexual status (35, 43, 56, 78, etc.). Such terms are highly ambiguous: *mægð* might be a maiden or a virgin or a woman or a wife; similarly, *meowle* could be a maiden or a virgin or a woman (Hall 194, 201). More often than not, however, these Old English terms designate the subject simply as a young woman or girl. It would be therefore quite erroneous to infer anything about

Judith's physical virginity from these two titles alone, since the multivocal nature of both *mægð* and *meowle* resists any definitive signifier of sexual performance. In spite of this, a significant number of translations insist exclusively upon "maiden" or "virgin" as the only possible rendering of these terms — even S. A. J. Bradley, whose poetic translations I find otherwise quite philologically acute. The problem, as Estes points out, is that the *Judith* poet does not limit himself to these two titles alone; if he had, a reading of Judith as virginal might not be entirely outside the realm of semantic possibility (Estes 343). However, he also describes Judith as *ides* and *wif*, terms which usually connote a married status (14, 55, 58, 148). Estes writes that "the range of terms is unusual, suggesting the range of responses her narrative evokes: in contrast, *Wealhtheow* is always either "wif" or "ides"...while *Julianna* is either "fæmne" or "mægð", with only one reference to "wif" (Estes 343). I would like to suggest that the *Judith* poet's wide-ranging semantics are not unusual at all, but rather perfectly in keeping with a description of the chaste, once-married noblewoman that Judith is.

The problem with such interpretations of Judith as a virgin, therefore, is not merely that they are erroneously misguided, but that they are entirely unnecessary. Judith need not conserve her physical virginity in order for the Anglo-Saxon audience to connect her to the perpetually Virgin Mary; it is enough that she exhibits the virtue of chastity and heroically maintains this quality despite the attempts of the lewd Holofernes to desecralize the female body. As Anne Savage describes, monastic Christianity and its institutions during this time period were not exclusive to virgin men and women, but also included those who — whether by death or divorce — had withdrawn themselves from marriage in order to dedicate their lives to spiritual work. To such people, Savage notes, Aldhelm applies the term "chastity" in a very specific way: "virginity is... unharmed by any carnal defilement, perseveres pure out of the spontaneous desire for

celibacy; and chastity, on the other hand,...having been assigned to marital contracts, has scorned the commerce of matrimony for the sake of the heavenly kingdom” (qtd. in “Three Centuries”). The widowed Judith thus falls into Aldhelm’s category of chastity, and though she cannot “reclaim” her virginity (as some scholars have tried to do hundreds of years later), she is still able to cultivate a lifestyle of purity and holiness that is consciously reminiscent of the archetypal Virgin.

However, while Judith’s chastity is certainly a primary point in the poet’s contrast of his holy heroine with the heathen Holofernes, it must also be noted that the Anglo-Saxon poet spends considerably less time and energy establishing Judith’s chastity than his Latin source does (Magennis 11). This is, of course, partially due to the fragmented and concise nature of the poem itself, and it is possible (though I would suggest not probable) that the lost lines of the poem explicate Judith’s chastity in greater detail. I find it more likely, though, that the poet is simply less concerned with questions of whether Judith was a virgin, or a wife, or a widow, and more preoccupied with her chastity as it manifests itself in her total devotion to God. This is not to disregard the prominence of the female body (in relation to both male and female bodies) within the text; on the contrary, of the three texts that I examine here, it is *Judith* that places the female body in the highest position of power, a point which I will discuss shortly. Instead, we must recognize that the poet, writing from a space of cultural syncretism, understands the body as a physical working out from the spiritual soul. That is, Judith’s chastity is performative, to use Butler’s terminology, and indicative of her pure and uncorrupted relationship with the divine.

Judith’s devotion to God — her pure heart — is therefore also suggestive of her status as a figure of Mary. This aspect of the Virgin’s virtue is often overlooked in gender and feminist studies, which tend to overemphasize the importance of physical virginity in their hagiographical

observations of this particular religious figure. However, when we apply Butlerian principles of performativity to the Christian concept of chastity and the Virgin Mary, we can discern that the performance of the chaste body is significant insofar as the heart or soul demonstrates a similar purity. Or, to quote the Gospel of Matthew: “Every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit...by their fruits you will know them” (Matthew 7:17-20 NKJV). So while Mary’s physical virginity is critical to the fulfillment of the Messianic prophesy, so too is her obedience (Luke 1:38), her humility (Luke 1:48), her prudence (Luke 2:19), and her reverence (Luke 1:46)—in other words, her utter devotion and reliance upon God. And the Anglo-Saxon poets are certainly not ignorant of this performative correlation between body and soul in regards to the person of Mary.

Observe, for example, Bradley’s translation of *Christ I* as it meditates on the mother of Christ and the mystery of the Immaculate Conception:

O splendour of the world, the purest woman on earth of those that have ever been: how rightly all people possessed of speech, men throughout the earth, joyful in mood, name you and say that you are the bride of the most excellent Lord of heaven...For you alone among all people, having the courage of your persuasions, gloriously determined that you would offer your maidenhood to the ordaining Lord and grant it to him without sin. None comparable has come, no other above all mortals, a ring-adorned bride who, with pure heart, then sent the sublime offering to the heavenly home. On this account, the Lord of victory commanded his exalted messenger out of his mighty throng to fly hither and swiftly reveal to you the abundance of his powers: that in a chaste birth you were to bring forth the Son of the Lord God as an act of mercy towards men; and yet thenceforth keep yourself, Mary, ever immaculate. (275-300)

Note how Mary’s “maidenhood” and “chaste birth” are intimately bound up with her sinless and “pure heart.” Such internal chastity perpetuates external chastity, as the final line of the excerpt indicates.

