

Ælfric's Sources and His Gendered Audiences

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Ælfric's prose adaptation of the apocryphal story of Judith, written ca. 1000, is one of the few Old English texts for which we have information about both its contemporary audiences and its intended functions within Anglo-Saxon culture.¹ According to the comments which Ælfric himself appended to the text, Judith is meant to function as an exemplar of chastity for "nunnan þe sceandlice libbað tellað to lytlum gylte, þæt hi hi forlicgon" ("nuns who live shamelessly and consider it a small fault that they commit fornication").² However, "wayward nuns" comprise only one of Ælfric's intended audiences for the Judith story. He also sent the text to his friend Sigeward, urging this nobleman and any other men whom the text might benefit³ to take Judith as an exemplum of military prowess, a model of how these noblemen "might defend (their) land with weapons against the attacking army" ("þæt ge eower eard mid wæmnum bewerian wið onwinnendre here").⁴

How the Judith narrative might have served these two very different audiences and didactic functions is the central problem this paper examines. I argue that while Ælfric did intend his text to be understood on different hermeneutic levels, that is, typologically and tropologically by the nuns and literally and tropologically by the noblemen, he also meant to provide both audiences with a more general lesson, namely that chaste and virtuous living is indeed possible and often necessary outside the monastic setting.⁵ My intention is to show how such a lesson would have been relevant to both religious and lay audiences and then to sketch out the portrait of gender politics which emerges as Ælfric offers both women and men the same female exemplar.

Ælfric's two audiences and the question of how his Judith narrative could act both as a call to chastity and as a call to arms was first addressed by Ian Pringle in 1975.⁶ Pringle argued that Ælfric's call to defend England "with weapons" (mid wæmnum) was meant to be read allegorically, that the "weapons" to which Ælfric was referring were not literal weapons, but rather spiritual ones, specifically mo-

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nastic chastity, the lack of which had enabled the Danes to invade England in the first place. Mary Clayton has challenged Pringle's reading of the text on the grounds that "[i]t seems very far-fetched that Ælfric would have directed an exhortation to monastic chastity at Sigeward, a layman."⁷ For Clayton, the text offers two very different and incompatible messages: it recommends virtuous living for the nuns and bold warfare for the noblemen.

Clayton's argument operates from the general premise that a single text is able to mean different things to different groups of people. A more specific and local context for this assumption can be found in the complicated preaching circumstances that existed at both Cerne Abbas, the place where Ælfric wrote most of his texts including Judith, and the diocese of Sherborne, to which Cerne belonged. As Jonathan Wilcox has noted, "since the separate village parish church of St. Mary's was not built until c. 1300, the monastic church must have served the local community in addition to the monks (and thus) preaching within the monastery of Cerne Abbas would have been to a mixed audience of monks and local laity."⁸ Similar preaching circumstances existed throughout the diocese of Sherborne; as Wilcox notes, "the Bishop of Sherborne would have preached to a mixed audience of secular clerks and the laity."⁹ Thus, it was amid a preaching climate which demanded that individual texts be able to adequately address mixed audiences that Ælfric wrote the vast majority of his works. Ælfric would have been accustomed to the notion that a single text would have to function on different hermeneutic levels, and he most likely would have seen little problem with expecting the

nuns to read Judith as an exemplum of virtuous living and the noblemen to view the text as an exemplum of military defense.

Yet the problem remains that each of the differing exegetical interpretations Ælfric attaches to the Judith narrative is somewhat at odds with the text itself.¹⁰ As Clayton has argued, Judith's ornate clothing and seductive behavior make her a less than ideal exemplar of chastity for the nuns.¹¹ Similarly, the text seems ill suited to be read merely as a straightforward exemplum of military prowess, since it dwells far more on chaste and virtuous living than it does on the bearing of arms. Why then did Ælfric elect to send this particular exemplum to both a group of nuns he believed in need of moral fortification and a group of noblemen engaged in warfare against the Vikings? Or to rephrase this question, do the differing exegeses Ælfric attaches to the Judith story (i.e. virtuous living and militaristic prowess) have anything to do with one another?

