The Missing Women of the Beowulf-Manuscript

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NEW READINGS ON WOMEN AND EARLY MEDIEVAL ENGLISH LITERATURE AND CULTURE
CROSS-DISCIPLINARY STUDIES IN HONOUR OF HELEN DAMICO

Edited by
HELENE SCHECK and CHRISTINE KOZIKOWSKI
NEW READINGS ON WOMEN AND EARLY MEDIEVAL ENGLISH LITERATURE AND CULTURE
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ASE     Anglo-Saxon England
ASPR    Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records
BHL     Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina
CCSL    Corpus Christianorum Series Latina
CSEL    Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
DOE     Dictionary of Old English
EETS    Early English Text Society
e.s.    Extra Series
o.s.    Original Series
s.s.    Supplementary Series
MGH     Monumenta Germaniae Historica
PASE    Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England database (www.pase.ac.uk)
PMLA    Publications of the Modern Language Association
Sawyer  Peter Sawyer’s Anglo-Saxon Charters: An Annotated List and Bibliography,
        updated and revised as e-Sawyer (http://esawyer.org.uk)

NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

During the production of this volume the discipline has confronted itself with the racial connotations that have attached to “Anglo-Saxon” even when denoting a period of history in a particular place. While it has been conventional to use “Anglo-Saxon England” to refer to the language, literature, and culture of England from the end of the Roman period to the Norman Conquest, the editors of the collection adopt the term “Early Medieval England” as reflected in the title of this volume to underscore the linguistic and cultural diversity of the people inhabiting the island at that time as well as to respect and nurture diversity within our field of study. Production had advanced sufficiently to prevent contributors from revising usage, so conventional usage stands within individual essays.
PART III

WOMEN OF THE BEOWULF MANUSCRIPT
Chapter 9

THE MISSING WOMEN OF THE BEOWULF MANUSCRIPT

TERESA HOOPER*  

IN THEIR INTRODUCTION to *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen called for a corrective turn towards scholarship “centered on women’s concerns, in the hopes of generating a more accurate reading of the texts involved and of promoting a more enlightened understanding of the position, role, and function of women in Anglo-Saxon culture and of the meaning of their experience.”¹ They illustrated this problem with the two-part and tripartite readings of *Beowulf* typified by J. R. R. Tolkien, which largely obscured important moments of women’s presence in the poem.² Among the scholars answering that call was Jane Chance, whose article revising the tripartite model of *Beowulf* in light of its women was a part of their original collection.³ In the decades since the publication of Olsen and Damico’s volume, many other scholars have answered their call, and a good number of studies now look to women’s presence and concerns in *Beowulf*. Nevertheless, a corrective codicological reading of the entire manuscript, the second part of British Library, Cotton Vitellius A.xv,⁴ has yet to arrive among them.

As it currently stands, this manuscript, also known as the *Beowulf* manuscript or the Nowell Codex, contains five texts: *The Passion of Saint Christopher*, *Wonders of the East*, *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*, *Beowulf*, and the biblical epic poem *Judith*. In their attempt to find a common thematic reading across the five texts, scholars ranging from Kenneth Sisam to Andy Orchard have focused on the central three texts—*Wonders*, the *Letter*, and *Beowulf*—which form a more obvious unit of texts with a clear focus on monsters. This scholarship offers thematic readings ranging from the monsters and

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¹ Various portions of this chapter were originally presented at the 2013 meeting of the Southeastern Medieval Association and at a special session in honour of Dr. Helen Damico at the 2014 International Medieval Conference, Kalamazoo.


³ Damico and Olsen, introduction to *New Readings*, 2.


pride of Andy Orchard to a preoccupation with kingship in Kathryn Powell’s work. The unintended consequence, however, is that important women in the manuscript tend to be overlooked.

One should blame the ravages of time rather than scholarly neglect in this case, as the physical state of the evidence is a major impediment. Our only copy of Judith is incomplete, and every manuscript of the full Christopher legend from Anglo-Saxon England is badly damaged. In particular, the Vitellius manuscript has lost about one quire of sixteen leaves from the Passion of Saint Christopher; the losses to Judith are not so easily measured. These lacunae obscure three important women: Judith, naturally, is the first and best known, but the manuscript also lacks the story of two martyrs named Nicea and Aquilina from the Passion of St. Christopher. Since there is no way to accurately measure the missing portions of Judith or even guess at its contents, a corrective reading must turn to Christopher and its now-missing women martyrs instead.

The questions I wish to propose here are, at their heart, more an act of feminist codicology than a unified thematic reading of the manuscript: what interpretive benefits, if any, can scholars reap by carefully re-introducing these martyrs’ stories into the gaps of the Beowulf manuscript? Secondly, can this reconstruction provide “a more accurate reading of the texts involved” as Damico and Olsen had envisioned? As the following analysis will show, recognizing Nicea and Aquilina’s rightful place among the texts of Vitellius A.xv transforms how scholars should discuss issues of monstrosity, gender, and faith in the manuscript, and it likewise reveals that thematic studies of the Beowulf manuscript will be incomplete without a consideration of what these women have to offer.

To give some background, the Acta Sanctorum traces Nicea and Aquilina back to the earliest versions of the Greek Christopher legend, which travelled to Western Europe

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8 No thematic reading of the entire Beowulf manuscript makes sense unless it was constructed as a single unit of five texts. For the purposes of this analysis, I have opted to use Kemp Malone’s reconstruction of the quires, which I have modified by moving the thirteenth quire containing Judith to the front as suggested by Ker, Clement, and Lucas: (14)²+(X)²+(1)(1)¹+(2)²+(4)²+(3)²+(5)²+(6)²+(7)² +(8)²+(9)²+(10)²+(11)²+(12)²+(13)². In this arrangement, the final lines of Judith appear on the recto of the first folio in Quire X, and Christopher begins on the verso. See: The Nowell Codex: British Museum Cotton Vitellius A. xv, Second MS, ed. Kemp Malone, Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile 12 (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1963), 14–16; Ker, Catalogue, 281–83; Richard W. Clement, “Codicological Consideration in the Beowulf Manuscript,” Essays in Medieval Studies 1 (1984): 13–27; Lucas, “The Place of Judith in the Beowulf-Manuscript,” 463–78.
from the Byzantine empire as early as the sixth century. In the ninth-century Latin versions of the legend, a pagan king named Dagnus of Samos imprisons Christopher and coerces two prostitutes named Nicea and Aquilina to tempt the dog-headed saint into idolatry. The king locks them into Christopher’s prison cell, but they are so terrified of his appearance that they cower on the ground. At Christopher’s encouragement, they confess their sins, convert, and vow to suffer martyrdom with him.

