

THE *ELDER* AND THE *YOUNGER JUDITH*: TWO BIBLICAL RETELLINGS AS MEDIAEVAL HIGH GERMAN BRIDAL COURTSHIP NOVELS?

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Abstract. This paper investigates two Middle High German verse retellings of the biblical Book of Judith, the *Elder Judith* and the *Younger Judith*, preserved in the twelfth-century Vorau manuscript. Despite their significance for vernacular biblical reception, these texts have received little sustained scholarly attention. The study argues that both poems reframe Judith’s story through motifs associated with bridal courtship literature, thereby adapting a biblical heroine to the cultural and devotional expectations of medieval German-speaking audiences. Drawing on the concept of parabiblical traditions and Michael E. Stone’s notion of the “Embroidered Bible,” the paper highlights how scriptural narratives were creatively reshaped within medieval literary and manuscript contexts.

Keywords: Judith, Middle High German literature, Parabiblical traditions, Embroidered Bible, Vernacular biblical reception, Bridal courtship motifs, Medieval manuscript culture, Gender and exemplarity.

There are several Medieval High German (MHG) manuscripts collecting vernacular texts, written with the intention to preserve them from being forgotten – as explicitly stated in the case of the *Ambraser Heldenbuch* (Vienna, ÖNB, Cod. ser. nova 2663): It was commissioned by the German Emperor Maximilian I., who considered himself “The Last Knight”, around the year 1500.¹ It is the only witness for many Mediaeval High German texts from the 12th–14th century.

¹ KLARER, Mario (ed.), *Ambraser Heldenbuch. Gesamttranskription mit Manuskriptbild*, 11 volumes (Transcriptiones 1.1-11), Berlin/Boston 2022. – DOMANSKI, Kristina, „Heldenbücher.



Not as lavishly decorated, but just as important for German philologists is the *Vorau manuscript* (Stiftsbibliothek Vorau, Codex 276, ca. 1175–1200),² containing a collection of religious poems following “the plan of a Christian word history”, from Genesis to the Apocalypse of John.³ Amongst them are two poems, the *Elder* and the *Younger Judith*, both ‘re-enactments’ of the (para-)biblical narrative, both so far untranslated into modern German and/or English and standing in a broader tradition of Mediaeval High German Judith poems.⁴

This article aims at two different goals: First, it offers a short introduction into two unknown texts and the different treatments of the biblical tradition. Second, it wants to show that the common division lines between apocrypha and canonical scriptures sometimes are insufficient (for example on the borderline between Jewish and Christian traditions) or little helpful to describe texts that originated after Late Antiquity. Using the term “Parabiblical Traditions” instead of the more common term “Apocrypha” has immense potential for the work of adjacent fields, like art history and philology. In our case, we have two Christian ballads reenacting the Old Testament *Book of Judith*, which is not part of the Hebrew bible. In this aspect, the poems’ source already crosses classic categories. Therefore, it is necessary to point out four important preliminary things:

1. As we are talking about a joint Judeo-Christian tradition, we must acknowledge the fact that we are dealing with different bibles⁵, and that the inclusion *in* or the exclusion *from* the biblical canon led to different lines of development in different geographical and religious contexts. For catholic and orthodox Christians, the *Book of Judith* is canonical, while it is not included in neither the Jewish nor the Protestant canon.

Handschrift Nr. 53.0.4“, in: *Katalog der deutschsprachigen illustrierten Handschriften des Mittelalters* vol. 6 (Munich 2015).

² First edited in DIEMER, Joseph (ed.), *Deutsche Gedichte des XI. und XII. Jahrhunderts* (Vienna 1849, reprint Darmstadt 1968).

³ EHRISMANN, Gustav, *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur bis zum Ausgang des Mittelalters. 2,1: Die mittelhochdeutsche Literatur; 1. Frühmittelhochdeutsche Zeit* (Munich 1922, reprint 1959), 103.

⁴ During the Middle Ages, the *Book of Judith* served as Vorlage for countless vernacular poems, plays, and epics. Best known are the (fragmentary) Old English Judith, transmitted in the “Beowulf manuscript” (British Library London, Cotton MS Vitellius A XV, ca. 1000 CE), as well as the “Ostmitteldeutsche Judith” (East Middle German Judith, ca. 1250), see Claus-Dieter WETZEL, „Judith“, in: *Lexikon des Mittelalters* vol. V (Munich, 2002), 796 and Dieter KARTSCHOKE, „Judith“, in: *Lexikon des Mittelalters* vol. V (Munich, 2002), 796–797.

⁵ For the question ‘What is Bible?’ in different contexts see FINSTERBUSCH, Karin & LANGE, Armin (eds.), *What is Bible?* (Leuven, 2012).

2. Following Michael E. Stone's concept of the *Embroidered Bible*,⁶ parabiblical traditions are not limited to textual witnesses from Late Antiquity. The use of this term avoids prejudices related to the term 'apocrypha' as well as any hierarchy between textual and artistic traditions.⁷ At the same time, it involves different fields to examine the fabric that evolves between texts, pictures, rites, and folklore over time. The concept of the Embroidered Bible helps us to understand that from certain perspectives (like, for example, iconography) parabiblical writings are anything but subordinate to canonical scriptures. They rather help to fill all the 'lacunae' that are left empty by the biblical words: An artist, who is to invent a composition around a biblical scene, usually needs to add many elements to make the scene recognizable and familiar for its viewer.⁸
3. Parabiblical writings help us to develop a more colorful, graphic understanding of the biblical tales in our heads. These *Mental Bibles*⁹ sometimes differ from, sometimes even are contradicting the "authoritative" texts – and still, in many cases, they form our own version of, for example, the Nativity Scene (where we find neither the names of the Three Holy Kings nor ox and donkey), which in the sphere of "Lived Religion"¹⁰ (McGuire) stands on equal ground with the words of the Bible.
4. Many parabiblical characters have symbolic meaning and encompass narrative complexes that span time, space, and cultural boundaries. They represent distinct manifestations of *Entangled Traditions*,¹¹

⁶ STONE, Michael E., "Parabiblical traditions in mediaeval Armenia and its social location(s)", in: *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 32 (2023), 229–43.

