

## **Text and interpretation: Gender and violence in the Book of Judith, scholarly commentary and the visual arts from the Renaissance onward**

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### ***ABSTRACT***

*The Book of Judith is replete with irregularities, not least of which is the character of its eponymous heroine. Judith is at once presented as a saintly, pure, wise, God-fearing and yet vampish, verbally and sexually deceptive widow – a heady mixture of qualities that have elicited more than their fair share of comments and interpretations over the years. This article contends that one of the main irregularities concerning this character is the way that she so easily traverses stereotyped gender roles and perceptions. It examines the way that her portrayal blurs gender lines and obfuscates which gender kills both within the text and in its artistic renditions from the Renaissance period to the present time.*

### **A INTRODUCTION**

*Judith* is a highly complex book that unabashedly combines historical places, people, and events with the most glaring historical and geographical inconsistencies. For example, Nebuchadnezzar is called the king of Assyria (1:1), while the vast Assyrian army (120 000 infantry and 12 000 cavalry) is said to have covered a distance of some three hundred miles from Nineveh to Northern Cilicia in just three days. Thereafter, they cut through Libya (Put) in Africa and Lydia (Lud) in Asia Minor, only to find themselves crossing the Euphrates and going West through Mesopotamia to arrive at Cilicia and Japheth facing Arabia (2:21, 23-25; Efthimiadis-Keith 1999a:216 n 13; 1999b:156-157)! Furthermore, certain portions of the text support a pre-exilic setting, whereas others clearly indicate early and late post-exilic circumstances. For example, *Judith* 4:3 relates that the Jews had just returned from exile, gathered again in Judea and rededicated the temple. However, Achior's account of Israel's history (cf 5:5-21), which includes the

destruction of the temple in 586 BC, does not even mention the name of the king responsible for the exile, namely, Nebuchadnezzar (cf especially 5:18-19), whereas the first part of the story itself would have us believe that 'Nebuchadnezzar' had *not yet* destroyed the temple in Jerusalem. Similarly, the interchange between Judith and Holofernes in chapters 10-13 indicates that he (through Holofernes) had not yet ravaged Jerusalem (cf especially 11:19)! Possibly the worst problem of all is the location of Bethulia – *the* local setting of the book. To date, this city has not been identified, although scholarly speculation has it that Bethulia refers to Shechem in Samaria (cf e g Moore 1985:150-151 and 69). Commentators have treated these inconsistencies in a rather dualistic manner. Some, such as Clement of Rome, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Jerome (cf Pfeiffer 1949:291-292), have wilfully supported the book's historicity despite them, whereas others like Capellus have erroneously discarded it as mere fiction because of them (cf Enslin 1972:49).

Similarly, some commentators have taken offence at *Judith's* supposedly 'turgid style' (Pfeiffer 1949:299), and others have rejected its value on account of its supposedly lopsided structure (cf e g Dancy 1972, in Alonso-Schökel 1975:3). According to the latter, the first section of the book, chapters 1-7, is completely superfluous to the 'real story' recorded in *Judith* 8-16. Others still have hailed *Judith* as a masterpiece of artistic creation that is completely balanced in its bipartite structure (cf e g Craven 1977; 1983). There seems to be little if any agreement about anything in *Judith* amongst its commentators.

However, the issue of dispute that most interests me as a woman, is the character of Judith. She is simultaneously presented as a saintly, chaste, wise, God-fearing widow woman and as a 'vamp' who does not hesitate to use verbal and sexual deceit to kill the enemy general, Holofernes. This depiction of Judith has given commentators and those who have chosen to portray her through the visual arts ample opportunity to exalt her either as a virginal saint or decry her as a voracious *femme fatale* – according to their needs. As one can see, there is a rather dualistic approach to her character that is similar to that of the historicity of the text and the balance between its two main structural components.

In this article, I should like to examine Judith's portrayal in the text and the way that this has been rendered by commentators and visual artists alike. In particular, I should like to focus upon the way that Judith traverses or transgresses gender boundaries and how her portrayal obfuscates or blurs which gender kills verbally and visually in the text and in the artistic renditions of her decapitation of Holofernes. It is my contention that these factors have become the basis for the

dualistic treatment of this character within patriarchal Western culture from which I stem.

I begin, then, with the portrayal of Judith in the text and in the artistic renditions of what has become the central focus of many a painter and commentator alike, *viz* her decapitation of Holofernes. To my mind, the most interesting renditions of this scene are found in the sculptures and paintings spanning the Renaissance period and the present time. I will therefore constrain myself to works that fall roughly (though not exclusively) within this time frame.

