"Cowardice" and Duty in Anglo-Saxon England*

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Then a great English army was gathered from Wiltshire and from Hampshire and they were going very resolutely towards the enemy. The ealdorman Elfric was to lead the army, but he was up to his old tricks. As soon as they were so close that each army looked on the other, he feigned them sick, and began retching to vomit, and said that he was taken ill, and thus betrayed the people whom he should have led. As the saying goes: "When the leader gives way, the whole army will be much hindered."

(Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (C, D, E) s.a. 1003)

Colorado Springs, Colorado, Oct. 30, 2003 (AP). An Army interrogator has been charged with cowardice for allegedly refusing to do his work in Iraq. . . . An October 14 charge sheet accuses him of cowardly conduct as a result of fear, so that he refused to perform his duties." . . . In an interview . . . Sergeant [Georg Andreas] Pogany . . . said he was with a team of Green Berets near Samarra, north of Baghdad on Sept. 29 when he saw the mangled body of an Iraqi. He said he began shaking and vomiting and he was terrified he would be killed. Sergeant Pogany said he told his team sergeant he was headed for a "nervous breakdown" and needed help. After that, he said, he was not asked to go on missions. "I don't know how asking for help qualified as misbehavior," Sergeant Pogany said. "You ask for help and they throw the book at you."

(The New York Times, Friday, October 31, 2003, A8)

In 1984, Philippe Contamine included in what is still the best general study of medieval warfare, War in the Middle Ages, a brief chapter he entitled "Towards a History of Courage." Contamine posed the question whether

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courage, defined as the strength of mind or moral character of one who masters fear in the face of imminent danger, can on its own "constitute a subject of historical enquiry." He answered affirmatively, noting that "recent examples have shown that a history of sentiments or emotions can be attempted, especially if approached from the exterior or periphery, that is to say by the study of the historical context in which they were formed and which, in a sense, conditioned them."

What Contamine offered, he conceded, was intended only "to mark out a trail in this little-explored historical domain." Although the history of sentiments or emotions has since been recognized as a proper, if problematic, field of study for medievalists, few historians of medieval warfare have taken up that trail. What was and still is needed is a full historical inquiry into how medieval soldiers and those who wrote about them understood fear and courage. Contamine's approach to the problem, moreover, was, to my mind, too limited.

To understand fully the virtue of courage as a historical-cultural construct one must also understand the opposing virtue of cowardice, and even fewer historians of medieval warfare have dealt with this topic.

1 J. F. Verbruggen, who pioneered so many of the central topics of discussion in the modern historiography of medieval warfare, explored, all too briefly, the mentalité of the knight on the battlefield, including the role played by fear. Verbruggen, however, was less interested in "cowardice" per se than he was in the mechanisms through which such fear was overcome.

This paper represents a preliminary investigation into the meanings of martial cowardice in Anglo-Saxon England. My presumption going into the research was that the Anglo-Saxons had a specific concept of "cowardice." There is, of course, no one definition of cowardice in modern American society, and one would expect that the concept of cowardice in Anglo-Saxon England would be equally multivalent. There are differences in emphasis, for example, between the philosophical definition of cowardice offered by Aristotle, which emphasizes character, and the U.S. military's Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ), which focuses on action. For Aristotle, cowardice is a disposition of character marked by excessive fearfulness and deficiency in boldness resulting in shameful behavior. In the UCMJ it is misbehavior motivated by fear. The

"Manual for Court Martial" acknowledges that "fear is a natural feeling of apprehension when going into battle" and that "the mere display of apprehension does not constitute" the offense of cowardice. "The refusal or abandonment of a performance of duty before or in the presence of the enemy as a result of fear" does, and distinguishes the offense of cowardice from mere dereliction of duty. What Aristotle and the U.S. military agree upon is that military cowardice is a specific condition that involves a soldier's failure to act as he ought because of excessive fear of danger. As understood in our society, cowardice arises from fearfulness.

The evidence drawn from the Old English corpus, however, challenges the assumption that the Anglo-Saxons, at least before the mid eleventh century, had a distinct conception of martial cowardice in the sense of a specific moral failing concerned with fearfulness in war. As presented in Old English vernacular texts, actions that one might term "cowardly" were presented as failures to perform military duties owed a lord due to insufficient love and loyalty. Rather than a personal and subjective response to the emotion of fear, "cowardice" so conceived was socially condemned behavior, structured by expectations arising from the lordship bond and by cultural assumptions about manliness. There is less of a focus on lordship in the insular Latin texts by ecclesiastical writers, especially those heavily influenced by classical models. In the works of Bede, Alcuin, Ælfric of Eynsham, and Archbishop Wulfstan of York the disposition toward ignavia and signitia is unsurprisingly moralized and given religious significance. Nonetheless, even in these texts "cowardice" was understood as a disinclination to fulfill one's obligations because of sloth and the effeminacy associated with it rather than debilitating timidity.