⁷ See also NICKLAS, Tobias, „Nikodemus und Gamaliel: Neutestamentliche Figuren an der Schwelle zwischen ‚Juden‘ und ‚Christen‘“, in: *Provokateure, Tabubrüche und Denkabenteuer: Grenzüberschreitungen im frühen und spätantiken Christentum*, ed. A. MERKT et al. (Göttingen, 2023), 269–82.

⁸ This can be achieved by backdrop (landscapes, props), attributes, or additional figures on the panel). They are necessary for what Erwin Panofsky calls "iconographic analysis" and "iconological interpretation". They, in turn, are grounded on the artist's knowledge of literary sources and "synthetic intuition, characterised by personal psychology and 'world view'", see PANOFSKY, Erwin, „Ikonographie und Ikonologie (1955)“, in: *ibid.*, *Ikonographie und Ikonologie. Bildinterpretation nach dem Dreistufenmodell* (Cologne 2006), 57.

⁹ On this term, see the forthcoming conference proceedings MAMYAN, Mari et al. (ed.), *Embroidered Bible and Mental Bibles: Some Changes of Paradigm in the Study of Christian Apocrypha and Parabiblical Traditions* (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2026) [forthcoming].

¹⁰ MCGUIRE, Meredith B., *Lived religion. Faith and practice in everyday life* (Oxford 2008).

¹¹ For the term *Entangled Traditions* see HALLINGER, Stephanie & NICKLAS, Tobias, „Von der Illustration zum Text: Ein intermediales Experiment mit der Bamberger Apokalypse“, in: *Textforschung zu Septuaginta, Hebräerbrief und Apokalypse*, ed. G. GAEBEL et al. (Berlin 2024)

interweaving various influences like a fabric: Media manifestations (texts, images, folkloric motifs, rituals, etc.) take shape in a specific contextual framework (determined by space, place, group affiliation and size...). They are being pulled, turned, and fitted to a specific circumstance, like cross-woven threads. When medium meets moment, nodal points take shape; these nodes in turn, develop and extend the emerging structure, reinforce the entanglements, and generate resonant layers of additional meaning.

The two texts presented here throw a spotlight on one detail within this fabric of Entangled Traditions about the pious widow Judith, whose beheading of the Assyrian warlord Holofernes sparked the fantasy of legions of authors and painters since the second century BCE.

This article concentrates on reading the texts in their relationship to the biblical text: What changes did the authors make, which narrative models did they lean on, and which effects does this have on the recipients? This analysis is part of a bigger project which attempts to trace the lines of development that the countless adaptations of the Judith material produce in literature and art, and to investigate the conditions under which the symbolic content of a biblical figure can change.

351–378; HALLINGER, Stephanie, “Entangled Traditions about Judith: From heroine to vamp”, in: Jan RÜGGEMEIER, Elizabeth SHIVELY (eds.), *Characters in Mind: The Migration of Characters in Early Jewish, Early Christian, and Greco-Roman Literature and Art* (Diegesis in Mind 2), (Bonn/Paderborn 2026) [forthcoming].

1. The Elder Judith

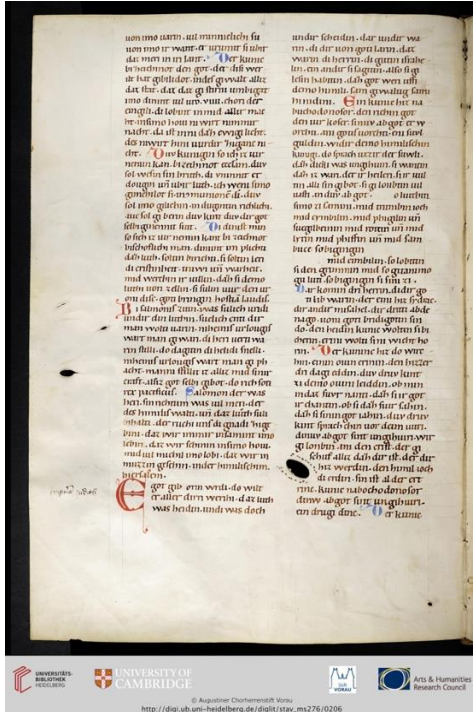


Image 1: Vorau, Archiv des Augustiner Chorherrenstiftes, StAV-Ms 276 (1175–1200), fol. 99v: Beginning of the *Elder Judith* – <https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.29478#0206>

The first text is transmitted solely in the *Vorau manuscript* on fol. 99v–100v (image 1) as second part of a poem on *The Three Men in the Fiery Furnace* (Dan 3,1–30) and the *Book of Judith* (fol. 100ra, l. 23–100va, l. 37) in a rather lyrical style.