By establishing Judith as a woman devoted only and entirely to God, then, the poet parallels his heroine with Mary as hagiographical and literary ideal. This he makes obvious from the opening lines of the poem:

tweode
gifena in ðys ginnan grunde. Heo ðær ða gearwe funde
mundbyrdæt ðam mæran þeodne, þa heo ahte mæste þearfe,
hyldopæs hehstan deman, þæt he hie wiðpæs hehstan brogan
gefriðode, frymða waldend. Hyre ðæs fæder on roderum
torhtmod tiðe gefremede, þe heo ahte trumne geleafan
a to ðam ælmihtigan. (1-7a)

Marie Nelson's translation highlights the virtues of courage and trust in God for protection that appear also in the passage from *Christ I*.

Judith prayed to God, Giver of all goodness,
and did not doubt that the Ruler of creation,
our Highest Judge, would strengthen her,
protect her from fear. Because she trusted
in Almighty God, our Father in heaven
gave her courage. When she had great need
of His help, God protected Judith. (Nelson 12)

It is apparent from what remains of the beginning of the narrative that Judith has obtained God's favour, much like Mary in the Gospel of Luke. It is to God that Judith turns in prayer in Holofernes's tent, and it is he who honours her devotion and ensures that her chastity remains, like Mary's, immaculate or uncorrupted by the debauched Holofernes:

þa wearð se brema on mode
bliðe, burga ealdor, þohte ða beorhtan idese
mid wile ond mid womme besmitan. Ne wolde þæt wuldres dema
geðafian, þrymmes hyrde, ac he him þæs ðinges gestyrde,
dryhten, dugeða waldend. (57b-61a)

Holofernes exulted, planned to defile
the bright, beautiful woman; but God,
our Judge, the Guardian of glory, would
not permit the war-leader to harm Judith. (Nelson 13)

As Jane Chance contends, “the importance of any female saint in England depended in part on her literary and religious relationship with the Virgin” (Chance 15). I have established that a key part of the poet’s literary project is to stress the existence of such a relationship between his female protagonist and the religious archetype. Throughout the latter half of this chapter, though, I will discuss how the poet seeks to define this relationship. Does Judith adhere to the passive peace-weaving example that Chance suggests Mary best exemplifies? Or is she transgressing the type of Mary, seeking — quite literally — to decapitate the male authority within the poem? As with *The Dream of the Rood* and *Elene*, I argue that there is a potential third option, that the poet works to create a new sort of hero(ine), one who comprehends the ethical parameters of both secular and monastic Anglo-Saxon culture. This unique blend of heroism navigates a fluid set of both masculine and feminine performances; ultimately, however, it is dependence upon and obedience to God that determines whether or not the hero will meet a victorious end. As I have observed in the two previous chapters, such devotion can manifest itself as a feminine performance (as in submission to divine authority), as well as a masculine performance (as in aggressive physical tactics). Like Christ and the cross, or Elene, Judith as holy heroine demonstrates that obedience to the divine supersedes gendered performances as the essential element in the quest for success.

Of course, to suggest Judith as a Mary-figure is to set her character up for a feminine-coded performance. For the initial one hundred lines or so of the poem, Judith’s heroism plays out in the background of the narrative, mirroring more so the steadfast and prayerful Julianna than the headstrong and active Elene. Indeed, though the poet opens with a brief description of Judith’s firm faith, the voice of his female protagonist is almost immediately drowned out by the raucous brawling of Holofernes and his drunken thanes. Unlike her Latin counterpart, who

makes use of her *ælfscinu* or “elven beauty”¹ to seduce an inebriated Holofernes in order to bring about his demise (14), the Old English Judith is not privy to the rowdy and decadent feast scene.

The element of sexual allure and manipulateness on the part of Judith is firmly edited out in the Old English poet’s adaptation of the biblical Book, but her female qualities remain very evident in the poem. Indeed the editing-out of the sexual allure and manipulateness (one kind of feminine stereotype) has the effect of rewriting Judith as in key respects an unthreatening model of female virtue. Holofernes’s downfall is caused by his own lust and drunkenness rather than by any disconcerting seductiveness on the part of Judith. (Magennis 9-10)

This alteration is the first of several which Christopher Fee finds to “severely diminish” the active nature of Judith’s heroism (Fee 401). Judith is silent even as she is brought captive into Holofernes’s tent, neither protesting nor planning an escape. When she finally does speak, it is to utter a prayer of anguish and urgent pleading for the help of the Lord:

“Icðe, frymða god ond frofre gæst,
bearn alwaldan, biddan wylle
miltse þinre me þearfendre,
ðrynesse ðrym. þearle ys me nu ða
heorte onhæted ond hige geomor,
swyðe mid sorgum gedrefed.” (83-88a)

