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Queer Afterlives: The Old English Hero and the Scholarly Tradition

This article rethinks the scholarly tendency to focus primarily on Beowulf and male, pagan heroes when considering Old English heroism. It offers a more inclusive definition of Old English heroic poetry and of the Old English hero, one that does not consider women and Christian heroes as marginal iterations of the norm, but rather as an integral part of heroic stock. While the heroism of women such as Judith, Elene, and Juliana has been the subject of much scholarly interest, this interest has most often focused on how these women present a gendering of, or a departure from the heroic ideal. Women heroes have tended to be compared to the pagan Beowulf and found wanting. In contrast, I argue, with the example of the Old English *Judith*, that we should compare these figures' heroic performance to other Christian heroes such as Andreas and Guthlac, to avoid any confusion between enacting a Christian heroism and a potentially specifically feminine heroism. I show that, in opposition to the tendency of scholars to focus on gender performance as, in one way or another, productive of heroism, the very heroism of a Judith or an Andreas in Old English poetry transcends gender binaries to become a queer performance.

Keywords: Heroism, Old English heroic poetry, gender, literary genre, *Judith*, queer, scholarly tradition

Quid Hinieldus cum Christo? Angusta est domus: utrosque tenere non poterit. (Dümmler II 183)

*What has Ingeld to do with Christ? The house is narrow and has no room for both.*¹

The epigraph to this article is an oft-excerpted passage from a 797 letter by Alcuin, probably addressed to a Mercian bishop concealed behind the

¹ All translations from Latin and Old English are my own.

by-name Speratus, rather than, as hitherto supposed, to Bishop Hygbald of Lindisfarne (Bullough). Alcuin expresses in this part of the letter his recommendation that the episcopal dinner-table benefit from Christian readings rather than from the entertainment of scopas reciting pagan songs about such heroic figures as Ingeld. Rare is the scholarly discussion of heroic poetry and/or *Beowulf* that fails to refer back to Alcuin's words to signify the boundary that existed in Early Medieval England between Old English heroic poetic tradition and Christian writings, respectively represented by Ingeld, the pagan hero of Germanic legend who appears in *Widsith* and *Beowulf*, and Christ.² This despite Mary Garrison's convincing argument that the passage should be read not as a generalising commentary but instead as a local critique of royal Mercian involvement in the bishop's affairs.

This article proposes that the recurrence of the *Quid Hinieldus cum Christo?* passage in the scholarship is less revealing of any actual Christian/'Germanic' heroic divide in Old English poetry than the tendency, inherited from nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship, to project this divide onto Old English poetry, and to continue considering heroism as primarily male, pagan, and embodied in the hero Beowulf. In fact, I shall submit that the hero Ingeld has *everything* to do with Christ in Early Medieval England, and that Old English heroes are overwhelmingly, and unproblematically, Christian. They are also not infrequently women. I will therefore propose to replace the image of a virile, pagan Beowulf as the epitome of the Germanic hero with a more inclusive representation of heroism, one that comprises Christian and women heroes.

Women heroes are often seen as a sort of contradiction in terms. Thus Jeffrey J. Cohen makes the general remark that medieval "heroism is a gendered realm," and that the "hero represents a kind of hypermasculinity, an exaggerated and perhaps idealized version of maleness" (2, 13). As a result, most of the scholarship that has discussed women heroes in Old English poetry has concentrated on resolving this perceived incongruity and has focused on these heroes' gender performance through opposition to Beowulf, a pagan hero. In contrast, I will argue that in order to understand the heroism of a character like Judith, we should concentrate on their Christianity and piety rather than on their gender. At the same time, I will compare Judith's heroic performance to that of other Christian figures, such as Andreas and Guthlac, since critics often confuse performing

² See, however, Thomas Duncan pp. 29–31.

Christianity with performing femininity.³ Finally, I will show that whereas scholars have focused on gender performance as, one way or another, productive of heroism, the very (Christian) heroism of a Judith or an Andreas in Old English poetry supplants the importance of their gender for the Old English poet, turning them into queer figures.