The Three Men in the Fiery Furnace is presented as a legendary tale in 82 verses (with three missing lines towards the end), restyled as a Christian martyrdom legend. To that purpose, the biblical tale is tightened and shortened, no allegoric interpretation is offered. The author assigns a more active role to the Three Men, as they are not being denounced, but appear in front of the king by their own will with an almost “missionary zeal”, as Werner Schröter states.¹² No angel appears inside the furnace to cool it down, but God in his

¹² “Sie werden nicht denunziert, sondern kommen aus eigener Initiative und mit missionarischem Eifer“ – SCHRÖDER, Werner, „Die Ältere Judith“, „Die drei Jünglinge im Feuerofen“, in: Kurt RUH; Gundolf KEIL; Werner SCHRÖDER; et al (ed.), *Verfasserlexikon – Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters. Band 1: ‘A solis ortus cardine’ – Colmarer Dominikanerchronist* (Berlin 1978), 288–293, at 288.

power himself works the miracle (“got mid sinir giwalt/machit in den ovine kalt”, ll. 63f.). The mediaeval ballad is not ending with an ‘edict of tolerance’ by Nabuchodonosor, who is displayed as an unforgiving villain. Instead, the ‘heathens’ (l. 73) witnessing the miraculous rescue start to doubt their own gods and admire the God of the three men as a “very good emergency helper” (“ein vil gut helphaeri”, l. 78). The long song of praise of the three young men (Dan 3,51–90) is abbreviated to the Latin formula “gloria tibi, domine! / Deus meus, laudamus te.” (ll. 70f.) (“Glory to you, o Lord!/My God, we praise you”), and the ballad ends with their redemption, without any further information on their future and the king’s efforts about their afterlife in the province of Babel (Dan 4,34). The manuscript shows no clear caesura between those two parts, which are bound together by a pair of rhymes:

“Der kunic Nabuchodonosor undi sinu abgot	King Nabuchodonosor and his idols
wurdin beidu zi Babylonia gilastiro.	all were derided in Babylonia.”

These hinge verses are the beginning of the *Elder Judith*: The ‘historical’ background around the Assyrian king Nabuchodonosor is tying the two independent stories together under the topic of an unjust king constantly opposing God’s chosen people.¹³

The 1976 edition of the poem by Werner Schröder subdivides the text into 13 sections according to initials in the manuscript, with the last one presumably being a later addition.¹⁴ At the same time, these 13 sections of meaning offer a clear structure of the poem: Repeated formulaic elements at the opening and ending of the stanzas hint to an (at least temporary) oral passing on before the final stanza was added and it was combined with the *Three Men in the Fiery Furnace*, for example the formula “Do sprach” (“There said”) at the beginning of stanzas 5, 6, 7, and 9 as introductions to speeches, the prophecy of Holofernes’ fall at the end of the stanzas 2 and 3, or numerous affirmations of truth and resumptory by the narrator. Names of places and persons show up in rather

¹³ This is even more striking in the context of the manuscript: Nabuchodonosor is presented in opposition to the just king Salomon, who is being praised in the preceding poem (fol. 98va–99va), see HOFMANN, Konrad, „Über die mittelhochdeutschen. Gedichte von Salomon und Judith“, in: *Münchener Sitzungsberichte 1871*, 553–561, at 558; SCHRÖDER 1978, 292. The question whether this interpolation was already part of the *Vorlage* or whether the two ballads have been turned into one entity by the Vorau scribe is not to be answered by the manuscript, which is the only text witness.

¹⁴ See SCHRÖDER 1978, 27; HÄNDL, Claudia, „Ältere Judith“, in: *Killy Literaturlexikon* vol. 6 (Berlin 2009) (<https://www.degruyter.com/database/VDBO/entry/vdbo.killy.3040/html>); DIEMER 1849 dates the poem back to the 11th century, and describes it as a fragment of an elder (lost) retelling of the bible.

unknown (probably corrupted) forms, such as “Bathania”; some characters are simply being exchanged – like the bishop (sic!) Bebilin, who takes the place of the biblical Usija. Others, like the Ammonite Achior, who plays a major role in the biblical account, are left out to abbreviate and clarify the story.

The following 220 verses tell parts of the biblical *Book of Judith*:

1 (85–94)	Description of Holofernes’ warmongering: He gathers the fiercest pagan fighters around him to fight against the Jewish god.
2 (95–100)	Holofernes threatens the Hebrews to extinguish them all. The narrator comments on his end by a woman called Judith.
3 (101–108)	The warlord summons a large army of many thousand warriors and moves westward, sieging a castle called Bathania (where the beautiful Judith would later kill him).
4 (109–116)	During the siege that lasts an entire year, the castle is attacked daily, and the inhabitants suffer from dire famine.
5 (117–124)	Holofernes wants to get hold of the castle. He wonders who its lord is, as the inhabitants’ end is near.
6 (125–132)	The duke of the castle silences Holofernes, he acclaims the city’s allegiance to and belief in Christ who created “everything that is”. He calls king Nabuchodonosor’s gods idols.
7 (133–142)	A citizen asks bishop Bebilin to negotiate a grace period of three days for them, so God might save them before they have to hand over the castle.
8 (143–152)	The beautiful woman Judith takes a bath, gets all dressed up and sets out together with her servant Ava for Holofernes’ war camp on her own account, without telling anyone.
9 (153–162)	As the warlord sees the beautiful woman approaching, he orders his chamberlains to win her for him – otherwise, he would die of longing.
10 (163–176)	The chamberlains lead Judith in front of Holofernes. Without further speech, she calls for a wedding.
11 (177–190)	The feast is being prepared hastily. Judith and her servant Ava appear as barmaids and get the guests drunken; because of Judith’s efforts, Holofernes gets tired of the wine.
12 (191–198)	Holofernes is carried to bed. Judith kneels down and prays to the almighty God for deliverance from their enemies.
13 (199–220)	An angel from heaven commands her to get up and sever Holofernes’ head from his body. Meanwhile, her maiden should wait with a linen sheet and carry the head back to the castle to save the people of Israel, which is a command by God.