Or, as Bradley translates:

“God of beginnings, Spirit of comfort, Son of the universal Ruler, I desire to entreat you for your grace upon me in my need, Majesty of the Trinity. My heart is now sorely anguished and my mind troubled and much afflicted with anxieties.” (Bradley 498)

Fee criticizes Judith’s admission of anxiety and petition for divine assistance as a demeaning of her heroic role; citing Chance, he argues that such a prayer confines her to a traditionally passive role in that she must still depend on masculine support — here, of the triune God, who is anachronistic to the apocryphal Old Testament narrative but not to the Old English adaptation (Fee 406). In this manner Judith clearly diverges from her Codex companion and fellow Anglo-

¹ The term refers to physical appearance, and implies a supernatural sort of beauty as of an elf or fairy (John Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1916, page 7).

Saxon hero, Beowulf. While the Geatish leader is confident in his militaristic abilities and fearlessly proceeds to engage the dragon in single combat, Judith acknowledges her inability to overcome Holofernes on her own and pleads for assistance from the divine. In this regard Judith resembles more the cautious Hrothgar, the geriatric lord of a people on the verge of being destroyed in a family feud — though the *Judith* poet soon reveals that his heroine is hardly battle-shy, and her people are far from diminished.

Fee's assessment, however, seems to be missing the point. Certainly Judith's femininity is evident — even emphasized — in the moments leading up to the critical beheading scene. Yet Fee continually overlooks the poet's repeated pronouncements of Judith's rational intelligence and heroic appearance throughout her captivity, as well as the pointed contrast of the devoted heroine with the parodied and ultimately doomed Holofernes. Although Judith's physical presence is limited during the feast scene, the poet employs a variety of epithets to assure his audience that she is no damsel in distress. On the contrary, she is *gleaw* ("shrewd"), *ferhðgleaw* ("wise"), and *snoteran* ("prudent"), indicating that her present lack of action is thoughtful and preparative (13b, 41a, 55a). She appears also as the *torhtan mægð* ("illustrious young woman") and *þeowen þrymful, þearle gemyndig* ("very mindful and majestic servant"), epithets which contextualize her heroism and foreshadow her triumph (43a, 74). These latter virtues the poet expounds upon in his description of Judith just prior to her prayer, a portrayal which assigns Judith an explicitly (militaristic) heroic appearance:

Genam ða wundenlocc
scyppendes mægð scearpne mece,
scurum heardne, ond of sceaðe abræd
swiðran folme; ongan ða swegles weard
be naman nemnan, nergend ealra
woruldbuendra... (77b-82a)

Then the ringletted girl, the Maker's maiden, grasped a sharp sword, hardy in the storms of battle, and drew it from its sheath with her right hand. Then she called by name upon the Guardian of heaven, the Saviour of all the world's inhabitants... (Bradley 498)

Garner argues that the word *wundenlocc*, or “ringletted” as Bradley translates it, takes on a special significance within the Old English version, particularly in this scene. While the word refers to Judith having plaited or curly hair, the poet's deployment of *wundenlocc* represents a departure from the Vulgate Judith's careful adornment before her seduction of Holofernes. Instead, the Anglo-Saxon poet describes Judith as *wundenlocc* in order to align her with her fellow Bethulian male warriors, who share the same physical feature. This association, coupled with Judith's grasping of the sword as the first person in the poem to initiate combat, places her in the powerful position of hero and leader (Garner 180-181). This transition — from a captive woman about to be raped to an armed warrior woman — is made without poetic commentary, which seems to imply that Judith's assumption of militaristic power is a natural move rather than a transgressive one.

It is also important to note that Judith's prayer as she takes up arms is poetically expressed as a moment of empowerment rather than inactivity, as Christopher Fee suggests. In fact, in this particular section of the narrative, Judith manages to exemplify both secular and monastic military heroism at once. She demonstrates the same hardiness as Christ in *The Dream of the Rood* as she prepares to either enact Holofernes's death or meet her own, drawing the sword from its sheath. But her fervent prayer indicates her reliance upon another set of armour—one that is spiritual in nature. The apostle Paul exhorts all Christians—male and female alike—to put on the armour of God in the battle against evil, and prayer figures prominently in this armoury:

Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil...

Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints... (Ephesians 6:10-11, 14-18)

The militant believer described in this passage must prepare for battle spiritually as well as physically; while the majority of Paul's audience probably did not wear armour at all, armour had a definitive presence in Old English poetry, and likely in the secular community as well. So an Anglo-Saxon imagination could easily transition between the metaphorical and the real-life connotations of Paul's admonition. Of the military gear that Paul describes, prayer represents a potent weapon in the Christian's arsenal, and this is certainly the case with Judith, whose request for aid and courage is immediately granted.

