This Old English poem survives in the manuscript that also contains the poem *Beowulf* (London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A.xv). As with most Old English poems, its author is unknown, and the poem is untitled in the manuscript. It is commonly referred to as *Judith* because it takes its subject from the Book of Judith, a text found in the Greek and Latin versions of the Bible and accepted as canonical in Catholic traditions, but placed among the Apocrypha in the Protestant Bible. The book and the poem tell the story of a pious Hebrew widow, Judith, who rescues the people of the besieged city of Bethulia by beheading the Assyrian general Holofernes as he attempts to seduce her.

The beginning of the poem has been lost, and the story begins in mid-sentence just before the raucous banquet in which Holofernes orders Judith to be brought to his tent. It is not known how much is missing prior to the first surviving line of the poem. Although the first numbered section is X—implying that nine previous sections (perhaps some thousand lines) have been lost—some have suggested that this is misleading, and the surviving poem is nearly complete. Like other Old English Biblical poems, they argue, *Judith* is a heroic ode that focuses on the most crucial episode of the story, the slaying of Holofernes and the rout of the Assyrian army.

*Judith* is metrically unusual, especially in contrast to the metrical precision of its manuscript neighbor *Beowulf*. The poem abounds in hypermetric lines (lines with more than the four stresses normally found in lines of Old English poetry), in irregular alliteration, and in rhyme, a very rare feature in Old English poetry. This relatively unusual meter has suggested to some scholars that the poem was composed fairly late in the Anglo-Saxon period, but the relationship between metrical strictness and date of composition has not been established with any certainty.

Poetically *Judith* blurs the distinctions between ancient and contemporary, Biblical and Germanic, a characteristic of many other Old English poems such as *Exodus*—Hebrew warriors rage into battle clad in helmets and byrnes (coats of mail), carrying linden shield and ancient swords, while around them circle the traditional Germanic "beasts of battle," the wolf, raven and eagle. Accuracy of historical details mattered less to Anglo-Saxon poets than fidelity to the spirit of the story and the dramatic deployment of their traditional poetic motifs. In contrast to *Exodus*, however, the poem focuses on heroic action rather than complex allegorical interpretation. The choice of a female character as the subject of a heroic poem indicates the relatively high status of women within Anglo-Saxon nobility prior to the Norman invasion of 1066; the poem subtly alters its source to stress the heroine's wisdom and courage rather than the allure of her beauty or the cunning of her plot to seduce Holofernes. Judith is portrayed as a woman of power, and may have been seen by audiences not only as a figure from the Biblical past, but also as a contemporary hero; the homilist Ælfric, who wrote his own prose paraphrase of the Biblical Book of Judith, sees a connection between her time and his own. At the time Ælfric was writing, the Danes were carrying out frequent raids along the English coast; in Ælfric's retelling Judith is not only a Hebrew fighting against the Assyrians but also a saintly Christian queen defending her homeland against pagan invaders. We should therefore not be surprised that, although the poem is set in pre-Christian Israel, Judith prays to the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit to give her strength to assassinate Holofernes, nor that many of the poem's most dramatic moments seem drawn as much from Christian hagiography as from Old Testament history.
... nor ever upon earth’s broad surface could she be brought to doubt
the grace of God — who gave favor —
renowned Ruler — when she needed it most:
protection came from the primal Power — against pure terror,
help from the highest Judge — when our heavenly Father
in glory bestowed — an outstanding gift,
thanks to her full belief — her faith in the Almighty forever.
I’ve heard that Holofernes — then heartily called
for a wine-swilling — with wonders served
to senior thanes — each sweet delight;
and the master of men — commanded them come.
Shield-fighters rushed — to their ruling prince —
all his folk-leaders. That was the fourth day then
since she’d first arrived — since the radiant lady,
elf-lovely Judith — ingenious had come.