When Dagnus learns of their conversion, he threatens Nicea and Aquilina with disfigurement and death if they refuse to sacrifice to his gods, but they deceive him long enough to gain access to his temple, openly ridicule his gods, and pull down their statues with Nicea’s girdle. Both suffer a worthy martyrdom in return for their rebellion: Aquilina dies by dismemberment and Nicea by immolation and decapitation, and the miracles displayed during their execution turn Dagnus’s kingdom against him. Christopher’s more passive struggle against Dagnus takes its cues from Nicea’s martyrdom, whose blazing pyre bursts into falling roses in front of an awestruck crowd. Christopher’s face, at one point described as appearing full of flames as he prays, also becomes swylca rosan blostma (like a rose blossom) in the torturing flames. The sisters’ death marks an important episode in the Christopher story: their subplot covers about 30 percent of the Latin version, which is only marginally shorter than the entire Christopher fragment in the Nowell Codex.


10 Using the system set up by the Bollandists, this includes BHL 1764–75. Most scholars link the OE Christopher to BHL 1764. For a collated edition of three 1766–68 texts, see Hans-Friedrich Rosenfeld, Der hl. Christophorus, 520–29. Rosenfeld’s MS “T” has been edited separately in Monique Goullet and Sandra Isetta, Le légendier de Turin: MS D. V. 3 de la Bibliothèque Nationale Universitaire (Florence: SISMEL-Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2014), 229–43.

11 Scholars disagree on whether the Vitellius version is cynocephalic. This is a problem of recensions: BHL 1766–67 frequently call him a “dog-man” (Canineus) while most versions of BHL 1768–ff omit references to his head and call him a “Cananite” (Cananeus). The effective difference comes down to a single vowel. Ian Wood, however, proves that the Christopher legend existed alongside a body of material that conflated “Cananites” with dog-headed “Caninites,” so I see little reason why the audience would have been aware of the distinction. See Ian Wood, “Categorizing the Cynocephali,” in Ego Trouble: Authors and Their Identities in the Early Middle Ages, ed. Richard Corradini et al. (Vienna: Verlag der österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2010), 132–33.


13 Lucas estimates that the surviving folios in the Vitellius manuscript represent only 36.7 percent of the original. See Lucas, “The Place of Judith,” 471–72.
Although these two martyrs first show up in Greek memorials by the sixth century, they were celebrated in Latin calendars and martyrologies on the Continent from as early as the late eighth century. In the Latin tradition, Nicea and Aquilina are honoured on July 24 (the day before Christopher) in the martyrologies of Lyon and Florus by at least 806, and Usuard’s martyrology disseminated their memorial more widely thereafter. In contrast, the sisters’ English textual footprint is relatively small: they do not appear in the so-called Bedan Martyrology, the Martyrology of Willibrord, or any English-made calendar surviving from Anglo-Saxon England. Even the summary of Saint Christopher’s passion in the Old English Martyrology edits out Nicea and Aquilina entirely. They eventually have some recognition in martyrologies via Usuard, but most manuscript evidence is late; Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 57, in fact, is the only contemporary martyrology to record their name. English interest in Christopher’s co-martyrs, it seems, did not originally extend to official recognition in the calendars.

Nicea and Aquilina do survive in three English manuscripts of the Christopher legend, however, but damage to every copy has erased most of their existence. Parts of two English translations have barely survived into the modern period. One, obviously, is the material preserved in London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A. xv, part 2; Wanley’s catalogue entry and Laurence Nowell’s ex libris on the top of fol. 94r suggest that the missing material was already gone by the Early Modern period. Based on the closest Latin analogues, the surviving folios in the Nowell Codex miss Nicea and Aquilina’s exit by just four sentences. What does survive is a rather close translation of its Latin exemplar; however, and based on that fact, Peter Lucas estimated that the Vitellius manuscript version lacks exactly three hundred lines, or a single quire of eight folios, minus one page for the last lines of Judith.

The second English translation is found in the remains of London, British Library Cotton Otho B.x, an early eleventh-century homiliary of mostly Ælfrican material. This manuscript was largely destroyed in the Ashburnam House fire of 1731, and parts of fifty-three folios, less than a third of the original, survived the conflagration. All that now remains of Christopher is a heavily burned scrap of the beginning (fol. 69r) and an incipit/explicit recorded by Humfrey Wanley. The original length of the Otho text recorded in

16 s. x/xi, prov. Abingdon. Nicea and Aquilina’s memorial appears on fols. 69v–70r. Gneuss and Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts*, item 41.
18 Lucas, “The Place of Judith,” 471–72. The folio containing the last six lines of the poem is now missing and were later added to the lower margin of fol. 209v by what appears to be an Early Modern hand.
the catalogue, however, suggests that it was likely a complete copy prior to its destruction. John Drayton Pickles analyzed the available material of both the Otho and Vitellius copies and concluded that they were, at some point, descended from the same exemplar and once roughly the same length.  

The third, a Latin version, is Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale Lat. 5574, a collection of saints’ lives better known for the Latin Life of St. Margaret. The manuscript was most likely written in Mercia in the early tenth century, with French provenance by the twelfth. Christopher is the first text in the manuscript, and although the first folio and its large, ornate initial have survived, the microfilm shows evidence of at least one and perhaps more folios ripped from the binding. The text now leaves off at Christopher’s first sermon to the Samians and picks up in the middle of Nicea and Aquilina’s desecration of the temple. Even though this is the most complete version of the Christopher legend in Anglo-Saxon England, the now-missing material leaves a considerable hole in Nicea and Aquilina’s story. Moreover, the text is idiosyncratic, and a comparison to the surviving English material disqualifies it as the source for the English translation.