## **B TEXT AND INTERPRETATION: JUDITH IN THE TEXT, SCHOLARLY COMMENTARY AND THE VISUAL ARTS FROM THE RENAISSANCE ONWARD**

According to the text, Judith is a wealthy, beautiful, pious, chaste, blameless, wise, generous, and God-fearing widow who lives fasting before God (cf e.g. 8: 4-8, 28-31; 10:19, 23; 11:20-21; 16:23, 25). She has a sixteen-tier genealogy that roots her in the history of Israel [Jacob] and identifies her potential to act as judge [Gideon], prophet [Elijah, Nathaniel], ambassador [Joseph], and priest [Merari] (8:1; Levine 1989:565; cf also Van Henten 1995:241, 242; Alonso-Schökel 1975: 10). She is an expert in intercessory prayer (cf 9:2-14). Her faith, courage and understanding of the situation at hand as well as the nature of God far exceeds that of her elders/political-religious leaders and fellow-citizens (cf 8:11-27). She is very community-orientated and, as a result of her self-sacrifice, death is transformed into life and social transformation is effected for a number of characters, including Achior and her unnamed stewardess or ἄβρα (cf 14:10; 16:23).

On the other hand, and in sharp contrast to the above – as some would have it:

- Judith does not hesitate to request God's assistance in verbally and sexually deceiving Holofernes (9:10, 13).
- She is a past master at using 'feminine wiles' (beauty, flattering speech and sexuality) to deceive and murder (symbolically castrate) Holofernes (cf 10:22-13:10a).
- She easily transgresses gender boundaries in liberating her people (cf e.g. Levine 1989:561, 566).

It is this juxtaposition *and* combination of godliness versus carnality, chastity versus 'immorality', truth versus deception, strength versus weakness, masculinity

versus femininity – this duality of character and deed – that has made it easy for Judith’s commentators to depict her both as a ‘virginal saint’ and a voracious *femme fatale*. Most of them – mostly men until recent times – have focused on one ‘side’ of the composite duality that is Judith, depending on their perceptions of womanhood and the needs or circumstances of their times.

For example, Bissel (1886, in Moore 1985:64), undoubtedly motivated by Victorian, patriarchal concerns regarding women, writes,

[Judith’s] character, moreover, is not simply objectionable from a literary point of view, but even more from a moral standpoint .... Her way is strewn with deception from first to last, and yet she is represented as taking God into her counsels and as having his special blessing in her enterprise ... she assents to [Holofernes’] request to take part in a carousal at his tent and to spend a night in his embrace ... it would seem a mere matter of chance that Judith escaped an impure connection with Holofernes ... that she would have been willing even to yield her body ... [to accomplish] her purpose. That God by his providence interposed to prevent such a crime, cannot relieve her of the odium attaching to her conduct .... And she exposes herself ... to sin, simply for the present purpose of gaining the confidence of a weak slave of his passions that she may put him to death ... there are elements of moral turpitude in the character of Judith.

Likewise, Shumaker (1975:33, author’s italics), writing almost a century later, voices a similar though less acrimonious opinion:

As I read Judith, a scruple is raised by her lying. I should have preferred her to speak in such a way as to invite misinterpretation. Is her heroism in some degree compromised, or is it not, by her assurance to Holofernes that if he does as she says he will ‘not fail to attain his ends’ and that not only men but animals and birds will owe their lives to his power so long as the dynasty of Nebuchadnezzar reigns? For me, the answer must be a reluctant ‘yes’ ....

Contrary to the above, Clement of Rome, who wrote at a time when Christians were suffering persecution, was able to seize upon her courage and comment as follows:

Many women have received power through the grace of God and have performed many deeds of valor. The blessed Judith, when her city was besieged, asked the elders to allow her to go out into the camp of the strangers [*sic!*]. So she gave herself up to danger, and went forth for love of her country and her people in the siege, and the Lord delivered over Holofernes by the hand of a woman (I Clement 55:45).

Similarly, at a time when sexual temptation was more of a threat to the celibate clergy than was religious persecution, Church Fathers such as Tertullian (c 160-230 AD), Methodius of Tyre (3rd century AD), and Ambrose of Milan (339-397 AD) were able to overlook Judith's patent sexuality and 'unconventional sexual behaviour' (Brenner 1995:14) and praise her for her self-imposed celibacy (cf Moore 1985).

The debate regarding Judith's character continues into the modern era with scholars like Dundes (1975:28) decrying Judith for her deception, while feminists like Levine (1989:561) praise her for transgressing social and gender boundaries, and still others can extol her as an 'alternative leader' (Van Henten 1995:238) who is 'morally superior to the subverted male figures' because she 'manages' to save herself (Brenner 1995:12).

There are almost as many interpretations of this character as there are commentators/interpreters, for whom she is the archetypal androgyne: warrior, seductress and *femme fatale* (Montley 1978, in Moore 1985:65), the epitome of the 'faithful wife' paradigm in which a woman, disguised as a man, switches sex roles and saves her enslaved husband (Cote 1975:21-26), a model of liberation (Craghan 1982:79 especially; Kolenkow 1975:40-41; Narito 1992), an 'alternative leader' in the style of Moses (Van Henten 1995), a subversive, unconventional female figure (Levine 1989; Lacocque 1990:41; White 1992) whose strength and fortitude surpass that of the men in the story (cf Brenner 1995; Craven 1977:85ff; Lacocque 1990:33) and, surprisingly, as the 'weak woman/widow' through whom God saved Israel (notably Alonso-Schökel 1975:14-15).