Before re-defining the hero in Old English literature, one should first have in mind the masculine, militaristic, and non-Christian connotations that have traditionally accompanied the term ‘hero’ for scholars of Early Medieval England.⁴ Since the term ‘hero’ does not actually appear in Old English (Bremmer 76), it is revealing that it is words that usually translate as “warrior,” such as “hæleð” and “eorl,” that are uncritically translated into the Modern English “hero.” Scholars likewise understood these words to be constitutive of the period’s definition of heroism (Herbison 17; Bremmer 75). The result has been the privileging of a militaristic, masculine, type of heroism.⁵

Keeping this connotation in mind, scholars have usually accorded with Cohen and dismissed the possibility of women being heroes whenever not directly tackling heroism in a specific text, such as *Judith* or *Elene*. Hugh Magennis can in this way dismiss women as heroes on the basis that violent action is central to the hero and “belongs firmly to the sphere of male performance” (*The Cambridge Introduction* 79). Even when writing about Judith’s heroism, the notions of woman and hero are so irreconcilable that he concludes that “[t]hroughout the poem Judith’s attitudes and ‘instinctive’ behaviour are presented as those of a Germanic noblewoman, even though her role is not that of a woman at all but of a hero” (“Gender and Heroism” 18). For him, it is Judith’s “ostensible unsuitedness to the task” that makes the poem so successful (18). If one looks through common introductions to the hero and heroism in Old English poetry, women are never mentioned as heroes, apart from in the aforementioned passage in Magennis (*The Cambridge Introduction*), who evokes them only to dismiss them, and in Greenfield and Calder’s *New Critical History of Old English Literature*, which proves a surprisingly early breath of fresh air in

³ Judith is anachronistically presented as a Christian, praying to the Trinity, in the Old English poem *Judith*. See *Judith*, line 86 in Treharne 230.

⁴ In line with the recent drive to dissociate the field of Old English studies from its racist scholarly past, encapsulated for some in the term Anglo-Saxon, I will call the pre-Conquest period ‘Early Medieval England,’ and those who study it scholars of Early Medieval England. For a useful overview of, and discussion on this controversy, see Louviot.

⁵ For such an assumption, linked with an assimilation of the term “hero” with that of “warrior,” see Magennis, *The Cambridge Introduction* 79–81.

1986 by including, after its section on “Secular Heroic Poetry,” a chapter on “The Christian Saint as Hero” that includes a discussion of *Juliana* and *Elene* (167–178).⁶ John Edward Damon also discusses *Juliana* and *Elene* in a short section of his book on *Soldier Saints and Holy Warriors* (95–122).

There therefore appears to exist a tendency in current scholarship on the Old English hero to forget about Christian saints and biblical characters whose lives and deeds are often portrayed as heroic in Old English poetry.⁷ Stanley Greenfield and Daniel Calder are obviously an exception to this, as is Damon, and it seems that it is those scholars who take into account the potential for the Christian hero who can also accept the possibility of the woman hero. Making a case for the consideration of Christian saints as heroes, Greenfield argues that there is a “rather complex overlapping in the two kinds of heroes” (102). However, whenever Christian or women heroes are acknowledged, it is always apart from the other heroes in appending chapters, as marginal or extreme cases of heroism, implying that ‘true’ Old English heroism exists elsewhere.

Even when Graham Caie astutely notes that “it is perhaps the Christian poetry of saints’ lives and biblical heroes and heroines that best illustrates what we call the heroic spirit” (80), he does not make use of this insight in the remainder of his essay on heroic verse. Robert Fulk and Christopher Cain claim that the best way to define heroic conventions is to compare and contrast heroic texts with “poems about the champions of Christ, which are cast in the same heroic mode” (193), displaying a similar tendency to separate Christian and pagan heroes while still acknowledging their similarities: they are comparable, and yet different. That this opposition makes little sense is reflected in their subsequent claim that the most important of these conventions is the loyalty between lord and thane, something that is an obviously crucial feature in such texts about the champions of Christ as *Fates of the Apostles*, *Andreas*, or *The Dream of the Rood*. Rare are those who refreshingly actually consider that secular and religious heroic poetry share the same ethos. Among them is Kent Hare, who for instance notes in passing that “*The Battle of Maldon* and

⁶ The more so because this partition reproduces Calder’s *Critical History of Old English Literature*, published in 1966. See the absence of women in discussions by Niles (136–184); Shippey (26); Caie; Pearsall (1–24); Orchard; North, “Is there more like *Beowulf*?”; Magennis, “Germanic Legend” 136–148.