Without a complete text of the Christopher legend from England, the search for a close Latin analogue must head to the Continent. No direct source for the English translation has been identified, and there is no comprehensive edition of the legend; in fact, the only collated edition, by Hans-Friedrich Rosenfeld, contains just three manuscripts. John Pickles compared readings across Rosenfeld’s three manuscripts plus one more from St. Emmeram. He concluded that the OE Christopher had mixed descent, but he also conceded that the differences between the manuscripts were “not vitally important, for they indicate no essential changes in the story itself.”

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21 To summarize the history of this argument, Kemp Malone incorrectly thought that the Otho version was only three hundred lines long. John Pickles re-calculated Malone’s numbers using the correct number of lines per page from Otho and found a gap of only about ninety lines. If one uses Peter Lucas’s more accurate estimate of the text length, however, the difference shrinks down to about forty lines, or an 8 percent difference. My visual observation of one of the folios from Otho (Oxford, Bodleian Library Rawlinson Q. e. 20 [15606]) reveals a much more compressed aspect than Vitellius. When differences in size for the text block and text compression are calculated in, I find that the difference between the two versions is likely negligible. See Malone, The Nowell Codex, 114; Pickles, “Studies,” 24–25; Ker, Catalogue, 224–25.


23 Microfilm of Paris lat. 5574 clearly shows at least one torn stub between fols. 1–2.

24 Rosenfeld, Der hl. Christophorus, 520–29. In contrast, I have counted at least a dozen Latin versions just prior to 1100. Of these, Pickles’s evidence strongly indicates either a BHL 1768 text with sporadic corrections from a 1766 text or a manuscript recension older than any texts he had on hand. Pickles, “Studies,” 19–20.

25 These include: Würzburg, UB Mp. Th. F. 28, southern Germany, s. ix1/4; London, BL Additional 11880, St. Emmeram dated s. ix1; Turin, BN D. V. 3, Soissons, s. ix10; and the lost “Fulda” manuscript collected in Acta Sanctorum. The Paris MS was unknown to Pickles. Pickles, “Studies,” 18.

Based on the available evidence, Turin, Biblioteca Nazionale D. V. 3, a late ninth-century legendary from Soissons, is the closest match out of these four and the Paris manuscript.\(^\text{27}\) Of the twenty-four textual variations catalogued by Pickles, the Turin manuscript agrees with the Old English versions seventeen times; two more ambiguous readings may also match Turin as well. Nine of those shared readings are unique to the Turin manuscript, and only this manuscript is a near-perfect match for both the incipit and explicit of the Otho version.\(^\text{28}\) The Vitellius likewise closely tracks the stylistic idiosyncrasies of the Turin manuscript, down to an odd infinitive construction repeated throughout the second half of the English text. Provided that it is cautiously applied, this manuscript can therefore serve as a rough but largely accurate account of the events missing from the Nowell Codex.

Now that their presence in the \textit{Beowulf} manuscript is more firmly established, I would like to show how Niceta and Aquilina’s story reinforces some themes already discussed by scholars and highlights others that have gone unnoticed. For one, the sisters’ martyrdom sheds light upon a strong correlation between women, monsters, and places of pre-Christian power across all five texts. In four of these (\textit{Christopher, Wonders of the East, Letter of Alexander,} and \textit{Beowulf}), encounters with monsters are punctuated with scenes at pagan altars or temples; in \textit{Judith}, that encounter occurs over Holofernes’s bed, and the ensuing political and spiritual struggle is painted in graphic and sexual terms. In two texts (\textit{Christopher} and \textit{Beowulf}), a monster with a Judeo-Christian backstory walks into the centre of a palace or hall to wreak havoc on a well-ordered pagan society. That number increases to three depending on one’s tolerance for thinking of Judith as a “monster,” a point which will be considered later. In these same three texts, a woman or women also sneak into the physical centre of the enemy’s power, and, finding their enemy incapacitated, they decapitate them. All three invasions are facilitated by feminine traits highlighted in the texts—sensuality, maternity, or beauty—and in two of these texts, the women abscond with the head.

Monsters and women are tied to these pagan centres of power because all of these texts engage with monstrous and/or female bodies as signs. A host of subtle, interesting readings have investigated how monsters “mean” across the manuscript, but what they mean evades understanding.\(^\text{29}\) As Dana Oswald notes regarding the \textit{Wonders of the East},

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{Goullet and Isetta, Le légendier de Turin,} 91.
  \item As per Pickles’s own analysis. I have located two more correspondences, both of which are also unique to Turin. Pickles, “Studies,” 21–22.
\end{itemize}
“it is difficult to resist the urge to totalize the experience of the text, and so constitute it in some unifying structure, but the text itself resists this impulse.” 30 Similarly, Susan Kim and Asa Simon Mittman claim that “these images, and the texts with which they are partnered not only encourage contemplation but also insistently evade and deny resolution.” 31 One can read Alexander the Great, for instance, as a victim of this impulse. In both Wonders and The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle, the conqueror spends an inordinate amount of time searching out different kinds of monstrosity, avoiding some and killing others, but he never comprehends them any further than as a part of their environment. Beowulf and King Dagnus also treat monsters as an irruption into their well-ordered societies, which, in Dagnus’s words, must be “abolished from memory and from life.” 32 Both try to turn the bodies of their enemies into a competing bysen or sign of their own: a bloody arm in Beowulf, an arrow-riddled body in Christopher. To borrow Susan Kim’s reading of Judith, monsters can also highlight an Augustinian “failure to understand how to read, and inability to discern what to read” across the manuscript as a whole. 33

Male characters like Dagnus, Alexander, and Beowulf only demonstrate two real options in the face of monstrosity: flight or flight. Only the women in The Passion of Saint Christopher offer us an alternative. Monsters should be read rather than merely responded to, not because they necessarily carry any immediately accessible meaning, but because they indicate the existence of a Creator who wields them as signs of His will. In the beginning of the Passion of Saint Christopher, for instance, an anonymous woman arrives on the edge of the city to worship her idols and sees Christopher praying; according to the text, she looks at his presumably monstrous face and runs back into the city saying, “Come and see marvels which up to this point nobody has been able to see!” 34 All five of the early Latin manuscripts call Christopher a mirabilia: his monstrosity is a marvel, and it prompts this woman to leave her idols behind and gather the townspeople to see him. The crowd then witnesses Christopher’s first miracle, the flowering of his wooden staff, and he baptizes the masses with his own hand. 35