The content differs strongly from the *Book of Judith*, abbreviates it and tightens it up. It adapts the *dramatis personae* to German Medieval circumstances, when, for example, Holofernes is called a „herzog“ (“duke”, l. 85), Bathania a “castle” instead of a city (l. 107), and the lord of the castle a “burcgravi” (“duke of the castle”, l. 125). Entire passages are left out, like the Achior story, or Judith’s background (Jdt 8,1–10). It is not even mentioned that she is a widow; her theological talk with the Eldest of the city (Jdt 8,11–36) as well as her prayer to God (Jdt 9,1–14) are completely missing. The emphasis clearly lies on her beauty. Apart from the repeated line “du zi goti woli digiti” (“who firmly trusted in God”, ll. 144, 168, 182), there are no allusions to Judith’s piety, which is contrasted by the epithetic ”di burc habit er gerni” (“he really wanted to own the castle”, ll. 118, 154) on Holofernes’ side. Holofernes’ decapitation is not even told, just commanded to Judith by God’s angel. The description of the cruel deed takes the better part of the angel’s announcement and closes with a lapidary statement that God commands Judith to liberate the people of Israel.

According to Claudia Händl (following the general opinion), stanza 13 is a later addition, while the original end (which the stanzas 2 and 3 point to) seems to be missing.¹⁵ In contrast to this, Anton Wallner already in 1918 stated convincingly that the *Elder Judith* is not a fragment:

“[...] the angelus ex machina closes the little drama with his foreshadowing of the heroine’s return home and the liberation of her people. There is no room for direct narration. The artifice that pushes the murder behind the scenes and relieves the heroine of any responsibility, is very remarkable. The outer sign of the conclusion is the three rhymes.”¹⁶

Verses 203–220 show a prophetic epic foreshadowing of the events to come. That the mentioning of the stolen sword (l. 192) point towards a later addition of the 13th stanza is not a binding argument, as logical flaws are to be

¹⁵ HÄNDL 2009; EHRISMANN 1922, 104 also assumes a lost ending; DE BOOR, Helmut, *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart. Band 1: Die deutsche Literatur von Karl dem Großen bis zum Beginn der höfischen Dichtung, 770–1170* (Munich 1949), 164, considers it as ‘corrupted’. – SCHRÖDER 1978, 292 suggests that the 13th stanza has been added by the same redactor as a minor interpolation in the Three Men, stanza 4, as well as the hinge verses (ll. 83f.), which serve to bind the two independent texts together.

¹⁶ “[...] das kleine Drama beschließt der angelus ex machina mit seinem vorausdeutenden Bericht, der sogar die Heimkehr der Heldin und die Befreiung ihres Volkes vorwegnimmt. Da bleibt für directe Erzählung kein Raum mehr. Der Kunstgriff, der die Mordtat hinter die Szene schiebt und der Heldin jede Verantwortung abnimmt, ist sehr beachtenswert. Das äußere Zeichen des Abschlusses ist der Dreireim.” – WALLNER, Anton, „Pfaffendichtung. 1. Salomon und Judith“, in: *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 43 (1874), 181–218, at 182.

found in longer texts with an (at least temporal) oral passing-on. In any way, the concluding verses have been considered (or added, as some suggest) as original part of the poem by the scribe of the Vora codex, as it is written in the same hand as the surrounding texts and has been inserted in the layout of the folium.

The German Philologist Gustav Ehrismann pointed out the importance of the *Elder Judith* for the development of German literature in general in its early phase (unfortunately without resonance, as the ballad is still a blank spot in research):

“The German poem is [...] one of the few folk ballads that we have from the Old and Middle High German period and thus is a model for the style of an epic folk song from the early period of the Middle Ages; at the same time, however, it is also an example of the method of transferring a biblical subject into a German minstrel poem, and indeed the only example of this, for the Elder Judith is the only genuine German spiritual minstrel song. The foreign material is the German world of imagination remodeled, which is the basis of most [...] deviations from the Old Testament Jewish narrative.”¹⁷

However, the poem offers a very independent, innovative approach to a (para-)biblical tale, with a peculiar re-evaluation of the account and the protagonist’s actions.

The female protagonist is introduced not as a widow, who already gave proof of her wisdom in several public speeches and prayers, but simply as an “excellent” woman when she first appears in the MGH ballad:

8	Do gided du guti Judith (du zi goti wol digiti).	There the excellent Judith did (the following) (who firmly trusted in God).
145	su hizzir machin ein bat. ziwari sag ich u daz. su was diz allir schonis wib, su zirti woli den ir lib. su undi ir wib Ava,	She instructed to prepare a bath for her, I tell you this truthfully. She was the most beautiful woman, she made herself look her best. She and her servant Ava,
150	di gingin ziwari uzzir der burgi undir di heidinischi menigi.	they actually went out of the castle in the midst of the crowd of pagans.

¹⁷ EHRISMANN 1922, 104: „Das deutsche Gedicht ist für die Entwicklung unserer Literaturgeschichte von ganz besonderer Wichtigkeit: Es ist eine der wenigen volkstümlichen Balladen, die wir ahd. bzw. mhd. Zeit besitzen und damit ein Muster für den Stil eines epischen Volkslieds aus der mhd. Frühzeit; zugleich aber auch ein Beispiel für die Methode bei der Übertragung eines biblischen Stoffs in ein deutsches Spielmannsgedicht, und zwar das einzige Beispiel hierfür, denn die ältere Judith ist das einzige echte geistliche Spielmannslied. Der fremde Stoff ist die deutsche Anschauungswelt umgeformt, darauf beruhen die meisten [...] Abweichungen von der alttestamentlichen, jüdischen Erzählung.“

The author focuses entirely on the interplay between Judith and Holofernes and therefore assigns a more active role to Judith. Holofernes himself is preparing the successful killing by ordering the feast and drinking too much. Judith is wanted as a lover for the night, not as a legitimate bride: “The cunning plot of the execution of which she creates even the most favorable opportunity, burdens the legitimate bride more than the beloved of one night”, as Werner Schröder explains.¹⁸ The author used secular poetry extensively to facilitate these changes in the general concept and content of the *Elder Judith*.¹⁹

One of the literary traditions he leaned upon was the genre of “Bridal Courtship Novels”²⁰ – a group of texts²¹ which is connected by the motif of the dangerous courtship of a bride in a foreign cultural and religious context. This genre was highly popular during the 12th century, usually telling a knight’s adventures to exotic Eastern countries in his attempt to win a bride. Those romances are much closer to the early Medieval heroes’ epics like the *Nibelungenlied* than to the courtly literature of the 13th and 14th century, in their “light-hearted joy of fables”²² without too deep moral or religious implications. The outdated term “minstrel novels” implies that the texts derive from a circle of wandering, rather uneducated poets in vernacular language without too much care for formal or stylistic questions. This low estimation of

¹⁸ SCHRÖDER 1978, 290.