Given the heroic rhetoric that suffuses so much of Old English poetry and prose, one might expect to find a clear binary opposition between bravery and boldness, on the one hand, and cowardice and timidity on the other. But this seems not to be the case. The problem is more complicated. While Old English has a rich vocabulary for fear and terror with adjectives such as acol-mod, egeful, fyrh, forht, afdirken-mod, anforht, fordilic, fornmod, and forhtendlic to connote timidity or fearfulness, the language lacks any specific word that corresponds precisely to the modern English words "coward," "cowardly," or "coward," a situation one would not even begin to suspect based on the many translations that use these terms. For most, though not all, Anglo-Saxon authors, actions that translate have characterized as "cowardly" had less to do with a timorous disposition than with slackness and torpor. The shame lay in a man's willful choice, when faced with danger, to turn his back on the duty he

4 This is quite evident from pursuing the bibliography of William Ian Miller's essay on the meanings of courage, The Mystery of Courage (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. Press, 2001).
7 UCMJ (United States Uniform Code of Military Justice) art. 99; Manual for Court Martial, 2002, Chapter 4, Paragraph 23.
8 Words related to fear: Ælfric, with Lyne Grundy, A Thesaurus of Old English, 2 vols. (London, 1995), 1:384–86 (06.01.08.06–06.01.08.06.03.01). Words translated as "cowardice": 1:402 (06.02.07.07).
9 See discussions of Alcuin's Pros De Virginitate and of the Durham Proverbs below.
owed his lord. The moral failure was the willful refusal to fulfill the duty owed to lords, kinmen, and friends, to undertake on their behalf the hard work and risk of battle.

According to the OED, the word "coward" only entered the English language in the late thirteenth century and derived from Old French coart, meaning an animal's tail. The authors of the OED explain the etymology by suggesting that it might refer either to "the habit in frightened animals of drawing the tail between the hinder legs" or an allusion to "turning tail" in flight from the enemy. What one might think ought to be the primary terms for cowardice in Old English, words such as acol-mod and aference-mod that literally connote a fearful or timid spirit, are not. Oddly, Anglo-Saxon words that literally mean "fearful" are rarely found in military contexts. A search of Toronto's Old English Corpus produces over five hundred hits for the word forth and its various compounds. Relatively few of these references to fear, however, are associated with war, and even fewer imply moral judgments. That an army or its leaders would feel fear when confronted by a larger host was accepted as natural and carried no stigma. Cynewulf's Constantine in Elene, for example, is frightened (cryning was aferhied) at the sight of the massive army of Huns:

smiten of terror (egsan geacelad), as he surveyed those foreign hordes, the host of the Huns and Hreswirith, that at the kingdom's end, on the edge of the water, gathered their force, a countless throng. Heart-sorrow smote the Roman ruler: of his kingdom he had little hope, for the dearth of men. Too little strength of warriors, of trusty fighting men, had he to battle against that overwhelming of warlike strangers. (lines 56-66)\(^{11}\)

This sets the stage for Constantine's vision in his slumber of an angelic messenger who tells him not to "dread though foreign hordes threaten terror against you and hard war"\(^{12}\) assures him victory over the "loathsome host" if he fights under the sign of the cross. Constantine awakes relieved and now eager for the "terror of battle" (hildegese) (line 113).

Typical also are the passages in the Old English Exodus describing the fear felt by the men of the Hebrew "army" when they heard the sound of the Egyptian trumpets and of the Egyptian host when it swelled up by the sea:

There dread terrors of inland pursuit came unto the army. A great fear (egsan stoden) fell upon them, and dread of the hosts (wælgyre wærde). So the exiles awaited the coming of the foreign pursuers, who long had crushed those homeless men and wrought them injury and woe. (lines 135-41)\(^{13}\)

And then all the folk was smitten with terror; fear of the flood fell on their wretched hearts. The great sea threatened death. The sloping hills were soaked with blood; the sea spewed gore. In the deep, the waves were filled with weapons; a death-mist rose. Fearful the Egyptians fled (fregen forhringende), and, shunning battle (herebeahde), they wished to seek their homes. Their boasting was humbled. (lines 446-55)

Since the poet had earlier emphasized the valor and strength of the Egyptian host, it is unlikely that he now intended the reader to view those same warriors as cowards; rather, the terror felt by the drowning Egyptians is presented as the proper response to God's awful wrath visited upon them.