Nicea and Aquilina follow suit. When Dagnus locks them in Christopher’s cell to tempt him, they first react to his monstrous, flaming face. 36 After they cower for hours

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30 Oswald, Monsters, Gender and Sexuality in Medieval English Literature, 33.
31 Mittman and Kim, Inconceivable Beasts, 135.
33 Kim, “Bloody Signs,” 293.
34 Goullet and Isetta, Le légendier de Turin, 234. Traces of this episode can still be read on the verso side of the Otho fragment. See Pickles, “Studies,” 23.
35 Goullet and Isetta, Le légendier de Turin, 234–35.
36 Christopher’s fiery face may be endemic to his species, as the Wonders of the East states that the Cynocephali (called Conopenas) have “breath like a flame of fire.” Goullet and Isetta, Le légendier de Turin, 236; Rypins, Three Old English Prose Texts, 54, lines 14–15.
while he prays, Christopher puts them at ease; after a short conversation, they explain that they are prostitutes (though very charitable ones) and ask, “Pray for us, servant of God, that He would forgive our sins.”³⁷ Like the unnamed woman, Nicea and Aquilina also gather the townspeople together, ostensibly to watch them sacrifice to the gods, and they convert thousands more through their own miracles. This pattern repeats itself in the Christopher legend, with both women and men: the vision of a monster leads to confusion, revelation, and conversion. These women, however, are the ones who make that pattern clear.

Identifying monsters as signs of the Creator is a common enough trope in medieval thought. When Isidore of Seville introduces the monstrous races, he defines them not as merely prodigious bodies but as statements that must be interpreted: “Monstra,” he tells us, “derive their name from admonition (monitus), because in giving a sign they indicate something, or else because they instantly show what may appear.”³⁸ Echoing Augustine, he likewise claims that “they are not contrary to nature, because they are created by divine will. […] A portent is therefore not created contrary to nature, but contrary to what is known nature.”³⁹ Susan Kim notes that Isidore’s definition of monsters as signs is woefully incomplete: “Although Isidore quite explicitly equates monsters with a certain kind of sign, he never provides a method for reading them as such […] Isidore’s failure to map out an interpretive guide for the portents which he catalogues underlines the problem of locating meanings for these monster-signs as his chapter progresses.”⁴⁰

St. Augustine, however, places the interpretive burden for monsters on the people who read them. As he explains in The City of God:

Qualis autem ratio redditur de monstrosis apud nos hominum partibus, talis de monstrosis quibusdam gentibus reddi potest. Deus enim creator est omnium, qui ubi et quando creari quid oporteat uel oportuerit, ipse nouit, sciens uniuersitatis pulchritudinem quarum partium uel similitudine uel diuersitate contextat. Sed qui totum inspiciere non potest, tamquam deformitate partis offenditur, quoniam cui congruat, et quo referatur ignorat.

(Moreover, the explanation which is given of monstrous human births among us can also be given in the case of some of these monstrous races. For God is the Creator of all things: He Himself knows where and when anything should be, or should have been,

³⁷ Goulet and Isetta, Le légendier de Turin, 237.
³⁹ “[Portenta] non sunt contra naturam, quia divina voluntate fiunt [...]. Portentum ergo fit non contra naturam, sed contra quam est nota natura.” Isidore, Etymologicarum, XI.III.31–2; trans. Barney et al., Etymologies, 244.
created; and He knows how to weave the beauty of the whole out of the similarity and diversity of its parts. The man who cannot view the whole is offended by what he takes to be the deformity of a part; but this is because he does not know how it is adapted or related to the whole.)

Augustine’s argument has interesting implications for those who are not Christians or, because of accident of birth, lived before the Incarnation: without a full revelation of God, they cannot “view the whole” of creation and thus cannot see monsters as meaningful. They only see the “deformity of the part,” a sign without any locatable meaning. Without the bridging knowledge of revelation, monsters are messages without meaning, and this makes their bodies, the carriers of that sign, dangerous and threatening.

The women of the Christopher legend demonstrate an alternative response to the monstrous not demonstrated by King Dagnus, Alexander the Great, or even Beowulf. Since monsters are contrary only to known nature, their bodies can also signal to the beholder that their view of nature, and by extension, the God of Nature, is insufficent; they need a more complete grammar of revelation, provided here by Christopher’s sermonizing, to make the leap from the sign to its Creator. At the challenge of the monster’s body, Nicea and Aquilina’s fear signals where the problem lies—not with the monster, but with their means of comprehending it. Christopher’s body operates as a semantic arrow: it points to either destruction or to a Creator whose knowledge can make sense of its bizarre form.

This is therefore the point of Christopher’s monstrosity: he is not a sign of danger so much as one whose signifier cannot be understood on the far side of divine revelation. Identifying God as Creator is thus necessary for proper understanding of the monster; consequently, monsters like Christopher also serve as the catalyst for the process of Christian conversion. As Bede explains in his exegesis of Paul’s sermon to the Athenians and “the unknown God,”

\[ \text{qua ita apud gentiles tractatus seriem format ut primo unum deum auctorem mundi omniumque esse doceat [...] ut non solum propter munera lucis et vitae, verum etiam propter cognationem quandam generis diligendum ostendet; deinde [...] quod totius mundi conditor et dominus templis non possit includi saxeis, quod omnis beneficii largitor sanguine non egeat victimarum, quod hominum denique creator et gubernator omnium non possit hominis manu creari.} \]

(Among gentiles the treatment of [Paul’s] subject takes the form of a series of steps. First, he teaches that the one God is the originator of the world and of all things [...] Thus he demonstrates that God is to be loved not only because of his gifts of light and life, but also because of a certain affinity of kind. Next [...] [he argues] that the founder and Lord of the entire world cannot be enclosed in temples of stone, that the granter of all favors has no

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need of the blood of victims, that the creator and governor of all men cannot be created by the hand of man.)  