The visual depiction of Judith has been equally varied and has often alternated between the two aspects of her 'dual' nature. Once again, the 'interpreters' have been mostly male. Note, for example, the differences between the chaste, pensive look that Botticelli (1445-1510) gives her; her cruel, smug appearance in Cranach the Elder's first painting (1530); her pensive look in his second painting; the sexual, yet somehow innocent depiction of Judith holding Holofernes' head by Massys (1509-1575); the disinterested, almost emotionless Judith of Cristoforo Allori (1577-1621); the detached severity of Caravaggio's Judith (1598), the almost gaudy, prostitute-like depiction of Kremser-Schmidt's triumphant Judith (1718-1801); the smug, wicked smile of Metsys' highly sexualised Judith; the downright vampish, evil looks she is given by Gustav Klimt (cf Bade 1979:33) and

Franz von Stuck (cf Bade 1979:6); the prayerful piety of Giulia Lama's Judith (1730); the near-saintliness of Judith as portrayed by Giorgione (1504) and the angelic approval granted to the victorious Judith in Solimena's portrayal of her triumphantly holding up Holofernes' head for all to see (1730).<sup>1</sup>

To my mind, these interpretations find contrast in the works of Donatello, Robbia and, particularly, in Artemesia Gentileschi's depictions of Judith. Note, for example, the chaste intensity of Donatello's Judith (1455-60), who portrays extreme fortitude and inner strength as she slays Holofernes. Note, too, how she images the modern female figure of Justice/the Law and her close resemblance to a Grecian warrior-woman/goddess. Robbia's Judith displays the same Grecian look and heroic Justice-quality as she lifts her sword in victory. There is no overt sexuality in either of these statues as Judith is fully clad with no enticing flesh showing at all. Rather than emphasising her sexuality or saintliness, Donatello and Robbia have chosen to accentuate Judith's fortitude and liberative power/deed.

We find something similar in the faces of Judith and her stewardess as depicted by Artemesia Gentileschi. Note, for example how they '[radiate] a contained and serious, almost organized passion that enhances the sense of efficacy of the work being done' (Bal 1995:269) in her *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1620; Bal 1995:268). In similar vein, Gentileschi's *Judith and her Maid Servant Leaving the Enemy Camp* (1613-1614; Bal 1995:275) shows the women with heads turned back in an attentive pose – aware of 'the precise moment of greatest danger' (Bal 1995:276), intently listening to sounds (and perhaps looking at sights) outside the pre-established frame of the painting, but also moving forward. Likewise, the women in *Judith and her Maid Servant with the Head of Holofernes* (1625; Bal 1995:279) look beyond the frame. In this painting, Holofernes' sword covers Judith's genitalia (even though she is fully dressed), and Judith wears a heavy-duty, military type of shoe (Bal 1995:277). Her left hand is raised across her body, signalling the leader, signalling attention, warning, directing. It 'foretells the cautious actions to follow, which will bring complete success to Judith's self-assigned mission' and directs the gaze of the viewer 'outside the bedroom, as if it were dismissed as indiscreet' (Bal 1995:278). There is no vampishness in any of these paintings, no emphasis on Judith's sexuality, no pristine innocence, no distanced, disinterested parties; there are just two 'working women' – as Bal calls them (1995:277) – going about their business attentively, intently aware of the importance of their mission and its dangers.

### C TRAVERSING THE BOUNDARIES OF GENDER – JUDITH IN THE TEXT AND ARTISTIC INTERPRETATION

What, then, are we to make of the often-contradictory, dualistic manner in which the highly complex Judith figure has been treated? In my opinion, there are at least three interrelated factors at play here.

First, from a Western point of view, Judith is indeed a heady mixture of dualities: good/evil, chaste/sexually ‘promiscuous’ (*sic*) or sexually questionable, at least, spiritual/carnal and so forth. As such, Western binary thinking tends to interpret her textual depiction into either one of its components, favouring either her ‘innocent’ or her ‘vampish’ side.

Secondly, as I have already indicated, most interpreters of *Judith* – commentators and artists alike – have been male until recent times. As males subject to castration anxiety – the fear of losing one’s essential power or manhood to a woman in particular – they have been terrified by Judith’s castrating potential (cf Efthimiadis-Keith 1999a:216-219; Bal 1995:257-258) and produced Judiths of a vampish, disinterested, or downright evil type. These Judiths are manifestations of what Jung has called the negative *anima*, the archetype which engulfs and destroys men when she is ignored, suppressed or remains an unintegrated, projected aspect of the male psyche (cf Jung 1940:21-25, 73-82; 1953:195-198). Usually, the negative *anima* is depicted in the form of the *femme fatale* and finds expression in many of the paintings that I have briefly reviewed above, for example those of Gustav Klimt (Plate 1),<sup>2</sup> Massys, Von Stuck and Metsys. However, none images the fear of the woman’s castrating sexual potential quite as well as Irene Caesar’s 1996 ink drawing (Plate 2),<sup>3</sup> *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*. I shall return to this drawing a little later.