Most references to fear and fearfulness are found in homilies, devotional poems, and religious epics such as Andreas, Exodas, Genesis, and the usual context is the awe inspired by God or by some divine prodition. In Andreas, for instance, Andrew and his troop of thanes are tossed on a raging sea in a ship that is captured, unknown to them, by God himself:

Then the whole wave was troubled and stirred;... the cloud of the sky grew dark, the winds rose, the waves dashed, the floods were fierce, the cordage cracked, the sails were soaked. The terror of the tempest (wætstorgan) rose up with the might of hosts; the thanes were afraid; none looked to reach land alive, of those who with Andrew sought the ship on the ocean stream. (lines 369-77)\(^{14}\)

The storm, of course, was a test, but, oddly enough, not of the thanes' faith in the Lord, but rather of their devotion to their sworn lord, Andrew. When Andrew tells the divine ship's captain that "my thanes, the young warriors, are cast down;... the men are afflicted, the band of the brave ones mighty oppressed" by the turbulent sea, God suggests that he land the ship and disembark the frightened thanes, who could await in safety Andrew's return. But in words reminiscent of the Wanderer,

the heroes straightway gave him answer, thanes strong to endure, they would not agree to leave their loved teacher at the ship's prow and seek land for themselves: "Whither shall we turn, lacking our lord, heavy at heart, bare of happiness, stricken with sins, if we desert thee? We shall be despised in every land, hateful to the peoples, when the sons of men in their valour bold debate as to which of them has always served his lord best in war, when land and shield backed by swords, suffered distress on the field of battle in the deadly play."\(^{15}\)


10 Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. coward.
12 The Anglo-Saxon reads: "ne ondred fe de, dech de eoldeofte egesan hwapan heordum hide." Elene, lines 81-3.
15 "Andreas," lines 401-14: "Edere him fe dealos agestan onendawe, pegnas probet, paspan ne woldon/ dest be forlote on lodo stefan/ leodisc lareow on mid land curan." "Hwider hweorduill we hlafofeolwe/ geornormode, gode ofeorpe/ synnum wundan, geof we swac med? We bide lace on landa gehwine, folcan fricaco, bones fyrn beare, ellemore, mht beuhtu.
The discourse of courage and cowardice as revealed in this and like texts is a public one in which the audience, the warrior nobility, awards honor and shame. Although greatly destroyed by the “water- terror,” Andrew’s followers choose to face danger with their lord rather than abandon him; the shame of such an abandonment would be worse than death. Andrew, urged on by God, then assures his thanes that the Creator protects them and that “through the King of Glory the water terror, the tossing flood, shall be rebuked and vanquished, grow more calm,” and that “the living God never forsakes a hero on the earth if his courage fail not.” Heartened by their lord’s words, the thanes’ fear abated, so much so that they gave into their weariness and slept.16 The fear felt by Andrew’s thanes, thus, is not a sign of their cowardice, but a necessary precondition for their demonstration of loyalty, love, and trust.

In Daniel it is the power of God and portents of disaster that inspire fear. Nebuchadnezzar awakens from his dream with “fear (egera) of it upon him, and terror (geye) of the vision which God had sent him (lines 523–25),” while of Belshazzar, we are told, “the chiefstain (folcetoga) became ‘fearful in mind, trembling with terror’ (Du weard folcetu fortha on mode, acut fo pam egesan) (Dan. 5:5–6). Such fear is justified and even praiseworthy. It is not depicted as a moral failing.

The words most often translated as “cowardly” or “cowardice” are terms of scorn. The most common of these are earg/earg, swene, and wac; the most explicit in terms of warfare are the rare poetic compound words herblæð and hildlaða. To translate earg as “cowardly” is reasonable in terms of the historical development of the word. Certainly this is its meaning in a saying in the mid-eleventh-century Durham Proverbs: “A coward (earg) can do only one thing: fear.”17 Similarly, an early eleventh-century glossator of Aldhelm’s De Virginitate explained the Latin phrase timidorum militum, “of the fearful soldiers,” with earga campana.18 The Middle English word derived from earg, arg, is glossed by pusillianus in thirteenth-century texts, and the usual meaning of arg in Middle English literature is “cowardly” in the sense of shamefully fearful.19 In Old English, however, earg most often meant “slug-