Hi ða se hehsta dema
ædre mid elne onbryrde, swa he deð anra gehwylcne
herbuendraþe hyne him to helpe seceð
mid ræde ond mid rihte geleafan. Ða wearð hyre rume on mode,
haligre hyht geniwod... (94b-98a)

The Highest Judge, Who helps all earth-dwellers
who pray with wisdom and true faith,
gave Judith courage. Her mind was opened,
her noble hope renewed. (Nelson 15)

It is significant that only after Judith's prayer is granted does she take on a new set of epithets that signal her heroism. These include such terms as *ellenrof* ("brave"), *collenferhð* ("bold"), and *eadhreðige* ("triumphant") (109a, 134b, 135a). These descriptions, Garner argues, "all reinforce this image of Judith as heroic leader and add to the audience's association of her with other Germanic heroes" (Garner 179). We see here that Judith's heroism — her courage in battle and her eventual triumph — are all rooted in her devotion to God. The poet urges his audience to see

that the saintly Judith cannot be a successful hero in the physical sense (slaying Holofernes, defending her people) if she neglects her spiritual well-being.

This is made all the more explicit in the poet's contrasting his female protagonist with Holofernes, the lord of the Assyrian army. Although the Anglo-Saxon poet outlines Holofernes as a traditional Anglo-Saxon lord, his descriptions are heavily layered with irony. The first half of the poem contains all of the stock literary elements of the feast scene in the mead hall, with Holofernes presiding. A splendid meal is laid out for the thanes and drink is available in abundance, as if to celebrate a great victory— but the triumphant setup proves to be a prequel to ruin and defeat. Portrayals of the exulting warriors and their leader are overshadowed by the poet's darkly humorous insistence on their eventual doom.

Ðær wæron bollan steape
borenæfter bencum gelome, swylce eac bunan on orcas
fulle fletsittendum; hie þæt fæge þegon,
rofe rondwiggende, þeah ðæs se rica ne wende,
egesful eorla dryhten. (17b-21a)

Deep bowls were borne continually along the benches there and brimming goblets and pitchers as well to the hall-guests. They drank it down as doomed men, those celebrated shield-wielders—though the great man, the awesome lord over evils, did not foresee it. (Bradley 496-497)

Swa se inwidda ofer ealne dæg
dryhtguman sine drencte mid wine,
swiðmod since brytta, oðþæt hie on swiman lagon,
oferdrencte his duguðe ealle, swylce hie wæron deaðe geslegene,
agotene goda gehwylces. (28-32a)

So the whole day long the villain, the stern-minded dispenser of treasure, plied his retainers with wine until they lay unconscious, the whole of his retinue drunk as though they had been struck dead, drained of every faculty (Bradley 497).

The poet's portrait of the "great lord" is intensely satirical — Holofernes fulfills all the obligations of an Anglo-Saxon lord to excess. The text marks him as the *rican þeodne* ("mighty lord") and the *folces ræswan* ("people's chief"), epithets which confirm Holofernes as a powerful

— even heroic — leader (11b-12a). He is a generous ruler, dispensing freely of gold and food as a reward for the loyalty of his thanes, who are eager to obey his command. Yet, as Bradley remarks, “when [such heroic diction] is applied to Holofernes and the Assyrians its juxtaposition with gross behaviour effects not compliment but sardonic ridicule” (Bradley 496). Holofernes not only meets the requirements of the successful warrior lord, he exceeds them to perversion, such that the drunken and death-like stupor of him and his men becomes a grim foreshadowing of their imminent — and permanent — impotency. Haruko Momma claims that these lines represent a corrupted version of the feast scene:

When ideally conducted, feasting...should provide the chieftain with an opportunity not only to display his wealth and power by way of conspicuous consumption but also to reinforce his retainers' loyalty and ensure the quality of their service. Holofernes's orgies arguably achieve the first goal because he is called *rice* (“strong and rich”) twice in the feast scene (11b, 20b). But they evidently fail to achieve the second. After the feast, his warriors are apparently too drunk to notice Judith's departure, thus presenting a clear contrast to the Bethulian warriors, who keep a vigilant watch at the city gate and mark Judith's return promptly. (66-67)

Thus Holofernes's immoderate and indulgent feast in fact counteracts the underlying goals that such a celebration traditionally achieved. At the same time, the poet works to clarify that although the caricatured Holofernes's “hyper-heroism” is to be mocked, it is his opposition to the Lord and his chosen people that seals his demise. The text repeatedly refers to the Assyrian ruler as *galferðor galmōd* (“wanton” or “licentious”), terms which criticize not merely Holofernes's drunken actions but his corrupt spirit (62, 256). Even more explicitly, he appears in the text as *deofulcunda* (“diabolical”) and *nergende lað* (“hostile to the Saviour”) (61b, 45b). So the poet follows his positive designations with these implicative titles, urging his audience to recognize that a good Anglo-Saxon lord who lacks faith cannot be the hero of the story — only the villain. And as he shifts his focus back to Judith in her state of prayer, we are reminded that obedience to

the Lord is empowering rather than diminishing. Judith asks and receives. Holofernes does not ask, and the consequences are deadly.

