

IMAGINING JUDITH: AN EXAMINATION OF JUDITH'S REPRESENTATION IN
THE MIDDLE ENGLISH METRICAL PARAPHRASE
OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

by

TERRI VAUGHN

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ABSTRACT

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Terri Vaughn, PhD

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Supervising Professors: Kevin Gustafson and Jacqueline Stodnick

The poet-paraphraser of *The Middle English Metrical Paraphrase of the Old Testament* (MEMPOT) imagines Judith and other women biblical characters as courtly ladies, whose performance and dress reflect the values and customs of literary courtesy, as well as the poet's interpretation of Christian morality. Judith's narrative in particular resonates with the positive views accorded to women by some medieval romance texts and yet supersedes these by positioning Judith as mobile—able to move independently within the world of men—and aggressively verbal—commanding her fellow Hebrews and advising the Assyrian general. These characteristics go beyond the mobility and verbal acuity of Judith in biblical tradition, where Judith is defined more clearly as subordinate to masculine society through an emphasis on her widowhood and chastity.

Bakhtinian analysis indicates that the treatment of Judith in MEMPOT is a product of *heteroglossia*—the blending of familiar ideolanguages that occurs within each person's speech and writing. In lieu of repeating the *authoritarian discourse* associated with the patriarchal image of Judith, the MEMPOT-poet has allowed his/her own *internally persuasive discourse* to produce a female hero that reflects both the poet's openness to gender equality and insistence

on the hierarchies of social estate. The poet accomplishes this altered image of Judith through details of dress and courtly manners, as well as a carnivalesque portrait of her superior “woman’s wit”—adding to the biblical account by presenting her correcting the male elders in the temple, digging a well to provide water for her community, and directing the people to apportion the spoils of war to men and their wives.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCING MEMPOT'S JUDITH

1.1 Introducing MEMPOT

While the Latin Vulgate was not available to the majority of English-speaking Christians during the Middle Ages, stories of the Bible in other forms, including dramatic, pictorial, and verse, entertained and inspired audiences outside of the clerical vocation. Today the latter form is, perhaps, the least studied and appreciated, particularly in some of its longest variations. Yet these works must have been popular with at least some contemporary audiences and seem to have had the approval of the church along with visual representations, for neither vernacular biblical paraphrases, drama, nor paintings received the criticism that literal translations did. In fact, retellings of the Bible were often encouraged for popular devotion and instruction. In this atmosphere, verse paraphrases multiplied, but in spite of the fact that there are still many extant manuscripts, they have received very little scholarly attention. More study is due these texts, for they provide insight into an internalized discourse that allowed for considerable freedom to interpret and challenge existing authoritarian texts.

The Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin offers one model for studying the act of paraphrase and its inherent transformative power. The act of paraphrase, according to Bakhtin, struggles against the authoritative text, in that it requires the writer to use already synthesized words and ideas to retell the original.¹ Thus, the person paraphrasing actively combines his own language with the “indisputable” language of the text. Apparently, this inherent mixing of languages—its natural *heteroglossia*²—invites further embellishments and alterations, which are not considered acceptable in the act of literal translation. Bakhtin’s view of language, however, challenges the possibility of providing a completely literal translation:

But no living word relates to its object in a singular way: between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object, the same theme, and this is an environment that it is often difficult to penetrate. It is precisely in the process of living interaction with this specific environment that the word may be individualized and given stylistic shape. (*Dialogic* 276)

Thus, the elasticity of language prohibits the exact reproduction of meaning from one language to another. Paraphrasers participate in the same process of stylizing and individualizing as translators, but with more obvious deletions, additions and transformations to the text.

The seeming uniqueness of some alterations in the medieval paraphrases creates interesting material for study. A particular case is the innovation found in what Ann Squires has referred to as “the little known,” *Middle English Metrical Paraphrase of the Old Testament* (MEMPOT), which dates from the late fourteenth century.³ There are two extant manuscripts containing the MEMPOT text. The L: Longleat House, MS 257. Fols. 1194-212r remains in the private collection of the Marquess of Bath,⁴ while the more complete version is held by the Bodleian Library: S: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Arch. Selden. Supra 52. Fols. 2r-168r. Neither is considered to be the original text—both obviously copied from different intermediaries. Because the L version is missing a portion of the beginning and appears to be in a different dialect than the original, the S version is used as the base for both the older Kalén-Ohlander edition and an edition recently completed by Michael Livingston.⁵ MEMPOT’s editors have cited similarities between the text and an Old French Paraphrase; and yet MEMPOT’s invention of new details and deletion of certain attitudes and descriptions is apparent, leaving critics to wonder if both texts are “creative revoicings” of yet another seminal text.⁶

Modern reception of MEMPOT has been varied, with scholars finding the verse to be of poor quality or greatly admiring the poet’s storytelling talent.⁷ Livingston posits that the value of

the text is its connection to both the Bible's substratic presence within medieval culture and the medieval debates issuing from that presence:

Thus engaged on both sides of a fundamental and foundational debate, *The Middle English Metrical Paraphrase of the Old Testament*, in a way that few texts can claim, taps into a range of deposits undergirding the cultural geography of late medieval England: the context of vernacular translations of the Bible, the importation of the Bible into romance contexts (and the corresponding morphology of romance into the Bible), the tendencies toward realism in the conceiving of individual and social circumstances, and a generally sympathetic attitude toward the roles of women and Jews that is reflective of a more heterogeneous culture than we might typically expect.

(Middle 4-5)

Livingston claims that MEMPOT's importance resides in its obvious blend of underlying social and literary factors present within late fourteenth-century England. Moreover, MEMPOT served as a conduit of these factors into medieval drama. Richard Beadle has demonstrated satisfactorily that this paraphrase is a direct source of material used in the York mystery play *Abraham and Isaac*. In addition, the twelve-line-stanza form of the MEMPOT is found in other York plays. The connection of the MEMPOT text to these popular plays suggests that it, too, may have been a popular text. Beadle posits that the play's confused order, yet almost exact wording, indicates that the scribe writing the play was drawing on his imperfect memory (182). How many readers there were during that time who could have recollected lines from MEMPOT because of their frequent reading of the text cannot be known. Nevertheless, the fact that there existed at least one individual who used the text in his own dramatic embellishments of biblical stories suggests that the text played an important part in the northern English religious dialogue of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

1.2 Following Tradition (Sometimes)

Michael Livingston points out that MEMPOT is also significant for medieval studies because “it comprises the most sustained translation—though one that is so loose as to seem at times a paraphrase of Comestor’s paraphrase—of the *Historia* into Middle English” (“Introduction” 20). The MEMPOT-poet gestures towards a plurality of sources for this paraphrase, but refers directly only to the writer of the *Historia Scholastica*:

This buke is of grett degre,
Os all wettys that ben wyse
ffor of the bybyll sall yt be
the poyntes that ar mad most in *price*,
Als maysters of dyuinite
and on, the maystur of storyse (13-8; 2.1-6)⁸

In spite of the fact that the text gives credit to only one particular origin for its Bible stories—that of “the maystur of storyse,” Peter Comestor— throughout this paraphrase, and particularly in MEMPOT’s account of Judith, which is the focus of this study, the looseness of the translation is evident. Upon further investigation it becomes obvious that the poet-paraphraser invented the text upon the authority of several works (giving them a medieval English interpretation) rather than strictly rendering Comestor’s biblical paraphrase into Middle English.

In paraphrasing the Bible into Middle English verse, the writer of MEMPOT was merely adding his own voice—or a mixture of acquired voices—to an already established tradition of biblical paraphrase. Apparently, this tradition was more directly related to other acts of paraphrasing than to the Bible itself. According to Michael Lapidge the verse paraphrase tradition was an integral component of academic curriculum in the Middle Ages (11). Lapidge credits four early Christian poets for their Latin verse paraphrases, which influenced Christian studies and textual traditions across Europe and in Anglo-Saxon England. Juvenius was the father of Christian-Latin poets and “created, at a stroke, the diction of Christian-Latin poetry”

(Lapidge 13). Juvencus wrote in the “high” style, and while Juvencus’ poetry normally reflected the biblical text closely, it emphasized literary metaphors, such as “light” (Lapidge 14). His diction influenced preceding Christian-Latin poets, particularly Caelius Sedulius, who wrote the *Carmen paschale*, a treatment of Christ’s miracles. Sedulius framed his account with Old Testament miracles, linking the two with figural interpretation (Lapidge 16). These two poets were responsible for the beginning of two traditions: “Juvencus created the diction of Christian-Latin biblical verse; Sedulius opened up the possibility of using it for figural and typological interpretation. Subsequent Late Latin poets followed these two models” (Lapidge 17). In the early sixth century, Avitus added to the telling of biblical stories in verse by embellishing biblical narratives with creative details.⁹ Arator, in the later sixth century, emphasized the interpretive aspect of biblical studies: “The poem [*Historia Apostolica*] consists of brief paraphrases of a [sic] biblical events, giving the gist of the action, each of which is followed by twenty-five to a hundred lines of interpretation, in which the event itself may be referred to allusively, but is rarely spelled out” (Lapidge 20). After generations of studying these ancient Christian works, they were eventually replaced by new Latin verse paraphrases, of which the *Aurora* by Peter Riga was probably the most popular (judging by the number of extant manuscripts) (Lapidge 30). Peter’s work was not popular because of its exciting details or eloquent language, however: “Peter has created not so much a poem as a biblical commentary in doggerel; and it is interesting to note that his version of Exodus is not a paraphrase of the biblical text, which he did not consult, but a versification of the *Expositio in Exodum* by Bruno of Asti (d. 1123)” (Lapidge 32).

Peter Riga’s text is a 15,000 line example of the interpretive tradition, while Peter Comestor’s work in the next century indicates the treatment of the Bible as history—a synchronization of “Jewish, classical, and barbarian records” (Morey “Peter” 14).¹⁰ *The Historia* (as well as MEMPOT) resonates with a new scholastic focus on the literal aspects of biblical narrative, as it “conforms to Comestor’s Victorine principle that the historical or literal level of the

text must be thoroughly grasped before the exegete can begin to approach the higher levels of interpretation” (Livingston 43). Emphasis in Victorine reading was placed on understanding the text literally, but it is important to note, as Livingston explains in his discussion, that the Victorine tradition did not discount all allegorical readings. Whenever a text did not make sense to a reader or translator literally, it was automatically assumed to be allegorical.¹¹ According to James Morey, Victorine doctrine sought primarily to “restore man’s fallen condition”; and this “anthropocentric retelling” of the Bible results in Middle English paraphrases which create an “individualistic and egalitarian slant” to their biblical stories (“Peter” 16). The innovative nature of biblical paraphrase—its continuous reframing of scripture to appropriate Christian tradition and cultural values—acquires a particularly humane face in the later Middle Ages, which is evident in MEMPOT’s language and characters.

It is especially in MEMPOT’s treatment of biblical women that the paraphraser’s task was dependent on his source texts and yet not wedded to them. Instead of merely repeating the source text’s depictions and opinions, the writer reforms the descriptions of and commentaries about women, creating a positive spin on the image of “woman.”¹² In passages such as the account of Samson and Delilah, the MEMPOT-poet leaves out the personal tirades of the French poet and Peter Comestor and merely gives what Urban Ohlander calls a “tame...matter-of-fact statement” about Samson’s destruction occurring as a result of “a wekyd woman wyle” (“Old French” 213).¹³ In other passages, the paraphraser’s positive attitude toward women becomes even more apparent. According to Livingston “we see that many of the negative connotations associated with Eve, or even the Eva/Ave dichotomies so common to fifteenth-century thought, are missing,” and negativity is also forgotten in the text’s treatment of Rahab, who is not called a “harlot,” as in the Bible, but keeper of the inn (“Introduction” 43). Clearly the MEMPOT-poet considers it completely within the bounds of a paraphraser’s task to redraw traditional portraits of biblical women.

Probably the most striking of MEMPOT's portrayals of women is its account of Judith. The text agrees with earlier and contemporary English writings on Judith that create a heroine who acts and is treated as an equal to men both publicly and privately. The poet's innovations are evident through changes of detail that give Judith even more freedom, while avoiding any cautionary comments regarding women's behavior. In addition, Judith's intellectual and physical strength is not presented as an unusual condition. In the final stanza of Judith's narrative the text comments on her actions, and transfers her abilities to women in general:

Now be þis werke wele may we wytt
how god wyll pupplysch his power
In wemen forto fall als fytt
als in men on þe same manere" (1737-40; 1479.1-4).

This text appears to give the same power to men and women, or at least the same capabilities to both sexes, which can be equally used by God. And even more surprisingly, the focus on Judith's chastity, which in many other texts holds Judith's dangerous sexual power at bay, is replaced by an emphasis on her wisdom. The text is silent on certain standard aspects of Judith's portrayal, such as her widowhood, while adding to her performance with details not mentioned in other well-known texts. In MEMPOT, Judith orates publicly in the temple, rebuking the Hebrew leaders, rather than privately calling them to her own quarters. She is also given the attributes of a courtly lady, and much of the outcome of her victory over Holofernes, results from her ability to play at courtesy—including the game of flattery and deception. Yet, the text clearly demonstrates that these games are merely the necessary means to protecting her people. Judith is depicted as a powerful noblewoman with the people's needs at heart. Instead of spending the four nights within the Assyrian camp in prayer and bathing, as in other accounts, she and her maidservant spend the first night digging a well and rerouting it to Jerusalem so that the Israelites can have clean water. When the Israelites present Judith with plunder, she distributes it to all—men and women. Given these many variances from typical accounts of

Judith, readers are left with multiple questions regarding the text's presentation: Why create a new rendering of Judith? How does this depiction interact with patriarchal discourse regarding the heroine and the Christian themes she usually represents? From where do these seemingly new ideas originate?

No doubt the text, to a degree, exemplifies the type of "mosaic" discussed by Bakhtin, who suggests that in the Middle Ages "the boundary lines between someone else's speech and one's own speech were flexible, ambiguous often deliberately distorted and confused. Certain types of texts were constructed like mosaics out of the texts of others" (*Dialogic* 69). As discussed previously, medieval biblical paraphrases participate in a long tradition of appropriation and imitation, as writers reworked their source material into their own cultural understandings. And yet, the reworking of Judith's narrative is puzzling because it omits many contemporary attitudes and details regarding women in general and Judith in particular. Why does the writer of the text leave out certain keywords and add in new modifiers? Why make changes regarding the heroine's actions, and even in the details of her character? These alterations result in an account of Judith that does not closely follow already established (or "authoritarian" to use Bakhtin's term) patriarchal discourse, which had previously guided the boundaries of the heroine's portrayal. The writer has freed the text from some of its expected meaning passed on by past authorities and opened the possibility of fresh insights into the Judith story. Bakhtin understands this denial of authoritarian discourse as the result of a constant struggle "being waged to overcome the official line with its tendency to distance itself from the zone of contact" (*Dialogic* 345). Perhaps the writer of MEMPOT is struggling to retell biblical narratives from a less distanced perspective. However, to posit a lack of distance in the text would be to imply that women's actions were in reality closely aligned to men's, while many medieval texts reflect different expectations for men's and women's performances.

1.3 Re-Presenting Women

That texts of the Middle Ages misrepresent the truth regarding women's reality is not a novel suggestion. Clare Lees and Gillian Overing, in their study of Anglo-Saxon women, have presented this idea through the use of a metaphor:

The female agent is a double agent: she moves in this 'real' world of Anglo-Saxon society, but we can only perceive her in that penumbral, nether world to which she is relegated by clerical culture....We address women's entry into the patristic symbolic, by which we mean not only the cultural record itself but the symbolic order that authorizes the record. (2)

Lees and Overing suggest that women characters within texts play a particular role in the male symbolic order, which is not necessarily reflective of their historical lives. In the Anglo-Saxon period the symbolic role of "woman" did not tend to define her as obtainer or dispenser of knowledge. Yet an image of "woman" might be used to portray knowledge or wisdom, as in the use of personified virtues. In other words, women in texts were allowed to be nouns or characteristics, described and used by male clerics, but not verbs or actors in the clerical dispensation of knowledge. Many later medieval texts appear to use women characters in a similar fashion.¹⁴

Yet, occasionally there seems to be a struggle from within medieval texts themselves, as if a woman character is rebelling against her enforced containment. This appears most evident in Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*, who challenges patriarchal discourse regarding women on several levels, while simultaneously using parts of that discourse to manipulate men and situations to her own advantage. While the *Wife of Bath* is created from Chaucer's male imagination there is something within her character that speaks for the intelligence of women. As some feminist scholars have noted, women characters who have traditionally been read as passively expressing the masculine dominant discourse might be expressing more than we give them credit for.¹⁵ In other words, the ambiguity of language and the writer's inevitable

experience with women's actual performances may allow characters to speak for themselves in novelistic fashion (Bakhtin's version) in spite of a writer's intent. Jane Burns' study of Old French literary texts, for example, finds that

even the most misogynous of medieval literary texts, where a longstanding tradition figures woman's body as the precondition for and guarantor of male intellectual, sexual, and chivalric prowess, can be seen to reveal repeatedly how women's bodies and the voices issuing from them can resist the constructions that contain and define them. (*Bodytalk* 6)

In Burns' view, feminist readers can read beyond authorial intent to the manifestation of women's voices, which "speak against and dissent from the dominant tradition" (*Bodytalk* 7).

The MEMPOT-poet's reading of Judith may have been informed by the availability of women's voices within popular texts of the later Middle Ages, but it also draws on the traditional image of Judith, which resonates with unusual power and independence. While scholars disagree regarding the nature of the biblical narrative—some calling it a romance, others historical fiction, and still others a folktale¹⁶—most agree that she is portrayed as an unusually powerful woman. Although Judith's voice does not overtly resist patriarchal discourse, she does wield it with equal force as the men in her story. Frequently her command of language seems to exceed that of her male counterparts. She is listened to respectfully, and her advice is followed by all of the male leaders on both sides of the conflict. Judith's rhetorical superiority in the tale, however, does not mean that she is a champion of feminine discourse. Her language is often meant to uphold the status quo and keep the community within the bounds of their traditional religious beliefs. Her first speech to the Israelites may be challenging the decree of the governor, and yet it appeals to the established beliefs of the patriarchs. In the dénouement of the tale, Judith encourages the Hebrew men to pick up their weapons and fulfill their gendered roles within society as protectors of their people. Finally, Judith's representation is ambivalent: it can

be read as upholding patriarchal hierarchies and community structures and simultaneously challenging the stability of an androcentric society.¹⁷

Unfortunately, the powerful image of Judith is infused with the language and attitudes of masculine domination.¹⁸ Today's feminist biblical scholars, such as Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, are painfully aware that "theological articulations . . . are permeated by androcentrism and shaped by sociopolitical patriarchal power relations" (*But She Said* 6). Nonetheless, while feminist scholars may find medieval representations of Bible stories authoritarian, designed to enforce adherence to the church's doctrines, apparently some aspects of biblical narratives were open for dialogue in the Middle Ages. The Judith story in the MEMPOT text is a fascinating example of the ways in which a story could be rearranged and amended for a new retelling that opened up the possibilities of new discussions and attitudes. Yet, in order for the text to work, those discussions and attitudes must have already been in the making. In other words, what seems like new material had to be available in some fashion for the writer to put to new use. For language does not just appear. When a writer creates a new word or a new idea too alien for use by the general population, it quickly disappears or remains stranded within the text where it started. On the other hand, new words and ideas that have close ties to developing beliefs or attitudes flow into the existing conversation to be re-used and rearranged as a matter of course. This flow of dialogue is often missed when examining biblical accounts, which some readers have considered authoritative and therefore unalterable. Adherence to the literal level, however, was not as important to medieval re-tellers of the biblical narratives as it has been to later church scholars. In fact, a paraphrase or verse account of Bible stories seems to have been preferred at times over more literal translations—which could be dangerous because of their competition with church authority.¹⁹ Re-telling the Bible in this manner allowed for addition and deletion of some parts of the biblical text and appear to have encouraged the writer to incorporate contemporary cultural dialogues, both religious and secular, into the narrative.

I am not claiming for this text, or for any other text of the medieval period (Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* might be the exception), the type of openness or dialogic imagination that Bakhtin lauds in Dostoesky.²⁰ Retellings of Bible stories and courtly romances did not allow characters the freedom to go where they would or to intentionally speak apart from the writer's purpose. (This is not to say the text does not speak beyond the writer's intention.) Yet there are certain aspects of Bakhtin's analysis that prove useful while considering texts of the Middle Ages—primarily, the obvious *heteroglossia* of each text, which illustrates the writers' incorporation of many dialogues into his/her own internalized beliefs. The text repeats these dialogues that have created it and simultaneously breathes a new voice into the conversation. Clearly, there were certain parameters to discussion of biblical topics, and yet these parameters were not as fixed as is usually supposed. In fact, Robert Sturges posits that Bakhtin's theory is applicable when considering medieval texts because of "the very nature of manuscript textuality itself. . . writers in a manuscript culture inevitably think of texts as open-ended, always subject to revision, whether by an author, a compiler, or a commentator" (126). Openness within medieval texts is not the portrayal of characters who speak independently of the author's viewpoint, but the attitude that promoted a liberal policy of commentary and rewriting authoritative texts, as is obvious in the tradition of biblical paraphrase.

Rita Copeland points out that this openness of medieval texts evolved from St. Augustine's system of treating biblical topics. In *De Doctrina de Cristiana*, Augustine combines the purposes of rhetoric and hermeneutics in order to train the biblical exegete to expound the Scriptures.²¹ This training involves a type of translation that requires interpretation applied to the reader's own historical references: "It is the responsibility of the reader to interpret these signs and to produce an account of their meaning. The whole responsibility of invention, of discovery, is transferred to the reader, and the function of invention is to make, not *res*, but *signa* meaningful" (Copeland 158). Augustine's notion that all of scripture must be "interpreted for the end of charity" leaves much room for individual explication. For "the meaning itself may be

unitary, but the signs which convey that meaning are subject to multiple interpretation, as their significance changes from age to age, from people to people" (Copeland 157). In Augustine's view the reader invents his topic from specific authoritative texts---the Old and New Testaments. This notion of turning to textual authority for inventive topics was followed also by writers of the *Artes Poeticae*, such as Matthew of Vendome and Geoffrey of Vinsauf, whose twelfth century works emphasize the elocutionary effects of "amplification, abbreviation, and ornamentation of the *materia* that tradition has selected" (Copeland 166). In the Middle Ages, the act of invention was not only acceptable, but expected, in the process of biblical paraphrase and in the process of translating and exegeting all traditional texts.

1.4 Summarizing the Study

In order to delineate the inventiveness of the MEMPOT-poet this study will take a close look at other depictions of Judith, both early and contemporary. Of significant interest is the importance of audience as the poet invents a character for his (her?)²² late medieval audience. Chapter One discusses theories of audience and their importance to scholars examining medieval texts. Confusion or misinterpretation can occur because of readers' failure to distinguish the different levels of audience or their inability to recognize the expectations the writer has for authorial and narrative audiences, or from planned or accidental ambiguities within the text. Misinterpretation can also occur when readers assume that a text's addresses to audience or stated purposes are all inclusive or to be taken literally. Critics have raised multiple questions regarding who read medieval texts and how the gender and social status of readership affected the images, themes, and language used by writers. Contrary to Walter Ong's suggestion that writers tend to imitate earlier writers when addressing a reading audience,²³ translators/writers of Middle English demonstrated their awareness of the particular material that interested readers of Middle English and did not hesitate to modify earlier texts to fit their contemporary audience.

On the controversial subject of women, MEMPOT is one of a number of Middle English texts that imply an audience whose ideas about women were not in line with the typical misogynist diatribes of French and Latin texts. Urban Ohlander's comparison of the Old French paraphrase and MEMPOT provides ample evidence in this regard.²⁴ MEMPOT uses similar tactics—erasing misogyny, but sticking to the main plot—as a roughly contemporary translation of *Ipomedon*.²⁵ This positive attitude toward women is probably a result of literary involvement by women, which served to slowly dam the general tide of misogynistic discourse, resulting in increasingly positive texts, at least in Middle English. While it is not clear how much reading was actually performed by women, Chapter Two demonstrates that gender played an important interpretative role for readers in the Middle Ages. Interestingly, MEMPOT addresses a male audience directly, even while implying through its equitable portrayal of women that women readers must have been present. MEMPOT's wording implies that men are addressed because at least some of them need to “amend.” Thus, MEMPOT is reminiscent of the “mirrors for princes” genre in its didactic tone, as well as its interpretation of Christian conduct as a blend of courtly and religious values to which those in leadership should adhere. Yet the intended audience of Judith may not have been limited to the aristocracy. Its appeal through the representation of an aristocratic Judith in a courtly setting is to a popular romance audience, which, as Derek Pearsall has suggested, probably included readers/listeners of varied backgrounds.²⁶

Yet MEMPOT's descriptions of women might also be associated to medieval depictions of women for English readers of other genres. Saints' lives provide an example of English transformations in idealized images of women—transformations that confirm Bakhtin's claim that language belongs to both past and present. Middle English versions of saints' lives emphasized attributes of faithfulness and charity over the earlier focus on virginity and martyrdom. Transformation is also evident in the MEMPOT-poet's descriptions of biblical women. These alterations not only reflect social ideals, but literary ideals as well, particularly

physical beauty. The patriarchal idealization of silence and obedience in women is replaced in MEMPOT by an idealization of beauty, wisdom, and wit, when the use of it serves God and his people. Furthermore, in some parts of the text women are humanized—they perform and speak equally with men. Rarely does the poet reflect the generations of misogynistic commentary which has preceded MEMPOT. When these negative comments do occur, they create a tension between their obvious misogyny and the text's prevalent attitude towards women, which represents them as equal players with men and avoids masculinizing them.

Judith is portrayed in MEMPOT as the ultimate image of a woman who speaks and acts on God's behalf, a powerful and equal member of her community. Yet this interpretation is not necessarily new—Judith's narrative contains these attributes inherently. In fact some readers may question whether MEMPOT expands Judith's powers or offers a domesticated version of Judith. To answer these questions some aspects of Judith's representation in two biblical versions of the Book of Judith, as well as two medieval Latin paraphrases of the narrative, are discussed in Chapter Two before considering the alterations performed by the MEMPOT-poet.²⁷ The two Latin paraphrases, Peter Riga's *Aurora* and Peter Comestor's *Historia Scholastica*, have already been introduced; the two biblical versions of the Book of Judith used in this study, the Latin Vulgate and the Greek Septuagint, warrant a brief introduction. The Greek text appears to be the intermediary text between the Hebrew Judith and the Old Latin. There is no extant copy of an ancient Hebrew text, perhaps because the Book of Judith was never canonized by Hebrew scholars. However, several scholars have noted how "in the case of Judith. . . proof of the LXX's faithful rendering of the Hebrew syntax and idiom is unmistakable" (Moore 92).²⁸ The Old Latin (OL) version is a translation of the Greek, evidenced by two principle observations: "the OL closely adheres to the content and sequence of the LXX . . . Second, throughout Judith the OL has readings which are clearly a transliteration of a Greek rather than a Semitic text" (Moore 94). On the other hand, Jerome claimed to use an Aramaic

text for his Latin translation of Judith, and his interpretation proves to be quite altered from the Greek.²⁹

Textual tradition has also generated alternate ideas regarding Judith. In the Middle Ages, she is allegorized and stereotyped in ways that demonstrate the multivalent meanings prevalent in traditional images of “woman.” Chapter Two examines several representations of Judith in medieval texts. Riga presents a Judith who is allegorized as *Ecclesia* and the soul, as well as idealized as saint and lover. Comestor treats Judith as a historical/literal character, giving more details of her personal life, which illustrates her position within a patriarchal milieu. Ranulph Higden represents Judith as a *femme fatale*, mostly through association. Chaucer’s Monk’s Tale also demonstrates Judith’s popular usage as a *femme fatale*, while other character’s within Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* use Judith for various purposes, exemplifying the notion that images (just as utterances) are part history and part fresh application. Caxton’s *Golden Legend* portrays Judith historically, following Jerome’s containment of her power through chastity, and also presents her typological connection with the Virgin Mary. MEMPOT presents a literal/historical Judith, but changes her character, avoiding associations with temptresses and widows. The MEMPOT-poet creates a Judith who speaks—she is allowed to present herself as a Hebrew. It is remarkable that while the poet suppresses the identification of Judith as widow, the identity of Judith as a Hebrew is emphasized whenever she is introduced by the narrator or introduces herself. This emphasis appears to contradict textual traditions that disparage Jews, as well as figural representations that contrast *Ecclesia* and *Synagoga*. Judith’s portrayal in MEMPOT is that of a woman who believes in God and acts on behalf of her people. The fact that she is a Hebrew alerts readers to the idea that she is serving the true God and not a god of the pagans. Judith also presents herself as “old and young,” an image related to the *puella senex*—the young but wise woman—but this concept is not emphasized.³⁰ Perhaps, Judith’s treatment as *puella senex* is primarily another way to avoid negative stereotypes.

The primary method by which the MEMPOT-poet circumvents negative judgments against Judith is her presentation as a noblewoman. Chapter Three examines earlier English versions of Judith, which generally focus on Judith's nobility as well. This glance backward examines the early dialogue that served as background material, albeit indirectly, to the paraphraser's account. The purpose of this chapter is not to establish any particular influence or connection, but to look at early English textual and artistic depictions of Judith that participated in creating a traditional dialogue regarding her symbolic value. The two Anglo-Saxon accounts of Judith that have been studied most frequently are the Old English poem in the Cotton Vitellus manuscript and Ælfric's homily on the Book of Judith. Both of these are focal points in the beginning of my study, but subsequently I examine Judith's appearance in early English pictorial representations. In many early portrayals, visual and textual, I find it most interesting that they depict not a simple, holy widow, but a woman of wealth and position. Thus, the focus of my study in Chapter Three is on the material aspects that indicate Judith's position within the aristocracy, because it is Judith's role as noblewoman which allows her to perform within the social hierarchies of patriarchal society and disarms the threat of her audacity—the audacity to leave her secluded female place and enter into the public sphere, and then the greater, more culpable audacity to decapitate a man of great position and power.

MEMPOT continues the earlier tradition of portraying Judith as a powerful aristocrat, but with a particularly courtly slant. The use of courtly language and themes is not unusual for popular religious literature of the fourteenth century. What is innovative is the extent to which the text interweaves courtly motifs into biblical narrative in a positive manner. MEMPOT does not decribe elaborate dress and material goods or the traditions of courtesy and *fin amore* as sinful. Instead these romantic motifs appear to be essential to the stories and characters, especially in the case of Judith. Through courtly additions to the narrative, the MEMPOT writer presents to the reader a Judith with even more dominance than the heroine of the Old Testament. Descriptive details and contemporary dialogue also add to the power of Judith for

contemporary audiences, through their attempt “to up-date the past slightly, to make it more meaningful in contemporary, ‘modern terms,’” as A. J. Minnis claims of Chaucer’s similar anachronistic technique in the *Knight’s Tale* and *Troilus and Criseyde* (6). Many of the anachronisms used by Chaucer and the MEMPOT-poet are related to the popular appetite for courtly literature. Michael Livingston notes that “The Paraphrase is the Old Testament formed into something akin to romance—a popularized and at times more sanitized account of history” (“Middle” 92). It is “what we might term romantic Scripture: a holy text that becomes at once ancient history and present reality” (Livingston “Middle” 95). The power of MEMPOT’s words to perform this dual task is remarkable, but not extraordinary. As Bakhtin remarks, “at any given moment, languages of various epochs and periods of soci-ideological life cohabit with one another” (*Dialogic* 291). During the Middle Ages biblical language and courtly language frequently cohabited the same text, but in this case, the writer has imprinted the voice of medieval romance literature upon the biblical text in a far more conscious manner than in many other paraphrases of the Middle Ages.³¹ The purpose of Chapters Four and Five is to explore this aspect of the “heteroglossia” of MEMPOT: the romance “language” of the later Middle Ages—the words it uses, the characters it creates, the attitudes it spawns, and how all of these contribute to a rendering of Judith as a courtly lady.

Even in the biblical narratives that precede Judith, the MEMPOT-poet’s use of courtly details is striking. The account of David is particularly full of courtly romance additions, from the banners of the Hebrew and Philistine armies to the portrayal of David and Mycoll’s love relationship. While the description of the armies and armor is fairly close to the Vulgate version, there are minutiae added which seem to have come from medieval romance elaborations on scenes of armies encamped for battle. An emphasis on the brightness of the armor and the fluttering banners, which add descriptive color to the tale, are found in MEMPOT when Saul looks out over the Philistines encamped “Under a banke, wher þei abyde, / *with* baners spred, of brad full bryst” (6027-8; 503.3-4) and in the account of Goliath’s armor “brygh glyterand as

any glas" (6056; 505.8). These same details appear in other late fourteenth century Middle English works as well.³² Theseus in Chaucer's *Knights Tale* glitters as he rides under his banner: "The rede statue of Mars, with spere and targe, / So shyneth in his white baner large/ That alle the feeldes glyteren up and doun" (974-7).³³ An even closer analogue is found in the beginning of *Wynnere and Wastoure*, when the narrator dreams of the troops encamped in a lovely land:

In aythere holte was ane here in hawberkes full brighte,
Harde hattes appon hedes and helmys with crestys;
Brayden owte thaire baners bown for to mete (50-2)

The view of the dreamer like Saul's view in MEMPOT paints a colorful picture of two armies courteously and bravely waiting for the beginning of battle.

The courtly themes of romance literature are nowhere more evident in MEMPOT than in the portrayal of King Saul's daughter, Mycoll, who falls in love with David in spite of her father's hatred of the young man. Perhaps her father's antipathy sparks the maiden's desire and creates a scenario ripe for "courtly love" or love between courtly people.³⁴ Reminiscent of the "love longing" of Chaucer's Troilus or Palamon and Arcite is the reaction that Mycoll has to David:

In luf þus lang was scho led,
Scho had [no] lykyng of hi[re] lyfe.
When he in any stoure was sted,
þen wa[s] hyr mynd in mekyll stryfe,
Scho swere þat no wylt suld hyr wede,
Bot scho [myst euer] be his wife.
Scho had no beld at bowre ne bed;
hyr care was kene as any knife.
Scho changed hyde *and* hew,
Hyf fayrnes fast can fale. (6205-14; 518.1-10)³⁵

In the Vulgate and the *Historia* readers are told only that Mycoll loves David; in MEMPOT we are given the excessive feelings of *fine amor*. Mycoll's "love longing" causes her to hate her life, to be mentally anguished, to refuse all other offers of marriage, and to grow so pale as to begin to lose her beauty. These reactions of desire were frequently attributed in medieval literature to male lovers, and they were a sign of a noble, and thus sensitive, heart, which was capable of strong passion. The MEMPOT representation of Mycoll as being capable of the same sensitivity as a male lover is one way in which the text demonstrates an equitable attitude toward the sexes.³⁶ This emotional and psychological equality is not new, however. In a study of women lovers in thirteenth-century romances, Flora Alexander finds that "the English poets create a sharp awareness of the quality of the love experience, and it is depicted as something in which woman and man participate on equal terms" (35). She cites examples in which the heroines often participate in extreme forms of love-longing, such as Rymenhild's love for King Horn:

And meft him louede Rymenhild,
Be kinges ozene dofter.
He was meft in pozte;
Heo louede so Horn child
Pat ne3 heo gan wexe wild (248-52)³⁷

MEMPOT's Mycoll is cast from the same mold—the overly anguished female lover. After all, she is a king's daughter and thus capable of the sensitivity expected of noble love.

For the writer of MEMPOT the nobility of Mycoll appears evident in her love-longing, and therefore no other description is given to reveal her status. Physical and material details are omitted. This lack of detail is not true of other heroines in MEMPOT who receive ample elaboration, particularly of their dress, which according to Derek Brewer is a sign of nobility: "Care for fine dress is a form of ennoblement...On the whole, in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, clothes were of great significance as direct witness to the true inner man and woman" (124). Judith, in particular, receives witness of her noble character through the writer's

delineation of her apparel. In order to analyze the implications of dressing Judith in late-medieval aristocratic garments, Chapter Four begins with relevant theories related to fashion, and then examines prominent medieval attitudes towards wealthy attire. Judith's dressing performance resonates with both the patriarchal tradition of seeing women's dress as seductive and the courtly tradition of appreciating the beauty of noble dress in an aesthetic sense. The poet relies on the audience's acceptance of dress as a customary part of the noble "organic body," as defined by Elizabeth Grosz and Jane Burns,³⁸ in order to present a heroine that will fit into the mores of readers and allow them to identify with her as an example for how they should perform. In MEMPOT clothing is used to depict a woman who represents and protects her nation in a spectacular manner, while simultaneously depending on God and caring for her people.

In Chapter Five, I use Maureen Fries' categories of female hero, heroine, and counter-hero to discuss how MEMPOT portrays Judith's behavior as a noblewoman. These categories, which define women's roles in Arthurian romance often blend or overlap, creating ambiguity for readers. MEMPOT's paraphrase appears to shape the narrative and Judith's presentation so that readers will not become confused regarding Judith's character. She is a female hero—a model of exemplary behavior, not a passive heroine or destructive counter-hero. Yet MEMPOT's depiction of Judith's performance creates a hero who goes beyond the normal romance mode. She is mobile and strategic, appearing to possess all the positive qualities lacking in the men of the story. The role reversals in MEMPOT are part of the heritage of Judith's tale, but MEMPOT increases the upside-down nature of Judith's authority with extra-biblical additions not found in its source texts. Thus, the tale takes on an even greater sense of challenging the authoritarian nature of patriarchal structure, as it participates in the "literary carnivalesque" as defined by Bakhtin. Not only does a woman appear to be "King" in this text, but Judith "crowns" and then "decrowns" Holofernes in one degrading act, and by so doing gives her people renewal. While MEMPOT depicts Judith's act as one that proves God's power

in women, throughout the text there is an emphasis on her “woman’s wit” and nobility, qualities of female romance heroes that enable her to defeat Holofernes.

Chapter Six connects the questions and theories of the body of the paper together and adds a brief discussion of a late fifteenth-century French play, indicating that Judith’s image had become traditionally associated with courtliness in the Middle Ages. Yet MEMPOT’s Judith seems unique, not in its description of Judith as a courtly noblewoman, but in its treatment of her independence and mobility, as well as her value as an example—one that men or women might follow in the same manner. In the French play’s rendering of Judith, she is both idealized and contained within the male perspective of women. In MEMPOT’s narrative, the writer has inscribed a rare ideology of equality between the sexes. While this study has focused upon the manner in which Judith has been constructed from traits of courtly literary characters, the notion of heteroglossia suggests that there are other languages at play. Perhaps the presentation of Judith as mobile and independent comes not only from the ideolanguage of medieval romance texts, but also from that of women religious writers, who—according to Carolyn Walker Bynum’s research—stressed humanity rather than maleness.

The primary purpose of the study is to explore the MEMPOT-poet’s creation of the character of Judith, a noblewoman who appears to represent the notion of women’s equality with men in both spiritual and political matters. This egalitarian image of “woman” is presented as a result of evolving medieval attitudes displayed in art, and literary portrayals. Some aspects of her depiction, such as her dress and mobility, have parallels in the female heroes of courtly romance literature. Yet even while constructing Judith after the pattern of a romance hero, the poet pushes the image of an independent woman further by erasing Judith’s personal identification with her forefathers and ignoring her deceased husband until the end of the narrative. Judith becomes “Queen” in a land without a “King,” providing an interesting form of the *literary carnivalesque*. Still Judith remains situated within a patriarchal system of religion and politics; and thus her image remains ambiguous. This study presents a close examination of

that ambiguity and how representing Judith as a noblewoman/hero defined her character for medieval readers. It is no wonder that the poet felt Judith's character was in need of definition. Because Judith's story, and therefore her character, is fictional (even while a few scholars argue it may have had a historical base), its value has been traditionally understood as providing a moral example or a spiritual type. Judith is not the typical material for a Christian example, however, because as Margarita Stocker has so aptly stated, "Judith's gender, vampishness and homicide defy all the normal canons of received Christian morality" (4). Judith is inherently double-sided—the "devil's gateway" and heaven's guardian.³⁹

CHAPTER 2
ENVISIONING JUDITH FOR A MEDIEVAL AUDIENCE

2.1 Signifying Judith

MEMPOT's paraphraser follows the tradition of reinventing biblical stories through the creative use of other texts.⁴⁰ The poet positions the text as authoritative by aligning it with Comestor's work,⁴¹ following medieval tradition, yet reworking the material for the intended audience. It was common for medieval writers to give credit to previous sources for the material rather than admitting any originality. Tim William Machan's discussion on Chaucer's claim to be a translator illuminates the practice: "assuming the pose of translator was a way for Chaucer to view himself and act as an author without claiming the authorial status which was, in any event, denied him" (67). Perhaps the idea of original author was not available to medieval writers who wished to be considered credible, but this did not prevent them from using their sources in new and creative manners. Generic boundaries were easily crossed: images, themes, and motifs were frequently borrowed and rewritten across secular and religious genres.⁴² In the Middle Ages (as today) the choices that writers make regarding the material to be used or avoided seem to be linked most conspicuously to audience and how the writer desires to engage readers. Constructing the audience of a text is a task that often takes the scholar beyond extant manuscript study, records of book ownership, and direct address into the less certain analysis of textual content, especially the alterations that occur during translation or rewriting. MEMPOT's transformations of the Judith narrative, as well as its alterations of other biblical stories about women, indicate the writer's awareness of audience in addition to demonstrating purposeful invention.

Compared to popular religious and secular texts that portrayed women as passive and meek, MEMPOT's Judith appears active and forceful. Yet at least one critic has sensed a less

positive view of Judith in this text than in the original biblical version. Ann Squires' analysis of MEMPOT's account of Judith claims that the text fulfills the medieval "social need to diffuse the potential threat of this story, in particular to 'domesticate' its heroine and find an acceptable stereotype, or blend of stereotypes, for her" (187). Although I agree that the text diffuses that threat through its characterization of Judith as a noblewoman (particularly in the mold of a female romance hero, as I will discuss in Chapter Five), I propose the text contains alterations that tend to restrict certain female stereotypes that might be read into Judith's character. In this way, the writer of MEMPOT stresses as primary Judith's nobility and increases the identification between its aristocratic audience and the female hero in order to present her as an example to be followed by both noblemen and noblewomen. For other readers—quite possibly merchants and their wives, as well as clerics—Judith's character still serves as an example of self-sacrifice and faith. (Perhaps the text could also be read as a critique of anyone who does not reign with the good intentions of Judith, who loves her people even to the point of sacrificing her own safety.) Along with the customary use of a female figure to preserve the existing social order, there are elements of Judith's portrayal that challenge traditional hierarchies. Even while Judith is depicted as able to lead independently as a result of her high social standing, she still represents "every-woman" (according to the MEMPOT-poet),⁴³ and in this role she breaks typical social barriers.

In lieu of seeing MEMPOT's Judith as a radical image of "woman," Squires reads her character as consisting of a variety of stereotypes—pious widow, seductive temptress, saint/female authority figure, and powerful noblewoman. These stereotypes are not the only images that Judith evokes, however, because readers come to the text already encumbered by past encounters with her character. Any depiction of Judith contains (as do all images of "woman" portrayed within texts), in the words of Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson, "a signifying surplus" (2). Her figure has been used in literature and art as a metaphorical sign containing multiple meanings related to virtues and vices, as well as theological and political doctrines.⁴⁴

Judith has been read as a type of Eve, the Jews, Mary, the Church, the temple, and Christ.⁴⁵ She has also been used as a sign for humility, chastity, and political victory. Conversely, Judith has also been employed as a symbol of a *femme fatale*.⁴⁶ Many of these stereotypes and metaphors are already inherent within the Book of Judith, while others accumulated over centuries with the use of Judith as an image, and, thus, even when overtly present cannot be credited to the paraphraser's intention unless speculation is made regarding why some characteristics of Judith go unaltered while others receive substantial transformation. In order to sort through the signifying value of MEMPOT's female hero and her possible effects upon its imagined medieval audience a close examination of two extant biblical versions, as well as two medieval Latin paraphrases will first be attempted for the purpose of identifying aspects of Judith's image that are inherited from earlier depictions. Subsequent discussion will include typical medieval readings of "woman" and the use of the character of Judith to communicate "woman" to readers. First, however, theories of audience as they relate to medieval texts will be discussed.

2.2 Imagining Audience in Theory

Scholars of medieval texts commonly make a distinction between a work's real and implied audience.⁴⁷ The real audience consists of documented readers, those whom scholarship has discovered through the attestation of other texts (i.e. wills, letters, inscriptions, allusions). The implied audience refers to the readers that the writer seems to have had in mind while writing. Examination of these two categories of audience has been productive in considering the gap between a writer's intention and cultural reception, as well as proving useful in comprehending popular tastes and social values, but some critics have pointed out that distinctions of audience can be even more complex. Paul Strohm finds four levels in Chaucer's audiences: "fictional," "implied," "intended," and "actual" (137). His additional categories are not found in every medieval text, but neither are they distinctly Chaucerian. The motif of having a "fictional" audience—characters listening to or reading tales within the text—was popular in the

Middle Ages, as was the inclusion of an address to patrons or others of a specifically “intended” audience. Within some works, scholars note apparent conflicts between the audience implied by the choice of theme and language and the audience explicitly addressed. Fiona Somerset suggests Trevisa’s project of translating into the vernacular for a broad English audience (clearly visible in his *Dialogue*, which serves as introductory material to his translation of Higden’s *Polychronicon*) is limited by a controlled publication of the texts:

It might look as though Trevisa’s translation offered lay readers of all sorts the opportunity to read like a pope, or a parishioner, and to arrive at their judgements by any of the means the text so thoroughly describes. . .it only does so—initially at any rate, and according to the plan for publishing information on which Trevisa and Berkeley seem to have collaborated—for a very limited audience of lay nobility. What it offers that lay noble audience is the capacity Trevisa’s *Dialogue* conferred upon the Lord: the ability to speak at once like a pope and a parishioner, advancing what are presented as the interests and concerns of the lowest of the laity while deploying clerical ‘informacion’ of the most sophisticated sort, all in order to inspire action. (100)

While Trevisa advocates the idea of a lay readership, he (and his patron, Berkeley) apparently felt that only an audience of the lay nobility were capable of reading these texts and acting upon them. Somerset’s analysis of Trevisa’s translations demonstrates that the extra division between intended and implied audience, suggested by Strohm, allows for more nuanced answers to the difficult questions surrounding audience.

Peter J Rabinowitz’ work on reexamining literary audience forces a distinctively more complex discussion of readers and their relationships to a text, as well as to a writer’s projections regarding audience. Following the proposals of Walker Gibson and Walter J. Ong, Rabinowitz argues that writers often write toward an audience expected to read on several levels, and reading becomes more complex “with more intricate and ironic works” (125). The

real or “actual” reader, is accounted for in Rabinowitz’ schema, while not emphasized, as he is more interested in the imaginative audience of the writer. The second level of audience is hypothetical, named “authorial” by Rabinowitz because readers must align themselves with the author’s intended audience in order to appreciate the text. Writers address particular audiences, using vocabulary, images, and themes that they believe appropriate to their implied readers, but the actual audience may find it difficult to become the readers intended by the author: “If historically or culturally distant texts are hard to understand, it is often precisely because we do not possess the knowledge required to join the authorial audience” (Rabinowitz 127). In addition to the necessity of readers identifying with the implied audience, readers are frequently expected to become the “narrative” audience—to “pretend to be a member of the imaginary narrative audience for which his narrator is writing”—an audience which believes in the characters and events that the narrator describes (Rabinowitz 127). In order to receive the text as intended by the author it is necessary for readers to participate in the text’s fictional demands. “If we fail to pretend to be members of the narrative audience, or if we misapprehend the beliefs of that audience, we are apt to make invalid, even perverse, interpretations” (Rabinowitz 129). It is obvious that the position of “narrative audience” must be experienced for fiction, particularly novels, but perhaps not so clear that imagining oneself as a member of the narrative audience can be productive when examining medieval texts in which history and fiction (as well as literal and allegorical meanings) are not easily separated.⁴⁸

Some texts may also address readers on a fourth level—this level of audience is often directly addressed and usually intended to provide an ironic tension between the beliefs of authorial/narrative readers and what Rabinowitz labels “the ideal narrative” audience. Whenever a narrator makes a claim that would shock or disgruntle his authorial/narrative audience, he/she is speaking to “ideal” readers, or those who supposedly believe the unreliable narrator. (Other critics refer to the “ideal” audience as consisting of readers/listeners that a writer expects will agree with his/her own opinions.)⁴⁹ Reading confusion or misinterpretation can occur because

of readers' failure to distinguish the different levels of audience or their inability to recognize the expectations the writer has for his/her authorial and narrative audiences. Modern critics may posit tensions within a work or fail to perceive inconsistencies because of historical, religious or ethnic misunderstandings. Moreover, there are sometimes planned or accidental ambiguities within texts—unidentified ironies—that complicate reader comprehension, while providing more interesting material for critics. Chaucer's works come most readily to mind as an obvious source of ambiguities that provoke academic dialogue, consequently inciting scholars to examine issues related to audience reception; however, questions regarding audience have been initiated in all areas of medieval studies.

Critics of various theoretical backgrounds have addressed questions of medieval audiences, inquiring about issues related to various aspects of reading—public/private, auditory/textual, vernacular/Latin, popular/courtly, secular/religious, male/female—to mention no more than the most common topics.⁵⁰ Clearly the categories are not mutually exclusive. Even if a writer makes a specific claim about the purpose of the text or its method of delivery, that does not exclude the probability that other purposes and deliveries also existed. When a writer gestures textually to a particular audience, it can neither be assumed that others were not within the range of the implied audience, nor that actual readers did not expand the boundaries of the writer's intentions. To complicate matters, there is also the possibility of a writer intending irony when addressing an "ideal" audience, as Richard Firth Green points out may have been the case with some of Chaucer's overtures towards women readers/listeners:

Be war, ye wemen, of youre subtly fo,
Syn yit this day men may ensauple se;
And trusteth, as in love, no man but me. (*Legend* 2559-61)

Green's question, "Would such a joke be more effective before a mixed audience or not?" (151) highlights the possible inaccuracy of assuming a certain actual or intended readership based on specific references in the text. The possibility of ironic or rhetorical significance for such

addresses (Rabinowitz' fourth level) creates further problems for critics who desire to discover who a medieval writer hoped would read his text and what results he (and in rare cases, *she*) purposed to achieve.

Examining the idea of purpose or *causa* in the Middle Ages has given modern critics one way to consider audience from a rhetorical point of view. In a general sense, the medieval writer had Aristotle's *finalis* in mind –“to teach and to delight” was the ultimate goal of a text, whether secular or religious.⁵¹ Middle English writers, including the MEMPOT-poet, seem to be particularly conscious of their own cultural milieu and the ways that it interacted with texts—requiring new interpretations to meet existing social values and readers' experience (both actual and literary). Marking the intentional alterations made by medieval translators, Middle English scholars usually downplay Walter Ong's suggestion that

if the writer succeeds in writing, it is generally because he can fictionalize in his imagination an audience he has learned to know not from daily life but from earlier writers who were fictionalizing in their imagination audiences they had learned to know in still earlier writers, and so on back to the dawn of written narrative. (11)

As many scholars aver, it is apparent from changes in content and tone that most writers who translated texts into Middle English did not address the same audience as their source texts. The following evidence will demonstrate that medieval translators were well aware of the particular material—vocabulary, images, characters—that would delight readers of Middle English, resulting hopefully (from the writer's perspective) in their acceptance of the doctrine/knowledge that the writer desired to impart. It is within this English tradition that the paraphraser of MEMPOT offers a retelling of Old Testament stories, making them simultaneously enjoyable and instructive.

2.3 Designing Texts for a Medieval English Audience

The relation between material and audience in *The Cursor Mundi* (*CM*) is of interest to this study because of the work's extensive use of Comestor's *Historia Scholastica*, along with other authoritative texts, to create a narrative of world history. Written at the beginning of the thirteenth century, *CM* predates MEMPOT by almost one hundred years, and yet, based on the fact that it was recopied in various versions throughout the fourteenth century, it quite possibly shared a contemporary reading audience. This text is usually referred to as a compilation of various works: "the Cursor-poet can be shown to have used at least twenty-four different texts as sources, nineteen of them in Latin and five Old French" (Horral 104). Sarah Horral notes the intelligence and creativity used in the compilation, as the poet intersperses material from different sources, weaving together parts of various narrative authorities, as well as brief commentary from theological and interpretive sources (104). Horral also points out that when the text was recopied during the late fourteenth century, parts of popular devotional literature were substituted for the original text, creating "a mini-history of changing tastes in devotional literature" (106). Again, Copeland's comments on translation apply: "One of the most important rhetorical actions that exegesis performs upon the text is to 'rewrite' it according to the significance that the interpreter discovers for the text" (76). The medieval writer, such as the anonymous writer(s) of *CM*, does not invent an individual interpretation from thin air, nor solely from the examples of past authorities, but instead writes from "a place within a vigorous new vernacular tradition in which negotiations between authors, audiences, and meanings are the very stuff of composition" (Evans et al. 329). When a writer (or re-writer) presents a text to a medieval audience, it is not the historical consequence of the work's original words that is significant, rather how the material of the topic can be adapted to delight and teach a contemporary audience—at least the ideal audience that the writer imagines based on his/her involvement within a particular social and textual milieu.⁵²

As John Thompson attempts to recreate the *Cursor*-poet's imagined audience, he emphasizes the wide appeal that the content of *CM* apparently generated: "the material in the *Cursor Mundi* seems designed to attract listeners and readers who were equally likely to have been drawn to a range of different types of short vernacular items, including romances, saints' lives, independent temporale narratives, and even lyric poetry" (101). (Based on Horral's work, short theological commentary can be added to the list.) When the *Cursor*-poet textually outlines a general reading public, he stresses readers' shared enjoyment of verse, romance, and stories of "princes, prelates, and kings," which Thompson argues connotes an audience with a tri-lingual literary background.⁵³ It becomes even more obvious that the poet imagines at least part of his audience as learned when he offers the purpose of his vernacular work:

Efter haly kyrc state
Pis ilk bok it es translate,
In to Inglis tong to rede
For the oue of Inglis lede,
Inglis lede of England,
For the comun at vnderstand. (231-6)

As Thompson explains, this passage implies that readers are familiar with the Fourth Lateran Council's injunction for more religious teaching aimed toward the laity, which gave rise to the production of instructional and inspirational works in vernacular languages (106). In addition, these lines suggest a political audience—readers who are concerned about England's identity as a nation (Thompson 108).⁵⁴ These gestures, along with the poet's list of biblical and romance heroes, indicate to the audience that the writer is knowledgeable on issues of concern to well-read readers, simultaneously implying that within the audience there are readers of considerable literary experience.⁵⁵

CM attempts to utilize readers' interests in other types of literature to redirect their attention toward biblical and historical narrative, without an accusation of vanity toward readers

of romance and epic, such as found in William Nassyngton's *Speculum Vitae* written at the end of the fourteenth century (Thompson 116-7).⁵⁶ Although MEMPOT is closer in date to the *SV*, its attitude toward secular literature resembles that of *CM*. Indeed, there may be a distant textual connection between *CM* and MEMPOT. Michael Livingston notes that "a number of lines in the *Paraphrase* [MEMPOT] echo parallel lines found in *Cursor Mundi*, and at times both works concur in their choice of extra-biblical material for inclusion" ("Introduction" 28). While these similarities do not prove exact borrowing, the MEMPOT-poet must have known and appreciated *CM*'s use of popular romance themes and motifs—and in all likelihood was aware of several romance-related texts—appropriating these romance images because of their appeal to the poet's desired audience. The poet professes to write "for sympyll men" (line 19), but as in *CM*, the intended audience may include a broader base than merely those who cannot read Latin fluently. The most obvious claim that can be made regarding the poet's intended readers/listeners is that whether erudite or "sympyll" they loved action-packed romance stories—for this is what MEMPOT delivers.⁵⁷

The MEMPOT-writer, however, is offering these exciting stories for more than good reading material. His purpose, "that men may lightly leyre / to tell *and vnder take yt*" (23-4; 2.11-2), reveals that his ideal readers will incorporate the stories into their lives. While the poet does not use the popular metaphor of "eating the word," there seems to be an expectation that biblical stories rendered in English, using romance motifs that are familiar to the imagined audience, will be more readily "embodied" into readers' actual experience. Some scholars have found in Usk, Trevisa, and Norton (writers/translators of roughly the same period as MEMPOT) an attitude toward the vernacular which claims a unique physical quality: "this uniqueness again resides in the language's embodiedness, a quality that is prosaic and somewhat crude but gives the language an immediacy unmatched by Latin or French" (Evans, et al 327). In its expectations for readers, MEMPOT participates in this prevalent attitude that reading in the vernacular is incarnational, and thus suitable for devotional literature. Yet the poet also sees the

writing project as blending “the profit of sacred literature with the pleasure of the secular” (Livingston “Introduction” 42).⁵⁸ Perhaps the poet was somewhat retrospective, aligning his paraphrase with the romantic aspects of *CM* rather than with more literal translations that were becoming popular through the Wycliffite/Lollard movement. Judging by the numerous extant copies of Wycliffite Bibles, compared to the two extant versions of MEMPOT, the medieval taste for Bible stories over scriptural texts appears to have waned in subsequent years. Nevertheless, the adaptation of parts of the text into the York plays implies that the paraphraser correctly discerned the immediate desire of at least some in his medieval audience to be entertained with familiar romance motifs even as they learned how to embody God’s word.

At times the MEMPOT-poet offers explicit lessons to be learned through a story’s outcome or through the actions of a particular character.⁵⁹ This concrete manner of teaching Christian principles through the use of stories was in tune with the late-medieval emphasis on devotional imagining made popular through works such as *Meditationes vitae Christi*, an outgrowth of St. Francis’s “incarnational aesthetic” (G. Gibson 8). Still, not every reader in the Middle Ages appreciated the transformation of spiritual concepts to concrete images that could be easily imagined, as Gail MacMurry Gibson notes: “The ever-growing tendency to transform the abstract and theological to the personal and concrete was not only the general characteristic of mind in the late Middle Ages, it was the center of raging controversy” (7). Although the poet presents Bible stories in an imaginative fashion and speaks reverently of Mary and Holy Church, the emphasis on righteous living rather than ritual within the text prevents reading MEMPOT as accepting traditional religion without reservations. Livingston asserts that the poet positions the text carefully in the center of prevailing controversies in order to access a broad audience:

By straddling the line between reform and status quo, the poet manages to construct a narrative that spoke to any number of audiences: from reformers seeking access to Comestor’s influential work to young clerks not yet well

versed in Latin and in need of a crib text to gain an initial understanding of the essential stories of the Old Testament. (“Introduction” 37)

However, there is one controversial subject upon which the poet does not carefully remain neutral—when it comes to the topic of women, MEMPOT’s paraphraser iterates a definite opinion, one that treats women as capable of thinking and acting for God and their communities.

2.4 Constructing MEMPOT’s Audience: To Gender or Not to Gender

Each of the editors of MEMPOT’s Judith (Ohlander, Peck and Livingston) comments that MEMPOT portrays women in an unusually positive manner. Eve, Michal and other women are transformed, as traditional negative commentary and sometimes even biblical details are erased from their descriptions. Women antagonists tend to stand alone in their wicked deeds rather than serving as an illustration of the wickedness of women in general. These transformations of commonly held clerical attitudes toward women provoke interesting questions regarding authorship and readership. It is unlikely that scholars will ever know what personal reasons caused the paraphraser to create a text where women are respected as capable of bravery, reason, and goodness. It is probable that MEMPOT’s attitude reflects not only its writer’s opinions, but also an audience with ideas about women not in line with the typical misogynist diatribes of many French and Latin texts.⁶⁰

This more favorable attitude toward women is demonstrated clearly within several translated texts of the period.⁶¹ In particular, three Middle English translations of Hue de Rotelande’s *Ipomedon* (Anglo-Norman, ca. 1180) have aroused interest in discussions of medieval audience, not least because they have each deleted much of the misogynistic discourse of the French original. While these three translations are extant in fifteenth century manuscripts, the earliest text, often referred to as *Ipomedon A*, is posited as roughly contemporary to MEMPOT and serves as a fitting example of changing attitudes in English literary texts of the late fourteenth century.⁶² Jordi Sánchez-Martí argues that these transformations occur to broaden the audience: “The English translator . . . aspires to reinstate

a balance between the two sexes to include a female audience and put an end to their antagonization in Hue's biased account, and he accomplishes it by subtly toning down the antifeminism of the source text without altering the plot" ("Reconstructing" 162).⁶³ This description of the translator's tactics sounds strikingly similar to the deletions of antifeminist tirades performed by the paraphraser of MEMPOT, even in stories whose plot remains close to the Old French paraphrase, as in the account of Delilah and Samson. Yet do these positive depictions of women provide enough evidence to posit a female audience for MEMPOT, or do they merely indicate a temporary transformation within men's religious discourse regarding women?