I want to address this question by focusing on the story of Malchus and his unnamed wife, the exemplum that concludes the copy of Judith which Ælfric sent to the nuns. The sequence is as follows: first Ælfric narrates the tale of Judith, then he gives a lengthy exhortation on the power of chastity, and finally he turns to the story of Malchus and his wife, which (except for the last seven lines) is largely lost, but was most likely taken from Jerome's Life of St Malchus.¹² Among Ælfric scholars, the addition of the Malchus story has been read as evidence that Ælfric considered Judith an insufficiently demure exemplar for the nuns,¹³ or merely as "a typical exemplum of chastity," evidence of Ælfric's penchant for translating countless *vitæ* to bolster the faith of slothful, unlearned

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Englishmen.¹⁴ However, when considered in terms of the multiple audiences which Ælfric expected the Judith narrative to serve, the story of Malchus and his wife sheds light on the text's didactic functions and can also help us understand Ælfric's complicated gender politics.

Malchus is the tale of an only son who enters a monastery in order to preserve his chastity. Most of Malchus's life, however, is spent far away from his monastery, for one day, when journeying home to visit his mother, Malchus is captured and enslaved by a hostile army. His first job is that of sheep-tender, and he does such a good job of caring for his master's animals that he is ultimately offered a wife as reward. Having a wife is a source of great anxiety to Malchus until he discovers that she is just as interested in preserving her chastity as he is. When the unnamed wife suggests that they live together in a kind of "spiritual marriage," Malchus is surprised and overjoyed. The two then become fast friends and proceed to defeat a multitude of adversaries who threaten their chastity.¹⁵

What is remarkable about both Malchus and his wife is precisely the fact that they are fairly unremarkable. Each is simply an ordinary person who becomes dedicated to chaste and virtuous living: they don't have visions, they don't heal anybody, they get scared and suffer pain; in short, neither conforms to standard Anglo-Saxon definitions of sanctity. Furthermore, even in the seven extant lines of the story, it is obvious that Ælfric has taken great pains to anglicize the text in order to make both Malchus and his wife more familiar exemplars, and thus figures whom the nuns might more readily emulate. For example, while Jerome's characters ride on camels, Ælfric places Malchus and his wife on horses.¹⁶ Like Judith, both Malchus and his wife demonstrate tremendous virtue within a setting which poses constant threats to this virtue. As Mary Clayton has noted, the nuns to whom Ælfric addresses the Judith narrative were dedicated virgins living within a non-monastic community, a group of women who had banded together, taken vows of chastity, and were most likely living under a local rule.¹⁷ Given Ælfric's Benedictine bias against such communities, he would have considered these nuns particularly prone to temptation, and he thus offers them Judith, Malchus, and Malchus's wife as particularly fitting exemplars, characters who successfully preserve their chastity in less-than-ideal and, more specifically, non-monastic settings.

Indeed, the Malchus exemplum does serve to strengthen the Judith narrative's contention that non-monastic and military settings posed extreme threats to chaste living. However, later Anglo-Saxon usage of the Malchus story suggests that Ælfric might also have intended the two narratives to function antithetically and, more specifically, that he might have been attempting to create a contrast between Judith and Malchus's wife. An Old English version of the complete story of Malchus and his wife appears in the mid-eleventh century manuscript London, BL, Cotton Otho C. i, vol. 2.¹⁸ As Kenneth Sisam has argued, linguistic features suggest that the anonymous text was most likely composed in territory once Mercian, but the script suggests that the text was subsequently copied by Worcester scribes onto

several blank pages which remained immediately following two Old English translations from the *Vitas Patrum*.¹⁹ The first of these lives details a

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female prostitute's unsuccessful attempts to seduce a monk. The second life concerns a monk who is temporarily overcome with desire for a pagan priest's daughter. In both stories, women function as serious threats to male chastity. All the more striking, then, is the contrast between these women and the female heroine of the third story, Malchus's wife. In this mid-eleventh-century manuscript context, Malchus's wife appears as an aid rather than a threat to male chastity, and thus as a woman who differs significantly from and presents a stark contrast to other women. When Ælfric turned his attention to Malchus's wife at the end of his Judith narrative, he might have been thinking of her in a similar fashion, as a woman who, in her unambiguous desire for chastity, provides a strong contrast to Judith, whose fine clothing and seductive charms render her a far more problematic exemplar.

