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Reading *LXXJudith* 13:1–9 as performance

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The Septuagint Book of *Judith* and its derivatives have had an enormous influence on the history of Western Europe and the Christian church. *Judith* has been employed in various situations to incite violence against a perceived opposition. In this regard, this article focuses on the climax of this book (Jdt 13:1–9) as performance text. In this context, many of the insights proffered by Perry in his seminal work *Insights from Performance Criticism* (2016) have been expanded upon from the perspective of a Greek and/or Hellenistic environment.

Contribution: The value of reading *LXXJudith* as performance is clearly demonstrated. The conclusion is reached that this pericope is indeed highly subversive. Suggestion is also made that, contrary to more conservative wisdom, with reference specifically to *LXXJudith* 13:1–9, the *Judith* fabula is not really reconciliatory in nature. Rather, it seems to provoke conflict between competing powers.

Keywords: *LXXJudith*; Performance; Performance criticism; Power and identity; Judaism.

Introduction

Judith has, over the past millennium, been exploited as a theme for numerous plays, paintings and sculptures by, *inter alia*, Donatello, Botticelli, Michelangelo, Caravaggio, Gentileschi, Tintoretto, Titian, Goya, Hebbel, Klimt and Giraudoux. *Judith* had an influence on the music of Vivaldi, Mozart and Parry. It has also been the topic of countless analyses by various leading scholars, including foci on artistry and faith (Craven 1983), theology and gender (Van Henten 1994), feminism (Bal 1995), Jungian psycho-analysis (Efthimiades Keith 2004), therapeutic narrative (Jordaan 2009), midrashim and folk tales (Gera 2010b), morality (Wojciechowski 2012), Jewish textual traditions and the arts (Xeravits 2012), psychology (Schmitz 2015) and Jewish practice and philosophy (Allen 2016). However, in its reception, *Judith* has also emerged as both an instigating and a subversive text. The fact that it has been employed, on various occasions, to incite people to violence simply cannot be ignored:

- *Judith* acted as the basis for Catholics claiming their right to launch the Counter-Reformation against the dissident Protestants. Here, Judith was seen as an historical personage of the *Ecclessia Militans* and its pope who would surely defeat its heretical enemies (Ciletti 2010:352).
- *Judith* was also employed as the *Ecclessia Truimphans*. Judith the widow, fully dependent on God, should not refrain from taking on the mighty Holofernes. This signifies the victory of a modern-day state over Turkey and the stopping of the expansion of Islam (Harness 2010:374). Thus, *Judith* was used for anti-Islamic purposes.
- Quaker women demanded their right to preach the Gospel using *Judith* as the authority to proclaim God's message. This was firstly because of the fact that in the Septuagint version, Judith was portrayed as wholly virtuous and through her 'example' proclaimed God's message. However, Margaret Fell (an advocate for woman's preaching) goes further than this. She also focuses on the end of Judith's tale, where Judith returns to her people and actually preaches to the people about God (Bartholomew 2010:261–262).
- *Judith* was likewise used in various roles in Italy depending on the requirement of the time. Judith actually underwent a metamorphosis, taking up the role of, *inter alia*, a seductress, saint, charmer, heroine and deceitful liar (Lhâa 2010:424). Judith functions in the Italian context mainly as a liberator, casting down the chains of enslavement and handing Italy its long-fought liberty.

Note: Special Collection entitled Septuagint SA, sub-edited by Johann Cook (SUN).

- *Judith* has also, on rare occasions, been employed for more peaceful purposes. One such example concerns its employment as an agency for pro-Semitism. Nestroy in his 1849 edition of *Judith und Holofernes* used *Judith* to propagate a more tolerant stance towards Jews by the so-called Jew eaters of Vienna (Zaragoza 2010:467). Nestroy rewrites the decapitation scene of Holofernes – one where he actually survives an assassination attempt. Here, a dummy head (the German *Papp Kopf*) replaces Holofernes' head. The surviving Holofernes then becomes a friend of Joab, Judith's brother. The dummy head is then used to scare off the stupid Assyrians (Wills 2019:150). In this way, Nestroy tries to induce the inhabitants of Vienna to be more tolerant towards the Jews in the adjacent ghetto. Nestroy clearly hints that the Viennese should repent for their evil ways. *Judith* is here rewritten in a way to accommodate and embrace the Jews.
- Lastly, a modern-day play by Rudolf Hochbuth entitled *Judith* that was staged in 1984 needs to be mentioned. Here, *Judith* acts as a commentary on violent acts committed in the Second World War by the Red Army, as well as Vietnam, and in the Cold War. Two Judiths respond in equally violent ways to these modern situations. One Judith is in Minsk, where she assassinates a Nazi-aligned official. The other one is in the capital of the United States of America, where she kills President Reagan with nerve gas. Hochbuth thus does not hesitate to use the tale of Judith against modern-day 'tyrants' (Wills 2019:153).