Many scholars have argued for medieval women as readers; however, there are some who believe they were not great in number. In any case, a more positive rendering of women in several late Middle English texts indicates a cultural change, whether that change happens to be the increased literacy of women or a more accepting attitude, which accorded an increasingly favorable representation of women by male writers and readers. Of course, individuals and small groups of women had engaged in literary activities throughout the Middle Ages, as textual evidence indicates. D. H. Green's *Women and Reading in the Middle Ages* cites numerous textual examples that "illustrate the many ways in which women were involved in literature: not merely as authors, but more frequently as patrons, encouragers of literature, dedicatees, addressees and, not least for us, readers" (252). Perhaps their involvement served to slowly dam the general tide of misogynistic discourse, resulting in the increasingly positive Middle English texts.

Vernacular texts that adopted a pro-feminine stance were often composed with women religious in mind.⁶⁴ The Middle English retelling of saints' lives is one genre in which writers directed more positive images of women (in the sense of imagining a woman as brave and respectable) toward women readers. This "invention of a female audience . . . helped to create the very category of women's literature, and they helped to inscribe female readers in the

discursive—and so in the historical—arena of late medieval England” (Sanok 32). According to Catherine Sanok, Chaucer’s audience in the *Legend of Good Women* is made up of the typical feminine audience who read saints’ lives as well as masculine readers who read from an antifeminist position. It is the expectation of multi-perspective readers in this work that creates a complexity similar to the divergent voices of multiple characters in the *Canterbury Tales* and simultaneously points to the writer’s acknowledgement that textual interpretation is gendered: “Indeed, in its use of hagiography’s feminine address, the *Legend of Good Women* provides striking, if indirect, evidence of the crucial role that female saints’ lives played in thinking about the place of gender in vernacular hermeneutics” (Sanok 43). Although some critics might posit that the *Legend’s* audience may not have included the same readers as those that read saints’ lives, Chaucer’s gestures towards that feminine audience—even if meant as an ironic or humorous aspect of the work—demonstrate that gender played an important interpretative role for readers in the Middle Ages.

The interpretative function that gender plays within MEMPOT is a critical area of consideration, particularly because of the text’s emphasis on Judith as an exemplary figure. In this text, however, there appears to be no humor implied within addresses to the audience, as well as no division of interpretation for men and women readers. In fact, the text, while holding women as equal examples, does not address women directly; instead its specific gesture towards audience is to “men” (16960; 1414.4).⁶⁵ This specific term may be inclusive, meant to incorporate both genders, but there are instances within MEMPOT’s narrative when the text mentions men and women separately where both could easily be subsumed under a masculine reference.⁶⁶ Thus, it seems significant that in the beginning and the conclusion of Judith’s narrative the poet refers to “men” profiting from Judith’s example.⁶⁷ Perhaps this reference is in deference to the traditional employment of Judith’s character to stir men to bravery and action, as will be discussed with the Old English renditions of Judith in Chapter Three. On the other hand, the many other places throughout the narrative where the poet mentions women

specifically, indicating their equal involvement, causes the reader to suspect there may be another reason for directing the lesson to men. Even more convincing evidence is found in the beginning lines of the poet's conclusion:

Now be þis werke wele may we wytt
how god wyll pupplysch his power
In wemen forto fall als fytt
als in men on þe same manere. (17737-40; 1479.1-4)

It appears that one didactic intention of this narrative is to demonstrate that women can be used by God as well as men—perhaps this lesson addresses the attitude (and resulting behavior) which some men need to change without necessarily implying that women are discluded from the projected readership of the text.

The text's stated purpose of improving behavior is reminiscent of the popular *speculum regis* literature, which addressed the moral behavior of kings and other nobles.⁶⁸ Carol Meale argues for a similar purpose for the Middle English translation of *Ipomedon*: "It would seem then that an important part of the appeal of all the M. E. versions of *Ipomedon* lay in a didactic emphasis on matters of courtesy: the hero instructs the audience by example" ("Middle" 155). However, the MEMPOT-paraphraser has lessons other than courtesy in mind for the audience to receive of the female hero Judith:

Dame Judyth was a gentyll jew
and woman wyse whore sho suld wende.
Now wyll we nevyn hyr story new,
for to sum men yt myzt amend
To see how sho in trewth was trew
als lang als sho in lyf con lend,
And lufed þe Law als lele ebrew
þat Moyses tyll hyr kynred kend.

pat Law forto mayntene
sho ordand in all thyng,
Als Insampyll was seyn
and wytteneſt in werkyng. (16957-68; 1414.1-12)

Judith (as “dame”) is intended primarily as an example of loyally following God’s law. Notably, by the end of this narrative readers understand that both chivalry and courtesy play a part in Judith’s loyalty. Yet self-sacrifice and charity are also visible components of the writer’s overall depiction. The poet, like others who would advise medieval princes and nobles, demonstrates an interpretation of Christian conduct as a blend of courtly and religious values to which men in leadership should adhere. That a woman is used to provide an exemplary model may be an indication that estate rather than gender is the more important aspect of the poet’s lesson.

Presenting Judith and other biblical characters within courtly settings and possessing courtly attributes appears to speak directly to a mixed-gender audience of the gentry and nobility, providing a character that can be imitated by all.⁶⁹ Indeed, the treatment of Judith’s story resembles the assimilation of religion and courtliness that David Aers finds in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: “At both Camelot and Hautdesert Christianity is thoroughly assimilated to the celebration of forms of life aspired to by contemporary gentry and nobles” (95). However, to suppose an exclusively aristocratic audience is to deny the text’s apparent connection to a general romance audience, which has frequently been posited as diverse. Derek Pearsall warns against positing a narrow audience for romance texts: “It is not only a matter of allocating certain romances to certain appropriate kinds of audience: the audience of a *disour* could be a noble household as well as a more humble gathering, and likewise written texts of romances could find their way into the hands of anyone who could read” (“Middle” 43). Thus, while Judith as a courtly noblewoman may serve to inspire the nobility and gentry, there is no obvious reason to assume that the implied audience of the paraphraser was limited to the highest estate.

The characters and descriptions of MEMPOT imply that the poet is writing for readers interested in courtly details and romance motifs. Ideally, the poet is also writing to an audience that believes the positive spin given to women, as well as to nobility, within these biblical narratives. Therefore, the narrative audience of MEMPOT must remove itself from any anti-feminist and anti-aristocratic leanings in order to believe the Bible stories as told in this version. Perhaps this fact would have limited clerical and popular reading, but the poet does not concede this possibility. Instead, positive comments about women are directed to the audience as a way of explanation, without an acknowledgement of readers holding other views.⁷⁰ The fictional audiences within the narratives are usually depicted as possessing the poet's views as well. The patriarchal leaders in Judith's story do not protest that she has entered the temple and spoken to the people from "on high." Neither do they seem horrified that she has dressed seductively, traveled into the enemy's camp accompanied only by her handmaid, and returned with Holofernes' head. The sole critical opinions which are expressed against Judith in this text reside within the minds of the Assyrians, who find that Judith has decapitated their general: "þen wýst þei wele þat werkyng was / by hyr wyles *and* her wekyd red" (17635-6; 1470.7-8). Taken alone these lines appear to agree with views of women as conniving and evil, placing Judith as a negative example. Yet these are the only lines in the narrative that give a derogatory view concerning Judith's tactics of deception. Readers who concur with this pejorative view of Judith are agreeing with the enemies of God and his people, not with those who are loyal to God's law. Perhaps this is the poet's backhanded way of revealing to the audience that anti-woman statements are not appropriate for Christians.⁷¹

2.5 Viewing Medieval "Woman"

Modern readers and critics of medieval texts often oversimplify medieval attitudes toward women, positing a general misogyny that controlled the production of text and presentation of material, which resulted in negative views of women's dignity and capabilities. The attitude toward women taken by MEMPOT's writer argues that positive views of women

existed along with the misogyny. This is not to claim that the poet was pro-feminist, or interested in women being given political power equal to men's, but to argue along with Alcuin Blamires that there existed "profeminine" works in the sense that they "develop constructions of 'woman' which are positive according to the cultural ideology of their period" (Case 12). The "case for women" literature that Blamires examines generally includes arguments for and against women or "woman," indicating a cultural milieu in which the idea of "woman" as the other predominates: "'Woman' in this arena is not a visibly secure category but an obscured and threatened one, requiring legal aid" (Blamires Case 62). Because women are assumed to be outsiders, incapable of defending themselves against masculine discourse, there was a certain rhetorical formula developed for their defense. Blamires suggests that two rhetorical modes collapse into each other: judicial defense and praise (Case 63). The MEMPOT-poet rarely falls into either mode, instead presenting women characters as if readers already understand and respect their worth.

The overall view that women were other, belonging to a different category of humanity than men, is misogynistic in itself. This essentialism was so embedded in medieval culture from centuries of patriarchal Greek and Christian writings that we could hardly expect writers to pull themselves from centuries of thought and treat "woman" as an equal with "man" in the later Middle Ages. However, as I will demonstrate throughout this study, MEMPOT comes very close to reversing masculine superiority and presenting a case for gender equality. The poet does this in part by refusing to use biblical women's behavior as an indication of the essence of all women. In addition, the actions of women are portrayed as independent performances, which—when acting for Christian society's good—should be imitated by real men and women. The MEMPOT-poet, most certainly, did not invent this pro-feminine attitude toward women from a social climate that was entirely anti-woman. No doubt, MEMPOT's positive view of Judith and other biblical women is the result of "the gradual consolidation of a pro-feminine stance, whose consequences trickle slowly over centuries" (Blamires Case 31).

In all likelihood, this changing attitude toward “woman” is associated with a slowly evolving religious transformation because of the effect that “Christ’s *humanitas* had on the way human nature was approached and discussed. Renewed discussion of the incarnation accelerated the pace of anthropocentrism by interpreting the event as the rebirth or recovery of natural man” (Rhodes 24). That this new way of considering “man” was also applied to “woman” appears evident in late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century women’s writings, such as that of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe.⁷² Yet in order for these women to be accepted by their contemporary audiences, attitudes toward women were probably in the process of change for some years. This slow transformation is most notable when comparing accounts and descriptions of women that are taken from other languages and transformed as they are represented in English, as in the case of saints’ lives, as well as *Ipomedon* and other romances. Perhaps these alterations are related to treating the vernacular not only as an “embodied” language, but also as a language more capable of examining and redefining “human beings in their natural existence in this world, a view inhospitable to traditional attitudes of contempt for human existence and for this world” (Rhodes 22). As vernacular writers explored and dignified the value of “man” within texts, the value of “woman” appears to have become increasingly accepted and portrayed favorably as well.

St. Francis of Assisi is often associated with the rise of a spirituality that emphasized the “human” aspects of Christ, which thus raised the value of humanity. His counterpart, Sister Clare, may have been an important influence in the realization of the value of women as human:

While Clare is forever linked with Francis in the modern mind, the art depicting her nevertheless is distinct from that depicting him and, in fact, distinct from previous images of holy women. Just as the new spirituality placed more emphasis on the affective and the human, so too did thirteenth-century Italian art. The famed monumental panel, the Santa Chiara dossal (ca. 1281-1285), presents not a virgin bride holding a traditional and symbolic lily but a

determined, stern, and very real woman whose life triumphs are represented in the eight pictorial narratives surrounding her. (Ranft 167)

Although the humanity of individual holy women and the value of their lives' accomplishments have been illustrated in some works of art, visual (as well as many textual) representations tend to lean toward allegorizing. Biblical and historical women that can be read as allegorical figures are portrayed in texts, stained glass windows and other religious art. An illustration of Clare, created after the Santa Chiara dossal, depicts an idealized Clare, whose image is associated with other idealized holy women:

A few decades after the dossal made its appearance, frescoes were painted in the church of Santa Chiara on the main vaults above the high altar . . . The Madonna with Child and Clare have the place of honor directly above the roundel of the Pantocrator over the main altar . . . the women are presented in spiritual and human perfection, enclosed on thrones and in tabernacles, enjoying their celestial rewards in heaven. Angels pay court to them and their accomplishments, some kneeling before and above them in respectful awe. (Ranft169)

These representations omit the reality of Clare's humanity and her life struggles and instead portray Clare as a symbol of perfection, who along with the Virgin Mary and other idealized saints serves as a hagiographical figure. Despite the fact that originally Sister Clare was appreciated for her human ability to care for those in need, Clare's humanity has been appropriated for use by the artist to symbolize an abstract ideal, distanced from her original performance.

This appropriation is not surprising, since many artists and writers of the Middle Ages found the symbolic use of "woman" irresistible. Eve and Mary served as polar types, used to transform the gender of the New Testament's juxtaposition of Adam and Christ as fallen man and redeemed humanity.⁷³ Eve as symbol of human fallibility takes on a host of associations

unrelated to Christian or Jewish theology. "Woman" as Eve becomes conflated with every misogynist text known to medieval readers; if a writer wished to evoke an anti-feminine image, Eve was available for sundry uses. On the other hand, Mary could be used as evidence for the opposite argument, as she was the idealization of everyone's mother, beloved, and sister, as well as the woman so perfect that she was chosen to be God's "bride."⁷⁴ These appropriations were often utilized to teach spiritual lessons, but could also be employed for rhetorical use by secular poets, flaunting their own creativity. Sunhee Kim Gertz argues that the image of "woman" was often appropriated in medieval works to draw attention to the poet's own rhetorical skill. The significance of "woman as word" embedded within courtly and religious texts "may appear as spoken word (oratorical word), written word (as material or text), and as creative word (as storyteller, generating literature" (107). "Woman as word" as well as other uses of "woman" as type or metaphor might be overtly positive or negative, and frequently appears ambivalent.⁷⁵

As Howard Bloch claims, woman's image as constructed in the Middle Ages labels her both "devil's gateway" and "bride of Christ," and the irony of these opposing stereotypes is their simultaneous presence within medieval constructions of "woman." For Bloch this double-sided construction "renders the feminine so abstract that woman (not women) can only be conceived as an idea rather than a human being. It polarizes the definition of the feminine to such an extent that women are pushed to the margins, excluded from the middle, in other words, isolated from history" (90). Depicting the humble Sister Clare, whose life was spent in poverty caring for indigents and lepers, as a noblewoman seated upon a throne erases her historical performance and leaves no corporeal model. This erasure is similar to the elimination of women's physicality that Lees and Overing have discovered in some Anglo-Saxon texts: "Indeed, the complex ways in which the female body is present at such sites of signification are dependent, paradoxically, on the absence of that body as the point of reference" (*Double* 159-60). Indisputably, most textual and graphic depictions of women are the product of a cultural

imagination that is interested in reflecting social values over lived experience. Yet in spite of the constructed nature of women's representation in medieval texts, there exists evidence that women writers were able to utilize these stereotypes to create a place for themselves within medieval religious life, positioning themselves as susceptible to weakness, and so, humble enough to be used by God. Julian of Norwich and Bridget of Sweden, for example, chose to embrace the fallen humanity of Eve and simultaneously the virtue of Mary, and in doing so were accorded a personal religious power that even men respected.⁷⁶ Perhaps a similar stance was also adopted by other women readers with favorable results.

Nevertheless, feminists generally agree that female stereotypes and feminine abstractions "reveal more about the fantasies, dreams, and nightmares of men than they do about the lives of women" (Bornstein 11). As a solution to the idealized version of "woman," Diane Bornstein examines medieval books of courtesy to find out how real medieval women were expected to perform. Of course even these texts, meant for emulation, contain notions of the ideal, which are to be translated into the lives of women. Courtesy books and other didactic literature, which served as conduits for ideals regarding women's behavior, supplied readers with imitative material that often appears unrealistically difficult to incorporate into actual performance. Hagiography, with its emphasis on chastity and martyrdom, appears particularly incongruent with the lives of readers in the late Middle Ages. Nonetheless, the lives of saints were often re-written particularly for the instruction of women readers who wished to imitate Christ.⁷⁷ Catherine Sanok examines the tension inherent in Julian of Norwich's imitation of Saint Cecilia, which

paradoxically serves as an index of the enormous transformation in ethical and devotional practice that distinguishes, or should distinguish, early Christianity from the practice of religion in late medieval England. In the ethical world Julian imagines, there is no place for the experience of martyrdom, the violent differentiation of the saint and her persecutors; it must be transformed instead,

she suggests, into the inward violence of spiritual desire, which seeks to overcome, rather than create, difference. (5)

Even though women saints continued to serve as idealized figures, some women were able to adapt these idealizations to their own lives. Still more prevalent was the reconstruction of exemplary images by male writers writing to a female audience. Sanok also examines conduct literature for its use of saints as exemplary material for readers. She finds that books such as Geoffrey de la Tour Landry's *Livre Du Chevalier De La Tour* or Caxton's Middle English translation, *Book of the Knight of the Tower* construct their own readings of women saints that uphold contemporary social values.⁷⁸

Reading St. Margaret as a model for marital fidelity requires an interpretive leap as large as that required for reading St. Cecilia as a model for private charity. It is a leap that signals historical difference: if only implicitly, the *Book of the Knight of the Tower* teaches its audience not so much that the paradigms of feminine virtue in saints' lives are imitable but that they are subject to the protocols of historical and social location. (8)

The Tower's depictions of saints that reflect marital fidelity and private charity indicate that the social values of this text's readers are not identical to those of the earlier saints' legends where martyrdom and virginity were proposed as spiritual models. Later medieval writers and readers were more interested in idealizations related to their own lives than they were to the idealizations of past Christendom. Clearly, ideal images within texts suffer the same type of transformations as Bakhtin theorizes for other aspects of language. They belong both to past records and to present interpreters.

Just as common as the interpretations that link biblical characters and saints to medieval understandings of ideal performance are interpretive leaps that connect them to contemporary medieval literary characters and motifs. Literary allusions are particularly visible in MEMPOT, in which biblical women are praised as the "fairest," as if they belong to the world

of romance, where physical beauty is a prerequisite for the heroine's virtue. In MEMPOT, there "were none fundon so fayre os" the noble Job's three daughters (15188; 1266.8), while in the Latin Vulgate they are without description. In this text, when a male character is presented as rich and noble, his wife and daughters are usually portrayed as beautiful:

And a prince proued of gret prow[e]s,
Naman neuynd, of nobyll fame. . .
his wyfe was fayre of flesch *and* fell
and of gud maners mekyll more (12351-2, 12361-2; 1030.3-4, 1031.1-2)

The Vulgate version of Naaman offers no descriptive information about his wife.⁷⁹ It is obvious that the MEMPOT-paraphraser is writing with descriptions of romance characters in mind.⁸⁰ *CM*, in spite of its use of romance imagery, mentions feminine beauty to a lesser extent. Rebecca is "milde" and not "wilde" in the thirteenth century text (3283-4);⁸¹ whereas, in the fourteenth century MEMPOT, Rebecca's "fayrer is not fon" (63.10).⁸² The MEMPOT-poet has replaced the traditional religious value of meekness with the literary value of beauty.⁸³

Yet beauty is not the sole quality by which the poet's women characters are identified. Women in MEMPOT, in lieu of being appreciated for their silence and obedience, are admired for their wisdom and wit. Rebecca is not only beautiful, but also capable of conversing with God and creating a "sotell gyn" ("subtle ruse")⁸⁴ to fulfill God's promise that her younger son will be served by the older twin (830; 70.2). The MEMPOT-poet is careful in this instance to emphasize that Rebecca and Jacob's scheme is in accordance with God's will: "þus begylyd he his brothy, / bot all was goddes wyll" (863-4; 72.11-12). Through brief commentary—without defending women outright—the text attempts to control readers' reactions to the women characters, being careful to ensure that customary misogynistic readings are not blankly applied. The account in *CM* gives no explanatory statement, allowing readers to interpret the deception on their own (3619-70). Although accounts of biblical women in MEMPOT quite often consist of standard literary claims of "fairness," these women are treated as agents who use their intelligence to

make choices for good or evil. For example, the poet recognizes that in the biblical account Samson's two Philistine lovers deceive him, but for different reasons. His Philistine fiancé reveals the answer to his riddle because she and her family have been threatened with death. In contrast, Dalyda (Delilah) has been offered gifts and prestige for revealing the secret that will destroy Samson's strength.⁸⁵ Despite the fact the narrator does not criticize the first woman's behavior,⁸⁶ the narrator harshly disparages Dalyda by calling her a devil and associating her with "yll wemen" in general:

A woman *wiþ* hyr weked ingyne
has lorne þat led, alas þat whyle!
Of hyr falshed scho wold not f[y]n;
full freke scho was *hym* forto fyle.
Scho dyd *hym* drynke of diuerse wyn
wiþ grett gladnes *hym* to be gyle.
So yll wemen wyll glose
þem þat þei wold haue schent,
ffor men sall not suppose
in þem none yll entent. (4335-44; 362.3-12)

While Dalyda is grouped with other "yll women," the poet does not categorize all women, nor claim that women as a class are deceptive.

Men in MEMPOT appear naïve when it comes to being deceived by women. This could be said of Holofores as well as Samson. However, this paraphrase makes clear that it is not the actions of deceiving a man that make a woman good or evil. MEMPOT's "yll wemen" belong to a group who oppose God and his people, the Hebrews.⁸⁷ This treatment exposes a religious prejudice, but not an ethnic one, as the text's favorable treatment of Ruth and Rahab reveals. Ruth—called a Philistine by the poet—is praised for her loyalty (as well as being "right fayr of hew and hyd") (4513-4; 377.1-2), and Rahab, though a gentile, is appreciated for her ingenuity

in hiding the Hebrew spies. Rahab is a particularly good example of women's cleverness and performance being appreciated when on the side of God. She deceives her own people and helps God's people with the same motivation as Samson's first love—to save herself and her family. Ingenious deception is admirable in the eyes of the writer and the ideal audience of MEMPOT as long as God and his people benefit.

Even though the individual stories of MEMPOT's women characters treat them as independent agents whose motivations for ill or good behavior are the same as men's, the poem's narrator occasionally ventures into a misogynistic diatribe. For example, when the narrator describes Solomon's many wives leading him into idolatry, he concludes with comparisons of other biblical men who were deceived by women:

Of Ebrews had he *qwennes*
 þat full wyse *wemen* wore,
bot most *part* was *paynims*
 þat plessed *hym* mekyll more.

þei fed *hym* fere in foly
 þat all *his* forse fouly he fyled.
He made *tempyls* to *mawmentry*
 and to fals *goddess* that *hym* be gyld.
So he forgate god *allmighty*
 þat euer had bene *his* bote or beld,
And lyfed in lust *and* lechery
 aftur the wylles of *wemen* wyld.
So Adam *and* sampson,
 our *forfaders*, ware flayd,
Dauid and *salamon*
 with *wemen* ware be trayde. (10017-32; 835.9-836.12)

It is clear that Sampson and Solomon fit into the poet's category of men deceived by "wylde" women, but it is not quite clear why the poet has included Adam and David. The stories of Adam and Eve and David and Bathsheba, as told by the paraphraser, include scenarios where both the man and the woman are equally to blame.⁸⁸ Adam and David's inclusion here (and by default Eve's and Bathsheba's) appears to come from traditional comparisons rather than from the viewpoint communicated by the poet in retelling the biblical stories.⁸⁹ Perhaps this inconsistency is evidence of the "mosaic" style of the MEMPOT-paraphraser, an indication that while the writer appears to have a generally consistent manner of treating the women characters, elements from the past are not totally eradicated.

In most instances MEMPOT's rendition of biblical women avoids reducing their characters to mere abstractions of good or evil and instead emphasizes their human ability to choose and act. They are as capable as men in using their wits and speaking their minds, and men listen to them. To illustrate women's capabilities, MEMPOT even includes accounts of biblical women with lesser-known stories, such as the wise woman of a besieged city whose leadership saves the lives of the people (9133-64; 762.1-764.8). *CM*, by contrast rarely includes Old Testament women's stories. The difference is particularly evident in the account of David. Where MEMPOT details the performances of his first two wives, Michal and Abigail, as well as the wise woman previously mentioned, *CM* leaves out the latter two characters and gives only one line to Michal. Yet *CM* does present a favorable view of a biblical woman in an expanded scenario between Bathsheba and David, which occurs towards the end of his life. In the biblical account, Nathan the prophet sends Bathsheba to David to tell him that Adoniaias has seized the throne instead of Solomon, and afterwards Nathan confirms her story. In *CM* David calls for Bathsheba to ask her advice regarding an heir.

"Dame, I did þe hider call,
Als mi wedded wijf of all,

Wit eild i am be-runnun nou,

O mi kingrike quat redes þou?" (8349-52)

Before answering, the queen bows low to the ground and he raises her up to sit beside him (a move much like MEMPOT describes when Judith greets Holofernes).⁹⁰ Bathsheba speaks with diplomacy, reminding David of his promise to Solomon and claiming that Solomon's wisdom and cooperation make him the wisest choice for the kingdom. *CM* leaves out Nathan's role in this scene, and David makes his choice based on the queen's recommendation. MEMPOT's rendition of this incident appears to mingle elements of the biblical story and *CM*'s narrative—Nathan addresses the queen and she immediately approaches David, as in the Bible, but MEMPOT resembles *CM* in noting the queen's fear when entering the king's presence and then by claiming that she has approached him to seek a "boon" (MEMPOT 784.9-10).⁹¹ Perhaps these additions are unrelated, simply medieval understandings of the customs associated with approaching a king. Yet MEMPOT also erases Nathan's presence and influence in the rest of the passage. In both of these medieval paraphrases, Bathsheba is capable of influencing the king without help from the prophet.

In MEMPOT, as in the biblical account, Bathsheba appears to resist any form of idealization or demonization. She performs in ways that benefit both herself and God's people, but she also has a past that shows her capable of performing against Hebrew and Christian values. Yet Bathsheba is somewhat unusual. Most of the paraphrase's women remain embedded in abstract values of right or wrong. At the same time, however, the MEMPOT-poet attempts to treat women as humans fully able to make their own wise or disastrous choices. Still the characters' textual histories—and thus their symbolic interpretations—remain complicated by oral and graphic histories. Perhaps traditional symbolic interpretation is intentional on the part of the poet in instances where little is altered in the poet's rendition, such as the story of Delilah, which is greatly expanded from Comestor's version, but follows the Old French Paraphrase closely—omitting the narrator's misogynistic ramblings about women.⁹² In

MEMPOT merely a few, “evil” women reach this state of stereotypical abstraction, which may be due to the poet’s desire to set these apart as negative examples. While much of the demonization is purged from potentially negative women, the poet does not or cannot eliminate all of the idealization from women characters that are used as positive role models for readers. There are particular aspects of these characters that are already culturally stereotyped and thus difficult to erase. Although MEMPOT’s use of direct speech adds a more personalized view of the characters, their actions frequently remain within the mold of the obedient, virtuous woman. Nevertheless, because MEMPOT’s women typically speak, the stereotype of silent meekness is removed from the text.⁹³ The ideal woman in MEMPOT is active and intelligent in her obedience to God—and obedience to men is not required if it is contrary to the woman’s faith.⁹⁴

2.6 Inventing Medieval Judith

The character of Judith in MEMPOT resonates with the poet’s view of women as equal performers within a masculinist society. Judith’s beauty, wit, and speech are all important aspects of the paraphraser’s version of her tale. Yet these qualities are not merely literary expansions, as in some of the writer’s retold stories. Instead, remarkable beauty, intelligent deception, and courageous speaking are essential to the plot. Additionally, Judith’s narrative requires both feminine and masculine performance from the same actor, asking its ideal audience to believe that the deception often associated with women, along with assertive action, can serve a productive purpose in protecting masculine society and promoting God’s plan. Consequently, the basic plot details line up with the MEMPOT-poet’s assumptions regarding women’s performance and the paraphrase’s positive attitude toward deception if used against pagans for the common good of God’s people. Thus, Judith’s traditional character fits almost perfectly into the image of “woman” that the MEMPOT-poet designs for readers. Even so, there are aspects of MEMPOT’s Judith that the poet alters. Before an analysis can be made regarding the poet’s original handling of Judith, a closer study of the biblical versions and their later medieval interpretations must be attempted. The metaphors and stereotypes inherent in

the tale of Judith need to be examined previous to positing, as Squires does, that MEMPOT through its use of common medieval stereotypes domesticates Judith, robbing her of the biblical Judith's performative power.

Perhaps it is wishful thinking to attribute feminist—or even feminine—power to the original story of Judith.⁹⁵ Even if the independent power of a woman was apparent in the first writing of the story, it has since been reinterpreted and reformed by the comments of writers and readers immersed in male-dominated societies. Still, within the story of Judith resides a muted power—one that later readers sought to carefully interpret and control. The Latin Vulgate version translated by Jerome in “a single night's work” is one of the most obvious attempts at maintaining Judith within acceptable boundaries, in this case by “convey[ing] in Latin only what I could find expressed coherently in the Chaldean words” (Jerome *Preface*).⁹⁶ Thus, Jerome's version of Judith is a quickly rendered translation: “As the Aramaic text was being translated aloud into Hebrew by a Jewish scholar, Jerome was dictating to his secretary a Latin translation of it” (Moore 96). Carey Moore claims that Jerome did not spend adequate time on the book to give an error-free translation, because he did not believe the book was deserving of careful treatment. When compared with the Greek Septuagint, however, it is obvious that Jerome did take the time to stamp the story with some of his own glosses, resulting in a Judith he believed would be more useful as a model for Christian men and women.⁹⁷

In a comparison of Carey Moore's English translation of the Septuagint and the Douay Rheims (a sixteenth-century English translation of the Latin Vulgate),⁹⁸ Jerome's reinterpretation of Judith becomes evident, particularly through its justification of Judith's strength: “For thou hast done manfully, and thy heart has been strengthened, because thou hast loved chastity, and after thy husband hast not known any other . . . therefore thou shalt be blessed for ever” (Judith 15.11).⁹⁹ In Jerome's telling of Judith, Joakim the high priest asserts that chastity has given Judith the power to act with masculine strength, while in the Greek text no such claim is made: “You are the great boast of our nation! For by your own hand you have accomplished all

this. You have done well by Israel; God is well pleased with it. May the Omnipotent Lord bless you in all the days to come” (Judith 15.9-10). The Septuagint attributes to Judith the power of a performance based on her own abilities, not upon her chastity or even God’s might. In contrast, the Vulgate emphasizes Judith’s chastity and her dependence upon God as she acts. Although both accounts mention Judith asking for God’s help immediately before severing Holofernes’ head, the Vulgate includes prayer at other times during the plot when Judith’s behavior might be interpreted as an assault to patriarchal structures, as when she leaves the city dressed “to kill.” In the Vulgate, Jerome uses Judith’s departure from the city to emphasize the people’s blessing on her mission and provide an image of a praying Judith that dulls the details of her beauty:

And when they came to the gate of the city, they found Ozias, and the ancients of the city waiting. And when they saw her they were astonished, and admired her beauty exceedingly. But they asked her no question, only they let her pass, saying: The God of our fathers give thee grace, and may he strengthen all the counsel of thy heart with his power, that Jerusalem may glory in thee, and thy name may be in the number of the holy and just. And they that were there said, all with one voice: So be it, so be it. But Judith praying to the Lord, passed through the gates, she and her maid. (Judith 10.6-10)¹⁰⁰

Conversely, the Septuagint makes no effort to conceal Judith’s beauty or independence:

They then went toward the town gate of Bethulia and found Uziah standing there with the other town elders, Chabris and Charmis. And when they saw her (for her face was so transformed and her clothes so different), they were much struck by her beauty. They said to her, May the God of our ancestors grant you favor and fulfill your plans so that the Israelites may glory and Jerusalem exult!” She bowed to them and said to them “Order the town gate to be opened for me, and I will go out and accomplish the things you have just mentioned to me.” So they ordered the young men to open up for her, just as she had asked, and

they did so. When Judith went out, accompanied by her maid, the men of the town kept staring after her until she had gone down the hill and crossed the valley, where they lost sight of her. (Judith 10.6-10)

In the Greek text, Judith is allowed to command the gatekeepers, and her beauty is permitted to impress the men without any attempt to emphasize her purity or dedication to God—an indication that the writer did not attempt to subdue Judith’s appearance or behavior, whereas Jerome, providing a text for Christian readers, attempts to contain the performance of a beautiful and self-governing woman.

An equally obvious containment of Judith’s autonomy is the Vulgate’s treatment of what happens after Judith rebukes the elders for their lack of faith. Here Judith indicates that she is subject to the elders’ authority by asking them to judge her performance and pray for her: “So that which I intend to do prove ye if it be of God, and pray that God may strengthen my design” (Judith 8:31). Even while Judith is submitting herself to their leadership, the idea of her own ability to strategize and to act is not erased; and yet there is the sense that Judith sees herself as participating with the religious leaders in rescuing the people, as one who acts under their government. This attitude is definitely not present within the Septuagint, in which, instead of asking for prayer, she makes a confident claim: “Listen to me . . . I am going to do something which will go down among the children of our people for endless generations” (Judith 8.32). In the Greek text, this powerful plan and performance belongs solely to Judith. She is both actor and director, whereas the religious leaders are merely part of the audience. In this way the text invites readers/listeners to watch Judith’s plot unfold with the expectation that Israel will be delivered through a woman’s hand; conversely, the Vulgate’s treatment invites its audience to spiritualize Israel’s deliverance and the conquering woman who acts in the name of God and the patriarchs.¹⁰¹

Jerome provides readers with a version of Judith that emphasizes chastity foremost, which he believed could be useful for both men and women:

Receive the widow Judith, example of chastity, and with triumphant praise acclaim her with eternal public celebration. For not only for women, but even for men, she has been given as a model by the one who rewards her chastity, who has ascribed to her such virtue that she conquered the unconquered among humanity, and surmounted the insurmountable. (*Preface*)¹⁰²

Of course, it should not be too surprising that Jerome, who reads the glory of virginity into even the erotic Song of Solomon,¹⁰³ should stress Judith's chastity over her courage and independence. In fact, Jerome is not the only writer of his time who read Judith as a figure of chastity. Prudentius, Jerome's contemporary, also used Judith in this way in his *Psychomachia*, where she was paired with Mary. According to Marc Mastrangelo, using Judith in conjunction with Mary blends the image of a fight against *libido* with the purity of Christ's incarnation:

The story of Judith typologically prefigures the events of Mary's virgin pregnancy and eventual birth of Christ, and also heralds the new post-Incarnation age (*tempora nostra figurat*)—and, by implication, the triumph of Pudicitia. Virginity and celibacy resulted in the greatest of all births and a clear opportunity for human salvation. The typological use of Judith ultimately suggests this allegorical version of the pure Christian soul, forming the climax of the poetry through *Psych.* 108. (95)

While Jerome uses Judith as a model of physical chastity,¹⁰⁴ Prudentius allegorizes Judith, creating a literary device to depict the Christian soul's struggle and ultimate victory over vice and evil. Mastrangelo claims that the effect upon readers of *Psychomachian* allegory is one of association, which causes "the reader [to] become typologically linked to the Old Testament heroes. . .like Adam, Job and David, he is faced with choices between virtuous qualities of the soul and vice-like ones" (99). Apparently, Prudentius' ideal reader possesses the background knowledge and intellectual ability to make allegorical connections between biblical characters and human psychological experience, perhaps indicating a more erudite audience than

Jerome's readers, who were invited to follow Judith as a model for their physical performance. Both Jerome and Prudentius' representations of Judith indicate they expect their audiences to recognize within her the value of chastity as a significant Christian virtue.¹⁰⁵

The practice of interpreting biblical narratives and characters, including Judith, as either literal or allegorical continued into the late Middle Ages, although different periods were dominated by one view or the other.¹⁰⁶ Biblical paraphrases follow these two trends, often combining the literal with the use of allegory and typology for interpreting Judith. The allegorical reading takes precedent in the twelfth century *Aurora* by Peter Riga, which for centuries after its composition was considered a Christian classic that "might more accurately be termed a verse commentary on the Bible" (Beichner xi). Riga's metrical version of the Book of Judith recounts the biblical story and then expands the significance of its typology in a section dedicated to allegorical reading. According to Riga, Judith represents *Ecclesia* in battle with Satan (Holofernes). She is also a type of the spirit that wars against the flesh.¹⁰⁷ Panegyric adjectives abound within Riga's description of the allegorical Judith. Because Judith is an abstract idea, rather than a character read as an example of a historical woman, she can even be praised as "a woman presbyter; a woman worthy to be a hero" (Riga 384).¹⁰⁸

Although there is nothing threatening to medieval Christian readers in Judith as the corporate church or the individual spirit severing the head of an enemy—Satan or the flesh—Riga does attempt to guard Judith's reputation in the first section which recounts the biblical story. Judith is introduced as one who has been blessed by God with wisdom and beauty: "Judith dwelt in this city, famous, gifted with understanding / Distinguished by birth, loved by God, of beautiful complexion (Riga 373).¹⁰⁹ The poet leaves no doubt in ideal readers' minds as to Judith's identity as a special representative of God. Riga's narrator and characters are convinced of her saintliness. Thus, instead of ogling Judith as she passes, the Hebrew men react to her beauty by praying for her:

Seeing her, the crowd was astounded by the extraordinary splendor of her
beauty

On her behalf all the elders (priests) offered devout prayers to God
As soon as she descends the hill held by those guarding the posts,
They are amazed by her beautiful countenance. (Riga 379)¹¹⁰

This response to Judith is similar to that described in the Vulgate, but here Judith does not ask for prayer. In spite of the fact that the men participate in her mission by praying on her behalf, Riga's Judith seems to hold an iconic power over the Hebrews, reminiscent of that wielded by the Virgin Mary. However, the poet does allow for some variance in the reactions she provokes—in the eyes of Holofernes she becomes a romantic idealization: “Her grace appears to the ruler's eyes, and the beauty of her countenance / And her sparking eyes inflict a serious wound [of love] in him. (Riga 379)¹¹¹ Holofernes is caught by his eyes and receives the wound of love. No blame is accorded to Judith, who remains the idealized heroine. The conclusion of Riga's account (previous to his explanation of the allegory) portrays Judith as a glorious female hero, devoted to God and celebrated by the people with festivals. There is no mention of her chastity in the story, even though the adjectives *sobria* and *casta*, which can be translated as “sober and chaste,” are used afterward to elaborate on her allegorical image. Riga apparently did not feel it necessary to emphasize Judith's chastity for his twelfth-century audience, who already understood her figure as associated with the Church and the Virgin Mary.

The most famous of Latin paraphrases, Comestor's *Historia Scholastica*, does not treat Judith, or other biblical subjects, as abstract types. Instead it presents the Bible as a book of literal stories with historical characters. Judith is introduced with a brief reference to her background: “Now in the city was Judith, who had been a widow for three years, a most beautiful woman, but also chaste (or devout), from the tribe of Ruben,” which is immediately followed by her rebuke of the Hebrew elders (Comestor Col. 1477C).¹¹² Comestor's depiction of Judith does not frame her as blessed by God with beauty and wisdom as does Riga's

description, nor does Comestor offer a commentary on her dressing performance as does the Vulgate. Her beauty seems to be considered something separate from her devotion/chastity, and she is not idealized nor considered typologically. Even the response of Holofernes is not as dramatic as in the *Aurora* where he was: “immediately captured through his eyes” (Comestor Col. 1477D).¹¹³ Throughout Judith’s portrayal in the *Historia* she is treated as a normal (although heroic) human, even when honored by her people for saving their lives. In the conclusion Comestor ends with personal details, which are omitted in the *Aurora*:

Judith daughter of Merari, a Rubenite, returned to Bethulia. A mother from the tribe of Simeon, and a widow all the days of her life. And after living 105 years, she died, and was buried with her husband Manassa, and she set her maid free, and all the people mourned her for seven days. (Col. 1479C)¹¹⁴

By identifying Judith as a Rubenite, Comestor frames her as a member of her people; additionally, the details he gives guide readers to understand Judith’s role within her cultural milieu. Although a hero, she is also a woman in the midst of a patriarchal culture, where her value is at least in part measured by her father’s name and her own respectable status as widow of Manassa.¹¹⁵ Comestor is careful to include these biblical details because, unlike Riga’s typological presentation of Judith, he presents a female character within a historical context, a brave widow within a familiarly patriarchal environment.

Late Middle English biblical paraphrases also generally fall into the two categories of historical/literal and typological—usually a separation according to emphasis rather than exclusion. Unfortunately, the inclusion of the Book of Judith within these texts is rare. An early fifteenth century (1429) Middle English translation of the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, entitled *The Mirour of Mans Saluacioune*, mentions Judith simply as a prefiguration of Mary, demonstrating that figural typology was still a viable alternative for readers of Judith. Most Late Middle English paraphrases, however, follow Comestor’s lead in rendering historical/literal models, as can be seen in John Trevisa’s translation of Ranulph Higden’s *Polychronicon*, which

is a synthesis of historical, legendary and biblical tales. James Morey's analysis of the text indicates that biblical stories and characters play a lesser part within the chronicle:

Classical history and mythology constitute the bulk of the text, with frequent digressions and quotations of Josephus, Peter Comestor, and others. The amount of biblical material is in fact spare, often amounting to no more than a mention of a name, though it does include some brief narrative vignettes. (*Book* 108)

Judith's story amounts to one sentence, identifying her as the widow who slew Holofernes. Judith's action is not placed in the context of the siege of Bethulia or the salvation of Hebrew lives. Her performance follows the killing of Cyrus by the queen of Messagetes in retribution for the slaughter of her son and, thus, serves as an early example of Judith's identification with women who murder men. The parallels between certain aspects of the two women's stories are striking, as Trevisa's translation reveals:

But for solas and conforte sche [the queen] desired forto take wreche, and bygiled Cirus wiþ suche a manere gile. Sche as it were felynge for hir sone þat was newe wounded, drou3 Cirus into a narrow valley bytwene hi3e hilles, and slow Cirus and two hondred þowsand of his men of Pers, so þat nou3t oon scaped to bere hoom typinges how hem spedde. Þe queene hi3te smyte of Cirus heed, and prowe it in a flakett ful of manis blood. (169, 171)

Both the queen and Judith destroy their enemy through deceptive strategies, and both sever the man's head and place it in a container. Judith, in this text, loses her connection with God and his people and becomes a *femme fatale*. Even though Higden offers no commentary on Judith's guile, her pairing with the Messagete queen creates an association between the two, fueling further misogynistic generalizations regarding the danger of women.

In some texts Judith had begun to be used as a figure of “woman,” divorced from her chaste character and devoted purpose, as is evident in Chaucer’s Monk’s rendition of her tale, which warns men that no one is safe from Lady Fortune:

But taak kep of the deth of Oloferne:
Amydde his hoost he dronke lay a-nyght,
Withinne his tente, large as is a berne,
And yet, for al his pompe and al his might,
Judith, a woman, as he lay upright
Slepynge, his heed of smoot, and from his tente
Ful pryvely she stal from every wight,
And with his heed unto her toun she wente. (VII 2567-74)

Again there is no context given for Judith’s actions. She is neither commended nor criticized, and neither is Holofernes. Readers are allowed to supply both context and judgment, even while the Monk seems to direct readers’ opinions by presenting Holofernes, along with the other men who are destroyed by Fortune, as tragic figures. Various interpretations are possible. Perhaps these examples serve as warnings to men that their pride and/or behavior can destroy them by bringing God’s wrath, implying that Judith is an agent of divine justice. However, alternative readings might occur within a cultural milieu that already sees women as dangerous. No matter how evil the character, his place within a literary tragedy draws sympathy from some members of the audience..¹¹⁶

The multiple ways that Judith can be read becomes even more obvious within the larger context of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, where she is presented as an image read differently by various characters. For the Monk she may be Fortune’s hired assassin, but in the *Tale of Melibee* Prudence regards Judith as a figure of wisdom and counsel: “Judith by hire good conseil delivered the cite of Bethulie, in which she dwelled, out of the handes of Olofernus, that hadde it biseged and wolde have al destroyed it” (VII 1098). Here the actual decapitation is

ignored and Judith's intelligent plan becomes the focus of her story. Judith is paired with other biblical women whose counsel resulted in prosperity for the Hebrews, and together they provide proof for a positive generalization regarding women: "What is better than gold? Jasper. What is better than jasper? Wisdom. / And what is better than wisdom? Woman. And what is better than a good woman? Nothing" (VII 1106-7).¹¹⁷ Offering another perspective, *the Merchant's Tale* mentions Judith within a list of examples meant to prove that a wife is a remedy for all unhappiness. She serves beside Rebecca and Abigail to illustrate that husbands should always listen to their wives because they have their husbands' best interests in mind. Even though each of these women characters is notable for her wise advice and independent actions that create prosperity for her people, there is an ironic twist to their use in this instance. Rebecca and Abigail acted against their husband's desires, because their husbands were not acting in accordance with God's plan. Judith's husband is dead, and her actions definitely do not benefit Holofernes, who, while not her husband or lover, is sometimes depicted as her counterpart in medieval art and literature. In this instance the reference to Judith is satirical in the manner of verse that praised women in order to mock them. Yet Chaucer provides a serious reading of her heroic character when Constance petitions God for the same "spirit of vigour" that he sent Judith (*The Man of Law's Tale* II 943-5). Chaucer's four characters use Judith to represent four distinct medieval readings, upholding the notion that images acquire significance as they move through texts and graphic representations. Much as Bakhtin has claimed for the utterance, each image is a combination of past expression and the individual's fresh application.

It is unfortunate that the popular *Cursor Mundi* does not depict Judith, because it would provide a roughly contemporary portrayal for comparison with MEMPOT's depiction. The only Middle English paraphrase that contains a long version of Judith's tale was written much later than MEMPOT's supposed composition, and yet the biblical stories and saints' lives contained therein would have been well known by earlier medieval audiences.¹¹⁸ William Caxton's *Golden Legend* (of which there are no extant manuscripts) was printed by Caxton in 1483. Caxton

composed his paraphrase using three books— “an unidentified Latin text of Jacobus de Voragine’s *Legenda Aurea* (ca. 1260), the *Legende doree*, a French translation by Jehan de Vignai (ca. 1333), and the English *Gilte Legend* (1438)” (Morey *Book* 154). He introduces Judith as “a widow and a blessed woman,” terms that position her within a masculine and Christian social structure. Judith’s depiction here is similar to the Vulgate: although Judith plans the strategy, she is dependent on prayers from the elders and she passes through the gates praising God. Caxton thereby follows Jerome in de-emphasizing Judith’s beauty and the male gaze. *The Golden Legend* also quotes the Vulgate commendation of Judith’s chastity and manful behavior, providing a close paraphrase of the Latin. Despite the fact that Caxton’s *Book of Judith* presents her character as a historical figure, the typological connection between Judith and Mary is expounded upon in the Legend’s version of Gabriel’s visit to the Virgin:

Mary, thou has found grace at the Lord. . . For thou has vanquished the temptations of the world which kele my love, and thereof as is said Judith, cap. Xv., *Tu Gloria Jerusalem, tu laetitia Israel, tu honorificentia*, etc.: Thou art the glory of Jerusalem, though art the joy of Israel, thou art all the honour of our people. Cap. *Eodem: Confortatum est cor tuum, eo quod castitatem amaveris, et post virum tuum, alterum nescieris: ideo et manus Domini confortavit te. Et ideo eris benedicta in aeternum*: Thou hast kept chastity, and therefore thou shalt be blessed permanably. Judith viii. *Ora pro nobis, quoniam mulier sancta es*, etc. Item cap. Xiv. *Benedicta es*, etc. It was said to Judith the widow, this that we may say to our Lady: Pray for us for ye be an holy woman, ye be a daughter that is blessed of the sovereign God above all the women that be on the earth. (Vol. 2 *The Feast of the Conception of Our Lady*)

Here Judith is typologically connected to Mary in three ways: 1) through the honor the people accord her; 2) through her chastity, which causes her to be blessed; 3) through the people’s

request for her prayers. Caxton's portrayal of Judith contains both literal model and spiritual type, based on Judith's image as constructed through centuries of patristic writing.

Judith has been employed by writers (as well as artists) for a variety of didactic purposes: spiritual typology, stereotypical generalization, and literal example. As previously discussed, MEMPOT's poet crafted the work by adapting Comestor's more literal reading of the Bible, and therefore MEMPOT's Judith is designed to be a practical model for readers. However, the poet does not give readers the same Judith as other writers who have used her as literal example. Neither the Vulgate, nor even the *Historia*, is followed closely. MEMPOT's poet does not emphasize chastity, nor frame Judith within a patriarchal lineage. Moreover, Judith's own intellectual ability is emphasized, and as a result a positive spin is given to misogynistic readings of the schemes of women. Judith's introduction in MEMPOT ignores the fact that she is a widow and that she is beautiful, indicating that the poet is attempting to ward off negative readings of Judith's character by avoiding her association with stereotypes of temptresses and widows.¹¹⁹

If the poet concentrates efforts on steering the reader away from interpreting Judith as a stereotypical widow, the endeavor may be in part caused by the medieval literary tendency to portray widows as licentious and capricious—the typical “Wife of Bath.” Because of this tradition, the writer of MEMPOT, who desires to present Judith as a Christian “insampyll,” must combat both her deceptive performance within the narrative and the negative stereotype of Judith's widowed state.¹²⁰ The poet's first strategy is to present other aspects of Judith's identity and ignore her widowhood when she is introduced at the beginning of the poem. Her nobility rather than her marital state forms the foundation of her character and the frame in which readers are to understand her actions. This authorial strategy is not based on the Vulgate, which identifies Judith immediately as a widow and devotes three verses to her husband and his death as a part of her introductory description. Where the faithful, chaste widow was a standard, well-respected figure of Old and New Testament texts and saints' lives, widows in

medieval texts were just as likely to be the target of biting satire.¹²¹ Thus, this paraphrase approaches the subject of her widowhood with caution, and does not even refer to her status until after the complete victory has been won, the spoils divided, and Judith has taken up her former lifestyle—which is still primarily that of a lady, albeit one whose allegiance to God and her people has been proven. Apparently, toward the end of the narrative the poet feels confident that the heroine has gained the respect of readers, and considers it safe to allude to Judith’s widowhood:

þen home to hyr hows scho zede,
and pepyll past to þer places sere.
A lades lyfe þen con sho led,
and Goddes law lyked hyr euer to lere.

And furth sho weryd hyr wedow wede (17703-7; 1476.3-7)

Readers discover that Judith is a widow only because she puts on clothing appropriate to that status. The poet of the *Metrical Paraphrase* does not identify Judith’s character with her widowhood. In spite of wearing her “wedow wede,” Judith is never called “widow” throughout the poem, which is further indication of the poet’s anxiety regarding the stereotype.

The poet attempts to control negative associations between Judith and stereotypical widows even in the last lines of the poem, where Judith’s performance of widowhood reflects the roles assigned to Christian nobility, whose social and spiritual obligation required them to take care of the sick, old and mentally ill—the needy who made up part of any large landholding. These tasks were particularly expected of wealthy widows, who had no husband or children to nurture:

Sho had enogh of rent and land
in ylke sted whore sho was sted
Aftur manasses, hyr husband,
þat lorly lyf be fore had led.

And of all that sho had in hand
over honest spence þat suld be sped,
þer *wit*h pore folke sho fed *and* fand
and beldyd both to bake *and* bede. (17713-20; 1477.1-8)

This description of Judith's generosity emphasizes a different set of virtues than some popular sermons of the later Middle Ages, which frequently used Judith as an idealized version of Christian widowhood: "her-of is ensample in holy writt of the noble womman Judith, that was a faire womman and a clene wedowe, and sche held hir priveliche in clos in hir hous with hir women and wolde nocht goon out, but schoned sight of men and los of the world" (qtd in Owst 119).¹²² This sermon's account of Judith's life as a widow stresses her secluded focus on God, not her compassion toward suffering humans. Locked safely away and always piously conversing with God, she is no longer a threat to masculine fears.¹²³ Perhaps, by refusing to mention Judith's status as widow for most of the poem, the poet is avoiding a notion of widowhood that demands inactivity, as well as diverting readers from a premature judgment regarding her morality.¹²⁴

Silence on the topic of widowhood is not the single indication that the MEMPOT-poet desires to transcend traditional stereotypes. While other biblical paraphrases, literary texts, and sermons either narrate Judith's story and/or use her figure as exemplary material, MEMPOT differs in that it allows her to speak within the tale. As previously noted, this use of dialogue is typical of MEMPOT's treatment of women characters that use their wisdom and wit to serve God. Instead of being defined exclusively by a narrator, the poet depicts a Judith who is capable of presenting herself. Although MEMPOT frames Judith's representation with introductory and conclusive narration, we learn much about Judith through her own words, particularly her introduction of herself to the Assyrian guards and to Holofernes. The technique is similar to that used in the biblical Book of Judith, with a variation in content. In both the Septuagint and Vulgate versions of the Book of Judith she introduces herself as a "daughter of the Hebrews";

alternatively, in MEMPOT, there is no reference to gender in either introduction.¹²⁵ To the guards she is only one among many: “I am on of þe ebrews / that wuns in þis Cyte” (17291-2; 1441.11-12). Here Judith’s ethnic identity is of primary importance to her character,¹²⁶ and in fact it is her association with the Hebrews that helps to set up the juxtaposition of God’s people versus pagans and erases the sexual connotation of her struggle with Holofernes.¹²⁷ To Holofernes she introduces herself as an individual, but one who represents the entire population, as she remains ungendered and of an age that encompasses all: “I am an Ebrew ald *and* 3yng” (17342; 1446.2).

When Judith claims to be both old and young, the text is probably not implying that she is of mature age with unusual characteristics of youthful beauty—for an older person who acted as if she/he were younger was usually considered foolish in medieval society.¹²⁸ Rather, she is referring to both her “old and wise” soul, and her “young and beautiful” body, reminiscent of the *puer/puella senex* topos, where a child is remarkably wise in spite of his/her youth. This is a familiar description of Christ and, as demonstrated by John Burrows in his work on *The Ages of Man*, a common place in hagiographic literature.¹²⁹ Judith transcends the limits of her youth so that she can act according to admired virtues—“*maturitas*,” “*gravitas*,” and “*sapientia*”—that were presumably acquired in many people through the experience of a long life, while divinely present in the early lives of saints (Burrows 107).¹³⁰ In the late Middle Ages, however, examples of *puer/puella senex* are not confined to saints’ lives or religious literature. Burrows points out that an occasional reference might be found in medieval romance, but it is in the epic that the trope becomes prominent, which appears to have resulted from elements present within Virgil, in which Burrows finds “a grand equalization of ages there, a convergence of old and young characters in the direction of an ideal heroic condition which escapes the limitations of both” (117). Burrows demonstrates how the hero in Virgil is not limited to having virtues based on those assigned to his particular age; he can be characterized with strength and sexual prowess, and simultaneously with maturity and wisdom, without attracting the readers’ criticism. In the

epic tradition the hero already contains characteristics associated in the Middle Ages with various “Ages” of man; however, neither these nor the *puer/puella senex* trope are emphasized, as in past literary traditions. Burrows asserts they are not completely erased, but are merely mentioned in “passing” (121-3). Similarly, the MEMPOT-poet does not expand upon Judith’s remarkable combination of maturity and youthfulness. Perhaps the text’s lack of embellishment on this topic is related to the waning of the theme within secular texts; it may also be related to the idea of Judith as an example for ordinary readers—only heroes and saints could obtain the label of *puer/puella senex*. Thus, while the writer intends an association between Judith and this image, it is probably not meant to dominate readers’ view of her, but to inhibit her association with temptresses or hags.

Even as MEMPOT uses positive religious images to avoid associations between negative stereotypes and Judith, the poet also creates a secular context for her character to interest medieval readers. Remarkably, the writer does not launch the story with the background of the Jewish nation nor even Judith’s previous marriage and widowhood. Instead her social position is employed as a frame for the tale. She is primarily a lady or “dame” in line one of the poem, and secondarily a “lele ebrew,” who loved the Law, in line seven. At the end of the narrative, the poet mentions Judith’s government of her noble household as the last piece of pertinent information before her death: “hyr servandes, man, maydyn, and knaue, / mad sho to goueren gud degree / þen dyed scho as god voched saue” (17725-7; 1478.1-3). The storyteller emphasizes Judith’s position and her ability to live within it wisely—keeping order and security for all. This frame differs from versions of Judith that conclude her story by noting her chastity and the fact that she dwelt within her husband’s house for the rest of her life. Here again the MEMPOT-poet stresses Judith’s activity and agency: she is not a passive widow, living in seclusion; her active life consists of wisely governing her household. Squires reads MEMPOT as domesticating Judith, because she no longer takes an active part in the political aspects of her nation. However, Judith’s return to private life is not the MEMPOT-poet’s invention, but an

inherent part of Judith's story. Other accounts emphasize her continued devotion and connection to her husband, whereas MEMPOT depicts an independent woman not defined by her widowhood—and still a woman who lives within a patriarchal society where her high social position within that hierarchy, as well as her religious devotion to the God of the fathers, determines the freedom that she is allowed to exercise.¹³¹

2.7 Considering Readers and Writers

An informed reading of MEMPOT's Judith takes into consideration the way in which medieval writers used women characters to teach and to delight their audiences. The presentation of an intelligent, courtly, and/or saintly woman was a positive image that contradicted centuries of misogynistic renderings of "woman" as temptress.¹³² Apparently, many readers, particularly women, received these favorable portrayals as part of a pleasurable reading experience. Anne Clark Bartlett posits that the reading of secular and devotional material adorned in courtly discourse could provide women readers with a way of escaping their not-so-perfect lives: "Such narratives vicariously transport women readers into a discursive world in which they could identify with beautiful, leisured, and eloquent heroines; they could participate vicariously in amatory adventures; and they would be reassured that the dangers threatening a society's stability could be resolved by the courageous deeds of a legendary hero or heroine" (59). While Bartlett concurs with Howard Bloch that the language and terms of courtliness served as a method of controlling women, she argues that just as studies of modern romance readers have indicated the positive effects of escaping into romance fiction, medieval women may have used courtly reading to empower their lives or alleviate their suffering, at least for a time. Even so, the depiction of positive women characters often led to abstract and/or stereotypical readings. If, as Elizabeth Clark avers, there "is the inherited tendency of exemplification to erase history" and create myth (169-70), then whatever history might have once been present within the stories of women, including Judith, has since become mythic by continual use. Thus, writers who desired to present practical models for their medieval audience

were forced to use figures already laden with meaning. The MEMPOT-poet appears to recognize this phenomenon and attempts to construct women characters that defy some of their past signification. The poet does not limit portrayals of women to their religious context, but draws upon images present within secular texts (particularly romance models, as we shall see in Chapters Four and Five) to construct women characters who demonstrate that women are just as capable as men of thinking and acting for the greater good, thereby providing an image of “woman” that reflects an equal to the poet’s image of “man.”

