

# 8. Typology and Agency in Prudentius's Treatment of the Judith Story

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In the late fourth century, the Christian poet Prudentius wrote the *Psychomachia* (The Battle within the Soul), which depicts a series of single combats between personified virtues and vices. Immensely popular in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the *Psychomachia's* allegorical battles were depicted in a variety of relief sculptures and paintings throughout churches in Europe.<sup>1</sup> In his poem, Prudentius frequently uses a character or story from the Old Testament that prefigures a character or event from the New Testament, Roman Christian history, and a personified virtue or vice. These typologies form the backbone of Prudentius's poem; so, for instance, the biblical story of Judith who refuses the sexual advances of the Assyrian king, Holofernes, and then kills him in order to save the Israelites is treated at *Psych.* 58–75. In the passage, the personified virtue, *Pudicitia* (Chastity), tells the defeated vice, *Libido* (Lust), that her violent death was predicted by Judith's killing of Holofernes:

Tene, o vexatrix hominum,  
potuisse resumtis  
viribus extincti capitis recalescere  
flatu,  
Assyrium postquam thalamum  
cervix Olofernīs  
caesa cupidineo madefactum  
sanguine lavit

Should you, harasser of human  
beings, be able to resume your  
strength and grow warm again  
with the breath of life that was  
extinguished in you, after the severed  
head of Holofernes soaked his  
Assyrian chamber with his lustful  
blood, and the unbending Judith,

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1 Adolf Katzenellenbogen, *Allegories of the Virtues and Vices in Mediaeval Art* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1964), pp. 7–13.

gemmantemque torum moechi  
 ducis aspera Iudith  
 spreuit et incestos conpescuit  
 ense furores,  
 famosum mulier referens ex hoste  
 tropaeum  
 non trepidante manu, vindex mea  
 caelitus audax!  
 At fortasse parum fortis matrona  
 sub umbra  
 legis adhuc pugnans, dum  
 tempora nostra figurat,  
 vera quibus virtus terrena in  
 corpora fluxit,  
 grande per infirmos caput  
 excisura ministros?  
 Numquid et intactae post partum  
 virginis ullum  
 fas tibi iam superest? Post partum  
 virginis, ex quo  
 corporis humani naturam pristina  
 origo  
 deservit carnemque novam vis  
 ardua sevit  
 atque innupta deum concepit  
 femina Christum,  
 mortali de matre hominem sed  
 cum patre numen.<sup>2</sup>

spurning the lecherous captain's  
 jeweled couch, checked his un-  
 clean passion with the sword, and  
 woman as she was, won a famous  
 victory over the foe with no trem-  
 bling hand, maintaining my cause  
 with a heaven-inspired boldness?  
 But perhaps a woman still fighting  
 under the shade of the law did not  
 have enough strength, though in  
 doing so she prefigured our times,  
 in which the true power of virtue  
 has passed into earthly bodies so  
 that a great head is severed by the  
 hands of feeble agents. Well, since  
 an immaculate virgin has born a  
 child, do you have any claim re-  
 maining – since the day when a  
 man's body lost its primeval na-  
 ture, and power from on high cre-  
 ated a new flesh, and an unwed-  
 ded woman conceived the God  
 Christ, who is man in virtue of  
 his mortal mother but God along  
 with the Father?<sup>3</sup>

Not only do Judith and her story prefigure the victory of the virtue *Pudicitia* over the vice *Libido*, they also prefigure Mary and Christ's immaculate birth.<sup>4</sup> In Prudentius's version of the Judith story, the agency of Judith is emphasized and the typological pairs of Judith/Mary and Judith/*Pudicitia* become directed toward the reader who is encouraged to choose between Judith and Holofernes, chastity and lust.

For Prudentius, the decision and action of Judith is a prototypical act of free will. This extraordinary act by a woman raises the issue of female

2 The text is from the edition of M. Cunningham (ed.), *Aurelii Prudentii Clementis Carmina*, Corpus Christianorum, series latina, vol. 126 (Turnholt-Brepols: Leuven University Press, 1966).

3 Translations with changes are from H. J. Thomson, *Prudentius*, vols. 1–2, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949).

4 See Marc Mastrangelo, *The Roman Self in Late Antiquity: Prudentius and the Poetics of the Soul* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), pp. 93–96.

agency as it relates to human agency. Recent scholarship has shown that the agency of ancient female figures is delimited according to political and social constraints. Exclusion from political decision making, social segregation, and subordinate legal status all factor into a picture of female agency that has largely been viewed as severely limited. However, some recent work has argued that female roles in religious rituals reveal autonomous actions that contribute directly to the political and social life of the state.<sup>5</sup> Barbara Goff has argued that fifth-century Athenian literature depicts women who obtain fuller agency because these characters take ritual (and social) tasks to an extreme often resulting in the usurpation of masculine power (for example, in Euripides's *Bacchae*, the maenads and Agave<sup>6</sup>). Judith conforms in part to this model as she eliminates a king and preserves her native land.