Christopher follows nearly the same pattern in the conversion of his own “gentiles.” He tells Dagnus at their first meeting, “Dii autem qui non fecerunt caelum et terram. pereant. et ipsi qui adorant eos [...] utinam audires me et adoraris deum qui fecit caelum et terram quia in potestatem habet liberare te de igne et demittere peccata tua” (May the gods who did not make heaven and earth perish, and the very ones who worship them, too [...] If only you would hear me and worship the god who made heaven and earth, because He has it in his power to free you from the fire and absolve your sins!). From Dagnus’s limited perspective, Christopher can only portend disaster to his kingdom, so he violently contains the threat; for this reason, in the very first lines of the Vitellius fragment, Christopher calls him “dysig” and “unsnotor” (crazy and foolish) because he does not know the “Dryhten se ys ealra þinga Scyppend” (the Lord, who is the Creator of all things). Through the destruction of the idols, Nicea and Aquilina also demonstrate to Dagnus that this same Creator “cannot be enclosed in temples of stone” or “created by the hand of man.”

There are important parallels in Judith and Beowulf as well. One of the most common epithets for the Christian God in the Anglo-Saxon canon, Scyppend or “Creator,” only appears in Judith once, when the narrator proclaims her “scyppendes mægð” (the Creator’s maiden). This is also why, after their victory over the Assyrians and the “heathen hound” Holofernes, the poem ends with an invocation of God as the one “pe gesceop wind ond lyfte,/ roderas þrum grundas” (He who created wind and air, the heavens and far-spread foundations). Mary Flavia Godfrey notes that the words of this invocation serve both as a glorification of God and “also an occasion to enumerate the parts of creation” in terms familiar in both an explicitly Christian and a more obliquely mythological context. The poet of Judith thus introduces the grammar of creation from a universal standpoint and links it explicitly to the Christian conception of God.

One sees a similar distinction in Beowulf. “Scyppend” is only used once, in the story of Cain’s curse, in the first 150 lines. As Fred Robinson explains concerning the Beowulf poet’s epithets for God,

44 Goullet and Isetta, Le légendier de Turin, 235–36.  
45 Rypins, Three Old English Prose Texts, 68, lines 1–3.  
46 See footnote 43.  
48 Judith, lines 347b–348a.  
50 “þifelcynnes eard / wonsæli wer weardode hwile, / sibeas him scyppen forscrifen hæfde / in Caines cynne” (this miserable man lived for a time in the land of giants, after the Creator had
The ambiguity of words like ælmihtig, alwalda, dryhten, god, and metod, which have a pre-Cæmonian meaning coexisting with a postconversion Christian meaning, was, I believe, seized upon by the Beowulf poet [...] By restricting his names for the higher being(s) to words which have two possible referents [...] he has solved [...] the problem of what to call the supernatural forces to which the characters in the poem appeal.  

Tellingly, the word Scyppend is not a part of that list of terms because it has a single, specific referent in a Christianized English society: God the Creator. The characters of Beowulf seem “capable of sensing the existence [...] and of directing their piety toward this dimly perceived Creator,” just as one sees during the scop’s song about creation.  

God is praised as Ælmihtiga (Almighty) during the song, but the limitations of a pre-revelation understanding of creation make this an imperfect act of sincere devotion. When faced with an Old Testament horror like Grendel, Hrothgar and his people turn to idols for help because they cannot give that creator-god the proper name. They can praise God vaguely as Ælmihtiga and Metod (Judge), but not as Scyppend—the Maker. Beowulf can defeat Grendel, but he does not also learn of the Scyppend who cursed Grendel’s kind. The Mother’s death leads Beowulf to an ancient hilt inscribed with the Judeo-Christian story of the Flood, but the text never indicates whether or not Hrothgar can comprehend what he is holding in his hands.  

Turning to other examples, the conqueror-philosopher Alexander is a classic example of a pious and knowledgeable heathen who “cannot see the whole” and is “offended by the deformity of the part.” As he tells his teacher Aristotle,

The earth is a source of wonder (to wundrienne) first for the good things that she brings forth, and then for the evil, through which she is revealed to observers. She is the producer of [...] wondrous creatures (wunderlice wyhta), all those things which are difficult to comprehend for those who look and observe because of the variety of their forms.

condemned him among Cain’s race; 104b–106a). The verb scyppan is used of God’s work once in the song of Creation (lines 90–98) and twice in the damaged portion regarding the dragon, though the context is no longer discernible. See Klaeber’s Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg, 4th ed., edited by R. D. Fulk, Robert Bjork, and John D. Niles (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008). Translation from R. M. Liuzza, Beowulf: A New Verse Translation (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2000).


52 Robinson, Beowulf and the Appositive Style, 35.

53 “Hroðgar maðelode; hylt sceawode, / ealde lafe. On ðæm wæs or writen / fyrgewinses; syððan flod ofslóh” (Hrothgar spoke—he studied the hilt of the old heirloom, where was written the origin of ancient strife, when the flood slew), Klaeber’s Beowulf, lines 1687–89; trans. Liuzza, Beowulf. The text says Hrothgar sceawode the hilt rather than reading it—he can see but not interpret. Michael Near gives a excellent reading of this scene in light of Hrothgar’s inability: “Anticipating Alienation: Beowulf and the Intrusion of Literacy,” PMLA 108 (1993): 320–32, esp. 323–24.