Nevertheless, while demonstrating an attitude toward gender that appears nearly modern, the poet still retains an attitude toward social hierarchies that is obviously medieval. In this paraphrase Judith is primarily a noblewoman. She is embedded within the patriarchal hierarchy, and yet the poet gives her character power and freedom beyond normal depictions of even a noblewoman. Hence, the paraphraser places Judith within a social context that medieval audiences can understand and simultaneously portrays a woman figure that pushes medieval gender boundaries. The poet presents, without apology or restriction, a saintly noblewoman who defies male leaders—both Hebrews and Assyrians—by speaking her own identity, defining her own limits and planning her own schemes. Additionally, MEMPOT claims that Judith can be used as a model that will amend the behavior of readers. Judith, the exemplary figure, is presented as a medieval noblewoman—not surprisingly, as many medieval devotional texts employed courtly themes and language. Bartlett suggests that women, as well as men, were encouraged to identify with courtly characters in order to become socialized:

If, as Judson Boyce Allen has argued, the ideology of courtesy and the romances that disseminated this code of conduct were ‘part of the *paideia* of the statesman,’ they must also have figured importantly—though perhaps less publicly—in the socialization of medieval women, supplying a vocabulary for the formation, dissemination, and internalization of feminine identities and experiences. The conventions of courtesy in devotional treatises undoubtedly

combined with a text's doctrinal teaching both to attract and to shape female readers in culturally constructed and idealized codes of conduct, along with whatever doctrinal force they may have possessed. (60)

Bartlett contends that the use of courtliness in religious texts appears to indicate that women, as well as men, used this code of conduct in constructing their own lives, just as writers hoped. She bases her argument on Allen's claim that medieval readers "classified literature simply as ethics, which still preserved the memory that was the third part of practical prudence in the form of stories, and which was therefore still able to believe that in order to be good, a real person should act as if he were a character in a story" (298-9).¹³³ Although the MEMPOT-poet addresses men as needing to reform themselves by reading Judith's story, women, as Bartlett argues, would have also considered her figure as a model for emulation.

In MEMPOT Judith is presented to all readers without reservations. There are no cautions to women regarding her behavior and no warnings offered to men about the seductiveness of women. The writer appears to expect that an ideal audience will understand the image of Judith that is offered, read her performance as a way of serving God, and then follow her lead. Audience response, however, cannot be guaranteed: "Because it is the result of a dialogical process of exchange between reader and writer concerning the signification provided by the materiality of the linguistic medium, each and every reading is unique" (Furman 68-9). Despite the poet's attempt to guide the interpretation of Judith's actions by placing her securely within a medieval hierarchical structure, her unique independence might be applied by readers in a variety of ways. Scholars have noted that even within texts specifically addressed to women the reading intended by the writer may not have been the reading received by all readers: "whatever the containment strategies operative in texts for women, the possibilities of resistant readers and the social history of women's reading both argue for slippage between the ambitions and the effects of such texts" (Wogan-Browne 114). In other words, the neat frame of nobility created by the poet to contain Judith's independence may not always result in "ideal"

readings. Just as Rabinowitz posits, readers may misread a writer's intended meaning, or refuse to become part of the narrative audience.¹³⁴

While audience analysis provides further insight into a text's meaning, this chapter's examination of the MEMPOT Judith necessarily returns to the construction of her character by the poet, rather than its interpretation by readers. This preliminary study of imagining Judith is an attempt to examine the repetitions and innovations present within MEMPOT's treatment of the character and her story: "A text is the meeting-place of signifiers, and to read a text is to attempt to understand the process of repetition, substitution and displacement of its signifiers" (Furman 68). MEMPOT repeats many aspects found in traditional Judith stories, but the displacement of Judith's widowhood and chastity through a focus on Judith's independence and nobility appears unique within the biblical paraphrase tradition. This depiction resonates with the positive attitude toward women apparent throughout MEMPOT and also in some other Middle English texts. While Judith stretches the margins of acceptable female performance, other Middle English texts had begun to show women using their own agency to instigate change in their society. Usually these portrayals were limited to aristocratic women who were working for the benefit of their husbands, families, or the greater community. Readers of medieval texts, particularly the audience of romance stories, were accustomed to aristocratic women acting outside the leadership of men for a time, even though they eventually rejoined the existing social structure. It is no wonder that MEMPOT employs a similar noble image when representing Judith's powerful agency. In subsequent chapters, discussion will evolve around the image and performance of Judith, the noblewoman, and the significance of both for Old- and Middle-English readers.

CHAPTER 3

FASHIONING JUDITH IN EARLY ENGLISH TRADITIONS

3.1 Vesting an Aristocratic Judith

Image and performance are two significant aspects of the representation of Judith in narrative. One definition of the term “image” is related to ideas of mirroring or reflection; one aspect of “performance,” is action or process. These associations are critical when considering the manner in which MEMPOT employs past reflections of her character and simultaneously invents new details and actions for the female hero. As mirror, the poet’s characterization of Judith as medieval “dame” cannot be considered entirely original, even though it includes inventive elements. Indeed, the fourteenth-century MEMPOT introduces her nobility more frankly and immediately than most accounts and constructs her performance in specifically aristocratic ways, but even in earlier English accounts, both textual and graphic, Judith was often portrayed as a noblewoman. Thus, before examining further details of the paraphraser’s depiction of Judith’s nobility, it is necessary to investigate earlier representations that may have already created an English tradition (or traditions), which the MEMPOT-poet’s ideas of an aristocratic Judith partially reflect. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the earlier descriptions and illustrations of Judith as aristocrat, which may have provided material through cultural legends for MEMPOT’s development of the character of Judith. Understanding the image of Judith as a cultural tradition is more complex than to posit that the poet read specific English works and/or viewed certain artistic portrayals and based her character upon these previous renderings. It is more likely that the MEMPOT-poet received an idea of Judith through sermons, popular texts, visual depictions and oral discourse that had developed as scholars

and artists received and appropriated the tradition of a noble Judith that many earlier representations illustrate. Judith's portrayal as an aristocrat is consistent within most early English texts, but its form and meaning varies, creating an ambiguous biblical figure that demonstrates both the power a woman can exercise and the way patriarchal writers/artists tended to manipulate that power.

Perhaps Judith's character was originally meant to be aristocratic. Although the nobility of Judith is not an obvious theme within the Book of Judith, Solomon Zeitlin proposes that she was made a widow and given command over the Israelites in honor of "Alexandra, idealized in the eyes of later Pharisees under the name Salome, who ruled for nine years (78-69 [bce]) as queen" (181). Zeitlin posits that the book was not necessarily written during Salome's reign, but perhaps afterwards in her memory. His reasoning is based on the casting of Judith as a widow (unusual for a biblical heroine, but a possible reflection of Alexandra's status) and numerical details within the book, as well as Judith's performance within the narrative: "the way Judith addresses the elders of Bethulia and issues unqualified directions and commands is rather more natural for a queen than from a laywoman, wealthy and pious though she might be" (Zeitlin 181). Yet Zeitlin's reasoning reflects a twentieth-century glance backwards, and there is no textual evidence that early readers of the book considered Judith a queen. Judith's early reputation appears to depend upon her devotion to God and her people, her ability to lead and act forcefully, and divine calling. Although often associated with Queen Esther in later tradition, the biblical Judith seems to be cast from the same mold as common but powerful Hebrew women, such as Deborah and Jael.¹³⁵

In many medieval depictions, however, Judith's aristocratic position is commonly assumed, as she wisely directs and fights for her people. Occasionally her high social rank may even be said to obscure her other characteristics, such as her sex or gender, privileging her to be displayed in a heroic role.¹³⁶ Whereas Judith uses feminine seductiveness to win her cause, the cause is one expected of the nobility, to some extent regardless of sex or gender

distinctions. This chapter will demonstrate that centuries before MEMPOT some early English versions of Judith transfer the seductive sexual powers given to her character in the Book of Judith, to the authority of rank and wealth, allowing her to perform her heroic deed as an elite agent of the patriarchal social system. While gender plays an important role in Judith's performance, it is subsumed under her social status: she is first an aristocrat and secondly a woman. As a representative of the aristocracy, she can be accepted by male readers without much of the fear and dread that accompany many post-medieval representations of Judith.¹³⁷ In some portrayals Judith as noblewoman continues the typological/allegorical tradition of the heroine; in others Judith's narrative performance is stressed. In either case, Judith, dressed in the wealthy garb of the nobility, is an acceptable heroine to most Anglo-Saxon and later medieval English writers and artists in spite of the necessity of portraying her feminine tactics.

3.2 Adorning Judith as Noble Hero

Earlier discussions of critics have associated the tactics and characteristics of heroism in Anglo-Saxon poetry to the Old English poem referred to as *Judith*.¹³⁸ What has fueled investigation regarding this poem's usage of heroic language and themes is the fact that *Judith* comes to contemporary scholars bound in the same manuscript as *Beowulf*, clearly the primary model of Anglo-Saxon heroic epic available today. Some scholars, such as Patricia Belanoff, have given considerable effort to comparisons between the heroic actions of Beowulf and Judith, also discussing the usage of similar heroic words and phrases.¹³⁹ In addition, the fairly recent feminist thrust has produced multiple studies regarding Judith's heroism. Jane Chance examines the reasons that Anglo-Saxon "poets selected fighting women saints [Judith, Elene, Juliana] as the subjects of religious epics" and concludes that they "function martially on three allegorical levels as types of the Virgin. . . [which] thus provide models for Anglo-Saxon women who themselves strove to be chaste, holy—and heroic" (31, 52). Looking beyond the religious aspects of the characters, Helen Damico investigates the Norse influence of the valkyrie, or warrior-maid image upon depictions of the three "fighting women," as well as on the women

characters in *Beowulf*. Of course, the conclusions of all these investigations are varied and at times contradictory. For example, Hugh Magennis claims that Judith's female characteristics are kept in the forefront in the Old English poem, while Alfred Litton posits that Judith is more masculine than other heroines of Anglo-Saxon literature. Christopher Fee accuses the poem's author of "violent contortions performed on his source" and reads Judith as demoted from the strong heroine of the Vulgate to an idealized figurehead whose "active heroism...is appropriated by men" (406).

Obviously, the portrayal of Judith's gender can be read in a variety of ways, even by critics whose theoretical objectives are similar. Perhaps this confusion is compounded when critics automatically assume vast differences between depictions of male and female roles. It may be possible to clear up some of the perplexity regarding Judith's image by looking for cultural circumstances that result in similarities within renderings of men and women rather than assuming binary gender differentiation in all aspects of representation. Damico avers that the idea of the heroic within Anglo-Saxon poetry provides one context where men and women are treated similarly:

In general . . . the treatment of the female warriors of Old English heroic poetry—Elene, Judith, and Juliana—corresponds closely to the treatment given the Old English heroic male warrior. In an examination of the rhetorical figures used to describe these three female characters, Patricia A. Belanoff demonstrates that the epithets used to define Beowulf, Hrothar, and Andreas are likewise employed to distinguish the Cynewulfian and Old Testament heroines. Although the female characters undergo slight alterations—their femininity is diffused, while their heroic attributes (sobriety of mind, nobility of birth, courage in action) are emphasized—the heroic temperament is rendered as equally appropriate to male and female. ("Valkyrie" 182)

It may be that arguments related to gender differentiation give less insight into some medieval portrayals of Judith than studies related to understanding why or how heroic characteristics are rendered equally for both genders.¹⁴⁰

Another context that might prove useful in considering Judith's representation, because it allows for undifferentiated characteristics within gender depictions, occurs when the author is principally concerned with illustrating the responsibility of the aristocracy to protect the nation from either physical or spiritual harm. When the safety of an entire people was threatened during the early Middle Ages, gender does not appear to be as important as the power of social status. Historical accounts of women who led troops or protected their homeland indicate that sometimes if a nobleman was not available for guidance and protection, then a noblewoman's leadership was considered a viable alternative. Women may have often performed roles of leadership for which they were not given credit, especially in the larger conflicts where only male leadership has been traditionally assumed. Historian Susan M. Johns posits that "some women of the nobility may have taken a more direct role in the organisation of resistance to the Normans. Indeed, the countess Gytha may have been central to the English resistance and important in the refusal of the Godwin family to accept the defeat at Hastings as final" (22). Johns is not alone in pointing out the military role of some noblewomen. Although Shulamith Shahar argues that women are treated as a "fourth estate,"¹⁴¹ she mentions occasions when women's high social position, rather than gender, became the crucial factor in their activities, particularly when the defense of their lands or people was involved.¹⁴²

Women's leadership did not necessarily indicate female independence. When noblewomen engaged in military activity, they were involved in upholding the social hierarchies that offered them opportunities and power. Shahar comments on the important social duty charged to the nobility and gives examples of women whose circumstances demanded they accomplish this task:

In the literature depicting the sins and omissions of members of the various classes, the heaviest sin of noblemen is non-fulfillment of their function, which is to defend other classes....The noblewoman was no warrior in medieval times . . . [but] women sometimes defended castles during their husbands' absence. There were heiresses and widows who defended their fortresses, like Donna Jimena, widow of Le Cid, who for more than a year (1001-2) held Valencia, organized the army and beat off Muslim attacks. (126-7)

These noblewomen were protecting not only their individual interests, but also the interests of their noble estate, which invariably meant they were protecting the livelihood of their communities. Given these historical examples, medieval readers may not have felt that Judith's bravery was unique. In Kimberly A. LoPrete's study on the term "virago," used occasionally in the Middle Ages for powerful noblewomen, she asserts,

Lay viragos in the Middle Ages were neither monstrous, hybrid, 'men-women', nor otherwise 'unnatural' women usurping men's 'natural' places and powers in the world—even as they routinely performed men's deeds in 'male' domains when familial circumstances required. More often than not such sexually-active viragos were praised for the lordly deeds they performed, usually as wives and mothers, and such deeds were recorded with appreciation by their male peers. (38)

Lo Prete's study concludes that the negative image of a powerful woman has been disproportionately construed by scholars. Indeed, many noblewomen were called on to protect their families and property along with their regular household duties.

In the early Middle Ages, protecting the continuance of the community required more than occasional military duties, however. At times noblewomen were expected to be spiritual leaders if the men were not fulfilling this obligation. In his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Bede records a letter from Pope Boniface urging Queen Æthelburh to speak out boldly

to her husband regarding the truth of Christianity: “Therefore, my illustrious daughter, persevere with all your might to soften his hard heart as soon as possible, by piously teaching him God’s commandments” (ii.ii).¹⁴³ The gender restrictions that would normally prevent Æthelburh from speaking boldly to a man, especially the king, are not applicable—at least in Pope Boniface’s opinion—because Æthelburh shares in the royal position as queen of the land and is therefore partially responsible for the country’s spiritual condition. Instead of restricting Æthelburh, Boniface implores her to rise to her responsibility as a Christian queen.

Biblical and historical figures of wise queens and other leading women were frequently used to encourage Anglo-Saxon queens to give spiritual counsel to their husbands and to let their Christian influence be felt within the politics of the land. Judith and Esther were two frequently mentioned models, even appearing in some of the *ordos*, the coronation prayers for queens.¹⁴⁴ Another association of Judith and Esther with queens can be seen in Hrabanus Maurus’s dedication of the commentaries he wrote on the books of Judith and Esther to Queen Judith, the second wife of Louis the Pious.¹⁴⁵ Pauline Stafford understands the comparison made between queens and these two powerful women figures as more than adulation offered by the queens’ admirers:

Hrabanus’s dedicatory letter to Judith shows how they [Judith and Esther] offered a mode of action to queens who could overcome worldly enemies by cultivating spiritual qualities. It seems possible that the Anglo-Saxon poem *Judith* was written for or about that great Mercian queen and military leader Æthelflæd. Its stress on the warlike capacities of Judith, the reknown she won in battle, the emphasis on her execution of Holofernes, her vanquishing of the heathen and the inspiration she gave to her warriors would all fit Æthelflæd.

(*Queens* 26)

Apparently the relationship of the queens to these biblical figures was more complex than simply following a role model. Stafford suggests that these two exemplary figures may have

influenced the actions of Christian queens, and conversely the actions of Christian queens influenced later portrayals of the figures, specifically the image of Judith.

Although Æthelflæd is an unusually military queen, Anglo-Saxon documents indicate that several queens were allowed to perform as spiritual and political advisors. One such example was Eadgifu, whose accomplishments are paraphrased in Pauline Stafford's study of tenth- through twelfth-century depictions of noblewomen:

Eadgifu is the benefactress of churches and a pious influence on her sons. It is at her intercession that Eadred offers a bishopric to Dunstan in the "B" Life of Dunstan; it is she, the venerable queen, who prevents Æthelwold from leaving the kingdom in Ælfric's Life of Æthelwold, advising her son what a loss Æthelwold would be to the kingdom and persuading him to give the abbot Abingdon to revive (Whitelock 1979a: no. 235 [at 905]). ("Portrayal" 150)¹⁴⁶

According to these accounts, Eadgifu is a queen-mother who counsels and intercedes for the sake of the church and her representatives. In the eleventh century, Margaret of Scotland also fulfilled the expectations accorded to queens. Pauline Stafford claims that an early version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle reported, "she was to turn her husband and his people from the path of error" ("Portrayal" 153). While both of these positive accounts of spiritually productive queens present only one side of politically-complex figures, it is evident that early medieval writers and readers had formed particular ideas about the performance of queens—one aspect of that performance was to serve as spiritual leader.

Women of the nobility who were not queens had other opportunities to provide spiritual leadership. Carol Neuman de Vegvar argues that in Anglo-Saxon England, particularly during the early days of Christianity, royal women monastics held powerful spiritual roles and were frequently recognized as saints upon their death. Many of these women became abbesses of double houses and, therefore, held spiritual positions over men. This period was brief in England's history—most of the double houses were dissolved by the tenth century. The

importance of the monastic women's leadership during this time, however, was similar to that of queens:

Because of these unusual circumstances, their [royal women monastics'] lives and customs, as demonstrated by the documentary and archaeological evidence, find close parallels both in the monastic communities of their male contemporaries and in the lives of their female relatives at court. Because of the particular dynamics of the relationship of court and convent, the Anglo-Saxon royal women monastics found themselves in a position, like that of their secular female relatives, in which they could be profoundly involved and influential in the events and developments of their day. Far from being isolated by their spirituality, it became their passport to a level of power parallel to if not higher than that of their queenly cousins. In this equation their membership by birth in the aristocracy of the period played a critical role. (Neuman de Vegvar 75-77)

The notion of a "golden age" for women during the early Anglo-Saxon period is under debate, but it is generally agreed that some women—those who were aristocrats by birth—wielded more power in the seventh century than their female descendants of the tenth.¹⁴⁷ In the beginning of the Anglo-Saxon conversion, noblewomen were allowed more opportunities of influence because Christianity needed their authority and wealth to establish monasteries for Christian training. By the tenth century the Benedictine reform accompanied other changes within Anglo-Saxon power structures. As Clare A. Lees notes, queens were still expected to give their support to monastic houses, even while the separation of male and female houses signals a new emphasis on masculine power (*Tradition* 134).¹⁴⁸

The height of women's spiritual leadership may have already begun its decline by the time of the Old English *Judith*,¹⁴⁹ but the author of the poem appears to attribute to the heroine the same type of leadership abilities desired of and performed by queens, as well as women

monastics, in early Anglo-Saxon Christianity. Clearly, the poet also attaches to Judith's character the strength and aggression of Germanic literary heroines.¹⁵⁰ The poet draws on the cultural memory of powerful aristocratic women—political, military, and holy— as he forms Judith's character, recognizing that Judith's brave activism, her wisdom in designing a plot to overcome a powerful enemy, which results in her people's victory in spite of tremendous odds, makes the Book of Judith a story to be retold to anyone in need of courage and the hope of protection.¹⁵¹ In spite of its spiritual and political inspiration, however, there are problems to retelling the Judith narrative in a Christian patriarchal society, such as early medieval England. The primary impediment, of course, is the difficulty of hiding the power Judith wields as a woman: teaching one's husband, as Boniface advised the queen, is one thing, but killing a general in his bed is definitely another matter. One ancient solution to promoting the heroic virtues of a woman was to masculinize the heroine—which was not a completely satisfying resolution for Judith's story.¹⁵² Because the plot of this tale depends not only on Judith's devout faith and fearless courage, but also on the power of her feminine charms to attract the mighty Holofernes, medieval storytellers had to find creative ways of representing Judith that would downplay her sexuality (without erasing it) in order to inspire, rather than threaten, their male audience—and in order to provide an acceptable model for both genders. This ambiguous representation was probably not as difficult to invent as it appears, because Anglo-Saxon culture already had ways of displaying women in powerful social positions that seem to minimize their sexual attractiveness.

In spite of the fact that beauty is sometimes mentioned as a quality of early queens,¹⁵³ the outstanding queens of Anglo-Saxon texts are not remembered for their sexual allure. Neither Bede's *Æthelburh*, nor Beowulf's *Wealtheow*, seduces the reader with her corporeal endowments. Indeed, we are told very little about the queens' physical traits. Perhaps this anti-corporeal emphasis is connected to traditional Germanic figures, the memory of which permeated early English renderings of women.¹⁵⁴ In early Germanic and Nordic portrayals,

gender characteristics depend largely upon clothing and hair style.¹⁵⁵ In a sense, the adornment is the woman. This reduction of a woman's representation to clothing and accessories may have served multiple purposes within Germanic and, later, Anglo-Saxon society.¹⁵⁶ No doubt, outward adornment served to organize gender and social rank, as well as hide anything physically alluring. Some forms of adornment, however, gained a type of power that can be represented as seductive, at least when worn as a symbol of social position. In the Anglo-Saxon poem *Judith*, Holofernes is not only thinking of Judith's body when he desires to seduce her, but also imagining the seductive ornaments that prove her elevated status:

. . . The one corrupted by evil,
Commanded that they hastily fetch the blessed maiden
To his bed, laden with bracelets,
Adorned with rings . . . (34-7)¹⁵⁷

This emphasis on the power of costume is apparent in the Old English poem, even though the adornment delineated in the extant part of the text is limited to jewelry and braided hair.¹⁵⁸ Here the social value of ornamentation appears to be accepted rather than criticized—both Holofernes and the narrator value Judith's jewels. Judith's bright ornaments—along with her devotion and prudence—is what creates the magnificent image of the heroine in the poem.¹⁵⁹ Yet some retellings of Judith's tale, such as Ælfric's homily on Judith (which I will discuss in detail later), treat adornment as a powerful, but potentially negative force.

The description of Judith's adornment reveals what an Anglo-Saxon audience needed to know about her social position and gender. Consequently, there appears to be no need to elaborate on the details of her physical characteristics. Modern readers may find this lack of corporeal detail unusual when depicting an attractive woman, but the distinctive quality of dress as a symbol of identification is not unique to this time and place and can be rationally explained in sociological terms:

The preponderance of visually recorded properties in our classification system indicates that we can expect the visual stimuli of dress to outweigh the impact of other sensory stimuli... in establishing gender identity. An additional reason why the visually observable properties may have more impact is that they do not require close proximity to be noticed by others. On the basis of this heavy weighting of visual impact and what we know about theories of communication, we can expect dress to precede verbal communication in establishing an individual's gendered identity as well as expectations for other types of behavior (social roles) based on this identity. (Eicher and Roach-Higgins 17)

While the emphasis in the above observation is gender recognition, dress serves to identify other social roles in the same manner, particularly elevated status.¹⁶⁰ Because of the power of the visual quality of dress, it seems credible to assume that artists, as well as writers, appropriated concepts regarding clothing that were already present within the culture to symbolize estate and gender differences in easily recognizable ways. Gale Owen Crocker remarks that artists did not make these distinctions elaborate, but when representing aristocratic dress highlighted decorative borders, such as cuffs and shoulders, and added extra material and layers to the garments being illustrated (*Dress* 229). This non-elaborative approach was common for differentiating gender as well. For example, visual portrayals of classical and biblical women distinguish them from their male counterparts most noticeably through their head coverings and the extra layers of material that hang over their shoulders. Again, clothing, not bodies, signifies the gender of the figure. The looseness of women's long robes rarely demonstrates even the outline of knees that are almost always evident in representations of men. These characteristics can be observed in countless depictions of the Virgin standing beside the crucifix or lying prostrate in nativity or death scenes,¹⁶¹ but they are also obvious in female personifications representing either contemporary or classical ideas.¹⁶² Similarly, queens are distinguishable from kings because of their longer robes as well as the head coverings worn

underneath their royal crowns.¹⁶³ While social and gender distinctions were evident within Anglo-Saxon illustrations of dress, there appears to be no need to represent every detail—apparently the audience understood and appreciated the subtlety of artistic imagery.

Although the evidence is slight, it is probable that the actual clothing styles worn by Anglo-Saxon women were not drastically different from those depicted in art throughout the West during the early Middle Ages. Owen-Crocker tentatively supports this view based on textual illustrations from the reign of Edgar (959-975 C.E.):

Female figures wear a costume with long, figure-concealing garments and voluminous headdresses, without jewellery, a style which probably owed its popularity to the dissemination of Byzantine depictions of the Virgin Mary through western Europe. As far as we can tell, Anglo-Saxon women did copy this style. (*Dress 31-2*)¹⁶⁴

Art historian C. R. Dodwell comments on the similarity between women's portrayals across Europe and England and concludes more definitely that women were actually wearing the type of clothes reflected in art:

In the tenth and eleventh centuries, when we have numerous illustrations of women's attire, we find that they are everywhere wearing ankle-length robes with wide sleeves, and a simple wimple-like head-dress which amply covers both head and shoulders....It was simple in construction and worn by all but the laboring class" (*Anglo-Saxon 172-3*).

The simplicity of the cut of noblewomen's clothing is not to be confused with plainness of ornament. Although visual depictions of Anglo-Saxon nobility do not usually reveal elaborate displays of wealth, Dodwell has documented instances of spectacularly glittering gold embroidered on royal and sacramental garments. Owen-Crocker claims there is a gap between artistic renderings of adornment and practical usage: "though jewellery is rarely displayed in art, archaeological evidence proves its existence and will confirm that it was treasured and

bequeathed” (*Dress* 318).¹⁶⁵ According to Dodwell, English apparel “must have been costly even by the contemporary standards of the Continent for the Normans who first saw them were clearly taken aback by their opulence and thought that they rendered worthless anything they had seen before” (*Anglo-Saxon* 175).¹⁶⁶ Dodwell’s remark describes the reaction of the eleventh-century Norman conquerors recorded in Guillaume de Portiers’ *Histoire*, but the social value of gold adornment is evident in a variety of earlier texts. When Weltheow is introduced in *Beowulf*, the only personal physical details given about her are that she is “gold-adorned” (*goldhroden*) and a “ring-adorned queen” (*beaghroden*) (*Beowulf* lines 614, 623, 640). Apparently, no other statement about the queen’s beauty or appearance was necessary. Her metallic wealth marks her significance, at least to the story-teller and his audience.¹⁶⁷

Bede’s account of Abess Æthelthryth offers a female perspective (or Bede’s interpretation of a female perspective) on the use of elaborate accessories.¹⁶⁸ Actually, we receive two temporal perspectives—one regarding how she felt about wearing jewelry in her youth, and the other, her later feelings of guilt for having worn it:

‘I know well enough that I deserve to bear the weight of this affliction in my neck, for I remember, that when I was a young girl, I used to wear an unnecessary weight of necklaces; I believe that God in His goodness would have me endure this pain in my neck, in order that I may thus be absolved from the guilt of my needless vanity. So, instead of gold and pearls, a fiery red tumor now stands out upon my neck.’ (Bede iv.19)¹⁶⁹

No matter what may be said regarding Æthelthryth’s self-diagnosis, the telling aspect of this account is that Æthelthryth once wore gold and pearls to appease her vanity, which appears to indicate her perception that the wearing of jewelry increased the wearer’s value. Æthelthryth’s changed attitude indicates a struggle between the cultural values passed down by Anglo-Saxon and Christian traditions—a clash between exterior and interior adornment.¹⁷⁰ Yet even while

Christian doctrine often emphasized the vanity of material ornamentation and the pride of those who decorated themselves, the practice continued.

Precious metals, especially gold, were apparently the preferred material signifiers of opulence in Anglo-Saxon England for multiple reasons, practical as well as artistic.¹⁷¹ As Paul Beekman Taylor notes, “the association of radiance with beauty and goodness is of long Indo-European tradition” (232).¹⁷² The connection between beauty and brightness is evident in both scriptural references to God’s brightness and Old English references, such as the *Dream of the Rood’s* glistening cross (P. Taylor 233). Dodwell maintains that in a society with few windows, a substance that glittered was valued supremely and, in fact, became an aesthetic standard for measuring color, rather than hue, which is appreciated today:

Overlaying, and even overriding, these distinctions of the spectrum for the Anglo-Saxon were other modulations of brightness and shade. This is indicated in some of their colour-words which, primarily, express nuances of brightness—most particularly the words *brun*, *fealu* and *wann*, which suggest, in turn, the degree of brightness of metal in sunshine, of shining material under the same circumstances, and the subdued brightness of something seen on a dull day.
(*Anglo-Saxon* 34)

Scholars translating Old English terms for color have found it difficult to convey the concept of brightness using our modern terminology.¹⁷³ In Gunmere’s 1910 translation of *Beowulf*, *brun* is consistently translated “brown” in spite of its obvious reference to shining metal (lines 1546, 2578, 2615). A new verse translation by R. M. Liuzza, however, translates *brun* as “bright” in the first two occurrences and as “burnished” in the third. The one occurrence of *brun* in the Anglo-Saxon *Judith* (line 317) also receives varied treatment.¹⁷⁴ Yet today’s terms, even when signifying a metallic glint, seem to lack the relative aspect of the Old English. Clearly, modern readers cannot appreciate the superlative cultural value of glistening gold.

Yet even today when hue attracts the greater aesthetic attention, precious metals still hold great monetary value. Additionally, gold, in Roland Barthes' analysis, signifies more than economical worth—ultimately it denotes consummate power:

And it [gold] is precisely the sign par excellence, the sign of all the signs; it is absolute value, invested with all powers including those once held by magic: is it not able to appropriate *everything*, goods and virtues, lives and bodies? Is it not able to convert everything into its opposite, to lower and to elevate, to demean and to glorify? . . . pure gold, whose usefulness was almost entirely self-referential, became superlative gold, absolute richness—here the gemstone becomes the very concept of price, it is worn like an idea, that of a terrific power, for it is enough to be seen for this power to be demonstrated.

(*Language* 60)

Thus, it is easy for even today's readers to understand gold's social power as depicted in Old English literary portrayals of women, who are often described as adorned with gold accessories.¹⁷⁵ The terms *goldhroden*, *golde*, *gehyrsted*, and *golde gefrætewod*, which are used in Old English poems to refer to Wealtheow, Judith, and Cynewulf's heroine Elene are recognized by Damico as being especially connected to Anglo-Saxon military descriptions and closely related to terms used for the valkyrie-brides of Nordic legend. Thus, Damico reads a cultural connection between the aforementioned heroines and Germanic warrior women (*Beowulf's* 29). She seems to de-emphasize, however, the aristocratic nature of shiny-helmeted warriors, these three powerful figures, and their gold adornments—which might be considered a too obvious connection for the queens Wealtheow and Elene, but important when considering the character of Judith, whose nobility is not stated outright. It seems likely, given the cultural value of gold that these terms, as well as another term used in the Old English poem for Judith and her maidservant, *bēahrodene*, or "ring-bearer," are not exclusive to military usage, and indicate just as significantly the women's high social position. Yet this distinction may be

unnecessary, since military responsibility belonged specifically to the nobility. Therefore, the gold adornments of aristocratic women appear to signify their position of power within both the civil and military hierarchies.¹⁷⁶

If it is nobility that wears gold and is responsible for military protection, the question then arises why in the Anglo-Saxon poem both Judith and her servant are described similarly, as well as given equal credit for bravery as they return home with the head of Holofernes. They are portrayed as glistening “ring-adorned” women, returning to their “shining” city:

So that they could clearly see
the beautiful city walls of Bethulia
glitter. Then, ring-adorned,
they hurried forwards along the path
until, glad at heart, they had reached
the rampart gate. (138-141).¹⁷⁷

The glittering radiance of both the women and Bethulia seems to connect Judith and her maid to the city in some material way. Judith takes on the glamour of a king, returning in the glory of golden splendor.¹⁷⁸ Some readers may question the maidservant’s equally metallic description, which appears to deny the elevated status of those wearing precious metals—unless the literary technique of “pairing” is taken into consideration.¹⁷⁹ As Damico explains, the maid participates in Judith’s status “through a characterization device whereby a minor figure is endowed with similar (or contrasting) traits belonging to the hero in an effort to enhance the person of the hero himself” (*Beowulf’s* 32-3). Through her maid’s adornments, Judith is represented as being twice as rich and, therefore, twice as heroic.

In addition to Judith’s doubled wealth and heroism, her countenance appears to shine more brightly than any normal person’s. She is referred to as *ælfscinu*, *beorht mægth* and *beorhtan ides*. (Beginning with the latter, these terms are often translated “radiant lady,” “bright maid,” and “woman with shining, elfish beauty.”) Based on these terms, readers might be

tempted to place a magical or supernatural quality to Judith's beauty, but it is possible that these are exterior social indicators rather than interior signifiers. There are various clues in the poetic narrative concerning the political and social significance of shiny adornment.¹⁸⁰ Not only Judith, but also Holofernes, the royal general, is associated with shining metal. His bed is surrounded by a net of gold,¹⁸¹ his mail coat contains gold, and after his death, Judith is given his necklaces and jewelry, which no doubt contain precious metal as well. Even more telling than Holofernes' possessions is his command to bring Judith to his bed-chamber bedecked with bracelets and rings: "beagum gehlæste, / hringum gehrodene" (l36-7), an illustration that she must bear the symbols of aristocracy. The glitter of precious metal, a reminder of elevated social status, has become the sign of a woman's attractiveness and allure, which appears to be more important in this characterization of Judith than any feminine physical beauty she might possess.¹⁸²

3.3 Robing Judith's Noble Chastity

The poetic Judith wears her nobility—indicated by her shiny ornaments—proudly, as was expected of a hero. The problematic nature of Judith's wealth and sexuality is not addressed as in other Anglo-Saxon versions that emphasize her chaste living. The Old English poem concentrates on Judith's bravery and wisdom and only implies Judith's chastity and self-denial.¹⁸³ In contrast, Abbot Ælfric's homily on Judith, written probably within the same century, stresses the heroine's chastity. This focus is not surprising considering, as Clare Lees avers, that "Christianity brings a religion not only of the book but also of the body to Anglo-Saxon England" (*Tradition* 138). Ælfric frequently (although perhaps reluctantly) addresses issues of the body through "his representations of female sanctity [which] both address and deny the body of the saint and her desires" (*Tradition* 137). In contrast with his portrayals of other women saints, Ælfric accomplishes his idealization of the chaste Judith with some difficulty. While the poem ignores or alters parts of the Vulgate Judith in order to downplay the seductiveness of Judith's attempt to attract Holofernes,¹⁸⁴ Ælfric appears to have felt more obligated than the

poet to translate the Vulgate literally. Adhering to the Vulgate, he includes a few details regarding Judith's dress, but he merely hints at Judith's scheme to charm the tyrant. Ælfric's Judith is not a seductress—he carefully avoids any allusion to her deception in an attempt to present a saintly character.

In the late seventh century, Aldhelm takes a much bolder approach than Ælfric to Judith's behavior, explaining that "she did not believe that he could be deceived any other way than by snaring him by means of the innate beauty of her face and also by her bodily adornment"—accompanied by the warning that the scriptures call women's adornments "the deprecation of men" (*de Virginitate* 127).¹⁸⁵ Aldhelm's treatment is ambiguous. He uses Judith as both an example of chastity in her secluded widowhood and as an illustration of the seductiveness of women's adornments. On the other hand, Ælfric is not as forthright about the woman using her physical attractiveness as Aldhelm, nor even as the Vulgate.¹⁸⁶ Although Ælfric includes a description of Judith adorning herself beautifully before leaving for the Syrian camp, he does not directly state her plan nor allow her actions or dress to tempt Holofernes overtly. Instead he presents the feast from the point of view of the general's desires rather than Judith's seduction:

Then on the fourth day, the lord entertained his ministers in his tent in much joy and asked his chamberlain that he should bring into his feast the aforementioned Judith, so he did. She came, then, adorned for no immorality; stood in the presence of him in such fair form that his mind immediately became greatly kindled in the desires for his immorality. He commanded her to be joyous at his feast, and she promised that she would. (lines 238-246 my own translation and emphasis)¹⁸⁷

This passage reflects the Vulgate's claim that God beautifies Judith because "all this dressing up did not proceed from sensuality" (Judith 10.4), both texts indicating that there are at least two motivations for dressing elegantly. In this instance, Judith has chosen to dress herself for

reasons other than seductive manipulation, for which women are often accused. Even though Judith planned her wardrobe to be attractive, Ælfric (in the tradition of Jerome) does not want that attractiveness to be seen as dressing for immorality. Perhaps, Ælfric is insinuating that she is dressed to command Holofernes' respect for her social position. Aware of his problematic position as teller of a possibly seductive tale, Ælfric keeps the specifics of Judith's attractiveness hidden, creating questions for readers. Is her "fair form" only related to the nobility of her appearance? Or is Ælfric implying physical glamour?¹⁸⁸

Conceivably, Ælfric's ambiguity as a storyteller arises from the fact that he is telling Judith's story under two major constraints: first, an apparent wish to stay close to the Latin Vulgate, and secondly, the desire to use Judith as an illustration for Christian behavior and doctrine. For several centuries, Judith had been a principal figure for exemplifying chastity and faith, as well as allegorizing the church's battle with the devil. Yet Ælfric seems aware that Judith's behavior in the Vulgate does not match the behavior expected of Christian heroines in his day.¹⁸⁹ Perhaps Ælfric is much more comfortable presenting the lives of martyred saints, who refuse all worldly behavior and material goods.¹⁹⁰ In some ways Judith is the antithesis of the typical saint—she decapitates her enemy rather than being decapitated or tortured.¹⁹¹ Obviously, Ælfric is not able to cast Judith's story in a saintly mold without making alterations. Although he includes more about Judith's adornment than does the poem, he parts significantly from the Vulgate regarding Judith's acceptance of the spoils of Holofernes. Whereas Ælfric's version relates Judith as refusing all of the goods which were once owned by Holofernes, the Vulgate depicts her accepting the goods and then later offering up as an "anathema of oblivion" only his arms and "the canopy she had taken away out of his chamber" (Judith 16.23).¹⁹² Nothing is mentioned in Jerome's translation regarding Judith relinquishing the "gold and silver, and garments and precious stones, and all household stuff" that had been given to her by her people (15.14-16:31).¹⁹³ Nonetheless, standard patriarchal Christian teachings on the denial of the self and separation from evil required that Judith refuse to touch Holofernes' possessions.

She cannot play Ælfric's version of a Christian heroine unless she demonstrates her separation from the pagan world. Perhaps in altering this minor aspect of the story, Ælfric is attempting to allay any doubt that her earlier adornments had been donned from a selfish desire to display her social position because of female vanity. She did not kill her enemy for the sake of spoils or splendor, but for the defense of her people and to show God's might.¹⁹⁴

Despite Ælfric's attempt to portray Judith's actions as having godly motivations, when Judith is interpreted as an example for Christian behavior her glamorous adornments may have been problematic for Christian readers taught to eschew material wealth. However, the metaphorical understanding of Judith as the church triumphant, which overcomes the enemy through God's power, may have enabled Ælfric to depict a richly adorned heroine, described with more detail than the shining Judith of the poem: "she cast off her sackcloth and widow's robe and adorned herself with gold, purple, and wondrous dress....and they all wondered at her great beauty" (191-3, 197-8)¹⁹⁵ As a figural representation, this description works well, for in religious writings, the church was often portrayed dressed as the bride of Christ. It was fitting then for the bride of the king of the universe to wear gold and purple adornments. According to Dodwell, although Anglo-Saxon Christians were quick to condemn worldly wealth, they envisioned the saints of heaven wearing "resplendent" garments:

Æthelwulf speaks of an Anglo-Saxon woman in heaven with her 'whole body covered with gold-embroidered robes.' He also describes an ideal church in which an altar flamed with gold, vessels gleamed with gold or glistened with precious stones, and a cross was lustrous with ruddy gold and dark-hued gems. (*Anglo-Saxon* 31)¹⁹⁶

Furthermore, Dodwell explains that the metaphorical representation of the church's eternal glory had become a physical reality in many Anglo-Saxon churches whose altars were laden with gold, and in which clerical robes sported elaborately embroidered, golden motifs (*Anglo-Saxon* 33).¹⁹⁷ As mentioned previously, this esteem of gold and precious metals was not only

figurative. According to Coatsworth and Pinder the talent of goldsmiths was considered the gift of God in at least one Old English poem, *Alethia*, and there is an admiring reference to “Weland’s Work” in *Beowulf*, both examples indicating the value of goldwork to Anglo-Saxon society despite the church’s stand on the corruption of wealth (200).

In spite of the figural application of Judith’s behavior and dress, Ælfric demonstrates anxiety regarding his audience’s misunderstanding of the text. As Mary Clayton has so aptly stated, “Ælfric is unable to think himself free of how such behaviour would normally be construed in his own society and he seeks, to little avail, to limit those aspects of his biblical source” (225). Ælfric accomplishes control over what might be perceived as the unchristian behavior of Judith’s purposeful luxurious dressing by framing her escapade into the enemy’s camp with her continuous chaste actions and modest adornment before, as well as after, this one-time event. In contrast to the Old English poem, Judith is not primarily noble or heroic, but saintly. The introduction Ælfric gives to his main character is carefully planned to create an immediate respect for the widow: “She lived in cleanness, according to her faith in her upper chamber with her handmaids. She was very beautiful and of fair form. She fasted continually except for festivals, with sackcloth worn next to her body always, in the fear of God without dishonor” (170-176).¹⁹⁸ Ælfric constructs a character that chooses to rule her body according to the holiest standards. The writer wants his audience to realize she is not beautiful because of her own primping. This acknowledgement of her natural attractiveness deflects suspicion from Judith’s later actions. Even though she dresses in gold and royal purple, it is not her fault that Holofernes desires her. Ælfric seems to think it safer to allow Judith’s body to be seductive, rather than her will. The homilist also dispels any doubts about her character by having the returned heroine assure the townspeople of Bethulia that she has come to no harm or defilement. As mentioned before, the writer then alters the Vulgate account, claiming that Judith did not accept the spoils of the battle, an action which would have implied a desire for carnal pleasure or gold. In Ælfric’s version, Judith is not a heroic noblewoman of shining beauty

created by metallic bangles and decorations, but a humble woman of faith, who is free from all desire for wealth and temporal ornamentation—and who just happens to be beautiful.¹⁹⁹ Contrasting these two Old English portrayals indicates that variant readings of Judith were possible in early English texts. Judith's nobility was sometimes hidden beneath her faith. Nevertheless, even Ælfric's Judith maintains a noblewoman's wardrobe for use in a time of crisis.

3.4 Dressing Judith "For Show": Early Visual Portrayals

The two extant Old English narrative representations of Judith, Ælfric's homily on Judith and the anonymous poem, have received substantial critical treatment. Attention has also been given to the textual treatment of Judith as an exemplary figure for queens. However, it is difficult to find scholarly work on Judith in Pre-Renaissance art, with the notable exception of Frances Gray Godwin's dissertation from 1945, which examines in great detail a large number of continental and English illustrations, particularly in illuminated manuscripts. Nira Stone has also explored Judith in early art; however, her study is less descriptive and thus less productive for studying the depiction of Judith's nobility. Both studies shed light on the known early pictorial images of Judith, but unfortunately, no Anglo-Saxon pictorial representations of Judith have been discovered for comparison to the textual versions. Yet there are a few continental visual illustrations from the early Middle Ages that are worth examining, especially since women's portrayals have not been shown to be regionally unique during this period. Later English interpretations of Judith may, perhaps, resonate with traditional characteristics begun in early artistic renderings.

Godwin cites the records of St. Paulinus of Nola (401-431) as the first documented evidence of a visual representation of Judith. In poem 28, St. Paulinus describes the area of the basilica where Judith's image was painted:

recesses are set in the side of the cloisters where one portico covers a narrow unbroken stretch, and three entrances close to each other provide admission to

them, three gates in a continuous lattice. The middle one is adorned with the holy names and portraits of martyrs who though of different sexes are crowned with equal glory. The two extending on the right and left are adorned each with a twofold inscription and depiction of faith. One is covered by the holy achievements of saintly men—the trial of Job by ulcers, and of Tobias through his eyes. The other gate is occupied by the lesser sex in the portrayal of renowned Judith and also the powerful queen Esther.²⁰⁰ (294-5)

While the description of these figures lacks detail, Judith's position in the basilica indicates her significance and possibly the general details of her representation. Judith is paired with Esther, another figure that not only serves as a model for queens, but also frequently signifies both the might of God displayed through a weak woman, and metaphorically, the church conquering evil. Queen Esther is a woman with the highest social position in her land and would have been portrayed with some indication of her social status, even though her depiction on the basilica would not have been used as a literal indication of her position within the biblical narrative. The art historian Barbara Raw maintains that

the earliest Christian pictures were signs: figures like the Good Shepherd which were used to evoke ideas in a metaphorical way instead of representing people or events directly. When historical events were represented they were selected and arranged in order to illustrate non-historical themes. (4)

The portrayal of biblical women as richly clothed was a symbol of the "Holy Church, which homilists—invoking images found in the Psalms, the Song of Songs, and Revelation—often described as an elaborately adorned royal woman decked out for her bridegroom" (Klein 59). Therefore, it seems likely, though not verifiable, that Judith would have also worn a noblewoman's dress to solidify the common theme of these figures,²⁰¹ as well as to provide rich decoration for the basilica.²⁰²

Moving forward chronologically, the next known rendering of Judith is from the eighth century. On a choir screen in S. Maria Antiqua, Rome,²⁰³ remains a poorly preserved fresco of “Judith’s liberation of Bethulia,” illustrated along with other Old Testament scenes. Godwin translates J. Wilpert’s description of the scene, which does not give much detailed attention to Judith’s clothing, but does state that “the garment worn by the woman to the left is richer than that of the other, and therefore this figure can be identified as Judith, the other as her maid” (19).²⁰⁴ In this instance, Judith is identifiable only because of her wealthy attire, an important detail that distinguishes her in the painting and avoids the “pairing” technique of portraying both noblewoman and servant splendidly clothed, utilized in the Anglo-Saxon poem. In spite of the female figures’ difference in garments, they are both represented “enlarged to heroic scale” (Godwin 21), which creates a visual emphasis much like “pairing.” This phenomena, posits Godwin, is probably due to the artist’s use of a model taken from a Psalter or other Christian manuscript. Art historians generally agree that this is not an original depiction of Judith—or of the numerous characters painted on other panels of the choir screen, which indicates the tendency of early art to borrow images and utilize them in new ways.

Godwin proposes that these various scenes linked by their common background are suggestive of a new turn in meaning for artistic portrayals of the Old Testament: “the mediaeval conception has already transformed the late antique narrative into types” (23). Yet a different view is proposed by Van Dijk, who explains that these narrative scenes differ from earlier Old Testament characters found nearby, which are stationary figures:

All these features of the Old Testament imagery on the transennae—the expanded repertoire, the arrangement in a series of adjoining scenes running from the presbytery down the length of the nave, and the images’ more narrative quality—suggest that John VII’s repainting of S. Maria Antiqua was intended to bring the church in line with a very traditional form of church

decoration, well attested in Rome and elsewhere during the Early Christian period. (115)

Van Dijk points out that in other churches of this era similar Old Testament scenes were represented. Thus, it appears that the new turn in artistic representation here is not the introduction of typology connecting Old and New Testaments made popular by Latin poets, which was already being represented artistically by static figures. Under John VII the new aspect of Old Testament representation was a return to narrative portrayals, which still held typological significance.

In the Old Testament narrative paintings on the transennae of S. Maria Antigua, Ann Van Dijk suggests that “David appears as a type of Christ, and his victory over Goliath typifies Christ’s victory over evil. Hezekiah, whom God allowed to rise from his sickbed after three days, pre-figures Christ’s resurrection. And Judith serves as a type of the Virgin” (119). Another reading of these paintings is to give them all a similar figural interpretation—the church triumphant. This interpretation is particularly apparent in Judith’s connection to the Virgin, who is often portrayed enthroned as *Maria Regina* and/or *Maria Ecclesia*. Throughout early medieval art, and even in Anglo-Saxon renderings, the depiction of Mary enthroned and wearing richly ornamented clothing is common, and appropriately found on a fresco at S. Maria Antigua.²⁰⁵ As the Church/Mary antitype, Judith may be represented wearing rich clothing to demonstrate the Church’s eternal glory.²⁰⁶ Therefore, my speculation regarding the attire of the earlier Judith paired with Esther—that because both represent the church, both are probably presented in rich attire—appears reasonable.

This typological reading of Judith as the church (or Christ) overcoming Satan, the church’s enemy, continues to be a major theme in Christian artistic portrayals of Judith, especially in Bible illustrations. Yet this New Testament connection is not always signified through the same techniques. In the Bible of S. Paolo fuori le Mura in Rome (from the latter half of the 9th century), the connection is made simply, through filling Holofernes’ bed with crosses

(Godwin 29). Although the typological connection is indicated through the anachronistic inclusion of crosses, the emphasis of the illumination seems to be narrative: Judith's story is illustrated in several scenes. Again, Judith is differentiated from her maidservant by the extra ornamentation given to her head-covering and cloak. In addition, the artist has drawn Judith with a variety of intelligent countenances, including a scene where she is pensively considering the situation; a scene where she walks in a determined way from the enemy's camp, followed by her maid, who looks back in terror; and the final scene, where she is shown greeting the townspeople with an upraised hand. While the actual decapitation is not included, the overall portrayal demonstrates that Judith acts with wisdom and bravery. In each scene she demonstrates the confidence of someone with a higher position as compared to her servant who follows. The inventive details of the artist clearly demonstrate Judith's nobility and her people's respect. Judith's leadership abilities are probably emphasized to align her with Christ. The crosses included on Holofernes' bed may indicate that the artist is depicting Judith's story "not merely for its own sake but by way of concordance with the New Testament" (Godwin 29).

The artist of the Byzantine Leo Bible, from the tenth century, provokes the association of Judith with the New Testament through a textual frame that surrounds the entire page of narrative illustration.²⁰⁷ The inscription, or catena, around the Judith drawings, translated from the Greek by Godwin, reads: "See the liberation and admire the female sex, for with the sword and God's strength it brought salvation to Israel. Out of the female, and once more through the wisdom of God, Christ sprang carrying the cross like a sword to defeat satan [sic]" (37). There is a clearly stated emphasis on Judith's sex in this inscription and no mention of her nobility, which is, however, indicated through her dress in the illumination.²⁰⁸ At the same time, Judith's bloody action has been taken away—instead it has become Christ's action to defeat his enemies. In the Leo Bible's drawings of Judith, her depiction is quite obviously typological rather than literal, a comparison that seems to relate especially to Judith as a type of Christ. At the same time, it is easy to perceive from the inscription that Judith's image is also identified with the Virgin Mary

from whom Christ “sprang,” which associates her with typological references to Holy Church and the noblewomen who represent her. Here Judith is represented in the very act of decapitation, which emphasizes Judith’s power and decisiveness. The top left corner of the page depicts the Hebrews watching their heroine, and the bottom scene portrays the battle between the Hebrews and Assyrians. Judith within this illumination appears to be a noblewoman acting for her community. Although the Leo Bible differs in its choice of scenes from the Book of Judith—most notably the representation of the beheading²⁰⁹—it concurs with the Bible of St. Paul in representing Judith as a noblewoman, as is found in many later illuminated Bibles, including some in England.

The first examples of English illuminations of Judith that I have been able to locate date from the twelfth century. These seem to be modeled on earlier continental models. Godwin posits that the *Winchester Bible*,²¹⁰ from the later twelfth century, is modeled after a narrative cycle whose prototype is used by the Spanish *Farfa Bible* of the eleventh century.²¹¹ The *Bible de Manerius*,²¹² also from the late twelfth century, contains only one scene—that of the decapitation—inside of an initial at the beginning of the Book of Judith. Godwin believes that these illustrations come from “the East Christian tradition [which] dominates England” (102). This tradition appears to concentrate on the Judith narrative, rather than her image typologically. Even so, in these narrative portrayals Judith is imagined as belonging to the nobility. Judith in the *Winchester Bible* is adorned in a noblewoman’s dress, complete with wide sleeves and some type of ornamentation at the neck and under-sleeves. Admittedly, she lacks the extra cape given to queens illustrated in the manuscript, and because the page was never finished, readers do not know if the ornamentation on her garments would have been trimmed in gold, as are some of the *Winchester* illuminations.²¹³ In *Manerius*, Judith’s dress does not have wide sleeves or any type of ornamentation. Her outer robe hangs loosely and thus indicates an abundance of fabric, as well as double layers, evident through her white sleeves, which contrast with the outer layer, whereas her maid appears to wear only one layer of

clothing. However, the headdresses of both are elaborately tied around their heads. In these two Bibles, although Judith and the maid differ slightly in their clothing, they are portrayed as partners at the beheading—in essence creating the “pairing” effect, as well as giving viewers a sense of female community.

The early thirteenth-century M 0791, sometimes referred to as the Lothian Bible (1215-1225),²¹⁴ presents Judith alone at the beheading, but portrays the two women leaning close together as they place Holofernes’ head in the bag. Judith’s dominance is highlighted not through “pairing,” but through her solo performance, as she confidently raises the sword above her head with her elaborately ornamented right arm and grasps Holofernes’ hair with the other hand.²¹⁵ Ms. G. 18 from the Pierpont Morgan library (1235-45) depicts Judith in a similar pose, but the sword appears too heavy—it is not raised above her head but is pointing to the ground. Judith wears plain clothes, except for a hint of ornamentation around the neck-line. The emphasis here is not on Judith’s might or nobility, but upon the contrast between her weak physical capabilities and her determined faith, evidenced through her steady look and the confident way she seizes Holofernes’ hair. A contrast may also be intended between Judith’s simple clothing and the elaborate bedding of Holofernes. More than likely this is not meant to negate Judith’s nobility, but to stress her single-minded devotion.

At least two other Bibles of the thirteenth century contain similar portrayals of Judith and Holofernes within an initial. Pierpont Morgan Ms. G-42 (1260-1270), like G-18 contrasts Holofernes’ bright bedclothes and Judith’s plain, gray garment. Yet in this initial Judith’s garment is rich in material—the extra folds of the nobility are obvious. Even more apparent is the powerful way in which Judith wields the sword to decapitate Holofernes. Judith’s two hands grasp the sword firmly, not in raised position, but having just completed a powerful swing. The sword has hit its mark and the head of the general rolls to one side, indicating that it has been severed (although the blood and gore is hidden behind the sword). Ms. M-138 (1255-75) offers a very different rendering. The artist has depicted both Judith and Holofernes in brown without

ornamentation. Unlike the other illuminations in this study, the presence of wealth appears only through the embellishment of the manuscript initial. Even more unusual is the peculiar pose of Holofernes. While Judith places a determined hand upon Holofernes' head and holds the sword resolutely against his neck, Holofernes has one hand upon the sword as if attempting to stop the action. This is an unusual rendering of the decapitation scene, which appears to ignore the Bible's claim that Holofernes had passed out from drunkenness. Perhaps this depiction can be interpreted as giving Judith more power and honor, implying that she killed Holofernes while he was still awake; and yet it may encourage more sympathy for Holofernes in the pathetic way he attempts to ward off his attacker. In some ways, the two characters appear as equals, both engaged in a struggle and wearing the same color. Their garments indicate that wealth is not an important aspect of the story to this artist. The typological significance of Christ and/or the church's triumph seems to be downplayed, as well. Perhaps, instead there is an emphasis on the struggle between good and evil; Christ and the devil; or the church and her opponents. On the other hand, some degree of sympathy for Holofernes appears—possibly signifying a movement toward his later appearance in the “power of woman” topos.²¹⁶

While there appears to be a tendency to portray Judith as an aristocrat in English artworks of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, there is a great deal of variety regarding the emphasis placed on Judith's apparel or other attributes that point to her nobility. Yet in none of the illustrations examined here do Judith's clothes appear alluring or even lavish. On the contrary, some artists prefer to depict Holofernes as a representative of the class of aristocrats who pride themselves on extra ornamentation and splendor, while representing Judith (judging by the simplicity of her clothing, which still displays subtle hints of wealth) as unconcerned about her adornments. This particular theme is also popular within the “Esther topos” used to encourage royal women to remain humble even as they live in luxury. The Septuagint emphasizes Esther's reluctance to wear the luxurious adornment of a queen and her concession to do so because she was appointed by God to be in such a position.²¹⁷ This

example of humility proved useful for Church authorities, who appeared to have found it more productive to encourage royal women to use their wealth wisely than to condemn it outright. Huneycutt posits that Queen Esther's story "provided a justification for the lavish lifestyle of royalty and the aristocracy in that it sanctioned worldly splendor as long as it was used in the proper manner" ("Intercession" 130). As evident in Ælfric, some Christian writers (as well as artists) were more uncomfortable with the idea of wealthy aristocrats than others. Stafford notes that Goscelin, writing in the late eleventh century, found it acceptable to justify noblewomen's wealth because of the support that aristocratic women gave to the church, while William of Malmesbury (1085-1143 approximately) considered wealth problematic ("Portrayal" 155).

The depiction of noblewomen in the early Middle Ages was fraught with the ambivalent message that the Christian church and its religious writers and artists presented: temporal wealth was evil, or at best not to be desired, but still it could be used to promote the development of Christianity and to support its institutions. Furthermore, material riches, particularly gold, could stand metaphorically for spiritual wealth and present a picture of heaven or The New Jerusalem: crowns and luxurious robes were often depicted on Christ, Mary, and other biblical figures. Another consideration in the Christian attitude toward wealth is its indication of hierarchy. Because Christians were taught to obey their anointed rulers, they often expected them to dress and live in a higher fashion, which required expensive material goods. Therefore, the almost parenthetical information about Judith's wealth in the Book of Judith becomes an important aspect of her portrayal to many—but perhaps not all—in early England. Typological readings of Judith as Holy Church, Mary, or Christ appear to have influenced both initials and narrative cycles as they frequently emphasized Judith's nobility, but the fact that she was used as an example for queens, and that medieval holy women were usually of aristocratic heritage, may have also played a significant part in her depictions.²¹⁸ In narrative art, as well as text, Judith's nobility may protect her image from being corrupted by the seductive details of her story. Representing Judith as a member of the nobility obscures her identity as a woman,

marking her instead as a representative of the patriarchal aristocratic hierarchy. Yet this marking of Judith as aristocratic may have been unconscious—perhaps the medieval imagination accepted Judith’s nobility as a given, a result of her long association with Queen Esther, as well as the common expectation that it was the role of the aristocracy to lead and protect the people.

3.5 Clothing Judith for Conversation: Bakhtinian Insights

Judith as noblewoman appears to be an example of authoritarian discourse, passed down from one patriarch to another with the expectation of continuing the significance of her representation through future generations of readers or viewers. Yet we see that small changes occur, that the figure refuses to remain completely static. Interpretations and/or translations of Judith create space for stylistic alterations, which in time become traditions—new authoritarian discourse. Writers and artists blend traditions, and along with these syntheses appear new renditions of the old story. Determining exactly when and where these changes to Judith’s image took place may be impossible, but recognizing how the alterations occurred leads to a Bakhtinian understanding of language. While it is apparent that patriarchal discourse propagates its authoritarian values through the retelling of such stories as Judith, it is important to note that this discourse is inevitably changed to some degree through each retelling. Even when many of the same words and details are used in a new rendition, the meaning will change, because words (and, likewise, images—both as graphic illustrations and mental concepts) travel through each usage picking up new contexts and significations.