Thus, since at least the Middle Ages, the text of *Judith* has predominantly been employed for inciting people towards both active as well as passive resistance.

Most of the examples cited here illustrate the versatility of *Judith* employed as a text of action and its power, in many cases, to incite communities to perform acts of violence. *Judith* has proved popular amongst both people in power and rebellious groups to entice their members towards action against their opposition. This also meant, as history has proven, the taking up of arms and, if necessary, the violent killing of the enemy. In this regard, Moffat (1913:247) states that 'the objection made to Judith's approval to violence scarcely deserves notice'. Moffat in this way condones the fact that the character of Judith encourages violence. He adds that violence should be seen as perfectly normal in the time that *Judith* was written in. However, this does not take away the dire consequences of a text like *Judith*.

Problem statement

In light of the above-mentioned examples and the tendency for aspects of the Judith tale to swing towards violence, it would seem in order to inspect the Greek text of *Judith* once again. The focus here would specifically be on the climax of the violence, that is, the 'beheading scene' of Holofernes in *LXXJudith* 13:1–9.

This brief, climactic pericope is of course well known.

The reader has just read (Jdt 12) that the Assyrian general, Holofernes, is in the process of seducing Judith at a banquet held in his personal tent. He has consumed a vast amount of wine and is extremely intoxicated. As the evening draws to a close, the servants leave the tent (Jdt 13:1) and a very circumspect Judith and drunk Holofernes (sprawled upon his bed) are left alone (Jdt 13:2). Judith's handmaid waits secretly outside the tent (Jdt 13:3). Judith then makes a silent prayer (Jdt 13):

> O Lord, God of all might, in this hour look graciously on the work of my hands for the exaltation of Jerusalem. Now is the time for aiding your heritage and for carrying out my design to shatter the enemies who have risen against us. (vv. 4–5)

Next, Judith takes Holofernes' sword and grasps his hair saying, '[s]trengthen me this day, Lord, God of Israel!' (Jdt 13:6–7). Then with two strokes of the blade she decapitates Holofernes (Jdt 13:8). Lastly, Judith rolls the body off of the bed, removes the canopy from its posts and hands the head to her handmaid outside the tent (Jdt 13:9).

Various interpretations have been proffered for this dramatic culmination (Gera 2014:387); however, we mention a few here: castration (Bal 2005:257), the assimilation and integration of the unconscious into consciousness (Efthimiades Keith 2004:237–238), the Assyrians becoming leaderless (Hobyane 2012:136), the female body and beauty triumphing over male strength (Jordaan & Coetzer 2008:26) and the losing of a blasphemous head (Jordaan 2013:725).

Our focus, however, will be on this pericope (Jdt 13: 1–9) as performance. Until now, *Judith* has never been fully scrutinised as a performance, and in this context we seek to propose a suitable method that focuses on performance.

Departure points of methodological investigation

A specific literary approach that would address the role of the audience is performance criticism, as propagated by, *inter alia*, Peter S. Perry in his 2016 publication *Insights from Performance Criticism*. Perry (2016:29) fully recognises the difficulty when dealing with the word 'performance', stating that it is highly contested and brings us into the real but often ignored contest for culture, power and identity. He also quotes Marvin Carlson (Perry 2016), who says that:

> We will never be able to agree on a definition for the word *performance* because at its heart, the term points at the human jockeying to label some behaviours as appropriate and others not appropriate. (p. 29)

Nevertheless, Perry (2016:26–27) then goes on and highlights the following important aspects concerning the performance and the audience:

- A text is a system of signs that was written with the intention of being read and interpreted, such that it

ultimately guides an audience towards a specific desired performance or behaviour.

- Human communication is inferential. Audiences use their memories, ideas, observations and imagination to infer the meaning of the signs in their situation. The signs are always incomplete and unavoidably ask audiences to add information in order to reach maximum impact.
- Memory and imagination are required in human communication and are often found in combination. An audience unconsciously draws on their memories to make sense of the signs proffered. They also use imagination to complete the picture that is suggested by the signs.
- We can also speak about 'intended meaning' because the author's attempt to communicate makes an assumption that there is some intended performance or effect that the audience should ultimately emulate. This poses a challenge to a modern audience as the readers or hearers of a text, who are separated from the earliest version of this text by more than two millennia.
- There are always unintended effects in human communication. This is because of the fact that the audience might have different ideas, behaviour and memories that might come into play.