¹⁹ SCHRÖDER 1978, 290 calls the poem “something like a 'double-sided event song' in the sense of Heusler”, recurring to HEUSLER, Andreas, *Lied und Epos in germanischer Sagendichtung* (Dortmund 1905). Heusler’s work on the *Nibelungenlied* is based on the assumption that two separate epics (the Brunhild saga and the fall of the Burgundians) were only poured into a new form and adapted to the courtly taste of the time by an Austrian minstrel who was merely a gifted reviser in the last stage of editing.

²⁰ Within research history, those novels/epics have always caused issues regarding their classification within the genres of vernacular mediaeval literature. Their denomination changed from “Spielmannsepik” (Minstrel’s novels, which included a rather devaluating aspect regarding style and content of the texts in question) to “Brautwerbungsroman” (Bridal Courtship Novels). See SCHMID-CADALBERT, Christian, *Der Ortnit AW als Brautwerbungsdichtung. Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis mittelhochdeutscher Schemaliteratur* (Bibliotheca Germanica 28) (Bern 1985); Monika SCHULZ, *Eherechtsdiskurse. Studien zu König Rother, Partonopier und Meliur, Arabel, Der gute Gêhart, Der Ring* (Beiträge zur Älteren Literaturgeschichte) (Heidelberg 2005); SCHULZ, Armin, *Erzähltheorie in mediävistischer Perspektive* (Berlin 2012).

²¹ *König Rother, St. Oswald, Orendel, Ortnit, Kudrun and Salman und Morolf*.

²² BEHR, Hans-Joachim, ‘Spielmannsdichtung’, in: *Reallexikon der deutschen Literaturwissenschaft. Neubearb. d. Reallexikons der deutschen Literaturgeschichte*, vol. III (Berlin/New York 2003), 474–476, who suggests avoiding the former genre classification “Spielmannsdichtung”, as it does not convey either the content nor the circumstances of text production adequately; HOFFMANN, Werner, *Mittelhochdeutsche Heldendichtung* (Grundlagen der Germanistik 14) (Berlin 1974), 34.

‘folk poetry’ has been revised during the last two decades, when the complex interplay between text and legal discourses sparked the interest of scholars.²³

One of the constitutive elements of Bridal Courtship Novels is the tension they display between the (Christian) West and the (‘oriental’) East, as their narration usually points to a marriage between a (future) king from the West with a royal bride of the East. The texts in question share a whole “treasure box of action roles, character constellations, spatial concepts, motifs and narrative connections”²⁴, as well as a common thread in terms of conflicts between Christians and ‘Saracens’²⁵. Those are closely related to the acquisition of the respective bride, which is sought or averted across the boundaries of religion (and thereby often shifting this boundary). The same goes for the constellation between Judith and Holofernes in our ballad, if one applies the matching vocabulary and background knowledge for the topics of “bride from the Orient” as well as “interreligious or political marriage” as they are being dealt with in Bridal Courtship Novels in general. For the context at hand, it is particularly significant that the *Elder Judith* forms a kind of “prototype” of a worldly-wise, level-headed, adult woman, which is reflected again and again in the medieval literature.²⁶ In the field of courtship narratives, many different constellations are possible and conceivable, already based on the surviving texts; this allows the author a certain flexibility. Due to the brevity of the text, however, he does not spread out an original, new variant of the courtship scheme: Rather, the author draws from the existing arsenal of narrative patterns and thus activates the familiar/similar.

²³ See SCHULZ 2005, who takes a post-structuralist approach to *König Rother* as an „exemplary story of traditional courtship“ (27) to show how the text delicately weaves political discourses of the time (tensions between the Empires of Byzantium and Rome around 1150) into contemporary (legal) canonical marriage law.

²⁴ KOHNEN, Rabea, *Die Braut des Königs. Zur interreligiösen Dynamik der mittelhochdeutschen Brautwerbungserzählungen* (Hermaea N.F. 133) (Berlin 2014), 1.

²⁵ Kohnen points out that her translation of the MHG terms *heide*, which has had a certain ambiguity since the Middle Ages, mark the topic of dealing with the stranger: “Heath” or “pagan” originally was used as antonym for “Christian” – for Jews, heretics, Muslims, as well as pre-Christian, not yet baptized peoples such as Saxons and Slavs. Therefore, Kohnen (2014, 1) explains convincingly, she works with the term *Saracen* instead of *heath* or *Muslim*, because this “terminology serves the epistemological goal of the present study, which does not so much want to examine the relationship of courtship narratives to contemporary ‘reality’ but rather their interweaving with contemporary discourses and ways of writing.”

²⁶ Amongst the most famous examples in MHG literature is the protagonist’s wife in Wolfram’s von Eschenbach *Willehalm* (ca. 1217), a “Saracene” queen called Arabel (Gyburc after her baptism). Other genres, like the moralistic-didactic merry tales by the Stricker (ca. 1200–1250), even cultivate the image of witty, cunning women, see EHRISMANN, Otfrid (ed.), *Der Stricker, Erzählungen, Fabeln, Reden. Mittelhochdeutsch/Neuhochdeutsch* (Reclams Universal-Bibliothek 18821) (Stuttgart 2011).