In Bakhtinian theory this accumulation and shedding of meaning, which happens in spite of patriarchal resistance to keep things constantly under the authority of established male discourse, is only half of the picture. In Bakhtin’s view, new meanings are created through “internally persuasive discourse,” which belongs partially to the individual and partially to previous users. A mature individual’s consciousness is brought to life through the struggle of the

many ideological discourses that he/she hears, and thus the individual begins to create his/her own meaningful discourse:

Its creativity and productiveness consist precisely in the fact that such a word awakens new and independent words, that it organizes masses of our words from within, and does not remain in an isolated and static condition. It is not so much interpreted by us as it is further, that is, freely, developed, applied to new material, new conditions; it enters into interanimating relationships with new contexts. More than that, it enters into an intense interaction, a struggle with other internally persuasive discourses. Our ideological development is just such an intense struggle within us for hegemony among various available verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions and values. The semantic structure of an internally persuasive discourse is not finite, it is open; in each of the new contexts that dialogize it, this discourse is able to reveal ever newer ways to mean. (*Dialogic* 345-6)

When we examine changes that have occurred to Judith's image, we are looking at alterations caused by words and visual representations that have struggled against each other, both on the written page and within the minds of writers and compilers—or within the graphic space and the imagination of the artist. According to Bakhtin, words (and in the same sense, images) through their cultural significances and interaction in the mind of writers are open to new meanings beyond the authoritarian discourse through which they may have begun. Considering that Judith is treated primarily as an image or symbol in these early patriarchal retellings (whether graphic or textual) over and beyond her role as a narrative character, it is no marvel that her figure goes through a similar transformation. Each teller of her tale mixes past usages and associations with current language and understandings to transform her image slightly, thus adding new depth to the totality of Judith as signifier.

This quality of change or development that occurs throughout the use of an image requires that the critic examine two aspects of the representation in question: it is important to know what has been passed on and is “traditional” within patriarchal usage, and it is equally significant to understand how the user—writer or illustrator—has incorporated new ideas into the tradition. This second aspect requires investigation into the source of the newly integrated ideas in order to understand the interplay of concepts that commonly occurred within the dialogues available to the writer or artist. In her study of Judith in early art history, Godwin focuses on establishing the existence of iconographic traditions, but she also comments on seemingly innovative aspects of certain representations. Of course, her emphasis is on style rather than significance. In Bakhtinian analysis the two are interwoven: style and meaning are a manifestation of the dialogues available to the writer/artist.²¹⁹ Because of the close association between style and dialogue, Godwin’s analyses have been extremely useful in my discussion regarding the formation of Judith’s image in early artistic renderings. Unfortunately, I have not located a study as thorough as Godwin’s regarding the tradition of Judith in early texts. The textual aspects of Judith are clearly too expansive and complex for a single exhaustive development of the topic. In the discussion of this chapter I have been limited by time and space to a brief discussion of some of the early texts and graphic visualizations which established Judith’s image, adding my own analysis on the creation of a noble, “well dressed” heroine whose participation in the upper echelons of patriarchal society provide a spiritual metaphor and create an acceptable portrayal of a noblewoman who performs powerfully, but not outside of her established role in masculinist society. In the next two chapters I will look at the repetitions and innovations at play within this same aspect of Judith’s depiction in the MEMPOT manuscript, as the poet represents the heroine through a blend of historical reflections and internal discourse, which both repeat the Judith story and present it anew.

CHAPTER 4

ADORNING JUDITH FOR THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY

4.1 Embellishing Courtly Judith

The story of Judith—along with other Old Testament narratives—is refashioned in MEMPOT to please a late fourteenth-century English audience. The MEMPOT-poet presents a biblical narrative that in some ways gratifies its readers' romantic desires by giving them biblical heroes and heroines that resemble courtly nobility, not only through their actions, but through vivid detail, particularly regarding some aspects of their wardrobe. In contrast, Comestor's *Historia* and most English metrical paraphrases of the Bible are noticeably silent regarding sartorial description,²²⁰ while MEMPOT's characters, especially the women, are regaled in finery. Of course, other genres of late fourteenth-century poetry frequently presented women biblical and religious characters dressed in courtly guise. Often adorning these characters with noble characteristics and apparel serves to present them as idealizations—perfect and unreachable.²²¹ On the other hand, the courtly attributes of Chaucer's prioress, which have been noted by scholars since the early twentieth century, serve to create an ironic, even comic portrayal of the religious woman, which “was already present in the tension between the ideal of the nun and the language in which it was recommended” (Mann 137). In MEMPOT's Judith, this tension is ignored, as courtly dress and behavior create a heroic and emulable character. Instead of inducing laughter, the text explicitly encourages readers to see in her a model for Christian behavior. In essence, Judith's appearance in this text resonates with the discourse of medieval romance, in which “a courtly and largely literary ideal developed whereby a person's outward qualities perfectly mirrored that person's inner qualities” (Wright 3).

The description of Judith's clothing in MEMPOT is significant,²²² and yet ambiguous, produced in a culture where both the substantive and performative significance of dress was recognized and debated. This chapter will consider how the depiction of Judith's dress arises from a nuanced dialogue regarding clothing, particularly for women, and what significance the heroine's adornment may have had for contemporary readers. Judith's portrayal is caught between the interior/exterior debate of a blended Christian and secular culture; and yet the MEMPOT-poet depicts a heroine in which the two sides are not exclusive. In this story Judith's sartorial details appear as important as her inner characteristics in presenting a model for readers to emulate. Judith's choice to dress herself plays a major part in her overall scheme to conquer Holofernes and bring peace to her people. This is an independent choice—Judith dresses herself without any help from men, but she wears the clothes of a medieval aristocrat and, thus, becomes a signifier for the poet's contemporary patriarchal society. MEMPOT's account of Judith is complicated not only by traditional interpretations of her character, but also by the historical weight her adornment carries. Before beginning this examination, then, it will be useful to consider recent theories concerning the signification of clothing, particularly the meaning of clothing within texts.

4.2 Creating Dress in Theory

Roland Barthes, one of the first theorists to explore the significance of fashion in both a sociological and semiological sense, poses the question “[what happens] *when an object, whether real or imaginary, is converted into language? Or rather, when an object encounters language?*” (*Fashion* 12). Barthes' question is relevant for any scholar studying material descriptions within literature and of special interest to this study regarding MEMPOT's portrayal of Judith's apparel. What does it mean to imagine and then provide a written sketch of Judith's clothing? Barthes reminds us that to study written depictions of clothing is a quest for implication: “written clothing has no practical or aesthetic function: it is entirely constituted with a view to a signification . . . we might say, then, that the being of the written garment resides

completely in its meaning" (*Fashion* 8). Therefore, we can conclude that clothing in literature, including MEMPOT, does not exist for ornamental purposes only. When reading about Judith's apparel it is important to regard it as a multivalent signifier and to question its significance for the writer and contemporary readers.

While Barthes' study focuses on twentieth-century fashion magazines, his basic premise that textual accounts of clothing are written to signify meaning to readers can be applied equally to literature. Barthes notes that both fashion magazines and literature use description, although "in literature, description is brought to bear upon a hidden object (whether real or imaginary): it must make that object exist" (*Fashion* 12). In most cases of literary representation of dress, there is no visual depiction provided to readers, so language must communicate all that the readers need to know regarding the garment(s) in order to imagine the clothing described. Similar to Barthes' study of modern fashion magazines, there are three classes of clothing to consider within literary texts: the real (or writer-imagined) object; the representation of the object; and the used (or reader-imagined) object. Although Barthes does not explore the portrayal of fashion in literature and its resulting "use," it seems reasonable to suggest that a similar process happens in literature as in fashion representation. The garment exists in pre-representation form (as a material object or mental image); it then undergoes a significant change as representation, because of the purposeful signification applied by the writer, as well as the diverse connotations of the words that represent it. As each reader uses the representation further to aid in comprehension of the text, further change in meaning occurs. Barthes' analysis of fashion is similar to Bakhtin's analysis of linguistic utterance. The word, phrase, or more expanded utterance exists in the writer's mind from previous experience; the writer blends the "languages" she has learned/heard/experienced to create a new blend in written form; then the reader receives the text and blends it with other texts (other utterances and other "languages") to imagine it and possibly to create new utterances, oral or textual. Thus

depictions of dress in text undergo a similar process as speech/textual utterances. Indeed, even before it is represented, the social significance of clothing works in ways similar to language:

Clothing seems to resemble language in a number of ways. Like language, clothing was pre-eminently a collective activity. Clothing, however it is defined, seems to have a universal cultural presence, and while it is not as deeply embedded as language, it could be argued that wearing 'clothes' is one of the defining characteristics of being human. Again, like language, clothing is an 'authorless system' and not contingent in its operations on the conscious will, or intention, of the individual. Like language, we 'wear' within a set of forms and norms and just as we do not 'just talk' nor do we 'just dress'. Finally clothing seems to resemble language in that it displays a synchronic density, but at the same time also has a diachronic dimension—a history—so that it (clothing) exhibits the dual aspects of system and process, structure and becoming.
(Carter 155)

While clothing is heavy with historical weight, that weight is often invisible or vague. More apparent is the weight of soft or coarse material upon human skin. Clothing as real object, known through sensory experience, creates another dimension of meaning for writer and readers. Medieval readers, as owners and spectators of fashionable medieval clothing, possessed an experiential cognition by which to derive meaning from the description of contemporary garments in literature. We as twenty-first century readers can only imagine medieval dress vaguely, based on our own experiences and generalizations. Historical studies of material articles are useful for enabling us to add more substance to our imagination, but we must resign ourselves to the limited availability of material objects from the Middle Ages, particularly clothing. As clothing historians Françoise Piponnier and Perrine Mane remind us, medieval clothing was expensive, and "it seems likely that clothes were worn until they were worn out, possibly by a succession of wearers, and that the parts that were still usable were re-

used in different ways” (9). There have been occasional archeological finds, but for the most part Christians buried their dead without clothes (nobility and religious leaders excepted, of course).²²³ Hence, much of what we know about medieval clothing has been derived from texts and paintings, having already undergone the process of representation, leading us again to the continuous cycle of signification—adding layer upon layer of meaning to the original object being represented, which already contains a semiotic significance of its own.²²⁴ The complexity of understanding textual portrayals of clothing is, therefore, doubled, as both writer and reader bring not only the past utterances of texts and visual renderings to bear upon the meaning of the described attire, but also former experiences and personal understandings of the object being represented. Because clothing has a history of religious, political, and social meanings, the unraveling of significance becomes problematical indeed.²²⁵

One complexity of clothing is its use as a form of power. Dressing up oneself or another can indicate either superiority or inferiority. Fashion can be used to force values on others, such as an insistence on perceived properness, or it can be used to keep others in subjection, requiring old or different materials for those of lower classes. Joshua Miller asserts that it can also have a leveling affect:

Clothing has political significance because it affects the relationships among citizens. Clothing is not simply a private or personal matter; it implies the existence of an intersubjective social world in which one presents oneself and is seen by others . . . Clothes, therefore, sometimes facilitate the democratic ideal of widely distributed power. Fashion can provoke dialogue about social and political matters, and that dialogue is democratic. When fashion manifests creativity, respect, allegiance, or membership, the relationships that it fosters are potentially democratic. (3)

In order for clothing to contribute to equality, however, there must be freedom of performance. Individual choice must come into play. There are indications that medieval women sometimes

chose their own clothing (particularly rising merchant class women, as fictionalized in Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*), and perhaps they could make the same claims to the power of dressing as has been made for eighteenth-century wealthy women: "There is a case to be made for reading eighteenth-century female dress in terms of power: the power to take up space, the power to make a visual statement, the power to spend money on the unessential" (Munns 343). Yet women who attempted to gain power through dress were usually criticized. The medieval cultural expectation was for a woman to be dressed by her husband or father in order to demonstrate his social position.²²⁶ Far from creating a "leveling affect," this legislated form of dress was obviously meant to reinforce the established hierarchies. The dressing of characters in texts also lacks a democratic element. Writers choose what clothing their characters wear. In this sense writers, just as husbands and fathers, become Pygmalions, robing their creations. Writers reinforce religious, political, and social hierarchies and values through a character's garments; consequently, examining a text's description of clothing may provide valuable insights into the social values and biases of a writer, as well as an audience. Noticing the text's presentation of dressing is also useful. Is the character given personal choice in the matter? Are clothing acts emphasized or does clothing reside on the body as a permanent fixture? Does the character's robing of self or another represent a type of religious, political, or social power? What gender, racial, economic, or religious biases are presented through dress?

Important theoretical questions regarding an individual's dress are of interest to feminist critics, as well as other theorists, especially the question of dress as it relates to performance and perception of gender. Judith Butler's notion that every person is born into the political and cultural construction of the gender label they are assigned at birth reminds readers that biological features are secondary to cultural constructions: "the body is a historical situation, as Beauvoir has claimed, and is a manner of doing, dramatizing, and reproducing a historical situation" ("Performative Acts" 521). Thus, dress and other cultural gender signifiers become of primary importance for any research into humans and their representations of themselves.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performance appears easily proved through the body's ease in putting on and taking off a garment; and yet Elizabeth Grosz interjects an interesting complication to this notion in her discussion of body concept. Grosz posits that the human body consists not only of what can be studied physically, but of the psychic and social realities that interact with the body. In other words the body merges psychically with that which it associates closely, such as clothing. In her work *Volatile Bodies*, Grosz warns that those who consider only the bare physicality of the body and its performance refuse "to acknowledge the distinctive complexities of organic bodies, the fact that bodies construct and in turn are constructed by an interior, a psychological and a signifying view-point, a consciousness or perspective" (8). For Grosz, Butler's model of "doing" becomes "being" within an individual's self-concept and often within the perception of others as well.

Grosz's concept of the body as inscribed by both culture and nature has been utilized in connecting clothing to the "social body" by Jane E. Burns in her study of Provençal lyrics from the thirteenth century:

The body, Grosz contends, is "a cultural interweaving and a production of nature" and as such must be regarded as a site of social, political, cultural, and geographical inscriptions, production, or constitution. One could profitably extend Grosz's project to address clothing as especially crucial in the construction of the social body, since clothing stands on the threshold between nature and culture, creating a body out of materials other than flesh. It is important to understand the function of clothing in this sense not as a layer of socialization that can be removed to locate a biological substrata which it is assumed to conceal, but rather to see dress as an integral part of the body it fabricates. ("Speculum" 259)

Both Grosz and Burns contend that the individual's body concept is built around much more than the original physicality that nature bestowed—those items and actions that Butler

considers a historical performance. For these theorists it is not performance but psychology that receives substantial emphasis. Because of the psychological aspects of being human, a body consists of those items that an individual has learned to identify with on a self-concept level. The wearing of clothing is a psychological and sociological act of identification in which the cognizance of one's dress merges with the knowledge of one's body, and hence, while culturally learned and performed, it takes on a dimension of substance, at least in the imagination of wearers and spectators. The imagination, as part of the psyche of each individual, is considered an essential body function, constructing and being constructed through the blending of social, emotional, and psychological forces. Thus, an individual's perception of frequently worn clothing, along with other closely associated external objects, merges with the perception of self. In view of the fact that articles of dress in the Middle Ages might be worn until they became unusable, they would likely have been even more a part of conceptualizing the body than clothing is in the twenty-first century, when many people purchase new clothes every year.

To say that a person realizes her body along with its apparel—and all its semiotic weight— as an organic whole is not to deny that the body is a historical and social body, consisting of those items that society has deemed proper for each individual. In addition to understanding the body as socially constructed, however, this notion of clothing and body synthesis allows that the individual constructs her own social body, one that might rebel against the pattern given her by society, and simultaneously maintains that the individual can choose to cover up or hide the “perceived” body, such as in the case of the wearing of costumes. Barthes accounts for each of these ideas in his adaptation of Saussure's concept of the individual drawing from the social bank of language. For Barthes “le costume” is the reservoir of dress, given by society, and “habillement” is the individual's use of clothing, which may not be in accordance with the prevailing fashions (Carter 156).²²⁷ In my reading of Butler and Barthes in conjunction with Grosz and Burns, the performance which an individual repeats concerning “habillement,” whether or not it is chosen after the socially or politically correct pattern, becomes

a part of the individual's organic body and is frequently perceived as such by other members of society. This metamorphosis occurs both in material and textual forms—particularly when a society's prejudice creates hierarchies in which certain human beings are considered to be of purer or more “noble” stock than others.

4.3 Exploring Medieval Attitudes Toward Dress

In the Middle Ages, the concept of nobility was profoundly entangled with social, political, and religious beliefs, and yet there was much disagreement regarding whether nobility was inherent in the blood or of a performative nature. This argument carried over to noble apparel as well, where it took a particularly religious turn, based on the early church fathers' views on adornment and its use by “seductive” women. As early as the beginning of the third century, Tertullian demanded that Christian women identify themselves with Eve by wearing penitential garments rather than identifying with their social status (Chapter 1.1). Eventually he does concede, however, that some women may be forced to dress according to their positions:

First, then, blessed sisters, have nothing to do with the lewd and seductive tricks of dress and appearance. Secondly, if some of you, because of wealth or birth or former dignities are forced to appear in public in overly elaborate dress, as if they had not yet acquired the good sense that is fitting to their age, take heed to temper the evil that is in this thing, lest under pretext of necessity you give rein to unbounded licence. (*Apparel* 141)²²⁸

Apparently, Tertullian's view of clothing is performative, and for women the performance of dressing nobly is equated with seductive allure. Although he recognizes performance in relation to social expectations, he believes that dressing according to one's social rank is dangerously close to presenting oneself as sexually attractive. This pejorative attitude, associating women's dress with sexual license, is passed down from patriarch to patriarch, eventually making its way into medieval religious texts and sermons.²²⁹

Not all medieval religious voices reiterate the disdain for elegant attire found in the patriarchs, however. In the fourteenth-century *Dives and Pauper* there is a discussion of women's clothing that presents two sides of this debate: "Dives. Womany's aray steryt mychil / folc to lecherye. Pauper. And þous in cas þe aray & þe tyr is nout to blamyn no mor þan is hyr bewte to blamyn" (xiii.1-3). While Dives takes what might be considered the traditional view that women who dress up are to blame for lechery, Pauper disagrees and goes on to argue that men and women both dress according to the customs of their countries and the propriety of their positions. He does posit that wearing the extremes of fashion (such as articles that are "to costful or to straunge in schap or to wyde or to side" (xiii.11-2))²³⁰ or using clothing beyond one's station in life are worthy of blame, but most of his argument allows the use of elegant dress by nobility. His interpretation of biblical principles of dress seems to incorporate the typical Christian warnings against sin; and yet he accepts clothing as an essential part of a person's station in life:

Petir & Powyl defendedyn nout uttyrlyche swyche aray but þei defendedyn women swyche aray to usyn in pryde or to prouokyn folc to lecherye & to usyn swyche aray pasying her astat, for we fyndyn þat **Sent Cecilie & many opir holy women wentyn adyth in clopis of gold & in ryche perre && weredyn þe heyre vndir þat solempne atyr.** (xiii. 25-30) [emphasis mine]

In Pauper's view it is wrong to be prideful or to create desire through one's clothing, and these attitudes are connected to dressing beyond one's estate. In other words there are different reasons for dressing. One is to perform for others to attract attention, which may incite lust or feed pride. The other impetus seems to be of a substantive character. According to Pauper, holy women of high estate kept their clothing and other social indicators such as hair styles underneath their somber clothes, indicating that these garments are a part of a noblewoman's identity even if she chooses not to display them to others. Perhaps Pauper's opinion has

something to do with an attitude that accepts a person's place in the social world as God-given and sees the material signs of that estate as inseparable from the person's inherent nature.

While Pauper's opinion regarding the substantive nature of nobility was frequently held among contemporary writers, there are indications that some in the Middle Ages supported the notion that a person's estate could be changed—inevitably requiring a change of clothes. An obvious example is when a nobleman joined a religious order, shaved his head, and exchanged his former elegant apparel for a simple habit. For many, the religious vows and accompanying actions signified the giving up of a former secular estate in order to be part of “those who pray” (i.e., Saint Francis of Assisi), indicating a more performative understanding than Pauper's argument, which considered nobility too essential to shed when one joined a religious order. Another illustration that seems to indicate a performative attitude toward dress is the popular tale of Griselde. The story, retold by various interpreters, represents the heroine's change of estate from peasant to lady, back to peasant, and then again to lady. In Chaucer's *Clerks Tale* these transformations take place through rituals of dressing and undressing reminiscent of the rituals of religious affiliation.

In some ways Griselde's adornment seems to indicate a passive performance of the type misogynistic medieval texts required of women. She does not perform clothing rituals herself. Instead she is portrayed as donning the robes of the governor, as long as he chooses to give them to her, but humbly submitting to being disrobed when she is no longer desired. That Griselde no longer owns the clothes of her peasant estate might seem disturbing. Because she must go back to her original life without her original clothing, her plight might be viewed as that of a person whose complete identity has been stripped. Yet, as the “ideal woman” she shows no sign of a lost identity. She allows herself to be dressed and undressed according to the whims of her husband without complaint or mourning.²³¹ Modern scholars, however, have offered increasingly complex interpretations of Chaucer's Griselde.²³² Perhaps, as Margaret Hallissy suggests, Griselde's submission demonstrates a woman whose identity is not connected with

clothing, but with her noble character (129). The ability to hold oneself aloof from material possessions, including clothing, to use them as signs of where one stands in the ordained hierarchy without becoming attached to them or engaging them to enhance one's beauty or power, seems to be one version of the Christian ideal. For those who held this belief, garments were not connected to one's body concept; they were merely a sign of status, easily slipped on and off. Clothing in this sense has lost its pejorative signification and become merely "useful" in identifying a person's estate.

Perhaps it seems obvious to interpret medieval clothing as social signifiers of a performative nature, but some medieval understandings of dress reach beyond performative signification. At times, the performance of adorning one's body transforms that body into something else, and the adornment becomes a part of the newly perceived body. This idea was present in some of the patriarchs as well. For Cyprian the performance needs only to occur in the imagination: "hence virgins in desiring to be adorned more elegantly, to go about more free, cease to be virgins" (quid in Bloch 237).²³³ Apparently, notions of performance and substance were not as separate for the early church fathers, or for their progeny in the Middle Ages, as theorists have frequently made them today. Quite often, in medieval texts, there seems to be an acceptance of the possibility that what is considered of a substantive nature can be transformed through performance, and the performance of dressing or undressing is often one of the key acts of this transformative process. Burns finds transformation a key aspect in the notion of *largesse*, especially in the giving of courtly clothes:

To understand this view of courtly dress will mean envisioning clothing in the courtly world, in line with Terence Turner's formulation, as a kind of 'social skin' that combines corporeal features of the physical body with adornment that significantly transforms and alters that body. From this perspective we can imagine not only how the material of courtly clothing might be deployed by its various users to different ends—to signal social rank or to convey gender

differences, but also how those material garments themselves might construct, maintain, control, and transform social identities based on gender and class distinctions, and how they might do so in unregulated, unexpected, and disruptive ways. (*Courtly* 25)

Thus, it seems that courtly garments were expected to wield a certain transformative power on those who donned them. On the other hand, there is evidence that medieval people sometimes feared the transformations that might take place.²³⁴ It may be possible to read the sumptuary laws not just as a way to control the performance of the lower estates, but also as a method of controlling their transformation into equivalent beings.²³⁵

England's sumptuary law of 1363 was passed at a time that historians have sometimes equated with the beginning of "fashion" as we know it. Before the fourteenth century clothing was passed on from one generation to the next. It kept society stable—one recognized the rank—even the specific clothes that came down from mother to daughter (Hallissy 115). *Largesse*, if it was practiced much beyond the texts of courtly literature, was probably limited. In the fourteenth century emerged a new appreciation of sartorial variety and performance. Of course, this appreciation was tied to the availability of textiles and the growth of a prosperous merchant class. It was also linked to the more extravagant use of clothing and outlandish styles to create spectacle by the upper echelons, particularly royalty. We might expect to see, then, concepts of sartorial performance reflected within texts of the later fourteenth century, such as in the tale of Griselde. Simultaneously, however, texts continued to employ dress in traditional ways that equated clothing with certain estates, indicating a more substantive attitude toward clothing. Chaucer's detailed description of pilgrims in the *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales* appears to do both, while demonstrating the loaded social significance of dress. The manner in which each pilgrim is dressed—in a mixture of the traditional, the exaggerated, and the ambiguous— contributes to the ironic comedy of the *GP*.

While it may be most obvious in Chaucer, there is no doubt that the descriptions of clothing in other texts of the late Middle Ages are also laden with religious, social, and/or political significance. In particular, garments of luxury could be used with variant meanings, depending in part upon the dialogue in which the writer was participating. The *Pearl*-Poet, also writing in the late fourteenth century, seems especially adept at fitting clothing to match the religious and social expectations of his audience in accordance with his general ability to equate Christianity and the chivalric values of romance.²³⁶ The poet describes the court adorning Sir Gawain in the clothing of the noble knight, luxury garments that in addition to indicating his social status represent his faithfulness to Mary. Even the lady's girdle that he accepts secretly, indicating his human weakness, is later changed into a sign of penance and community. In *Cleanness*, the poet attires everyone within God's community—angels, people, and even God—in noble clothing, following the biblical parable of the wedding feast.²³⁷ The difference between the medieval poem and the biblical account is perhaps emphasis. The New Testament stresses that festive clothing has been made available to everyone by the host, whereas the medieval poet focuses on the nobility of the garb, equating luxurious garments with spiritual prosperity and the lack of them with spiritual poverty. *Patience* refers to Jonah's soiled clothes when washed onto the beach, which is interpreted by Andrew and Maldron as symbolizing his sin (199-200). This of course is reminiscent of the old and torn clothes worn by the sinful guest at the wedding feast. However, the equation of noble garments to spirituality is not present in *Patience*. Instead we see the king tearing his royal robes and the people wearing sackcloth in repentance, perhaps a more conventional Christian attitude toward clothing. On the other hand, in *Pearl*, the title and central desire of the dreamer is an article of luxury—"a pearl of great price," valuable in human terms, but also a traditional spiritual metaphor used in the New Testament.²³⁸ Obviously clothing can serve in multiple and opposite metaphors within the medieval Christian tradition.

In spite of the fact that luxurious clothing details are important in portraying the spirituality and nobility of both genders during the Middle Ages, there is an underlying rhetorical concept within the medieval imagination, which linked the idea of the feminine to ornamentation. In *Medieval Misogyny*, Howard Bloch asserts that in patriarchal texts, beginning with Tertullian, women become equated with seductive ornamentation, and this pejorative perception of decoration transferred to forms of representation, particularly poetry, so that women and ornamentally rhetorical texts were considered deceptive: “the alliance of woman with the material, with the senses, with the superficiality of signs and artifice, lies at the root of a deep identification between the feminine and the literary” (49). In the *Artes Poetica* tradition the portrayal of adorned woman becomes conflated with the ornament of rhetoric, both easily manipulated for the writer’s purposes: “Geoffrey [of Vinsauf] explicitly joins language and woman throughout his treatise. Geoffrey, in fact, carries the analogy of text-as-woman one step farther, figuratively joining rhetoric as woman to rhetoric as clothing or ornament” (Hass-Birky 193). Robin Hass-Birky suggests that the *Artes Poeticae* tradition includes masculine and feminine forms of rhetoric which often correspond to the masculine or feminine characters being described. She argues that there are three types of masculine discourse—Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s “incarnational” rhetoric,²³⁹ “naked” (plain/unornamented) rhetoric as exemplified by John of Garland, and Matthew of Vendome’s “disembodied rhetoric, language and rhetorical techniques that erase the body in the depiction of worthwhile masculine subjects in contrast to the focused physicality of feminized language and subjects” (174).²⁴⁰ Hass-Birky also categorizes feminine types, all of which either emphasize the body or negate it. “The most obvious difference between the masculine linguistic variations and the feminized ones is that the types of feminized language are all paradoxically clothed, yet the focus on the physicality, or ‘bodiliness,’ of language and woman is marked” (182). While the secular types of woman emphasize her flesh, yet cover her with clothes, the two religious types that Birky identifies are akin to the masculine types; nevertheless, they require ornamental language for expression: “In a sense, Marian and

chaste rhetoric are the feminized analogues of the masculine incarnational and naked rhetoric, but these types admit, even require, ornamentation or clothing, possibly necessitated by the perceived nature of female flesh after the Fall" (182). Ornamental clothing and rhetoric are deemed necessary by the writers of *Artes Poeticae* to dress the descriptions of women and make them presentable for readers.

The conflation of the feminine with excessive adornment created a disapproving attitude toward both. Thus, representing religious women who *purposely* adorned themselves in elegant clothing seems particularly problematic because for centuries Christian women had been warned against presenting themselves as objects of desire. Yet MEMPOT does not use a negative tone when presenting a woman who is actively using clothing to create allure. One reason for this change may lie within variant attitudes toward clothing which French romance literature had introduced. Burns points out at least three uses of clothing found in courtly literary texts. The tendency to employ clothing to emphasize the physical body and the opposing technique of hiding the body beneath layers of fine cloth work in opposing fashion to create a masculine view of "woman." The first practice stresses women's corporeality, and the second reveals its shamefulness resulting from Eve's sin. On the other hand, Burns discovers a third use, a positive "shift away from courtly love's typical obsession with the anatomically figured body...rather, it considers a social body formed from clothing that does not so much envelop or hide but actually creates the courtly bodies of both players in the love scenario" (*Courtly* 70). As telling evidence in her argument, Burns cites the difference between Alain de Lille's depiction of Nature, whose clothing is an artful cover-up of the natural that lies beneath, and Guillaume de Lorris's depiction of Nature in the *Roman de la Rose*, whose dress cannot be separated from her being. The garments of the god of love in *Roman* also seems "no more separable from a physiological body than is Nature's robe from the earth herself" (Burns *Courtly* 154). In these characters the body and clothing become one, a manifestation of noble beauty and love. Burns asserts that this attitude can be found in other medieval French works as well.

In courtly literature this merging of body and clothing creates a representation of ideal beauty to be gazed upon and celebrated. Scholars hold differing opinions about when this notion began to take form. Burns emphasizes Lorris' portrayal of the unification of beautiful clothing and body, but David Burnley, in his study on courtliness and literature, gives Alain credit for the notion that Nature is "the creator of beautiful human beings" (46), which results in later depictions of beautiful heroines and heroes wearing elegant finery. Burnley points out that romance literature did not follow the abstract descriptive models for male heroes as used in the *Artes Poeticae*: "Unlike the Latin rhetorical models, the presentation of the young hero is felt to require the description of physical appearance" (38). Burnley's examples of Marie of France's hero, Lanval, and Hue de Rotelande's Ipomedon demonstrate that heroic male characterizations employed stock phrases and stressed similar qualities as delineations of the courtly ladies who motivated their adventures. Two aspects of these detailed descriptions are of particular importance to Burnley: "First, the emergence of a conception of beauty based upon proportion, moderation, and appropriateness; the idea of a physique well and proportionately formed is usually present in such descriptions. *Secondly, there is a heavy emphasis on external finery*" (41) [italics mine]. Beauty—defined as both physical form and its clothes (categories that are often represented as inseparable)—becomes representative of an ideal to be enjoyed, not just erotically, but also aesthetically:

Beauty has become a social benefit, a quality which enriches the life of all who are privileged to witness it. Canons of beauty developed in literary sources have been incorporated into the aspirations of fashionable society, and are reciprocally held up as ideals in the literature produced for that society's entertainment. (Burnley 46)

Of course, this canonization of beauty began in secular literature, especially the genre of romance, but by the fourteenth century its penetration into the imagination of writers and readers resulted in the idealization of beauty within religious narratives as well, both in

depictions of chaste medieval damsels and metrical retellings of the lives of biblical women.²⁴¹ In these instances beauty has lost its erotic and personal quality and has become an ideal to be viewed and enjoyed by society at large.²⁴²

4.4 Being: Judith is Adornment

The notion of celebrated noble beauty permeates MEMPOT's portrayal of Judith, as the poet creates a religious character who can adorn herself without shame for the betterment of her community; and yet the MEMPOT-poet tempers the idealization of beauty in the narrative by downplaying her physical characteristics. Nowhere in the account does the writer mention Judith's physical beauty except in the lines that connect her motivation for helping her people to God's purpose in making her attractive:

God wyst wele that sho went
to save His pepyll exprese.
Therefor to hyr He sent
both favour and fayrnesse. (1438.9-12)

Here the poet understates Judith's physical form as delineated by other writers. In its opening description of Judith, the Latin Vulgate claims that she is "exceedingly beautiful" (8.7),²⁴³ and when the Lord increases her beauty "she appeared to all men's eyes incomparably lovely" (10.4).²⁴⁴ As we have seen in Chapter Two, earlier retellings of Judith echo the Vulgate: the Old English poem gives her "elvish beauty," and Ælfric admits that "she was beautiful and of fair form."²⁴⁵ Even Comestor asserts that Judith was an "extraordinarily beautiful woman" (Col. 1477C).²⁴⁶ Although MEMPOT's depiction appears grossly insufficient in comparison to earlier texts, perhaps it was unnecessary to expand upon Judith's beauty because readers would have brought to the reading previous knowledge of her unusual attractiveness.

In omitting all physical details of Judith, MEMPOT minimizes the literary tradition of equating corporeal beauty with perfection and/or spirituality. Even more surprisingly, the text appears to disregard the tradition of elaborating on Judith metaphorically as Holy Church—the

beautiful bride of Christ. Perhaps it is because Judith is represented in MEMPOT as a woman whose example should be followed by all readers that she is depicted as neither a metaphor nor an ideal. Even though her performance is exemplary, it is one that can be performed by her audience—at least conceptually. Perhaps the poet did not mention details of Judith's countenance in order to allow closer reader identification, as well as to direct the reader's gaze away from her attractiveness and onto her actions. Yet while ignoring Judith's physical traits, the text goes into great detail regarding some features of Judith's wardrobe, particulars that identify Judith with the social elite and would have been appreciated by aristocratic readers, as well as all readers of popular romance.

This obvious method of communicating Judith's nobility—and thus her social power—through dress resonates with former descriptions of Judith, particularly her treatment in the Anglo-Saxon poem. Nevertheless, whereas the Old English poem refers to Judith's aristocracy in short, subtle hints about her shiny countenance and ornamentation, the Middle English metrical version uses several lines to describe the garments she wears into Holofernes' camp:

And sythyn sho hyr arayd
in *garmentes gud and gay*...
with sylke and sendell and satayn
and baulkyn bettur non myzt be,
hyr pe[ll]our all of pure Armyne,
with pyrry plett full grett plente,
with gyrdyll and garland [of] gold fyne
to make hyr semly vnto se. (17241-2, 17245-50; 1437.9-10,1438.1-6)

Of course, part of the reason for the longer elaboration in the fifteenth century is connected to the demands of fashion. In Anglo-Saxon England it was the glistening of gold thread and jewelry that made a noblewoman recognizable. While the gold and jewelry ("pyrry plett") are still part of the equation, being fashionably noble in the later Middle Ages required more elaboration,

particularly in textual tradition. Indeed, in the twelfth century, with the rise of courtliness as a literary topic, the detailed description of dress had become part of the presentation of a beautiful heroine or gallant hero. Burnley notes that the beauty of the protagonist is portrayed by elaborating on the physical surroundings, particularly clothing:

The aesthetic ideal encompasses not only the physical beauty of the protagonists in the story, but also the grace of their demeanour, and the appreciation of those concrete artefacts by which they are surrounded. In most direct connection with the formal descriptive passages, this means of course their clothing, which is often described in loving detail, clearly representing the fashionable wear of the day. (50)

Examples of this lovingly detailed depiction can be found in several versions of the tale of *Lanval*. In the twelfth century, Marie de France describes Lanval's lover in alluring detail:

She was dressed in this fashion:

In a white linen shift

That revealed both her sides

Since the lacing was along the side.

Her body was elegant, her hips slim

Her neck whiter than snow on a branch. . .

Her cloak, which she had wrapped around her,

Was dark purple. (559-64, 571-2)²⁴⁷

Marie's particulars of clothing and physical traits merge, presenting a portrait of noble and ideal beauty—the image of desire for medieval readers. This focus on the alluring details of the lady's body are repeated in later Middle English accounts, which continue to use clothing to emphasize the lady's physical characteristics. *Sir Landevale*, an early fourteenth century adaptation of Marie's Old French work, emphasizes the lady's lack of clothing:

Thereon lay that maydyn bright,
almost nakyd, and upright.
Al her clothes byside her lay;
Syngly was she wrappyd, parfay,
With a mauntell of hermyn,
Coverid was with alexanderyn.
The mantell for hete down she dede
Right to hir gyrdillstede. (lines 97-104)

The one item of adornment the “maydyn” wears is luxurious fur, erotic in its softness and available only to royalty, signifying her elite social position. In another version of the narrative, *Sir Launfal*, held to be from the last part of the fourteenth century, the poet’s depiction is decidedly different. Here clothing highlights the woman’s body, but while employing almost identical terms as the earlier poet to describe her white skin and golden hair, the *Sir Launfal*-poet refuses to delineate her clothing— as if a textual description would limit its worth and thus the worth of its wearer: “May noman rede here atyre, / Ne nauzt well þenke yn hert” (lines 299-300). The attitude this poet takes toward clothing seems almost spiritual. The idea of not being able to imagine clothing so wonderful is akin to the biblical idea of not being able to imagine the things of God, as in 1 Corinthians 2.9: “But, as it is written: That eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man, what things God hath prepared for them that love him.” Occurring simultaneously with this biblical allusion is the emphasis of the corporeal beauty of the woman. She is still portrayed as being almost naked: “For hete her clopes down sche dede / Alмест to her gerdylstede” (*Sir Launfal* I 289-90). The lady’s dress, although not defined and apparently spiritualized, is instrumental in revealing her ideal physical beauty.²⁴⁸

Although MEMPOT lacks the erotic dimension found in many romance works, it continues the trend of lovingly detailing the heroine’s clothing, omitting references to her body and the way that clothing fits upon the body. Also omitted is a description of clothing style, thus

avoiding the controversies that inevitably surrounded the latest fashions— often criticized as excessively loose or snug, extravagantly wasteful or sinfully revealing. Much is left to the imagination as readers are forced to connect the parts of Judith's costume on their own. Yet this would not have been a difficult task for medieval readers. Contemporary accounts suggest that male readers would have been just as appreciative of and familiar with each textile mentioned, as well as with the "gyrdyll and garland of gold fyne," because each was commonly worn by aristocratic men as well as women. In fact Piponnier and Mane suggest that, in spite of all the complaints regarding women and dress, noblemen were the actual setters of fashion and their expenditures for clothing well exceeded those of noblewomen (77). A more generic account of Judith's clothes, therefore, may have deflected the male readers' attention away from the depiction of an elaborately dressed woman onto themselves and their own finery.²⁴⁹

Notably, the poet's list of textiles appeals mostly to touch rather than sight. This love of texture seems to be a general cultural tendency rather than specifically associated with women, as has often been the case in modern society. Hence, the details included in Judith's description reflect the medieval "preoccupation with the qualities of contrasting or even clashing textures and effects" (Breward 14), while omitting the more specific, gendered imagery of style. The only color word used within the text is "gold," which to modern minds may appear as primarily an indication of material; however, just as I have argued for the importance of shininess to an understanding of color in Anglo-Saxon England, Sarah Grace Heller has posited that luminescence is a key factor to understanding color, as well as beauty, in romance texts. She bases this claim on a careful examination of the *Roman de la Rose*, but also points out that Christine de Pizan "produced many luminescent portraits as well as advice discourses, suggesting that the luminescent ideal successfully appealed to women involved in court life" (951). Although brief, the mention of "gold" within Judith's portrayal was undoubtedly a significant indication of color and luxury to readers of MEMPOT.²⁵⁰

Signification is apparent in every detail of Judith's apparel. Each item mentioned by the poet carries legendary and textual histories, which permeated the medieval imagination and would have therefore colored the perception of readers. The girdle, one of only two articles of clothing specifically mentioned, is especially loaded with past significances, as Albert Friedman and Richard Osberg claim in their study regarding the background of Sir Gawain's girdle: "the girdle...has deep, ancient, 'natural' psychic and cultural resonance; its meaning goes without saying and, in certain reaches, is too indelicate to be said" (315). According to folk historians the girdle is probably the earliest garment worn by humans— first worn not for covering, but for magical protection. This idea of the belt or girdle signifying supernatural fortification is clear even in the Old Testament (Ps. 18.2, 30; Is. 11.5), and in the New Testament it forms a part of the symbolic "armor" of a Christian: "Having your loins girt about with truth" (Ephesians 6.14). It is not surprising then that Judith, the heroine who saves her people by conquering Holofernes, would be depicted wearing a girdle. Yet the girdle resonates with nuances beyond the protective, which enrich and complicate the image.

In the Middle Ages the girdle was often worn and read as a symbol of power, whether of the wearer, the giver, or the remover. Therefore, the image could often resonate with clashing implications. Meanings came from early sources and had multiplied by the time of the MEMPOT-poet:

Thor's strength doubled when he put on his magic girdle; others magnified their wearers' strength as much as twentyfold. . . . Male girdles, especially the gem-encrusted belts worn to gather tunics at the waist for freedom of movement or over surcoats to support dagger and sword, represented sovereignty, authority, power. To get someone's head under your girdle meant to conquer him. . . . The great legendary girdles are all women's, and all seem to have originated as symbols of cosmic sovereignty that dwindled to narrower jurisdictions . . . the most famous of all girdles, the *cestus* (*kestos*) of Aphrodite-Urania, at one stage

a symbol of life's continuity, became as early as Homer a 'girdle of lecherie,' exuding all the enticements of lust . . . Contrasted with Venus' licentious *cestus* was the *cintola* of the Virgin Mary, dropped upon doubting Thomas at the Assumption . . . enshrined redundantly . . . and invoked by maidens in danger of losing their virginity or women in difficult childbirth. (A. Friedman and Osberg 304-5)

Judith's girdle is loaded with associations. She is a conqueror, strengthened by God's truth around her waist and his power encircling her, doubling both her strength and beauty. A belt around her waist can signify closure, protection from assaults to chastity.²⁵¹ At the same time she wears the girdle as part of her seductively feminine clothing—the garments that will incite sexual attraction in Holofernes. In the Middle Ages girdles were worn by both maidens and matrons as a part of the patriarchal symbolic system. The virgin's belt was to be removed by a woman's husband at the consummation of marriage and to be replaced by a matron's girdle—a symbol of the husband's ownership. In Judith's case, however, neither type of girdle quite suits her position, because as a widow, she is neither virgin nor married. While the girdle is a significant part of her dressing up, its exact meaning is elusive. The girdle signifies her feminine power as sexual being, and yet the lack of clarity regarding its specific purpose seems to point readers to a spiritual significance, a power that can be equated with the Virgin Mary's *cintola*. Just as the Virgin Mary aids doubting Thomas with the faith signified by her belt, Judith aids her people and inspires them to believe because she is enwrapped with the girdle of God's truth. Yet Judith's use of her girdle is unusual in medieval narrative. Instead of giving it away to inspire a male hero, Judith puts on her girdle to strengthen herself.²⁵² Judith wears a girdle in male fashion, but the article of clothing is feminine since it is a part of her seductive costume. The girdle works as a double synecdoche, reminding the reader that Judith's performance is double-gendered.

The other item that Judith puts on in MEMPOT's narrative, a "garland of gold fyne" could also be worn by either men or women, especially in literary texts. While a garland refers to a circle or wreath, which might be placed anywhere, most references in texts refer to garlands worn on the head. The terms "garland" and "corone" are frequently interchangeable. In Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale*, Cecilie and Valerian are given coronas of roses and lilies, which an angel has brought from Paradise. These crowns represent the chastity and purity to which the couple is committed: "With body clene and with unwemmed thought / Kepeth ay wel these coronas" (l. 225-6). No doubt these "coronas" are associated with the "crown of life" promised in the Bible: "Blessed is the man that endureth temptation; for when he hath been proved, he shall receive a crown of life, which God hath promised to them that love him" (James 1:12). Crowns are mentioned several times in the New Testament as a future reward for the faithful or in the Apocalypse as a sign of those who had already received their reward.²⁵³ Judith's "garland of gold fyne" is especially reminiscent of the crowns of gold worn by the twenty-four ancients that surround God's throne (Apoc. 4.4). These crowns represent both purity and authority, and with an unusual twist they become significant of humility also, as the ancients "cast their crowns before the throne" (Apoc. 4.10). Biblical associations seem especially pertinent to Judith as a Christian example, but because MEMPOT's depiction has connected her clearly to courtly romance, uses of garlands in literary texts such as the *Roman de la Rose* also come to mind.²⁵⁴

Chaucer recognizes both biblical and romance meanings of garlands/coronas. There are three specific references to garlands in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*. One king wears a green garland; another wears a wreath with jewels—both on their pates. The statue of Venus is crowned with a gold garland, and Emily gathers flowers to make a garland for her head. Garlands in this narrative denote hierarchy. The goddess wears a garland of gold, representing her divinity and power; kings wear garlands signifying their wealth and authority. Emily makes her own garland from nature, symbolizing both her ideal beauty and her fertility—and perhaps also implying her availability and her susceptibility to being "plucked" by those who hold power.

Chaucer's use of garlands to represent hierarchy is not an isolated example. They are employed in similar fashion in other romance narratives.. In Malory's tale of *Gawain, Ywain, and Marhalt*, these three knights (nephews of King Arthur) find three women near a stream. The two oldest women wear garlands of gold, while the youngest wears a garland of flowers. Gold in this instance seems to signify the power gained from experience and the garland of flowers points to the innocence, susceptibility, and beauty of youth. The oldest is chosen by the youngest knight because "she hath sene much and can beste helpe me whan I have nede," while Sir Gawain is elated that he has been left with the "yongyst and the fayryste" (61v.11-20). When Judith wears a garland of gold she is participating not in associations with susceptibility and youth, but in traditions that associate the wearing of a garland with power, experience, wisdom, wealth, and authority, as well as Christian chastity and faithfulness.

Perhaps the MEMPOT writer also chose to adorn Judith's head with a garland to denote more respectable, albeit less fashionable, attire. Clearly the poet is avoiding the highly criticized fashions of many late fourteenth-century noblewomen, who sported elaborate headdresses or crespines decorated with jewels.²⁵⁵ No mention is made of the "horns"—a title given to fashionable headgear by medieval preachers. Yet the poet does not avoid dressing Judith in the most expensive textiles available. Most noticeably, the textiles Judith wears encourage readers to imagine an aristocratic heroine, since according to sumptuary laws of the time gold was reserved for the more prosperous knights, while ermine was reserved for nobility.²⁵⁶ Monica Wright provides background information regarding ermine, which enables modern readers to imagine how Judith might have worn the fur and to understand why it was associated with aristocrats:

The *hermine*. . .was most often used to line the exquisite mantles worn by the nobility of the period, although ermine might also appear as a hem decoration. Of Russian origin, ermine has a strong symbolic association with nobility: according to legend, the animal would kill itself rather than allow its winter white

coat to be spoiled, incarnating the noble values of bravery, virtue, and rarity, to which royal humans aspired. (8)

In Middle English texts luxurious textiles, especially fur and silk, not only were found in courtly literature, but also were a part of most descriptions of wealth, whether the significance was pejorative or laudatory—particularly when religious writers were criticizing the greed of the rich or describing the bliss of heaven.

It is notable that negative comments toward expensive textiles were usually made in relation to people who wore them out of their station in life. Even the acclaimed champion of women, Christine de Pizan, was critical of women wearing clothes above their social standing, and she also warned against following the latest fashions. Committing either of these sartorial errors would reflect against a woman's character:

Even though a woman may be inspired only by good will and has neither a wicked act nor thought in her body, the world will never believe it if she is indiscreet about her clothes. False opinions will be formed no matter how good she is in reality. Thus any woman wishing to preserve her good name should cultivate unpretentiousness in her dress and accoutrements. She should avoid clothes that are too tight, too low-cut, or have other details in bad taste. She should especially avoid styles that are too flashy, too costly, or too suggestive.
(III.2)²⁵⁷

Christine advises her readers to remain conservative in dress in order to guard their reputations. In the Middle Ages, a woman without a good reputation lost the respect of the community, and without respect a woman might lose much of her social power. Perhaps because of a desire to maintain readers' respect for Judith, the MEMPOT-poet, while elaborating on her luxury garments, omits detail of style lest she be accused of following new fashions. The textiles Judith wears are meant to be an indication of her high position in society and not of her own individual desire to appear stylish. The poet is able to portray Judith dressing with confidence because

she uses clothing appropriate to her estate. Medieval readers may have accepted her dressing performance as suitable, without contradiction to her reputation as a godly woman, because they read her clothing as part of the organic body of a noble heroine. This does not mean that the medieval understanding of Judith's garments was simple. As we have seen, each of the sartorial details included in her representation carries a complex system of signification. What Felicity Riddy claims of fur can also be applied to silk and gold, girdles and belts: "Fur, like cooked food, is part of a complex symbolic system; it too, has connotations of ritual and excess which are markers of culture as distinct from nature" (216). Burns and Grosz might argue that culture and nature are not distinct but subtly blended to create the organic body, while agreeing that this clothed body consists of heavily nuanced material. Additionally, as readers decode Judith's description, they add to the significance of her written body with their previous knowledge of the biblical heroine, as well as knowledge of other texts and personal experience related to noble clothing. Judith's character becomes solidified in the minds of the audience, and who she is perceived to be relates directly to how she has been dressed by the poet.

4.5 Doing: Judith Performs Adornment

In Chapter Three, I examined earlier depictions of Judith's adornment, which serve to identify her with the aristocracy, thereby providing her not only an identity, but also a social purpose: the responsibility to act on behalf of her community. Who she is requires the audience to expect a particular performance. In earlier texts clothing serves as a form of identification provided for the audience's recognition, but in MEMPOT the visible sign of Judith's nobility—the textiles with which she adorns herself—are additionally designed to move the narrative toward Judith's encounter with Holofernes and then to nudge Holofernes towards accepting and desiring her,²⁵⁸ thus enabling the heroine to move freely within his court.²⁵⁹ In this text, the heroine's noble dress causes the enemy soldiers to recognize her status and keep their hands off her, as they conduct her to Holofernes in safety. MEMPOT makes it clear that they are delighted to deliver such a noble prisoner to their general and that her apparel played a

significant role in their delight: “Sum of þem ware prowde of þat pray, / for gay geyre had sho full gud woyn” (17283-4; 1441.3-4). This is a different reaction to that of the army in the Vulgate, who remark on her physical beauty and assume that all Hebrew women are beautiful: “Who can despise the people of the Hebrews who have such beautiful women, that we should not think it worth our while for their sakes to fight against them?” they ask Holofernes (Judith 10.18). There is no hint of Judith’s social significance in the desire she produces in the Vulgate.²⁶⁰ Yet in MEMPOT, upon seeing Judith for the first time, Holofernes (as well as his men) reacts to her garments rather than her face or physique, indicating that in this text it is Judith’s power and position that make her desirable. “He saw hyr g[e]yre of so heygh prid, / he trowed sho was of grett degre” (17331-2; 1445.3-4). From the first sight of richly arrayed Judith, Holofernes found his “hert was rauyscht ryzt” (17319; 1444.3),²⁶¹ and his desire becomes even more obvious at the later banquet:

Be for hym self hyr sett was wroyzt
 full presciosly forto apere
 hyr ryalnes rayuyschyd his toyzt;
 he bede hyr mete *with* mere chere” (17497-500; 1459.1-4).

Judith’s physical beauty or adornments are not mentioned specifically, yet the phrase “hyr ryalnes” conjures to the mind romance heroines, as well as living queens, dressed in royal finery.

This emphasis on the desirability of Judith’s social rank rather than her physical attraction may deflect attention from her sexuality in some cases, but it might also be read as provoking desire. Current scholars have begun to note that our modern assumptions regarding human desire and sexual appeal are not appropriate for all cultures. Alternatively, desiring a noble body (as signified through clothing and behavior) may be read as a culturally loaded erotic signifier that has lost its force for today’s readers.²⁶² For medieval readers, desire seems to have been triggered through elaborate description of noble attributes, both material and

conceptual. When one gazed at a beautiful lady, it was not always what was underneath that was significant. The poet of *Sir Launfal* records that when the “maydenes bryzt” ride in on elegant horses to announce their lady’s visit “ech man hadde greet desire / To se har clodynge” (lines 883, 90-1). This clothing is recorded as being of “samyt,” a silk textile frequently referred to in medieval romances as a signifier of nobility (*Sir Launfal* 889). In the courtly economy it is what the maidens wear that make them desirable rather than their bodies.²⁶³ In some instances even gender or sexual attributes do not seem important to the economy of desire in the Middle Ages. James A. Schultz finds that in Gottfried von Strassburg’s *Tristan und Isold*, social distinction is more readily identified and desired than gender differentiation:

Class, one of those ‘other regimes of regulatory production [that] contour the materiality of bodies,’ is written on the body more clearly than sex. Bodies differ in visible ways because they are noble or because they are beautiful (for which their nobility is a prerequisite). The nobility and the beauty of the desirable body are culturally visible in the morphology of the body itself. The sex of the desirable body is not. (96)²⁶⁴

Perhaps the MEMPOT-poet has omitted a description of Judith’s body not because he is avoiding the portrayal of physical attributes, but because the poet sees the aristocracy of Judith as the desirable aspect of her sexuality. The catalog of textiles that Judith wears serves the same purpose as a catalog of physical attributes—to draw a picture of an ideal courtly heroine. It also points specifically to the source of Holofernes’ lust: his desire for power, not solely over a beautiful noblewoman, but more importantly over all nations.²⁶⁵

While Holofernes’ lust is typical of medieval romance narrative, his desire is out of bounds for medieval readers because he desires a woman who serves the Jewish (Christian) God, while he is serving the heathen king Nebuchadnezer. Judith is not fair game—she belongs not only to the Jewish God, but to the Hebrew people. She is their public figure, their spectacle, as well as their heroine. To conquer Judith would be to conquer her people, because she, in all

her finery, represents them. Indeed in MEMPOT, it is her elegant attire, even after conquering Holofernes, which creates the “social skin” that signals to readers she is of noble blood and able to perform noble deeds for her people’s benefit.:

And furth sho weryd hyr wedow wede

bot in souerane sesons of the zere.

þen wold sho be more gay

to syght *and* more honest

In *purpas* god to pay

For wrschepe of þat fest. (17707-12; 1476.7-12)

The nature of Judith’s dressing performance in these lines is complicated by the poet’s comment on its two-sided significance. Judith’s noble clothing seems to signify more than just garments to be taken on and off. The festive clothing—presumably similar to (or perhaps the same as) the attire which she wore to Holofernes’ camp, since the term “gay” is used both places—plays a part in her worship of God. It appears to do this in two ways: first, it makes her “gay to syght”; and second, it creates a person who is more “honest” towards God.²⁶⁶ The word “honest” here may be connected to the Latin word *honestas*, often associated with suitability, proper order, or respect. Judith appears more reputable in this text when she wears the clothes that are proper for her position and, therefore, suitably represents her people as a whole.²⁶⁷

The festivities in which Judith participates are presented as a meaningful aspect of living with the Hebrew people. The idea of community celebration is not far from the biblical account, which also records Judith celebrating the religious holidays of the Hebrews: “And on festival days she came forth with great glory” (Judith 16.27). This line comes after a testament to Judith’s fame among the people, following the description of her song and her offering up of Holofernes’ goods as a sacrifice to the Lord. Thus, the idea of Judith’s glory in the biblical passage appears to indicate spiritual significance rather than physical glamour. While it is doubtful that she would have remained in clothes of mourning for the celebration, the way she is

clothed does not seem to be of primary importance. Yet dress is important to the writer of MEMPOT, who connects Judith's worship to her clothing and makes a point of informing readers that Judith has not given up this aspect of her identity. She performs as a noblewoman in the clothes of nobility when the occasion demands it, because it is "more honest" for her to be dressed according to who she is within the community. Her primary significance is not that she is a widow, personally in mourning, but that she is a noblewoman, and her clothing and performance must match her social identity.

Not only is Judith to demonstrate her position through clothing, she is to do it in such a way as to be a spectacle. Considering traditional Christian commentary on dress, Judith's purpose in dressing up to be "gay to syght" seems problematic. Dressing to be seen was considered a sign of pride by the church fathers and many medieval theologians, but is here accepted as the proper motivation for Judith's dressing without any further discussion. The poet appears to understand the spectacle of a noblewoman as enhancing the people's spiritual lives rather than causing them to sin. To complicate further the writer's attitude toward Judith's dressing, we might consider that Judith's dressing up serves two opposite purposes: one to deceive by pleasing Holofernes and his "court," the other to take her "honest" position within her own community as her people worship God. In both cases Judith's appearance gives pleasure to the people around her. The writer only hints at this pleasure when it comes to Judith's own people: she is "gay to syght," but when she is with Holofernes the author is very specific about her desire to please the people: "Rychly sho hyr arayd / to seme fayr in þer syst. / þe pepyll were full wele payd" (17493-5; 1458. 9-11). In both instances there is no suggestion that in dressing gayly Judith is performing in an unusual or shameful manner; rather, she is following social expectations and providing a benefit to the community.

This expectation of a noblewoman dressing to please an audience is found in other stories of the MEMPOT manuscript as well. Abigail, who needs to convince David not to kill her household because of her husband Nabal's greed and stupidity, is presented as dressing up in

the same manner as Judith, albeit with less detail: ““In gud garmentes scho made hyr gay / with pe[l]ure *and with pyrre fyne*” (6879-80; 574.3-4). Here, however, it is not the garments that impress David but the “grett fauour in hyr face he fand” (6904; 576.4) Thus, the poet avoids a presentation of David as interested in power and position while still placing Abigail in the role of spectacle, whose audience in this case is primarily David. The role of a noblewoman as a sight to be enjoyed seems to be taken for granted by the MEMPOT writer whether he is presenting Hebrew or gentile women. In the Book of Esther, the heroine’s rise to power occurs because of Queen Vashti’s refusal to be made a spectacle in front of the king’s guests. However, in MEMPOT it is not the idea of appearing before the guests that Vashti disdains, but the fact that a lower-class messenger has been sent to retrieve her. The Vulgate version gives readers no clue as to the reason behind Vashti’s refusal, so the paraphraser interprets the passage with a courtly variation:

Sho toke yt gretly vnto grefe
 þat swylke men on þat errand wentt;
 ffor worthy lordes *that* were hyr leyfe
 suld make sych message, so sho ment. (16517-20; 1377.5-8)²⁶⁸

Apparently, it is not insulting to the queen to be made a spectacle, but it is insulting to be escorted by anyone lower than the highest nobles of the land. In MEMPOT, even the Hebrews do not find dressing their women for show problematic. Mordecai purposely creates a beauty queen out of Esther and takes her to the king:

Rychly he hyr arayd
 þat wrschep forto wyn,
 And for hyr parte he *purvayd*,
 so þat sho was takyn in. (16605-9; 1384.9-12)

Again this is an interpretation not found in the biblical source. Neither does Comestor portray Mordecai as the one to dress up Esther, just as he does not show Vashti’s reason for declining

the king's offer. These elaborations seem to be a result of the MEMPOT-poet's desire to render biblical women in courtly terms.²⁶⁹

MEMPOT's treatment of biblical heroines resonates with the themes and language of courtly literature. In courtly literature the heroine is always beautiful, and that beauty is a source of pleasure to her beloved as well as to the society at large. Indeed much of the lover's pleasure seems to be a result of loving someone who is widely acclaimed as beautiful. This is the choice given in some versions of the story upon which Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* is based. The knight must choose whether to have his lover beautiful at night when he is making love to her or during the day so that all the community sees he has a beautiful wife. The choice is complicated by the fact that if his wife is beautiful she will create desire in the hearts of other men, with the possibility that he will be cuckolded. In tales of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell, Gawain proves his noble character and wisdom by allowing the woman to make her own decision.²⁷⁰ Of course, the woman being given her own power is what breaks the spell and allows her to be herself again—a self who is truly beautiful. While the narrative of a woman making her own decisions appears to imply a pro-feminine attitude, the end result—the beauty of the woman—still serves to portray women as pleasurable forms to be seen and enjoyed. The pleasure given to a whole community by the beauty of a woman, as displayed in romance, is obviously tied to a woman's social status and her role as a symbol of wealth for her husband and for the nation.