We can summarise Perry and say that a text is a sign that has the intention to cause a certain behaviour or performance within an environment. Perry (2016:29–30) also states the following about *performance*:

- *Performance* strives to establish a culture or for that matter even a counter-culture.
- *Performance* is governed by a power relationship; otherwise, the audience would not bother to listen to the text and ultimately acquire meaning from its import.
- *Performance* establishes group identity.

The benefit of Perry's (2016) approach is that it certainly breaks new ground when scrutinising performance and the participation of the audience in ancient texts. This is a novel method that has a few predecessors. Perry certainly needs to be applauded for his contributions. However, one critique against his book is that he does not work with the 'source texts'. In this context, he seems to have a mainly metalinguistic approach towards ancient texts. 'Metalinguistic' here refers to the typical traits that accompany the text like humour, irony, sarcasm, gestures and so on (Perry 2016:122–130). This means that he does not consider the linguistic clues in the 'source language' sufficiently. He thereby misses out on a substantial amount of information that would have certainly helped him in his endeavour. There are no references to the original Greek text in his book. He only uses modern translations and commentaries (Perry 2016:94) and ultimately loses out on the vitality of the source text.

We must concede here that his 2016 book might well have been written as a popular guide and not necessarily intended for an academic audience. This might explain the reason why there are no references to original languages of ancient texts but only metalinguistic applications. We do not argue that these are not important but certainly that the source language would add substantially to his attempt. Therefore, we propose looking at the Greek again, as there are various performative clues imbedded in the ground text. Our suggestion is thus expanding his approach, especially on the linguistic level. This would include the typical Aktionsart of verbs, *phonology* and *syntax*, as found in a book like Blass and Debrunner (1961). This will be done later in the analysis.

Having said this on the method, we now wish to deal directly with the Greek text of *LXXJudith* 13:1–9 in the following way:

- Firstly, plotting *LXXJudith* 13:1–9 within the larger narrative of the book.
- Secondly, identifying different signs within the text that the audience or hearers would have recognised. These signs may be within the text, linguistic as well as metalinguistic signs like different topoi and irony. When the audience or hearers were exposed to the text or reading of the text they would recall similar narratives.
- Thirdly, an expected response that the audience would have had whilst receiving a specific narrative, taking into consideration their culture and environment.
- Lastly, a conclusion will be drawn about the value of a performance criticism approach, taking the implied hearers or audience into consideration.

Analysis

Gera (2014:387) confirms that *LXXJudith* 13:1–9 is the dramatic climax of the Book of *Judith*. This is also the view of Wills (2019), who states:

> [W]e now see that the dramatic actions of individual characters within and without the bedchamber become the *telos* toward which all of those nations were converging. The tiny actions are sometimes even repeated, as the voyeuristic audience looks on at the central deed. (p. 340)

All the events in the book are leading to this pericope, which is followed by the conclusion or denouement of the narrative. This is the reason why the beheading of Holofernes is pivotal to a better understanding of *Judith*. The Greek text of *LXXJudith* 13:1–9 holds various clues that indicate to the attentive listener that a 'critical time' for action of the character of Judith has finally arrived. Critical time in Greek is denoted by the term καιρὸς, contrary to χρόνος, which refers to chronological time. The tempo of this narrative is quite rapid, in that one action is swiftly followed by another. Wills (2019:340) correctly states that the narrative 'is told quickly in just a few lines'. A verse-by-verse analysis will now follow.

In the very first verse of *LXXJudith* 13, we find the verb ἐσπούδασαν [they rushed], which suggests that the slaves quickly cleared the stage for an unavoidable dramatic occurrence. One time indication is followed quickly by another and is often preceded by an aorist imperative denoting immediate action. The first time clue is found in Verse 1, stating ὡς δὲ ὀψία ἐγένετο [as it became evening].

This 'emerging' of the evening is full of promise. The mighty Assyrian general Holofernes has already indicated in Chapter 12:16 that 'he had an overwhelming desire to have sex with Judith' [καὶ ἦν κατεπίθυμος σφόδρα τοῦ συγγενέσθαι μετ᾿ αὐτῆς] and further that 'he had looked for an opportunity to seduce her' [καὶ ἐτήρει καιρὸν τοῦ ἀπατῆσαι αὐτὴν]. Note the repetition of 'καιρὸς' here. Holofernes and Judith are now left alone on stage (ὑπελείφθη δὲ Ιουδιθ μόνη ἐν τῇ σκηνῇ καὶ Ολοφέρνης) (Jdt 13:2).