Taking their cue from Jerome and Ambrose, Prudentius and his contemporary Paulinus of Nola (*Carm.* 26:160–65 and 28:26–7) construct Judith as a universalizable heroic exemplar.<sup>7</sup> However, as this paper argues, the *Psychomachia* uniquely portrays Judith as a typologically constructed, autonomous moral agent who is an example of freely chosen moral action. Her chastity is figured and refigured in the poetic personification of *Pudicitia*, the incarnation of Christ, and the purity of the reader's soul. The last term in this typological series is the reader of the *Psychomachia*, a Roman aristocratic Christian, whose own moral agency is implied by the Judith story. By locating the Christian doctrine of free will in a typological series of female figures (Judith, Mary, and *Pudicitia*), Prudentius has made female agency the ideal for both males and females. The imitation of female weakness and chastity is a source of moral strength for all.

Female agency, then, is tied to general human agency because both flow from an act of moral choice, constructed as a Christian act of free will. The quality and act of chastity are not only signs of a pure soul for Roman females, but also for males.<sup>8</sup> Prudentius simultaneously alludes to both the story of Judith and Matthew 25:7, which develops the metaphor of bridesmaids (all humans!) waiting for the bridegroom (Jesus). The pairing

5 Angeliki Tzanetou, Introduction to Marilyne Parca and Angeliki Tzanetou (eds.), *Finding Persephone: Women's Rituals in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007).

6 Barbara Goff, *Citizen Bacchae: Women's Ritual Practice in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

7 See also Prudentius's literary descendant, Dracontius, *De laudibus dei*, 3.380ff.

8 Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 382–83 and 427.

of texts from Judith and Matthew makes explicit the proposition that female agency exists as a result of a moral choice constructed within the self through the memory of biblical typological exemplars. Hence, female agency becomes identical to human agency (for both males and females).

Christian agency as universal human agency has as its foundation physical, worldly weakness. Spiritual strength for both men and women is constructed from weakness traditionally associated with women. By locating the Christian doctrine of free will in a female figure, Prudentius has bolstered female agency – at least when it comes to salvation and immortality. Early Christian (and thus human) agency often posits worldly weakness and helplessness, a condition that broadly describes the restrictions on ancient female agency; but in the face of a difficult moral choice, inner purity transforms worldly (female) weakness into virtuous action, power, and salvation. The seeds of Prudentius's approach can be seen in the writings of Ambrose and Jerome.

## The Reception of Judith: Latin Fathers, Paulinus of Nola, and Prudentius

The Latin Patristic literature has a strong tradition regarding the usage of the Matthew passage and the Judith story. We can connect one branch of the tradition beginning with Ambrose who is cited by both Jerome and Augustine. Ambrose's interpretation of Judith 10 at *De virginibus* 2.4.24 is referred to by Jerome at *Epistula* 22.22 and *Epistula* 58.14, and by Augustine at *De doctrina christiana* 4.129–130 (see also 4.132–33). At *De virginibus* 2.4.24, the bishop of Milan appears to be saying that the desire to preserve one's chastity can become extreme; yet for Ambrose, the Judith story illustrates the most important desire: to preserve one's religion. The same argument is given at *De viduis* 7 that Judith was successful because she acted for the sake of her religion. Ambrose also sees her as an example of chastity, wisdom, sobriety and moderation. Her faith is emphasized at *De officiis ministrorum* 3.13.82–85 in order to conclude that the power of virtue can make even a woman strong in worldly situations, but more importantly, in matters of spiritual salvation as well.<sup>9</sup>

9 At *De officiis*, 3.13.84, Ambrose includes the three basic statuses of Roman women: virgins, widows, and wives. Prudentius, *Psych.* 64 (*mulier*), 66 (*matrona*), 70 and 71 (*virginis*, said of Mary), hits a similar note and adds *meretricis* and *prostibulum* (*Psych.* 49 and 92) as applied to *Libido*. The distinction of purity between *mulier/matrona* and *virgo* is especially important for Jerome.