In MEMPOT's treatment of Judith, the heroine is not attached to any man, and her deceased husband is not mentioned until the end of the narrative. Thus, twenty-first century readers might receive the impression of an independent woman who dresses according to her own religious and heroic desires. Yet inherent in her status and clothing is the medieval perception of rank as stemming from a woman's connection to either father or husband. While Judith appears to make her own sartorial choices, a medieval audience would have understood her dressing performance as a manifestation of her family's position and her society's customs. Judith's dressing performances are not out of the ordinary for late fourteenth-century nobility.

Her first action to lay aside her fine clothes and dedicate her life to prayer was customary for noble widows.²⁷¹ Her decisions to dress to impress a foreign dignitary and subsequently to bedazzle her people during festivals were also socially appropriate actions for noblewomen. Underlying Judith as noblewoman is the ever prevalent notion that she represents—and even consists of— more than herself or even her family. A communal identity was at stake when the spectacle was a woman of courtly degree. This collective nature of Judith’s image makes her dressing for Holofernes an act of diplomacy. While Judith pretends to be addressing the general for her own safety, she is instead acting on behalf of the Hebrew people. Both biblical and medieval accounts record similar instances where women interceded for their people. Esther and Abigail stand out as biblical intercessors, and in MEMPOT’s retelling of both character’s narratives the women dress before attempting to negotiate for their people.²⁷² In medieval narratives everyone is expected to dress for court appearance, as is portrayed in stories of Griselda, Enide and the retelling of the parable of the marriage feast in *Cleanness*. In her study of Isabeau of Bavaria, Rachel C. Gibbons suggests that in the Middle Ages dressing was the first step in the performance of royal representation and international relations, just as it is essential in business and government relations today. Thus, it is not surprising that Judith’s depiction in MEMPOT resembles the construction of medieval queens as “social mannequins” who are required to play dress-up as a sign of their nation’s prosperity.²⁷³

4.6 Performing the “Organic Body”

The idea of dress as a part of one’s being appears incongruent with the idea of purposefully dressing-up; and yet both are apparent in the MEMPOT account of Judith. Integrating the two ideas is similar to forming a synthesis of Judith Butler’s emphasis on the performance of gender and Irigaray’s embrace of difference as a social reality of being.²⁷⁴ This synthesis describes the attitude of Elizabeth Grosz’s work in *Volatile Bodies*, and so it is fitting that Burns should use her work and equally appropriate that I should consider it in my analysis of MEMPOT’s account, in which Judith is presented as an aristocrat in both essence and

performance. The question that arises when considering MEMPOT's presentation is whether Judith's essence (her nobility) is meant to give rise to her performance, or whether her performance transforms her into a courtly heroine. Perhaps both are intended. Certainly, both possibilities are compatible with Grosz's presentation of the body and its image as a mobius strip, where the interior and exterior create and maintain one another:

The limits or borders of the body image are not fixed by nature or confined to the anatomical "container," the skin. The body image is extremely fluid and dynamic; its borders, edges, and contours are "osmotic"—they have the remarkable power of incorporating and expelling outside and inside in an ongoing interchange. (79)

In the Middle Ages body image was constructed from both the individual and social perception of a person's estate. Simultaneously, the perception of who a person is, whether it is self-perception or the perception of another, is dependent on body image, which in turn is dependent on interior and exterior conditions—physical, psychological, social, and so on. MEMPOT's portrayal of Judith participates in this type of interplay between perception and construction: clothes are her body and her social performance. She wears them and she *is* them.

Judith's character in MEMPOT is created as a clothed body—her physical traits are textiles, not skin or hair or eyes. Although readers may assume Judith has an underlying physique, the poet does not draw attention to it. The body underneath is not important, and in fact may be counterproductive. According to the text, MEMPOT was written to teach readers to follow Judith's example, not Holofernes' desire. The writer gives readers a romance heroine who through her position incites noble actions. Through her clothed body readers recognize Judith as a noblewoman able to incite the desire of Holofernes, but, more importantly, capable of appearing beautiful in an aesthetic sense and skilled at using her beauty for the good of her community. Judith's beauty and aptitude come from her nobility (richly displayed through

clothing), which gives her power to act for the Hebrew people. The MEMPOT-poet seems to count on at least some readers recognizing Judith's power and identifying it with their own in order to spur them to act for the benefit of their own people. The poet depends upon the social weight of courtly clothing and language to communicate ideas beyond the traditional narrative of Judith. The conventional Judith who has always been viewed with suspicion for her dressing performance can now be read as a positive role model, as she puts on and takes off luxurious garments much like a chameleon changes colors .

In spite of the pejorative views towards lavish attire that still existed in the fourteenth century, the MEMPOT-poet depicts Judith, as well as other Old Testament heroines, as clothed aristocratic bodies that perform feats of justice for their people. The poet is writing in dialogic fashion to connect to the interests of his noble audience and simultaneously to spur them on to appropriate Christian action. Apparently, using courtly language and themes in this fashion was not unique to MEMPOT. Nevertheless, the text appears innovative in its presentation of Judith and other heroines, who make their own clothing choices and serve God with equal ability as men. The sumptuous apparel that Judith wears, however, is not a sign of individuality. While the MEMPOT writer presents a woman character who decides when to dress, she is after all only following appropriate dressing customs for aristocrats—customs designed to reveal a person's status within masculinist hierarchies. The MEMPOT-poet has made changes to the standard Judith narrative by mentioning details of Judith's garments, particularly textiles, but the purpose behind these particulars appears to be similar to the Old English depictions of Judith as a noblewoman who represents and acts for patriarchal society. It is not Judith's clothing that communicates an independent woman who can be used equally by God as a man, as the writer claims.²⁷⁵ For that aspect of her portrayal we will need to examine other features of her courtly performance in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

ENHANCING JUDITH'S COURTLY PERFORMANCE

5.1 Bi-gendering Judith

The concept of courtliness, David Burnley argues, emerged “from the skills of *consilium* and the social experiences in the feudal hall” (21). His argument is based on the alterations evident in the retelling of ancient narratives, particularly a movement away from the emphasis of brute prowess in combat toward intelligent eloquence in council. It was not that bravery and physical strength were no longer valued within texts, but that heroes became multi-faceted, portrayed as both *chivalrous* and *courteous*. The terms used to describe courtly heroes reveal the double nature then expected of the ideal nobleman. The concept of “worthiness” or *pruesce* within texts such as Hue de Rotelande’s *Ipomedon* was often used “to include both military and peaceful accomplishments” (Burnley 31). Nevertheless, a man’s ability to fight well was of primary importance. Burnley notes that “the courtly man who does not employ military skills can be regarded as ineffectual, and worthy of neither love nor respect” (31). Courtly men were expected to be experts at war, hunting, political council, and the manners of court society. Courtly women, on the other hand, were to spend their time on aesthetic pleasures, creating a socially pleasant and courteous atmosphere in the courtly household (Burnley 53-4).

MEMPOT depicts Judith as performing well in both the female and male courtly roles as defined by Burnley. Her behavior indicates that she is expert at military strategy and prowess,²⁷⁶ as well as at the social graces that enhance the beauty of courtly society (i.e. dressing fashionably and speaking pleasantly). Within Judith’s portrayal the expectations for male and female courtliness merge into one performance. She performs “manfully” without the customary cross-dressing of other women depicted in military or political action.²⁷⁷ She openly presents

herself as a woman even when offering military/religious counsel to the Hebrew patriarchs. In fact, her feminine clothing, behavior, and wit are the major focus of her military strategy and provide the possibility of executing the major heroic act of the tale. Judith's martial behavior is in part traditional, derived from the Hebrew story and passed down to the Christian fathers. However, the MEMPOT writer embraces and embellishes Judith's military activity, transforming what is typically considered male performance into acceptable female behavior. This paraphraser of Judith's tale gives her authority and mobility, even above the men in the story, and sees no reason to apologize for her deceptions. MEMPOT's Judith is given the honor of a courtly romance hero, although frequently her actions resemble those of women romance characters.

Judith's conduct goes beyond the mold of "female hero," as defined by Maureen Fries, as she moves and acts with power in and between two male regimes. She is a powerfully unique character even within MEMPOT's consistent portrayal of biblical women who think and act independently. In the paraphrase's rendering of the other two biblical books which bear women's names, Esther and Ruth, neither protagonist is introduced as an example for readers, and only after telling Judith's story does the author go so far as to claim that

Now be gis werke wele may we wytt
how God wyll pupplysch h's power
In wemen forto fall als fytt
als in men on þe same manere. (17737-40; 1479.1-4)

According to the MEMPOT writer, Judith is the character who proves that men and women may perform equally and in the same manner— through God's power. While the emphasis in this claim seems to be upon God's use of power through women as well as men, throughout the narrative the writer gives as much credit to Judith's "wyt" as to God's power. Judith is wise and autonomous, beautiful and strategic. She is a female "super-hero" whose bi-gendered

performance contains elements of the literary carnivalesque even as it is modeled after women in courtly romance.

5.2 Preceding Judith: Romance Foremothers

Although the authority and mobility of Judith in MEMPOT's account appear striking, these characteristics are apparent to a lesser degree in numerous depictions of women in romance texts. Albrecht Classen argues that women in courtly romances often

play a significant, sometimes even the dominant role. They establish their influence not through chivalric deeds, not through acts of violence or by way of political struggles. Instead, women's public roles are determined by their skillful application of persuasion, by their intelligent strategies in handling the various demands on them and expectations of them as courtly ladies, and with the help of sensitive, particularly trustworthy communication. (100-01)

Classen cites two very clear examples of intelligent, persuasive women characters in thirteenth century German romance literature: the first, Enite in Hartmann von Aue's *Erec*; and the second, Isolde in Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan and Isolde*. While more lines are dedicated to the heroes of the narratives, both texts portray the heroines as dynamically involved in the action, and frequently instigating the strategies which move the plots of their stories. Classen asserts that because Enite does not allow the male characters to suppress her voice (even acting contrary to court custom by shrieking uncontrollably to express her sorrow) she pushes her husband Erec to find a new life, one that is appropriate to courtly values. After Enite's cries wake the unconscious Erec, he changes from a lonely hero interested only in his own adventures into a nobleman involved in his community, who acts "in defense of his wife, of other women and of the rest of courtly society" (Classen 88).²⁷⁸ Whereas Hartmann's Enite remains consistently strong and expressive throughout *Erec*, Gottfried's Isolde develops into "a highly educated, politically sophisticated, and communicatively well-trained" character, as she encounters various trials and social responsibilities throughout the narrative (Classen 91).

Although initially Isolde's language and behavior are easily manipulated by Tristan and Sir Mark, she learns to use language strategically to manipulate both men, as the desire for her love becomes the center of their lives.²⁷⁹

Feminist critics sometimes point to the manipulation of language by women characters such as Enite and Isolde as evidence of female agency within the text. Yet the fact that most of these courtly women are also overtly portrayed as objects of male desire and mirrors of male virtue problematizes their subjectivity. The question of whether or not women romance characters are ever active subjects requires a closer look at the descriptions of these women and the portrayal of their behavior—an examination that does not automatically create one category for all women characters, but that takes into consideration the character categories that often exist within a genre. By dividing Arthurian women's roles into three categories, Maureen Fries provides one method for examining women within medieval romance. Yet these classes she describes are not meant to provide rigid types. She contends that they differ from the "well-defined types" proposed by Georges Dumézil for male heroic roles, because "female roles are more fluid and far more ambivalent" (Fries 59, 61).²⁸⁰ These vacillating female roles seem to be created to keep women characters from overpowering their male counterparts. As Fries notes, "Arthurian women are essentially ancillary to the male actors of that literary tradition and must therefore be considered in relation to the male heroic roles they complement or defy: as heroine, female hero or counter-hero" (61).

Although individual women characters may move in and out of Fries' categories—"heroine, female hero, and counter-hero"—the categories are easily distinguishable. In Fries' analysis, the difference between a medieval Arthurian heroine and a female hero turns upon questions of mobility and purpose: "Heroines neither venture forth nor return . . . her greatest virtue is her beauty. And her most desired end is marriage, the target for which that beauty is poised" (60-1). In most accounts, a heroine exists to reproduce society's values. She does so through mirroring and replicating the male's image. Conversely, while a female hero may also

be married and she is probably beautiful, she is a “world-changer” in Fries’ terms, one whose role goes beyond sexual attraction and reproduction. The female hero moves in and out of society, but she still maintains society’s values. Her independent actions and decisions reflect her role as champion for a community and its mores; she is not one who desires to implement counter-ideals. The role of challenging the existing culture belongs to the counter-hero:

While the hero proper transcends and yet respects the norms of the patriarchy, the counter-hero violates them in some way. For the male Arthurian counter-hero, such violation usually entails wrongful force; for the female, usually powers of magic. . .Always she is preternaturally alluring, or preternaturally repelling or sometimes both . . .but her putative beauty does not as a rule complete the hero’s valor, as does the heroine’s. Rather, it often threatens to destroy him, because of her refusal of the usual female role. (Fries 61)

The actions of the female counter-hero are designed to seduce and destroy the male characters and their society, as is quite obvious in some versions of Guinevere and Morgan La Fey. The speech and actions of these women demonstrate female agency in a negative light—at least to most readers interested in a traditional story that upholds social continuity. Female counter-heroes are among the villains of romance narratives, designed as foils to male heroes. Narratives are not written from their point of view, and when they are overthrown, ideal readers are expected to breathe a sigh of relief because patriarchal hierarchies and values have been preserved.

In contrast to the alienation techniques employed when representing counter-heroes, writers commonly use techniques of identification between readers and female heroes. One reason for positing that Judith might be classified as female hero is that MEMPOT, as mentioned earlier, creates reader identification with Judith from the beginning of her tale by informing readers that she serves as an example. Furthermore, the audience experiences much of the narrative from “over Judith’s shoulder,” in a sense being privy to Judith’s prayers and

secret actions. According to Margaret Jewett Burland (who bases her study on Fries' categories), it is "the audience's interior view" of the character "that places her in the heroic role" (169). Watching the action from Judith's perspective, readers perceive Judith as mobile and decisive. Her behavior has nothing to do with the role of a passive heroine, whose final purpose is to be an object of exchange in patriarchal society. Instead of staying at home, Judith leaves the community and returns of her own accord. Moreover, her travels have resulted in a change, a renewal for her city. She has given her people a new freedom and literally a new life, which is a typical accomplishment of heroes: "If completely successful, female (like male) heroes return to their original societies with the prized gift of renewal" (Fries 60). In MEMPOT's version of Judith, not only is the entire city rescued from death, but also the poor—because of the wealth obtained from the Assyrians—are given enough goods to keep them comfortable for the rest of their lives (17677-84; 1474.1-8). Judith initiates this restoration of life to the city, even before she decapitates Holofernes, when she redirects water from a well so that the people will not die of thirst. She continues to renew the community through speech that encourages them to be brave and defeat their enemies and then completes her people's renewal by distributing the spoils to all—men and women.

Where Judith's behavior differs from a typical Arthurian hero (male or female) is in MEMPOT's treatment of her own renewal. After her homecoming, Judith's new life is apparent in the sense that she has become more celebrated and more celebratory. She is now more apparently integrated into her community. For the writer of MEMPOT, this integration goes beyond the Vulgate's claim that she comes "forth with great glory" on feast days (Judith 16.27).²⁸¹ In the Middle English text there is stress on her role as governor and benefactor of those in her charge (17717-28; 1477.5-1478.4). These details of her behavior are in keeping with MEMPOT's emphasis on Judith as a great lady. This change in Judith, however, is entirely external. Judith is not presented as acting in error or having a particular inner weakness that causes her problems which must be resolved, as we see in romance heroes, both men and

women. Instead Judith's inner strength is stressed from the first introduction to her character. Although these lines have been quoted in earlier chapters, the details are worth repeating here:

Dame Judyth was a *gentyll jew*
and woman wyse whore sho suld wende.
Now wyll we nevyne hyr story new,
for to sum men yt myzt amend
To see how sho in trewth was trew
als lang als sho in lyf *con* lend,
And lufed þe Law als lele ebrew
þat Moyses tyll hyr kynred kend.
þat Law forto mayntene
sho ordand in all thyng,
Als Insampyll was seyn
and wyttene in werkyng. (16957-68; 1414.1-12)

Throughout the story Judith's strengths are emphasized. She is presented as wise, true, and loyal to the Hebrew law in all of her actions, and her behavior may serve as an example to "some men" even though deception is a necessary aspect of her character. In fact the ability to deceive appears to be one of her strengths, which raises questions regarding the poet's values and medieval attitudes toward the subject. Apparently, the culture, which has often been considered monolithic, supported multiple views on the topic. While deceit is frequently practiced in romance texts, it is also frequently criticized. For instance, a nearly contemporary text, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (SGGK)*, presents the hero's use of deception to save his life as a weakness—a sign that he is not the perfect chivalrous knight.

Traditional Christian teaching against deception would appear to support the behavior of Sir Gawain as more clearly exemplary than that presented in MEMPOT's account of Judith.²⁸² Gawain deals honestly and plays by the rules of Bertilak's game, except for hiding the

girdle, for which he eventually expresses remorse. Judith, on the other hand, tells blatant lies to Holofernes and his men, deceiving them in order to save her people. Her first words when the Assyrians discover her outside the camp proclaim that she comes in peace: “I com to yow in trewse” (17289; 1441.9). In courtly tradition this type of behavior is unchivalrous, and it belongs not to female heroes, but to counter-heroes—those who attempt to upset chivalric values. MEMPOT’s elaboration of Judith’s determined behavior emphasizes the calculating nature of her actions. She behaves politely, following medieval courtesy; yet her ultimate goal is to conquer. In an initial move that the poet claims was meant to “marre hym more in myst,” she falls on her face at Holofernes’ feet (17321-2; 1444.5-6). While in the biblical text Judith also responds to Holofernes by lying prostrate, her performance is less theatrical—immediately she submits to being raised to her feet. In MEMPOT, after she is raised to her feet Judith immediately falls to her knees and “prayd h/s helpe to haue” (17325-6; 1444.9-10). Her behavior is reminiscent of a typical romance heroine who is overcome by extreme difficulty and thus swoons, and when brought to her senses, begs for help from a handsome and heroic knight. Clearly, Judith’s tactic of falling before Holofernes emphasizes his power and her weakness.²⁸³ Nevertheless, face to the ground is an exaggeration of common expectations regarding how to address one’s superiors. Her second action—falling on her knees—is the appropriate medieval response for addressing a powerful personage.

The act of falling on one’s knees in worship is ancient,²⁸⁴ however, in the Middle Ages the act was considered appropriate in other situations as well. Chaucer’s works, which are roughly contemporary to MEMPOT, provide numerous instances of characters falling on their knees, and in many contexts kneeling signifies an outward sign of an inner humility. Such is clearly the case in the *Clerk’s Tale* when the people bow before the Lord of the land: “And they, with humble entente, buxomly, / Knelynge upon hir knees ful reverently” (lines 186-7), as well as in the *Second Nun’s Tale*: “But on hir knees they setten hem adoun / With humble herte and sad devocioun” (396-7). At times this outward sign is particularly useful in asking for favors of a

noble personage, such as the people ask of the Lady in *The House of Fame*, or for pleading for mercy, as when Criseyde excuses herself before Ector: "On knees she fil biforn Ector adown / With pitous vois, and tendrely wepyng, / His mercy bad, hirselves excusyng" (110-2). Chaucer also recognizes the deceptive use of the outward sign of kneeling in the *Squire's Tale*, as the falcon tells her tale of a deceptive suitor:

"As he swoor he yaf his herte to me,
Anon this tigre, ful of doublenesse,
Fil on his knees with so devout humblesse,
With so heigh reverence, and as by his cheere,
So lyk a gentil love of manere." (542-6)

Chaucer's false suitor may be an adaptation of False Semblant, who falls on his knees and pledges to serve love in the *Roman de la Rose*:

And Fals-Semblant, the theef, anoon,
Ryght in that ike same place,
That hadde of tresoun al his face
Ryght blak withynne and whit withoute,
Thankyth hym, gan on his knees loute. (7330-4)

These lines, taken from Chaucer's Middle-English translation, describe the hypocrisy of Fals-Semblant, calling him "theef" and accusing him of bearing a treasonous countenance. Although he appears to be noble or "white" on the outside, he is really black within. The comments of the author reveal to readers that this character acts as if he is serving Love, but he really has other interests at heart.²⁸⁵

To a certain extent, Judith's behavior resembles the performances of both Fals-Semblant and Criseyde. Falling on her knees is designed to accomplish a deceptive purpose, and yet Judith's situation is much like that of Criseyde's in that her people, like Criseyde's father, are considered the enemy. She is in the predicament of needing to be perceived as

requiring mercy in order to save her life. However, Criseyde's tactic in appearing before Ector in the brown robes of her widowhood, and thus appealing to his pity, is quite different from Judith's appeal to Holofernes' desire. The portrayal of each character's strategy reflects her supposed intent. Criseyde is depicted as desiring to be faithful to the Trojans, although in the end she changes her allegiance. In contrast, Judith's aim from the beginning is to deceive Holofernes. In MEMPOT, the foundational motivation of saving God's people seems to outweigh the dishonest actions and speech taken to attain that end. Yet the text is not unique in this sense, as the Bible contains several examples of heroes who sneak into enemy quarters. The Hebrew spies are hidden by Rahab, and Ehud claims to have a secret message for the king, but stabs him as he rises in respect for the messenger (Judges 3:20-21). The trickster figure as hero was also familiar to the English in Robin Hood guise.²⁸⁶ Perhaps it is the knowledge of the hero as trickster in the folklore of many cultures that allows Judith extra latitude to infiltrate the enemies' camp in a fashion similar to the escapades of Robin Hood and his men.²⁸⁷ She plays at courtly games as a disguise, when in actuality she spends her life in prayer and charity. Judith, like Ehud, deceives in order to free an oppressed people; and thus her deception, while not in line with the rules of chivalry, is motivated from a heart desiring to follow God's law, making her an example of a "lele ebrew" that the MEMPOT-poet believes others should follow, rather than a female counter-hero who disrupts society.

The MEMPOT-poet seems particularly to enjoy retelling the Hebrew stories in which heroes save their people through trickery and is not averse to elaborating on the accounts to make them more believable.²⁸⁸ In MEMPOT's elaboration of Judith, it is her behavior as a noblewoman versed in courtly manners or courtesy that creates a believable story for a medieval audience.²⁸⁹ An equally obvious marker of Judith's nobility is her ability to perform confidently and strategically in courtly situations. From the moment she is brought before Holofernes, she plays her part as a courtly noblewoman, using her female charms and courtly word play to capture Holofernes through deception—much in the same way that Bertilak's wife

deceived Sir Gawain in *SGGK* through her pretense of honor and flattering speech. Judith feigns humble obedience and is believed because of her worthy appearance. Holofernes quickly responds to Judith's performed humility by promising in romance fashion to give her "oght þat sho wold craue" (17328; 1444.12), and then the courtly games begin in earnest:

Sho thanked hym frendly, noyzt at hyde,
and ryzt glad in hīs hert was he
He saw hyr g[e]yre of so heygh prid,
he trowed sho was of grett degre.
He made hyr sytt hym self be syd,
þat was ryzt semly syzt to see.
þei fell in talkyng so þat tyde
þat mery [sho] mad als hīs menezē. (17329-36; 1445.1-8)

Holofernes immediately recognizes Judith's nobility and places her beside him, indicating her equal status. Together they talk and laugh in the manner of romance characters, and Judith impresses the whole court with her beauty and gaiety. In the midst of this noble merriment, Judith presents Holofernes her supposed reason for coming, simultaneously appealing to his ego with flattery:

My menyng is to mend *your* chere
by gud bod word þat I yow bryng.
I wyll maynteyn in my manere
Nabogodhonosour, *your* kyng,
And hīs law wyll me lyke to lere
when we haue endyd oþer thyng.
And, ser, fully I fynd
how þou has in [his] sted

Power to lowse *and* bynd

als lord of lyfe *and* ded. (17343-52; 1446.3-12)

Obviously, MEMPOT's Judith understands how to behave effectively in order to gain Holofernes' trust. She appeals to his desire for power, claiming that her advice will bring him "chere"; she appeals to his patriarchal pride by indicating an interest in learning the law of his king; and she appeals to his self-image when she acknowledges his authority and military might. Her speech and actions are worthy of the compliment Chrétien de Troye's narrator gives to Enide: "When she puts her mind to it, she knows well how to infatuate a fool" (46).²⁹⁰ It is more than likely that MEMPOT's audience would have identified Judith with romance characters like Enide who could adeptly deceive a would-be lover.

Indeed, Chrétien's Enide (whom Fries classifies as both heroine and female hero) is an early illustration that not all medieval texts criticize women for strategic or deceitful behavior, nor treat them as inferiors to men. Frequently romance narratives (as argued by Classen and Fries among others) create a tone of admiration for female characters who outwit their male counterparts—as long as the ultimate purpose of their actions upholds male hierarchies and values. Chrétien often presents women as capable of strategically deceiving men in order to protect society's interests (interests that are usually in the form of a relationship with husband or lover, but inevitably affect the greater community). In *Erec et Enid*, Enide's ability to analyze a situation and decide the best form of action—which at times includes deception—becomes the driving force of the narrative. Enide is introduced in the tale by the praises of her father, who claims she is extremely lovely, "but her intelligence is far superior to her beauty. Never did God create anyone so wise or noble-hearted" (7).²⁹¹ This presentation of wisdom and nobility at the introduction of a woman character is the same tactic used by MEMPOT's writer when introducing Judith. The poets do not allow readers to base their judgment of the female characters solely on their actions. The narrator's or other characters' comments are employed to erase any ambiguity that might arise through watching the characters perform. Chrétien's text

ensures readers will understand that Enide's worth is the same as Erec's, whose value is praised throughout the land: "They were a perfect match in courtliness, beauty and great nobility of character; and they were so much of a kind and equal in conduct and bearing that no one wishing to tell the truth could have chosen the better or fairer or wiser of them" (20).²⁹² Chrétien portrays Enide and Erec as equals in courtliness, intelligence and love, in spite of the different gender roles they are required to play.

While the outward conduct of Enide and Erec is significantly gendered in Chrétien's text, the writer attempts to depict the quality of their performance as being equal. Even as Erec is teaching Enide that he is a superior knight, she is teaching him that she is a superior lady, one who is willing to risk even her life and honor for his sake. While Erec is wed to the rules of chivalry and must use them in the expression of his love for his wife, Enide does not feel bound to rules of courtesy, nor even to honor, when they are in opposition to her husband's safety. Enide is intelligent enough to know when to bend cultural values for a greater good. This fact is most obvious when Enide outwits a count who desires to murder her husband in order to take her as his mistress. She knows that her husband is not sufficiently rested or armed for battle and buys time by agreeing to love the count and go with him the next morning. She deceives him through courtly flattery and by appealing to his desires—much as Judith baits Holofernes. Chrétien's narrator attempts to circumvent the criticism Enide might receive from readers with an explanation that indicates her superiority over the count and makes her selfless motive clear: "It is far better that she should lie to him than have her husband cut to pieces" (46).²⁹³ Throughout the narrative Enide proves capable of independent thought and action. She can deceive a count, and when she is overcome by concern for Erec, she can also act and speak bravely against her husband's expressed wishes.²⁹⁴ Eventually both Erec and Enide are renewed internally as well as relationally —demonstrating their heroic development—and they become responsible leaders who together will renew their kingdom.²⁹⁵

Independently strategic, and sometimes aggressive, women heroes are found not only in medieval French and German romance, but also in English texts. A particularly strong example comes from the Tristan and Isolde legend, of which there are two Middle English retellings. I will refrain from discussing Malory's more familiar version because of its later date and concentrate on the thirteenth-century text of *Sir Tristrem* found in the Auchinleck manuscript. In this text, Ysonde is introduced as beautiful, nobly attired, quick to learn, and interested in courtly entertainments. When Tristrem meets Ysonde she already loves music and romance narratives, making her an apt pupil for Tristrem (disguised as Tramtris, the merchant), who teaches her—the highly noble maiden with whom no knight dared to “play”—all the techniques of courtly behavior as found in romance stories:

Ysonde he dede understand

What alle playes were

In lay. (1283-5)

When Tristrem returns to King Mark's court, he lauds Ysonde's beauty, nobility and intelligence, thus creating a desire within the King to have her as his queen (1327-42). Ysonde demonstrates her strength when (upon discovering the merchant Tristram is really Sir Tristrem, the knight who killed her uncle) she attempts to attack Tristrem with his own sword. This is an unusual demonstration of aggression by a romance heroine, or even female hero, and strikingly reminiscent of Judith's willingness to behead her people's enemy. While both women characters independently decide upon a course of violent action to be completed by themselves rather than relying on the power of a male surrogate, Ysonde's act is interrupted by her mother and by Tristrem's reminder that her uncle's death occurred during a fair battle. In spite of the fact that Ysonde does not complete the violence she has in mind, the inclusion of her intent within the story implies the possibility of women acting aggressively and autonomously with weapons.²⁹⁶

It is surprising that the text presents Ysonde sympathetically throughout the tale in spite of her aggressive tendencies and her consistent, false declaration that she is innocent of

adultery. For this text, Ysonde's voice is the voice of courtly values, spoken by a beautifully noble, courteous woman admired by all. The writer treats her defense of the love she shares with Tristrem with respect rather than with condemnation or laughter.²⁹⁷ Although the final page of the narrative in the Auchinleck manuscript is missing, Sir Walter Scott's edition includes an ending that idealizes the lovers and depicts Ysonde as actively faithful to her death. When Tristrem dies of a broken heart and Ysonde, the queen, kills herself in despair, the text does not encourage readers to empathize with Ysonde "with the white hand" or King Mark—the neglected noble spouses. Instead the language of the text encourages sympathy with the lovers, whose love has been persecuted throughout the narrative. In particular, the text stresses the nobility of the queen's heart, which is so touched by Tristrem's plight that she is willing to give up both her power and femininity, dressing as a man and boarding an unknown ship with Tristrem's emissary. While these are not the actual words of the original, but an addition added by Scott, they reiterate the text's emphasis on the valor, strategic abilities, and dedicated passion of Ysonde, and idealize her final action of self destruction for love. The courtly Ysonde is not a stereotypically flat and idealized heroine. She develops from a naive, although aggressive, virgin to an intentional lover. This text admires aggression and deception in Ysonde, because she is motivated out of love.

Both Ysonde and Enide's deception and aggression are portrayed as serving the men they love. They fluctuate from passive heroines to active female heroes, but are not represented as counter-heroes, because their performance does not deny male power. On the other hand, the character of Guinevere, despite her similarity to Ysonde, is more fluid, sometimes encompassing all three of the character types within one text (and thus demonstrating Fries' claim regarding the fluctuating depictions of women romance characters). In Marie de France's *Lanval*—a text in French, presented to an English court—Guinevere is treated as an evil woman, who schemes, lies and whines to obtain her desires. Two centuries later, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, she reigns as a figurehead to be admired and served. These texts

illustrate that tradition within Arthurian legend is split regarding Guinevere's involvement in the breakup of Arthur's kingdom. Larry Benson notes that this divided tradition contains two main branches, representing her as either a strategic schemer or a victim of misplaced love, as exemplified by two prominent Middle English texts. In the *Alliterative Morte Arthur*, "Guenevere's desertion seems more a political than an amatory act," while in the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur*, the focus is on the feelings of the characters and the tragedy of "real people caught in a real web of tragic circumstances" (Benson and Foster).²⁹⁸ While in the Alliterative version Guenevere (called Waynor in this text) is represented as a counter-hero who purposefully attempts to disrupt Arthur's kingdom with Mordred, in the *Stanzaic* poem Queen Gaynor speaks and acts independently, sometimes upholding society's customs and ideals, at other times denying them.

In the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur*, Gaynor's words and actions are essential to the movement of the plot. In the third stanza of the poem, the Queen gives King Arthur the idea for beginning the tournament, based on her assessment that his court is becoming empty of bold knights who are looking for adventure. She claims that their absence is tainting his honor, and the King quickly agrees. Later the queen, motivated by jealousy, speaks angrily, causing Lancelot to leave the court. The knights of the court consider Gaynor a disruptor (a female counter-hero) because of her speech, which has interrupted their fellowship. Soon she slides into another role, resembling a suffering heroine, who unknowingly hands a knight a poison apple—an unwitting action that propels Sir Lancelot to further adventure as he returns to defend her honor.²⁹⁹ Toward the end of the tale Gaynor begins to perform as a female hero. Although there is no direct dialogue, she directs a number of noblemen who serve as her guard. The writer tells of her strategy and courage to feign a trip to London to purchase wedding gowns and then to place herself within the impenetrable Tower of London, out of Mordred's reach. At the death of Arthur and Mordred, Queen Gaynor takes the initiative to live in a convent and repent of her sins. She blames herself for the battle that has killed so many men, even though the text, by emphasizing Sir Gawain's unrelenting desire for revenge, appears to downplay Lancelot and

Gaynor's part in instigating the conflict. The Queen's final words in the text, which explain her own desire to live the rest of her life in repentance, impel Lancelot also to renounce his courtly lifestyle and commence living within a hermitic community, as he repents his part in the destruction of King Arthur and the community of the Round Table. Queen Gaynor, who begins the tale's action by encouraging a tournament to expand the kingdom's honor, also articulates the appropriate medieval conclusion to the problem of earthly desire and conflict.

In the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur*, Gaynor displays an ambiguity and mobility rare in the portrayal of romance women. In the beginning her concern for Arthur's reputation and honor demonstrates her ability to use strategic thinking for her husband and the kingdom's welfare. Later we are introduced to her weaknesses—her short temper and passion for Lancelot— which cause her to act in counter-hero fashion. Gaynor ultimately becomes a female hero who deceives Mordred, keeping him from forcing her into a bigamous relationship. She also decides independently to join a convent—an act that serves as an example to Lancelot and medieval readers. Even while the emphasis appears to be on the actions of the male characters, Gaynor is the moving force and her actions form a frame for the poem. The writer offers a version of Guinevere that becomes distinctly positive in medieval terms. Yet it is difficult to discern the reaction of readers to the character of the Queen. Because medieval romance narratives portray women characters inconsistently, with some texts giving Guinevere attributes of the hero and/or heroine and other versions depicting her as a counter-hero—or even allowing her to slide into all three roles during the narrative— it is easy to imagine that the audience might confuse the role of her character or tend to make assumptions based on previous readings.

5.3 Presenting Judith's Performance: MEMPOT's Additions

The MEMPOT-poet seems particularly conscious of the problem of character ambiguity and, besides introducing Judith's superior qualities at the beginning of her story, adds details throughout the text that prevent readers from mistaking Judith's actions as those of a counter-hero. One significant detail that establishes Judith's role as hero is the already present notion of

Holofernes as the powerful counter-hero who desires to destroy the Hebrews. MEMPOT adds to this image by emphasizing his cunning. Indeed, according to the paraphraser, Holofernes is an evil trickster: “Sere soteltes he soyzt / to wyn þem be sum wyle” (17099-100; 1425.11-12). Thus, Judith must perform as the foil of this crafty general bent on destroying the Jews. In the poet’s view, Holofernes’ most powerful trick is to prevent all water from coming into Jerusalem, where his army is holding the Israelites under seige:

he wyst wele þe wold haue no dawt
whyls þei had welth of waters clere.
þerfor he gart spare ylk spowte
whore any wels of watur were.
he mad ther bekkes to ryn about
that non suld negh *that* Cyte nere. (17101-6; 1426.1-6)

Unlike the Book of Judith (in which the city’s aqueduct is cut off and the springs of fresh water are guarded by Holofernes’ soldiers), MEMPOT presents Holofernes blocking the wells of water and diverting the brooks from running near the city. Judith is able to counter this trick through resourcefulness and hard work rather than military might:

In þat ylke dale was dyzt a well
with Ebrew[s] that be fore had bene . . .
And þore scho *and* hyr damsell
trayuelde so þem two be twene.
Thei mad a spryng þat fro yt fell
at þe Cyte syde forto be sene,
So þat þei þat wund [within]
ware warescht wele of thryst. (17461-2, 17465-70; 1456.1-2; 5-10)

The ability of Judith to bring forth water from the well departs significantly from the biblical story, and yet its origin does not appear to be directly related to romance tradition. Peck comments in

his notes to the above passage that “in romance tradition the woman normally needs a guardian for her well (e.g., Chrétien de Troyes, *Yvain*). Here Judith tends the well herself for the benefit of the whole city” (152). Again, readers may be reminded of trickster heroes who provide for people who are being oppressed. However, providing for one’s suffering community was not only expected of a trickster hero, but, as examined in Chapter Three, required of nobility as well.

The additional responsibility of connecting an ancient well to the city’s spring, so that the Hebrews will again have a water supply, seems curiously unique to this portrayal of Judith. This addition to the narrative invites readers to consider its significance. Obviously, water from wells and fountains was literally a source of life to medieval people, as it was to the Hebrews in the story of Judith. Moreover, women’s connection to the drawing and carrying of water is well known. The labors related to water, however, are commonly the duties of peasant women. In *MEMPOT*, the noble Judith works beside her maidservant to cause water to flow to their city. There is no description of the exact labor that they perform. The focus in this passage is on what they accomplish: because of their labor the people “ware warescht wele of thryst.”³⁰⁰ Perhaps there is more to this activity than a literal reading can render. The result of the action is reminiscent of the biblical story of God commanding Moses to strike the rock in the wilderness so that the people will have fresh water: “Behold I will stand there before thee, upon the rock Horeb: and thou shalt strike the rock, and water shall come out of it that the people may drink” (Exodus 17.6). The poet may have chosen a familiar motif to expand the theme of deliverance in Judith’s narrative,³⁰¹ even while expanding the ways in which Judith might be considered an example to medieval readers, taking the focus off of her courtly deceptions and placing it onto the practical ways that she provides for her people.

Although the poet’s first concern with the well may be very practical, directed toward tricking the trickster and providing the people water, the idea of the well’s spiritual usefulness is not abandoned. According to the poet, she visits the well three times to pray because she is allowed to come and go as she wills.

So trayueld scho be tyms thre
into þat place hyr god to pray.

Scho had fre eschew *and* entre. (17473-5; 1457.1-3).

After the initial redirection of the water, Judith returns to the same location to pray. No mention is made of washing herself, as is found in Comestor and the Book of Judith. The emphasis of the three accounts is quite different. The Book of Judith stresses her bathing as an aspect of keeping herself clean before the Lord, a necessary partner with prayer:

And when she was going in, she desired that she might have liberty to go out at night and before day to prayer, and to beseech the Lord.

And he commanded his chamberlains, that she might go out and in, to adore her God as she pleased, for three days. And she went out in the nights into the valley of Bethulia, and washed herself in a fountain of water. And as she came up, she prayed to the Lord the God of Israel, that he would direct her way to the deliverance of his people. And going in, she remained pure in the tent, until she took her own meat in the evening. (Judith 11.5-9)

Washing in the water in this account is a sacramental action that reminds readers of Judith's purity and desire to dedicate herself totally to God's law. Comestor does not completely erase this aspect of the text, but his version does minimize its importance: "She was given liberty to go in and out at night to pray to her God, and in this manner for three nights she went and washed herself in water and prayed to the God of Israel" (Col. 1478B).³⁰² Comestor still links the acts of washing and praying, but readers are not given further details that might indicate the two are sacramentally connected. Nevertheless, those familiar with Jewish rituals would have understood its significance.³⁰³ MEMPOT's focus on the act of prayer at the well without ritual washing keeps the focus of Judith's nightly trips on worship, but removes an obvious Jewish element from the story.

In addition, the paraphraser's erasure of the act of bathing directs medieval readers away from considering Judith's body and removes the possibility of anyone in Holofernes' camp accidentally or purposely viewing her naked. The MEMPOT-poet seems particularly concerned that Judith's body remains dressed throughout the narrative, as illustrated by the lines directly preceding the description of her adventures at the well:

þen to [a] chamber þei hyr led
þat was *with* alkyns wrschepe wroyt.
All bewtese both for burd *and* bed
with mekyll blyse was ydder broyzt;
And in þat sted so was sho stede
with alkyns solace sere vnsoght.

Bot to slepe was sho neuer vn clede,

of oper thyng was mare hyr toyzt. (17449-56; 1455.1-8) (emphasis mine)

The narrator's claim that Judith never undresses to sleep works to negate the possibility that Judith is impressed by the sumptuous chambers. Yet this passage also stresses the idea that she remains clothed at all times.³⁰⁴ Clearly, her raiment protects her purity and also reminds readers that Judith is a noblewoman inside and out—one who is preoccupied with the responsibility of rescuing her people, not with luxury or the temptations of desire. Again, Judith's dressing actions—or inaction—serves to reveal her identity through the way she performs.

MEMPOT presents Judith's actions at the well as a practical solution to a serious problem—she plans, she works, and she prays.³⁰⁵ However, in spite of the poet's desire to remain focused on actions that will inspire readers to live more productive lives, the text resonates with other layers of meaning—significations that arise from the story's familiarity, as well as its participation in medieval religious and cultural dialogues. The biblical connection to water is obvious: water is considered a symbol of new life, such as in baptism rituals, and deliverance (i.e., the drowning of the Egyptians who follow the Israelites into the Red Sea). It is

also used in symbolic cleansing rituals. No doubt these meanings resound in the original Hebrew text and still reside within later retellings. Nonetheless, the paraphraser is presenting this text to an audience not only familiar with biblical narratives, but also immersed in the literature of romance (as evidenced by the many changes present within the text). Therefore, an examination of water and wells as they relate to secular medieval texts, particularly romance narratives, is warranted.³⁰⁶

The medieval terms used to indicate water in texts are more ambiguous than modern terms. The word “well” (“welle”), according to the *Middle English Dictionary (MED)*, is “a natural source of water, forming a fountain, pool, or stream . . . also a fabulous or miraculous fountain, spring or pool having magical or supernatural properties.” In medieval texts of all types, wells or springs of water are familiar motifs, which help to create a pastoral scene.³⁰⁷ The geographical calm and abundance present in natural springs and the legends of supernatural occurrences stemming from folklore blend within these representations to construct a setting that is simultaneously conceivable and mystical. The numinous aspects of a fountain or well are emphasized in biblical metaphor,³⁰⁸ and then easily transferred to erotic romance narratives, which borrow heavily from biblical images and language.³⁰⁹ Thus, women in medieval romance are often seen beside a fountain as a sign of their fertility and desire—a combination of physical allure and bewitchery.³¹⁰

Yet the combination of women and water is not always presented as seductive or detrimental to individual knights or the community at large. Within various Arthurian legends, the Lady of the Lake presents Arthur with Excalibur and receives it again. Moreover, Lancelot’s mother in early legend is a water fairy, also referred to as the Lady of the Lake. Anne Berthelot claims that the French prose *Lancelot* (from the first half of the thirteenth century) represents this woman as a positive source of wisdom and nurture while denying her supernatural nature: “The Lady of the Lake is a scientist, not a witch or an enchantress. Whenever she or one of her damsels accomplishes any undoubtedly magical feat, the word used to describe it is always *ars*

or at most *sors*, and never *nigremance*" (90). The Lady of the Lake changes in later works and often becomes a female counter-hero that threatens patriarchal power, an illustration that connections between women and water remain ambiguous. It appears that the positive elements residing within the myths of Celtic water goddesses denote relationships that cannot be entirely erased. Sue Ellen Holbert posits that, read through these positive associations, even the Lady of the Lake's capture of Merlin can be read as a nurturing, transformative act:

Bringing all points of reference to bear on the meaning of water in stories about Nymue, the Chief Lady of the Lake, we may see her as an active force, protective and generative, fairy lover and fairy godmother, avenger of wrongs and initiator of change. In taking Arthur to Avalon, as she does in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, she is a goddess who promises to heal, watches over the dead, and enables rebirth. Regarded as Merlin's mate or his successor, she is an 'uncontainable' agent of transformation. (84)

In Holbert's analysis, the meanings embedded within romance depictions of women related to water are not always sexual. The qualities of healing and transformation are compatible with the character of Judith as a role model who "avenges wrongs and initiates change."

While readers may have had previous encounters with female counter-heroes related to water, the MEMPOT writer does not allow readers to question Judith's power as Christian role model and female hero. The text ensures that she is read as model and hero (or *super-hero*): a woman not only strong enough to provide water for the city, but also to command her community—including the male rulers and soldiers—enabling her to be the sole initiator of renewal. When Judith hears of Ozi's decree that the Hebrews will give themselves up to Holofernes if God has not answered in five days, she acts with precise determination. She does not hesitate, but confidently walks to the temple:

To þe tempyll rayked scho ryst
and cald þo folke in fere,

And up sho stud on heyght

so þat þei suld hyr here. (17181-4; 1432.9-12)

In this passage Judith has the authority to walk straight into the male realm and instigate a meeting. She has the confidence to speak from an elevated place from the commencement of her narrative.³¹¹ In the Book of Judith, she calls “the ancients” to her house through her maidservant, and does not leave her home. It is not until Judith has brought back Holofernes’ head that she assumes a position of height and speaks to the people in public (Judith 13.16). In MEMPOT, Judith, on high in the temple, addresses her “mone” or complaint to the prophet Ozi and in the presence of the people rebukes his command. The reasons for her rebuke are based on Jewish religious beliefs, backed up with examples from the patriarchs:

how dere þou sett in certayn space

þe wyll of god to come or gang,

Sene He is Gyfer of all *grace*

sone forto leue or to last lang!

þis is more lyke to greue

our god, þat most may gayn;

þen vs oght to releue

at put vs fro þis payn.

þerfor is gud þat we be gyne

of þis greuance to geyte relese,

And say: þis sorow is sent for syn

þat we haue wroyȝt *and* wold not sese,

Als was *with* elders of *our* kyn,

Abraham, ysaac, *and* moyses. (17189-202; 1433.5-1434.1-6)

Judith informs Ozi and the other Hebrews of Jewish doctrines and history that they already know.. She continues for the next fourteen lines to remind them of their history and the

tests that God gave their ancestors to see if they “wold last in loue” (17207; 1434.11). Judith’s exhortation to the elders and her people fills three stanzas—a large portion of text compared to the treatment of other aspects of the story. (The description of Holofernes’ beheading takes only one stanza.) In addition, the tone of Judith’s speech has been altered from the Vulgate’s Book of Judith, in which she beseeches the elders to change their edict and speak to the people. The message that she gives “the ancients” to tell the people is similar,³¹² but Judith appeals to the men in private and expects them to be the public bearers of the word: “And now, brethren, as you are the ancients among the people of God, and their very soul resteth upon you: comfort their hearts by your speech, that they may be mindful how our fathers were tempted that they might be proved, whether they worshipped their God truly” (Judith 8.21).³¹³ It is obvious in the Vulgate story that Judith is submissive to the elders even when she is speaking for God; however, MEMPOT does not reflect this attitude.

The speaking Judith in MEMPOT is initially far more commanding than the biblical character. In both versions, Judith is given the power to make her own plans and to warn the men to be on guard. Additionally, the paraphraser depicts her as the military leader who actually places the guards at their posts:

Sho sett 3yng men to 3eme þe zate
and bad þei suld be redy bown
 To kepe hyr in *the* evyn late,
 for þat tyme wold scho wend o town. (17233-36; 1437.1-4)

This initial command foreshadows Judith’s military leadership after she returns from the Assyrians camp, when both the MEMPOT and biblical writers describe Judith giving specific instructions regarding the actions that should be taken. Clearly, Judith crosses gender boundaries to a greater degree in MEMPOT than in the biblical text and performs more like a male romance hero than a female one.³¹⁴

While Judith's military actions might be regarded as a demonstration of her male performance, the intelligence that instigates these actions is labeled by the poet as being characteristic of a woman. Judith's "wit" is referred to three times within MEMPOT's narrative of Judith, and, surprisingly, it appears as a woman's intelligence rather than wisdom given from God. In the first instance her "woman's wytt" will help her "waste" the plan of the Jews, who have decided to give God only five days in which to act:

Bot þen þis wyse woman ludyth,
when scho herd of ther tythyng tell,
How ser ozi had ordand yt
per Cyte *and* þer selfe to sell,
And how he made þat mesure fytt
to dome of god V days to dwell,
Sho wold yt waste *wiþ* womans wytt,
and furth scho went *that* fare to fell. (17173-80; 1432.1-8)

Here, as in the Bible, there is no mention of Judith being told by God to warn the people that their plan is wrong. (Yet the Bible frames Judith's reaction with an account of her place in the community and her devotion to God, whereas in MEMPOT wise Judith knows what to do without praying, though perhaps the audience remembers her prayerful life from other accounts.) It appears that the narrator, the people and Judith herself have confidence in her wit,³¹⁵ especially after she has led them to victory. They understand her intelligence to work in partnership with God's plan, and they are willing to place themselves and the booty they have acquired at her command:

þei broyzt hyr gold in bages bun,
and bed þem self at hyr wyll to be.
þei say, "we wott we haue yt wun
wiþ wyll of god *and* wyt of þe." (17665-8; 1473.1-4)

The striking aspect of this text is its emphasis on “woman’s wit” in partnership with God’s will, and its refusal to masculinize Judith’s strategies, as the Latin Vulgate does in the words of Joachim the high priest, who praises her for performing “manfully” (Judith 14.11).³¹⁶

Judith’s intelligence is also respected at Holofernes court, where it appears obviously related to the Assyrians respect for her as a courtly lady. Holofernes’ reaction to Judith is seemingly a response to both her dress and behavior. He sees a royal body, because he sees gold and ermine and a display of the habits and speech expected of the aristocracy. This obvious nobility not only gives Judith a future position in his bedroom, but an immediate seat beside his throne where she is free to offer military advice regarding the capturing of her people:

And, *ser*, so sall I tell þe tyll
to make a sawt by sotell gyne
To weld þe Cyte at [þy] wyll
and esely forto entur þer in. (17401-4; 1451.1-4)

Judith’s suggestion here indicates that she will be instructing Holofernes in a trick, “a sawt by sotell gyne,” thus appealing to his own trickster nature, as the paraphraser portrays him. The Vulgate does not mention tricks nor does it give many details: Judith alludes only to bringing Holofernes into Jerusalem so that “thou shalt have all the people of Israel” (Judith 11:15).³¹⁷ In contrast, Judith’s words in MEMPOT push his imagination as to what this entrance into Jerusalem will allow him to accomplish:

“And, *ser*, þan may þou spare or spyll
þe Ebrews ylkon or þou blyn,
And, yf þe lyke, to lend þor styll
or home agayn *with* wrschep wyn.” (17405-8; 1451.5-8)

Judith describes Holofernes’ options, arousing his warrior’s desire for blood and his chivalric desire for “wrschep.” MEMPOT’s courtly Judith displays a medieval understanding of the honor gained by defeating one’s enemy—an ideal not mentioned in the Book of Judith.

MEMPOT makes it clear that Judith uses courtly flattery as she speaks in this passage, and it depicts Holofernes as responding in the same manner:

*with gawdes þus scho hym glosed
to haue hyr purpase playn.
hyr sawys soth he supposed,
and þus he glosed a gayn. (17409-12; 1451.9-12)*

Judith's confident deportment as she sits in the seat of honor—"glosing" or speaking courteous and flattering words—can be clearly understood as an act only a noble could perform.³¹⁸ As I have argued in the previous chapter, both Holofernes and his men are impressed by Judith's noble dress and thus treat her with respect. Yet if she had not behaved in a courtly fashion, had not acted confidently and "courteously," she would have likely been demoted and her "sawys" would not have been accepted as truth. That is to say, that in order for the MEMPOT-poet to portray Judith consistently she must act, as well as dress, nobly.

The paraphraser presents Judith as using her knowledge of courtesy and courtly games in order to position herself strategically close to Holofernes so that he may be defeated. Therefore, Judith's wit and strategic abilities are admired not only by her kinsman and the court of Holofernes, but also, in all probability, by readers, particularly aristocrats, even though her strategies include misrepresentation and lies. An indication that medieval aristocrats placed a certain value upon "political" lies is seen in Christine de Pisan's advice to noblewomen. Karen Pratt interprets Christine's advice as encouraging diplomacy:

The princess's ability to keep her own counsel, to confide only in trusty servants and even to dissimulate on occasion is encouraged as a way of averting social, political and family strife. Female ingenuity (*engin*), verbal dexterity, and her exploitation of *semblant*, a term covering external appearance, facial expression, or even pretence, are often criticised in courtly romance as being the tools of the deceitful or adulterous wife. In Christine's *Livre*, however, they

are presented more positively as the instruments of diplomacy, especially effective in the political arena. (240)

Christine's advice may not agree with all romance texts' attitudes toward deception, but as I have pointed out earlier in the chapter, when male interests are at stake, some romance texts are willing to allow women characters opportunities to use strategic guile, and MEMPOT usually follows their lead when portraying biblical women. In Judith's case, however, this guile is lauded as "woman's wit."

While MEMPOT does not directly mention "woman's wit" in relation to other biblical women, it often shows a similar laudatory attitude toward their intelligent strategies. MEMPOT adds to the biblical account of Mycoll by depicting her rescuing David twice.³¹⁹ The first time she saves David's life by crying out when Saul is about to throw a spear at him. In the Old Testament, there is no mention of Mycoll in this scene, and as both Livingston and Kalén note there is no known source for this addition to the narrative, although Josephus mentions that David's escape was due to prior knowledge (Livingston "Introduction" 586). The poet seems to be adding weight to an emphasis on Mycoll's ability to think and act with David's interests in mind. The second time, Mycoll overhears her father's intent to kill David and devises a scheme to keep him safe. Mycoll's actions in this part of the narrative are similar to her behavior in the Bible, but MEMPOT places an emphasis on Mycoll's intentional strategy:

when Mycoll hath þis herd
how hyr fader can say,
ffull ferdly furth scho ferd
to marre yt, yf scho may. (6297-10; 525.9-12)

Mycoll is presented as understanding the problem and devising a plot to solve it—her mind works much in the same manner as Judith's, both described as possessing a desire to "marre" the plot. Mycoll's strategy is accepted without question by David, who after hearing her plan

flees, as in the biblical account. The MEMPOT-poet adds a note to readers regarding Mycoll's value as an example of a worthy woman:

Swylke wemen were worthy to wed
to helpe þer husbandes in a nede.
ffor hyr ded was scho not adred,
bot 3it scho dyd an oþer dede.
Scho layd a dry stoke in his bed
and couert yt with worthy wede.
when knyghtes come hym to haue [d]ede,
scho sayd, »sers, sen he fro cowrt zede,
he toke so hertly care;
hys lyf days ar nere done.» (6313-22; 527.1-10)

Even though she lies to her father and the king's messengers, Mycoll is described as being "worthy to wed" because she helps her husband when he is in need. The poet treats Mycol as a typical heroine according to Fries' categories. While her wit and agency are valued, her mobility is limited—she travels only from the house of her father to the house of her husband. Yet here lies further evidence that MEMPOT's poet views strategic deception as an acceptable means of obtaining victory over an antagonist, no matter if the character using deceit is a mobile, aggressive female hero or a passive heroine. Just as in MEMPOT's Judith's account, the poet offers no excuse for the deception—as if the paraphraser assumes the text's audience already shares this permissive attitude toward deceit.

Nonetheless, MEMPOT does criticize deceptive female counter-heroes. In spite of the text's tendency to purify women characters, such as Rahab and Mycoll, it retains a few "bad-girl" images from the Bible.³²⁰ In these instances the MEMPOT writer consistently informs readers of the women's counter-hero status when they are introduced. When readers are introduced to Queen Jezebel, for instance, she is a devil whose primary desire is "malyce":

And lyke to hym [Ahab] he toke a qwene
 of phylysteyns, full of þe fend.
 hyr name was I[e]sabell,
 þe kynges doughtur of tyre.
 Malyce to meue *and* mell
 þat was hyr most desyre. (10963-8; 914.7-12)

The paraphraser interprets Jezabel's later behavior for readers and presents the queen as someone whose personality is evil. She is "full of the fiend," from the beginning of her narrative, whereas the Vulgate introduction of Jezabel describes only her cultural background and emphasizes the wickedness of Ahab, the king: "Nor was it enough for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nabat: but he also took to wife Jezabel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians" (III Kings 16.31).³²¹ In III Kings the evil of Jezabel's character stems from her pagan background, but the MEMPOT-poet personalizes it—perhaps to create a more familiar reading for an audience accustomed to romance counter-heroes, who interrupt male-dominated traditions and hierarchies for their own personal desires.

Destructive desire is the primary trait that MEMPOT attributes to another biblical counter-hero, Delilah. Rather than cleaning up her occupation as the text does of Rahab (presented as a minor female hero), Delilah (Dalyda in MEMPOT) is introduced as a "leman," a term that echoes the Biblical introduction, because, apparently, the poet has no desire to sanitize the counter-hero who will destroy Samson by her deception:

In secrett can a lady lend³²²
 þat lemans lyfe had leued full lang.
 Hys [hert all] hale [to] hare he mend;
 full mekyll myrth was þem amang.
 ffor sho wold hym be gyle,
wiþ fayre chere scho hym fede.

Bot he wyst of no wyle

and was no thyng a drede. (4205-12; 351.5-12)

Readers are told that Dalayda is not only a harlot, but also actively deceives Samson from the start of their relationship. The poet contrasts Dalayda's guile with Samson's innocence, the opposite juxtaposition used in describing Judith, who is employed as a righteous foil to Holofernes' trickery and malice. In both narratives the poet sets up readers' expectations for the character upon her entrance into the text. MEMPOT's writer strives to destroy any ambiguity within the stories of women characters, purifying them by leaving out or adding details whenever they are to be considered good examples (i.e., if their actions qualify them as heroines or female heroes),³²³ and by emphasizing and/or exaggerating their vices whenever they are considered counter-heroes. In most instances, the alterations resonate with the characterization of women within the romance tradition.³²⁴

Nevertheless, the poet appears to find Judith more difficult to contain within the normal characterizations of women, as if female roles in romance literature are far too limited. As Maureen Fries laments:

All of these women, even the comparatively powerful counter-heroes, are limited by their inability to assume such traditional male roles as the warrior one of physical combat. Once, for instance, when Lancelot is wounded with an arrow by a comparatively unimportant damsel sauvage, both the Vulgate and Malory make clear that it is only by accident. In place of such usual male roles as warrior and seer, female heroes and counter-heroes must use guile, both verbal and magical. (72)

Obviously, Judith transcends the above limitations in her ability to plan Holofernes' death and to decapitate him without male assistance.³²⁵ Judith's conduct cannot be interpreted as an accident, even if the poet had refrained from making alterations to the narrative. Judith's fluidity exceeds all three of Fries' categories, and yet it seems that the poet intends something other

than Judith as supernatural female hero or saint. The emphasis on Judith's wit places her abilities within a more earthy tradition and allows readers to conclude that women can be used by God equally as men because their strategies and performances, whether considered traditionally feminine or masculine, can result in social and spiritual renewal.

5.4 Reversing Patriarchy: Judith as Carnival

While the MEMPOT-poet presents Judith as an unquestionable female hero who is motivated by her desire for God, there are still aspects of her account inherent in the traditional story that might be troubling to readers. In particular, the story of Judith does not contain any positive male characters. This omission has also been noted by Amy-Jill Levine, who discusses the reversal of all male and female roles within the Book of Judith:

Only the text's females act in a fully efficacious manner; only Judith displays well-directed initiative; only her maid competently follows instructions. The men are weak, stupid, or impaired: Manasseh dies ignominiously; Holofernes is inept; Bagoas is a eunuch; Achior faints at the sight of Holofernes' head. Uzziah, who shares Judith's ethnicity and elevated social status and who, because he is descended from Simeon, might even be able to claim levirate privileges, is the biggest disappointment. Judith must correct his naive theology, and she stands firm while he wavers in his faith (cf. 7.30-31). (214)

MEMPOT does not try to rescue any of the negative male characters provided by the biblical account of Judith. It leaves out Bagoas and Achior altogether, and Holofernes, while being cunning enough to block up the city's water supply, is naive enough to be tricked by Judith's flattery. Ozi (Uzziah) who, according to traditional cultural values, should be the spiritual leader, submits to Judith's correction and guidance without contributing any ideas of his own to her plans. Even though the ineptitude of male characters serves to reinforce the abilities of Judith, the lack of any powerful male is unusual and does not follow typical biblical or romance

traditions. These gendered role reversals, however, resemble the confusion and inverted hierarchies that appear in literature that Bakhtin labels the *literary carnivalesque*.