The aorist indicative passive 'ὑπελείφθη' denotes a simple action in the past. The action is neither prolonged (imperfect) nor has an effect in the present (perfect). The hearers or audience should sense that the time for action has come and would be filled with anticipation. A typical infallible recipe to keep the audience's attention is created here. This is in effect a typical 'sex scene'. However, what makes it even more interesting is that it is non-consensual sex. It is the same as in Esther 4:17, where Esther openly confesses to the Jewish deity 'πάντων γνῶσιν ἔχεις καὶ οἶδας ὅτι ἐμίσησα δόξαν ἀνόμων καὶ βδελύσσομαι κοίτην ἀπεριτμήτων καὶ παντὸς ἀλλοτρίου' ['You have all knowledge and you know that I hate the honour of the lawless and that I despise the uncircumcised bed and everything strange']. The same attempt at non-consensual sex is also found in Theodotian Susanna (v. 20). However, in Susanna, perverted Jewish elders attempt to have intercourse with a married woman. So Jewish literature of the same time frame has at least three versions of non-consensual intercourse (where a woman is the unwilling party). Judith (as a character) is no exception.

The question can be asked, 'is this Assyrian general going to have his way with a Jewish woman?' The voyeuristic audience, as Wills (2019:344) calls them, would certainly be filled with disgust at yet another attempt to entice a Jewish women sexually. In just 10 verses there are five references to Holofernes' bed (Wills 2019:344). The sexual nature of this scene is hard to dispute (Gera 2014:389). The brevity of the communication on a linguistic level is employed to arrest the attention of the audience. Naturally, one would most likely assume that the audience would rather identify with the victim (Judith) than the aggressor (Holofernes). This is despite the fact that the audience may well already know the outcome of the story. It is assumed that many of the audience members will have listened to the Judith story on various occasions. In this regard, Perry (2016:48–46) speaks about the memorisation, internalisation and reperformance of texts. Certainly, in the case of *LXXJudith* 13:1–9, the scene is charged with sympathetic emotion towards Judith as the female prey.

However, this scene is somehow surprising, as the mighty Holofernes is portrayed as being completely drunk and not able to do anything. On the non-tangible textual level, this is extremely ironic. There is a stark contrast between the situation that Holofernes now finds himself in and what he earlier predicted that he would do. The audience would find it amusing that the 'trickster' Judith had outsmarted Holofernes (Wills 2019:340).

The hearers or audience are further informed that, after she has instructed her maid to leave, Judith is 'μόνη' [alone] in the tent with Holofernes (Jdt 13:2). Judith now prays just like her fellow Jewish compatriots Esther and Susanna did in their moments of extreme turmoil. From the audience's position, something is about to happen. A second prayer is delivered by Judith in *LXXJudith* 13:4. This, however, is not a penitential prayer like Esther's (Esther 4: 19–24) or a supplication prayer like Susannah's (Theodotian 42) but an internal prayer (in her heart) intended only for God's observation: 'ἐπίβλεψον ἐν τῇ ὥρᾳ ταύτῃ ἐπὶ τὰ ἔργα τῶν χειρῶν μου εἰς ὕψωμα Ιερουσαλημ' ['Lord look upon the works of my hands in this hour for the exaltation of Jerusalem']. The aorist imperative ἐπίβλεψον denotes an immediate, once-off action. God is only asked to observe Judith's actions in this specific hour.

Jerusalem is another emotionally loaded sign within the text to the audience. The thwarting of Holofernes' intended attack on the Jerusalem temple is Judith's primary objective in the narrative. In this sense, Jerusalem is an important cultural marker for the audience. The Jewish audience would not find it hard to identify with the cause of Judith, who wants to defend Jerusalem. At this stage, the audience very likely knows why she is alone and why she asks the Jewish deity to observe her actions.

In Verse 5 there is a second reference to καιρὸς. On this occasion, καιρὸς is in the mouth of Judith, who indicates that her opportunity for action has now come. The time has arrived for God to help his inheritance ('καιρὸς ἀντιλαβέσθαι τῆς κληρονομίας σου'). However, the hearers or audience know exactly what to expect. In an environment where religious texts were read over and over again, there were very few surprises.