This arsenal of motifs from Bridal Courtship Novels also includes cunning. The MHG word *list* is not necessarily negatively connotated but bears an “ethically ambivalent character”.²⁷ As a motive for action in mediaeval texts, it is usually connected to a strategic approach, means and intention as well as a concrete goal, which must be behind this immediately achievable intention. In Hartmut Semmler’s categories of cunning that he unfolds on the backdrop of MHG literature, the *Elder Judith* (even more so in direct comparison with the biblical text) fills almost any of them:²⁸ Instead of plain lies, Judith remains silent and hides her true intentions to achieve her aim – a commonly used remedy in vernacular mediaeval literature: “*Application of cunning through silence* [...] consists in the deliberate withholding of information that the opponent knows exactly that the opponent needs or wants to know.”²⁹ A more thorough examination of this complex of motifs would certainly be rewarding, as even a brief comparison of the Elder Judith with Semmler’s categories of cunning reveals a close kinship with general narrative mechanisms in MHG secular literature. Narrators usually judge their protagonists’ cleverness positively, even more so when supernatural powers are involved in a positive outcome of the story.³⁰

Especially in religious texts the tension between cunning/deceit and actions that are following God’s *ordo* cause tensions; the theological discussion of this discourse recurs on the status of “Weltklugheit” (world wisdom, sophistication) during the 12th and 13th centuries, which underwent a change of the ideal of virtues during the 12th century: “The demand for prudence in practical action is replaced by the demand for the right worship of God, whereby the right ethical attitude is a prerequisite for such exemplary behavior.”³¹ In particular, this “right ethical attitude“ demands every human to decide according to the respective situation. This in turn assigns a central meaning to the category of interpretation when it comes to tell truth and lie apart, as the recipient always assumes that the correct course of action is

²⁷ SEMMLER, Hartmut, *Listmotive in der mittelhochdeutschen Epik. Zum Wandel ethischer Normen im Spiegel der Literatur* (Philologische Studien und Quellen 122) (Berlin 1991), 31.

²⁸ Starting with the secret departure (SEMMLER 1991, 99) from Bathania to deceit with a false statement about her consent of marrying Holofernes (107) as well as deceit by incomplete/ambiguous speech (145), Judith veils the true intent of her visit to Holofernes’ war camp. One might also interpret her behavior as deception by partial testimony (161) or prevailing intentions of deception (171).

²⁹ SEMMLER 1991, 44.

³⁰ With the connotation of MHG “list” (“cunning”) ranging from shrewdness (especially in comical texts) to prudence (as seen in poems and epics with a religious background, like the Elder Judith). See also SEMMLER 1991, 173.

³¹ SEMMLER 1991, 189.

absolutely valid in the respective situation. The question of logic is excluded from this discourse, because “with reference to biblical models, it was possible to manipulate to the point of arbitrariness.”³² On the other hand, questions about *prudentia* and influences that are beyond human powers gain importance during the 13th century and therefore „the work of divine grace was emphasized over the idea of virtue.”³³

One might find a hint to this discourse in the final stanza of the *Elder Judith*, the ‘originality’ of which has been questioned repeatedly: Instead of having Holofernes killed by a virtuous woman (as in the biblical text), the author avoids any ethical conflict by ‘depriving’ Judith of some of her traits (such as piety, humility and respective epithets) and at the same time just narrating God’s command delivered by an angel instead of the actual deed. This reading makes the *Elder Judith* even more interesting from a narratological point of view, as it shows the author’s experimental approach towards ‘new’ literary forms and different literary, cultural, and religious concepts that cross-pollinate each other in the second half of the 12th century, which proved to be existential for the further development of vernacular German literature.³⁴

³² SEMMLER 1991, 223.

³³ SEMMLER 1991, 230.

³⁴ One might even add that with this literary depiction stands at the beginning of a line of development (maybe even representing a prototype) which leads to the image of smart and cunning women, which so often are depicted as superior to their husbands, to priests and other male authorities within the genre of “Schwankmären” (farces, merry tales) which was very popular throughout the entire Middle Ages. For a general introduction, see the thorough studies of FISCHER, Hanns, *Studien zur deutschen Märendichtung* (Tübingen ²1983); RAGOTZKY, Hedda, *Gattungserneuerung und Laienunterweisung in Texten des Strickers* (Studien und Texte zur Sozialgeschichte der Literatur 1) (Tübingen 1981), and GRUBMÜLLER, Klaus (ed.), *Kleinere Erzählformen im Mittelalter* (Schriften der Universität-Gesamthochschule Paderborn 10) (Paderborn/Munich 1988). For more recent case studies, see WAGNER, Silvan (ed.), *Mären als Grenzphänomen* (Bayreuther Beiträge zur Literaturwissenschaft 37) (Berlin/Bern/Bruxelles 2018).

2. The Younger Judith

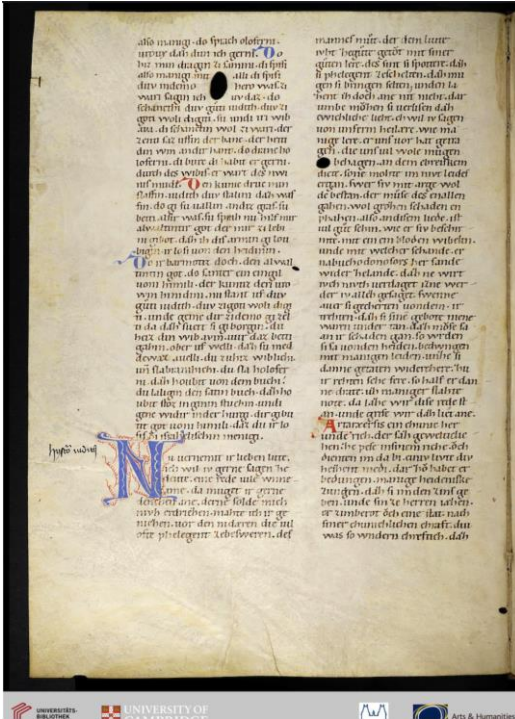


Image 2: *Jüngere Judith (Younger Judith)*, Vorau, Archiv des Augustiner Chorherrenstiftes, StAV-Ms 276 (1175–1200), fol. 100v: Beginning of the „Younger Judith“ – <https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.29478#0208>