Jerome refers eight times to texts from either Matthew or Judith in which his exclusive concern is to promote and preserve virginity or chastity (*Epistulae* 22.5; 22.21–22; 22.44; 54.13; 54.16; 79.10; 125.20; and 130.11). In *Epistula* 22, Jerome is concerned with the distinction between wives and virgins. An assumption of all these usages is that virginity makes one ready to receive the bridegroom (i.e., Christ). Two cases have some features in common with Prudentius's treatment elaborated below. At *Epistula* 54.16, Jerome combines Judith 13 with Matthew 25:4 to create a graphic narrative description, which is reminiscent of the Prudentian treatment. *Epistula* 79.10 is a case of typological thinking, as Judith is compared to Anna of the Gospel of Luke (Lk 2:36–38). Jerome's treatment of Judith and surrounding themes appears to have much in common with Prudentius's version – especially, the foregrounding of purity. Regarding 1 Corinthians 7:26 and 7:29, where Paul appeals to married men (and couples) to become celibate, Jerome points out that virginity is a choice originating in human free will and that sexual relations have changed under the new law of Christianity. Thus both men and women can purify their faith through celibacy. This is proven through the positive, typological example of Mary, with which Judith is connected; and through the negative typological example of Eve who represents the old law: *Mors per Evam, vita per Mariam* (“Death through Eve and life through Mary;” *Epistula* 22.21).<sup>10</sup> Relying on a series of typological examples, Jerome shows that the weakness of Judith (and virgins) is actually a great source of strength to overcome worldly and spiritual challenges.<sup>11</sup>

Paulinus of Nola, who wrote both prose and poetry in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, is best known for his poetic cycle, *Natalicia*, which celebrate the life and miracles of Saint Felix of Nola.<sup>12</sup> In the *Natalicia*, he

10 It is worth quoting an extended portion of the passage: *Inveniebatur ergo, ut diximus in viris tantum hoc continentiae bonum et in doloribus iugitur Eva pariebat. Postquam vero virgo concepit in utero et peperit nobis puerum, “cuius principatus in umero eius,” Deum fortem, patrem futuri saeculi, soluta maledictio est. Mors per Evam, vita per Mariam. Ideoque et ditius virginitatis donum fluxit in feminas, quia coepit a femina. Statim ut Filius Dei ingressus est super terram, novam familiam instituit, ut, qui ab angelis adorabatur in caelo, haberet angelos in terries. Tunc Olofernae caput Iudith continens amputavit ...* Note that *continentiae* is used of men and the old law at the beginning of the passage and *continens* is applied to women and the new law. With Jerome we encounter an unprecedented focus on women as agents of cultural and spiritual change.

11 *nunc, qui infirmus est, fortior est* (“now, one who is weak is stronger;” *Epistula* 22.21). This is said of Lazarus but is applicable to all the exemplars, including Judith, whom Jerome lists.

12 For a full treatment of Paulinus's life and work, see Dennis E. Trout, *Paulinus*

refers to the Judith story twice. The allusion to the story at *Carmen* 26 (402 C.E.) is germane to this discussion. *Carmen* 26:159–165 places Judith within a series of examples of heroic males and females whose “weakness” was more than compensated for by faith:

A holy faith has endowed women’s character with the strength of men, for through such faith the holy woman (Deborah) 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 barbarian’s camp victorious after slaughtering their leader.<sup>13</sup>

Paulinus locates Felix at the end of this line of figures (which include David, the Israelites of the Exodus, Joshua, and Rahab), who were able to overcome the weapons of war through their single-minded commitment to God. Again, Judith is one of a series of types, whose victory through faith alone Paulinus wishes to ascribe to Saint Felix so that the village of Nola (and Rome) will be protected from the threat of Barbarian incursions. Just like Jerome, Paulinus employs both men and women in his list of typological exemplars.

Paulinus understands individual agency in terms of faith in an all-powerful god. As he says earlier in the same poem, “Having trust in Christ, consigning everything to the God of powers, regarding God alone as all that is highest – this has always been efficacious in achieving every good” (*Carmen* 26:150–53).<sup>14</sup> Worldly weakness and vulnerability to powerful forces are associated with females in particular. Paulinus makes use of female “weakness” to illustrate the quality of faith, and link it to chastity (*Carmen* 26:132–33; Rahab the harlot who possesses a “chaste fidelity”). The poet relies on a series of typological examples from the Hebrew Bible to project qualities onto Saint Felix. It is striking that female figures, and agency modeled on the subjection of the female, become generalized into a strong notion of Christian agency. In his treatment of Judith, Prudentius employs similar methods as seen in *Carmen* 26, but goes even further by showing how typological series are fundamental to the ideas of free will and the

of Nola: *Life, Letters and Poems* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).

13 *Femineas quoque personas virtute virili / induit alma fides, mulier qua sancta peremit / terribilem Sisaram transfixum tempora palo; / terrentem magnos late populos Holofernem / arte pudicitiae deceptum callida Iudith / risit, in impuro quae non polluta cubili / barbara truncato victrix duce castra fugavit.* Translation by P. G. Walsh, *The Poems of St. Paulinus of Nola* (New York: Newman Press, 1975).