⁷ See the absence of Christian heroes in discussions by Niles (136–184); Shippey (26); Pearsall (1–24); Orchard; North, “Is there more like *Beowulf*?”; Magennis, “Germanic Legend” 136–148.

other late battle poems represent not [...] an enduring heroic tradition tempered little by Christianity [...], but rather express the very same ethos as the religious poetry.”

Apart from exceptions like Hare, then, an overwhelming majority of scholars of Early Medieval England still (sometimes unconsciously) consider the male and pagan warrior as representing the true hero in Old English literature, in other words, *Beowulf*. A good illustration of this is Rolf Bremmer’s definition of heroic poetry as

compris[ing] poems that deal with warriors endowed with often super-human courage whose actions are motivated from a special set of values, the “heroic ethos.” Successful in their early career, such warriors are eventually confronted with impossible choices or set such choices for themselves (such as choosing between conflicting loyalties or engaging in an unequal fight). They accept their decision knowingly and willingly, which leads either to victory and honour or to defeat and death, yet with the satisfaction of posthumous fame. (76)

This definition reads as a generalisation of the *Beowulfian* plot rather than of Old English heroic poetry as a whole. Indeed, if we consider the core texts that usually make up the corpus of Old English heroic poetry in scholarly discussions (*Beowulf*, the *Finnsburh* fragment, *Waldere*, *Widsith*, *Deor*, *The Battle of Maldon*, and *The Battle of Brunanburh*), one notices that while some of these poems comprise some aspects of the definition, none but *Beowulf* includes them all.

One might even claim that most definitions of Old English heroic poetry reflect this *Beowulfian* bias and look to have been worked backward from this poem. When comparing a sample of eleven introductions to, or discussions of heroic poetry,⁸ only *Beowulf* and *Waldere* are mentioned by all critics as securely heroic. Indeed, certain aspects of different critics’ definitions, such as the notion that Old English heroic poetry is situated in a pre-Christian context (Bremmer 78; Cherniss 26–28), or that it offers a backward look at the so-called “heroic age” (Niles 136), exclude all but *Beowulf* and *The Fight at Finnsburh* from the heroic corpus: *Brunanburh*, *Maldon*, and *Waldere* for instance feature Christian heroes, while the *Widsith* narrator evokes God and providence, and the Boethian influence on

⁸ Magennis, *The Cambridge Introduction*; Niles; Shippey 26; Bremmer; Greenfield and Calder 85–100; Renoir 99; Anderson 58 and 59–104; Caie 79–104; Orchard, “Is Violence what Old English Literature is about?” 63–94; North, “Is there more like *Beowulf*?” 95–129; Hill, “Old English” 1; Alexander 42; Fulk and Cain 193–224; Pearsall 5–6.

Deor is clear. *Brunanburh* and *Maldon* are further not situated during the heroic age. In truth, *Beowulf* constitutes the main, if not the only, part of the aforementioned eleven discussions of what heroic poetry is in Old English.

The fact that *Beowulf* should be the only work to fully correspond with the accepted definition of Old English heroic poetry is especially problematic when one considers how unusual it is compared to the rest of the Old English heroic corpus. Indeed, it is much longer than any of the other six poems, even if one makes generous projections for the fragmentary *Finnsburh* and *Waldere* (Magennis, “Germanic Legend” 81). This has led scholars to claim its being heavily indebted to classical models of epic poetry (e.g. Anderson 138–141). The fact that *Beowulf* displays superhuman powers, such as having the strength of thirty men (*Beowulf*, lines 379–380, Liuzza 76), further clashes with the very human protagonists of the other poems and may also be linked with the hero (ἥρως) of classical literature, traditionally a demi-god. We have therefore seen that scholars of Early Medieval England have inherited from their nineteenth- and twentieth-century predecessors the inclination to disregard women and Christians as heroes. Although they mention other poems than *Beowulf* as heroic, ultimately, they tend to dismiss those other texts and their heroes as lacking in comparison. A new, more inclusive definition of Old English heroic poetry therefore needs to be developed. In order to establish one, we should start by gathering together the different features which are most inclusive in previous definitions of Old English heroic poetry.