Then to the feast they fared — and found their seats.
Wine-drinkers reveled — wretched henchmen
in byrnies’ bold. Time after time were bowls so deep
down benches borne — brimful to hall-guests,
shield-warriors keen. Likewise were cups and jugs
for the fated filled, though their fell’ ruler,
the fierce warlord, didn’t know fate was near.
Old Holofernes, heroes’ gold-friend,
sunk in wine-joy — screamed with laughter,

1 Judith The poem has been newly translated for this anthology by Stephen O. Glosecki. The translator has asked that the following note be included: “I am grateful to Roy Liuza and Broadview’s four anonymous readers, whose suggestions vastly improved this translation. As far as possible, I follow Classical Germanic rules of prosody (rules equally apparent in Old English, Old Norse, Old Saxon, and Old High German heroic verse). I discuss my alliterative approach in “Skalded Epic (Make It Old)” in Beowulf in Our Time: Teaching Beowulf in Translation, ed. Mary K. Ramsey, OEN Subsidia 31 (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2002). I rely upon the original as edited in E.V.K. Dobbie’s Beowulf and Judith (Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records IV. New York: Columbia University Press, 1953). Dobbie’s introduction cites the poem’s numerous hypermetric half-lines. Though unable to preserve their original distribution, I include some long lines to suggest the poem’s remarkably ornate versification. But I have simplified its equally ornate syntax. This is unavoidable, since, for instance, verb-final periods, though still grammatical in German, disappeared from English centuries ago (along with a powerful suspended effect, a sort of semantic “crack the whip” when the closing verb clinches the action and the preceding phrases fall into place). The original also includes a surprising amount of end rhyme (a feature Dobbie notes, with line references; this flourish suggests a late date of composition). I therefore take my own liberties with the rhyme, using it to mark pivotal passages in a translation dedicated to my wife Karen Anne Reynolds, idee al-fœrite minne.”

2 ... nor ever upon earth’s broad surface The opening of the poem is imperfect, and the translation is conjectural. The manuscript reading is “… doubted the gifts in this wide world.”

3 elf-lovely The Old English compound elf-sce愧 may mean “wonderfully bright”; Elf is a common element in Old English names, so it presumably had a positive connotation.
roared and ranted, raged and chanted,
so no man afar could fail to hear
him storm with pride, while plunged in mead,
demanding brave war-deeds from bench-sitters.
Teachorous schemer! For the entire day he
drenched his band with drafts of wine,
arrogant ring-breaker, until his band all swooned
as drunk as death—doughty veterans
drained of virtue. So he kept the drink flowing,
poured for hall-thanes, prince of warriors,
till dark of night dropped down on men.
Festering with evil, he ordered her fetched—
brought to his bedstead—blessed maiden,
in circlets rich all ring-adored.

The appointed thanes as their prince ordered—
byrnie-troops' chief—charged off boisterous
and grabbed Judith from the guest-house there.
Then with the wise lady they went promptly,
linden-shield troops leading her forth—
the bright maiden—to the mighty tent,
towering pavilion where the tyrant slept
inside at night by our Savior loathed—
old Holofernes. There flowed round his bed
a fair curtain, fly-net all golden,
wrought so fine that the folk-leader—fiercely lethal
prince of warriors—could peer through it
to see whomever therein might come—
whichever heroes' sons; but at him not a one
from the tribe of men might take a look
unless that arrogant lord should issue commands
for counselors to come from his keen warband.

Straight to his bed they brought the brilliant lady.
Sturdy warriors strode to tell him
they'd brought the holy maid to the high tent then.
The famous fort-prince felt fiendish glee:
with filth and vice he'd ravish the radiant lady!
But the Guardian of Hosts, glorious Judge,
our Lord on high wouldn't allow this thing:

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1 tent The poet uses the unusual word "tent" rather than the more common "tabernacle", perhaps because the latter could also mean "tabernacle" and had a more positive connotation.