14 *semper in omne bonum valuit confidere Christo, / credere cuncta deo virtutum, ponere solum / omnia summa deum ...*

interiority of an individual Roman Christian.

*Pudicitia*, as she addresses the dying *Libido*, accuses her of corrupting human souls. After the immaculate birth of Christ, there appears to be no role left for lust in human affairs (... *ullum / fas tibi iam superest?* *Psych.* 70–71). The status of Christ's birth and relationship to humans and the father flows from lustless origins. When *Pudicitia* finishes her speech, she cleans her bloody sword in the Jordan River and places it by a divine spring in a Christian temple (*Psych.* 98–108). Purity remains a resulting condition of the *Psychomachia*'s portrayal of virtue. However, aside from the allegorical reference to Christian baptism and purification, these ten lines allegorically refer to the chaste (body) and pure soul, which has become a reality with the incarnation of Christ. Although Prudentius usually does not hesitate to sensationalize his material with graphic descriptions of death and violence, in this adaptation of the Judith passage, he is restrained (*Psych.* 40–108). The only grisly parallel to the biblical passage is the severing of the head of Holofernes. Prudentius excludes the description of Holofernes's headless trunk rolling off his bed and the section in which Judith places the head in a bag of food to bring to the Assyrian leaders. He keeps the focus on the characteristics of the pure soul, which are necessary to preserve one's chastity and therefore make one ready to receive Christ.

In the *Psychomachia* Judith does not hesitate to carry out the deed, whereas in the biblical version she constantly seeks strength from God, without which she does not seem able to accomplish the action (Jdt 13:4 and 7). At Judith 14:1–5, Judith is portrayed as a leader who gives orders and even predicts the outcome of the battle between the Jews and the Assyrians. The biblical Judith gains a personal power and authority after she kills Holofernes, whereas Prudentius characterizes her as a confident leader before and during the slaying of the Assyrian. These differences expose the characteristics emphasized in the typology between Judith and *Pudicitia*, the killer of *Libido*. Prudentius typologically projects this part of Judith's biblical identity on to *Pudicitia* herself who commands, leads, and gains total victory. Regarding the typological connection to *Pudicitia*, Prudentius emphasizes Judith's initiative, and consequently, her agency; but he deemphasizes the Father as prime mover and human passivity, ideas that occupy the foreground of Paulinus's poetry.

For Prudentius, Judith's typological connection with Mary logically leads to the topics of the ontological nature of Christ, his relationship to the Father, and the status of human flesh (*Psych.* 76–86). The theological

positioning is concisely expressed in an apophatic flourish at *Psych.* 82–84:

ille manet quod semper erat, quod	He remains what he always was,
non erat esse	though begins to be what he was
incipiens; nos quod fuimus iam	not; but we are no longer what
non sumus, aucti	we were, now that we are raised
nascendo in melius. mihi contulit	at our birth into a better condi-
et sibi mansit.	tion. He has given to me, yet still
	remained for himself.

Thus the Word, i.e., Christ, always remains what it was, though commencing to be what it was not; and humans were not what they are now. The important, positive meaning that Prudentius gleans from this apophatic (negative and enigmatic) formulation is that human flesh and souls have fundamentally changed due to God taking on human form – while the godhead remains the same. This change in humans is explained not in ordinary thinking and speaking, but in historical terms through the typology of Judith/Mary and, in conceptual terms, through the typology of Judith/*Pudicitia*. The stories of the defeat of *Libido* by *Pudicitia* and the killing of Holofernes by Judith, which together form a complex typological allegory, help define the change in human flesh by portraying the purity acquired from chastity. The quality of the soul, chastity, is a necessary ingredient for the acquisition of purity in both body and soul. Thus, the soul of each Roman Christian can become pure by becoming the re-figuring of chaste Judith, the Israelite woman whose extraordinary actions saved her nation. And finally, female weakness is transformed into spiritual strength for all by typologically relating the stories of Judith, Mary, and the Incarnation. Judith's story, which takes place under the old dispensation of Mosaic law, gains authority only when understood through the stories of the new, Christian, dispensation. For Prudentius, like Paulinus, female weakness becomes integrated into the definition of a salvational Christian agency with the pregnancy of Mary and birth of Christ.