The first of these is a recognisably heroic diction. As Michael Alexander notes, “the vocabulary of Old English heroic poetry is sufficiently specialised for it to be recognised as a true poetic diction” (48). This shared formulaic, lexical, and epithetic diction regroups most of the poems I have mentioned as “core” heroic texts, but also includes others, notably saints’ lives. Comparing the beginning of *Beowulf* with that of some hagiographic poetry suffices to show that a medieval audience would have instantly grasped that they were dealing with the same genre:

Hwæt, we Gar-dena in geardagum
þeodcýninga, þrym gefrunon
hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon! (*Beowulf*, lines 1–3, Liuzza 54. My emphasis)⁹

⁹ “Listen! We have heard of the glory of the nation-kings of Spear-Danes in ancient days, how those noble men did deeds of courage.”

Hwæt, we gefrunan on fyrndagum
 twelfe under tunglum *tireadige hæleð*
 þeodnes þegnas (*Andreas*, lines 1–3, North and Bintley 118. My emphasis)¹⁰

Hwæt! Ic þysne sang siðgeomor fand
 on seocum sefan; samnode wide,
hu þa æðelingas ellen cyðdon,
 torhte ond *tireadige*. (*Fates of the Apostles*, lines 1–4, Treharne 102. My emphasis)¹¹

Hwæt, we hyrdon oft þæt se halga wer
in þa aerestan aeldu gelufade
 frecnessa fela (*Guthlac A*, lines 108a–110a, Roberts 86. My emphasis)¹²

Hwæt, we ðæt hyrdon hæleð eahtian,
 deman dæd-hwate, þætte *in dagum gelamp*
Maximianes (*Juliana*, lines 1–3, Bjork 78. My emphasis)¹³

The repetition, in the initial lines of these poems,¹⁴ of the poetic interjection “hwæt,” the evocation of the orality of the source material (“we hyrdon,” “we gefrunon”), the community-building “we,” creating a link between scop/narrator and the poem’s audience/readership, and finally the localisation of the action in time (“in geardagum,” “on fyrndagum,” etc.) establishes a commonality between these and other poems that would automatically have alerted an audience to what they were to expect: a heroic poem.

In addition to heroic formulaic diction, scholars agree that Old English heroic poetry propounds a specific ethos, one that is “associated with the age of the pre-Christian Germanic tribes of the late Roman and post-Roman world, as imagined in the later centuries” (Magennis, “Germanic Legend” 77).¹⁵ Often mentioned as key characteristics of this ethos are a militaristic focus, the values of the *comitatus*, such as loyalty to one’s lord

¹⁰ “Listen! We have heard of twelve glorious warriors under the stars in ancient days, thanes to the King.”

¹¹ “Listen! I found this song journey-weary, sick at heart; assembled it from far and wide, how those noble men revealed their courage, splendid and glorious.”

¹² “Listen! We have often heard that the holy man, in his earliest age, loved many dangerous things.”

¹³ “Listen! We have heard deed-ready warriors meditate and consider that, what occurred in the days of Maximian.”

¹⁴ Initial except for the quoted passage from *Guthlac A*, which instead prefaces the introduction of Guthlac, who is first mentioned on line 94b.

¹⁵ See also on this Bremmer 76–78 and Fulk and Cain 193.