Thirdly, Judith easily traverses – some would say ‘transgresses’ – gender boundaries and stereotypes. She is a woman and yet she acts of her own accord. She does as she pleases without consulting any one (read any male), and neither she nor her sexuality are under the authority of any male. Moreover, she does what is perceived as a man’s job: she fearlessly goes down to the enemy camp and slays Holofernes using everything at her disposal – ‘feminine wiles’, flattery, prayer guidance, sexual armoury, deceit and even Holofernes’ own sword – to conquer him and liberate her people at a banquet at which *he* had hoped to seduce and conquer *her* (12:10-13:8). By contrast, the male leadership and the Bethulian men do little more than fortify their city, pray faithless, desperate prayers, and

watch her descend to the enemy camp from a distance (4:4-5, 9-15; 6:14-21; 7:19-29; 10:10). They remain fearfully and faithlessly ensconced behind their city walls while Judith fights the enemy alone. When Judith has returned triumphant, Achior, a seasoned Ammonite warrior, faints at the sight of Holofernes' severed head (14:6). Moreover, before her arrival on the scene in chapter 8, the men are ready to give up and hand themselves over to their enemy, so as to avoid watching their women and children die of the thirst that the Assyrians have imposed upon them by blocking their main water supply (cf 7:23-28). Whereas this may sound like a noble action, they barely consider its consequences. As Judith rightly points out, surrender would entail the worship of a foreign god, and a return to the slavery from which YHWH had saved them long ago in Egypt (cf 8:18-27). This means that they would effectively be reversing their divine election and the entire process of their becoming a nation under YHWH.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, because Bethulia was the entry point to the whole of Judea, their surrender would leave the rest of their Judean brethren open to attack, and the destruction of the temple would be sure (8:21-24). Clearly, Judith has a far superior understanding of the situation and its implications than they do, and she is not governed by the fear of destruction, based on some assumed sin before God as they are (cf 7:25, 28). In this way Judith not only traverses gender boundaries, thus blurring them, but she also shows up the men in the story for the cowardly, faithless individuals that they are (cf also Levine 1989:561, 566).

This point is intimately linked with the previous two. It is because Judith 'usurps' the male role (Dundes 1975:29) and so the male authority and prescription of what woman should be that she is both saint and murdering seductress, chaste, spiritual and carnal. It is also for this reason that she poses such a great threat to the male psyche, which baulks at the thought of a woman so powerful that she can easily beguile a powerful general and cut off his head. The head, being symbolic of the penal head, then conjures up images of the dreaded castration and concomitant loss of power, life and vitality. This element is clearly depicted in Irene Caesar's drawing to which I referred earlier. The woman kills the man with her overpowering sexuality – note how the woman's legs and hair surround the man in vulva formation – thus castrating him and subverting his authority, for it is she who is in control, not he. It is this 'subversive' aspect of the text that I should like to deal with next, focusing more particularly on the way that Judith's depiction in both text and artistic rendition blurs gender boundaries and obfuscates which gender kills, thus setting tongues wagging all the more.





*Plate 1*

Gustav Klimt (1862-1918);  
*Judith 1*, 1901



*Plate 2*

Irene Ceasar  
*Judith with the Head of  
Holofernes*, 1996

## 1 Blurring the lines: The transformation of Judith in *Judith 9-13*

The preceding discussion has indicated at least two ways in which Judith's textual portrayal blurs the gender lines, namely, she does a man's job and demonstrates a superior political understanding of the situation and its implications to the men and the political-religious male leadership of Bethulia. She also demonstrates a far superior understanding of God's nature, something that I shall not touch upon here owing to the obvious time-constraints implicit in a conference paper. There is a fourth way in which Judith blurs gender lines in the text and I should like to focus upon it here, as I believe it to be the main instrument of obfuscation in the book. Let us return to the beginning of Judith's actions in *Judith 8*.

Having invited the elders to her roof-top tent, Judith castigates them for their lack of understanding and their willingness to give in to the people's demands and turn their city over to the enemy should God do 'nothing' to save them within the next five days (cf 7:23-31; 8:9-17). She announces that she has a secret plan that she will not divulge and that God would save his people by her hand within the limits of the five-day ultimatum that they have imposed upon him (8:32-34). This announcement heralds the beginning of a subtle and yet profound transformation in which she, a chaste widow-woman becomes a bloodthirsty, (sexual) warrior – and *femme fatale*, as the traditionalists would say. This transformation is actualised through her prayer in chapter 9, which I examine below.<sup>5</sup>

Once the elders leave, Judith humbles herself before God and prays a lengthy prayer of empowerment for the task that lies ahead. Her prayer, which coincides exactly with the evening incense offering in Jerusalem (9:1), is built entirely upon an analogy between the current situation and the rape of Dinah – Jacob’s daughter and Simeon’s sister – in Genesis 34. Judith describes the onerous event of Genesis 34:2 in barely euphemistic language (cf 9:2)<sup>6</sup> and, extolling Simeon’s zeal, prays that God would crush the Assyrians through her hand as He had crushed the Shechemites through Simeon’s hand (9:8-10). She thus clearly identifies herself with her vengeful ancestor and so seals her internal transformation into a vengeful man of war.