For Bakhtin the literary carnivalesque reaches its peak within the texts of Renaissance writers, particularly Rabelais, but carnival elements were also present in ancient comic literature, such as Mennipean satire and vernacular folk tales.³²⁶ Furthermore, Bakhtin claims that the “carnival spirit” was contained within “the entire recreational literature of the Middle Ages” (*Rabelais* 13). In Bakhtin’s view, the associations between medieval mystery plays and the carnival are particularly intimate—this idea in and of itself is reason to investigate the relationship of MEMPOT to the carnivalesque, because of the text’s obvious connection to some of the York Corpus Christi plays.³²⁷ When literature resonates with this “carnival spirit,” it participates, at least partially, in the attitude that prevails within the feasts and carnivals of the common people:

As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed.
(*Rabelais* 10)

Besides the elimination of “established” and “immortalized” structure, there are other elements Bakhtin finds within carnivalesque literature:

All the images of carnival are dualistic; they unite within themselves both poles of change and crisis: birth and death (the image of pregnant death), blessing and curse (benedictory carnival curses which call simultaneously for death and rebirth), praise and abuse, youth and old age, top and bottom, face and backside, stupidity and wisdom. Very characteristic for carnival thinking is

paired images, chosen for their contrast (high/low, fat/thin, etc) or for their similarity (doubles/twins). (*Problems* 126)

Many characteristics of the Judith story resonate with the motifs of the carnivalesque. The death of Holofernes and the Assyrians is simultaneous with the rebirth of the Jews. What appears to be Judith's blessing on the pagans is in actuality a curse. The Hebrews, whose identity is not even known by the powerful general at the beginning of the narrative, placing them on the bottom of the political and military order, end up on top at the conclusion of the tale. Even the characters are profoundly carnivalesque. Judith's double is clearly her maid,³²⁸ and while Holofernes is most obviously her opposite, other contrasts might be seen in the entire male population of Israel.

Carnival is in essence a dialogue of opposites. It is subversive through the use of competing and dialoguing images without claiming the superiority or authority involved in subversive violence. "The most distinguishing characteristic of carnival is that it means to be subversive or metamorphic from the ground up and intends to preserve and perpetuate intersubjective dialogue at the same time" (Jung 271). This dialogue of change and subversion relates to the restructuring of society. Carnival suggests equalities where none exist in life, and although these suggestions are merely temporary, they have lasting metaphoric value, which threatens established hierarchies. Levine comments on the subversive metaphor that underlies Judith's performance in the Book of Judith:

At the beginning of the book, when she is apart, ascetic and asocial, Judith is merely a curiosity with metaphoric potential. Present in the public sphere, sexually active and socially involved, she endangers hierarchical oppositions of gender, race and class, muddles conventional gender characteristics and dismantles their claims to universality, and so threatens the status quo. Judith relativizes the normative cultural constructions of the community. Her ultimate return to the private sphere and consequent reinscription into androcentric

Israel both alleviate the crisis precipitated by her actions and discourse and reinforce the norms they reveal. Yet because her return is incomplete, the threat of the other remains. (209-10)

Instead of reading Judith as the church triumphant, or as a Christ-figure, as did the church fathers, Levine understands her metaphoric value as representing the power of equality over hierarchy. The MEMPOT-poet recognizes this value and attempts to change parts of the signification embedded within the story. In one sense, the writer reinstates the value of social hierarchies by presenting Judith as a powerful noblewoman whose status enables her to converse with Holofernes, thus erasing a dialogue between low and high. Yet the dialogue related to gender is embellished with details that appear to give the feminine gender an even greater voice than it already displays in the Book of Judith.³²⁹ Amazingly, Judith as signifier of gender equality is embraced as a positive truth, which the paraphraser declares is part of the text's didactic purpose. The poet's alterations of Judith's behavior do not set a frame of gendered space at the beginning and end of the narrative for Judith's bi-gendered performance in the middle, as in the Book of Judith. Instead, MEMPOT's Judith is allowed to move and speak within the public sphere from her introduction until the final lines of her story.

Although the Book of Judith places Judith within a secluded, private dwelling, from which she moves only after consulting with "the ancients," in MEMPOT her character is strategically mobile from the second line: "*and woman wyse whore sho suld wende*" (1414.2). In saying that she is a wise woman wherever she may go, the text intimates that she travels from place to place rather than remaining at home as a widow recluse. While it might be argued that the poet is again preempting the action of the narrative to negate any ambiguity in the character, it is significant that the form of this preemption is to ignore her secluded widow status, which the Book of Judith and later commentators use to prove that her motives are based on serving God. It might seem more feasible to gain readers' respect for Judith by presenting her as a female hero who normally remains within a limited domestic sphere, but

because of unusual circumstances is required to travel from private to public and then back to private space again. Instead, she is presented as a woman who throughout her life moves freely within public spaces that are usually considered taboo.

In presenting Judith as independently and permanently mobile within normally forbidden spaces, the paraphraser is adding to the carnival nature of Judith's behavior. Normal gender hierarchies are overturned—a woman becomes the all powerful “king.” The narration has become double-voiced: in spite of its serious intent, it presents the heroine in a manner normally associated with medieval laughter. Yet its tone is neither satirical nor parodical. The “carnival spirit” of MEMPOT's Judith narrative, even more than the original account, contains a type of laughter that Bakhtin calls festive, which is, above all, celebratory:

Let us say a few initial words about the complex nature of carnival laughter. It is, first of all, a festive laughter. Therefore it is not an individual reaction to some isolated “comic” event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival. (*Rabelais* 12)

Judith's victory over Holofernes is a laughing matter, which the people celebrate with mirth and song. Narratives of Judith create a joyful dependence between the contrasting characters within the tale. Judith's triumph is dependent on Holofernes' stupidity; her elevation as Israel's deliverer is contingent on the failure of the Hebrew leaders. When the people celebrate Judith's success, they are not only mocking Holofernes and the Assyrians, but also deriding their own spiritual fathers who did not have the faith to deliver them. Judith's exploits deny the patriarchal faith in which men act in the authority of God, even as she asserts a dependence on that faith. MEMPOT reiterates this carnival laughter and even builds upon the inherent celebration within

the narrative by creating a female hero whose bi-gendered, all-powerful performance is lauded as originating from “woman’s wit”—a much-criticized commodity within patriarchal and medieval texts.³³⁰

To posit intentional recognition of the “carnival spirit” on the writer’s part is not feasible; it seems more plausible to claim that the poet worked within a cultural memory that included the carnivalesque within its literary tradition. Perhaps, as Bakhtin says of Dostoevsky, the MEMPOT-poet “linked up with the chain of a given generic tradition at that point where it passed through his own time” (*Problems* 121). The generic tradition that most likely influenced elements of carnival apparent in MEMPOT’s alterations is that of courtly romance. Scholars who have succeeded Bakhtin have frequently pointed out elements within medieval romance that reflect a dialogic presence that the theorist himself missed.³³¹ Cesare Segre argues that, while

medieval romance does not involve true polyphony, it is nonetheless possible to discover in it what is, for Bakhtin, the primary precondition for polyphony: the author’s ability to identify himself with or detach himself from the characters, to espouse their point of view or impose his own on them. In sum, it is a question of being able to see, behind the perspective of the various voices, the perspective of the overall vision. In this way Bakhtin’s remarkable insights concerning the novel can be fruitfully exploited in the context of medieval romance. (29)

This ability of a medieval writer to portray other voices may be most obvious in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, but it is also present within Chrétien’s presentation of Erec and Enide, as well as within narratives which sometimes allow liminal women characters to speak and act beyond normal cultural bounds. Melanie McGarrahan Gibson avers that in both Chrétien de Troyes’s *Yvain (Le Chevalier au Lion)* and Malory’s “The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney” “the female characters speak perversely in carnivalesque voices” (213).

To Gibson, speech may be understood as a primary constituent of the carnivalesque in romance literature. It is used to break down the social order in order to build it up again. As a means of restoring order, perverse speech, that which denies the customs of courtly society, may be used to “crown” and “decrown,” to set up a substitute hierarchy with the intention of tearing it down or to destroy the existing order in order to build it up. In folk carnivals this disruptive speech occurs when a fool, a woman or a peasant wears a crown for the period of the festival. While the existing order seems to be upset, there is already the promise of its future reinstatement because of the temporal nature of the crowning. As Bakhtin claims, “crowning already contains the idea of immanent decrowning: it is ambivalent from the very start” (*Problem* 124). The carnival crowning is festively chaotic—the rules of the existing order are vanquished and the taboo becomes the norm. Within literary works it is rare to find a pure manifestation of carnival chaos because there is a tendency to cleanse or at least control the carnival impulse. Romance texts in particular appealed to an audience to which the complete reversal of hierarchies and suspension of law would probably not have been welcome.³³² Still, the “carnival impulse” remains within the medieval telling of stories for entertainment—sometimes manifesting itself in speech, as Gibson avers, and other times occurring through reversals of performance.

In *Yvain*, Chrétien plays with the “carnival impulse” through the characters’ speech and actions, creating a scenario where decrowning occurs prior to, and yet simultaneously with, crowning. Lyonet belittles Sir Gareth, calling him kitchen slave, although readers realize that he is from a noble bloodline. This narrative develops the idea of Gareth decrowning himself in order later to be crowned—a ploy that carnivalizes the carnival, by reversing its tactics. Other characters, particularly Sir Kay and Lyonet, continue Gareth’s decrowning. Lyonet’s perverse speech, her insults rather than courtesy, are disruptive and at the same time restorative. “Her words have acted as a magical incantation, humiliating Gareth but at the same time reviving and renewing him. The result of this behavior is carnival perversion, urging Gareth on to greater

glory with each joust" (M. Gibson 216). In the act of *decrowning* Gareth is "crowned," and simultaneously the knights who appear to wear the crown in each situation are decrowned, so that eventually the political world is shifted and the castle of Lyonet's sister is freed, resulting in Gareth's ultimate wedding and coronation as lord of the castle. Lyonet reverses her unruly speech with an apology, not required by Gareth, but needed for readers to understand Lyonet's role in Gareth's eventual crowning. Although the process of decrowning and crowning is self-inflicted initially, Lyonet and the knights they encounter on their journey continue the process, because carnival must be a communal activity.

Of course, in romance literature, the lower orders are rarely permitted to be part of the primary action; therefore, the carnivalesque narrative involves the community of nobles and centers on this reverse technique where the social order is disrupted through the decrowning of the noble character, whose eventual recrowning is inevitable. The political shifts of the romance social order are found not between the peasants and the nobility, but between different members of the nobility who move in and out of power. The place of romance carnival is not the marketplace, but the court or the tournament. Nevertheless, there is frequently an emphasis on the rise to power by the young and inexperienced, those who might feel more comfortable in the marketplace, such as Chrétien's Perceval raised in a rural setting, or Gareth who has confined himself to the kitchen. In addition, marginal characters, especially women, are often used to move the unprivileged characters to the top. Indeed, the entire movement of romance—the shifts of power seen in the rise and fall of heroes and kings—appears to capture the folk attitude upon which carnival is based: "Crowning/ decrowning is a dualistic ambivalent ritual, expressing the inevitability and at the same time the creative power of the shift-and-renewal, the *joyful relativity* of all structure and order, of all authority and all (hierarchical) position" (Bakhtin *Problems* 124). Courtly romance, and perhaps most literature, is intrinsically permeated with transgressive carnival attitudes from below, and yet strives to harness this carnival spirit to promote the contemporary social order. In other words, courtly romance literature aims to

promote the values of a powerful nobility and, at the same time, recognizes the instability of all political structures, as is evident in the fall of Arthur's kingdom. It upholds simultaneously the hierarchies of the Middle Ages and represents them as imperfect, subject to change and deterioration. It also recognizes the marginal characters within courtly society—the young, the old, and women—and allows them limited voices, even voices that interrupt, challenge, and reposition the existing authorities. This attitude Bakhtin describes as dualistic and dialogic. Many voices speak simultaneously and in opposition. In Bakhtin's view, paradox is synonymous with carnival.

It is the reader's knowledge of Judith's paradoxical actions—her obvious intention to decrown, even as she crowns, to lead as a matriarch who upholds patriarchal society—which allows her to command the leading men of Jerusalem and speak fair words to Holofernes without destroying her character. Under this ritual act of decrowning a king lies the very core of the carnival sense of the world.³³³ Holofernes' decrowning is a literal death, which will result in a figurative and literal renewal for Judith and her people. In this narrative, carnival brings salvation by causing "shifts and changes" in the political world. At the same time, the poet's emphasis on Judith's nobility and her clothed body may serve to negate at least some of the carnivalesque elements in the narrative. Nonetheless, the paraphraser's treatment of Judith as a noblewoman creates simultaneous doubling and opposition. Judith and Holofernes seem to be on equal terms socially, and in this way appear as doubles. The narrator's comments serve to direct readers to consider them as a pair: "yt was solace sertayn / to se þem syt to geydder" (1445.10). Another aspect of their doubling is their craftiness. In MEMPOT they are twins and opposites—very much alike in social rank and intelligence, but at the same time the contrasts between the two are obvious. This twinning/contrasting effect occurs between Judith and Ozi as well. Because she is portrayed as independently mobile and publicly vocal in MEMPOT, she seems positioned on the same spiritual level as the prophet. Simultaneously, the opposition between Judith and Ozi is emphasized more fervently than in the Book of Judith. As mentioned

earlier, MEMPOT's Judith sets out to "wast" (destroy) Ozi's plan, and she makes her complaint directly to him in front of the people. In no uncertain terms she accuses him of going "o myse" (amiss) (17187; 1433.3).

Perhaps because the poet is concerned that no reader understand Judith as going "o myse," her noble clothing remains on her body during her stay with the Assyrians. Of course, Judith's permanently clothed body also provides a carnival contrast between herself and the grotesque aspects of Holofernes' decapitated corpse. This contrast is emphasized when the Israelites visit the Assyrian camp and find no bodily evidence of Judith's defilement, only evidence of Holofernes' beheading:

þen come ebrews agayn
whore þer enmyse had beyne.
þei fand all safe certayn;
þer was no solpyng seyne,³³⁴
Bot only of Olyfernes blod
þat out of h/s body was bled. (17649-54;1471.9-1472.2)

In this passage, the poet adds extra evidence to prove to medieval readers that Judith has remained clothed and undefiled, details not contained within the biblical text. Perhaps this evidence is a practical detail—something that medieval society would expect to occur when a noblewoman had been in a compromising situation—but it also plays upon the carnival imagination, which focused frequently upon graphic descriptions of the body.³³⁵ Stressing the idea that no sexual intercourse transpired reminds readers that the possibility existed—another ambivalent crowning and decrowning that could have occurred.³³⁶

MEMPOT makes the most of the grotesque aspects of the crowning and decrowning that did occur in the tale:

Sho drogh h/s sword full sone sertayn,
qwylke sho fand standard in þat sted

And *with* þat brand sho brest his brayn;
 so *with* þat dynt sone was he ded.
 þen cutted sho sunder syn[ow] *and* vayn,
 and fro hys halse hewed of hys hed
 And putt yt in a poket playn,
 whore þei be for had born þer bred.³³⁷ (17545-52; 1463:1-8)

The picture the poet paints of Holofernes' brain bursting from Judith's stroke is reminiscent of romance duels.³³⁸ Judith appears powerfully competent—another Lancelot or Gawain— in contrast to her performance as described in the Book of Judith: “And when she had drawn it [the sword] out, she took him by the hair of his head, and said: Strengthen me, O Lord God, at this hour. And she struck twice upon his neck, and cut off his head, and took off his canopy from the pillars, and rolled away his headless body” (Judith 13: 9-10).³³⁹ The Vulgate description of the decapitation is without blood and mess, whereas the MEMPOT-poet follows the medieval tradition of emphasizing the grotesque nature of the body.³⁴⁰

In Bakhtin's view, “this exaggeration has a positive, assertive character. The leading themes of these images of bodily life are fertility, growth, and a brimming-over abundance” (*Rabelais* 19). The modern reader does not usually participate in the carnival spirit of grotesque realism that joyfully exaggerates the body and its messier/uglier aspects. Today's trends are to treat the messy/ugly body as unspeakable or degrading.³⁴¹ In the literary *carnivalesque*, degradation contains a positive dimension. Bakhtin posits that degradation signifies renewal within the carnival imagination:

Degradation here means coming down to earth, the contact with earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time. To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better. . . Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one. (*Rabelais* 21)

Holofernes' degradation is the only possible solution for Israel's regeneration. As such, it is to be not only desired, but also graphically described. This renewal occurs not only through the Hebrews' freedom, but also through the shame of their enemy. Holofernes is totally degraded in this text since he is abandoned by his followers and not even given a burial. His body—thrown by the Hebrews to the beasts and birds—returns to the earth, providing life for the animals, just as the money they find beside his bed provides life for the people:

þe body þei kest to bestes fud
and fowles ther *with* forto be fede.

Thresour þei toke *and* hame *thei* zode,
non oþer welth *with* þem þei led . . .

þei say, "we haue leued þore
of erthly welth to wyn

To make vs me[ry] ever more

and comforth all *our* kyn." (17657-60, 17673-6; 1472.5-8; 1473.9-12)

In addition to increasing the shame of Holofernes, the MEMPOT-poet has exaggerated the benefits of Holofernes' death and Judith's victory. The people are supplied with water, freedom, and wealth—gold, which by Judith's order is distributed equally to men and women: "be mesure both to man *and* wyfe" (17680; 1474.4).³⁴² Clearly the poet has associated decrowning and degradation with a regeneration of the community—a carnival utopia where all are merry and comfortable.

5.5 Questioning Judith's Powerful Performance

If the MEMPOT-poet had created an original utopian story of a woman in the Middle Ages, who informs religious men they are blasphemous and demands that they follow her advice (which includes seducing and beheading the enemy), readers would probably have seen it as comedy. If accepted seriously, it would have been read as blasphemous (the official English stance toward Joan of Arc's conduct). The fact that Judith's story is biblical saves it from

being placed into the above categories, and still these associations create a tension within the tale. The possibility that Judith's performance contains blasphemy or comedy, however, goes unrecognized by the paraphraser. The writer accepts the paradoxes within the story and even embellishes them. The depiction of Judith as a powerful and wise advisor mocks Holofernes' and Ozi's authority—ridiculing male power structures in general. It is as if the poet enjoys the carnival aspects of Judith's tale, recognizing them as necessary to telling a good story. Moreover, the poet treats the situation of a woman in power as possible, even desirable. The metanarrative that maintains a woman must never rule and never kill with the sword is challenged by the poet's positive commentary regarding Judith's behavior and the example she sets. Misogynistic treatment of women's reasoning is contested through MEMPOT's focus on "woman's wytt."

While the MEMPOT-poet may be more overt regarding women's intellectual and physical abilities, precedence for honoring the capabilities of women is seen in courtly romance, which sometimes allows women equality with men. Characters such as Enide, Ysolde, and Guinevere are given powers of mobility and strategy, and through these they create positive change in their narrative world. Usually women characters (whether in the role of female heroes, heroines, or counter-heroes) are marginal performers, but occasionally whole narratives are moved by the speech and/or actions of the female heroes. Sometimes women's voices are allowed the freedom to disrupt the social expectations of courtesy and chivalry while still accomplishing a socially productive end. Yet even these women speak and move under the constraints of a male-dominated culture and eventually return to female spaces and behavior defined by their male-created stories. The writers do not allow the reversal of power to be complete—it always ends, and even when the women are speaking and acting, there are male heroes who speak and act as well. Despite the fact that carnival reversals occur within romance narratives, they always remain under careful control. At times a degree of chaos appears, as in Chrétien's *Yvain*, but "instead of being anti-structural (the usual expectation of carnival), this is a

kind of carnival as fulfillment of social structures” (M. Gibson 219-220). Writers composed whole narratives from the acts of crowning and decrowning, but these acts are committed only by members of the nobility. After all, many of the readers of romance are aristocrats and religious, an audience who benefits from maintaining the existing order.

In spite of the containment of carnivalesque elements within medieval romance, its treatment of women characters opens up spaces for new questions and opinions regarding women and their behavior. These texts act just as carnival does, allowing room for subversive ideas. While the reversals and chaos are suspended at the end of the text or festival, they become part of the possibilities within the reader’s or participant’s imagination. Carnival is not just temporary subversion—it penetrates society and embeds a question mark within all authoritarian imperatives. Not content with the subtle subversion of carnival, the MEMPOT writer attempts to extract the gender question available in the Judith text and rewrite it as a statement of equality. Although the writer allows Judith’s dress to reflect behavior typical to the feminine gender and eventually clothes her in what might be considered more passive feminine attire—as in the Bible, she dons her widow weeds, except on feast days— Judith is not portrayed as retiring into domestic passivity at the end of her narrative.³⁴³ Here she goes beyond the role of heroine and female hero, because her performance is still mobile and assertive. Not only does she pray and do penance, she actively takes care of the poor and governs her household until she dies:

þer *wiþ* pore folke sho fed *and* fand
and beldyd both to bake *and* bede . . .

hyr *seruandes*, man, maydyn, *and* knaue,
mad sho to goueren gud degre.

þen dyed scho as god voched saue,
for fro þat fytt may no man flee.³⁴⁴ (17719-20, 17725-8; 1477.7-8; 1478.1-4)

In these lines Judith remains a powerful leader over the people. There is no mention of her relationship to the Hebrew elders or Ozi, thus leaving the impression that she governs her own world without the aid of men. While Judith's death might serve as an ending to the reversal of roles in the narrative, the paraphraser concludes with a statement that broadens the power given to Judith, suggesting that through God's power any woman can perform in this manner. What remains unsaid in the conclusion is the writer's portrayal of this power as stemming from "woman's wyt" and Judith's obvious nobility, in addition to her loyalty to God.

CHAPTER 6
PARTING WITH JUDITH

6.1 Re-telling Judith

A few basic notions from Bakhtin's language theory serve to explain how the alterations within Judith's representation occurred. Encompassed in each new utterance—in this case a retelling of her story—is the natural heteroglossia that exists in every culture as ideolanguages blend. Blending occurs not only among languages that are commonly recognized but have their own national ideologies, such as the vernaculars, or those used to confer religious ideologies, such as Latin, but also among those “languages” within language, having their own dialect and code-words, their hidden meanings and subtle nuances spoken and regulated by groups from different social strata, occupations, genders,³⁴⁵ ages, *ad infinitum*. The presence of these languages within the writer's experience brings about her/his own break with the authoritative discourse that is expected to be passed down from father to son throughout the generations and creates internally persuasive discourse, which causes the writer to produce new renditions of old topics in her/his own voice. The MEMPOT-poet's voice produces a text very different from known source texts, even when certain passages seem to approximate details. This late medieval narrative of Judith contains a blend of courtly and religious language, imagery and characterization, as well as elements from the literary carnivalesque, that give readers a new portrait of her character as independent, intelligent and mobile, yet still embedded within the social hierarchies of the late Middle Ages—hierarchies that are surprisingly depicted as privileging estate over gender.

Indeed, MEMPOT's depiction of Judith's gender performance is striking in its fluidity, and even more remarkable as it expands her portrayal to implicate women's character and performance in general. In contrast, Judith's identity as noblewoman appears fixed, unalterable,

a definitive aspect of her character as the writer imagines it. Originally, I had supposed that writing Judith as “dame” was a part of the MEMPOT-poet’s internally persuasive *discourse*; however, it seems that the notion of Judith as a woman of high estate is embedded in the medieval discourse of Judith to the degree that it became authoritative and continued to be so for many subsequent writers. Textual evidence of Judith as aristocrat can be found one hundred years later in a French mystery play, *Le Mystère de Judith et Holofernés* (from the cycle *Mistère du Viel Testament*), that also assigns Judith the status of a courtly lady (and expands Holofernes’ role to a courtly lover).³⁴⁶ Unfortunately, while the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were rife with Judith plays throughout Europe,³⁴⁷ no documentation or scripts have been found in English, making it difficult to consider MEMPOT’s role in passing on the authoritative opinion of Judith’s high estate or the more unique image—one that seems to be formed from the poet’s own internally persuasive discourse—of how Judith performs gender within her assigned estate.

I have argued that the poet’s attitudes toward women were influenced by the genre of romance and its portrayal of women characters. However, there may be other ideolanguages that also affect the depiction of biblical women in this text. One of these is the language of women themselves. Carolyn Walker Bynum offers evidence that women writers tended to consider faith in terms of “human” responses rather than posing a sharp distinction between male and female. Additionally, she claims that “a sharply defined sense of the male as superior was unimportant in women’s writings and visions” in the later Middle Ages (“And Woman” 272). Instead of concentrating on attaining masculine virtue, women theological writers re-appropriated male accusations of the weak, feminine flesh, and “thus women reach God not by reversing what they were but by sinking more fully into it” (“And Woman” 274). In MEMPOT Judith sinks fully into woman as portrayed by courtly literature—she embodies the idea of feminine cunning as well as sartorial flesh, and yet these are not characteristics to be warned against, but tools to be used in service of God. Clearly these aspects of the feminine are not identical to Bynum’s findings in her examination of theological writings; however, there may be

other associations. The elements of suffering and food, aspects that Bynum finds “were women’s most characteristic ways of attaining God” (“And Woman” 275),³⁴⁸ are aspects of Judith’s experience that the poet expands— defining her holiness through her abstention from “unclean” food, wine, and sleep (aspects of Judith’s piety not found in the French mystery play).³⁴⁹ Perhaps the text’s avoidance of contrasting male and female abilities and Judith’s association with female motifs argue for the poet being a woman. This is a speculative argument, however, not a provable one.

Even if the poet was a man, his depiction of Judith may have been affected by the language of women in ways that do not appear in *Comestor* or other related sources. The Old French paraphrase, which may have shared the same source text as *MEMPOT*, has a strongly misogynistic view of women (Judith’s narrative is not included), while the fifteenth-century French play (conceivably a possible descendant of the earlier French Old Testament paraphrases) idealizes Judith and separates her from the audience:

Holofernes’ ruin is entirely due to a woman.

Judith is thus an inspiration for all women.

But there are few who show such a high pedigree.

Most prefer to hide their light under a bushel. (2457-60)³⁵⁰

While Judith’s maid (“Abra” in this play) holds Judith up as inspirational, she claims it is unlikely that the women in the audience will choose to perform in like manner, and the possibility that men might find Judith exemplary is not even broached. Throughout the play Judith’s gender is highlighted, and her brave actions are credited to her unusually virtuous and noble character. Yet despite the idealizing nature of the characters’ comments regarding Judith—their praises often resemble the adoration more commonly directed toward Mary—the Hebrew leader still treats her in a patronizing manner:

Manasses Highly esteemed lady,

Your advice is most valuable.

Ozias I advise you now, please go back

To your house and rest yourself,

Lady Judith. (946-50)³⁵¹

In the play's rendition of Judith, the voices of men are set in juxtaposition to Judith's voice, frequently blocking her mobility and independence. Judith's strategy is to play along with Holofernes' and his men, as she and her maid are subjected to their stares and provocative comments; she is even forced to allow a kiss from Holofernes before beheading him. Irrespective of the many ways in which the male characters inhibit Judith's performance (while simultaneously exalting her), the playwright appears anxious about the portrayal of a powerful woman. In the end he reminds the audience of Judith's typological significance:

We beg you, most respectful audience,

Listening here with devoted attention,

Look kindly on our play, for it prefigures

The story of Jesus and his passion. (2467-70)³⁵²

Here, Judith's literal example is not the point, as it is in MEMPOT. The human element is erased as Judith's image is largely derived from the point of view of the misogynistic and vulgar Assyrians and the idealizing and patronizing Hebrews, and then finally subsumed under the category of *type*.

Judith's representation in *Le Mystère de Judith et Holofernés* resonates with most of the past significations of her image. She is overtly a loaded signifier—described as a *femme fatale* and an adored saint; a courtly damsel, as well as a type of Christ. A plausible explanation for why there is such a variance in the way that Judith is portrayed in texts and pictorial renderings can be discovered in the manner in which Judith's narrative works as *ideo-story*, a genre delineated by Mieke Bal:

An *ideo-story* is a narrative whose structure lends itself to be the receptacle of different ideologies. Its representational makeup promotes concreteness and

visualization. Its characters are strongly opposed so that dichotomies can be established. And its fibula is open enough to allow for any ideological position to be projected onto it. Ideo-stories, then, are not closed but extremely open; however, they seem to be closed, and this appearance of closure encourages the illusion of stability of meaning. (*Death* 11)³⁵³

Judith's story, and thus her character, appears to hold the everlasting truths of biblical authoritative discourse, but in actuality her figure is porous, absorbing the ideologies of both writers and audience. Perhaps to some extent the old meanings seep out of her image as new significances permeate the rewritten character, but for the most part they remain and become mixed with new understandings (as Bakhtin argues for the *utterance*), forming a part of the audience's interpretation—at least until no trace of the old significations are legible to new audiences.³⁵⁴

6.2 Succeeding Judith

A question for future study is whether the ideologies that the MEMPOT-poet deposits in Judith and other biblical women can be found within subsequent English texts. Probable sites for finding depictions of women that resemble MEMPOT's representations are the York Corpus Christi plays, at least two of which use material from this text. In the *Parchemyners and Bokebynders Abraham and Isaac* play several lines are quoted directly from MEMPOT, and other passages seem to come from the "dramatist's arbitrary recollection of the words of the *Paraphrase*" (Beadle "Origins" 182).³⁵⁵ Abraham's monologue, which describes the story of Isaac's birth, contains obvious echoes of MEMPOT's account:

But Sara was vncertan thane
That euere oure seede shulde sagates zelde,
Because hirselfe sho was barrane,
And we wer bothe gone in grete eelde.
But scho wroght as a wyse woman:

To haue a barne vs for to beelde,
Hir seruand prevely sho wan
Vnto my bede, my wille to welde. (*Abraham* 29-36)

The changes that have occurred in the play appear to result from point of view. Abraham, speaking in first person, claims that it was Sara who found it hard to believe they would have many descendants, while according to the narrator in MEMPOT “Abraham was all merveld then / that ever hys sede suld sogattes yelde” (43.1-2).³⁵⁶ The rest of the story is very close to its successor:

Bycause that his wife was baran,
And thei wer both in grett eld.
The wyf wroyght ose a gud woman
To geyt a barne to be ther beld;
Hyr servant prevely scho wan
Tyl Abraham at hys wyll to weld. (43.3-8)

There is a slight difference here in the way that Sara is described. In both, her performance is emphasized—in MEMPOT “she works as a good woman” (line 5), whereas in the play she “works as a wise woman” (line 33). The altered adjective may be from an imperfect memory, as Beadle suggests, because it is the same as that used in the next stanza of MEMPOT for Sarai’s actions toward Agar: “bot ever scho wrogh os woman wyse” (44.6). Perhaps further study of the York plays will yield even more evidence of borrowing from MEMPOT’s portrayal of women, either directly through exact language or indirectly by depictions that reveal the same ideology.

6.3 Embodying Judith

The notion of faith as a verbal, mobile and independent performance is one that the poet believed could be embodied by medieval women and men (rather than by theatrical performance), but it is difficult to imagine how readers would have responded to the ideology modeled within MEMPOT. That the poet’s ideology was not an isolated belief is evident in the

account we have of the travels, speech, and independence of a fifteenth-century woman, Margery Kempe. Although there is no evidence that Margery ever read MEMPOT, her behavior indicates an attempt at embodying the religious texts that she has heard or read. The *Book of Margery Kempe* recounts a woman's response to enacting her faith in opposition to social customs that would have discouraged her mobility and independent choices.³⁵⁷ I suspect that Margery's embodiment of her reading is highly individualized, and also suppose that MEMPOT's individual readers would have found creative ways to embody the fluidity of gender found in the poet's renditions of biblical women. Modern gender theory seems to support my supposition. Judith Butler defines the performance of gender as "a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint" (*Undoing* 1). While social structures of the Middle Ages provided many constraints for gender performance—both female and male—Margery's account demonstrates that improvisation was possible.

At the present the only clues available for finding MEMPOT's readers are contained within the two extant texts: the L and the S, as described in the introduction. In L, marginal glosses indicate a reader concerned about "where the Paraphrase disagrees with Holy Writ" as well as "where it disagrees with Comestor" (Livingston "Introduction" 47), indicating a reader who is perhaps more interested in the text's connection with past texts than with its interpretations for living in the present. The Longleat manuscript demonstrates more connections to an aristocratic household than to a clerical readership, however. The manuscript is elaborately detailed and contains decorative heraldic symbols throughout. Additionally, the texts that accompany MEMPOT are related to the court in either practical or fictional ways—containing Lydgate's *Siege of Thebes*, Chaucer's *Arcite and Palamon* and *Griselde*, a prose *Ipomedon*, as well as miscellaneous verse and instructions for those who serve in aristocratic households. The most telling indication of the text's connection to courtly circles, however, is the signature of Richard of Gloucester, who would later be crowned Richard III. In contrast to the impressive L manuscript, the S is plain and includes more religious material. Along with

MEMPOT, the manuscript contains excerpts from the *Northern Homily Cycle*, and three monk stories in verse, as well as “a fifteenth-century love poem” (Peck 109). Kalén has posited, based on language differences in the two extant texts, that at least 5 manuscripts of MEMPOT once existed (xxxiv). The two very different contexts of the manuscripts, as well as the earlier existence of other copies, suggests that the paraphrase may have appealed to a diverse audience, allowing for the possibility of very different improvisations or embodiments in response to the text’s representation of women.

6.4 Concluding Judith

In many ways the attitudes of the MEMPOT-poet discussed in this study confirms the work of other medievalists. Judith’s character displays the exteriority of self in ways that seem to support Susan Crane’s argument that secular rituals, gestures and clothing interacted with Christian belief to create a person’s performance. The description Crane gives of the external nature of the legendary Griselde’s identity seems to fit MEMPOT’s Judith as well: “Her exemplarity and her historicity intersect at just this point. She is a function of fable and exemplum, but also of a secular culture that values the visible, palpable creation of identity in rhetorical and material performance” (37).³⁵⁸ It appears that the body-clothing connection identified by Burns and other critics within lyrics and romance, and so prevalent within MEMPOT, is connected to the exteriority of secular medieval identity. This is not to say, however, that external behavior was not influenced by interior thoughts, feelings or faith, nor that external identity was not internalized. Medieval texts often indicate an indivisibility of outside and inside, much like Grosz’s image of a mobius strip, which “has the advantage of showing the inflection of mind into body and body into mind, the ways in which, through a kind of twisting or inversion, one side becomes another” (*Volatile* xii). In similar fashion the MEMPOT-poet presents Judith as a “sartorial body,” who performs and is what she wears. Presumably this image was familiar to medieval readers of courtly romance and to others who believed that a person’s clothing should be appropriate to their estate.

Clothing signifies the defining aspect of culture in this text. In presenting Judith in all her sartorial finery without distinguishing gender details, the poet indicates that Judith's clothed body is aristocratic, thus suggesting that the important classification within this tale is that of social estate, not of gender. While the poet often mentions men and women specifically, sometimes ascribing to them gendered roles, they are in many ways equals. Remarkably, the poet's vision of equality between women and men does not hold for only the nobility—Judith's treatment of those under her also indicates equality between the sexes. The poet poses a just society for women and men and at the same time attempts to hold up hierarchies of social position. In the poet's attempts to present Judith as a noble leader practicing *largesse* by distributing the booty gained from pillaging the Assyrians, there is a Utopian vision of community where everyone has enough and lives together in harmony. The writer also displays this attitude in other biblical accounts, as in the treatment of Sarai and Agar's reconciliation—finally they all live in concord, celebrating Isaac as heir. In the poet's ideology, the aristocracy will provide sufficiently for their servants and the servants will be content. MEMPOT's poet is as blind to the injustice of estate hierarchies as he or she is observant of the equal capabilities of women and men.

That a medieval poet should embrace the accepted social structure is not surprising, but it is significant when considering the character of Judith because her ability to move, think and speak relies on her role as aristocrat. This reliance on the image of nobility to explain Judith's performance is made more obvious through the characterization of Judith, which resembles that of ladies portrayed in courtly romance. However, at times her depiction defies the typical categories delineated by Fries, taking on associations with the literary carnivalesque. Normal gender hierarchies are overturned: a woman becomes the all-powerful "king" who decrowns Holofernes. Nonetheless, the carnival nature of Judith's deeds does not threaten the hierarchy of estate, even though it upsets masculine power. Estate seems tantamount to the writer, but perhaps its emphasis would not have appeared crucial to readers who desired to

embody Judith's active faith. Indeed, they may have found it simpler to improvise gender following a presentation that allowed for the constraints of social position.³⁵⁹

MEMPOT's tale of Judith distinguishes itself from many exemplary stories of holy women through the poet's claim that it is men who can learn from her example. Yet Judith's exemplarity is not exclusive to men, an idea that the poet makes clear from the claim that "God wyll pupplysch His power / In wemen forto fall als fytt / als in men on the same manere" (MEMPOT 1479.2-4). Instead of offering a gendered example, MEMPOT provides a model for all readers—one whose conduct cannot be labeled primarily male or female. Her bi-gendered behavior serves to create what some might consider a utopian woman, who can slide from one type of gendered performance into the opposite category. Because Judith was used regularly in other contexts as a model (or anti-model) for women's behavior, it seems that medieval women readers, especially, would have found within MEMPOT's Judith a welcome diversion from the commonly rigid, patristic symbol and encountered a fluid, speaking and breathing (in Irigaray's sense where breathing and speaking are linked)³⁶⁰ example that could serve as a more liberating image for their spiritual journeys. Clearly the figure of Judith in MEMPOT appears unusually powerful in the light of other early renditions of her character; and yet her dedication to a patriarchal God demonstrates that the poet does not provide a wholly feminine image, which Irigaray posits as necessary for the "becoming" involved in women's spirituality:

Our theological tradition presents some difficulty as far as God in the feminine gender is concerned. There is no woman God, no female trinity: mother, daughter, spirit. This paralyzes the infinite of becoming a woman since she is fixed in the role of mother through whom the son of God is made flesh. (Sexes 62)

Despite her powerful performance, Judith's embeddedness in the religion of the fathers, as well as the fixed nature of her social status, creates a tension for many modern readers. On the other hand, Judith is not placed within a male genealogy as she is in the biblical versions of her

tale. Instead she might be considered as the head of a new genealogy. Both the Hebrews who remember her “ever more” and the readers who are expected to emulate her become her spiritual children. Perhaps women today owe some debt to medieval writers who imagined new possibilities for women—particularly the MEMPOT-poet, who had enough vision in spite of cultural constraints to conceive of a matriarch who could move and speak freely in formerly gendered spaces, perform hard labor to dig a well, and use woman’s “wit” to save her people, in addition to carrying out the legendary task of decapitating a powerful general.

NOTES

¹ Frank Farmer explains Bakhtin's view of paraphrase:

retelling in one's own words,' the depleted sense of which we call 'paraphrase' but which Bakhtin understands as creative revoicing, is representative of what he refers to as 'internally persuasive' discourse—that is, discourse that ranges freely among other discourses, that may be imaginatively recontextualized, and that is capable of engaging other discourses in dialogue" (xix).

² The term "heteroglossia" is used by Bakhtin to explain the input of many "languages" (in the sense of dialects and cognitive understandings of vocabulary, syntax, etc.) into every utterance. "The authentic environment of an utterance, the environment in which it lives and takes shape, is dialogized heteroglossia, anonymous and social as language, but simultaneously concrete, filled with specific content and accented as an individual utterance" (*Dialogic* 272). An utterance can be oral or textual.

³ Livingston believes that Squires' claim does not emphasize the obscurity of the text: "Given that a complete bibliography of essays to date that take the *Paraphrase* [MEMPOT] as their primary subject might run to as few as three items, her opinion would seem to border on understatement" ("Middle" 1). Squires essay on Judith in MEMPOT is one of the three to which Livingston refers. The other two are by Ohlander and Beadle—see Works Cited.

⁴ See the introduction to the first volume of the Kalén-Ohlander edition for a description of both manuscripts and Jordi Sánchez-Martí for a detailed description of Longleat House MS 257 ("Longleat").

⁵ I will be using the Kalén-Ohlander translation for citations from the text, unless otherwise noted, and Livingston's notes on the material. Because Livingston's work is still at press the final page numbers may vary slightly from my citations.

Russell A. Peck has also edited two women's stories from MEMPOT using the Selden Manuscript—the account of Jephthah's daughter and Judith's narrative.

⁶ "Creative revoicings" refers to Frank Farmer—see footnote (fn) 1.

I am taking a different stance on MEMPOT's connection to the French paraphrase than Michael Livingston who assumes that many of MEMPOT's unique renderings must come from an earlier French source than the one it has been compared to by Kalén and Ohlander:

In the course of producing this edition I have made a number of additional comparisons between the *Paraphrase* and the Egerton paraphrase, cited in the notes as *OFP*, yet I cannot improve upon Ohlander's general conclusion. The poems are, at times, close enough to suspect the *Paraphrase*-poet is producing an almost line-by-line rendering of the Old French, yet the number of non-parallels — especially where the Middle English stands alone against all known sources — indicates a greater distance between the two poems. That an Old French source very much like the paraphrase found in the Egerton manuscript has been used by the poet is a near certainty, but beyond this conclusion we cannot now go. (*Middle* 14-5)

Livingston's conclusion is based on the assumption that the paraphraser would necessarily be translating a text without adding new motifs. As demonstrated by the example of *Ipomedon* (see footnote 25), it is not unusual for a writer to change a French source text for English audiences. Based on available evidence I have argued for the English poet's new additions to the text, but if other evidence is found, in the future I may have to reconsider my analysis.

⁷ See discussion on pages 2 and 3 of the Introduction to Livingston's edition of MEMPOT.

⁸ There are two ways of citing MEMPOT, by line or by stanza and line. I will be noting both because reference to stanza and line gives a closer sense of the construction of the verse and this is what Kalén and Ohlander use, while Livingston's footnotes refer to the total lines. I will note the line(s) within the whole body of the work first and then the stanza and line(s).

⁹ "*De spiritalis historiae gestis* includes five books based on Genesis and Exodus, concerning the Creation, the Temptation, the Fall, the Flood, and the Crossing of the Red Sea" (Lapidge 17).

¹⁰ Comestor's *Historia Scholastica* was also important material for study in medieval schools: "An Oxford University statute of 1253 allowed no one to complete theological study 'nisi legerit aliquem librum de canone Biblie vel librum Sententiarum vel Historiarum vel predicaverit publice universitati'" (Morey "Peter" 6-7). [No one may preach at the University publicly without having read some of the canonical books of the Bible or the Book of Sentences or the Historia.]

¹¹ Livingston expounds upon the manner in which allegory and literal readings occurred in MEMPOT:

There is an interesting interplay between the allegorical and literal within this textual philosophy, as exemplified in MEMPOT's introduction of Christ into the prophecy of Balam. In this example "the allegorical, then, has become the literal, introducing a surprisingly rare mention of Christ in what is undoubtedly a Christian text. In fact, its seemingly anachronistic incursion into the story of Balaam is one of only seven direct references to "Jesus" or "Christ" in this 18,372-line poem. (Livingston "Middle" 46)

This infrequency is remarkable when compared with texts such as the *Mirour of Man's Saluacion*, which only uses the Old Testament as a way of commenting on Christian doctrine and the lives of Mary and Jesus.

¹² The term "image" has multiple definitions, but in this study I have attempted to use the term in relation to a constructed conception—at times a cultural imagining, at others a more individualized mental perception or artistic rendering based on ideals or principles.

¹³ Ohlander's discussion regarding Samson and Delilah is revealing:

The OFr. Poet denounces woman's cunning most energetically, one might almost say with great personal engagement. He addresses to Samson an earnest entreaty not to let himself be deceived, he holds up Adam and Joseph as warning examples. Then he exclaims:

Pur nent, seignurs, pur nent les chastiu,

L'engin de femme l'ad pris en mal laçun. (Fol. 33d).

Hist. Schol., Jud. Ch XIX, follows the biblical narrative, but adds a devastating condemnation of women: *omnis enim mulier fere naturaliter avara, et levis, unde addam: Quid levius flumine? Flamen. Quid flamine? Fama Quid fama? Mulier. Quid muliere? Nihil.* ("Old French" 213)

The following are translations of the Old French and Latin respectively:

[For naught, sirs, for naught they warned him,

The wiles of the woman had caught him in an evil pit.] (Egerton 2710

Fol. 33d) Translation by Jada Pothina.

[Indeed nearly all women are by nature avaricious and fickle, whence Adam: What is lighter than a river? A gust of wind. What lighter than wind? Rumor. What lighter than a rumor? Woman. What lighter than woman? Nothing.] (Comestor)

Note: I am deeply indebted to Kevin Gustafson for help with the Latin translations throughout the dissertation. I have also received suggestions from Rebecca Stephenson and Paul Taylor on some of the passages. Any remaining errors are my own.

¹⁴ Helen Solterer discusses the problem of women and the symbolic in medieval texts:

Women are commonly typed as literalists—unable to pass beyond the letter of a text. From the scores of inscribed female readers in romance to Dante’s Francesca, they are presented as reading poorly, prone to misunderstanding. And their poor reading record has everything to do with their inability to gain access to the symbolic . . . Like one of Andreas Capellanus’s personae in the *De amore*, women are represented as confused by any level of signification other than the literal. They appear beholden to their masterly interlocutors to make the symbolic comprehensible. Yet even with such instruction, it is unclear whether they are ever fully initiated into the symbolic mode (*verba reposita*). (4)

¹⁵ Examples related to courtly romance characters will be discussed in Chapter Five.

¹⁶ See the chart created by Helen Efthimiadis-Keith on the opinions of various scholars (99-100).

¹⁷ Amy Jill Levine explores the ambiguity present in Judith: “Although her name, widowhood, chastity, beauty and righteousness suggest the traditional representation of Israel, the text’s association of these traits with an independent woman and with sexuality subverts the metaphoric connection between character and androcentrically determined community” (17). Levine points out that her name means “Jewess,” which creates her identification with the community of Jews.

An even stronger critique of the biblical Judith’s double-sided power comes from Pamela Milne: “On the one hand, the very fact that she is atypically active for a female biblical character leads some to see her as a feminist’s kind of person. On the other hand, however, her

very action is rooted in the dynamics of men's fear of women's sexuality and in the gender hierarchy that adds insult to the Assyrian injury" (55).

¹⁸ *Masculine Domination* is the title of Pierre Bourdieu's work, which contends that "we have embodied the historical structures of the masculine order in the form of unconscious schemes of perception and appreciation" (5).

¹⁹ See James H. Morey *Book and Verse* (11) and Margaret Deanesly (146).

²⁰ Bakhtin claims that in Dostoevsky's work characters speak for themselves: "Dostoevsky's voice is simply drowned out by all those other voices. Characters are polemicized with, learned from; attempts are made to develop their views into finished systems. The character is treated as ideologically authoritative and independent; he is perceived as the author of a fully weighted ideological conception of his own, and not as the object of Dostoevsky's finalizing artistic vision" (*Problems* 5).

Recent scholars have noted problems within Bakhtin's assumption that other voices are really speaking when directed by an authorial voice. On the other hand there are many voices speaking within any utterance because of the layers inherent in language. It is in this recognition that I find Bakhtin useful for my analysis—even more useful than Derrida. Robert S. Sturges explains the difference between the two theories:

Thus for Bakhtin, in a theoretical insight that in some ways anticipates Derrida's concept of *différance*, any speech act is already a tissue of quotations. . . . But Bakhtin's dialogic principle leads not into the Derridean textual vortex of endless supplementarity but rather, through its stress on human interaction, out once more to the marketplace, where the common people swear, and lie, and spit. . . . Heteroglossia thus is an openness; it opens literary form to the carnival of the world and perhaps textualism itself to the world outside the text. (32-3)

²¹ Copeland's footnotes cite *De Doctrina Christiana*, ed. William M. Green, CSEL 80, Vienna: Hoelder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1963; and *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr., Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958.

²² I am not claiming a woman writer for MEMPOT, but because of the text's unusual depiction of biblical women, I believe it is important to remain open to the possibility. I will discuss this possibility further in the conclusion.

²³ For further discussion of Ong, see page 30.

²⁴ In the introduction to the first volume of the 1923 edition of MEMPOT, Kalén includes some comparison between the two works, and Ohlander adds further comparisons in his article.

²⁵ For further references to *Ipomedon* see pages 35, 38, 123, 144, 197.

²⁶ Chapter Two briefly explains Pearsall's view on readership of medieval romance.

²⁷ The Latin version of the Bible I have used throughout this study is the *Biblia Sacra Vulgata*. The Douay Rheims is used throughout for translations of the Latin Bible and for all English quotations unless otherwise noted.

²⁸ Some scholars still disagree, however. Toni Craven explains her basis for holding an opposing view:

I am no longer convinced that we should assume a Hebrew original on the basis of Hebraisms in the Greek text and Jerome's dubious claims. Though the Greek canonical text is structured on Hebrew compositional patterns, it seems equally plausible that the Greek text could have been written from the outset in elegant hebraicised Greek. The author could have been familiar with both the language and the style of 'ancient' story-telling. There is, of course, no way to prove these claims, just as there is no way to prove the originality of the non-existent Hebrew and Aramaic texts. (5)

²⁹ Texts that were once thought to be proof of ancient Hebrew rendering are generally considered to be translations of the Vulgate. There are also midrashic versions of Judith in Hebrew that date in writing from the Middle Ages. These texts show evidence of alternative tellings of Judith's narrative stemming from oral legend. See Moore's introduction to the *Anchor Bible's* Judith, pages 103-7.

³⁰ Pages 70-1 contain more discussion on the notion of *puer/puella senex*.

³¹ It is important to keep in mind that the label "romance" encompasses a variety of topics and treatments in Middle English. As John Finlayson explains, "The *romance* is conceived of as a genre and at the same time a particular treatment of that genre. Yet anyone reasonably familiar with Middle English fictitious narratives will be aware that the only thing which many of them have in common is the fact that the *personae* are aristocratic" (45).

³² Consider the knights riding to the tournament in the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* "With sheldis brode and helmys shene" (line 51) and the colorfully pictured battles in Robert Thorton's *Alliterative Morte Arthure*:

Buskes in batayle with baners displayede,
With brode ssheldes enbrassed, and burlyche helmys,
With penours and penselles of ylke prynce armes,
Appayrelde with perrye and precious stones;
The lawnces with loraynes, and lemand scheldes,
Lyghtenande as *the* leuenynge and lemand all ouer. (2458-2463)

All references to *Alliterative Morte Arthure* come from Brock's edition—*Morte Arthure*.

³³ All references to Chaucer's works, as well as the translation of *Romance of the Rose* attributed to him are from *The Riverside Chaucer*.

³⁴ I am not using C. S. Lewis's definition of courtly love here, but David Burnley's:

Love among courtly people, that is courtly love, was conditioned by complex factors. Fundamentally, it depended upon the supposition that a particular class of people were defined and united by certain characteristics of their inherent nature, and in particular by their possession of an exalted moral and physical constitution. This nobility pervaded their senses, feelings, and intellectual capacities and influenced their ability to feel compassion, charity, and love. The noble heart was the essence of this constitution, and by its nature was drawn to what was perceived as good . . . The intensity of feeling, the unswerving loyalty, the conception of equality—sometimes exaggerated to become the subjection of the suitor—were all represented. The refined lover was kept on the rack by inventing means by which the consummation of his desires could be delayed and the lady kept unattainable. (173-4)

While Burnley's definition does not take into consideration that the lover might be a woman whose desires were delayed, my discussion will demonstrate that women were also portrayed with feelings of love longing.

³⁵ In elaborating upon Mycoll's feelings for David and how she worried when he is in danger (which according to the Bible would have been much of the time), the text provides a feminine perspective on the biblical passage.

³⁶ The text speaks of David's love for Mycoll as well. (7527-30; 628.3-6).

³⁷ From the C text in Joseph Hall's edition.

³⁸ See pages 113-5 for a detailed discussion of Grosz's concept of the "organic body" and how Burns' applies the concept to medieval texts.

³⁹ For a brief discussion of the "devil's gateway" turn to page 47.

⁴⁰ *Cursor Mundi*, *Pety Job*, Comestor's *Historia Scholastica*, as well as an Old French Paraphrase have each been connected to the poet's work –See the introduction to editions by

Livingston, Kalén and Ohlander, as well as Ohlander's article. Michael Livingston also suggests that the order of MEMPOT's biblical books reflects Cassiodorus' *Novem Codices* rather than the Latin Vulgate:

[T]he possibility that the Paraphrase-poet had access to Cassiodorus' *Novem Codices* seems increasingly intriguing. We might even speculate that the poet has at hand only three surviving volumes of the nine-volume work, and the last of those in somewhat fragmented form. . .the Paraphrase-poet was at work in the north of England, where centuries earlier these many strands of Cassiodorus' work had moved in and among the monasteries. ("Middle" 37)

⁴¹ It is not surprising that the paraphraser builds on Comestor's textual authority because after the approval of the Fourth Lateral Council in 1215, his paraphrase was translated into many vernacular versions and shaped most medieval readers' knowledge of the Bible (Livingston 41-2 and Morey "Peter Comestor" 6).

⁴² Particularly applicable to this study is Diane Speed's remark regarding the sharing of motifs and language between romance and exemplum: "There was evidently a two-way traffic between romance and exemplum: not only is basically exemplum material found in romance (for example the apparition story in *The Awntyrs*), but basically romance material is found in exemplum (for example *Guy*)" (55). The phenomenon of finding similar material and techniques in what some might consider separate genres is not unique to the Middle Ages. Hans Jauss posits that genres are not stable: they are continually being adapted and transformed. He suggests that we consider sociohistorical factors, comparing texts of a particular period and cultural milieu, rather than looking at defined models of genre.

⁴³ See lines 17737-40 (1479.1-4) in MEMPOT, which are discussed later in the chapter.

⁴⁴ For discussion of Judith's representation in art see Mira Friedman, Renate Peters, Frances Godwin, and Nira Stone. For discussion of Judith in narrative and art see Leslie Abend Callahan.

⁴⁵ Squires also mentions Judith as a type of Eve and Mary.

⁴⁶ Margarita Stocker claims that Judith as a godly *femme fatale* is a unique image in western myth: "Western culture has happily produced legions of sly seductive mankillers, but Judith, as good-bad woman beloved of God, occupies no such familiar cultural space" (15). According to Mira Friedman the "good" half of Judith's image begins to wane in fifteenth century artistic representations and continues to decline in the sixteenth. She posits that

The sudden transformation of the figure of a heroine, the personification of Humility and Chastity, into a figure of a sinner, may perhaps originate in one of the models of the figure of Judith holding the head of Holofernes: that of a frenzied maenad holding the head of Orpheus. . . This pagan image probably contributed to the Christian iconographic formula for the figure of Judith. The negative pagan meaning influenced the image of Judith only in the late Renaissance when the figure became mainly non-narrative. (245-60)

Friedman also points out that in contrast later Jewish representations continued to portray Judith as a heroine.

⁴⁷ Ann Middleton brought these distinctions to the attention of medieval scholars under the labels of audience (real) and public (implied). Yet she admits that the two categories cannot be considered as completely separate: "They are, rather, complementary and reciprocal processes. Both the audience and the public of the poem are capable of some objective specification, which in both cases requires interpretation" (101).

⁴⁸ This method has proven particularly effective in the study of medieval drama, where plays are often re-enacted in settings that resemble the medieval stage.

⁴⁹For example, C. Gris  considers the “ideal female religious reader” as the reader who receives the text addressed to women religious and then embodies it. This category is created through direct address and serves to establish a hierarchical relationship between reader—referred to as daughter or sister—and writer (spiritual father, brother).

⁵⁰ Recent criticism has focused less on binaries and more on complex relationships within these categories.

⁵¹ The specific lessons and delights to be experienced while reading a text were usually described in the writers introductory comments, which often explained the writer’s purpose in presenting the material as well. For example, see the Prologue to Marie de Frances’s *lais*.

⁵² I am using the term “ideal” (unless specified otherwise) not in Rabinowski’s sense of those to whom the story is directed in tension with the narrative audience’s belief, which creates an ironic tone, but in the sense of the utopian expectations of the writer.

⁵³ Jordi S nchez-Mart  identifies the *Cursor*-poet’s appeal as a “rhetorical trick with which to attract more adherents” and claims that his use of a story-telling style “acknowledges the success of romantic narratives in captivating wide audiences, and rather than criticizing it, tries to apply the same formula that has granted the Middle English romances their popularity” (“Reading” 14).

⁵⁴ While the *CM* poet gestures toward patriotism in the introduction, Thorlac Turville-Petre points out that contemporary history is left out: “There is the notable gap of the whole of the Christian era. In this way spiritual history avoids direct engagement with political history and contemporary events. The two operate in different spheres” (42).

⁵⁵ These lines also appear to identify the poet with Copeland’s work on the “Latin theoretical concept of *translatio studii et imperii* (the transferal of learning and empire), a concept that was of basic importance to medieval reflections on the relationship between present and past cultures, and on the means by which cultural value and authority was

transmitted from one period to another” (Evans, et al. 317). While Copeland suggests that this concept may not be applicable to works unconcerned with issues of prestige and competition with classical Latin, (Evans, et al 321-2; Copeland 221-9), the “transferal of learning and empire” appears to be the *Cursor*-poet’s ultimate goal based on his comments in the prologue. Moreover, in a general sense, the Fourth Lateran Council’s goal of transferring church doctrine to the unlearned clergy and laity appears to have something in common with the notion of cultural transference, in this case religious rather than national.

The MEMPOT-poet does not appear to be concerned with interests of the nation (which may be a sign of envisioning a different audience than the *Cursor Mundi*), but instead with a religious interest in passing on biblical stories in order to produce Christian behavior based on the poet’s own interpretations of sacred texts. Perhaps in appropriating ancient religious narratives for contemporary concerns the poet understands the project as a type of religious cultural transference, but as the paraphrase introduces new interpretations, past cultural understandings of the stories are altered. The similarities in details between the old narratives and new renditions, however, conceal the changes in significance that have occurred. (See my brief discussion of Mieke Bal’s notion of the “ideo-story,” pages 194-5 and footnote 354.)

⁵⁶ Thompson contrasts *CM*’s positive use of heroic stories to Nassyngton’s introduction to *Speculum Vitae* in the late fourteenth century: “Nassyngton is far more anxious than the *Cursor*-poet to dissociate his writing from the ‘vain speaking’ of a literary tradition where the heroes of love and chivalry are celebrated” (116-7).

⁵⁷ Several critics comment on the MEMPOT-poet’s story-telling abilities: Livingston, 41-2; also see Brunner, 478 and Ohlander “Old French Parallels,” 203.

⁵⁸ According to Livingston:

This is Horace’s *utile et dulce* (“both useful and pleasing”) principle at its clearest, a singular example of the didacticism that characterizes so much

medieval literature, an aesthetic of pedagogic efficacy that is inseparably linked to the essential component of true pleasure of the text. In a more doctrinal vein, we might call this the practice by which *ad litteram* makes the word flesh. (42)

⁵⁹ These life applications do not always reflect the central theme or involve the main hero of the work. In the last stanza of the book of Esther, the poet concludes that anyone who shames the innocent will suffer a bad end.

⁶⁰ Ohlander's comparison of the Old French paraphrase and MEMPOT provides a good deal of evidence in this regard.

⁶¹ Geoffrey Chaucer addresses this change of attitude directly in *The Legend of Good Women*, where he is rebuffed by the God of Love for translating stories that give a negative view of women. Here the main issue seems to be which stories are translated rather than how they are treated by the translator. It is a woman—the queen, Alceste—who desires that women who act devotedly rather than disloyally be treated in a new translation.