## Judith, the *Psychomachia*, and Female Agency

Feminist scholars and anthropologists have no fixed definition of female agency. Their interest has focused more on the methodological and ideological implications concerning agency.<sup>15</sup> However, in the context of Greek women's ritual practices, for instance, it is clear that agency as female autonomy, to whatever degree, grounds the scholarly discussion. The

15 Tzanetou, Introduction, p. 11.



dialectic between agency and subjection or, what Barbara Goff calls "the double bind of agency and subjection," is important as well.<sup>16</sup> In the ancient Greek ritual context, the representation of women oscillates between "female independence and male influence."<sup>17</sup> In the Roman Empire, marriage conferred a new degree of agency on women that was reflected in domestic authority and property ownership, especially amongst widows. By the time of Jerome, the estates of Roman Christian widows were a significant source of revenue for the church – and from the evidence of Jerome's letters, these women also played significant roles in the development of urban ascetic practices.<sup>18</sup> Female agency, then, is conceptually and historically specific. The term "agency" functions more meaningfully with historical and conceptual qualifiers; for example, "Roman," "Greek," "Christian," "aristocratic," "ethical," and/or "linguistic."<sup>19</sup>

The meaning of female agency is heavily context-dependent, especially since in representing ancient women, universalizing definitions tend to mask indications of autonomy that might provide important historical perspectives. Elizabeth Clark, following Joan Scott, confirms this idea when she discusses the study of early Christian women, the evidence for whom is primarily textual: "to study the meaning of the rhetoric pertaining to women – in addition to raising up women as agents and victims – enlarges our historical perspective."<sup>20</sup> Thus in my understanding of female agency, I begin from Scott's loose formulation: "... subjects do have agency. They are not unified, autonomous individuals exercising free will, but rather subjects whose agency is created through situations and statuses conferred on them ..." <sup>21</sup> Scott effectively guards against projecting twentieth-century notions of the individualist self onto different eras; in the ancient world, for example, a self is conceived as relational to others, to the roles one plays in the family and society, and to the institutions in which one participates.<sup>22</sup>

16 Goff, *Citizen Bacchae*, p. 91 n. 6.

17 Tzanetou, Introduction, p. 12.

18 S. Rebenich, *Jerome* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 28–39.

19 E. Clarke, "Engendering the Study of Religion," in S. Jakelc and L. Pearson (eds.), *The Future of the Study of Religion* (Leiden: Brill Press, 2004), p. 222: "Women's agency ... has varied considerably with the workings of class, law, social custom, generational differences, and religious hierarchy."

20 Ibid., p. 241.

21 Ibid., p. 236, quotes Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry*, 17 (1991), pp. 791–93.

22 Christopher Gill, *Character and Personality in Greek Epic and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) and *The Structured Self in Hellenistic and Roman Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) have set the terms of the discussion

If we understand the biblical Judith with Scott's formulation in mind, we see an aristocratic, pious, beautiful, chaste, Israelite widow. By replacing her clothes of widowhood with party dress and suggesting that her chastity is up for renegotiation, Judith further complicates the context of her agency by appearing to be an alluring, pious traitor who, nonetheless, is helpless from the point of view of the powerful commander, Holofernes. Her inverted Odyssean disguise, if you will (Odysseus preferred the disguise of a beggar), puts her in the "normal," subjected role that female agents in these stories played. Yet, just before her entry into the Assyrian camp, when she was back in her Israelite city, Judith is anything but subject to her male colleagues and superiors. The Israelite commander, Ozias, and his soldiers obey each of her commands. From the point of view of the Israelite men, Judith is indeed in charge, the master of her actions, which could result in the salvation of Israel. With regard to the reader, Judith's plan represents a desperate act, the Israelites' last hope. Why else put your faith in a lone widow? And for the character of Judith herself, any successful act that saves her people and comes about through her is an act of God. Her actions are really God's. Thus agency as degrees of autonomy is figured in several ways in the biblical text, according to Judith's variously construed situations and statuses, and according to the perspective of the two main characters and the reader. From the perspectives of male authority, female vulnerability, and an omnipotent God, the biblical text reflects a range of weak and strong agency.

We might add to Scott's formulation of agency that texts construct the female agent as a product of various viewpoints within and exterior to the text. However, given this, it is still possible to understand the biblical and the Prudentian Judith as an "aggrandized" female agent, that is, as an exceptional and "anomalous portrait" of a woman who manipulates her social and political position in a society in which most women were passive and subjected. Many feminist historians argue that the subjection that formed an essential part of women's subjectivity would be ignored if we were to focus on the rhetoric of such exceptional examples as Judith.<sup>23</sup> The task of reconstructing real women's lives, they claim, would be deemphasized. Feminist critics and historians have been involved in a lively de-

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regarding the ancient and the modern self.