The interesting thing about this prayer is that it not only extols Simeon’s actions as an act foreordained by God (9:2-6) – whereas Genesis 34 shows no indication of God’s involvement and Jacob roundly condemns his sons’ behaviour (Gn 34:30) – but it is also predicated completely upon deceit (*vide* especially 9:13 and the boldfaced words below) – that of Shechem (9:3), Simeon (not explicitly stated, but (cf Gn 34:13 below), and her own (9:10, 13) – for its success. Note particularly *Judith* 9:3, 9-10, and 13 below:

- 9:3      *Wherefore thou gavest their rulers to be slain  
so that they dyed their bed in blood, **being deceived** ...*
- 9:9      *... send thy wrath upon their heads:  
give into mine hand, which am a widow, the power that I have  
conceived.*
- 9:10     *Smite by the **deceit** of my lips the servant with the prince ...  
break down their stateliness by the hand of a woman.*
- 9:13     *And make my speech and **deceit** to be their wound and stripe,  
who have purposed cruel things against thy covenant, and thy  
hallowed house, and against the top of Sion, and against the house  
of the possession of thy children.<sup>7</sup>*

Moreover, it is clear that this deceit is both verbally and sexually motivated. It will be remembered that Simeon and his brothers used verbal deceit (‘And the sons of Jacob answered Shechem and Hamor his father **deceitfully**’; Gn 34:13; KJV) to cajole Shechem and the male members of his people to undergo circumcision, with the promise of intermarriage between Shechem’s people and those belonging to Jacob’s tribe (Gn 34:13-17). When the Shechemites were in the

throes of the pain resulting from the ‘surgery’ performed upon their chief sexual organ (cf 9:3), Simeon and his brothers pounced upon them, killed them with the sword – a phallic symbol – took Dinah back, and ‘spoiled the city, because they had defiled their sister ....’ (cf Gn 34:27-29; KJV).

Given the above, and the fact that Judith unabashedly asks God to grant her the same power of deception with which Simeon defeated his sisters’ rapist so that she may vanquish the enemy who has come to defile God’s temple (9:5-6), we may expect her to use both verbal and sexual deceit as her main weaponry in Holofernes’ demise. In this, she certainly does not disappoint us. Having arisen from her prayer, Judith goes down into her house and begins a beautifying process that externalises and completes her transformation into a vengeful man of war – although in female guise. She also adorns herself alluringly to deceive the eyes of all men that would see her (10:4), thus confirming that her chosen ‘weaponry’ is sexually feminine. Such is her beauty at the end of it all that she leaves all who see her breathless – including Holofernes whom she ultimately beheads.

Judith’s prayer draws a clear analogy between herself and Simeon on the one hand, and Dinah and the temple on the other. In this way, the gender lines are blurred, particularly as Judith’s inner transformation into a man of war is accompanied by her outward transformation into a sexually accessible woman.

To sum up, then, Judith’s prayer, and particularly her identification with Simeon entails the actualisation of an interesting and vital transformation that may be traced back to the conception of her secret plan while she was admonishing the elders in Judith 8. Whereas the plan she conceived then initialised the process by which she, a private woman of prayer, came out into the public sphere of men’s warfare, her prayer and subsequent beautification effectively transform her from a wise woman into a vengeful, bloodthirsty man of war like Simeon, and from a chaste widow into a beautiful, operative seductress. The fact that she retains her feminine identity throughout, as evidenced by her intensely feminine beautification process, complicates the transformation by mixing ‘masculine’ intent with feminine appearance – a deadly combination indeed. This, to my mind, veils which gender kills and is the chief or most profound form of gender blurring in the text.

Having examined the way that gender lines are blurred and the obfuscation of which gender kills in the text, I now turn to investigate the same in the renditions of the decapitation scene in the visual arts from the Renaissance period to the present.

## 2 **Blurring the lines and obfuscating which gender kills: The depiction of the decapitation scene in the visual arts from the Renaissance Period to the present**

I have noted previously that artistic renditions have produced Judith figures of varying natures. On the one hand, some artists have chosen to depict Judith as a saint, an innocent who defended her people; on the other, there are those who have depicted her as a voracious *femme fatale*. Still others, like Gentileschi, have desensualised this woman and focused upon the intensity of her emotions and the importance of the work she was doing. The blurring of gender lines that I detected in the preceding subsection unavoidably finds its way into the visual depictions of Judith – be they saintly or murderous. This blurring occurs in a number of ways. For the sake of brevity, I have decided to concentrate upon the following, which I regard as the main forms of obfuscation in the visual arts:

- Depictions in which an obviously feminine Judith wears an item/items of masculine clothing.
- Depictions in which Judith's appearance is somehow masculinised or androgynised by, for example, giving her an androgynous face or masculine features such as strong arms.
- Depictions in which the male body is somehow feminised.
- Depictions of Judith modelled after a male Biblical hero.
- Depictions of Judith modelled after/associated with a male mythical hero.
- Depictions in which Judith's maidservant has a haggish, boyish or manly appearance.
- Depictions of Judith as an Amazonian-type female warrior/freedom-fighter.