Having firmly contrasted Judith's devotion with Holofernes's debauchery, the poet brings us to the turning point of the text: the beheading scene. It is around this particular scene that the entire narrative revolves, and it is a peculiar passage, one upon which Old English scholars have long fixated. It is a curious moment of reversal: the drunken Assyrian leader climbs into bed with the intention of ravishing the beautiful Judith; however, his excessive drinking renders him unconscious and the shrewd Judith takes his sword and decapitates him in two swift strokes. Here again the poet's re-telling of the apocryphal narrative resists Christopher Fee's claim that the Old English Judith is largely a passive figurehead. Alexandra Hennessy Olsen points out that the Old English poetic version of this particular scene in fact represents a significant expansion of the Vulgate: the poet embellishes one brief verse into fourteen lines of detailed narration. Many Old English adaptations — such as *The Dream of the Rood*, or *Exodus* — expand certain scenes from the biblical narrative as a natural result of “translating” from one literary form into another. Still, Olsen argues that such an expansion indicates an attempt at a more realistic depiction of the beheading (expansions of battle scenes are particularly common) but also a deliberate effort to demonstrate an inversion of masculine and feminine performances (Olsen 291). This is a critical movement in the narrative, one which takes up prime real estate in the remnants of this brief poem, and the poet's expansion of this scene — which highlights Judith's actively heroic, masculine-coded actions—reveals his investment in the culturally syncretic heroism of his female protagonist.

Mary Flavia Godfrey writes extensively of the significance of the act of beheading in Anglo-Saxon poetry (particularly in *Judith* and *Beowulf*) and the decapitated head as a literary

and cultural symbol. Working from both Scandinavian texts and Anglo-Saxon traditions, Godfrey suggests that the pre-conquest Anglo-Saxon culture perceived the head to be the source of intellect and creation, as well as a “wellspring of inspired expression” (Godfrey 6). And she echoes my previous argument that *Judith* is similarly concerned with this connection between the external and the internal, the body and the mind (or soul — Anglo-Saxon poets regularly conflate these two aspects of the internal self): “In the form in which it is preserved, *Judith* is a poem obsessively concerned with intellection and reasoning, with examples of men whose minds and judgments are clouded by emotion, desire, drink, or simply by the trappings of civilization, to their detriment and disaster” (Godfrey 12). In contrast, Judith’s head is cleared and her mind calmed by the divine assurance of God, enabling her to assess her troubling situation and take action to her advantage. Her decapitation of Holofernes finishes the work which his drunken state had begun; his intellect is already dulled by mead, but Judith’s beheading completely and permanently severs the remaining bond between body and soul. Godfrey notes that the head of Holofernes then becomes a *tacen* or token like Grendel’s which, upon her return to the Bethulian camp, serves as a source of inspiration. First, it inspires two great speeches of exhortation in Judith, which in turn inspires courage in the hearts of the Bethulian warriors. And second, it inspires creative expression in the spirit of the poet himself, who pivots his literary work around this moment of beheading. According to Godfrey, this decapitation scene situates *Judith* alongside the epic heroic tale of *Beowulf*, whose beheading of both Grendel and Grendel’s monstrous mother offers many parallels to Judith’s severing of Holofernes’s head (Godfrey 29).

While Godfrey’s analysis proves both insightful and pertinent to my discussion of *Judith*, I also find her interpretation to be somewhat asymmetric in that she overemphasizes the pre-Christian symbolism of decapitation and entirely ignores any biblical frame of reference for

Judith's aggression. This imbalance is deliberate on Godfrey's part, who contends that such poetic representations of heads and beheading are

...not in the service of melding pagan and Christian elements of Anglo-Saxon society, a melding that would ultimately become an acknowledgment of Christian hegemony. Despite a Christian flavoring (particularly apparent in *Judith*), the language of these poems draws on distinctly secular concepts about the mind and intellectual activity, in which Scandinavian images of the head's importance as a locus of creative activity coalesce within two settings of heroic poetry. (Godfrey 30)

Not only does Godfrey fall into the trap of segregating “pagan and Christian elements of Anglo-Saxon society,” her argument also underestimates the *Judith* poet's familiarity with both sacred and secular stories and the breadth of his syncretic project. While it is true that beheading is a rather infrequent occurrence in scriptural narratives (the Old Testament in particular features stoning as the punishment of choice), there appears in the Book of Judges one tale that bears a remarkable resemblance to the apocryphal *Judith*, a story that parallels the Old English poem even more closely than the *Beowulf* text with respect to the beheading scene. This is the story of Jael, who drives a tent peg into the temple of the sleeping war commander Sisera.

The fourth and fifth chapters of Judges feature not one, but two powerful Hebrew women: the shrewd Jael, as I have mentioned, but also the wise judge of the Israelites named Deborah. In a time of religious and political turmoil, Deborah advises and exhorts the warrior Barak to meet Sisera and his heathen army in battle. Later we shall observe that Judith also urges the Bethulians to war; such militaristic goading seems to be reminiscent of both the Old Testament Deborah and the figure of the whetting woman of Scandinavian culture as another instance of cultural syncretism. Deborah also warns Barak that he will gain no glory from the battle, for “the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman” (Judges 4:9). And so it happens that Sisera flees the battle scene and seeks refuge in the tent of a woman called Jael, who lulls him to sleep with a drink of milk before driving a tent peg through his skull into the ground. The

death of the enemies' commander secures the victory for the people of God, and Deborah sings of Jael's actions during the celebration afterwards:

Most blessed among women is Jael,
The wife of Heber the Kenite;
Blessed is she among women in tents.
He asked for water, she gave milk;
She brought out cream in a lordly bowl.
She stretched her hand to the tent peg,
Her right hand to the workmen's hammer;
She pounded Sisera, she pierced his head,
She split and struck through his temple.
At her feet he sank, he fell, he lay still;
At her feet he sank, he fell...
Where he sank, there he fell dead. (Judges 5:24-27)

The parallels with *Judith* are quite apparent. Both Holofernes and Sisera assume that their safety is guaranteed within the shelter of the tent, underestimating the cunning of the women beside whom they intend to rest (although Sisera, unlike Holofernes, does not express any sexual intention). Both men succumb to the drowsy effects of drink, the mead-drunk Holofernes falling unconscious and the war-weary Sisera falling asleep after Jael plies him with milk as opposed to his requested water. The act of arranging Holofernes's body for decapitation is in itself a mockery or shaming of the male body, as Godfrey points out; similarly, Deborah informs Barak that Jael's actions signal a castration of his own glory (Godfrey 22-23). And finally, both women take this opportunity to make a military move of their own, targeting both the literal and figurative heads of their respective enemies which they later reveal as a guarantee of victory for the Lord's people. Contrary to Godfrey's claim, then, the poet demonstrates a definitive comprehension of biblical narratives depicting a parallel sort of beheading, as well as Anglo-Saxon concepts of the head and the significance of decapitation. The poet's attention to this scene is motivated by cultural syncretism, which he himself promotes both here and throughout the latter half of the text.

The beheading scene has also been a point of fascination for feminist and gender studies scholars, who frequently observe the passage as indicative of an inversion of gender roles, particularly Judith's killing Holofernes with his own phallic sword as a sort of reverse rape. Such analyses are intriguingly insightful; at the same time, I suggest that the poet is not advocating a simple reversal of the masculine and feminine, but a more complex form of gender syncretism in his portrayal of the sword-wielding Judith. Olsen's examination of the lines describing Judith's arranging of Holofernes's body and her cutting off his head persuasively argues that the poet presents this scene as a reverse rape:

...if the masculine and feminine pronouns were reversed, the same lines could easily describe the rape of a woman by a man. Judith draws Holofernes 'folmum wiö hyre weard' (line 99b) [towards her with her hands]. The manner in which she does so is 'bysmerlice' (line 100a) [disgracefully, indecently, or in a filthy manner]; one should note that in *Sermo Lupi*, Wulfstan uses an analogous term, 'to bismore' [with disgrace or with filth] to describe the gang rape of Englishwomen by Danes. Judith lays down 'bone bealofullan / listum' (lines 100b-1a) [the wicked one skillfully] so that she 'oæs unlædan eaöost mihte / wel gewealdan' (lines 102a-3a) [might most easily completely have power over the miserable one]. In Middle English, the word *wield* can mean 'to wield a woman ... to possess, enjoy, or swive a mistress'... After these lines, it is easy to view Judith's use of a sword as the inversion of the expected culmination of such a scene, especially since the weapon she uses is a 'mece' (line 78b), that is, a falchion, 'a short, broad sword with a convex edge. (Olsen 291-292)

Given the Anglo-Saxon poet's penchant for irony and poetic justice throughout the text of *Judith*, it seems likely that his audience would have arrived at a similar interpretation as Olsen's — and would probably have been equally startled. The scene is troubling as a potential point of gender anxiety, particularly in the poet's attempt to designate Judith as the heroine of the tale (Estes 345-346). However, we must remember that Judith does not actually intend to physically rape Holofernes, contrary to his own malicious objective; in fact, Estes goes on to note that Judith does not even breach the critical boundary of the bed's *fleohnet* or flynet, instead reaching into the bed with the sword and picking up the villain's severed head off the floor. This means

that she is able to decapitate Holofernes without marring her own pure and holy self in any way, thereby absolving her of any immoral activity.

Even more complicated is the poet's depiction of Judith's beheading Holofernes as a gendered performance. Clearly her drawing of the sword and decapitating its owner signals a masculine-coded performance — but to what extent? On the one hand, Judith seems to experience difficulty separating Holofernes' head from his shoulders: she must drag him out of bed by his hair and arrange him carefully in order to manage his body more easily, and even then two strokes of the sword are required to fully decapitate him. As Hugh Magennis comments, "Grabbing an enemy by the hair would be an undignified tactic for a male hero (not to mention killing someone in his sleep)...a male hero like Beowulf would have succeeded at the first stroke" (Magennis 17-18). On the other hand, Garner argues that the poet prolongs Judith's struggle purposefully; he deliberately remarks that *næs ða dead þa gyt, / ealles osawle* ("he was not yet dead, not entirely lifeless") as if to suggest that Judith is in quite real danger of the Assyrian lord waking up and having his revenge (107b-108a).