2 Their flowed... keen warband The Biblical source only mentions that Holofernes's bed had a canopeum; the poet adds the apparently original detail that it functioned as a sort of see-through mirror, an appropriately sinister detail that aptly reflects the paranoia of those who wield the power of evil.
He stopped outrage; He restrained evil.
Spawn of devils, his spirit lustful,
he strode toward the bed with his band of men.
Before that night elapsed he'd lose honor.
reach the unhappy end he'd earned before.
Evil-doer! On earth he'd dwelt
a cruel prince, oppressing men
under the clouds' rooftops. Then the king collapsed
in midst of bed so drunk on wine that
was of sense empty. Off went his soldiers,
wine-glutted troops, once they'd led that troth-breaker—
loathsome tyrant—to his last resting.
Then the Savior's handmaid, hearty and strong,
astutely sought the most certain way
to end that besotted life before the sinner woke.
Her locks entwined, she took a sword—
razor-sharp blade, battle-hardened:
the Shaper's maid from its sheath drew it
with her right hand then. Heaven's Defender
she addressed by name— Redeemer of all
in this world dwelling—and these words then spoke:
"Source of all, great God on high, and Spirit of holy help,
Son of the Almighty: mercy I need now.
Trinitarian strength Intensely now
is my heart inflamed: Lord, fierce sorrow
oppresses my soul. Prince of heaven:
give me triumph and true belief; let me take this sword
and cleave this murder-monger! Mankind's Ruler,
grant me health and grace: I've never had greater need
for your mercy before. Almighty Lord,
bright-minded Glory-Giver, grant me vengeance;
let my mind's fury inflame my heart!"
Then supreme Justice promptly filled her
with strength and zeal, as He still will do
for everyone who dwells down here seeking help for himself
with true faith and much counsel. Thus her mind was filled
with hope renewed. She took that heathen man
by the hair fast then and with her fists tugging
stretched him deftly in deep disgrace,

1 she took a sword As in the climactic dragon-fight in Beowulf, there is a considerable gap between the drawing of the sword and its use.
2 Source of all... inflame my heart Judith's prayer to the Trinity makes her more like a Christian saint than a Hebrew heroine, but her prayer for vengeance and courage in battle makes her a warrior rather than a martyr.
wielding control of the wicked man,  
that hapless wretch. Then with her hair knotted  
she hacked fearsome foe with fateful blade,  
carved halfway through his hateful neck,  
so that he lay in a drunken swoon with a deadly wound,  
though as yet unslain with his soul elsewhere.  
So she swung the sword a second time then—  
the brave lady lashed in earnest,  
and that heathen hound’s whole head unwound—  
rolled forth on the floor, leaving the foul carcass  
empty behind it. Elsewhere the soul went:  
under the cliff of death cast down below,  
ever thereafter in torment tied, to torture bound,  
with worms wound round rank under ground:  
leashed in hellfire! lost in darkness!  
Never a hope of leaving hell— hall of serpents!  
Throughout endless time eternally slow  
his soul shall stay enslaved below  
in that darkest home no joy to know!

Thus she won foremost fame as a fighter there:  
God gave Judith glory at war—  
the sky’s Chieftain let her achieve triumph.  
Into her bag at once the brilliant maid  
put the army-hunter’s head all bloody—  
in the supply pouch that her companion had brought  
with food for both when they’d first set out—  
fair-faced maiden, filled with virtue  
and astute judgment. Judith gave her  
the bloody head to bear homeward.

She and her young helper— high-born ladies,  
boldly daring, brave in spirit,  
blessed with triumph— both left quickly,  
steadfast maidens, to steal right through  
the hostile camp till they could clearly see  
the gleaming walls of the gorgeous town,  
Bethulia indeed! Adorned with rings,  
they hastened forth on the footpath then,  
until, glad-minded, they made it through  
to the wall’s gateway. Warriors sat there  
holding watch then, wakeful guardsmen  
at the mighty fort— just as, with mournful heart  
but good judgment, Judith had ordered  
before setting forth filled with courage.