Judith 13:6 and 7 address the audience in a way that is geared towards remembering it in an oral reading environment. The author employs the style figure of alliteration. In this case it is the repetition of the consonant κ. More than a quarter (11) of the total number of words (38) start with κ. The κ is a very short sound in Greek and if repeated often at the beginning of words (like in verses 6 and 7) tends to enhance rhythm. This is the case here:

⁶καὶ προσελθοῦσα τῷ κανόνι τῆς κλίνης ὃς ἦν πρὸς κεφαλῆς Ολοφέρνου καθεῖλεν τὸν ἀκινάκην αὐτοῦ ἀπ᾿ αὐτοῦ

⁷καὶ ἐγγίσασα τῆς κλίνης ἐδράξατο τῆς κόμης τῆς κεφαλῆς αὐτοῦ καὶ εἶπεν κραταίωσόν με κύριε ὁ θεὸς Ισραηλ ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ταύτῃ

A further observation here to strengthen the alliteration is that both sentences start with καὶ. They are thus paratactic clauses connected by καὶ and each time followed by a word ending in α. The words κλίνης and κεφαλῆς are also repeated in both sentences. In an oral culture this alliteration would make the reading and recitation of literature easier to listen to and remember. Having said this, we can now move to the content of these sentences. Judith (Jdt 13:7) now prays once more, again with an aorist imperative followed by indication of time:

κραταίωσόν με κύριε ὁ θεὸς Ισραηλ ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ταύτῃ	Lord God of Israel, strengthen me in this day.

By now the audience listening to this text would know exactly what was going to happen next. Judith is going to kill Holofernes. This happens after the repetitive κ sounds. As a woman she requires two strokes of the sword to behead the mighty Assyrian general. In a sense, the expected occurs here: a mere woman exhibits the ability to conquer a mighty man. Of course, this motif is prevalent in Jewish literature. The audience might well recall any or all of the following fabulae:

- the David and Goliath incident (1 Sm 17), where the mighty Goliath was decapitated by his own sword by a mere youth
- the woman of Thebez, who fatally wounded Abimelech with a millstone (Jdt 9:50–57)
- Jael, who killed Sisera using a tent peg (Jdt 4:21–22).

Holofernes also dies a shameful, unceremonious death. Shameful death and honourable death is a well-known topos within the Graeco-Roman environment (Doran 2012:152). Shameful death was deemed extremely degrading to a person. Shameful death is typical for a person who lived a polluted life and who set a bad example. Holofernes, with his disgraceful behaviour of drunkenness and bad example (blasphemy and boasting), qualifies for a shameful death. The hearers or audience might also recall other people like Goliath and Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who died similar shameful deaths. Both of them were filled with hubris and blasphemed against the Jewish deity. In Jewish literature, this is usually the outcome for arrogant blasphemers – they die a shameful death. Holofernes is no exception.

However, the transactional value of employing a topos cannot be overlooked. The topos is transactional in the sense that it seeks to transform the audience. A well-known topos within Hellenistic literature would compel an audience to introspection. A shameful death should not become their fate. They should transform themselves from passivity to proactive behaviour, from a life of indifference to determination. The audience would be reminded that it would be better to seek an honourable death than a life of oppression or slavery. They would be inspired to become participants in a worthwhile cause like defending their temple.

In summary, the following can be said about the Greek text of *Judith*. The text showed an urgency towards performance. The critical time for action (καιρὸς) runs throughout the entire passage. The narrative moves at a rapid pace from one event to another. The aorist imperatives followed by a direct reference to time add to this sense of urgency. Judith is the sexual target of a powerful general. She brilliantly outmanoeuvres his advances. Alliteration is used as a means for reciting, recalling and remembering the slaughtering of Holofernes. He dies a shameful death. The narrative is composed in such a manner that the author intended that his text should lead to the following desired behaviours by a typical Jewish audience:

- They should identify themselves with Jerusalem as the ultimate focus of worship and defend it (confirmation of their common identity).
- They should realise that they are God's inheritance and that he will help them (confirmation of their common identity).
- They should know that they are not insignificant when taking action, even in the face of giants; they can outsmart the opposition (remembering the underdogs like David, the woman of Thebez and Jael).

They should live exemplary lives and thereby escape shameful death (recalling the death of Goliath and Antiochus IV Epiphanes). Therefore, they should stand together whenever the temple in Jerusalem is threatened.

The value of performance criticism as an approach

Performance criticism as presented by Perry (2016) seems to be a valuable tool for scrutinising the effect that the Greek text of *Judith* must have had on the audience or hearers. However, the importance of the Greek source text and its subtleties was shown. The following deductions can be made from the text of *LXXJudith* 13:1–9. The source text is a highly provocative, divisive text. It clearly works with a binary opposition, namely, an 'us and them' approach. The other party is usually ridiculed and stigmatised. *LXXJudith* 13:1–9 is not a reconciliatory text. In the hands of religious groupings that blindly accept its authority, it has the potential to incite violence and conflict. This latter point has been proven by the historical record of violence associated with this book.

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