As these are by no means categories *per se*, and one may find a particular artwork displaying more than one of these elements, I would prefer to discuss individual and related works under one heading rather than discuss various artworks in particular categories. Having done so, I will return briefly to the reasons for Judith's variegated depiction in the arts as previously mentioned and advance further reasons from the perspective of Jung's psychoanalytic theory concerning the archetypes.

### a **Gentileschi's desensualised depictions of Judith**

We noted in the preceding sections how, contrary to many male artists, Artemesia Gentileschi does not depict her Judith figures in an overtly sexual way. This,

however, does not mean that her Judith figures are 'un-feminine'. Note, for example, Judith's full bosom, the curves of which just show above her neckline, in Gentileschi's *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1612-1613/1620; Plate 3),<sup>8</sup> and her cleavage which is only just visible in *Judith and Her Maidservant* (1612-1613). Nevertheless, if we return to the first painting, we note that Judith's face is rather square and masculine looking while Holofernes' arms have the distinct appearance of feminine legs (thigh to knee). Holofernes' head, which is being severed by Judith, then takes on the appearance of the head of an infant just emerging from its mother's womb. Moreover, it looks as though Judith is a midwife who is murdering or aborting this baby at the precise moment of its birth. This painting leaves us with the distinct impression that Holofernes had to die in order for the Jewish nation to be born/liberated. It obfuscates which gender kills by masculinising Judith, feminising Holofernes and, effectively, making him the birth mother of his own demise.

### **b Mantegna: Judith and Holofernes**

In this 1495 painting (Plate 4),<sup>9</sup> Judith hands the freshly severed head of Holofernes to her maidservant. Judith is clad completely in blue, and even her face is blue in hue, thus imbuing her with a ghostly, unearthly appearance. Furthermore, her face resembles that of a man as much as – and perhaps more strongly than – it resembles that of a woman. It is highly reminiscent of statues of Roman leaders, et cetera. The manly element is thus visible in the facial structure of Judith and the colour of the clothes she is wearing, with blue signifying the spirit, the intellect, the 'masculine' energy of the soul. By contrast, the aged maid is clad in orange and red, the colours of passion and danger, but wears blue trousers, a manly colour and item of clothing. Gendered murder is thus blurred by means of the androgynous presentation of Judith and her maid.

### **c Judith as David and Perseus**

Judith's defeat of Holofernes has often been likened to David's defeat of Goliath. The identification of Judith and David has been taken up graphically in Michelangelo da Caravaggio's *David with the Head of Goliath* (c 1605-1606? Bal 1995: 261). This painting resembles Hendrik Goltzius' print, *Judith* (c 1585, Bal 1995:257), which depicts Judith holding the head of Holofernes. Even more important, the latter is almost an exact replica – even though gender reversal is

involved – of Cellini’s *Perseus*, itself inspired by Donatello’s *Judith* (Bal 1995:257-258). Interestingly, Caravaggio’s David has distinctly feminine or, at the very least, androgynous features. He has a soft, boyish or feminine face and lacks the muscular definition of a man. By contrast, the Judith figure depicted in Goltzius’ print has strong manly features, with the muscles in her naked upper body being clearly defined. This criss-cross gender blurring, which is effected by the association of Judith with male Biblical and mythical features, is compounded by the fact that Judith is masculinised and Holofernes is feminised thereby: Holofernes becomes the feminine Medusa whom Judith/Perseus kills. Here we have the same death-to-life element that we detected in Gentileschi’s *Judith Slaying Holofernes*. Holofernes, who terrified the entire ANE a.k.a. Medusa who turned all who saw her into stone, had to die so that the Jews could live.



Plate 3  
Gentileschi Artemisia  
*Judith Beheading Holofernes*,  
1612-1613/1620



Plate 4  
Andrea Mantegna  
*Judith and Holofernes*, c. 1495.

#### **d Judith, Holofernes, and the Manly Mayservant**

In Tintoretto’s painting, *Judith and Holofernes* (1518-1594), Judith covers the dead body of Holofernes and looks away from it towards her mayservant as the latter is placing his severed head in their food basket. While Judith’s attire is

obviously feminine, it conjures up images of Greco-Roman battle garment. Even the boot she is wearing seems to display this element. The maid is almost kneeling at her feet, and seems to be emerging from some kind of robe that she has around her. This is reminiscent of a bird coming out of its shell and once again signifies that the death of Holofernes is bringing life and re-birth to the young, that is, newly reconstituted, Jewish nation. By contrast to Judith, whose body has feminine contours, the maid's body resembles that of a young man. Even her hair, which is curled into a bun, bears the appearance of a short, boyish hairstyle.