We don't know whether the story of Malchus ever accompanied the copy of Judith which Ælfric sent to Sigeward and company. There are only two extant manuscripts of Ælfric's Judith narrative: Cotton Otho B. x (Worcester, s. ximed), which was obviously intended for the nuns and includes the Malchus story, and Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 303 (Rochester, s. xii1), whose ending is lost.² However, the Malchus story does not really introduce new themes, but merely highlights a theme which is already present in the Judith narrative itself, that is, the necessity and difficulty of preserving virtue under adverse conditions. It is this preservation of virtue, I argue, that was very much a part of Ælfric's consciousness when he translated the Vulgate Book of Judith and offered it to this group of noblemen.²¹

To claim that Ælfric expected the noblemen to read Judith for its moral signification is not to deny that he also meant for them to interpret the text literally. Certainly, when Ælfric urged these noblemen to read Judith as a call to defend England mid wæmnum ("with weapons"), he was advocating the literal taking up of military arms. However, the Judith narrative contains only one instance in which wæpnum is meant to be read solely for its literal valence: when the Bethulians pursue the fleeing Assyrians, cutting them down from behind "with weapons."²² Far more often, the narrative explores the figurative senses of what it means to "be armed" or to "wield weapons." The Bethulians are said to be "gewæpnode" immediately after they have received good counsel from Judith; a few lines before this the term gewæpnode is clearly glossed as "on gode truwigende" ("trusting in God"),²³ and the text repeatedly attempts to explain the most impressive use of weapons in the narrative, that is, when Judith beheads Holofernes with his own sword, as having come about through chaste and virtuous living, with lines such as "god e gestrangode / for þære clænnysse" ("God strengthened you [Judith] on account of that chastity").²⁴ We don't know much about the interpretive skills of the nobleman Sigeward to whom Ælfric sent the Judith narrative. However, the host of biblical translations which Ælfric sent to Sigeward clearly suggests that the nobleman was very interested in reading and understanding religious stories, and thus might have been accustomed to interpreting a text beyond its literal level. It seems likely, then, that Ælfric could have reasonably expected these men to understand his call to defend England "mid

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wæpnum" as referring to both literal weapons and also the multiplicity of personal virtues which the successful Anglo-Saxon warrior was expected to possess.

One virtue which the Judith narrative attempts to instill in its male readers is abstinence from drink, depicting such abstinence as the mark of a fine warrior and a necessity for military victory. As has been often noted, the text dwells at length on Holofernes's drunkenness, which stands in sharp contrast to Judith's sobriety. The most notable example is Holofernes's feast, where the Assyrian general is sodden with drink and Judith completely sober, a radical departure from the Vulgate, in which Judith promises the general "Bibam domine" ("I will drink, my lord").²⁵ This lesson about drinking on the battlefield would have been appropriate for any Anglo-Saxon warrior, but it was perhaps particularly fitting for the nobleman Sigeward, who, as Ælfric writes in a letter, was prone not only to overdrink but to encourage his friends to do the same:

þu woldest me laðian, þa þa ic wæs mid þe, þæt ic swiðor drunco swilce for blisse ofer minum gewunan: ac wite þu, leof man, þa drincenne, þæt se mot aberan heora begra gilt, gif him ænig hearm of þam drunco becymð.²⁶
(When I [Ælfric] was with you [Sigeward], you would call upon me out of delight to drink too much as was beyond my custom, but you know dear friend that whoever forces another man to drink more than he is able shall bear the

guilt of both if any harm comes to them on account of that drink.)

