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Rejection Hurts the Status Quo: Did Judith Take the Weapons?

No one can graciously reject something like the women in the Bible. These women know how to tell someone “thanks, but no thanks; I have what I need” and aren’t afraid of doing it. Judith is one such woman, feigning a rejection from her own kingdom because of a war-torn situation. However, when it comes to rejecting gifts, she is downright worse than a spoiled child. The ending of “Judith” is a failed attempt to equate the Germanic hero with a Christian hero through the strength of heroes being their faith, not the amount of spoils they take from war.

To understand why this is a failed attempt to equate one with the other, but one that still works in the end to accomplish the goal of the author, there is one thing readers must understand about the intended audience: no matter what the rest of the world said about women at this time in history, the German tribes in England would have believed that she could have political sway to some degree. It wouldn’t have been as much as Esther’s power, as an example of a well-known woman from the Bible, and they would have had more leeway in how they showed that power in a group.

Continuing on, the narrator notes at the end of the poem that “…she did not doubt / in the reward which she had long yearned for” (345-6). With Judith being, well, a woman, this juxtaposition brings to mind the treasures that a male hero would have received. She couldn’t have used them easily in either society, which would turn the Germanic tribes this poem is trying to convert away a little. Alienating the audience is never an author’s goal, so the author has an issue: if Judith couldn’t use swords, shields, etc. without some problems in society, then what reward is she waiting for? Imagine a scop trying to justify her getting the shields, swords, and other battle-hardened soldiers’ goodies… particularly to the crowd of people who would use women to make peace instead of inciting more violence. It wouldn’t go over well. The author knows this and attempts to bait and switch the audience. The pitch for that must have gone like this: “Here is this quiet, demure Hebrew woman that can fight with her mind as well as a man can with the weapons his liege-lord gives him. She asks not for the typical Germanic leader spoils. She refuses them and says her reward is eternal life!” Followed, of course, by other Christians clapping him on the back in excitement. More Christian sub-text is added once this idea surfaces, and the rest of the story is history, so to speak.

Imaginary pitch meeting for this aside, the reward Judith gains is phrased as “…glory / to the beloved Lord for ever and ever…” with no mention of honor, more men, etc. (346-7). For the Germanic audience, this would have been an incredibly disappointing ending. Judith kills Holofernes… but gets something out of left field for her reward in terms of what these warriors would have expected. They more likely heard this as an addition to her rewards than her eternal reward. After all, nowhere in the poem does it mention that she refuses the traditional Germanic tribe gifts of honor. Instead, what it says is that “[f]or all of this Judith said / thanks to the Lord of hosts…” and leaves the reader to infer that she took the swords, rings, shields, and anything else listed in the spoils given (341-2). While modern audiences could read it as Judith refusing the rest of the spoils of war in favor of glory to God, as many stories in the Bible mention conquering armies doing when instructed to by the Lord, there is one crucial thing modern readers must understand about the audience this was intended for: they would have fundamentally believed that Judith deserved the spoils *because* she took the initiative and killed Holofernes. After all, this is how other epics of the time end the battle scenes. The hero that offers his (or her) help and defeats the problem in a spectacular manner is rewarded with the spoils of war in addition to rings, gold, swords, and/or property from the people he helped. End of story.

It is this belief that spurred the author to include some shadowy intentions on Judith’s part, but it does not resolve the fact that there is no easy way to conclude what happened to the rest of the spoils. Did she take them? Did she give them to someone else? Did she let them rot? Readers simply have to be content with what they can infer, which is an interesting way to accomplish a goal so specific to a single audience as the goal of “Judith” was to the Germanic tribes these missionaries would have come to know. With this inference being all that the audience has to go on, it makes sense that the warriors would have believed the spoils and glory of war to be dispersed among the men since Judith rejected it.

With two societal agendas pitted against each other, the author of “Judith” had to make some sacrifices to engage the Germanic audience, especially since this depiction of Judith “personified the intellectual and moral values” of the story (Raaberg 212). The traditional manner of heroines in the Bible went out the window in favor of a more Beowulf-like heroine, which does accomplish the purpose of engaging the original audience. However, the transition from Germanic heroine to traditional Christian heroine fails because of the lack of clarity surrounding Judith’s actions with her spoils of war. Since the author believed glossing over how Judith dealt with the spoils by simply saying she was thankful for them would work, there is serious doubt on if the intended response was elicited in just one group, or if multiple groups found this attitude to work for them as well as for Judith (IE, the Germanic tribes believing that faith was better than their war-hardened comitatus).

What makes this failure to transition properly so important to the text of Judith’s story is that in this failing, the story accomplishes the main goal its authors set out to accomplish: it showed that, while a hero or heroine can win it big as the Germanic warriors do, *there is something missing*. This is despite doubt on whether this response came entirely from the idea of Judith rejecting these gifts or not. The entire point of translating this Bible story for this audience is to convince them that Christianity is not so bad, like telling your parents that they ought to be grateful that you *only* had one drink and didn’t drive – so it’s not you to blame for the fact the car was wrecked when you egged your drunk brother on. What the author leaves out is left out for a purpose, and so it goes towards the motive of converting people.

The sneaky bait and switch falls short on many aspects, to be sure. However, where the two ideals were so different, attempting to equate one with the other by giving faith the same power as spoils of war was always going to fall short – no matter the intentions of the original author.

Works Cited

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