23 A. Hollywood, "Gender, Agency, and the Divine in Religious Historiography," *Journal of Religion*, 84.4 (2004), p. 247. See also "Agency and Evidence in Feminist Studies of Religion: A Response to Elizabeth Clark," in Jakelcic and Pearson, *The Future of the Study of Religion*.

bate concerning this issue, but it is not surprising that Judith is an aggrandized female agent because both in the biblical text and in the *Psychomachia*, Judith furnishes one of the terms in the type/antitype binary of typology. It is a requirement of the method of typology that persons and events from the past stand out in an exceptional way and are associated with other persons or events that come afterward. The point is that through this use of typology both ordinary men and women, whatever the state of their subjection, have access to salvation.

Connections between persons and events of different epochs illustrate how typological thinking in Judith and in the *Psychomachia* helps to define the agency of Judith and *Pudicitia*. Exceptional people and events of the past provide the keys to action for Judith in the biblical text and for *Pudicitia*. For instance, at Judith 9, in her prayer Judith invokes the example of Simeon and Levi, sons of Jacob, who avenged the rape of their sister Dinah (Gn 34): "O Lord God of my father Simeon, to whom thou gavest a sword to take revenge on the strangers who had loosed the girdle of a virgin to defile her, and uncovered her thigh to put her to shame, and polluted her womb to disgrace her" (Jdt 9:2). For *Pudicitia*, Judith herself furnishes the exceptional example that comes to her mind after the killing of *Libido*: "... and woman as she was, [Judith] won a famous victory over the foe with no trembling hand, my bold heavenly avenger!" (*Psych.* 64–65). Similarly, *Pudicitia* is a typological expression of Judith, constructed from the virtue that Judith exemplifies, chastity. Thus, the memory of past exceptional persons and events motivates, supports, and justifies the actions of these characters. The agency expressed by Judith and *Pudicitia* hinges on typological relationships explicit and implicit in the respective texts.

## Generalized Agency, Typology, and Free Will in the *Psychomachia*

The autonomy, status, and authority of the *Psychomachia*'s Judith derive from Prudentius's placement of the chaste widow in Christian salvation history. And her establishment as a prominent historical figure is accomplished through her deployment in typologies. The *Psychomachia* is rich with typological associations that define the agency of Judith, Mary, *Pudicitia*, and finally, the Roman Christian reader of the poem. The agency of Prudentius's Judith is realized through understanding her as a typological figure. Associated with the Virgin Mary, and her killing of Holofernes,

she becomes typologically related to the immaculate birth of Jesus. Judith's agency becomes defined in terms of a choice between two autonomous actions: committing adultery or saving her people through chastity (and guile!). Not only does she display her autonomous agency but she also exercises the right choice, thereby cementing her name in Christian universal salvation history, which is told in the *Psychomachia* through a series of types and antetypes from the Hebrew bible, the Gospel, and Roman history.

An examination of the language of *Psych.* 40–109 reveals the role that the trope of typology plays in generalizing female agency as seen in *Pudicitia*, Judith, and Mary. *Pudicitia* is twice referred to as a *victrix* ("victor"; *Psych.* 53, 103), while Judith, who is merely a *mulier* (wife; *Psych.* 63) and a *matrona* (widow; *Psych.* 66), achieves a great victory over Holofernes and the Assyrians. Judith is one of the "feeble agents" or "earthly bodies" through whom virtue defeats powerful vice:

at fortasse parum fortis matrona  
sub umbra  
legis adhuc pugnans, dum  
tempora nostra figurat,  
vera quibus virtus terrena in  
corpora fluxit  
grande per infirmos caput  
excisura ministros.  
(*Psych.* 66–69)

But perhaps one might say  
(wrongly!) that a widow fighting  
under the shadow of [Mosaic]  
law was not strong enough, even  
though she prefigured our times,  
in which true virtue has passed  
into earthly bodies, virtue, which  
through feeble agents, severs the  
great head.

To understand its full force one must look to *Psych.* 58–63: *tene, o vexatrix hominum, potuisse resumptis / extincti capitis recalescere flatu ... postquam ... Iudith ... incestos conpescuit ense furor* ("Will you [*Libido*], who vex human beings, be able to resume your strength and grow warm again with the breath of life that was extinguished in you after Judith checked [*Holofernes's*] unclean passion with the sword ...?"). *Pudicitia* indicates that the defeat of *Libido* is temporary, that the typologically prior event of the killing of Holofernes by Judith did not eliminate lust. It is an extraordinary observation because it implies that the battle with lust within each person's soul happens repeatedly (see *Psych.* 893–98). The only way to destroy lust over and over again is for an individual to remember the archetypal story that figures its defeat, for instance, the story of Judith (and *Pudicitia's* defeat of *Libido*), and finally, to choose to act according to her example. Even a feeble agent gains strength through the acquisition of virtue that purifies the soul.