or gift giving, but also bravery, pride, and the desire to gain eternal glory and praise (“dom,” “lof”) for one’s deeds leading to the immortality (“ece”) of one’s reputation through song. This representation is not confined to our seven core heroic texts — *Beowulf*, *Fight at Finnsburh*, *Waldere*, *Deor*, *Widsith*, *Battle of Brunanburh*, *Battle of Maldon*. Indeed, Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe claims that “the ethos of heroic life pervades Old English literature, marking its conventions, imagery and values” (“Values and Ethics” 101). This Old English heroic ethos tends to be articulated through often-rehearsed topoi and themes, such as the recurrence of formal speeches and boasts, the Beasts of Battle typescene, or the theme of the Hero on the Beach.¹⁶ If we take this heroic ethos into consideration, the Old English heroic corpus would include our core texts, but also some religious texts based on Old or New Testament events, such as the *Dream of the Rood*, which presents Christ’s passion as a heroically victorious battle and his relationship with the Cross as *comitatus*-like; *Judith*, with its heroine’s beheading of Holofernes portrayed as an epic battle; or *Exodus*, couching as it does the Israelites’ flight in the desert in heroic terms, complete with Beasts of Battle and Hero-on-the-Beach scenes. The genre would also contain hagiographies, such as *Elene*, *Juliana*, *Andreas*, *Guthlac*, or *The Fates of the Apostles*. I am not claiming that these texts are not, as well, biblical rewritings, or saints’ lives: they are both these things *and* heroic poetry, just as *Deor* and *Beowulf* are heroic but also elegiac. As any other literary genre in the medieval period, the boundaries of the heroic genre in Old English are permeable.

In this way, our new working definition of heroic poetry would include all Old English verse presenting heroic ethos and formulaic diction, painting pagan or Christian stories with the brush of heroic values and ideals. A hero would be then a person foregrounded in such poetry, who embodies and upholds key heroic ideals and concepts. Not necessarily engaging in active fighting, the hero’s tribulations are represented in martial terms. By adopting this new and more inclusive definition, scholars will become aware of the tendency to consistently adopt *Beowulf*’s heroism, and, by extension, pagan, Germanic, male, and militaristic qualities, as the fallback characteristics that constitute heroism, and will stop pitting women heroes against *Beowulf*, and finding them wanting.

Traditionally, the tendency of women protagonists such as *Elene* or *Judith* not to engage in battle has been viewed as an aspect of their weaker femininity rather than as denoting their Christianity. In *Judith*, the

¹⁶ First identified as a theme by David Crowne.

eponymous hero goes into enemy territory with her handmaiden, whose role has been augmented in the Old English version to form with Judith a makeshift *comitatus*. Once there, Judith beheads Holofernes, gives the head to her handmaiden to put in a bag, returns to Bethulia under cover of night, shows the head to the Bethulians, whets their warring appetites with this prop as proof of the feasibility of their task, sends them to battle, and then accepts from them Holofernes's spoils of war, including helmet, sword, and byrnie, thereby becoming the effective leader of their *comitatus*. Judith's taking up the sword makes of her a more physically active hero than male Christian heroes like Andreas and Guthlac. Andreas is for instance never explicitly represented as wielding a weapon. Few scholars have noted that the death of the seven guards barring access to Matthew's prison is recounted in the passive voice: execution takes them; the door of the prison further opens at Andreas's prayer and touch, rather than from any physical feat on his part:

gesch he [...]
fore hlindura, hyrdas standan
seofone ætsomne. Ealle swylt fornam,
druron domlease; deaðræs forfeng
hæleð heorodreorige. Ða se halga gebæd
bilwytnes fæder. [...]
Duru sona onarn
þurh handrine haliges gastes.
(*Andreas*, lines 992–1000, North and Bintley 171)¹⁷

Thus, if the heroic aspect of the scene is foregrounded (the Mermedonians are named “hæleð,” “heroes,” and their death is qualified as “without renown,” “domlease”) and Andreas is Christ's warrior (“Cristes cempa,” *Andreas*, line 991, North and Bintley 171), the military activity of Andreas is not considered by the poet as indispensable for his representation as a hero.

In the same way, Guthlac's actions may be presented in martial terms, but his fighting lies on the spiritual plane, limited to battling temptations with the metaphorical weapons and armor of his faith:

þær he mongum wearð
bysen on Brytene, sibpan biorg gestah

¹⁷ He saw [...] guards before the grated doors, seven in one place. Execution took all, they fell without renown; sudden death snatched warriors blood-soaked. Then the saint prayed to the Gentle Father [...]. At once the door opened with a touch from the hand of the holy guest.

eadig oretta, *ondwiges* heard.
 Gyrede hine georne mid gæstlicum
 wæpnum [7 wædum] wong bletsade,
 him to ætstælle ærest arærde
 Cristes rode, þær se cempa oferwon
 frecnessa fela.