Judith's maidservant takes on a more distinct manly appearance in Rubens' *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* (1620-1622). Note how hard and square her facial features are in contrast to Judith's rounder, softer face. Her hair is fairly long, but is depicted in such a way that it resembles a short male hairstyle. In this way, Judith's maidservant is depicted as Judith's opposite, as is often the case in artworks that depict them both. For example, one finds that a young Judith is paired with an older, haggish maidservant, as in Caravaggio's *Judith and Holofernes*, or that a very feminine Judith is paired with a rather masculine maid-servant as in Tintoretto and Rubens' paintings. This is not surprising as, according to my Jungian analysis of *Judith*, the maidservant is her mistress' shadow, that is, she exemplifies the hidden aspects of her personality or soul.<sup>10</sup> This aspect of their relationship is cleverly translated in the visual arts as described above. It furthers gender blurring and the obfuscation of which gender kills as it hints that Judith may indeed be a man or a haggard old woman at heart.

### **e Judith and the Boy Hercules**

In a very fascinating painting by the Master of the Mansi Magdalen, a naked and full-bodied Judith stands next to an equally naked though much younger Boy Hercules. Judith looks down at the head of Holofernes that she holds high up in her left hand, while the young Hercules looks up at a snake that he is holding above his head with his left hand. His right arm is close to his side and holds yet another serpent, whereas Judith's right arm is tilted slightly away from her body at the wrist and holds Holofernes' sword. This painting refers to the myth in which a very jealous Hera tried to kill the young Hercules by sending two poisonous snakes into his crib. Her attempt failed as little Hercules was very strong and strangled the snakes, one in each hand, before they could bite him. By analogy, Judith, although a woman, is as strong as he and is able to kill Holofernes as easily as Hercules had killed the poisonous snakes.

The painting bears close resemblances to two paintings of Venus and the young Eros. In the first, by Lucas Cranach the Elder, Venus' dark locks hang over a full right breast and her right hand is over the head of the young Eros who has a bow and arrows in his hand. Neither of them are looking at each other and their bodies are turned away from each other, just as those of Judith and Hercules are in the painting of her and Hercules. Cranach the Younger's painting of Venus and Eros closely resembles that of the Elder. There are, however, many important differences. Venus' red, curly hair flies away from her skinny body and she has a red belt/cord around her waist. Eros is depicted as a little baby angel with red wings who stares up at her. He stands on a pedestal to her right-hand side and reaches his left hand up to touch her right hand in vain, for her hand, which is sexually or coyly posed, is far above his reach. This painting takes us back to the smug, cruel-looking Judith of Cranach the Elder's first painting, which I have reviewed briefly above. The Judith figure of the latter painting also has red hair and looks smugly to the left of the frame. Her right hand is on the severed head of Holofernes to the right, whose dead eyes are turned back in his head looking back up at her – though not with the same adoration with which Cupid looks up at Venus in the Younger's painting of Venus and Cupid.

Once again, as in the case of Cellini's *Perseus* and Goltzius' *Judith*, which gender kills is blurred by associating Judith with a male mythical figure. This time, Judith is associated with Hercules and Eros, who together signify the castrating potential of a sexually charged strong woman. That she is depicted naked in this painting should come as no surprise.

#### **f Judith as Amazonian Freedom Fighter**

Here, I should like to mention two works of art, Benjamin-Constant's *Judith* (1845-1902) and Riedel's work by the same name. In the first work, that of Benjamin-Constant, Judith stands with a look of complete confidence in her face. Her body language mirrors this confidence and indicates a position of complete control. Her left hand rests resolutely on her left hip, while her right hand holds Holofernes' huge sword in front of her genitalia – even though she is fully clad. Her appearance is that of an Amazonian freedom fighter who has posed in victory after defeating the enemy. Her clothing is simple, the material seems hardy and utilitarian, though golden- and brass-hued, and bears the semblance of clothing torn or worn out in battle.



In Riedel's painting, Judith takes the appearance of a Greek female freedom fighter in Greece's war of independence from Turkish domination. She leans against a padded stool, although her position is far more upright than sedentary. Her left hand holds Holofernes' sword determinedly in a firm upright position, while her right hand is stretched out behind her towards the back of the picture. Her full blouse has fallen off at the sleeve on the right-hand side, revealing a strong yet feminine shoulder.

Both these paintings present Judith in semi-androgynous guise by virtue of depicting her as an Amazonian-type freedom fighter. In this way, they too blur gender lines and obfuscate which gender kills.

The contrast between these paintings on the one hand and those which depict Judith as a saintly person on the other with those that depict her as a *femme fatale*, brings us back to where we began, namely the dual character of Judith. This is a subject to which I wish to return briefly in my conclusion below.

## D CONCLUSION

In the preceding sections I have reviewed the depiction of Judith in the text, in scholarly commentary, and the visual arts from the Renaissance period to the present time. I have shown that the dualistic perception of Judith which many scholars and artists espouse stems from at least three interrelated factors:

- Western, binary, patriarchal perceptions that define and represent Judith according to one 'side' of her composite character.
- The castrating potential of Judith as a sexual entity that engulfs men and renders them powerless, thereby symbolically castrating them.
- The way that Judith traverses gender boundaries.