54 “Seo eorðe is to wundrienne hwæt heo ærest oþþe godra þinga cenne, oððe eft þara yfelra, þe heo þæm sceawigendum is æteowed. Hio is cennende þa fulcúþan [...] wunderlice wyhta, þa þing eall þæm monnum þe hit geseoð 7 sceawigað wæron uneþe to gewitanne for þære missenlicnisse þara hiow.” Orchard, Pride and Prodigies, 226–27. Translations are also Orchard’s.
Like the unnamed woman who meets Christopher, Alexander sees these *wunderliche wyhta* as a marvel, but without a full grammar of creation he can only go as far as pondering the nature of the earth itself. That knowledge can get him as far as a “prime mover” of sorts deduced from the stars, but he cannot follow these monsters all the way to contemplating the *Scyppend*. Since he can only see “the deformity of the part,” Alexander destroys the ox-tailed women in the *Wonders of the East* because of their “disgusting and unworthy bodies.” And, since Alexander’s quest of eradication and violence is punctuated by religious devotion, his distaste for the monstrous overlaps with the spiritual. Dagnus and, by extension, Beowulf, Hrothgar, and Alexander are all prior to either the Incarnation or their cultural knowledge of it, so they can only comprehend the totality of creation up to a certain point. They cannot read beyond the monster to the God who made it, and only Nicea and Aquilina give us an idea of the proper response.

Observing how Nicea and Aquilina react to a dog-headed saint gives us an idea how readers could approach the same creatures in the *Wonders of the East*. Heide Estes, Katherine Powell, and Greta Austin have all noted that the *Wonders of the East* is filled with references to an unnamed viewer looking upon or trying to touch or approach the creatures, and they regard this observer as important as the creatures themselves. If Nicea and Aquilina are meant to guide the reader, then the correct response is to look upon the monstrous as a revelation of the limits of human understanding. That is, the readers can either decide to reject the cynocephalus like Alexander or Dagnus, or, like Nicea and Aquilina, they can allow it to challenge their limited perception of the world.

If one looks through Nicea and Aquilina’s eyes, however, that also means one must consider whether that viewer or the objects of her gaze are female. All three manuscripts of the *Wonders of the East* have three illustrations of female marvels in common: the bearded huntresses, the ox-tailed women, and the generous hosts who give their guests a wife. Alexander serves as observer for two of these marvels, rejecting the ox-tailed women while marvelling at the wife-givers. The Vitellius version, however, adds two female observers into the existing illustrations. One of the Ethiopians (called *sigelwara*) on fol. 106v is a woman looking out from the margins of the page: she is much smaller than her male counterpart, literally excluded from the boundaries of his bordered frame, and she reaches inside the frame towards his shoulder. The victim of the *donestre* on fol. 103v is also a woman, lured into striking distance by an unambiguously male *donestre* who appears to hold her severed left leg as she stares out from the page in horror.

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57 Depicted on fols. 105v and 106v respectively.
In both instances, women view the East either from the inside or outside of that culture, and in the case of the female traveller, getting too close to the margins leads to decapitation, consumption, and the donestre’s tears. It is difficult not to contrast the donestre episode with the two marginalized women of the Christopher legend, as they also approach a powerful male figure and suffer dismemberment and decapitation. Instead of the donestre weeping over their heads, however, Nicea and Aquilina become martyrs, and Christopher asks for blessing on all who read his passion (and view his own dismembered body) mid terum—that is, “with tears.”

The women of the Passion of Saint Christopher therefore teach that monsters betray the limits of human, pre-incarnational understanding. Nicea, Aquilina, and Judith are more than sign readers, however: they also make signs from the corporeal fragments of their adversaries and interpret them. First, all three women perform acts of decapitation upon important (and masculine) centres of power; and they submit to physical control of their bodies just long enough to gain the upper hand. Just as Judith submits to being taken to Holofernes’s tent where he intends to defile her; Nicea and Aquilina likewise submit to their removal to the temple where, Dagnus hopes, they will defile themselves with pagan rites. When the sisters enter the temple of Jove and Apollo, however; they instead ridicule his gods by demanding that they speak to them. When the gods give no response, they repeat their call in front of their titillated audience, “just in case the gods had fallen asleep”.

Then Nicea took off her girdle and placed it around Jove’s neck, and they both dragged it down, and they threw it down onto its face, and they destroyed it. They did likewise with Apollo and said, “If you are gods, lift yourselves up and save yourselves.” But the king, upon hearing that Nicea and Aquilina had destroyed his idols said to them, “I asked you to sacrifice to my gods, not destroy them.” The two women responded, saying: “Fool, we have toppled stones; your gods are such that they are ruined by women.”

Through these stone bodies broken at the necks, Nicea and Aquilina declare that Dagnus’s gods, and Dagnus himself, are impotent and have no authority to rule. It seems appropriate to detect a trace of the Vulgate Judith here: “One Hebrew woman hath made confusion in the house of king Nebuchadnezzer, for behold: Holofernes lieth upon the ground, and his head is not upon him.”

58 “Cwæð drihten min gode syle gode mede þam þe mine þrowunga awrite þa ecean edlean þam þe hie mid tearum ræde.” Rypins, Three Old English Prose Texts, 76, lines 14–17.
60 “et dixit una mulier hebraea fecit confusionem in domo regis Nabuchodonosor ecce enim Holofernis iacet in terra et caput ipsius non est in illo” (Judith 14:16). Biblia Sacra Vulgata editio
The parallels across these two texts are far too rich to be adequately investigated here. For one, Nicea and Aquilina steal into Dagnus’s temple not unlike how Judith gains access to the Assyrian camp. All three of them are forced to enter male-dominated spaces, which then initiates an attack inside. Both Dagnus and Holofernes plan to dominate these women in those spaces, but their would-be victims find their adversaries surprisingly incapacitated—both “asleep,” in fact. They attack their oppressors at the neck and employ those broken bodies as signs of God’s power and omens of defeat to their oppressors.

Furthermore, these attacks bear the marks of sexual insult and assault. Both Godfrey and Kim have explored how Holofernes’s assassination carries specific overtones of castration and bodily shaming, and the Nicea and Aquilina episodes play with the same ideas. As already discussed, the sisters openly mock Dagnus’s gods and play up their impotency. One could describe what follows as either an overtly sexual symbolic act or an overtly symbolic sexual act: after insulting the gods, Nicea suggestively strips off her girdle and wraps it around the gods’ necks like a lasso. The moment is clearly a reprisal of what Dagnus hoped they would do to Christopher: overwhelm and sexually desecrate his body with their own. Dagnus first tries to silence Nicea’s mocking by knocking out her teeth, but when that fails, he orders that her body be burned. She calls for a miracle from God to humiliate the king. The desecrating fires burst into a cascade of roses, and her wish is granted. Enraged, Dagnus orders her decapitated, but her death confirms her power as a martyr of God rather than his own power as king.