In intermediate succession to the *Elder Judith*, the Vorau manuscript presents a second version of the Judith story (image 2), with its 1.826 verses being more than 13 times as long as the 135 verses older one. Its poetic conception and arrangement stay way behind the elder composition, which in many ways is more independent and daring than the younger one. Therefore, it is likely that the collector of the Vorau texts probably found the biblical narrative not inconvenient to complete and relativize the older version of the story. The written dialect points to South Germany, but as it is preserved only in this one collective manuscript, which was written in Bavarian-Austrian dialect, date and authorship remain unclear apart from the *terminus ante quem* “last quarter of the 12th century”, in which the manuscript was produced. The anonymously transmitted ballad does not offer any clear hint on its author, whose “gifts were very modest”³⁵.

³⁵ SCHRÖDER 1978, 924.

cold-blooded murder, as the exemplary nature of a saint.”³⁷ She is a silent saint, though, as the mediaeval author is not inserting her biblical prayer (Jdt 9:1–14) but simply states that “Her prayer was very extensive” (l. 1.124). The encounter between Judith and Holofernes is reported in all likelihood to the biblical text (ll. 1.460–1.475):

<p>Dû des dû gebat dû vrouwe vil tûre dû trat si zû der sûle dû ze sînen houbten stunt:</p>	<p>When the noble lady had prayed for this, she went to the bedpost which stood beside his head:</p>
<p>1460 dâ nam sî sîn swert, si zôch iz ûz der scheide dem hêren al ze leide, ich sage û daz zewâre, si vî in bî dem hâre</p>	<p>Then she took his sword, she drew it from its sheath, to the chagrin of the Lord, I tell you the truth, she took him by the hair</p>
<p>1465 unde slûch im alsô [<i>gebrouche</i>] daz houbet von dem bûche, dû ir alsô wal gelanch dû nam si von den sûlen den umbehanch unde gî vil drâte</p>	<p>and struck his [crouched] the head from his torso. When she had succeeded, she took the sheet from the bedpost and hurried quickly</p>
<p>1470 ûz der chemenâten: si wolde iz ir dûwe geben unde hîz sîz in ir taschen legen, danne gingen sî beide âne geleite nâch der êrom gewonheite</p>	<p>out of the bower: She wanted to give it to her servant and told her to put it in her bag, both went away without an escort according to their former custom,</p>
<p>1475 sam sî wolden gân an ir gebete.</p>	<p>as if they were going to their prayers.</p>

After the defeat of the Assyrians following their leader’s death, the author silences Judith a second time, just mentioning that she “indeed also sang a song of praise to her Lord” (l. 1.779f.), which takes a whole pericope in the *Book of Judith* (16:1–17). The ending formula is true to the bible, stating that the country lived through a long period of peace after Judith passed away at the age of 105 years.

Apart from smaller reorganizing interventions without significant effect on the story, the author sticks to the pattern of the biblical narrative. Around the time the *Younger Judith* was written (1160/70 at the latest), there was already a rising sensitivity for genres in German literature; the author either just had a retelling of the biblical story in mind – or he simply leaned on the conventions

³⁷ SCHRÖDER 1978, 924.

for parabiblical vernacular literature. Deriving from the monastic background of its producer, the text doesn't show the same liberal treatment of the story as the *Elder Judith*. Its attempt is limited to making the Greek/Latin text available for a wider audience rather than experimenting with a new artistic approach.

3. Comparison between bible and medieval retellings

The comparison of the narrative elements (figure 2) visualizes the different focal points, dividing up between the actual story about Judith and Holofernes (green) and the framing story between political (red: war, council, geographical names) and theological interests (purple: prayers, songs of praise etc.).

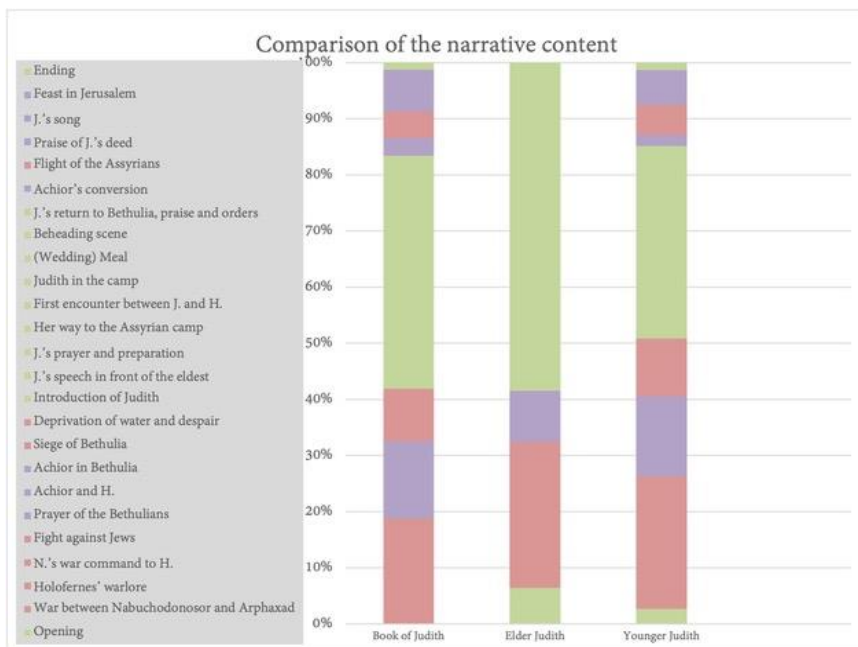


Figure 2: Comparison of the narrative elements in the biblical *Book of Judith*, the *Elder Judith*, and the *Younger Judith*.