Lady so brave— back at last now,
famed for valor, to her folk so dear:
at once the clear-minded woman called for someone
to come towards her from the tall fortress
to help them in with utmost haste
through the wall's gateway; and these words she spoke
to the victory-folk: "I can confirm for you
something to make us all grateful and end grieving:
mourn no longer: the Measurer exults!
Toward you the Wonder-Prince is well-disposed:
over the whole wide world it's well-known now:
to you is glory given and great honor
instead of the dire torment you've endured so long."
All those city-dwellers knew sudden bliss then,
one they'd heard her speak, the holy maid,
over the high wall there. The host rejoiced.
To the fortress-gate all the folk hastened,
men with women in multitudes.
The host in hordes all hurried and thronged,
by the thousands pressed toward the Prince's maid—
the young and old, each uplifted—
all their minds hopeful in that happy city
where they rejoiced to hear of Judith's return
to her own homeland. Humble, reverent,
with utmost haste they helped her in.
Then the deep-minded maid adorned with gold
bade her servant—resourceful companion—
to unveil the man-hunter's head before them—
show the bloody trophy to the townspeople
so all could see her success at war.
Then spoke the fine lady to the folk-gathering:
"Victory-famed troops, valiant commanders:
here you can see the heathen warrior's head before you. Yes, Holofemes
now lies lifeless. Our most loathsome foe,
who committed more murder than any man on earth,
caused us grievous pain and had plotted more
grief than before, but God refused
him longer life—didn't let him commit
more atrocity: for I took his life
with the help of God. Now, each good man here
in this town dwelling: I tell you all,
shield-bearing men: you must make haste now
and gird for war. When our glorious King,
God the Creator, from the east sends high
His shining light, then bear linden shields forth,
boards before breasts and byrnie-jackets
under gleaming helms to the host of the foe!
With flashing swords fell folk-leaders,
their doomed chieftains. Death is allotted
to all your foes and honor to you,
glory in battle, as God in his might
through this hand of mine has made clear now."

Then the eager host became all ready
to contend bravely. Thence bold as kings
200 veteran companions bore victory-flags
forth to the fight—forth for the right!
Heroes under helmets left the holy town
at dawn of day to din of shields
loudly resounding. And so the lean one rejoiced,
205 the wolf in the woods, with the wan raven,
corps-hungry bird. The beasts both knew
the local troops would allot them the fated,
let them feast their fill. There flew in their tracks,
all prey-driven, the dew-feathered
brown-coated eagle, who sang battle songs
through horn-hooked beak. The host advanced,
bear-troops to battle by boards covered,
by the curved linden—those who not long before
had suffered outlanders’ lashings of scorn,
210 heathen insults. But that was all repaid—
and repaid fiercely! when play of spears
found the Assyrian host once the Hebrews came
to wage battle under war-banners
in the invaders’ camp. Keenly they launched
215 arrow-showers shooting forward
from horn-curved bows—battle-adders,
stout-headed darts! Storming loudly
furious warriors flung forth spears then
into the hardy throng. Heroes went raging:
against that loathsome tribe, the land-dwellers
stepped stern-minded, stout in spirit,
unsoft to wake up old opponents,
all mead-weary. With mighty hands
220 thanes pulled from sheath the patterned sword
with sturdy edge to strike and slay

1 Then the eager host... horn-hooked beak The “beasts of battle” (the raven, wolf, and eagle) are a traditional motif in Old English poetry, signaling the beginning of a scene of slaughter.

2 bear-troops Literally bēornas or “warriors,” but the animal imagery is not inappropriate here.
Assyrian foes, fearsome warriors. 
Their spirits frenzied, they spared no one 
in that army's ranks, neither rich nor poor, 
no man alive they might subdue. 

And so in those morning hours the mighty thanes 
fiercely assailed the foreign troops 
until the chief leaders of that large army 
were forced to find fury drove them! 
They showed their strength with stout sword-swings, 

Hebrew fighters. Their foe brought word 
to the eldest ranks of ruling thanes: 
to their flag-bearers they brought fierce tidings: 
they woke warlords with wild stories— 
told the mead-weary of the morning kill, 