The rest of this section of the *Psychomachia* forms a reply to the recurring

problem of vice. On the one hand, freewill of the individual appears to be invoked since each person must summon his or her own inner virtues to suppress lust. On the other hand, what allows each person to fight this battle and kill off lust in universal salvation history is the immaculate birth of Christ, which *Pudicitia* explains over the course of twenty-seven lines (*Psych.* 70–97). *Psych.* 66–69 must be understood in this context. The phrase at *Psych.* 66, *sub umbra legis* (under the shadow of [Mosaic] law), points backward to the incompleteness of Mosaic law when an indefatigable lust was operative in the universe, and forward to the new dispensation of Christianity, in which *Libido* will be driven from the soul. This possibility of a future, free of lust, has been prefigured by the action of Judith. The typology has become more specific, pairing Judith's killing of Holofernes – and as a consequence, the saving of the Jewish people – with the birth of Christ by Mary, which saves all Christians. The elimination of lust by Judith typologically indicates Mary, her immaculate conception, and the birth of Christ, a moment in history when individual, freely taken action, resulting in the destruction of vice and evil became available to even “feeble agents.” The phrase *infirmos ministros* is typologically tinged, signifying Judith and Mary (as well as Martyrs), females whose worldly weakness is transformed into salvational strength. Through the association of females with weakness and salvation, Prudentius, Jerome, and Paulinus of Nola describe a new Christian agency, one that is universalizable to all human beings.

Early Christians such as Prudentius understood the idea of agency to include a degree of autonomy and independence that allows the human agent to choose freely between virtue and vice.<sup>24</sup> What is more, an act of a weak agent can defeat extremely powerful forces, either through earthly victory or through the winning of salvation in “defeat” (David, Judith, Jesus, and the Martyrs, respectively). The exemplary female agent in early Christian writing is often figured as strong though weak, first though last, included though excluded. Judith and Mary are certainly the most unlikely candidates to change the world with their actions, yet they do just that. However, these figures obtain much of their force and authority because of the pivotal roles they play in salvation history. And for Prudentius, salvation history is constructed through a series of typologies that unite the Hebrew past with the Roman Christian recent past, present and future. Adverbial expressions of time indicate these periods: *sub umbra legis* (*Psych.* 66–67), *post partum virginis* (*Psych.* 70, 71), *nostra tempora ... quibus* (*Psych.*

24 Mastrangelo, *The Roman Self in Late Antiquity*, chapter 3.

67–68), *inde* (*Psych.* 76), *post Mariam* (*Psych.* 88), *postquam* (*Psych.* 60). The killing of Holofernes, the incarnation of Christ, and the immortality of Prudentius's Roman Christian reader become constituents of a typology that signify individual salvation through freely chosen action.

Prudentius works out the ultimate meaning of the typology of Judith-*Pudicitia*/Mary/reader at *Psych.* 98–108, which portrays the washing and dedication of *Pudicitia*'s sword. *Pudicitia* is described as a *docta victrix* (a learned victor; *Psych.* 102–103). Her learnedness refers to her knowledge of Christian doctrine. The purity, intrinsic to the story of Mary and the pure birth of Christ, which are figured in the story of Judith and Holofernes, is

finally expressed in the treatment of *Pudicitia*'s sword. The sword is cleansed and left in a Christian altar so that it will always remain pure, never to be defiled in any way (*Psych.* 107–108). Paradoxically, a woman's act of ritual cleansing results in a phallic image of purity. Not only should the reader associate the story of Judith with the incarnation of Christ in order to trigger the virtue of chastity in his soul, but the reader should see this traditionally female attribute as a source of strength. Just as *Pudicitia*'s powerful sword shines with "eternal light" (*aeterna luce*; *Psych.* 108), so shall all persons bask in the glow of eternal life provided that he or she knows (*docta*) and commits to the doctrines of the Church.

## Female Agency as Religious Sexual Agency

Kathy Gaca has recently argued that early Christianity's prohibition of the worship of goddesses of sexuality, marriage, and child nurture stripped females of their religious agency as goddess worshippers. Gaca remarks that in pre-Christian Greece, women's "religious sexual agency" was "widespread and deeply rooted."<sup>25</sup> From the time of Plato, "women, their sexual bodies, and the female deities in charge of this domain played a pivotal role in this regenerative center of Greek life."<sup>26</sup> For Gaca, the defeat of polytheism by monotheism allows the figure of Christ to appropriate the authority of girls, adolescent girls, and mothers in the sexual and reproductive spheres.<sup>27</sup>