These factors have not only contributed towards the dualistic interpretation of Judith in commentary and art, they have also served the purpose of obfuscating which gender kills. This is particularly evident in works of art that feminise Holofernes while masculinising and/or androgynising Judith and/or her maid, and those that relate Judith to masculine Biblical and/or mythical figures.

I have also indicated that in many of these art works, Judith takes on the guise of the negative *anima*. The *anima* is the personification of a male's *personal unconscious psyche*. As an archetype, the *anima* has both positive and negative features, thus yielding the positive and negative *anima*. She is a numinous figure that stems from humanity's *collective unconscious* psyche as well as an aspect of the male's

*personal unconscious* psyche. In the latter case, the *anima* or female *soul-image* (cf Jung 1953:189, 197 for the equation of these terms) develops primarily from the male's perceptions of his mother and his subsequent encounters with female human beings. It is the particularity of the male psyche that, for it to develop successfully, a boy has to be separated from his mother at a young age and identify with his father. This necessitates that the female parental image – *the* primary receptor of the *anima* for a male child – is increasingly shut off from consciousness and may thus easily assume a negative aspect. As the boy grows up and the parental influence wanes, other women take up their positions 'as the most immediate environmental influence' in the life of the adult male (cf Jung 1953: 188). They then become the receptacles for the adult male's corresponding soul-image, or *anima*. Jung's term for this psychological phenomenon is *projection* – the internal soul-image is projected onto women whose personality/psychic make up makes them suitable receptacles for it.

Jung contends that, whereas distinction from the mother and so the female soul-image is necessary for the initial developmental stages of the male psyche, true maturation can only take place when a man willingly withdraws these projections and integrates his female soul-image into his *conscious psyche*. Failing that, the *anima* continues to be suppressed and projected onto women in the man's immediate environment – be they real or 'fictitious' women like Judith. The suppression of rising *anima* contents causes them to rebel and 'sour' as it were, which is how the negative *anima* figure is developed. Without conscious integration, she continues to plague and ultimately destroy a man, with the man becoming more and more immature as time goes by. It is little wonder, then, that Judith, a man-slaying, castrating woman, has become the receptacle for many a male's negative *anima* projections – witness in particular the male-gendered art works that I have scrutinised.

Furthermore, being an archetype, the *anima* also has composite characteristics that may be rendered as either feminine or masculine – hence the androgynous/masculine portrayal of Judith in many works of art. As we have seen, these portrayals contribute largely towards gender blurring and the obfuscation of which gender kills. Since this phenomenon is intimately connected with the vicissitudes of the male psyche, we may ask whence the dualistic, one-sided renditions of Judith's character that we find in predominantly male-originated works of art? Do they reflect a male psyche that is struggling to integrate its feminine side, or do they reflect an immature, underdeveloped masculinity? And what of the artworks

of Gentileschi? What is the psychological function of the Judith figure in them? Do they reflect the artist's shadow – her hidden psychological components? Or, rather, do they reflect the strong female figure that, according to Pratt's research on such figures in literature (Pratt 1992), guides women along their path of individuation? Let the reader decide.

## NOTES

- 1 Cf Sölle *et al* (1994:206-219) for these and other portrayals of Judith. Cf also Stone (1992:73-94) and the plates in Stocker (1998).
- 2 Reproduced by permission: <http://sunsite.dk/cgfa/klimt/p-klimt30.htm>
- 3 Reproduced by permission: <http://www.bethisraelct.org/dookh/judith.htm>
- 4 For a more in-depth treatment of this aspect, cf section 5.2.3.1. of my soon-to-be-completed Doctoral dissertation, *The Enemy is within: A Jungian Psychoanalytic Approach to the Book of Judith*.
- 5 Judith's transformation is dealt with at length in 5.2.3.1. of my Doctoral dissertation, referred to in note 2 above.
- 6 Judith 9:2 states that 'e[lusan mhvtran parqevnou' (literally: they loosed a virgin's womb), 'ejguvmnwsan mhro;n' (made bare the thigh), and 'ejbebhvlwsan mhvtran' (defiled the womb).  
All quotations from the Greek text of *Judith* are taken from *Septuaginta*, Morphologically Tagged Version (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart) 1979; Logos Library Systems 2.1. Any form of emphasis in such verses is my own.
- 7 All English translations of verses in *Judith* are taken from *The King James Version Apocrypha*, Oak Harbor, WA: LRS Inc 1995, unless otherwise stated. Any form of emphasis in such verses is my own.
- 8 Reproduced by permission: <http://sunsite.dk/cgfa/mantegna/p-mantegna1.htm>
- 9 Reproduced by permission: <http://sunsite.dk/cgfa/g/p-agentileschi2.htm>
- 10 For further details *vide* section 5.2.3.3. of my Doctoral dissertation referred to previously.

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