we þæs Guðlaces
 deorwyrðne dæl dryhtne cennað.
 He him sige sealde 7 snyttrucræft,
 mundbyrd meahta, þonne mengu cwom
 feonda færsctum fæhðe ræran; [...]
 him wæs fultum neah,
 engel hine elne trymede. (*Guthlac A*, lines 174–190, Roberts 88)¹⁸

However, the passivity of both Guthlac and Andreas and their reliance on divine or angelic help¹⁹ is never really foregrounded by scholars as an impediment to their heroic status. The same thing is, however, not true when it comes to Judith, whose actions are always open to criticism as arising from her perceived feminine weakness. Like the victory of Guthlac, Judith's success is ascribed to God: "hæfde ða gefohten foremærne blæd / Iudith æt guðe swa hyre god uðe, / swegles ealdor, þe hyre sigores onleah" (*Judith*, lines 122–124, Treharne 230).²⁰ This passage is repeatedly foregrounded in scholarship, in contrast to similar pericopes highlighting her male counterparts' passivity and reliance on God. Herbison can for instance claim, upon excerpting this quote, that Judith's "courage is not the product of her own physical strength, but comes from God," leading him to argue that this emphasises God's omnipotence, as he has the power to confer heroic qualities, and that even to a woman (6).

Since Judith tends to be compared by contemporary scholars to Beowulf rather than to Andreas or Guthlac, her actions are dismissed,

¹⁸ There he became an example to many in Britain, after that blessed warrior, stern in resistance, ascended the mountain. He prepared himself eagerly with spiritual weapons, blessed the field as a camp for himself, he first raised the cross of Christ on which that warrior overcame many terrors. [...] We ascribe the precious portion of Guthlac to the Lord. He gave him victory and wisdom, powerful protection, when the multitude of enemies raised hostility; [...] help was near him, the angel gave him the strength of courage.

¹⁹ Indeed, Andreas prays to open the door, Guthlac's victory and wisdom are God-given: "we þæs Guðlaces deorwyrðne dæl dryhtne cennað," (*Guthlac*, lines 182–183, Roberts 88), and the angel is at the ready to help bolster his courage when enduring temptation.

²⁰ Judith had then gained great success in the battle just as God, the lord of heaven, granted her, who gave her victory.

although she does act and take up the sword. For instance, the fact that Judith needs two attempts to cut off Holofernes's head is interpreted as a sign of her failure as a hero. For Christine Thijs, she "lacks the physical strength to be a warrior" (51). For Magennis, "a male hero like Beowulf would have succeeded at the first stroke, but then a male hero would not be pitted against a sleeping drunkard" ("Gender and Heroism" 18). This despite the fact Magennis himself acknowledges the uniqueness of Beowulf as a Germanic hero with superhuman strength (*The Cambridge Introduction* 77), and disregarding Beowulf's beheading of Grendel only once the monster is not only passed out, but actually dead. It would be anachronistic to think that the glory of an Old English Christian hero's actions being shared with God as the main *auctor* of the heroic plot should strip the hero of her/his heroic quality: it simply extends the glory of the *miles Christi* to include its maker, as demonstrated in the heroic passivity of the Cross in *The Dream of the Rood*.²¹

Because scholars overlook Judith and other women heroes' Christianity, their heroism is always analysed according to their gender; it is thus no surprise that 'woman,' 'femininity,' or 'gender' appear in nigh all the titles of the articles dealing, to date, with Judith's heroism (Swanton; Chance; Dockray Miller; Guenther; Lochrie; Magennis; Mullally; Shaughnessy; Thijs, etc.). Judith is either seen as performing a specifically feminine brand of heroism (Chance; Woolf 171; Dockray Miller), or her heroism clashes with her femininity, alternately subverting heroism (Herbison; Magennis, "Gender and Heroism"), or rendering her man-like/androgynous (Olesiejko; Lochrie; Shaughnessy). Yet some scholars suggest, one way or another, that this obsession with heroism as being primarily gendered, and gendered masculine, might be a mistake. In her analysis of gift-giving in *Judith*, Erin Mullally states that "[b]y allowing a woman to participate fully in this symbolic and material exchange, the *Judith*-poet is suggesting that gender is less relevant to heroic status than the ability to give and receive treasure" (284). Similarly, Patricia Belanoff proposes that Judith's heroic actions not only impact our conception of the specifically female but also push "back the boundaries of what it means to be a Germanic warrior" in general ("Judith" 260).