In each of these instances, women’s gender initiates their role in the violence. In the Vulgate version, Judith’s unearthly beauty brings her into Holofernes’s camp and motivates his attempted rape. The Old English fragment likewise plays up Judith’s beauty and her purity before God in contrast to the drunken revelry around her. In the context of Holofernes’s party and the aftermath, this normally “wise young woman” is called “ides aelfscinu” (elf-bright woman) and “wundenlocc” (with braided hair) by the narrator, as if seeing Judith in these moments through Holofernes’s eyes. Before their martyrdoms,

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61 “Ingresse sunt in templum. et clamabant idolis dei paganorum. audite nos. et non erat vox in illis. et dicebat iterum. ne forte somnium ceperint et non audiunt” (They entered the temple and shouted to the idols, “Gods of the pagans, hear us!” And there was no voice in them. and they said it again, lest they had fallen asleep and they did not hear). Goullet and Isetta, *Le légendier de Turin*, 238.


63 “Tunc nicia soluit cinctum suum. et posuit in collo iouis. et traxerunt ambas. et iactauerunt eum in faciem et contueruerunt. Similiter et apollene fierunt” (Then Nicea loosened her belt and put it on Jove’s neck, and they both dragged it and hurled it on its face and destroyed it. And they did likewise to Apollo). Goullet and Isetta, *Le légendier de Turin*, 238.

64 “Et mihi mittas angelum tuum et liberit me de igne isto ut erubiscat tyrannus cum ira sua” (Both send your angel and let him free me from this fire, so the tyrant with his rage be shamed). Goullet and Isetta, *Le légendier de Turin*, 239.

Dagnus co-opts Nicea and Aquilina’s bodies as a weapon against Christopher, hoping they will incite him to lust; when they refuse, Dagnus tells them to “think upon their beauty” before he punishes them with disfigurement. These male figures respond to these women with their eyes rather than their intellects, and later, with violence. Thus, they fail to understand what powers these women control.

Women and monsters, it seems, each tread with one foot in the same semiotic space. Each text draws attention to the female body during the act of decapitation just as it draws attention to the monstrous body in *Christopher* and *Beowulf*. Once the bodies are dismembered, these women can manipulate male bodies as signs, or in the case of Nicea’s miracles, make signs of themselves. Even so, women are not monsters, and understanding this distinction requires careful thought. Dana Oswald rightly insists that monstrosity is not purely behavioural. “In order to be a monster,” she specifies, “one must possess a monstrous body, largely because actions are temporary and can be changed.” As Heidi Estes has explained, however, Jerome’s standard for the “normative” human body is male, and so women’s bodies, ever changeable, given over to sex and fertility, fall short of that standard; they are both normative and deviant. So are monstrous bodies, in fact: not only are they less than human, but by Jerome’s standard, they are somehow less than fully “male.”

Furthermore, Estes likens women’s status to how Jeffrey Jerome Cohen describes giants: they are simultaneously “origin and enemy.” In *Christopher*, *Wonders of the East*, *Judith*, and *Beowulf*, women’s bodies are already the symbolic currency of power between powerful men: they are passed to each other as intended temptresses, gifts of goodwill, or peace-weavers. When those bodies step outside of their given semantic places by defying their sexual roles, those physical differences become glaringly

66 “Respondīt rex et dixit […] ‘cogitate pulchritudinem uестrām et sacrificarē diīs. si auēm noluerītis. male faciam uos perire a faciae terrae’” (The king responded and said […] “think upon your beauty and sacrifice to the gods; if you are unwilling, however, I will make you perish wretchedly from the face of the earth”). Goullet and Isetta, *Le légendier de Turin*, 236.


68 Dana Oswald, *Monsters, Gender and Sexuality in Medieval English Literature* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010), 7.


70 For more on women as a symbolic exchange between men, see Estes, “Wonders and Wisdom,” 365–66.
apparent; their “deformity of the part” is now offensive and a threat. Though not truly monsters, women’s changeable bodies are nevertheless capable of slipping out of the symbolic exchange between men and openly challenging masculine power—and those men’s bodies, once fragmented and made into signs, now point to God’s power rather than confirming their own.\footnote{I envision the turning of the male body into a sign in Karma Lochrie’s terms. As she explains of Holofernes’s head, “The sexual violence of Judith’s beheading takes the form of Holofernes’ bodily inscription, which the text then proceeds to read. This inscription in effect, renders Holofernes’ body into a text, thereby feminizing it.” Karma Lochrie, “Sexual Violence and the Politics of War in the Old English Judith,” in Class and Gender in Early English Literature: Intersections, ed. Britton J. Harwood and Gillian R. Overing (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 12 (emphasis mine).}

The limitation to this reading is that these women have no autonomy, regardless of their power to fragment male bodies and make them into symbols. Women can slip out of the symbolic exchange between men only by offering up their bodies in an exchange with the Creator. Nicea and Aquilina may refuse their cultural role as prostitutes and instead reduce Jove and Apollo to rubble, but, like Christopher, that power leads to dismemberment. Judith likewise offers herself as a sign of God’s wrath against Holofernes, but her sexual purity affords her a privilege denied to Nicea and Aquilina: survival. She and her handmaiden substitute Holofernes’s head for their own bodies, and they interpret its meaning to the Bethulians.

Granted, many scholars have already traced out the decapitation narratives in Judith and Beowulf, but let us consider one more female decapitator: Grendel’s mother, herself a fusion of the monstrous and female body. Not to push the parallels too far, but she too steals into a hall after a victory-party, attacks a sleeping man, and absconds with his head.\footnote{Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, Klaeber’s Beowulf, lines 1279–1306, 1417–24.} Her grief as a mother, rather than beauty or purity, drives her to Heorot, and rather than slipping out of a masculine exchange of female bodies, she forces herself into a masculine exchange of corpses during a blood-feud.\footnote{“[O]nd his modor þa gyt / gifre on galgmod gegan wolde / sorhfulne sið, sunu deoð wrecan” (But his mother still greedy, grim-minded, wanted to go on her sorrowful journey to avenge her son’s death). Klaeber’s Beowulf, 1276b–78; trans. Liuzza, Beowulf.} The first fragmented and subdued body is not hers but Grendel’s, for his arm hangs like a trophy over the door-post. Grendel’s mother takes that sign of victory and leaves a sign of her own: Æschere’s head, discarded like a bloody signpost at the edge of the mere. As the kin of Cain, she has no interest in using her body in a symbolic exchange with God. Rather, her body is a sign of God’s ire against Cain, and in a sense her rejection of that role to avenge her son moves her from one kind of omen into another one entirely.