The expansion of the "bis" into a more extended narrative element serves to heighten the tension in the battle between the two and, in effect, to portray Holofernes as a challenging, if unconscious, opponent. Again, the poet's movement towards specificity both brings the story into the Anglo-Saxon poetic idiom and adds to the protagonist's glory by posing her against a real and formidable antagonist. (Garner 174)

The solution to this complexity, I believe, is to resist the divisive effect of opting for either one reading or the other and to instead attempt to understand the poet's syncretic project with regards to gender performances. Yes, Judith assumes a masculine-coded performance in her beheading of Holofernes; however, this does not negate her femininity or feminine performance. On the contrary, Judith is able to achieve (traditionally masculine) heroism without "having to transcend

female weakness and act ‘manfully,’” as Magennis describes, instead negotiating a full range of both masculine and feminine performances in order to succeed.

Judith continues to display a fluid movement between masculinity and femininity during her return journey to Bethulia with Holofernes’s head in a bloody bag, at which point she encounters her maid. The two proceed to the Bethulian camp together, and the poet describes them together as women who have achieved great triumph in their militaristic endeavours:

Eodon ða gegnum þanonne
þa idesa ba, ellenþriste,
oðþæt hie becomon collenferhðe,
eadhreðige mægð, ut of ðam herige,
þæt hie sweotollice geseon mihten
þære wlitegan byrig weallas blican,
Bethuliam. Hie ða beahhrodene
feðelaste forð onettan,
oð hie glædmode gegan hæfdon
toðam wealgate. (132b-141a)

From there the two women then proceeded onwards, emboldened by courage, until they had escaped, brave, triumphant virgins, from among the army, so that they could clearly see the walls of the beautiful city, Bethulia, shining. Then the ring-adorned women hurried forward on their way until, cheered at heart, they had reached the rampart gate. (Bradley 499)

These lines suggest a relationship between Judith and her maid that is not unlike the traditional lord-retainer dynamic. Judith returns from the battlefield bearing her bloody token as did Beowulf with the head of Grendel’s mother; this she hands off to her loyal thane, her maid, who appears to have waited faithfully outside the Assyrian camp for her lady’s return. The various epithets applied to both Judith and her maid in this passage emphasize their victorious heroism, signalling to the Anglo-Saxon audience that the lord-retainer relationship has proved to be a successful formula for the two women (though not so for Holofernes and his men — nor for Beowulf and his thanes). Furthermore, as Garner remarks, the description of Judith and her maid as *beahhrodene* or “ring-adorned” in line 138 evokes specifically traditional imagery of

“gift-giving and the treasure of the hall” (Garner 180-181). Helen Damico even goes so far as to translate *beahhrodene* as “shield-adorned” rather than “ring-adorned,” alluding to a sort of “warrior dress” (qtd. in Dockray-Miller 168). When all of these conventional heroic terms and images are applied to Judith, the effect is masculinizing: alongside her maid, Judith clearly occupies the masculine-coded position of hero and lord. Mary Dockray-Miller, however, seeks to balance this reading with an analysis of the formation of female community between Judith and her maid in this segment of the text. Arguing that the presence of the unnamed maid is critical to Judith’s gender performance, she notes that Judith holds the position of a maternal figure within this female community (reminding the audience once more of her status as a figure of the Virgin Mother) and so “that female community constructs a heroism for Judith that is based on protection and generation rather than aggression and domination” (Dockray-Miller 165-166). The plurality of the Old English adjectives unites the two women across boundaries of social class and create a distinctly female space — one that is layered with triumph.

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...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. (Dockray-Miller 169-171)

Again we may observe that Judith’s performance is at once masculine and feminine, fulfilling all the obligations of the male hero in a lord-retainer relationship and yet still retaining the protective and maternal qualities of her femaleness. Judith therefore returns to Bethulia as the triumphant hero — not because she relinquishes her femininity, but because she maintains it alongside a simultaneous masculine performance.

One final example of the gender syncretism prevalent throughout the *Judith* poem is that of Judith's two speeches urging the Bethulians to war with and triumph over the Assyrians. Once more we find the literary scholarship divided on the gender performance of the female protagonist. Christopher Fee again criticizes the Old English *Judith* as maintaining a "strictly inspirational role" before and during the actual battle with the heathen army, concluding that her performance — while still heroic to a certain extent — remains well within the normal range of performances available to an Anglo-Saxon woman (Fee 405). Her speeches, Fee suggests, emphasize her role as passive vessel (God has achieved the victory through her) rather than active hero, reiterating her character as a Mary-figure; in this sense, her spiritual leadership would seem perfectly acceptable and welcomed by the male Bethulian warriors who are inspired to perform their masculine-coded physical duties in battle. Judith, however, is "put on a pedestal, dehumanized — or reified, as it were — and neatly extracted from her position as the active agent of triumph and rightful recipient of glory" (Fee 403). Judith's oral urgings also mimic the stock literary character of the whetting woman, as I have previously noted; though she does not take up a sword again to fight in the battle, she sharpens the weapons of the Bethulian men with her speech of mobilization. In this respect, Judith seems to submit to traditional gender roles and begins to fade into the background of the poem's tension and activity, leaving the "real" heroics to the men.