Perhaps, then, gender is not so important when considering the heroism of figures who are all, be it to a lesser or a greater extent, influenced by the Christian ideal. Their Christianity is actually the most characterist-

²¹ This reflection can be paralleled with Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe's notion that agency and obedience were conceived differently pre-Conquest, a concept she coins as "agent action" in *Stealing Obedience*.

ic aspect of their being and influences their heroic performance much more than their gender. The more a character's Christianity is important, the more it will influence their performance of heroism, a performance that increasingly becomes queer, that is to say a performance that so blurs together actions traditionally gendered feminine or masculine that the heroic subject's gender becomes unknowable, queer. Stacy Klein has already suggested that, even in *Beowulf*, Christian readers would have seen in the poem's women a model of heroism that would have been more in line with their religious values, encouraging them to turn violent heroic energies inward in order to battle against their inner vices ("Ruling Women" 91). This more Christian type of heroism represents, she argues, "the possibility of softening rigid boundaries of sexual difference, [...] allowing for a greater fluidity around gender roles and a more expansive definition of heroic masculinity" (93).

This same 'fluid' queering of heroic performance happens in *Judith*, only to a greater extent because the eponymous character's heroism is much more Christian in nature than that transpiring in *Beowulf* (as for instance evidenced in Hrothgar's "sermon"). Scholars have tended to ascribe either femininity or masculinity to different moments of Judith's existence (before and after she takes up the sword, for instance, e.g. Shaughnessy), or to different actions: (beheading Holofernes) is seen as a masculine performance (Magennis, "Gender and Heroism"), but then her speech to the Bethulians is conceived as her embodying the traditional whetting woman (e.g. Lionarons 55).²² Instead, I argue that Judith's heroism is queering, blurring the boundaries that scholarship has traditionally erected. This blurring can be seen most clearly in Judith's epithetic qualification as "ides ellenrof," "courageous lady" (*Judith*, line 109, Treharne 230). "Ellenrof" is usually a term reserved for male warriors (Chance xviii; Shaughnessy 6), while "ides" strongly associates Judith with Germanic womanhood (Meaney). The overlap of these two terms, one strongly connoting heroic masculinity, the other femininity, renders the subject queer.

Similarly, Judith's speech upon returning to Bethulia is a careful mingling of the traditional male Germanic hero's boast ("Ic him ealdor oðrong" *Judith*, line 185, Treharne 234),²³ the war leader's encouraging

²² The entire poem is even considered as enacting the role of whetting woman in the political context of later medieval England. On this, see Klein, "Gender" 44–45. On the validity of using the topos of the whetting woman in Old English poetry, see Lionarons 54–55.

²³ "I deprived him of life."

heroic speech (“Fynd syndon eowere / gedemed to deaðe, ond ge dom agon, / tir æt tohtan” *Judith*, lines 195–197, Treharne 234),²⁴ the Germanic whetting woman (“Nu Ic gumena gehwæne / þyssa burgleoda biddan wylle, / randwiggendra, þæt ge recene eow / fisan to gefeohte” *Judith*, lines 186–189, Treharne 234),²⁵ and the wise, prophetic, and rhetorically adept woman (“þæt gecyðed wearð / geond woruld wide þæt eow ys wuldorblæd / torhtlic toeward ond tir gifeðe” *Judith*, lines 155–157, Treharne 232).²⁶ The mixing of all of these positive heroic traits, some traditionally linked to masculinity, others to femininity, makes up the queer Christian hero that is Judith, who represents, through this queerness, the ontological change of the simple human to the signifier of God on earth: “eow getacnod hafað / mihtig Drihten þurh mine hand” (*Judith*, lines 197–198, Treharne 234).²⁷ While, in the Latin source text of the Vulgate, Judith’s action by killing Holofernes has made her a virago – she is deemed “viriliter,” “more masculine,” by the Bethulians (*Judith* 15:11) – the Old English removes any notion of “becoming male,” rather allowing Judith’s gender to become unknowable, queered, thanks to her heroism.