Sobriety is, however, only one of the many virtues which the Judith narrative advocates as crucial to military success. Again and again, the text calls attention to Judith's chastity as an enabling force in her defeat of Holofernes, with lines such as "god þe gestrangode / for þære clænnysse" ("God strengthened you [Judith] on account of that chastity"),²⁷ and "Heo eadmod and clæne / and ofercom one modigan" ("She, humble and chaste, overcame the proud one").²⁸ To return, then, to a question I posed earlier, why send an exemplum of chastity to a group of noblemen engaged in warfare against the Vikings? The answer to this question is, I believe, deeply embedded in an Anglo-Saxon (and also contemporary) ideology of warfare which views male heterosexual desire and militaristic prowess as deeply incompatible.²⁹ We might recall Beowulf, the bravest of Anglo-Saxon warriors, who has absolutely no ties with women; or Byrhtnoth in The Battle of Maldon, who has no desires other than the desire to defeat the Vikings. As a negative exemplum meant to teach the same lesson, we might recall the 755 entry in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle devoted to Cynewulf and Cyneheard, which is the story of a king whose visit to his mistress leaves him vulnerable to enemy attack.

Ælfric offers Holofernes to the noblemen as a similar kind of negative exemplum, a warrior whose uncontrollable sexual desire leads to the demise of his people. Furthermore, the Judith narrative also attempts to inculcate chastity in its male audience by suggesting that military downfalls occasioned by the fail-

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ure to control one's sexual desire lead to particularly shameful outcomes. Not only does one lose the battle, Ælfric suggests, but one loses dishonorably, and that dishonor stops not at the individual but accrues to the entire army. Here is one of Holofernes's retainers after finding his general headless:

An wifman hæfð nu us ealle gescynd
and urne cynehlaford. Her lið se ealdormann
heafodleas on bedde mid his blode besyled.
Hi wurdon þa afyrhte wundorlice ealle,
and butan alcum ræde bysmorlice flugon.³⁰

(A woman has now shamed us all and our lord. Here lies the general, headless on the bed, sullied with his blood. They were then all amazingly frightened and without any counsel fled shamefully.)

By using words such as "gescynd," "besyled," "afyrhte," and "bysmorlice," Ælfric clearly presents the Assyrians as shameful, dishonorable warriors. The general is shamed because he has succumbed to his sexual desire, which thus leaves his army without counsel, and so they too behave shamefully. The shameful tone of this passage is entirely Ælfric's interpretation of the Assyrian defeat; by contrast, the Vulgate account of this episode is surprisingly neutral. It merely reads: "Una mulier fecit confusionem in domo regis Nabuchodonosor: ecce enim Holofernes iacet in terra et caput eius non est in illo. Turbati sunt animi eorum valde. Fugit mens et consilium ab eis."³¹

(A woman has brought turmoil into the domicile of King Nabuchodonosor, for behold Holofernes lies on the ground, and his head is not on him. Their spirits were exceedingly troubled, and their reason and counsel fled from them.)

By transforming this fairly neutral passage into a passage that emphasizes shame and dishonor, Ælfric reveals a great deal about his own gender politics: not only is it shameful to be overcome by sexual desire, he suggests, but to be overcome by a woman during battle is perhaps the worst fate a warrior might suffer.

Ælfric, a staunch advocate for clerical celibacy, harbored great fears about female sexuality, not only that it might lead to the military downfall of men or the spiritual downfall of nuns, but also that he might be unable to control that sexuality through his didactic writings.³² Over and over, he exhorts the nuns to chaste living, anxious lest they should somehow misread the exempla he offers them. Likewise, Ælfric also harbored great fears about the reproduction and circulation of his works, evidenced in fervent pleas for faithful copying which appear in his prefaces to texts such as Catholic Homilies and Lives of Saints.³³ It seems appropriate, then, that Ælfric should represent his anxieties about textuality in terms of his anxieties about female sexuality, using the same verb *leogan* to describe both failed chastity and heretical translation, as he cautions the nuns to:

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Nimað eow bysne be þyssere Judith,
hu clænlice heo leofode þær Cristes acennednysse,

and ne leogað ge na gode on ðæs godspelles timan.[34](#)

(Take example from this Judith, how chastely she lived before Christ's birth, and do not lie to God during this time of the gospels.)