deadly 
death-fated troops tossed aside sleep, 
and, heavy-hearted, they huddled round 
the mighty tent of their murderous prince, 
old Holofernes. They'd hoped quickly 
to warn their lord that war was near 
before the attack itself brought terror down 
with all the armed Hebrews. They all still thought 
the bear-troops' chief and the bright maiden 
in the lovely tent still lay together— 
Judith the regal and their corrupt leader 
wickedly lusting. But of his lords not one 
would dare to wake the war-chief there 
or try to find how the flag-warrior 
had behaved himself with the holy woman, 
with God's handmaid. The host approached, 
Hebrew folk all fighting briskly 
with their hard weapons, with haft requiting old offenses when the flashing sword answered old slander. Assyria watched 
glory's downfall in the day's work there—her pride toppled! But troops still stood round the lord's tent then, intensely alarmed, their spirits darkening. Drawn together 
they began to murmur, moan, lament aloud, 

and grind and gnash: they showed no virtue, gnashing teeth in fear. Thus did they forfeit honor, glory and valor. They wanted to go waken

1 *mourn, moan* More comically, "cough," "clear their throats." The Old English word *cohhetan* appears only here and its meaning is not known. The hesitation of the retainers is presumably meant to be ironic and bitterly comical.
their beloved leader— which would do little good!
Sooner or later someone would have to.

275 So a ring-warrior went right to the tent—
undaunted enough when need drove him.
On the bed he found— blanched, sprawling—
his gold-giver: gone his spirit—
his life taken. Then he tumbled flat—
to the earth froze with frantic mind
he ripped his hair, rent his garments,
and wailed out words to warriors around,
unhappy all, outside waiting:
“Here it’s plain to see ourselves all doomed:
we have clear token our time has come,
evil upon us: now we must lose,
assailed by strife: here lies sword-stricken—
our lord:—beheaded!” Thus heavy-minded
they cast down weapons and went with weary hearts
in flight trembling. But they were attacked from behind
by the mighty host until most who ran
with that force all lay felled in battle
on the victory-field, hacked flat by swords
as wolves would wish and war-birds too,
all corpse-hungry. Yet they kept fleeing,
shield-foe survivors. Vying in foot-tracks
came the Hebrew force, flushed with triumph,
honored with glory: God the Ruler,
our almighty Friend gave His full support.

300 With bloody swords they boldly went:
headstrong heroes hacked a pathway
through the thronging foe. They thrashed linden;
they slashed shield-wall— those soldiers raged
with war’s frenzy— furious Hebrews.

305 Those thanes lusted with a long thirst then
for the spear-thrusting. There lay spent in dust,
by head-tally, a high number
of slain nobles, Assyrian lords,
the chief liege-men of the loathsome tribe.

310 Few survived to go home!

Valiant as kings then
the warriors returned, tearing through carnage,
reeking corpses. They found room to loot—
land-dwellers there— their most loathsome foe,
their old enemies, all unliving.
They took bright booty, bloody trappings,
board and broadsword, burnished helmet, much precious wealth. Thus they won glory on the battlefield when they beat enemies, the land-guardians: they’d laid to sleep old foes with swords. In swaths they sprawled, those whom they loathed the most among living tribes. Then the whole nation of noble clans— foremost families— took a full month there, proud, hair-knotted, to hoist and cart to Bethulia the bright beautiful city helm and hip-sword, hoary byrnies, men’s war-trappings all tooled with gold: they took more treasure than any man living, no matter how clever, could recount fully—all taken by troops with true valor, brave under banners, battling in strife, thanks to the wise counsel of the keen Judith, bold-minded maid. From their mighty quest spear-brave they gave gifts of esteem in her high honor: old Holofernes’ gory helm and broadsword beside his byrnies so wide, arrayed in gold so red, with goods that the ring-warriors’ prince in pride and power had owned: his heirlooms and riches and gems, all his glittering wealth and his rings: this to the radiant lady, to the one so ingenious they gave. And Judith devoted it all to the glorious God of high hosts who’d given her honor on earth, renown in the worldly realm, with reward in heaven to come, triumph in splendor on high, thanks to her true belief, her faith in the Almighty forever. In the end there could be no doubt about the reward she’d cherished so long. For this to our Lord so dear be their glory forever arrayed. Air and the lofty wind He made, rolling sky and roo my ground, rushing streams all tumbling down, and, through His bounty of merciful love, bliss in His heaven above.

—LATE 9TH OR EARLY 10TH CENTURY