Much like Nicea and Aquilina, the mother’s revenge prompts a vicious response—not in martyrdom like the sisters, but in her destruction nevertheless. Beowulf and Dagnus each try to co-opt these women’s bodies by destroying them. Dagnus dismembers Aquilina with heavy stones like the ones she destroyed; Grendel’s mother is also decapitated, just as she had done with Æschere, but her venomous head is left at the mere. Beowulf takes Grendel’s head back to Heorot instead of hers, however, because
he must complete the exchange of male bodies required by the blood-feud instead of claiming hers.

And so, to return to the initial question: does restoring these missing women of the Nowell Codex have interpretive benefits? The answer seems to be a resounding “yes.” Nicea, Aquilina, and their nameless counterpart highlight moments of interpreting bodies: monsters’ and women’s bodies, often in a spiritual context. Not unimportantly, it is the presence of women that makes the signifier beyond the sign apparent—not just the warrior Judith, but the martyrs Nicea and Aquilina, and, though only briefly mentioned here, Grendel’s mother. Something lurks behind these women’s bodies that makes them both like, and very unlike, the monstrous bodies around them.

Though this brief analysis cannot consider all of the implications or engage all of the relevant scholarship, by way of conclusion I would like to point out some broader implications of recognizing Nicea and Aquilina in the other English manuscripts. First, the Paris manuscript of the Christopher legend contains Latin materials important to three female saints popular in England: Helen, who found the true cross, Margaret, and Juliana. Recognizing that Nicea and Aquilina belong in this list means that the entire manuscript now reflects upon the deeds of holy women. Secondly, the now-destroyed Cotton Otho B.x, which contained mostly Ælfrician texts, also had an appreciable number of women saints and may have included, like the Paris manuscript, St. Margaret. Third, Kenneth Sisam believed that veneration of Christopher especially found a home in female communities at Shaftesbury and Nunnaminster, based on the calendars found in two manuscripts that had been associated with those communities. Half of all the surviving calendars mentioning Christopher, in fact, come from nearby in the areas of Winchester, Somerset, and Dorset. These are mostly places where his relics were placed, naturally, but they are also places with prominent women’s communities, and Nicea and Aquilina give those women’s communities an extra tie to the Christopher legend not previously recognized.

74 Ker notes that the manuscript could consist of up to three separate codices depending on how one interprets Wanley’s catalogue. Margaret originally comprised the entirety of Ker’s “Part C.” No leaves of Margaret survived the fire, however, and so this must remain a mystery. Ker, Catalogue, 228.


76 The calendars in question are Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 422, from Sherbourne, Dorset; Cambridge, Trinity College R. 15. 32, from Nunnaminster; Cotton Titus D. xxvii, from Nunnaminster; London, BL Arundel 60, from Winchester; BL Cotton Vitellius A. xviii, from Wells, Somerset; BL Cotton Vitellius E. xviii, from Hyde Abbey, Winchester. The other six surviving calendars come from Canterbury, Worcester, Bury St. Edmunds, and Lincoln. These calendars, along with Francis Wormald’s commentary, are available in F. Wormald, ed., English Kalendars before AD 1100, Henry Bradshaw Society 72 (London: Harrison and Sons, 1934).
Turning to the larger textual context of *Judith*, the story’s presence in England is entirely in texts which address the character or virtue of women. Aldhelm of Malmesbury, for instance, dedicates his prose *De laudibus virginitate* to the women of Barking abbey; in the chapter on Judith, in fact, he seems a little uncomfortable with Judith’s weaponized beauty: “See, the adornment of women is called the plunder of men, not by our own affirmations but by the support of Scripture!” 77 Ælfric of Eynsham, near the end of his homily on *Judith*, likewise admonishes women and for much the same reason: “I also wish to say, my sisters, that virginity and modesty have great power, just as we read everywhere in the passions of the martyrs and the Lives of the Fathers.” 78

This *Judith* material, like the *Christopher* legend, is likewise associated with gender and geographic region—to women’s concerns and communities, and to south-central/southwestern England. 79 The *Beowulf* manuscript, in short, is a major source for two legendary accounts of women whose analogues are closely tied to female audiences; those two accounts comprise 40 percent of the titles in the manuscript; and, if we take Peter Lucas’s reconstruction of the manuscript seriously, *Judith* may well have had pride of place over *Beowulf* in the full manuscript, followed by *Christopher*. The larger manuscript and historical data tie these stories to Wessex and southern Mercia, in the same general region where many scholars put the genesis of the *Beowulf* legend. 80 If scholars allow Nicea and Aquilina a place back in the *Beowulf* manuscript, then it must also open scholars to the possibility that more than men may have taken part in the use, or even in the creation, of Cotton Vitellius A.xv part 2.


79 One more manuscript deserves brief attention here despite its Continental origin: Arras, Bibliothèque Municipale, 764 (739), fols. 1–93, a late ninth-century copy of Raban Maur’s commentaries on *Judith* and *Esther*. The manuscript has French origin but an English provenance by the tenth century, generally ascribed to Bath. This provenance puts the manuscript a mere 30 miles from Malmesbury. See Gneuss and Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts*, item 779. Like Aldhelm, Raban dedicated his commentary to a woman as an exemplum of chastity—in his case, Judith of Bavaria: “Accipite ergo Judith homonymam vestram, castitatis exemplar, et triumphali laude perpetuis eam praeconis declarate.” *Patrologia Latina cursus completus*, ed. J. P. Migne, vol. 109 (Paris: Migne, 1864), col. 540d.