While I concur with Fee's argument that Judith's speeches demonstrate a continued feminine performance (as Mary-figure, spiritual leader, and whetting woman), I believe that his analysis fails to take into account the authoritative nature of Judith's rhetoric as she musters the men to war. Again I refer to Robert Bjork's contention that those literary figures who participate in the truth of the Christian faith demonstrate "open" speech — that is, speech that is direct and

aiming towards unvarnished truth — which indicates a command of power in Anglo-Saxon poetry. In contrast, those who adhere to another religion (like Judas in Cynewulf's *Elene*) demonstrate a perverted or diminished power in their “closed” speech, which is typically double-tongued and manipulative (Bjork 73). Like *Elene*, then, Judith addresses the men of Bethulia with boldness and plain speech that places her military authority on a par with that of any Anglo-Saxon king or lord:

“Her ge magon sweotole, sigerofe hæleð,
leoda ræswan, on ðæs laðestan
hæðenes heaðorinces heafod starian
Holofernus unlyfigendes,
þe us monna mæst morðra gefremede,
sarra sorga, ond þæt swyðor gyt
ycan wolde, ac him ne uð god
lengran lifes, þæt he mid læððum us
eglan moste; ic him ealdor oðþrong
þurh godes fultum. Nu ic gumena gehwæne
þyssa burgleoda biddan wylle,
randwiggendra, þæt ge recene eow
fysan to gefeohte.” (177-189a)

“Victorious heroes, leaders of the people; here you may openly gaze upon the head of that most odious heathen warrior, the dead Holofernes, who perpetrated upon us the utmost number of violent killings of men and painful miseries, and who intended to add to it even further, but God did not grant him longer life so that he might plague us with afflictions. I took his life, with God's help. Now I want to urge each man among these citizens, each shield-wielding soldier, that you immediately get yourselves ready for battle.” (Bradley 500-501)

Such a speech, which openly claims the death of Holofernes as her own handiwork and guarantees without a doubt the Bethulian victory, are not the words of a passive peacekeeper. They are the words of a commander, strong and courageous and fully capable of wielding power over the men of Bethulia. Judith's speech is not simply wise counsel, nor persuasive begging; no, her words are a military order, one which the Hebrew armies are swift to obey. And even

though Judith does not physically lead her men into battle, her words and her promise of victory are behind them at all times, propelling them onward and upward.

So even in her speech Judith demonstrates a heroism that is accomplished by performances of both masculinity and femininity, to a very successful end. Although her physical presence is not felt in the battle between the Hebrews and the heathens, her handiwork secures triumph for God's people; when Holofernes's men discover his headless body, they understand that their own fate is sealed and flee the battlefield in terror until they are overtaken by the conquering Bethulian warriors. In the final lines of the poem we observe the triumphant return of the men, who acknowledge Judith as the hero of the narrative by bringing back for her all of Holofernes's costly armour and treasure, which they lay at her feet. At the same time, the poet remarks that Judith does not revel in her bounty but directs the glory to God — understanding that her true reward is celestial and eternal. Thus the poet confirms Judith as the hero of the poetic narrative while reminding his audience that such heroism is inextricably bound up in one's devotion to God.

Conclusion:

The Anglo-Saxon Hero Re-forged and Remade

The text of *Judith* thus represents a culmination of the syncretic project of the Anglo-Saxon poets as they attempt to remake the heroic mould. In *The Dream of the Rood*, we observe that even the Anglo-Saxonized Christ need not resist feminine performances in order to succeed as the triumphant hero—not only of a particular nation, but of all peoples. Nor does submission to the will of God indicate shameful cowardice, as exemplified by the cross of the crucifixion. Instead, the poet's conscious amalgamation of secular and monastic values enables both the heroic Christ and the humbled cross to fulfill their roles as lord and retainer in the service of humanity. From this practice of cultural syncretism emerges an equally complex and intriguing form of gender syncretism as I have examined in *Elene*. Cynewulf applies a method similar to the *DOTR* poet's literary tactics in his reconstruction of the feminine Christian archetype, the Virgin Mary. Elene, as a figure of Mary, nevertheless resists Chance's determination that the feminine must remain passive, and Cynewulf's female protagonist goes on to dominate the action of the narrative as she achieves peace for the Roman Empire through militaristic aggression. Finally, the syncretic efforts of these two poets merge and climax in the heroine of *Judith*, which navigates the elaborate conventions of Anglo-Saxon heroism deftly as Judith works through a full range of masculine- and feminine-coded performances. As with *Elene*, the *Judith* poet establishes his female protagonist as a Mary-figure before recasting the traditionally passive and peace-weaving figure as a physically powerful and boldly courageous warrior woman. From these three poems, then, emerges a new formula for the heroic ideal of Anglo-Saxon literature. Heroes made from this mould are recognizably Anglo-Saxon and able to fulfill all the obligations of a courageous lord, from unwavering boldness to generous gift-giving. Yet

they stand apart from the Beowulfs and the Byrhtnoths of the Anglo-Saxon world, in that they also bear a striking resemblance to the archetypes of the Christian realm—either Christ or Mary. Built upon such archetypes and empowered by their devotion to God, these heroes are not confined by traditional gender roles; instead, they may freely assume masculinity or femininity as the situation demands. Certainly the boundaries of culture and gender are pushed, if not transgressed, within these three poems; however, each time the poet concludes with poetic approval and the blessing of the divine, confirming the success of their heroic actions. A new hero has arrived on the literary stage, one that appears both familiar and unique, but always and above all leaves triumphant.

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