⁶² This text is found in the same Longleat manuscript (L: Longleat House, MS 257) as the incomplete version of MEMPOT.

⁶³ Sanchez-Marti warns against “imputing all changes to the anticipation of a different public, since there are diverse factors involved in the gestation of new texts. . .we must be able to recognize those changes that seem more likely to have been inspired by the expectation of an audience. Hence, as a close translation of the Anglo-Norman, the tail-rhyme version [Ipomedon A] represents an exceptional case. . .The variations here are inevitably intentional because the translator had a copy of the original for the purpose of reproducing it faithfully, adapting it to its new Yorkshire public” (“Reconstructing” 159).

⁶⁴ “Pro-feminine” is a term used by Alcuin Blamires, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Bella Millet asserts that the texts written/translated for women recluses were instrumental in the development of vernacular literature:

The lay anchoresses of the twelfth and thirteenth century seem to have been significant for the development of vernacular literature mainly because of their intermediate position between laici and clerici, illiterates and literati. . . In the texts produced for recluses in this period, we see not only the recording in writing of works originally intended for oral delivery, but the development of something still closer to our modern concept of 'literature', vernacular works composed with readers rather than hearers in mind. (99)

⁶⁵ Addressing men's engagement with her figure is somewhat unusual; for as we shall see in Chapter Three, in early England Judith was frequently used to address women for the purpose of inspiring them in their roles. Furthermore, we cannot assume that addressing "men" was customary in vernacular religious texts. Nassington's *Speculum Vitae* addresses "men and women" (line 19).

⁶⁶ Judith commands the Israelites to distribute the "mobylys . . . to man and wyfe" (1474.3-4). While the use of the term "wyfe" here defines the women involved as connected to their husbands, it seems unusual for them to be mentioned at all. Again, at the end of the narrative the narrator mentions both men and women servants that Judith governs rather than using a common noun that would include both genders (1478.1). The paraphraser often mentions men and women whenever they are both involved.

⁶⁷ The beginning lines and ending lines of the poem create a frame, explicitly stating that this narrative is provided as an example. Compare the third and fourth lines in the first stanza (16959-60; 1414.3-4) of the Judith account with the 9th and 10th lines of the last stanza (17745-6; 1479.9-10): "Now wyll we nevyn hyr story new, / for to sum men myght amend" and "Insampyll may men here se / to be trew in trowyng." The frame is structurally balanced in that

two lines introducing the narrative occur before 1414.3-4 and two lines closing the narrative occur after 1479.9-10.

⁶⁸ Christian writers in England had been providing examples from biblical and saints' lives for their leaders for centuries. Spiritual women were often used as models, as in the case of Ælfric's saints' lives: "The female lives also offer Ælfric a vehicle for an oblique comment on the behavior of his rulers as well as advice on the practices of chastity for his male patrons" (Lees *Tradition* 152).

⁶⁹ Sanok argues that most medieval readers read exempla as metaphorical, applying culturally appropriate lessons to the example given. See page 45.

⁷⁰ The MEMPOT-poet does not obviously engage in different sides of the debate regarding women—quite a contrast to Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* where Chaucer consciously addresses the topic from various angles. The exception, of course, is the poet's reference of "men" needing to "amend," which might in part refer to the idea of changing their minds regarding women.

⁷¹ Another item to note regarding these lines is the poet's presentation of an opposing viewpoint without explanation, thereby illustrating that the writer expects the interpretative and biased nature of reading to be understood by the contemporary audience.

⁷² Admittedly women were not treated the same as men in most cases and still had to posture themselves differently when writing. Yet at least some women applied this new attitude to their lives and religious experience.

⁷³ New Testament comparisons are between Adam and Christ: "And as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:22). "But death reigned from Adam unto Moses, even over them also who have not sinned after the similitude of the transgression of Adam, who is a figure of him who was to come" (Romans 5:14).

⁷⁴ Perhaps the adoration of Mary is nowhere more obvious than in the many lyrics dedicated to her. See the TEAMS edition, edited by Karen Saupe, which gathers 91 of these lyrics into one collection.

⁷⁵ Lees describes the process whereby the metaphoric use of women controls the threat of their inevitable sexuality:

By using Mary and Anna as types, their signification slides from an emphasis on women to one on men: from Mary to Christ; from Anna and widows to all the chaste. In this process, the female first signifies the feminine condition, but then the masculine and thus the universal. This process of metaphorization is one of translation, or 'translatio.' Gender is here subordinated to conventional patterns of exegesis, and, in this particular case, these patterns are explicitly structured around patterns of exchange. The only way these patterns can hold women in place is by an insistent reiteration of type, which steadies their exchange. Both Mary and Anna are characterized as iconic images of endurance and suffering—symbols that condense both charity and chastity in images that immediately recall the archetypal female saint. (*Tradition* 140)

⁷⁶ One form of this self-defining power was for women to claim an education that came straight from God rather than from an academic institution: "Lacking access to higher education, women could claim, like monks, to belong to the *schola Christi* where, in accord with Peter of Celle, they learned without the formal instruction available to men (*sine studio et lectione*)" (Green, D. H. 77).

⁷⁷ "On each level of a hagiographical work, the major theme is imitation Christi" (Gertz 111).

⁷⁸ Apparently, Geoffrey wrote his book in 1371-2, and it was not translated into English until the middle of the fifteenth century. William Caxton also translated the work a couple of decades later (1483-4).

⁷⁹ See the Fourth Book of Kings , chapter four.

⁸⁰ Similarly, Michael Livingston comments on the poet's description of Keturah in a footnote on lines 733-4: "*Scho was woman wysom to weld, / non heynder haldyn under Hevyn*. Keturah is little more than a name in the Bible (Genesis 25:1), but she is here given high praise for her beauty and goodness in proper romantic fashion" (*Middle* 554).

⁸¹ References to the *Cursor Mundi* give line numbers.

⁸² The Old French Paraphrase emphasizes nobility of birth rather than Rebecca's beauty:

When Abraham saw that Isaac was of age
to take a wife of great social rank
This was Rebecca, the daughter of Batuel
The son of Nachor . . . (English translation by Jada Pothina)
[*Quant Abraham ueit ysaac de age*
Femme prendrez de grant parage
Ce ert Rebecca la fille batue
Le filz nachor . . . (f52ra qutd in Beadle "Abraham")]

⁸³ The poet may have chosen to follow the lead of Old French paraphrases while not rendering their descriptions exactly. Egerton 2710 describes Ruth as beautiful and noble:

Ruth ert bele et vis et de corage
Mult sembla bien femme de perage
Pur ço lo mirent li ebreu et li sunt ami

[Ruth was beautiful in her face and in her heart.

She had the appearance of a woman of great rank.

For this reason the Jews looked at her and were her friends.]

(translation by Raúl Ariza-Barile)

⁸⁴ This is Michael Livingston's gloss for the phrase.

⁸⁵ In the Bible, Delilah is offered 1,100 pieces of silver from each of the leaders of the Philistines. Comestor comments that this is equal to 5,500. However, in MEMPOT the reward is changed to something either more acceptable or more common to readers—land and social recognition.

⁸⁶ Nevertheless, Samson is allowed to speak of her in misogynistic terms:

“what may bettur begyle

A lele man, lowd or styll,

þen weked woman wyle,

wher yt is turned vnto yll.” (3981-4; 332.9-12)

⁸⁷ In spite of the marginalization and hatred of Jews in medieval society, texts that treat Old Testament Hebrews hold them up as central examples of the Christian faith. Elisa Narin Van Court argues that textual representations of Jews are complex and reveal a “theological ambivalence” to Jewishness where Jews become a way to define the identity of Christians, serving to point out who they should and should not be, as well as how they should and should not perform (326).

⁸⁸ Eve is not depicted as a polar type, a cohort of Satan, as in the *Cursor Mundi* (723-30). Instead Satan sets out to deceive both Eve and Adam, and the three of them are blamed for their fall.

Bot then the fend, *our* fellyst foe. . .

He soyght vp sotelte

Them both forto gyle. . .
When thei this frutt had takyd,
qwerfor thei wer both blamyd. . .
To manys kynd com this thyng
Through falssyng of the fend. (169, 179-80, 201-2, 227-8; 15.1,11-2, 17.9-10,
19.11-2)

In MEMPOT's account of David, it is his own lack of self-control that gets him into trouble

Kyn[g] Daudid rewled hym all vnryst.
In awowtry fowle he fell
With vry wyf, þat [was] h/s knist. (8068-70; 673.4-6)

⁸⁹Susan L. Smith has argued that the use of biblical examples to prove the power women have over men was introduced by the church fathers and became a topos repeated incessantly. The use of these four biblical heroes to demonstrate women's corrupt influence was traditional in the Middle Ages, but it took a new turn. One of the most popular works in the High Middle Ages was Walter Map's *Dissuasio Valerii ad Rufinum de non ducat uxorem*. Valerius, in attempting to dissuade Rufinus from taking a wife, "begins with four Old Testament exempla—Eve (disobedience), Bathsheba (bad influence), Delilah (deceit), and Solomon's harem (apostasy)" (McLeod 50). However, Valerius' argument begins to transform the topos: he portrays more nuanced characters, speaks mainly of classical examples and allows that perhaps the reader—Rufinus—will not believe him. Smith posits that after the twelfth century new ways of interpreting the topos become more common (39-40). Still the old misogyny continued within many texts. *The Mirour of Man's Saluacion* employs the same four Old Testament men as a warning:

O man, be warre in this of wikked wommans glosing,
If thow passé wele þat paas holde it no little thing.

Adam, þat noble man, loke, and the stronge Sampsoune—

David, Gods hertes choise, loke, wisest Salomoune— (359-62)

One major difference in MEMPOT's repetition of the topos is its lack of personal warning directed specifically to men.

⁹⁰ This episode is discussed in Chapter Five, page.

⁹¹ In *CM* Bathsheba does not directly state that she is asking for a "boon"; however, the narrator adds that David "yatte hir freli al hir bone" (8414).

⁹² See Ohlander's article which compares the OF paraphrase with MEMPOT.

⁹³ While "meekness" was still used as one descriptor of the perfect woman in medieval texts, it seems that this virtue was not always associated with silence. In *The Legend of Good Women*, Chaucer describes Alceste, who is standing next to the god of Love in idealistic terms:

And by the hond he held the noble queen
Corouned with whit and clothed al in grene,
So womanly, so benygne, and so meke,
That in this world, thogh that men wolde seke,
Half hire beaute shulde men nat fynde
In creature that formed ys by kynde. (G 172-8)

This queen who is described as "meke" does not stand silently by and allow the king of Love to pass judgment on Chaucer. Instead she defends him eloquently. Alceste in her active virtue is an figure much like the biblical women portrayed in MEMPOT.

⁹⁴ The stories of Jephthah's daughter and Michal (daughter of King Saul) illustrate this point. Both women characters are portrayed as thinking and speaking for themselves. Michal chooses to resist her father in order to save David's life. Jephthah's daughter chooses to die, not because her father says he must fulfill his vow, but because she believes it is God's will:

“ffor bettur is þat I dye,
þat may no thyng a vayle,
þen so fayr cumpny
os ye broyzt from batelle.”

“Sen 3e heist *sacrafy*ce to make
to god þat gouerans gud *and* yll,
Leues it not, [fader], for my sake,
Bot all *your* forward fast fulfill.” (3549-56; 296.10-297.4)

Jepthah’s daughter even sets the time for her death by requesting a two week period of mourning with other ladies.

The attitude that Jephthah’s daughter displays appears to contain a devaluing of herself and her gender, and yet it is not treated as a gendered performance by the poet. Ysaac’s answer upon discovering Abraham’s intention to sacrifice him demonstrates a similar attitude:

Ysaac sayd *with* semland lyght,
“ffader, os god wyll, be houeyse yt to be.
what hest to hym that 3e hath heght
leffe yt nozt for luf of me.” (713-16; 60.5-8)

In both cases the obedience expected is of a child to a father. While the children’s behavior is intended to demonstrate a Christian attitude acceptable for both genders, the conclusion to each tale is different. A lamb is provided as a substitute for Ysaac, while Jephthah’s daughter is beheaded. The biblical story does not address the horror of this gendered conclusion, but the MEMPOT-poet finds it unacceptable:

Swylke folys suld men [be] fayn to flee
and be abayst or þei vow so.
Ff[o]yle [v]ow is bettur to broken be

pen man or woman sak[!]es slo. (3581-4; 299.5-8)

The last line illustrates the paraphraser's tendency to demand equitable treatment for men and women.

⁹⁵ Several scholars disagree with the idea that the Book of Judith is pro-feminist or that it even presents a positive view of "woman." Leonard Swidler posits that

The moral of the Book of Judith is not that women are good creatures of God, but rather that God is so great that he can bring good out of evil; not that women are to be valued greatly, but rather that God is so great that he can humble Israel's enemies even through the lowliest of instruments, women—and the weapon women use against men, beguiling beauty and sex . (114)

For further challenges to a positive feminine view of Judith in the Bible see Pamela J. Milne and Jill Levine.

⁹⁶ See footnote 102 below.

⁹⁷ Because the texts that Jerome claims to have translated are not extant to our knowledge, it is impossible to know for certain what Jerome changed. Some have posited that these texts are fictional and he merely gave his own version of the Greek text. Even if the texts existed and Jerome did not alter the text substantially, it is obvious that he chose this text because it was more in line with his view of how Judith's story should be presented.

⁹⁸ See Introduction for an explanation of the biblical texts which contain the Book of Judith.

⁹⁹ "*Quia fecisti viriliter et confortatum est cor tuum eo quod castitatem amaveris et post virum tuum alterum non scieris ideo et manus Domini confortavit te et ideo eris benedicta in aeternum*" (Judith 15.11).

¹⁰⁰ In the Latin version below, I have added slashes to separate verses for easier reading:

[cumque venisset ad portas civitatis invenerunt expectantem Oziam et presyteros civitatus / qui cum vidissent eam stupentes mirati sunt nimis pulchritudinem eius / nihil tamen interrogantes eam dimiserun transpire dicentes Deus partum nostrorum det tibi gratiam et omne consilium tui cordis sua virtute corroboret ut gloriatur super te Hierusalem et sit nomen tuum in numero sanctorum et iustorum / et dixerunt hii qui illic errant omnes una voce fiat fiat / Iudith vero orans Dominum transit portas ipsa et abra eius. Judith 10.6-10.]

¹⁰¹ Obviously, there is evidence of a patriarchal society through similar elements in both texts: Judith is introduced by her patriarchal genealogy, and she mentions the Jewish patriarchs as examples for her own faith and performance. However, the Septuagint portrays Judith as acting independently within this masculine milieu.

¹⁰² Below is the Latin version of Jerome's Preface:

PRAEFATIO HIERONYMI IN LIBRUM JUDITH.

[Col. 0037D] Apud Hebraeos liber Judith inter apocrypha legitur: [Col. 0038D] cujus auctoritas ad roboranda illa quae in [Col. 0039A] contentionem veniunt, minus idonea judicatur. Chaldaeo tamen sermone conscriptus, inter historias computatur. Sed quia hunc librum Synodus Nicaena in numero sanctarum Scripturarum legitur computasse, acquievi postulationi vestrae, immo exactioni: et sepositis occupationibus, quibus vehementer arctabar, huic unam lucubratiunculam dedi, magis sensum e sensu, quam ex verbo verbum transferens. Multorum codicum varietatem vitiosissimam [Col. 0040A] amputavi: sola ea, quae intelligentia integra in verbis Chaldaeis invenire potui, Latinis expressi. Accipite Judith viduam, castitatis exemplum, et triumphali laude, perpetuis eam praeconiis declarete. Hanc enim non solum feminis, sed

*et viris imitabilem dedit, qui castitatis ejus remunerator, virtutem ei talem tribuit,
ut invictum omnibus hominibus vinceret, et insuperabilem superaret.* (PL 29:37-
39)

¹⁰³ See section 30 on the Song of Songs, From Jerome's treatise *Against Jovinian*.

¹⁰⁴ Jerome recognizes various readings of Judith, including the typological, but in presenting the Book of Judith to readers he emphasizes the tropological or moral reading. See S. D. Lee's "Introduction" to Ælfric's *Homily on Judith* for a detailed discussion on Jerome's readings of Judith.

¹⁰⁵ In later medieval versions of the *Psychomachia* Judith is cast as *humilitas*—emphasizing her humility over Holofernes' pride.

¹⁰⁶ It is important to note, as does Stacy S. Klein, that "medieval figural interpretation except among the fiercest of spiritualists—did not work through discarding literal, historical reality, but by preserving the historicity of both the early event or figure and its deeper meaning" (Klein 54). Klein cites Auerbach, "Figura," 53, which also discusses this notion.

¹⁰⁷ Stocker points out that Judith as an allegory of the Christian soul was used by Anselm: "Judith's excessively mournful widowhood...was, according to St Anselm, a metaphor for the spiritual state of all true souls, widowed brides of the crucified Christ who will be reunited with their spouse only in heaven, and must mourn for him in the meanwhile" (4).

¹⁰⁸ "Femina presbiteris, femina digna uiro" (*Aurora* "Explicit Judith," line 30).

¹⁰⁹ English translations of Riga are my own unless otherwise noted: "*Urbe manebat in hac Judith, inclita, predita sensu, / Ortu clara, Deo cara, uenusta genis.* (*Judith* lines 93-4)

¹¹⁰ *Turba uidens stupuit nimio splendore decoris,*

Pro qua presbiteri dant pia uota Deo.

Que dum descendit de monte tenetur ab illis

Qui loca conseruant, ora decora stupent. (*Riga Judith* 111-4)

¹¹¹ *Principis offertur oculis décor, et decus oris / Sidereeque gene dant graue uulnus ei.*

(Riga *Judith* 115-6)

¹¹² “*Erat autem in civitate Judith, vidua tribus annis, mulier pulchra nimis, sed casta, de tribu Ruben*” (Comestor Col. 1477C).

¹¹³ “*qui statim captus est in oculis suis*” (Comestor Col. 1477D)

¹¹⁴ “*Et rediit Judith filia Merari, Rubenitae in Bethuliam. Ex matre fuit de tribu Simeon, et fuit in viduitate omnibus diebus vitae suae. Et completis centum quinque annis, mortua est, et sepulta cum viro suo Manasse, et dimisit abram suam liberam, et planxit eam omnis populus septem diebus*” (Comestor Col. 1479C). In contrast Riga’s conclusion of Judith’s life lacks definite details. See *Judith* 185-90.

¹¹⁵ Manassa is mentioned at the end of Judith’s narrative, but Judith’s relationship to him appears more equitable than in the biblical versions and Comestor. They are portrayed as noble peers—Judith leads the same life as her husband did before (lines 17715-6; 1477.3-4).

¹¹⁶ If Holofernes is presented as the tragic hero, then some readers may consider Judith the female villain, and this reading is not unique. At least one Middle English sermon ignores the heroic aspect of Judith’s performance, portraying Judith against Holofernes as the battle between the sexes: Holofernes was “distrowed by þe nyce aray and atyre of a womman” (Ross 235).

Beginning in the fourteenth century, Judith sometimes appeared in sexual opposition to Holofernes, as in “the Power of Women” *topos* in art and texts. Susan L Smith cites an example from a wall painting in Konstanz, which is based on a German poem.

A woman deceived Adam the first man

Samson’s body

Was blinded by a woman

David was shamed

Solomon also lost God's Kingdom by a woman . . .

Holofernes was castrated . . .

[Adam den êrsten menschen den betrouc ein wîp,

Samsônes lip

Wart durch ein wîp geblendet,

Davît wart geschendet,

Her Salomô ouch gotes riches durch ein wîp gepfendet . . .

Olofern versnitten . . .] (138-9)

According to Susan L. Smith these examples of "lovers" paired together did not have the same signification in every rendering: "By 1300, its [the Power of Women *topos*] textual context was already fragmented and contested, and as the fourteenth century progressed, the *topos*'s claim to be a carrier of a single received truth was increasingly rejected and its status as a site of interpretive contest, in which the reader as well as the writer was a participant, explicitly acknowledged" (140).

¹¹⁷Here Prudence follows the rhetorical mode used by Comestor to disparage women. (See footnote 13.) Informed readers would have recognized the quote and perhaps found humor in the character's presentation of the opposite view in like form.

¹¹⁸Chaucer often refers to legends of saints' lives (as well as biblical motifs), expecting his audience to understand the allusions.

¹¹⁹Not all images of widows in medieval texts were negative. For example, in the late fourteenth-century *Book to a Mother* widowhood is reimagined as a model for all Christians, as Nicole R. Rice explains: "In casting the motherly widow as a figure who may stand for all Christians, the *Book* author reimagines the widow's status as central rather than marginal, a way to avoid the feminized perils of lust, greed, and vanity that lurk in the woman's cloister and are typically associated with widowhood" (112). However, that the writer felt it necessary to

dedicate a book to his mother, exhorting her to holiness as a widow, appears to indicate his own anxiety toward the widowed state.

Yet in actual medieval society there appeared to be respect directed toward and an active role expected of holy widows. Many people sought the advice of women recluses (often widows) who had prophetic and visionary powers. See Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker.

¹²⁰ Rebecca Hayward claims that

the key feature of the misogynistic stereotype of the widow was that the widow was associated with inconstancy, because it was assumed that once her husband had died, she would begin to lust for another husband or lover immediately. This was based on the deeply rooted misogynistic understanding of female sexuality as lustful and fickle . . . In part, the cultural tensions revealed by the misogynistic stereotype of the widow were caused by the conflict between the Christian ideology of chaste widowhood, which coincided with masculine fantasies of exclusive possession of a woman, and social pragmatism, which ensured that remarriage was a common phenomenon” (221-2).

¹²¹ Nevertheless, other paraphrases do not ignore Judith’s widowhood. Comestor’s introduction describes Judith as widow, and Riga labels her a “noble widow.”

¹²² Owst cites MS Har. 45, fol. 121.

¹²³ Jocelyn Wogan-Browne notes that despite numerous medieval texts that stressed secluded devotion for widows there are many accounts of active widowed noblewomen: “If widowhood is a version of death to the world, it is one in which, like the saints themselves, women could have a significant afterlife of activity” (*Saints*’ 47-8).

Yet there existed more than one version of piety in the later Middle Ages. Active piety for the upper classes is a topic of discussion in a number of late medieval literary works, such as Langland's *Vision of Piers Plowman*.

Michael Goodich examines the changes in female piety that take place in the late Middle Ages. These transformations show up in considerations of female sainthood, as well as the piety expressed by lay noblewomen:

Thus, contemporary female sainthood was very much a group or even family phenomenon, in which the northern nobility and the governing class of Europe's urban regions played a leading role . . . the newer ideal of sainthood demanded works of charity, such as caring for the sick, the aged, widows and orphans (23).

¹²⁴ Neglecting Judith's status as widow may also serve a more literary purpose. In later chapters I will discuss the association of MEMPOT's Judith with romance characters, and this connection may create a reluctance to present Judith as widow:

A romance heroine who is also a widow is a problematic figure, as an ideal widow remains celibate, whereas an ideal romance heroine yields to love for the hero. The conflict between these two ideals for women means that there is a risk that a romance widow heroine may be associated with the misogynistic stereotype of the widow. In such a case, the misogynistic stereotype functions as a contrasting discourse to that of romance convention. If such a counterdiscourse becomes too powerful, it will threaten the stability of the idealized romance elements in the narrative and thus the generic boundaries of the text. (Hayward 222)

¹²⁵ The *Historia* and the *Aurora* do not include dialogue here—Judith is not given the chance to introduce herself.

¹²⁶ This identification of Judith as a Hebrew contrasts with the Old English poem. As Patricia Belanoff points out, the Anglo-Saxon poet “never recognizes that Judith and her people are Jews” (248).

¹²⁷ Judith’s blend of signification as both Ecclesia and Synagoga, and the poet’s use of her as model for Christian readers, appears to ignore the medieval treatment of Jews as opposed to Christ and Christians in graphic and textual depictions, such as the one described by Anthony Bale:

On the marvelous and celebrated thirteenth-century west front of the Cathedral of Nôtre Dame, Paris, stand two figures, Ecclesia and Synagoga. They are the focal statues at the base of the façade, flanking the central west door, the so-called Portal of the Last Judgement. They are conventional: Ecclesia looks up, towards heaven and towards Jesus, who sits at the centre of the decorative scheme; Synagoga is blinded by a round, pointed hat which has slipped over her eyes, her head turned towards the ground. She clutches a broken staff and, in her right hand, the tablets of the (Mosaic) Law. She is, like Ecclesia, a young and pretty woman, but, on the left of Jesus, she turns away from Him and towards the Left Bank of the Seine instead. (1)

¹²⁸ Burrows cites William Dunbar’s ‘Tretis of the Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo’ and paraphrases the widow’s advice: “That is, the elderly woman who behaves like a feather-headed girl (‘hallock lass’) deserves public ridicule” (156). In the widow’s opinion the problem is a social one—if the woman has not learned how to be maturely discreet regarding her affairs she deserves public shame.

It is possible that Holofernes’ negative portrayal may be enhanced by the motif of the *senex amans*: “No species of old devil appears more commonly in medieval literature than the *senex amans*—the man (it is usually a man) whose amatory activities are prolonged beyond the

term set for them by Nature” (Burrows 156-7). Yet there is no proof of Holofernes’ age since the poet has provided absolutely no description of his appearance. The emphasis is not on his prowess or strength in battle, but on his ability to lead and his “soteltes.”

¹²⁹ While the *puer senex* title is frequently given to males, it can occasionally be found in descriptions of women (*puella senex*) such as in some Old and Middle English descriptions of St. Agnes and the Virgin Mary (Burrows 102, 112).

¹³⁰ Interestingly, Judith seems to be implying sainthood in the same stanza where she begins to lie to Holofernes. This identification of Judith with *puella senex* is consistent with her later performances, but in this instance, Judith as a beautiful noblewoman engaged in courtly flattery with the powerful Holofernes presents a conflicting image—one, however, that was not always criticized in the romance genre, as we shall see. Even didactic texts, such as “the elementary schoolbook *Disticha Catonis* might advise its young readers that it was sometimes prudent to simulate foolishness” (Burrows 146), agreeing with the attitude of Chrétien that deception is acceptable whenever the end result is of social or moral value. (For discussion of Chrétien’s attitude see pages 155-6.)

¹³¹ The Septuagint ends Judith’s story by placing her in the “cave of her husband, Manasseh” (Judith 16.23). Amy-Jill Levine notes that finally the biblical Judith is domesticated: “in death, she is made to conform to her traditional role as wife” (27).

¹³² I recognize that many women today may not read this as a positive image; however, as I have noted previously, I am following Blamires in defining a favorable / positive image of “woman” as one which would have been judged as favorable by contemporary women. In addition, I consider this text favorable towards women because it attempts a more equitable presentation of men and women—or the images associated with them.

¹³³ Allen’s argument is founded on two facts: first, the claim that “medieval commentators virtually always classified works we would call literature as ethics” (281); second,

the contents found in the library of Jacques d'Armagnac, in which "three categories of books stand out: histories, romances, and theoretical books of ethics—many of them especially useful to a ruler" (Allen 283).

¹³⁴ There is also the possibility that a writer intends to solicit multiple readings.

¹³⁵ Sidnie Ann White argues "that the comparison to Jael and Deborah is neither superficial nor coincidental, but that the author of Judith had the story of Jael and Deborah in the front of his mind as he wrote his story" (5).

¹³⁶ Karma Lochrie suggests that military rank rather than social class is what subsumes gender in the beginning of the Old English poem *Judith* (2). Because high military rank was usually held only by nobility, I maintain that rank is merely one aspect of the broader category.

¹³⁷ In the early modern period Judith becomes a political figure. Queens use her figure as a symbol of power, and in addition "inspired by Judith's sanction as God's assassin, a number of obscure, disturbed and fantic individuals attempted to change the course of history by stepping into her shoes" (Stocker 87). Thus Judith becomes a violent figure of retribution against the oppressor. Some male artists used her representation to present themselves as the victim, terrorized by the seduction of a woman. One very poignant example is given by Mira Friedman of Christoforo Allori, who, in 1609, paints "the face of Judith, who is La Mazzafirra [his former lover]...as cold and devoid of expression, with nothing to express the horror of the decapitation. Holofernes' face, on the other hand, conveys great suffering" (240). (Perhaps not surprisingly, Allori has given Holofernes his own facial features.)

¹³⁸ The terminology that connects medieval literature to classical heroes and epics is relatively new as Henry Ansgar Kelly demonstrates in his article "Medieval Heroics without Heroes or Epics."

¹³⁹ Belanoff concludes, however, that Judith does not exactly fit the heroic male category. She does not go to war with men and neither does she distribute booty, both

indicators of a male “comitatus” ethic— “despite the fact that the poet decenters Judith’s femaleness, he does not turn her into a male figure” (257).

¹⁴⁰ Stephanie Hollis posits that the passive, merciful female was not known to Old English literature and cites the portrayals of Wealthew, Elene and and Juliana. They speak and act in heroic manners, with the exception of active battle and, thus, become actors rather than signs: “the presentation of women in the same, militantly assertive modes as men also characterizes the depiction of women who have no allegorical dimension. . . . The indiscriminately heroic portraiture of women, though underlain by a gender-based distinction that removes them from the sphere of active combat, is at the same time a convention which foregrounds male-female identity, submerging differences” (92-3).

¹⁴¹ Shahar argues that women are not treated as belonging to one of the three estates composed of men—nobility, religious, peasant—but make up an estate of their own.

¹⁴² See also Corinne Saunders discussion in “Women and Warfare in Medieval English Writing.”

¹⁴³ Throughout this study both the English and Latin have been taken from Colgrave and Minors’ edition of Bede: “*insiste ergo, gloriosa filia, et summis conatibus duritiam cordis ipsius religiosa divinatorum praeceptorum insinuatone mollire summopere dematura*” (ii.II).

¹⁴⁴ Janet Nelson has translated these *ordos* from “a now-lost Liège manuscript, edited by Sirmond in *Capitula Caroli Calvi* (Paris, 1623), and repr. By A. Boretius, MGH, *Capitularia regum Francorum*, edd. A. Boretius and V. Krause, 2 vols (Hanover, 1883-97; repr. 1957). Below is an excerpt from Hincmar’s prayer into English:

[God] who by this unction made joyful the face of your maidservant Judith for the liberating of your servants and the confounding of their enemies and who so made radiant the face of your handmaiden Esther by this spiritual anointing of your mercy that by her prayers you inclined the fierce heart of the king to mercy

and to the salvation of those who believed in you, we ask you, omnipotent God, . . . to make her fittingly lovely with chastity. (*Early* 308)

(See Stafford's discussion on the variable portrayals of this queen, in *Queens, Concubines and Dowagers*, pages 19-20.)

¹⁴⁵ Grzegorz Pac argues that “victory over enemies and salvation of the people are the properties common to the Church, biblical Judith and a queen” (86). He cites the usage of Judith's image in both Hrabanus Maurus and Walafrid Strabo. (Hrabanus Maurus, ‘Expositio in Librum Judith’ in *Patrologia Latina*, ed. J. P. Migne, 109, 540C. Walafrid Strabon, ‘De Judith imperatrice, et Carolo Augustorum filio’ in idem, *Versus in Aquisgrani Palatio Editi* in *Patrologia Latina*, 114, 1094 B.)

¹⁴⁶ Stafford's study stresses the political atmosphere in which all historical records—particularly those written while the queens were still living—are created. For this reason, she suggests that the documents may tell more about the expectations placed upon queens than upon their actual lives (*Queens* 12).

¹⁴⁷ Yet it is probably not until the 10th century when the first coronation of a queen occurred within England. Huneycutt interprets the *ordo* for this event as giving the queen substantial power: “the author of the new rite . . . saw the queen primarily as a regal protectress of religion rather than as the king's consecrated bed-mate” (*Matilda* Huneycutt 35). Huneycutt's study provides documentation regarding later queens (tenth-twelfth century) that become politically involved as counselors, witnesses and even keepers of the royal treasure.

¹⁴⁸ There are other phenomena that mark changes in this period. However, Lees and Overing warn that “the before and after model [of women's golden age], while validated by certain legal and historical developments, obscures differences among women (like those of class), and aspects of similarity and continuity (as Bennett has suggested) in representational practices that create women's difference as well as men's” (“Before” 319). In addition, they aver

that changes in portrayals of and references to women and their bodies may not signify a change in actual practice: “There is no necessarily direct correlation between representation and the real without the mediation of ideology” (“Before” 318).

¹⁴⁹ As with most Anglo-Saxon poetry, the date of *Judith*'s composition can only be estimated—generally scholars place the poem in the latter half of the tenth century. See the introductions of editions by B. J. Timmer and Mark Griffith for further information regarding the dating of the poem.

¹⁵⁰ Alexandra Hennessey Olsen remarks that “In the Latin tradition, good women are passive” (63) and builds an argument for Cynewulf's borrowing from the German and Norse tradition in portraying Helene. Of course, Damico's work also demonstrates the power of women in Germanic literature.

¹⁵¹ David Chamberlain argues convincingly for the poem's political significance. He cites Ælfric's reference to a work which was written as “an example to men to defend our land against the assailing army” (144). Chamberlain comments that even if Ælfric is not referring to the extant Anglo-Saxon poem, he is definitely informing his readers that Judith's narrative has been used to incite bravery.

¹⁵² There are several examples of saints' legends in which the woman who seeks to become holy must dress in men's clothes and play the part of the man in order to escape her situation. The transformation in these stories was more than just a practical escape strategy, however.

This transformation was, evidently, an article of faith...Ælfric wrote in a mid-Lent homily included in . . . The Catholic Homilies, ‘if a woman is manly by nature and strong to God's will she will be counted among the men who sit at the table of God.’ That is, the woman earns salvation by acquiring a man's nature; that is why, in these saints lives the woman first acquires the

appearance of a man's nature: when the natural transformation is accomplished, the way for the supernatural transformation is prepared.
(Frantzen 162-3)

Also see Gopa Roy's study for several detailed examples of women who were called "manly" because of their desires to follow Christ. These women were especially admired for their attempts to remain virgins.

¹⁵³ Nelson finds that in *Liber de rectoribus christianis* by Sedulius Scottus (869), the queen "must be the beauty of the familia" (305). In light of the rest of the queen's roles and attributes accorded by Sedulius, virtue was an important element of that beauty.

¹⁵⁴ This is Helen Damico's assertion, which will be discussed briefly later in the chapter.

¹⁵⁵ Lori Eshleman analyzes several visual representations of women found on Viking memorial stones. She finds that these women appear to be mediators of either peace or war and comments on literary and historical texts that document this dual role of women as well. My own interest in these representations is not only related to the roles they are performing, but also to their physical depictions. Each woman is portrayed in a simple fashion, her facial features ignored. "In general she is shown in profile, wearing a wing-like cape and long tunic, her hair knotted and hanging down her back" (Eshleman 17). Besides her bearing of the ritual cup, it is the woman's long, knotted hair and long tunic that distinguish her representation from the men around her. Her clothing is always depicted as loose and long, and therefore, female physical characteristics are not visible.

¹⁵⁶ Gale Owen-Crocker maintains that seeing a body in Anglo-Saxon art is quite unusual: "it is the clothed body that is seen in Anglo-Saxon art. Occasionally, in the line drawings of the Winchester School, one is conscious of an elegant human form beneath the drapery; but in most instances the person is represented by the dress; the clothes are the body" (317).

¹⁵⁷ All English translations are my own. I am indebted to Jacqueline Stodnick for advice regarding translation. The Old English text from the poem *Judith* is taken from Dobbie's ASPR edition *Beowulf and Judith*.

. . . *Het ða niða geblonden*
ða eadigan mægð ofstum fetigan
to his bedreste beagum gehlæste,
hringum gehroden. . . (34-7)

¹⁵⁸ The Vulgate describes Judith's ornaments and qualifies their use:

And she washed her body, and anointed herself with the best ointment, and plaited the hair of her head, and put a bonnet upon her head, and clothed herself with the garments of her gladness, and put sandals on her feet, and took her bracelets, and lilies, and earlets, and rings, and adorned herself with all her ornaments. And the Lord also gave her more beauty: because all this dressing up did not proceed from sensuality, lent from virtue: and therefore the Lord increased this her beauty, so that she appeared to all men's eyes incomparably lovely. (Judith 10.3-4).

[(vs. 3) *et lavit corpus suum et unxit se myrro optimo et discriminavit crinem capitis sui et inposuit mitram super caput suum et induit se vestimentis iucunditatis suae induitque sandalia pedibus suis adsumpsitque dextraliola et lilia et inaures et anulos et omnibus ornamentis suis ornavit se* (vs. 4) *cui etiam Dominus contulit splendorem quoniam omnis ista conpositio non ex libidine sed ex virtute pendeat et ideo Dominus hanc in illam puchritudinem ampliavit ut incomparabili decore omnium oculis appareret.*]

Lori Ann Garner suggests that while jewelry and braided hair are mentioned in both the Vulgate and the Old-English poem, the cultural associations of these items are different for

each: “As ‘beahhroden’ women (138b), Judith, and her servant as well, are connected with such figures as Wealthew, the “beaghroden cwen” (Beowulf 623), and evoke the entire complex of positive qualities associated with rings and ring-giving” (180). Garner also demonstrates that the term “wundenlocc” appears to be used to show Judith’s power, rather than her beauty (181).

Perhaps it is power rather than beauty that provides the real temptation Judith offers Holofernes in this poem. Stephanie Hollis posits that

there is a case to be made that sexual provocation in the Anglo-Saxon world-view expressed itself as a challenge to combat rather than as an alluring enticement . . . the first woman’s role in Genesis B is to urge representative man by eloquence to perform a deed that will enhance his own prestige. The conception of woman as tempter, in other words, adverts to her role as agent provocateur in the pursuit of renown, which Tacitus claimed to be the role of Germanic women on the battlefield. (100-1)

¹⁵⁹ See line 171 and references to her jewelry in lines 36-7 and 138.

¹⁶⁰ In *Dress in Anglo-Saxon England*, Owen-Crocker avers that “social differences would have been instantly visible. Simply woven cloth would have been distinguishable from sophisticated patterned weaves and rare imported fabrics, particularly to women, who constantly worked cloth with their hands” (320).

¹⁶¹ Fourteen Anglo-Saxon examples of the Virgin at the cross are given in Barbara Raw’s work on crucifixion iconography (Plates I, II, IIIa, IIIb, IVa, VI, VIII, IX, X, XI, XIIb, XIV, XV, XVI). Examples of Mary’s prostrate body can be found in illustrations of the death of the Virgin and nativity scenes—see Dodwell’s *Pictorial Arts*.

¹⁶² See “*Otto II surrounded by the personified provinces of the empire*, detached leaf from a copy of the Letters of St Gregory. 983/7. Chantilly, Musée Condé” (Dodwell *Pictorial Arts*

138). Also, “A portrayal of Pompa and her head-dress from a manuscript of the late tenth century (British Library Add. MS. 24199, fol. 21v)” (Dodwell *Anglo-Saxon* 178).

¹⁶³ Two examples of kings and queens on each side of Christ can be found in Dodwell’s *Pictorial Arts*: “Echternach: *Christ in Majesty adored by the Emperor Conrad II and the Empress Gisela*, from the Speier Goden Gospels, MS. Vitr. 17, folio 2 verso. 1045-6. Escorial Library” (145); and “Echternach: *Christ Crowning the Emperor Henry III and the Empress Agnes*, from the Uppsala Gospels, MS. C. oe, folio 3 verso. Completed in 1050. Uppsala, University Library” (147).

Gale R. Owen-Crocker notes that “depictions of Anglo-Saxon monarchs are sometimes referred to as ‘portraits’ but there is no pretension to facial likeness. It is the clothing of the figures which distinguishes them, and this, together with their attitudes and relationships to accompanying figures, determines our response” (*Pomp* 41). She also argues that queens are depicted as less ornamented than kings in order to keep women in a secondary place.

¹⁶⁴ Owen-Crocker warns against too literal of an interpretation of clothing representation, such as “the kind of naivety which led one costume historian to believe that Anglo-Saxon men habitually dyed their hair and beards blue because they are painted blue in the Hexateuch” (*Dress* 211).

¹⁶⁵ One documented example of the glittering silver gold threads used in Anglo-Saxon clothing, in this case for headbands, is cited by Owen-Crocker: “We have three late Anglo-Saxon wills in which gold bands are bequeathed...They were all bequeathed for their bullion value; in each case the testator directed that the bands should be divided up” (*Dress* 225).

¹⁶⁶ A recent archeological finding substantiates this point. The New York Times reports that the cache found in July 2009 is “a hoard of early Anglo-Saxon treasure, probably dating from the seventh century and including more than 1,500 pieces of intricately worked gold and silver whose craftsmanship and historical significance left archaeologists awestruck” (Burns).

¹⁶⁷ Owen-Crocker claims that “prominent social messaging, such as ethnicity and public rank, was provided by the choice of jewellery at neck and shoulders” (*Dress* 317).

¹⁶⁸ Æthelthryth is also referred to as Saint Audrey or Queen Etheldreda. According to Bede she lived as a married queen for 12 years and then became Abbess in Elge (Ely). Claims were made regarding her prophetic powers during life and the uncorrupted state of her body after death. When her body was moved after sixteen years her appearance was fresh, and the tumor that was on her neck at death was no longer present, according to her personal physician.

¹⁶⁹ *Scio certissime, quia merito in collo pondus languoris porto, in quo iuuenculam me memini superuacua moniliorum pondera portare; et credo quod ideo me superna pietas dolore colli uoluit grauari, ut sic absoluar reatu superuacuae levitates; dum mihi nunc pro auro et margaretis de collo rubor tumoris ardorque promineat.* (Bede iv.19).

Whether or not this quotation repeats accurately Etheldreda’s feelings regarding her tumor and former adornments, its denunciation should be read from the point of view of a woman immersed in the patriarchal values of the Anglo-Saxon church.

¹⁷⁰ As I will discuss in the next chapter, medieval Christian texts were not consistent in their opinions regarding the appropriate attitude to be taken toward ornamentation as a sign of social status. Stephanie Hollis points out that *Maxims I* treats decorative dress as an obligation of social status, while Aldhelm in his *de Virginitate*, written to the nuns at Barking, “embarks on a contrast between the chaste adornment of the self in virtues and the kindling of marital wantonness with necklaces, bracelets and rings, the curling of tresses and the painting of the face. Nor can he conceive of any reason why fine clothing should be worn except for the purpose of enticement” (99).

¹⁷¹ In Gale Owen-Crocker's discussion of Anglo-Saxon jewelry she admits that finds of gold brooches and rings are rare, but based on textual evidence concludes that "it is apparent, both from the wills of laymen/women and from the records of gifts given by seculars to religious foundations, that costly jewellery was certainly in circulation and that this jewellery was probably gold. We must draw the conclusion that personal ornaments of precious metals existed but have rarely survived" (207).

¹⁷² Sarah-Grace Heller has argued that "recognizing the desire for luminescent glamour on the part of both medieval authors and readers leads to a much more nuanced reading of passages describing beauty, where details may emerge as loaded with coded significance, rather than as repetitive clichés" (937).

¹⁷³ Perhaps this is a distinction only pertinent to art historians. The Dictionary of Old English does not mention the definitions given by Dodwell. The DOE does list both "brown" and "burnished" as possible translations of *brun*.

¹⁷⁴ Albert S. Cook translates the term as "brown-hued" ignoring the brightness factor. Treharne captures the metallic sense of the word without indicating color. Her translation reads "shining" (209).

¹⁷⁵ See Klein's discussion of Cynewulf's dressing Helene in gold, page 58-9.

¹⁷⁶ Klein cites *Maxims I* "which proclaims that "gold *geriseþon guman sweorde, / sellic sigesceorp, sinc on cwene*" [gold is fitting on a man's sword, an excellent ornament of victory, treasure on a queen]" and infers "that such conspicuous displays of royal wealth in the fictional courts of heroic poetry may not be too far from Anglo-Saxon social practice. The richly adorned body of the queen may well have served as a means of publicly signaling the wealth and power of her kingdom, inviting traveling guests to broadcast afar that hers was a kingdom with great monetary reserves and hence one that would not prove an easy target of conquest" (59). She cites as a source "*Maxims I*, in *The Exeter Book*, ed. George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk

Dobbie, *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records 3* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), 156-63, ll. 125-26.”

¹⁷⁷ “*Hie ða beahhrodene / feðelaste forð onettan, / oð hie glædmode gegan hæfdon / to ðam wealgate*” (lines 138-141).

¹⁷⁸ Although I am discussing the material aspects of gold and kings, there is a spiritual connection as well, associated with Christ returning as King and to the splendor of the heavenly city.

¹⁷⁹ Mary Dockray-Miller interprets the presence of the maid and the use of plural adjectives as a unique instance of female community within Anglo-Saxon texts. For Miller, the relationship between Judith and her maid is so significant in this text that it changes the nature of Judith’s heroism: “The maid and Judith create a cooperative community of women, wherein Judith is a maternal figure: that female community constructs a heroism for Judith that is based on protection and generation rather than aggression and domination” (165).

Perhaps, the presence of the maid which creates the female community also protects Judith’s reputation, much in the same way that medieval dramatic accounts of the Virgin Mary added maidservants to vouch for her virginity. It is likely that the pairing technique works in conjunction with the notion of female community, but as Dockray-Miller points out, the women’s relationship is no longer highlighted after they return to Bethulia—the mission is now accomplished and Judith is safe among her people so that female community is no longer deemed necessary (171).

¹⁸⁰ It is also notable that the description of the conquering Hebrews includes references to their bright city and to shiny booty, such as “men’s armour decorated with gold” (*guðsceorp gumena golde gefrætewod*) (line 328).

¹⁸¹ That the flynet is described as golden signifies the luxury and power that surround Holofernes—a social, and perhaps spiritual, power that is so great he is separated from the rest of his company.

Holofernes' "flynet" of gold has interested many scholars. Heide Estes interprets the flynet as one of the "margins which ultimately she [Judith] never crosses" (346). Estes imagines Judith reaching through the flynet to decapitate Holofernes "standing at his bed without fully breaching the space within" (347). In Estes' view Judith challenges the social boundaries wherein she is limited as a woman, but she challenges them from without, rather than being subsumed by the social space that denies her power. (Another example is her command for the men to take up arms from without the walls of Bethulia.)

The flynet is a symbol of spiritual margins for Bernard J. Huppé:

The netting with its suggestion of the mysterious presence of a god-like figure, not seen, but seeing all, invisible except as it chose to make its presence visible, suggests an analogy to the veil of the holy of holies within the temple, as in Exodus 26.33, *the veil shall divide unto you between the holy place and the most holy*. The analogy between the canopy and the veil of the temple again suggests not only the mysterious power of Holofernes, but even more powerfully the falseness and self-destructiveness of this power. (164)

Huppé demonstrates that the poet's use of words in this scene build up the evil presence of Holofernes, which is divided from Judith (and the rest of the world) by the flynet.

¹⁸² In positing the material importance of Judith's radiance, I do not mean to deny that the idea of a radiant heroine also contained Christian metaphorical significance similar to the significance read into gold and riches of eternity that I will discuss regarding Ælfric's work.

¹⁸³ Dockray-Miller points out that scholars have argued over the term "mægð," which is used to refer to Judith and her maid. The term can mean "maid," "virgin," or more generally refer

to any woman. Patricia Belanoff lists the Old English references for the term, as well as the women to whom it refers. "Of these women Sarah, Beowulf's mother, Grendel's mother, and Circe are certainly not virgins" (259). The reason many scholars have interpreted the term as "virgin" is because it is often used to signify the Virgin Mary.

Other scholars have also commented on the poem's lack of emphasis on chastity. See John Hermann (182-3), Karma Lochrie (3, 17), and David Chamberlain (154-5).

¹⁸⁴ Of course, the section of the poem where she would have initially dressed for her mission is missing.

¹⁸⁵ The English translation is by Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren.

Below is the entire passage on Judith:

LVII. JUDITH, the daughter of Merari, scorned the flattering allurements of suitors after the death of Manasses, taking up the weeds of widowhood and rejecting a wedding dress—and (this at a time) when clarion-calls of the apostolic trumpet had not yet put out the call 'But I say to the unmarried and to the widows; it is good for them if they so continue' [I Cor. VII.8]. Flowering [p. 317] like a bright lily in her devout chastity and hiding from the public gaze she lived a pure life in an upstairs solar. (And) when in company of her handmaiden she undertook to overthrow the dreadful leader of the Assyrians, who had terrified the quaking world with his innumerable thousands of soldiers glorying in the cavalry and infantry, she did not believe he could be deceived in any other way, nor think that he could be killed otherwise, than by ensnaring him by means of the innate beauty of her face and also by her bodily adornment. Of her, it is written in the Septuagint: 'And she clothed herself with the garments of her gladness, and put sandals on her feet, and took her bracelets, and lilies, and earlets, and rings, and adorned herself with all her

ornaments' [Iud. X.3], and tricked herself out to prey on men. You see, it is not by my assertion but by the statement of Scripture that the adornment of women is called the depredation of men! But, because she is known to have done this during the close siege of Bethulia, grieving for her kinsfolk with the affection of compassion and not through any disaffection from chastity, for that reason, having kept the honour of her modesty intact, she brought back a renowned trophy to her fearful fellow-citizens and a distinguished triumph for (these) timid townfolk—in the form of the tyrant's head and its canopy [cf. Iud. XIII.19].

The following Latin version is from *Malmesbiriensis Prosa De Virginitate*, Turnhout edition:

LVII. Iudith, filia Merari, post obitum Manasse sumpto uiduitatis theristro et spreto sponsali peplo blanda procorum lenocinia contempnens, nondum resultantibus apostolicax salpicis clangoribus, dico innuptis et uiduis: bonum est illis, si si permanserint, quasi candens lilum pia castitate floescens atque a publicis conspectibus delitescens in cenaculi | solario pudica conuersabatur: cum horrendum Assyriorum principem, qui innumeris manipulorum milibus equitatu et peditatu glomerantibus orbem trementem terruit, abra comitante circumuenire moliretur, haud secus decipiendum credidit nec aliter obtruncandum rata est, nisi cum natiua uultus uenustate ornamentis etiam corporalibus caperetur. De qua in .LXX. translatoribus scriptum est: induit se uestem iocunditatis suae et imposuit periscelides et dextralia et anulos et omnia ornamenta sua et composuit se nimis in rapinam uirorum. En non nostris assertionibus sed scripturae astipulationibus ornatus feminarum rapina uirorum uocatur! Verum quia hoc in arta Betuliae obsidione pro contribulibus dolitura compatiens affectu, non castitatis defectu fecisse memoratur, idcirco salua pudoris reuerentia celebre meticolosis minicipibus tropeum et inclitum

oppidanis trepidantibus triumphum teste tyranny capite et conopeo reportauit.
(729-733).

¹⁸⁶ It is not only Ælfric's version of Judith that differs from Aldhelm's but also his other representations of women. Lees and Overing claim that "Without the dense layers of metaphoric citing of the body found in Aldhelm . . . the level of violence in these [Ælfric's] later female *Lives*, whether perpetrated on the saint or resisted by her, diminishes, perhaps sanitized for a wider, vernacular audience" ("Before" 327).

¹⁸⁷ I have used S. D. Lee's edition of Ælfric's homily on Judith for my translations of Ælfric's Judith.

*Ða, on þam feorðan dæge, feormode se ealdorman his
heahþegnas on his getelde on micelre blisse, & bebead
his burðegne þæt he gebringan sceolde into his
gebeorscipe þa foresædan Iudith, & he swa dyde. Heo
com þa geglenged for nanre galnysse, & stod him
ætforan swiðe fægres hiwes, & his mod sona swiðe
wearð ontend on hire gewilnunge to his galnesse; & het
hi beon bliðe on his gebeorscipe, & heo him behet þæt
heo swa wolde. (238-46)*

¹⁸⁸ Again, Judith is not the only text in which Ælfric displays an uneasiness regarding women's bodies. In contrast to Aldhelm's portrayals, Ælfric's saints' lives appear to avoid the presentation of the female body for readers to imagine or "gaze" upon:

For all Ælfric's innovations in the developing discourse of chastity, certain conventional emphases about female sanctity persist, as do the paradoxes they produce. Paramount among these is a certain nervousness about the power of the gaze and the knowledge it yields. We never see the tortured body of Lucy,

and all the female *Lives* appear defended against the unregulated gaze. (Lees and Overing "Before" 328)

¹⁸⁹ See Mary Clayton for a detailed examination of Ælfric's portrayal of Judith and how he handles the problems inherent in his desire to use the text to illustrate chastity.

¹⁹⁰ Even so, Lees points out that when Ælfric translates the saints' lives into English he is careful to censor

certain elements of the lives for fear of lay misunderstanding. . . While he does not explicitly refer to the female lives as a locus for such misreadings, their repetitive staging of conventional scenes testifies to Ælfric's general concern. What is at stake in hagiography is the *meaning* of the saint, as the preface suggests. This meaning is bound particularly to the female saint's sexuality, which has to be transformed in order to offer an exemplary life: the transformed body, not the sexed one, is the exemplar. (*Tradition* 148)

¹⁹¹ Yet Judith demonstrates in the same way as Ælfric's female saints "that chastity is a discipline of restraint. . . characterized by struggle" (Lees *Tradition* 151). Judith's struggle is definitely unusual in Christian literature, because she instigates the encounter with Holofernes and resolves it not with passive resistance, but with force.

¹⁹² "*porro Iudith universa vasa bellica Holofernis quae dedit illi populus et conopeum quod ipsa sustulerat in anathema oblivionis*" (Judith 16.23).

¹⁹³ In the Septuagint, Judith accepts Holofernes' possessions from the people and later dedicates them to God, offering the canopy as a burnt offering. (Judith 15.19) See Carey Moore, *The Anchor Bible Judith* (245).

¹⁹⁴ As Lees argues, women were understood by the patriarchs as having "sexuality where men don't and women who become saints redirect it toward God. . . Sexuality is what matters in the female life, but as a source of temptation it must be seen to be understood and

therefore denied" (*Tradition* 147). Ælfric's presentation of Judith accomplishes this image. Yes, Judith is sexual, as is any woman, but she has completely redirected her sexuality into God's service.

¹⁹⁵ *Æfter þisum wordum, & oðrum gebedum, heo awearp
hire hæran & hire wudewan reaf, & hi sylfe geglængede
mid golde, & mid purpuran, & mid ænlicum gyrlum. . .
. . . & hi ealle wundrodon hire wlitas swiðe. (191-3; 197-8)*

¹⁹⁶ Dodwell's footnotes read: "61. '...radianti lumine uibrans, / uestibus aurigeris in toto corpore plena...' (ll. 360-1, ed. Campbell). 62 Ibid., lines 767-8, 777-8, 723-5" (248).

Gold has an obvious metaphorical value in manuscript illuminations where it is frequently added to the nimbus of God, Christ, Mary, the apostles or saints. God the father is often portrayed as having some type of golden instrument such as a sword or cross-shaft. Books and inkwells representing the divine word are often in gold. For examples see Ohlgren, pages 255, 259, 260, 265, 355, 365, 433 and 435.

¹⁹⁷ See Barbara Raw's discussion on "The nature and purpose of Anglo-Saxon Church Art," particularly pages 8-11, in which she describes several specific examples of ornamentation within Anglo-Saxon churches.

¹⁹⁸ *þære wudewan unlytel on feo & on oðrum æhtum, æfter
his gebyrdum mycele welan on manegum begeatum; &
hi wunode on clænnysse æfter hire were on hyre
upflore mid hire þinenum. Heo wæs swiðe wlitig, &
wenlices hiwes, & heo fæste symle buton on
freolsdagum, mid hæran gescryd to hire lice æfre, on
Godes ege butan unhlisan. (170-6)*

¹⁹⁹ Ælfric's anxiety over ornamental attire and riches being used for even metaphorical purposes seems to be a common concern of some Christians in the early Middle Ages. For example the Abbess Tengwich in approximately 1150 wrote to Hildegard of Bingen, complaining of the use of symbolic ornamentation in worship. Parts of their correspondence have been translated into English and cited by Maud Burnett McInerney:

It seems that your virgins on feast days stand up in church singing with unbound hair, and that they wear as ornaments some kind of silk veils long enough to touch the ground and even elegantly wrought crowns on their heads with crosses worked in on either side and in the back; and in the front they have the figure of the Lamb elegantly attached. And on top of this, their fingers are decorated with golden rings; the first shepherd of the Church forbade such things in his letter with this warning: women should comport themselves with modesty, not wearing their hair in curls, or gold, or pearls, or precious clothing. (*Letter 52:126*) (111)

Apparently, Hildegard did not deny any of the accusations, and even defended their customs, demonstrating that the use of elaborately decorated apparel could be used to symbolize the riches of the Christian faith.

²⁰⁰ The English translation of Saint Paulinus' poetry is by Patrick Gerard Walsh. The Latin can be found in *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 61:

[Col.0663C] *Appositas lateri tria comminus ora recludunt, Trinaque cancellis currentibus ostia pandunt: Martyribus mediam pictis pia nomina signant, Quos par in vario redimivit gloria sexu. At geminas quae sunt dextra laevaue patentes, Binis historiis ornat pictura fidelis. Unam sanctorum complent sacra gesta virorum, Jobus vulneribus tentatus, lumine Tobit. Ast aliam sexus minor obtinet, inclita Judith, Qua simul et regina potens depingitur Esther.*

Saint Paulinus used Judith in his poetry, but in his work nothing is revealed about Judith's clothing or appearance for the emphasis is on her active faith. He finds no fault with her cunning because it is accompanied by chastity:

A holy faith has endowed women's character with the strength of men, for through such faith the holy woman destroyed the fearsome Sisora, whose temple was pierced with a stake. The wily Judith with her chaste cunning deceived and mocked Holofernes, who had terrorized mighty people far and wide. She remained inviolate in that lewd bed, and then fled from the barbarians' camp victorious after slaughtering their leader. (lines 160-5)

Femineas quoque personas virtute virili [160] [Col.0642C] Induit alma fides: mulier qua sancta peremit Terribilem Sisaram transfixum tempora palo, Terrentemque manu late populos Holofernem Arte pudicitiae deceptum callida Judith Risit, in impuro quae non polluta cubili, [165] Barbara, truncato victrix duce, castra fugavit. (Patrologia Latina)

Rahab is treated similarly—she is a woman of “chaste fidelity” and her deceptive trick was “good” (Poem XXVI 132-149).

²⁰¹ See S. D. Lee for a discussion of Judith as Ecclesia (“Introduction” to *Judith*) and Pac (85-6).

²⁰² The beauty of the basilica is stressed in Paulinus' description and can be compared to Raw's description of opulently decorated churches, which were believed to reflect the beauty of the New Jerusalem (8-11).

²⁰³ Ann Van Dijk provides a more exact description than Godwin “Judith returning to Bethulia with the head of Holofernes” is located on the “right transenna dividing nave from bema” (117).

²⁰⁴ Godwin's bibliography entry for Wilpert reads: Wilpert, J. *Die roemischen Mosaiken und Malereien der kirchlichen Bauten von IV. XII. Jahrhunderts*, Freiburg. B., 1917.

²⁰⁵ For a sample of Mary enthroned in Anglo-Saxon art see D. Talbot Rice, plate 34b. For further descriptions of *Maria Regina* in other early portrayals see James Snyder—photo of fresco at S. Maria Antigua—(64-7), and Elizabeth Coatsworth—photo of ivory plaque of the Carolingian *Ada School*, ninth century—("Cloth-Making" 11).

²⁰⁶ It is important to note that not all representations of *Ecclesia*—the church triumphant—were dressed nobly. However, a richly clad woman was one manner of treating the subject. See Thomas Gambier Parry (317-8). At times *Ecclesia's* royal apparel is representative of the power she has been given and contrasted with "the veiled, defeated *Synagoga*" who loses the signs of her royalty, including a staff and crown (Delaney 10). Also, see Sara Lipton (129-30).