At first glance, this provocative argument appears to contradict the view that early Christian women may have become more independent in the sexual sphere because adultery became equally blameworthy for both males

25 Kathy Gaca, "Early Christian Antipathy to the Greek 'Women Gods,'" in Parca and Tzanetou, *Finding Persephone*, p. 283.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 286.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 283, with 2 Cor 6:14–7:1.

and females (at least in theory) by the fourth century. Given that Gaca's argument focuses on women's actual practices in ancient society, Judith and her story could be understood as a counterexample to her claim that women lost an important aspect of their agency. The use of the Judith story in the *Psychomachia* portrays a kind of female agency that reconfigures a woman's relation to her sexual and reproductive roles. On the one hand, Judith influences history through the pleasurable temptations associated with her body. Her sexual and childbearing potential is subordinated to her capability of saving herself and her people. On the other hand, Judith's agency has been universalized. It is a new kind of agency, grounded on the precepts of post-Nicean Christianity. Both women and men can imitate her historical example when they choose chastity over sexual pleasure in order to behave morally within a marriage or purify the soul for the coming of the bridegroom, Christ.

Thus Gaca may be right that the sexual and reproductive roles of women, so important to the scholarly construction of ancient female agency, are disassociated from women of early Christianity.<sup>28</sup> However, at least for one aggrandized example of female agency, Judith of the *Psychomachia*, the "female" virtue of chastity of paganism is appropriated as central to the universal Christian doctrine of immortality. In practice, most Christian women of this period may have lost an aspect of autonomy and independence that they possessed in their sexual and reproductive lives; but in the ideal and in certain aristocratic circles, women had gained an autonomy consisting in choices that define what it means to be a good Christian. An aristocratic Christian widow of the fourth century could do what she liked with her property if she did not form any more attachments by remarrying and having (more) children. The Jeromes and Ambroses of the fourth century encouraged them not to form these attachments. In other words, these widows should be chaste, and, as a consequence, many gave their wealth to the Church. Jerome and other bishops of the late fourth century appeal to this *mentalité* when raising money for the Church or recasting sexual mores as Christian ones.

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28 Clark, "Engendering the Study of Religion," p. 222, cites K. King, "Prophetic Power and Women's Authority: The Case of the Gospel of Mary (Magdalene)," in Beverly Mayne Kienzie and Pamela J. Walker (eds.), *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 32–33.

## Conclusion

To understand constructions of female agency in early Christian or medieval history is in part to see how typology functions. The disassociation of women from the sexual and reproductive sphere, the tolerance for prophecy, and the presence of Christ as the expectant bridegroom help to form a new idea of female (and male) Christian identity. However, a typology that is anchored in an exemplary figure, and also includes the reader, viewer, or parishioner, helps to define in what ways the autonomy and independence of early Christian women and men is to be understood. In Prudentius's *Psychomachia*, Judith's story, as in various martyr stories, shows that the hierarchical relationships given in the world are powerless in the face of internalized Christian virtue. The male Israelite commanders, Holofernes, and *Libido* yield to Judith's authority, which is constructed in large part from her place in a typology. We have seen that this typology includes the most important figures and events in Christian salvation history. Thus Judith herself gains great power from these explicit associations. But if the autonomy of female agency, as seen in Prudentius's Judith, is diminished because it distracts us from how early Christian women lived, it simultaneously undergoes a process of generalization (or appropriation) that results in an ideal Christian agency for both men and women, whose most salient characteristic is a limited version of free will.



# The Sword of Judith

## Judith Studies Across the Disciplines

Edited by Kevin R. Brine, Elena Ciletti  
and Henrike Lähnemann

The Book of Judith tells the story of a fictitious Jewish woman beheading the general of a powerful army to free her people. The parabolic story was set as an example of how God will help the righteous. Judith's heroic action not only became a validating charter myth of Judaism itself but has also been appropriated by many Christian and secular groupings, and has been an inspiration for numerous literary texts and works of art. It continues to exercise its power over artists, authors and academics and is becoming a major field of research in its own right.

*The Sword of Judith* is the first multidisciplinary collection of essays to discuss representations of Judith throughout the centuries. It transforms our understanding across a wide range of disciplines. The collection includes new archival source studies, the translation of unpublished manuscripts, the translation of texts unavailable in English, and Judith images and music.

This volume is part of the Re:Enlightenment Project formed as a collaboration between New York University, New York Public Library and other distinguished academic institutions. As with all Open Book publications the entire work is available free to read online, while printable digital editions of the volume together with additional resources can be downloaded from the publisher's website:

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Cover Image: Title-page to the Book of Judith in a 15th century German Bible, workshop of Diebold Lauber (1441-1449), Heidelberg University Library.

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