This passage, which depicts failed chastity as a form of lying to God, is striking when read next to Ælfric's fervent truth claim for his own text:

Nis þis nan leasspel: hit stent on leden,

ðus on þære bibliothecan. þæt witon boceras,

þe þæt leden cunnon, þæt we na ne leogað.[35](#)

(This is not a false story: it stands thus in Latin in the Bible. Scholars who can understand Latin know this, that we do not lie.)

In other words, the nuns might lie to God, but Ælfric does not.

Offering female exemplars to men and male exemplars to women was not at all unusual in Anglo-Saxon England.

Indeed, approximately one quarter of the saints' lives Ælfric wrote for his male patrons Æthelwerd and Æthelmer are vitæ of women. Ælfric was most likely familiar with Jerome's preface to the Vulgate Liber Judith which reads,

"Accipite Judith viduam, castitatis exemplum. . . . Hanc enim non solum feminis, sed et viris imitabilem dedit." ("Take the widow Judith as an exemplum of chastity. One gives it not only to women, but also to men, for imitation").[36](#)

What is unusual about Ælfric's Judith is that we know something about both the male and female audiences for whom Ælfric intended this text. As Ælfric adapts, abbreviates, and alters his written sources to meet the imagined needs of these audiences, his Judith narrative reflects not merely these source texts but, more interestingly, his deep-seated anxieties about male heterosexual desire and female sexuality, anxieties which most likely reflect and helped to perpetuate cultural conflicts about desire in late Anglo-Saxon England.[37](#)

[Page numbers of the printed text appear at the right in bold.]

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Notes

1. Ælfric, *Judith*, ed. Bruno Assmann, "Abt Ælfric's angelsächsische Homilie über das Buch Judith," *Anglia* 10 (1888), 76-104; repr. in *Angelsächsische Homilien und Heiligenleben*, ed. Assmann, Bibliothek der angelsächsischen Prosa 3 (Kassel, 1889; repr. with a supplementary introduction by Peter Clemons, Darmstadt, 1964), pp. 102-16. References are to the 1888 edition by line number.
2. Ælfric, *Judith*, lines 429-30. Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.
3. In his "Letter to Sigeward on the Old and New Testament," ed. S. J. Crawford, *The Old English Version of the Heptateuch*, EETS o.s. 160 (London, 1922), p. 15, Ælfric states specifically that " is gewrit wæs to anum men gediht ac hit mæg swa eah manegum fremian" ("This text was com-

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posed for one man, but it may nevertheless benefit many").