²⁰⁷ Godwin posits that glossing might have been used because the artist lacks the mastery of expression of the St. Paul artist. Then again, perhaps the cause lies, not in the artist's deficiency, but in the artist's "various motives, all in a classical tradition but following various stages of this tradition" (Godwin 34).²⁰⁷ In commenting on the style of this Bible, Ingo F. Walther and Norbert Wolf suggest that "the influence of Antiquity led to a pronounced illusionism. . . more marked by naturalism, even interspersed with verism, which heralds the departure from the antique ideal of beauty" (461). Speculations on motive and style aside, the illustrator found it necessary, or perhaps desirable, to include explanatory glosses along with illuminations.

²⁰⁸ This is an example of subtlety in depiction. Judith's nobility is hinted at through the contrast of her shod feet with those of her barefoot maid and through the extra material on her robe and hood.

²⁰⁹ Godwin concludes that these two Bibles come from differing pictorial traditions –one portrays the act of decapitation and the other generally depicts before and after scenes.

²¹⁰ The large, elaborately decorated Winchester Bible is under glass in the Winchester Cathedral Library. Detailed information about the Bible, as well as reproductions of many of its beautiful illuminations and unfinished drawings, such as Judith's page, can be found in Claire Donovan's *Winchester Cathedral*.

²¹¹ The Farfa Bible is an early eleventh century Spanish Bible that Godwin discusses in some detail in relation to one of the Judith iconographic traditions she identifies (39-61).

²¹² Godwin claims that the style of the late twelfth century Manerius Bible is a combination of English and French, but that it contains a "colophon of the scribe Manerius, which at least is an assurance of its English origin, but neither date nor exact locality are given in the colophon [sic]"(87).

²¹³ Godwin claims that the Winchester Bible's portrayal of the Judith narrative is based on a cycle that seems to be "of extraordinary detail. It is not only concerned with the exploits of Judith, as the other cycles are, but with the entire Book of Judith beginning with Nabuchodonosor's victory over Arphaxad and ending in the flight of the Assyrians" (60). Godwin accepts Millet's iconographic studies of New Testament scenes as evidence that this cycle stems from an East Christian tradition. The connection of the Judith portrayal to the New Testament occurs in the banquet scene which has been designed similarly to traditional Eastern versions of the last supper with Christ in the center and his apostles around him. It appears that Judith has merely been added to the side and integrated into the scene by the act of receiving a cup from Holofernes. Godwin believes that the *Winchester's* portrayal indicates the likelihood of the popularity of this tradition: "The fact that an East Christian tradition served as a model for a Spanish manuscript, the Farfa Bible, and an English manuscript, the Winchester Bible, describes the wide circulation of this cycle and gives an approximate conception of the number

of manuscripts that have been lost" (60). Given the popularity of this cycle, it seems probable that the Winchester Bible's depiction of Judith wearing the garment of the nobility was a familiar tradition.

²¹⁴ This is the title given in the Pierpont Morgan Library's catalog; Godwin calls this text the Hofer Bible.

²¹⁵ While the narrative depiction of M 0791 differs from the Winchester Bible, its final scenes are not an isolated instance of pictorial representation. These drawings have some similarities with an early Christian prototype identified by Godwin. In fact, the details that might appear to the viewer as being quite unique are the very details that connect this manuscript with the early tradition. Some of these details are a scabbard that hangs on the bed of Holofernes and a background portrait of the women placing Holofernes' head in a bag. In the foreground is a depiction of Judith immediately before the act, with sword raised. According to Godwin, these two scenes are very significant particulars shared by other manuscripts which stem from this early narrative cycle:

This cycle is characterized most strongly by the fact that Judith is not depicted decapitating Holofernes, but either she swings her sword to do so or places the decapitated head in the maid's bag or both. It may be safely assumed that the original cycle had both these moments, moments before and after the deed, but not the deed itself. (Godwin 59)

This manuscript contains both a before and after scene in contrast to the *Winchester Bible* and Morgan's G-42 which depict Judith in the moment of decapitation.

²¹⁶ See footnotes 89 and 116.

²¹⁷ Honeycutt cites an interesting example of a writer who uses this narrative of Esther:

The author of the life of St. Margaret of Scotland, most likely writing in the first decade of the twelfth century, recalled the scene where the Old Testament

queen abased herself and carefully pointed out that Queen Margaret (reigned c. 1070-93) also “[t]rampled all her ornaments in her mind like another Esther, and underneath the gems and gold considered herself nothing but dust and ashes” (“Intercession” 130).

Huneycutt gives the Latin text and reference information in her notes:

Omnia ornamenta velut altera Esther mente calcavit; seque sub gemmis et auto nihil aliud quam pulverem et cinerem consideravit (Vita Margaritae, chap. 2, par. 12[326]). All citations of the *vita* are to the Bollandist edition in *Acta sanctorum quotquot toto orbe coluntur*. . . , 70 vols., 3d ed. (Paris, 1863-1940), June, 2 (June 10), 324a-31a” (140).

²¹⁸ Several scholars have commented on the aristocratic background of medieval religious women: “We should not forget that nuns were overwhelmingly drawn from the upper strata of society. Some nunneries were highly aristocratic; many others drew on the gentry and upper sector of urban society” (Cross 155). Clare Lees and Gillian Overing also mention the importance of social position: “Any discussion of female monasticism throughout the period should, but too rarely does entail consideration of class...Hild and her peers are not only women: they are, for the most part, high-ranking women” (*Double* 33).

²¹⁹ “Style can be defined as the fundamental and creative [triple] relationship of discourse to its object, to the speaker himself and to another’s discourse, style strives organically to assimilate material into language and language into material” (Bakhtin *Dialogic* 378).

²²⁰ Peter Comestor emphasizes Judith’s beauty more than MEMPOT, but does not mention clothing details. *Genesis and Exodus*, which David Morey claims to be “perhaps the best paraphrase of the *Historia Scholastica* to survive in Middle English” (*Book* 133), withholds any mention of adornment particulars in its descriptions of biblical women. The *Cursor Mundi*

also refrains from commenting on specifics, limiting its indications of wealth to more general phrases, as in its description of Jacob and Rebecce's nuptial adornments: "And cled þe may wit riche weede" (line 3341). *The Mirour of Man's Saluacion* uses clothing details only as an aspect of typology, as in a comparison between Solomon's temple and the Virgin's clothing:

This Temple of marbre white was mad vppe alle bedene,
Ennournyd with golde withinne, Per moght none more be clene.
So was this virgine, white be purest chastitee,
With golde ouercledde withinne of perfite charitee.
O how is faire and clere generacioune of chastitee! (695-9)

²²¹ Similarly to *The Mirour*, lyrics in praise of Mary often presented her as beautiful and noble.

Another biblical character depicted as a courtly heroine in the Vernon Ms. is Susanna, a character from the apocryphal section of the book of Daniel. In *Susannah* (also referred to as *The Pistel of Swete Susan*), Susanna is dressed in royal attire, and her problems occur in a medieval garden under a laurel tree. (Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale* may be a parody of Susanna's plight.) Susanna, however, in spite of being attractively dressed, is modest and chaste, and it is the old men in the narrative who are lecherous. In this version of her story, her outstanding chasteness appears to be signified by the uniqueness of her noble appearance:

Hyr here was 3elow as wyre
Of gold fynyd wiþ fyre
Hiyr scholdres schaply & schyre,
þat borely [was] bare
[Now] ys Sussan in sale senglych arayde
In a serke of sylke wiþ scholdres full schene. (192-7)

The above quote is from Alie Miskimin's edition, in which she uses a composite of the five existing manuscripts, following Kane's treatment of Piers Plowman. Peck includes a version taken from the Vernon manuscript in his anthology *Heroic Women*.

²²² In answer to an ongoing debate between scholars regarding the significance of medieval vernacular description, Sara Sturm-Maddox and Donald Maddox demonstrate that vestimentary description can serve at least three purposes: *referential*, *auto-referential*, and *inferential*. In other words, descriptions of dress may refer to the historical period, may rely on literary convention, or may serve a symbolic purpose. Their study indicates that these categories are not exclusive.

²²³ For a thorough study of textiles found in excavations conducted in London and northern Europe, see Crowfoot, Pritchard and Staniland.

²²⁴ This layered significance has produced a host of interesting and complex studies related to textiles and clothing, as both representational and material objects, such as the the anthology *Medieval Fabrications: Dress, Textiles, Clothwork, and other Cultural Imaginings*, edited by Jane Burns.

²²⁵ On the other hand, descriptions of dress in texts should not be considered as merely signifying social status. Laura F. Hodges argues for the complexity of studying medieval dress representation in her detailed examination of *Chaucer and Costume*:

At least seven models of characterization by costume may be discerned in the literary tradition that forms the backdrop for Chaucer's pilgrim descriptions. Although nominally these models are distinct, often in practice the patterns overlap as well as subdivide within types and sometimes intertwine inseparably. This blurring, branching, and intermixing of models is especially evident when costume signs are examined simultaneously from a variety of perspectives—social, economic, allegorical, to mention only a few possibilities. A single

costume item might be interpreted at one time as belonging to more than one model listed below when the reader is receptive to all signifieds in a polyvalent sign. In addition, a costume sign that is realistic at the literal level may yield ironic implications at the social, allegorical, or any other level. . .1. Spiritual Mirror. . .2. False Vestment. . .3. Omitted Clothing. . .(clothed by their actions) 4. Emblematic dress. . .5. Actual Garment or Accessory. . .6. Social Mirror. . .7. Generalized Costume (stereotype or lacking detail). (5-6)

While I will not be using her distinct categories, much of my discussion intersects with these divisions, and her argument that clothing needs to be considered as a multivalent sign is essential to my analysis.

²²⁶ Both medieval noblewomen's beauty and their fashions, while constantly under criticism, were promoted by men who wanted to display their own wealth. Perhaps the best evidence that men were in control of the fashion scene can be found in books that regulated the behavior of women. In *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, Caxton's Middle English version of Geoffroy de la Tour Landry's *Livre du Chevalier de la Tour*, the knight advises his daughters to be the last to wear new fashions. He cites as an example a French Lord who refuses the new, immodest fashions for his wife until after the rest of the women of his country have adopted that attire. Yet in order to refute one baroness' claim that his wife is not in fashion, he asserts that he will outdo the popular mode:

Madame syth she is not arrayed after your guise / and that her pourfyls seme
lytell / wherefore ye blame me be ye certeyn that ye shal blame me nomore
therefore / For I shall doo araye her as queyntely and as nobly as ye or any
other ben [bvij] and ye more/ For ye haue not but the half of your garnementes
and of your hoodes torned outward with gys and ermines / but I shalle doo to

her better / For I shalle make her kirtels and hoodes alle the furre outward / &
so she shalle be better pourfyllled than ye ne the other. (xx.5-13)

Apparently, the man has two concerns—that his wife does not earn a bad reputation for wearing the extremes of fashion, and that she displays his wealth. This man's wife, fully clothed in fur would indeed have been a spectacle for viewing and a display of the husband's affluence. In spite of the sarcastic undertone, a sense of the theatrical nature of nobility can be perceived through this man's attitude. Being noble meant being a spectacle. A nobleman dressed his wife to be viewed as an extension of himself and his importance in society—which evidently meant she must not be considered too unusual in her dress.

²²⁷ For more development of this subject see Carter's discussion.

²²⁸ *Ergo, benedictae, primo quidem ut lenones et prostituteos vestitus et cultus ne in vos admiseritis; tum si quas vel divitiarum [suarum] vel natalium vel retro dignitatum ratio compellit ita pompaticas progredi, ut sapientiam consecutae temperare saltem ab hujusmodi curate, ne totis habenis licentiam usurpetis praetextu necessitatis.* (Caput IX Col 1326)

²²⁹ Some medieval sermons can be quite extreme, equating women who dress in the latest fashions with the devil, animals or filth. See G. R. Owst's discussion. (388-402). Burns discusses similar French examples found in religious and secular texts in the first chapter of *Courtly Love Undressed*.

²³⁰ The Middle English Dictionary gives several meanings for "side" that indicate something exaggerated. It could be an item that hangs down longer than normal, or is very broad, or is stretched out of shape.

²³¹ See Margaret Hallissy's discussion, pages 129-134.

²³² Lee Patterson maintains there are several possible readings of the Clerk's Tale: the use of clothing to make visible who Griselde already is, the transformative purpose of clothing, and the social/political purpose. For Patterson, however, the significant aspect of this tale is its

critique of theatrical performativity—perhaps a political critique aimed at Richard II and his extravagant use of clothing to proclaim himself sovereign.

²³³ The English translation is found in endnote 21, page 237 of Bloch. The Latin is as follows: “*Sic, dum ornari cultius, dum liberius evagari virgins volunt, esse virgins desinunt*” (*Patrologia Latina* Column 459A).

²³⁴ In Carolyn Walker Bynum’s study on medieval notions of metamorphosis, she finds that medieval attitudes toward transformation reflected both wonder and fear: “since the days of the pre-Socratics, change has been seen in the Western tradition as both horror and glory. If there is real replacement, we can after all both lose and transcend the self. And in writers of the Western mainstream, there has been a tendency to fear these two—loss and transcendence—as the same thing” (*Metamorphosis* 32).

²³⁵ This possibility is in line with Burns’ opinion of French sumptuary laws: “these royal decrees attest to the power of clothing to overwhelm biological heritage and effectively forge a social body from cloth” (32).

²³⁶ For a more in-depth discussion on the Pearl-poet’s integration of chivalric values and Christianity, see Andrew and Waldron (16-7).

²³⁷ See Matthew 22.1-14.

²³⁸ See Matthew 13.45-6. Andrew and Waldron expand on the pearl’s significance:

Clearly enough, the dominant symbolic significance of the pearls is that the Maiden is an inmate of heaven; the great pearl is probably intended to be identified with the pearl of price—alluded to in the other passage (733-5)—and thus with salvation. Beyond this, the central image of the pearl is a poetic rather than an allegorical symbol. Its significance cannot be unlocked in any mechanical way; it functions, rather, with a wide range of metaphorical suggestions and connotations, yielding rich and many-faceted significance and

representing many different things and concepts in relation to different strands in the total meaning of the poem. (32)

²³⁹ The notion of “Incarnational rhetoric” requires further explanation:

In the *Poetria nova*, Geoffrey predicates discourse formation upon and models it after Christ as Word made Flesh, a paradigm in which language has an increased capacity to signify the divine yet wherein, once the language is embodied, it exists in feminized form...As such, incarnational rhetoric is at once ‘figuration’ and ‘representation’ in that the author appears in his own text and the reader is meant to spiritually desire knowledge or a realization of the Logos as the precursor to cognitive or linguistic renewal, yet the embodiment evokes a certain morality or truth rather than erotic pleasure. (Hass-Birky 171)

²⁴⁰ “Matthew’s use of *notatio* for men and *efficitio* for women and one degenerate man indicates a correlation between the interior body and men and the exterior form and women or dissolute men... [She quotes M:] ‘in praising a woman one should stress heavily her physical beauty. This is not the proper way to praise a man.’ (Galyon, 46)” (174). Here Hass-Birky cites Aubrey E. Galyon’s translation: *Matthew of Vendôme: The Art of Versification*. Ames: Iowa State UP, 1980.

²⁴¹ I have already mentioned the noble descriptions of Mary and Susannah. Another interesting woman from the Bible who is represented as a noble heroine, is Asneth, the wife of the Old Testament Joseph. In the *Storie of Asneth* (early fifteenth century), she is first described as dressing in noble attire because of her noble lineage:

Clothed comely in bright byse, lykyng to her lynage,
And wrought *with* goold of iacint, a girdel of goold *per* to,
With Armillis aboute here handis, and here feet also. (lines 121-3)

After Asneth discovers she has misjudged Joseph, she repents and casts off her opulent garments. However, when God sends an angel to answer her prayer, he commands her to put on her noble clothes before he gives his message:

“. . . do on þi riche aray,
þi linnen robe, untouched newe, þat glorious ys & gay,
& gird the *with* þe double ceynt of þi virginité,
And then com to me agayn, & I schal speke to the.” (436-9)

Asneth’s clothes represent her status as a chaste and noble princess.

²⁴² Perhaps “lost” is too strong of a word here, because the erotic quality seems more likely hidden under the surface.

²⁴³ “erat autem eleganti aspectu” (Iudith 8.7).

²⁴⁴ “incomparabili decore omnium oculis appareret” (Iudith 10.4).

²⁴⁵ See Chapter Three’s discussion on pages 89 and 94 (fn 198) for these phrases in Old English.

²⁴⁶ “mulier pulchra nimis” (Comestor Col. 1477C)

²⁴⁷ This English translation is by Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante; the Old French from the edition by Jean Rychner, Paris, 1973:

*Ele iert vestue en itel guise
De chainse blanc e de chemise
Que tuit li costéli pareient,
Ki de dues parz lacié esteient.
Le cors ot gent, basse la hanche,
Le col plus blanc que neif sur branche. . .
Sis manteus fu de purpre bis; Les pans en ot entour li mis. (559-64, 571-2)*

²⁴⁸ In courtly romance, descriptions of dress and body often confound our assumptions regarding erotic texts. Kraus' nuanced analysis of the *Roman de la Violette* explains how the heroine becomes sexualized through her clothing, whereas descriptions of her naked or almost naked body lack eroticism.

²⁴⁹ Similarly, Sarah-Grace Heller contends that because much apparel in the thirteenth-century was unisex, male readers of romance probably would have been able to "identify with feminine dress in description as much as with masculine dress, appreciating it for its social signification or for its aesthetic interest" (952).

²⁵⁰ According to Pipponier and Mane, colors have both secular and religious significance in the Middle Ages: "While aristocratic society might pass the time by working out the relationship between colours and the stages of a love affair, the Church established a relationship between colours and the theological and cardinal virtues or the manifestations of godliness" (119). (I have already mentioned the symbolic color on Mary's clothing in the *Mirour of Man's Saluacion*.)

²⁵¹ Krause has demonstrated that Euriat's belt and brooch in *Roman de la Violette* (thirteenth century) carry a similar meaning: "Firmly associated with female literary predecessors who went to great lengths to preserve their honor and fidelity, the brooch and the belt also firmly close Euriat's clothing. The jewels guard, with the armor of intertextual virtue, Euriatu's neckline and waist/hips, symbolic points of access to the female body" (27).

²⁵² See Burns' discussion on love tokens. She points out that in Marie de France's *Eliduc* a belt (along with a ring) serves to indicate the woman's desire (vv. 510-14) (*Courtly* 8).

²⁵³ In saints' legends crowns become particularly significant as a reward for martyrdom.

²⁵⁴ Burns uses *Roman* as a specific example when she describes garlands of flowers as the "quintessential dress of courtly lovers in the thirteenth century" (*Courtly* 72).

²⁵⁵ For a discussion of headdresses, see J. L. Andre's study on female headdresses on Norfolk brasses.

The term "garland" did not signify simplicity in fashion to all medieval writers. Bromyard takes a particularly pejorative view of "garlands," although it seems he is conflating all types of headdresses into the term: "For, just as horses and pack-animals for sale are decorated, and some kind of notice is put on their head, so the Devil's pack-horses wear garlands on their heads that they may be the better and sooner sold" (qut in Owst 395). This is one of many instances where the Devil and fashion are closely associated.

In the *Book of the Knight of the Tower*, the knight offers an example of a woman who had a headdress that looked like the gallows. She was very proud of it, but she was mocked because of it (capitulum L).

²⁵⁶ The sumptuary law of 1363 legislates the type of clothing to be worn by different levels of society. Claire Sponsler asserts that "the petition attempts, then, primarily to control status, which it does by setting out a system of gradations in the social body that correspond primarily to the cost of apparel" (275).

ITEM, That Knights, which have Land or Rent within the Value of ii. C. [li.] shall take and wear Cloth of vi. Marks the whole Cloth, for their Vesture, and of none higher Price: And that they wear not Cloth of Gold, nor [Cloths,] Mantle, nor Gown furred with Miniver nor of Ermins, nor no Apparel broidered of Stone, nor otherwise; and that their Wives, Daughters, and Children be of the same Condition; and that they wear no turning up of Ermins, nor of Letuses, nor no Manner of Apparel of Stone, but only for their Heads. But that all Knights and Ladies, which have Land or Rent over the Value of iv. C. Mark by Year to the Sum of M. li. Shall wear at their Pleasure, except Ermins and Letuses, and apparel of [Pearls and Stone, but only] for their Heads. (*Statutes* 381)

²⁵⁷ The English translation is by Charity Cannon Willard, edited by Madeleine Pelner Cosman. The Old French comes from the critical edition by Willard and Hicks:

Poson que une feeme soit de tout bonne volenté et sans mauvais fait ne pensee de son corps, sin e le croira pas le monde puis que desordonee en abit on la verra, et seront faiz sur elle mains mauvais jugemens, quelque bonne que elle soit. Si apertient doncques a toute femme qui vault garder bonne renommee / que elle soit honneste et sans desquiseure en son abit et abillement, non trop estraincte ne trop grans coléz, ne autres façons malhonnestes, -- ne trop grant trouverresse de choses nouvelles, par especial cousteuses et non honnestes. (III.2)

²⁵⁸ In a similar manner, Wright's analysis of Bérout's *Tristan* demonstrates how significant the donning and removal of clothing is to both plot and theme. Just as significant is the removal of Yvain's clothing in Chrétien's *Le Chevalier au lion*, because, as Wright explains:

The removal of his clothes also signifies the removal of his social status—to such an extent that it is nearly impossible for two maidens who know Yvain from court to recognize the unclothed, compromised man they encounter one day in the forest. The text makes clear, however, that they would have recognized him immediately if he had been dressed appropriately. (3)

In both Bérout's and Chrétien's narratives, clothing is employed in a similar manner as it is in MEMPOT—the characters dressing and undressing performances causes other characters to react and to treat them according to the status indicated by their apparel.

On the other hand, my argument here is somewhat different from Hodges argument that Chaucer uses “sartorial metaphors which highlight the plot structure while they explicate and elucidate characterization” (“Sartorial” 223). Hodges is arguing for the metaphorical value of clothing items used within the text (i.e. Panderus's hood represents deception). I do not believe

that the MEMPOT-poet is aiming for metaphor in Judith, although any representation of her figure retains the historical weight of past metaphorical use.

²⁵⁹ Admittedly this part of Judith's story is missing from the Old English text, so the difference I recognize here might be minimal if the entire *Judith* poem were available for comparison.

²⁶⁰ This holds true for the Septuagint as well, where the Assyrians study Judith's face and are "struck by her beauty" (10:14). Her clothes have nothing to do with their judgment.

²⁶¹ The dreamer in Langland's *Piers Plowman* has the same reaction to Mede. In version B he exclaims, "Hire array me ravysshed, swich riches saugh I nevere" (Passus II.17). However Langland revised the words in C to sound even more like a love-struck lover: "Here aray with here rychesse raueschede my herte" (Passus II.16).

Pearsall comments that the ravishing depiction of Lady Mede both echoes the introduction of Holy Church and seems to allude "to Alice Perrers (Huppé, 1939, 44-52) mistress of Edward III in his last years and renowned for her extravagance of dress, her love of rings (l. 12 h343) and her corrupt manipulation of royal favor" (54). This two-fold allusion is indicative of the ambiguous nature of medieval signs, particularly the sign of an elaborately clothed lady which might represent Christ's bride and/or worldly vanity. Langland presents Mede as just this type of personification—the question is whether she will be wed to Truth or to Falseness. (Above Pearsall is citing B. F. Huppé, "The A-Text of *Piers Plowman* and the Norman Wars," *PMLA* 54 (1939), 37-64.)

²⁶² We have our own culturally-loaded erotic signifiers, such as leather jackets, power ties, or black lingerie.

²⁶³ See Burns' detailed discussion of the jealous husband in *Roman*, who criticizes his wife's use of clothes to attract lovers (44-53). She concludes that "extravagant court dress threatens to conflate garments and bodies so that one cannot separate the two" (*Courtly* 53).

²⁶⁴ Schultz is quoting Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York: Routledge, 1993, 14.

²⁶⁵ Holofernes' lust for power goes beyond even the common connection between desire for a noblewoman and a lust for wealth, which are connected in several romance texts, as Burns points out in her discussion of Meun's character Reason, who warns against desiring *amour*, which leads to lust for wealth: "Different from the reciprocal affection of Ciceronian friendship that Reason condones, the pursuit of physical pleasure and passion more often resembles the obsessive pursuit of tangible material gain the "couvoitise de gaaing" that plagues all rich men and misers (vv. 4744, 4773-5)" (*Courtly* 19).

²⁶⁶ *The Mirour of Mans Saluacioun* uses the term "honest" to describe wearing clothing that signifies one's estate. It seems that wearing clothing that is above one's estate is as if one is being deceptive—perhaps similar to wearing a mask to cover identity:

Nor in faire clothing synne if the hert be to God swete:

For ilk man after his state may honest clothing bere,

Als wham God makes a kynge besemes no sekke to were,

Nor husbandmen awe nought clothis to wear of sylke. (448-451)

²⁶⁷ The poet appears much more approving of Judith's "gay" clothes than of her "widow wede," Which is unusual, because many medieval texts insist that widows should wear clothing that is appropriate to their mourning, such as this commentary from *Book of Vices and Virtues*, which praises Judith for wearing simple clothing as a sign of her widowhood and chastity:

To suche state belongeþ also meke cloþes, þat is no grete arraye ne riche robes ne queynte, as bi þe ensauple of Iudith, þat lefte hire riche robes and noble attire whan hire lord was ded and toke cloþinge of widowhode, meke & simple, þat was more tokenyng or wepyng and sorwe þan of ioye or of veyne glorie; and for sche toke chastite and wolde kepe it al hire-lif, sche dide vpon

hire flesche þe hayre, and faste eury day but þe his holi daies, and 3it sche was wonder fair and 3ong and wise and riche, but goodnesse of herte and loue to be chaste made hire do þis. (251)

A similar attitude is found in this medieval sermon:

Also hit falleth to wedoewes for to use symple and comune clothinge of mene colour and noght gay ne starynge, ne of queynte and sotil schap, and take ensample of the holy wedowe Judith, of whom holy writ maketh mynde, that anone whan hir housbonde was deed sche lefte all hir gay attyre and apparaile bothe of hir body and of hir heed, and toke mekeliche clothing and attyre that longed to a wydowe, to schewe doel of her herte and to eschewe veynglorie for the love of God. (qud in Owst 119) (MS Harl. 45, fol. 121)

As I discuss in Chapter Two there are many reasons that may motivate the poet to avoid Judith's status of widow and thus her mourning clothes. Another possible cause for avoiding Judith's widows weeds might be to focus on her strength, because "widow's weeds imply mutability—the instability of Fortune and life" (Hodges "Sartorial" 227).

²⁶⁸ In *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, Vashti's refusal is used as an example of how women should obey their husbands. The knight believes it was the Queen's duty to let the king parade her beauty in front of the other nobles.

²⁶⁹ The Old French Paraphrase (Egerton 2710), which shares many details with MEMPOT, does not contain the book of Esther. It would be worthwhile to search other French paraphrases for possible similarities.

²⁷⁰ For a late medieval example, see *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* in Hahn's edition of romance tales about Sir Gawain.

²⁷¹ Judith and Saint Paul were often used as exempla when encouraging widows to remain secluded and prayerful, with fasting—the three instructions for widows in *The Book of Vices and Virtues*:

Be first is to hide hire and be priueliche dwelling in hire place and noust for to folewe suspicious felawschep, and þer-of haue we ensaumple of Iudith, þat was widowe and was wonder fair and comeliche, wher-of men redden in holy writt þat sche hilde hire in hire chaumbre y-schut wiþ hire maidens; wherefore seynt Poule vndertakeþ þes zonge women widowes þat weren idel & besy to go alday hider and þider and iangelode & speke to moche, but þei schulde schut hem wiþ-ynne houses and entende and be besy to do goode dedes, as seynt Poule techeþ. þe secunde þing is to entende to bidde God goode praiers. . .þe þridde þing is scharpe metes and drynkes. For as seynt Poule seip ‘þe woman þat is widowe and ledeþ hire lif in delite is ded in synne.’ (250-1)

Given the religious bias for seclusion, it seems somewhat unusual that MEMPOT’s poet emphasizes active good deeds, rather than prayer and fasting.

²⁷² See MEMPOT 574.6879-80 (Abigail) and 1393.16715-6 (Esther).

Their intercessory role was one reason that Judith and Esther were often paired, as discussed in Chapter Three. Of course Judith’s intercession is unique in its deceptive, seductive, and violent nature.

²⁷³ Gibbons uses the term “social mannequin” in her discussion of Isabeau, suggesting that this queen’s expenditures were not always for personal indulgence. She cites an example of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary who was said to have dressed herself in penitential robes, but upon being required to appear for a meeting of state was miraculously given opulent garments. This account is what spurs Gibbons to posit that “the notion that God Himself would see fit to intervene to prevent sartorial embarrassment emphasises the importance of clothes to the

reflection and maintenance of rank, and perhaps even validates this public role of the queen as ‘social mannequin’” (371).

²⁷⁴ Butler and Irigaray sometimes appear to be on opposite extremes of the discussion regarding sexual difference, but Elizabeth Grosz claims that Butler and Irigaray (as well as a list of other feminists) share some basic notions about the body:

The body cannot be understood as a neutral screen, a biological *tabula rasa* onto which masculine or feminine could be differently projected. Instead of seeing sex as an essentialist and gender as a constructionist category, these thinkers are concerned to undermine the dichotomy. The concept of the social body is a major strategy in this goal. As sexually specific, the body codes the meanings projected onto it in sexually determinate ways. These feminists thus do not evoke a precultural, presocial, or prelinguistic pure body but a body as social and discursive object, a body bound up in the order of desire, signification, and power. (18-9)

Unlike others who have criticized Irigaray’s work as essentialist and not compatible with the performativity theory of Butler, Grosz understands Irigaray as speaking of the uniqueness of the feminine because the experience of a female body would contribute to a creation different than that of experiencing a male body—not only physically, as in the inner workings of hormones, but also in social experience. Grosz’s model requires that both a bodily experience—Irigaray’s point—and the exterior performance—Butler’s argument—create the body of the perceived self.

²⁷⁵ On the other hand, “dressing” as a part of Judith’s self-developed scheme indicates some degree of sovereignty over her person. She is portrayed as utilizing contemporary cultural expectations to obtain her desired goal.

²⁷⁶ While there are differences between Judith’s slaying of Holofernes and that of a “proper” chivalric battle—mainly that of location and the weakened state of Holofernes—

MEMPOT's describes Judith's actions as similar to romance heroes. (I will go into detail later in the chapter.)

²⁷⁷ See discussion of the Vulgate's use of the term "manfully" in Judith 14:11 on pages 53-4.

Joan of Arc is, of course, the most famous woman military hero. See Valerie R. Hotchkiss' collection of essays on the subject of female cross dressing. For an analysis of cross dressing in a 13th century romance text see Brahney's discussion of the *Roman de Silence*. She concludes that this

romance constitutes an experiment yielding empirical data which demonstrate that were she freed from the constraints of society, woman's capacity for development would be unlimited. In the final analysis, however, Nature and society align to place Silence or 'woman' in what is deemed a proper but—from a feminist point of view—very limited role. (57)

²⁷⁸ Classen cites Hartmann Von Aue. *Erec*. *Mittelhochdeutscher Text mit Übertragung* von Thomas Cramer Frankfurt a.M: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1973.

²⁷⁹ Classen cites Gottfried Von Strassburg. *Tristan und Isolde*. Ed. Friedrich Ranke. Frankfurt am Main: Kristandt KG, 1969.

²⁸⁰ Fries is referring to Dumézil's study "Le trio des Macha," *RHR* 146:5-17.

²⁸¹ See a more thorough discussion of this passage in Chapter Four, pages 136-8.

²⁸² Scholars differ in their opinions on the representation of Christian values in *SGGK*. Nichol Smith reads the text as transformative—issuing a call to transformation in the community. However, David Aers claims the poem "involves no transformation of the church or of the Christianity to which the poem's elites subscribe" (95).

²⁸³ MEMPOT represents the character of Abygay [Abigail; 1 Kings 25] performing in a similar fashion as Judith, as she wisely approaches David with gifts and pleads for the lives of

her household. There are two particular similarities in the accounts: before going to see David, Abygay dresses elaborately, as discussed in Chapter Four, and when she meets him she falls at his feet in humility:

Scho menys to mend yt, yf scho may,

pat þei suld not be putt to pyne,

In gud garmentes scho made hyr gay

With pe[[]ure and with pyrre fine. . .

And sone when scho hym mett,

Scho fell down to his fette. (6877-80, 87-8; 574.1-4, 11-2)

Here Abygay's clothing serves to give her a public identity: she wants David to see that she is a noblewoman, one who looks and acts the part. She proves that she is nobler than her husband Nabal who has denied David the reward he deserved. She shows knowledge of courtly behavior through her manner of dressing, the gifts she brings, and the humble way she approaches David to ask for a favor. Abygay's role is straightforward. Her courtly behavior leads up to asking David directly for mercy, but she is only able to do this because they are not really enemies—they both serve the same God. Judith's strategy, on the other hand, must necessarily be deceiving, because Holofoernes does not share her beliefs or her love for the Hebrews.

²⁸⁴ Both Old and New Testaments mention bowing the knees for the purpose of worship to the Jewish/Christian God and in other religions, as well as noting the use of bowing to show worship to powerful humans (3 Kings 19.18; 1 Esdras 9.5, 4 Kings 113; Esther 3.2, Romans 11.4, Ephesians 3.14).

²⁸⁵ The theme of hypocrisy must have interested Chaucer, because he expounds upon hypocrisy in humorous fashion—fabliau style—within the Canterbury Tales. All of the characters (excepting the parson and plowman) seem to be Fals-Semblant wearing various costumes.

Chaucer's ironic tone allows readers to judge the characters without the more direct condemnation used in *The Rose*.

²⁸⁶ Recent critics usually place the original Robin Hood somewhere between the first half of the thirteenth or as late as early fourteenth century, but in either case his legend was popular at the time of MEMPOT's composition, demonstrated by a reference to him in *Piers Plowman* (B Passus V.396), which was written somewhere between 1377-79. See Thomas G. Hahn (41-6) for discussion regarding the dating and Barbara Hanawalt for a discussion of Robin Hood's legendary characteristics that make him an acceptable hero rather than a villain.

²⁸⁷ See discussion of infiltration as a common motif in Robin Hood literature in Stephen Thomas Knight's mythic biography.

²⁸⁸ Therefore, in MEMPOT's portrayal of Ehad, he is a storyteller, accustomed to being in the king's presence, and in its account of Rahab, she maintains an inn, making it likely (and somewhat less controversial) that the Hebrew spies seek refuge in her home.

The MEMPOT-poet does not, however, mention Jael, the Hebrew woman famous for piercing the general Sisara's head with a tent peg after giving him refuge (Judges 4.17-24). Some scholars believe that the character of Judith is a combination of the wisdom of Deborah and the courage/cunning of Jael.

²⁸⁹ I use the word "believable" here in a literary sense—medieval readers are able to suspend disbelief, because Judith's manners are similar to those of familiar courtly romance characters.

²⁹⁰ All English translations of Chrétien are from D. D. R. Owen. The Old French is from Poirion's edition: "Bien sot par parole enivrer / Bricon, des qu' ele l met l'antante" (3428-9). (I have italicized the letters for which the orthographic symbol was not available on my word processor.)

²⁹¹ *Mout est bele, mes mialz asez*

Vaut ses saviors que sa biautez:
Onques Dex ne fist rien tant saige
Ne qui tant soit de franc coraige. (537-10)

²⁹² *Si estoient d' une meniere,*
D'unes mors et d' une matiere,
Que nus qui le voir volsisdire
N' an poïst le meillor eslire
Ne le plus bel ne le plus sage. (1495-9)

²⁹³ "*Mialz est asez qu' ele li mante, / Que ses sires fust depeciez*" (3430-1).

²⁹⁴ Erec commands Enide not to talk to him unless he speaks first. Yet several times along the journey she fears for his life and warns him of coming danger in spite of his threats each time. There are varying interpretations regarding the significance of Erec's command. Chrétien makes it clear that Erec loves Enide, because before they go on their adventure he extracts a promise of his father to give Enide half of the kingdom if she returns without him (lines 2716-42).

²⁹⁵ Burland gives a similar observation: "That Enide has no trouble assuming her own adult responsibilities as queen is indicated by the narrator's focus on the exterior of the coronation scene and on its symbolic meanings: with the inner crises of hero and heroine resolved, the characters' perceptions of themselves match their triumphant appearance" (181).

²⁹⁶ However, in Ysonde and Judith's case the aggressive act is to be completed on an unwary victim, since women were not skilled in battle, thus making their conduct unchivalrous. (We might also read the aggressiveness of these women characters as being *carnivalesque*, a term which I will discuss later in the chapter.)

The legendary Amazons fed the imagination of medieval writers. See Lorraine Kochanske Stock for a brief overview of “medieval romances [which] feature female characters either based on classical Amazons or representing fantasies about female knighthood” (16).

²⁹⁷ Alan Lupack points out the comedy within the text, including the involvement of the hound in drinking the love potion with his master and mistress and thus participating in their love. However, it is not clear whether or not a faithful dog, as a symbol of love, was considered humorous in the Middle Ages. (In later art dogs are painted into domestic paintings as symbols of marital fidelity.) While I agree with Lupack that the poem can be read as comedy, I wonder whether it is our modern sensibilities and imagination that makes it so. Thus, I have taken the text at face value, even though its condensation of facts and certain elements of plot appear humorous to a modern audience. Philipa Hardman treats the poem similarly and also points out that J. M. Steadman has argued for Chaucer’s usage of a dog to symbolize faithfulness in marriage (221). Her footnote at the bottom of the page cites: ““J. M. Steadman, “Chaucer’s ‘Whelp’: A Symbol of Marital Fidelity,” *Notes and Queries* 201 (1956): 374-5.”

Perhaps the laughter in *Sir Tristrem* is caused by elements of the literary carnivalesque. A Bakhtinian reading of carnival indicates that medieval carnival humor is not quite the same as modern parody or satire. Instead it turns the world upside down in order to laugh at it, not in condemnation, but in identification. In this reading the tale can be read as comic and yet non-critical toward the characters within it. Later in the chapter, I will discuss more about reading carnival elements.

²⁹⁸ This quote and the preceding information are from the Introduction to the two poems, for which the online TEAMS edition does not credit an author. The first editor is Larry D. Benson, while the revisor is Edward E Foster. Some of the exact phrasing is used in an introduction by Benson in his student edition published in 1986 by Exeter University, so I assume that the entire introduction in the TEAMS edition is also by Benson.

²⁹⁹ In this text, it is not only Queen Gaynor that has power to move the actions of men, but other noblewomen also have authority. When Sir Lancelot needs men to defend himself against King Arthur, it is the ladies who supply his need:

quenys and countesses that Ryche were

Sende hym erlys *with* grete meyne;

Other ladies that might no more

Sente hym barons or knyghtis free. (lines 2038-41)

The ladies whose lands Lancelot has defended have the authority to send men to battle, even earls and barons.

³⁰⁰ There is an interesting folk legend, extant in ballad form, found in both India and the Balkan, in which a well will not flow until a woman is walled up within it or thrown into the spring and drowns. Thus, a woman loses her life, but the people receive water. I have not included this legend in my analysis because there is no evidence that it was known in medieval England.

³⁰¹ Jan William Van Henton comments on the similarities between the biblical narratives of Moses' striking the rock and Judith's striking Holofernes head: "Although the narrative of Judith 7-13 is certainly much more elaborate than the short story of Exod. 17.1-7, the pattern of actions and ending of both narratives are strikingly similar" (236). She has developed a comparative table to illustrate her claim.

³⁰² *Petitque sibi dari copiam egrediendi foras nocte and adorandum Deum suum, et ita per triduum noctibus exhibat, et baptizabat se in aquis, et orabat Deum Israel.* (Col. 1478B)

³⁰³ The Old Testament laws about washing were very specific regarding touching unclean animals and unclean humans. Washing would have been very important for Judith's piety, particularly while she was in a "pagan" setting, exposed to many things that according to Jewish law were unclean.

³⁰⁴ There is one exception to this statement. Before Judith dresses in her finery, MEMPOT tells us that she scrubs herself completely: “*with bawme and with bathes hate/clense all hyr cors fro fote to crown*” (17239-40; 1437.7-8). In these lines the poet focuses on the practical side of washing before dressing. The text does not try to explain why Judith has water when the people are dying of thirst—but neither does the Book of Judith. (See Levine 215).

³⁰⁵ These three actions are reminiscent of the responsibilities of the three medieval estates: fighting, praying, and plowing—perhaps an indication that in some sense she is an “everyman/woman” figure.

³⁰⁶ The example noted by Peck is of the woman in *Yvain* whose husband died defending their magical spring or fountain. Whenever an intruder poured water from the spring onto a stone, all hell broke out in nature—rain fell, thunder rolled and lightning bolts pierced the sky, destroying the forest and causing all of the animals to run away. The spring in this story does not protect or provide for the people of the story, but serves as an instigator of adventure and a sign of the dependency of the woman, who owns the spring even while not being able to defend it from intruders (Nitze 179). There appear to be no other storm-making springs within medieval romance poetry, although scholars have uncovered various folk legends that include the phenomena, and the motif appears in texts that claim a more historical reference (Morgan 2). Maxwell S. Luria cites Alexander Neckam’s encyclopedia *De Naturis Rerum* as having an entry describing the fountain as well as his own moralization of its significance: “To Neckam this symbolizes the beneficent action of Holy Doctrine upon the hard heart or mind” (571). Given the medieval tendency to moralize and symbolize unusual aspects of literary accounts, the MEMPOT-poet’s lack of commentary regarding Judith’s well appears to serve as another indication that the poet intended a literal reading even while non-literal associations are inevitable.

³⁰⁷ Piers Plowman rests by a bank of water in the beginning of Langland's text. Also see Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* (line 187); *Book of the Duchess* (160); *Canterbury Tales*, *Clerks Prologue* (48).

³⁰⁸ Water, becomes more than the sustainer of physical life in the Christian scriptures. Often passages from the New Testament are read as metaphorical—God gives spiritual life as he gave the people water in the desert. In the book of John, Jesus claims that “the water that I will give him, shall become in him a fountain of water, springing up into life everlasting” (John 4:14).

³⁰⁹ Scholars have noticed the borrowing and transforming of Christian ideals into courtly romance themes. C. S. Lewis suggests that “this erotic religion [i.e. courtly love] arises as a rival or a parody of the real religion and emphasizes the antagonism of the two ideals” (*Allegory* 18).

³¹⁰ In two French versions of the legend *Melusine*, which are nearly contemporaneous with MEMPOT, Melusine is sitting beside a fountain when Count Raimondin first sees her. Immediately he is ravished with desire and soon they wed (J. Taylor 556-7).

³¹¹ Judith speaks from literally high locations twice within MEMPOT's narrative—once in the temple and then again when she brings Holofernes' head into the city: “Sho stud vp in a sted of hyt / þat all men myzt se hyr certain” (17573-4; 1465.5-6).

³¹² One very noticeable difference between the two versions is that in MEMPOT Judith claims the Hebrews need to repent of sin, while in the Book of Judith she reminds them they have not sinned in following other gods: “For we have not followed the sins of our fathers, who forsook their God, and worshipped strange gods” (Judith 8. 18). “*quoniam non sumus secuti peccata patrum nostrorum qui dereliquerunt Deum suum et adoraverunt deos alienos*” (*iudith* 8:18). Perhaps the MEMPOT-poet is modeling Judith's speech after a medieval sermon, exhorting the people to repent.

³¹³ “*et nunc fratres quoniam vos qui estis presbyteri in populo Dei ex vobis pendet anima illorum adloquio vestro corda eorum erigite ut memores sint quia temptati sunt patres nostri ut probarentur si vere colerent Deum suum*” (*Judith* 8 :21).

³¹⁴ There are occasional references in medieval texts to queens commanding troops—according to the *Stanzaic Morte Darthur*, Guinevere did have some military power, as she commanded her knights, who protected her from Mordred. Yet commanding one’s bodyguard is not equal to commanding the military of an entire city.

³¹⁵ See 17188;1433.4 for Judith’s confident referral to her own “wytt.”

³¹⁶ After the decapitation, as the women are leaving the scene, MEMPOT uses the adverb “wyghtly” that is sometimes defined as “manfully.” Both Peck and Livingston have glossed it accordingly, but there are two other uses of the word within MEMPOT’s account of Judith where the same term is used to mean “quick” or “quickly.” Because there is no precedent for its other meaning within this account, I believe the line could just as well be read “quickly went their way,” rather than “manfully went their way.”

³¹⁷ [*et habebis omnem populum Israhel* (*Judith* 11 :15).] Commentators enjoy commenting on the irony of this passage—she does bring his head into the city.

³¹⁸ The term “glosen” can carry either pleasant or pejorative connotations. According to the Middle English dictionary, it can mean “to use fair words, talk smoothly or courteously; speak with blandishment, flattery, or deceit” (n. pg). In romance texts “glosing” can be a game, much like today’s flirtation between people who are somewhat attracted to each other, or it can be an indication of polite conversation between equals, such as kings. On the other hand, it is often criticized as false: for example MEMPOT’s description of Delilah’s actions, “So yll wemen wyll glose / þem þat þei wold haue schent” (4341-2; 362.9-10). Often women are connected to the pejorative meaning of glose, because of the patristic tendency to present women as deceptive.

Another meaning of *glose* relates to texts: “to comment on, interpret, explain, paraphrase,” but textual glossing can also have pejorative connotations: “to interpret (a text) falsely” (MED n. pg.). Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath* is an interesting depiction of a woman who connects the textual and behavioral meanings of the word. She speaks out against men who gloss misogynistically, claiming that women are deceptive and evil. Carolyn Dinshaw reads both the *Wife of Bath* and *Griselda* as feminine texts to be glossed or translated by men: “Translation takes place on a feminine body, as it does as well in *Troilus and Criseyde*; like ‘glossing’ in the *Wife of Bath*’s Prologue and Tale, it is a masculine hermeneutic gesture performed on the woman, on the text” (133). In *MEMPOT*, Judith is depicted as “glosing” first and then Holofernes “gloses” in return—in the sense of courtly flattery—but Judith is also the ultimate glosser of in this text: she reads the judgement of Osi as wrong and corrects him; she reads the masculine desires of Holofernes and manipulates him in the manner of her own desire. (If it could be proved that *MEMPOT* were written by a woman interesting analogies could be made.)

³¹⁹ See the discussion of Mycoll, pages 19-20.

³²⁰ In the Bible Mycoll eventually criticizes David and becomes barren. The paraphraser ignores this aspect of her character.

³²¹ *nec suffecit ei ut ambularet in peccatis Hieroboam filii Nabath insuper duxit uxorem Hiezabel filiam Ethbaal regis Sidoniorum et abiit et servivit Baal et adoravit eum (I Kings 16:31).*

Note: this Latin version has been updated so that instead of four books of Kings as in the Douay Rheims there are First and Second Samuel and First and Second Kings.

³²² The word “secrett” is noted as *soreth* in Kalén’s textual notes. It is surprising that he did not connect it to *Sorec* where *Dalila* lives according to the Douay Rheims Bible. Livingston renders the word “*Soreth*.”

³²³ Sarah (Abraham’s wife) is another good example of a woman whose negative actions have been erased from the story. In the Bible Sara gives her handmaiden to her

husband to conceive an heir, but is then despised by the maid so that Sarah responds by “afflicting” the maid and driving her into the wilderness while she is pregnant and then again many years later when she sees the teen-age Ishmael playing with Isaac. In MEMPOT, Sarai behaves as a “woman wyse” who protects her handmaid and her son—until after Isaac is born and then drives her out. Unlike the Bible, in which Ishmael is raised in the wilderness, MEMPOT’s Abraham makes peace between the two women and they all live together happily celebrating Isaac as heir (lines 505-28, 637-60; stanzas 43-44, 54-55). MEMPOT also completely erases the biblical detail that Sarai laughs (evidently in disbelief) when she is told she will have a son and then lies about doing so to God’s messengers.

³²⁴ Another good example of a romance alteration is the changing of Delilah’s reward from money to lands. This may be due to the influence of the still undiscovered Old French paraphrase, which is assumed to have influenced the MEMPOT-poet. See Livingston’s discussion over lines 3601-4440, page 578 of his edition.

³²⁵ Admittedly, Judith does not defeat Holofernes in battle—this would be to alter the story and the character excessively. More to the point, Judith’s performance must indicate that she maintains her feminine clothing and behavior. She does not go to war like a male hero, but she can accomplish the same results.

³²⁶ While Bakhtin does not discuss the aspect of literary carnival as related to the Hebrew scriptures, he does mention that the basis for the carnivalesque is ancient. Thus, Kenneth Craig argues that studying the carnivalesque in the Hebrew book of Esther is an appropriate application of Bakhtin’s theory:

“The special carnival form of symbol and metaphor evolved as a rich idiom reflecting the varied experiences of the people, and the open-ended nature of carnival forms to the dynamics of social change enabled their further historical development in literature. Certain experiences, opposed to all that was ready-

made, found dynamic expressions. Authors developed new, ever-changing, and playful forms. In Bakhtin's words, "these [carnavalesque] forms developed during thousands of years . . . they were filled with powerful historic awareness and led to a deeper understanding of reality" (1984b:208) . . . Established hierarchies, reigning authorities, and worldviews are all destroyed in Esther's narrative world. We may, indeed, be in the world of carnivalesque folklore. (31, 32)

Craig is quoting from Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*.

³²⁷ See pages 3 and 195-6 of this dissertation.

³²⁸ See Chapter Three's discussion of the pairing effect in literature and art (89, 97, 101).

³²⁹ While read as a separate work, the Judith story, particularly MEMPOT's version, might be understood as almost erasing male voices (except for her reference to the fathers of the faith). Thus, its discourse becomes almost matriarchally *authoritarian*. However, read as a story within the larger context of biblical literature or as one continuous poem of the Old Testament, this presentation of Judith and her maid becomes part of a dialogue with competing male voices.

³³⁰ See the dialogue between Blamires ("Women and Creative Intelligence") and Newman ("More Thoughts") on this topic. Apparently opinions on the subject of woman's wit were not monolithic.

³³¹ Bakhtin divides the literature of the Middle Ages into two registers. Courtly romance is included within the high register and generally not credited as a precursor to the dialogic imagination of the novel.

³³² However, carnival elements provide the tension needed to create an interesting plot—the conflict rather than being primarily individual is related to a threat to the social order.

³³³ When Judith bows to Holofernes, making him her king and then subsequently decrowns him through decapitation, she performs the ultimate act of carnival: “The primary carnivalistic act is the mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king. . . —the pathos of shifts and changes, of death and renewal” (Bakhtin *Problems* 124).

³³⁴ The word “solping” in the MED refers to “stain, filth, defilement.”

³³⁵ Bakhtin emphasizes that the grotesque stresses “those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world” (*Rabelais* 26). The Judith narrative contains many of the activities by which “the body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits. . . copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation” (*Rabelais* 26). Feasting and Death are essential to the story, as is the possibility of copulation.

Another way of examining this passage is through Grosz’s assertion that men have often looked upon and represented women as “seepage.” This attitude toward the female body prompts representations that expect women’s fluidity and anticipate its danger:

Can it be that in the West, in our time, the female body has been constructed not only as a lack or absence but with more complexity, as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as formless flow as viscosity, entrapping, secreting; as lacking not so much or simply the phallus but self-containment – not a cracked or porous vessel, like a leaking ship, but a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order? (203)

The Hebrew men checked the scene in Holofernes tent in order to be certain that Judith’s female fluidity had not overflowed. They found that she had remained self-contained, uncontaminated, the masculine order had not been threatened from their point of view. On the

other hand, the reaction of the Assyrians demonstrates their perception that an uncontrollable woman had entrapped their general.

³³⁶ David Hayman asserts that Bakhtin did not adequately stress the contrast essential to the carnival grotesque (see Hayman's discussion 105-6). The contrast between Judith's lack of corporality and Holofernes' grotesque body, however, serves to protect Judith from carnival chaos. While she upsets gender hierarchies, the poet obviously does not desire her to be read as upsetting aristocratic values or sexual taboos.

³³⁷ Placing Holofernes' head in the basket used normally to carry "bread" resonates with the death to life topos of the carnivalesque.

³³⁸ Not only medieval romance but medieval epics, such as the *Chanson de Roland*, also painted violence graphically, embellishing the battles and executions with details of body parts being severed and the hair plucked out (i.e. Ganelon's punishment 137.15-22, 289).

³³⁹ [*cumque evaginasset illud adprehendit comam capitis eius et ait confirma me Domine Deus Israhel in hac hora et percussit bis in cervicem eius et abscidit caput eius et abstulit conopeum eius a columnis et evolvit corpus eius truncum* (Judith 13 :9-10).]

³⁴⁰ Belshazzar in the Middle English *Cleanness* (late fourteenth century) dies in a similar messy manner. For further discussion regarding the surprisingly graphic details about violence done to the body in late medieval texts, see Claire Sponsler's discussion of the murder of the innocents and Christ's passion depicted in the Corpus Christi plays (*Drama* 136-60).

Bakhtin explains this fascination with the violent as a coping mechanism: "All that was terrifying becomes grotesque . . . The people play with terror and laugh at it; the awesome becomes a 'comic monster'" (*Rabelais* 91).

³⁴¹ Although today we have alternative treatments that rebel against these trends (as in much feminist drama).

³⁴² In this passage there is, of course, still a prejudice towards single people, but it is remarkable that women are not automatically subsumed under their husbands' distribution allotment.

³⁴³ Squires argues that these activities place Judith in domestic space as a "pious widow"; however, I think the emphasis here is on her activity, not her retirement, as I have argued in Chapter Two. Judith is definitely not portrayed as a modern feminist, who is involved equally in public affairs, but she has been given remarkable mobility and power for the portrayal of a female hero in either romance or the Bible.

³⁴⁴ Here is one instance where "man" is used as a general pronoun to represent all humans. In Judith's death as well as life, she is an example for men and women.

³⁴⁵ Bakhtin never mentions gender in his analysis, and thus his theory has often been shunned by feminist critics. However other feminists, such as Kay Halasek have found his theory useful in spite of the absence of gender: "I—like Kristeva and Bauer—am not so concerned with Bakhtin's omitting the feminist voice in his work. We, you and I, can add that . . . We make the monologue dialogic" (73).

³⁴⁶ While there is not absolute proof of the playwright of this play, Graham Runnals argues for authorship by Jean Molinet, based on style and content in comparison with his other work.

Holofernes is a comic figure in the drama—one who has been struck by cupid's arrow:

When this woman gives me that look of hers,

I am completely afire with love for her.

Ah, love, your visit is most welcome,

Visit us just for this one feast!

I shall feast on love, now we are face to face.

My love is torturing me to death. (1960-5)

*Au doux regard de ceste femme,
Afflambé suis de son amour.
Ha, amours, quell plaisant sejour
De sojourner ung seul repas!
Repeu en seray bras a bras.
Frappé en suis jucqu'au mourir. (1960-5)*

³⁴⁷ “Of plays on Judith there are eight versions in Latin, twenty in French, twenty-six in Italian, twenty-three in German, and numerous versions in Spanish and other languages” (H. Craig 365).

³⁴⁸ Bynum argues that there is a difference in the way that women religious renounced the world as compared to their male counterparts. Men often claimed to take on the role of woman, becoming weak for Christ’s sake:

To men, woman was a marked category, an exception to the generalization homo, a reversal of ordinary condition. “to become woman” was an obvious image of renunciation and conversion. . . . But women themselves did not, by and large, see woman as a marked category, nor did they worry about themselves as exceptions or special cases of the general category humanity. Women did not assume that their religious progress involved “becoming male.” Women, of course, described themselves in female images. Moreover, religious women—whether nuns, beguines, tertiaries, or lay women . . .—adopted practices (such as fasting, chastity, white garments, uncontrolled weeping) that distinguished them from those in worldly roles. (269-70)

³⁴⁹ Intrinsic to the narrative (the biblical story as well as most other retellings) is the idea that Judith places herself in physical danger so that the possibility of suffering is consistently present. In some versions of her narrative there seems to be an indication that she suffers

internally because of the assault of heathen lives on her morality and spirituality—what we might call psychological or emotional suffering. This interior suffering is usually revealed within Judith’s prayers as she calls on God for help.

³⁵⁰ The English is from Graham A. Runnalls’ translation, entitled *Judith and Holofernes*. The Old French is Runnalls’ edition.

Par femme jus est du tout la ruïne,
Don’t toutes femmes en Judich ont ressource;
Mais peu en a qui soient de cette orine,
Car volentiers mettent honneur en bourse. (2457-60)

³⁵¹ **Manassés** Dame de haulte renomnee,

Vous avez ung tresbon conseil.

Ozias Allez vous en, je vous conseil,

En vostre hostel vous reposer,

Dame Judich. (946-50)

³⁵² En vous priant, devotes creatures

Cy assistans par grant devocion,

Que en gré pregnez, car ce sont les figures

Du doulx Jesus et de sa passion. (2467-70)

³⁵³ Bal uses Judith as an “ideo-story” to consider its relevance for modern cultural analysis. Her discussion includes interpretations of Judith in art and Freud’s use of Judith. Bal’s overall objective is to consider Judith as a ‘topos,’ representing ‘knowledge.’ Her final question illustrates the complexity of considering Judith’s many representations:

Could she/it be the representation of an alternative story of origin, not one where the one gender’s wholeness must be safeguarded by the other’s fragmentation, but one where fragmentation is endorsed to prevent ‘wholeness’

from being pressed into service as an excuse for the fierce safeguarding of separation?” (285)

Bal reads vision and wholeness into Artemisia Gentileschi's depictions of Judith rather than castration and fragmentation.

³⁵⁴ As Mary Jacobus explains in relation to Judith's representation in later art and Hebbel's 19th century drama:

The image has a prehistory, and yet it can only tell its story by being installed in the narratives which reread it. Moreover, its interpretability depends on the onlooker's insertion into the same narrative . . . There can be no such thing as 'innocent' seeing, only one that is already structured, already symbolic . . . or one that is not seeing at all . . . What makes the image 'significant'—what gives it the status of an objective truth—is not its visibility, but its legibility. (Jacobus 122, 124).

³⁵⁵ Beadle compares The Old French Paraphrase, MEMPOT, and the York Play in his article.

³⁵⁶ [Abraham was astonished that his seed could yield in that way (my translation)]

³⁵⁷ Here I am not making a claim that the book is historically accurate. Although the autobiography may be partially or completely fictional, it is still a textual representation of a mobile and independent woman.

³⁵⁸ For a brief discussion of Chaucer's version of Griselde see page 117-8 and fn 232.

³⁵⁹ In *Le Livre des Trois Virtus* Christine de Pizan outlined a liberal plan of action for women of different estates, acknowledging that women had to accept where they were in the hierarchy and live their lives accordingly.

³⁶⁰ Irigaray posits that women's liberation is connected to a spiritual "becoming," which in patriarchal society has only been available for men:

To remain faithful to herself, to turn back to herself, within herself, to be born again free, animated by her own breath, her own words, her own gestures, this corresponds to the most decisive conquest for women. And to speak of woman's liberation, women's liberation, without such a course, such autonomy, is not possible" (*Key 166*).

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Terri Vaughn resides in Austin, Texas, an intellectually stimulating location, where accessible resources and thought-provoking dialogue allow her to pursue her many academic interests with ease. Along with Terri's interest in medieval studies—particularly topics related to women—she is interested in reading French feminist theory and studying art history. Future research projects include continuing study on the MEMPOT manuscript and publishing an examination of the Veronica image in Carol Maso's *The Art Lover*. She also enjoys writing creatively and has published her first book of poems, *Now and Then* (Thorp Springs Press), a collection of poetry that explores her work with Central Americans in the 1980s. She hopes to mingle her creative and academic talents in future works of poetry, and perhaps fiction. While writing and research are major goals in Terri's career, her first love is teaching. Without a doubt she will be pursuing a career that enables her to interact with students on a regular basis, hopefully sparking a similar passion for critical reading and writing within new generations of scholars.