This is the same queer heroism that, to my mind, is used to suggest the ontological *otherness* of the angelic messenger in *Elene*. The angel is turned into “a certain warrior,” “hæleða nathwylc,” of the male sex, “on weres hade” (*Elene*, lines 72–73, Bjork 146), therefore being introduced as a seemingly stable masculine heroic figure. Yet his appealing shining quality – the angel is deemed “hiw-beorht,” bright of hue, and “wlitig,” radiant (*Elene*, lines 73, 77, Bjork 146)²⁸ – links him closely with the preternaturally all-knowing shining *ides* (Belanoff, “The Fall”), something that is reinforced by the angel being deemed a true peace-weaver, “fæle friðo-webba” (*Elene*, line 88, Bjork 148), the only time this term is employed in the masculine in the Old English corpus.

Andreas, in the eponymous poem, is also performing a heroism that could be deemed queer, one that is presented with all the trappings of the

²⁴ “Your foes are condemned to death, and you will gain glory, honour in battle.”

²⁵ “Now I desire to request of every one of the men among these citizens, each of the warriors, that you at once hasten to battle.”

²⁶ “It has been revealed throughout the world that splendid glorious success and honour is granted by fate to you.” On Germanic women as often represented as shining, wise, rhetorically adept, prescient, and of good advice, see notably Robinson and Belanoff, “The Fall.”

²⁷ “[M]ighty God has given you a sign through my hand.”

²⁸ On “wlitig,” usually translated as simply beautiful, most often when it is applied to a woman, and its original meaning “radiant,” see Paul Beekman Taylor 213–214 and Belanoff, “The Fall” 829–830.

warrior-hero, since he is hailed a warrior and a champion (e.g. “beorn,” “cempa,” *Andreas*, lines 982, 991, North and Bintley 170, 171), but one who fights the Mermedonians and the devils appearing in his cell with prayers and well-chosen words rather than with a sword, a characteristic that has often been associated with feminine performance (Belanoff, “The Fall” 823; Magennis, “Gender and Heroism” 5; Fee 406). The devil expresses the heroic, martial, power of Andreas’s words to cut him when haranguing the Mermedonians to action:

Nu ge gehyrað hæleða gewinnan,
se ðyssum herige mæst hearma gefremede;
ðæt is Andreas, se me on fliteð
wordum wrætlicum for wear menigo! (*Andreas*, lines 1197–1200, North and Bintley 182)²⁹

Here Andreas’s heroic battle against the devil is presented as a flyting: he cuts with words rather than a sword, in the style of women. This queer performance is, however, seen as most injurious (“mæst hearma”) to the army. Andreas’s Christian heroism is linked, like that of Judith, with prudence and mindfulness: he is “mindful, a man of mental patience, the warrior hard in battle” (“gemyndig modgepyldig, / beorn beaduwe heard” *Andreas*, lines 981–982, North and Bintley 170). The emotional display Andreas produces when imprisoned, phrased in Old English as a “wopes hring,” a ring of weeping (*Andreas*, line 1278, North and Bintley 186), might further link him with the Germanic model of the “geomuru ides,” the mourning/lamenting woman (Hill, “‘Pæt wæs’”). Notwithstanding a potential association with the feminine, the “wopes hring” bursting out of Andreas’s breast appears elsewhere in the corpus of specifically Christian Old English heroic poetry, and is only once ascribed to a woman hero, Elene (*Elene*, line 1131, Bjork 222).³⁰ This further suggests that Christianity queers the heroic performance.

One of the current aims of feminist medievalists, as Klein phrases it, is “[t]o rewrite the categories through which the past is constituted, asking questions that invite attention to women’s lives, thereby demonstrating that what counts as established ‘knowledge’ is often shaped by research that takes men’s lives as an unquestioned standard and that overlooks or distorts women’s experiences” (“Introduction” 3–4). I hope to have

²⁹ “Now you can hear the warrior, who perpetrated the most injury to this army, fight; that is Andreas, who cuts me in a flyting with wondrous words in front of a multitude of men!”

³⁰ On this expression, see North, “‘wopes hring’.”

shown how re-categorising Old English heroic poetry can participate in this project. De-emphasising the gender binary and foregrounding the heroic qualities of Christian protagonists permits a fairer assessment of both Christian women and men's heroic performances.

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