4. Ælfric, *Heptateuch*, p. 48. A much later hand has substituted above the line for the in wæmnum.
5. For discussion of the various levels of allegory and their relationship to Anglo-Saxon history in the anonymous Old English poem Judith, see Ann W. Astell, "Holofernes's Head: Tacen and Teaching in the Old English Judith," *Anglo-Saxon England* 18 (1989), 117-33.
6. Ian Pringle, "Judith: The Homily and the Poem," *Traditio* 31 (1975), 83-97.
7. Mary Clayton, "Ælfric's Judith: Manipulative or Manipulated?" *Anglo-Saxon England* 23 (1994), 215-27, at 217. Clayton's article is to date the most insightful reading of Ælfric's Judith.
8. *Ælfric's Prefaces*, ed. Jonathan Wilcox, Durham Medieval Texts 9 (Durham, 1994), pp. 12, 21.
9. Wilcox, *Ælfric's Prefaces*, p. 21.
10. Although dissonance between texts and their allegorical significance is very common in both early and later medieval writings, here that dissonance is so great that it leads Ælfric radically to alter his source texts and invoke additional exemplars. See Clayton, "Ælfric's Judith," p. 220.
11. Clayton, "Ælfric's Judith," pp. 220-24.
12. The last seven lines of the Malchus story are printed by Assmann, "Abt Ælfric's angelsächsische Homilie," p. 79. For Jerome's *Life of St Malchus* (BHL 5190; CPL 619), see Vita S. Malchi monachi captivi (PL 23.55-62); and Charles C. Mierow, ed. and trans., "Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi Vita Malchi Monachi Captivi," in *Classical Essays Presented to James A. Kleist*, ed. Richard E. Arnold (St. Louis, 1946), pp. 44-49.
13. Clayton, "Ælfric's Judith," p. 222.
14. Pringle, "Judith: The Homily and the Poem," p. 86.
15. On the idea and practice of spiritual marriage, see Dyan Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock* (Princeton, 1993).
16. Ælfric, *Judith*, p. 79.
17. Clayton, "Ælfric's Judith," pp. 225-26.
18. The complete text and the two lives that precede it in the manuscript are printed by Assmann, *Angelsächsische Homilien und Heiligenleben*, pp. 195-207.
19. Kenneth Sisam, "An Old English Translation of a Letter from Wynfrith to Eadburga (A.D. 716-17) in Cotton MS. Otho C.1," *Modern Language Review* 18 (1923), 253-72; repr. in Sisam, *Studies in the History of Old English Literature* (Oxford, 1953), pp. 199-224, at 209-11. For

further discussion of the manuscript, see Christine Franzen, *The Tremulous Hand of Worcester: A Study of Old English in the Thirteenth Century* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 64-65; and Peter Jackson, "The Vitas Patrum in Eleventh-Century Worcester," in *England in the Eleventh Century: Proceedings of the 1990 Harlaxton Symposium*, ed. Carola Hicks (Stamford, 1992), pp. 119-34, at 127-28.

20. On the manuscripts of Ælfric's Judith, see Walter W. Skeat, ed., *Ælfric's Lives of*

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Saints, EETS o.s. 76, 82, 94, 114 (London, 1881-1900; repr. in 2 vols., 1966), 2:xxxi.

21. The Vulgate Book of Judith can be found in *Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem VII* (Rome, 1950), pp. 210-80. My citations are from Assmann's edition of Judith, which prints the Latin below the Old English text.

22. Ælfric, *Judith*, line 374: "and hi æfre hyndon / hindan mid wæpnum" ("and they continually injured them from behind with weapons").

23. Ælfric, *Judith*, lines 350, 356.

24. Ælfric, *Judith*, line 393.

25. *Judith* 12.18.

26. Ælfric, *Heptateuch*, p. 74.

27. Ælfric, *Judith*, line 393.

28. Ælfric, *Judith*, line 410.

29. For a discussion of the ways in which sexual violence is intertwined with both Anglo-Saxon and contemporary ideologies of warfare, see Karma Lochrie, "Gender, Sexual Violence, and the Politics of War in the Old English Judith," in *Class and Gender in Early English Literature*, ed. Britton J. Harwood and Gillian R. Overing (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1994), pp. 1-21.

30. Ælfric, *Judith*, lines 367-371.

31. *Judith* 14.16-17 and 15.1.

32. For fuller discussion of this issue, see Clayton, "Ælfric's Judith."

33. See Ælfric, "Preface to the Catholic Homilies," in *The Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church: The First Part Containing the Sermones Catholici or Homilies of Ælfric*, ed. and trans. Benjamin Thorpe, 2 vols. (London, 1844-46; repr. New York and London, 1971), 1:9; and Ælfric, "Preface to the Lives of the Saints," in *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, ed. Skeat, pp. 3-7. For the complete collection of Ælfric's prefaces, see Wilcox, *Ælfric's Prefaces*.

34. Ælfric, *Judith*, lines 434-36, my emphasis.

35. Ælfric, *Judith*, lines 404-6, my emphasis.

36. Quoted by Jackson J. Campbell, "Schematic Technique in Judith," *English Literary History* 38 (1971), 155-72, at 159.

37. I am grateful to Nicholas Howe and Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe for their comments on earlier versions of this paper.