A first overview shows big similarities between the biblical and the younger mediaeval one: The vernacular text abbreviates the story around Judith a bit in favor of the 'political' frame story. The *Younger Judith* generally leans on the bible and appears way less courageous than the older one. Judith appears as an *instrumentum dei*, who sees her own role in fulfilling his vengeance on his enemies (ll. 1.547–1.550). It is highly likely that the biblical text was not the author's direct source in neither of our two cases, but that they might have known the narrative from either oral transmission or a lost *Vorlage*. In its simplicity and abstinence of décor, the *Elder Judith* tells a convincing version

up to Judith's prayer right before the beheading of Holofernes. The decapitation is not told, it is just commanded to Judith by an angel.

The author of the (possibly later added)³⁸ 13th stanza illustrates a reader's response to the uncommon text, seeing no reason to repeat the actual deed after the angel's words: The description of the cruel deed takes the better part of the angel's announcement, which closes with a lapidary statement that God commands her to liberate the people of Israel. As already mentioned, the original end (which the stanzas 2 and 3 point to) seems to be missing.³⁹ In contrast to this, one might also argue that the actual deed does not have to be re-told after it had been announced and described by the angel, moreover: that telling it after the angel's words would have been a mere repetition, which stands in strong contrast to the author's strive for brevity in style and length. His main interest was clearly not a theological one, as the omission of all religious discourses shows. The main purpose of the whole manuscript seems to have been *prodesse aut delectare*⁴⁰, which was also the case for Bridal Courtship Novels. Many of their characteristic traits appear in our Judith poem, such as the topics of cunning, lies, the tendency to the miraculous and the courtship scheme:⁴¹ When bluntly asking for the wedding after entering Holofernes' war camp, Judith seems to behave in a treacherous way from the recipients' perspective, because the text is not explaining her intentions (as the biblical narrative does) to kill Holofernes as an act of liberation. Apart from mentioning her trust in God (l. 144), the text is not indicating anything else than a beautiful woman (not a pious widow) bathes and makes herself look the best setting out to visit the enemies besieging her city. Holofernes' reaction to her first sight resembles typical formulae for Mediaeval poetry in courtship scenes; the story itself, with a woman approaching the man (and not the other way around), *Die Ältere Judith* bears some resemblance with the corresponding scene in *König Rother*, which was composed approximately at the same time: When the daughter of the emperor Konstantin misses the chance to see Rother (in disguise under the name of Dietrich) at her fathers' Pentecost feast, she sends her beautifully dressed maid Herlint to his chamber to declare her love.⁴² In an almost unheard-of bravery, the female protagonist of the Judith poem directly replies to Holofernes' interest in proposing a marriage right away. Despite of all the outward differences, the two texts therefore share a reversed courtship

³⁸ See SCHRÖDER 1978, 27; HÄNDL 2009. DIEMER 1849 dates the poem back to the 11th century, and describes it as a fragment of an elder (lost) retelling of the bible.

³⁹ HÄNDL 2009.

⁴⁰ DIEMER 1849, XXXVIII.

⁴¹ See HOFFMANN 1974, 35.

⁴² *König Rother*, ll. 1925–1964.

theme with the woman approaching the man (assisted by her maid); in both cases, the future spouses come from different cultural backgrounds, and in both we find an element of disguise which enables the marriage in first place.

At the same time, the wedding feast itself has no counterpart in the *Book of Judith*, and its description differs strongly from the usual solemn sobriety of Mediaeval biblical retellings: It mimics the atmosphere of a tavern, with Judith and Ava diligently serving Holofernes' army wine until everyone (and especially the warlord himself) is drowsy. In contrast to the biblical story, the medieval narrator does not offer any moralist-ethical valuation of Judith's deed. The most striking fact about the poem, however, is its ending: The author seems to have written himself into a dead end after the angel's appearance, which shows the experimental character of this ballad.

4. Conclusion


Applying Michael Stone's concept of the Embroidered Bible allows us to include the two ballads into a 'Judith library', containing all the material written (and painted)⁴³ around her. The idea of a 'library'⁴⁴ allows us to recontextualize medieval texts and images that are versions, translations, and transformations, as parabiblical traditions of equal rank to what is usually called Christian apocrypha. The concept of Entangled Traditions shows how these parabiblical tales have succeeded in surviving amongst all changes of time and staying relevant for different groups and communities to keep them alive, transform, and re-enact them repeatedly over centuries, giving us an insight in the interests and concerns of their environment of origin. At the same time, this case study demonstrates how classic categories for extrabiblical material are sometimes difficult when looking at the texts under a cultural-historic lens.

⁴³ For a brief introduction, see HALLINGER, *Entangled Traditions about Judith* (forthcoming 2026).

⁴⁴ "It is surely true that the exceedingly complicated textual traditions and trajectories make for difficult study. But we would argue that the complex lives of such texts—the multiple versions, translations, and transformations—are a feature, not a bug: The phenomenon of change is what gives us insight into the interests, concerns, and practices of each successive generation or community of Christians who valued the text enough to reproduce it." – NICKLAS, Tobias & SPITTLER, Janet E., *Reading Christian Apocrypha. Tradition, Interpretation, Practice* (Minneapolis, MN 2025), 99.

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Opening them up to a broader understanding help to explain their vivid ‘afterlife’ way beyond Late Antiquity, and to recognize the innovative role that biblical retellings like the *Elder Judith* played in the development of vernacular literature.

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