16 Andrees, lines 433-60: “Sc he pet swif faht, pet he us grycedfeo/ scyppen engla, wernus dryckten/ Weseregses sceal, gedyl gyde gedesmall/ byth bybytting, laco laehte, fryd wyadmen. . . . / Forban to ele to sode seccan wilde/pet acfre reterede lifgeade gode/ eor ou eoradon, gis eli tenure” (Trans, Gordon, p. 188–99).
19 See the electronic Middle English Dictionary, s.v. arg (http://ets.unl.edu/memoz/).

lish” or “slothful,” though it could also convey a more general sense of opprobrium. The same is true for swene, “slack,” “lazy,” or “dull,” and wac, “weak,” “soft,” “feebly,” “faint-hearted,” “irresolute.” Hereblead, a hapax legomenon that appears only in the Old English Exodus, and hildlaða, literally mean, respectively, gentle or slothful in war and slow in combat. The complex meanings of all these words relate to sluggishness/laziness or weakness/passivity/shirking, and arising from this is a connotation of worthlessness.20 There is a distinction, however, between this vocabulary of contempt and the terms most often used to denote physical lethargy and enervation such as slewæd and sleac, which rarely appear in a military context. Earg implied willful dereliction, a shirking of duty, rather than simply a state of enervation.

To translate earg, swene, wac as “cowardly” is merely inference from context colored by expectation. Consider, for instance, how the Alfredian author of the Old English Osrosius used earg. The word appears three times in the work. In two of these, the best translation is probably “cowardly,” though in both the connotation is passivity or sluggishness. Hearing of Hannibal’s approach, the men of Rome, we are told, were so “frightened and astonished” that their women grabbed rocks and ran to the walls, declaring that if the men would not defend the city, they would. This shamed the consuls, who “did not think themselves so cowardly (swe earge), as the women had before spoken of them, that they dared not defend themselves within the earth; but they armed their troops against Hannibal outside the walls.” (Or. IV.10). The author clearly used swe earge as an expression of contempt voiced by the Roman women, and in particular for the consuls, for their men’s terrified paralysis. If they are unwilling to act like men, the women will. The consuls respond not only by defending the city walls but by challenging Hannibal to battle in order to preserve their challenged honor and masculinity.21 In this passage, which was expanded by the translator to add the women’s challenge and consuls’ response, the label earge is an accusation of cowardice. The same may also be true of a passage in Book VI, chapter 36, where the translator, again expanding upon Osrosius’s text, explains that Theodosius was able to break through a mountain pass because the enemy general foolishly had entrusted its defense to a few vile men (hybrum monium) who were “viele and earge.” Earlier in the narrative, however, the term ear
gish
appears without any implication of timidity or cowardice. Thus the translator characterizes the successors of Romulus as "more wicked, and more vile (earyran) than he was, and more hateful and troublesome to the people." Of them Turpin was "agger ge eargast, ge wrenast, ge oforlagodast," "the most vile, the most lustful and the most proud." (Or. II.2). Since the narrative neither emphasizes Romulus's courage nor the timidity of his successors, the term seems to be used here with the more general meaning of vile or worthless.22

The Old English Ornea's story of Roman consuls shamed into facing Hannibal in battle by the scornful words of women may suggest that a failure of will in war was seen as emasculating or feminizing the warrior. This is also the sense of an interesting passage in Aldhelm's prose De Virginitate written toward the end of the seventh century. In chapter eleven, Aldhelm, loosely following Prudentius's Psychomachia, advances an elaborate marital metaphor in which the "virgins of Christ" protected by the corselet of virginity and the shield of modesty battle the eight principal vices with the weapons of virtue:

Virgins of Christ and raw recruits [virginitas] of the Church must therefore fight with muscular energy [lacertosus virilitas] against the horrendous monster of Pride and the same time against those seven wild beasts of the virtuous vices ... and they must struggle industriously [nauter] with the arrows of spiritual armour and the move-tipped spears of the virtues as if against the most ferocious armies of barbarians, who do not cease from barraging repeatedly the shield-wall (?) [sternitatem] of the young soldiers of Christ with the carpet of perverse deceits. In no way let us slackly...[nauter] offer to these savage enemies the back of our shoulder-blades in place of shield-bosses shields, after the fashion of timid soldiers ineffectively [muliebriter] fearing the horror of war and the battle-calls of the trumpeter.23

In addition to supplying evidence of Aldhelm's familiarity with classical texts dealing with war, the prose De Virginitate provides the clearest equation in the Anglo-Saxon corpus of military cowardice, in the classical sense of fleeing the enemy from fear, with effeminacy. The image that Aldhelm conjures of the

cowardly soldier turning his back and shield on the enemy because he fears the "horror of war and the battle-calls of the trumpeter" is couched in Roman military terminology and may indeed owe something to Aldhelm's reading of classical authors. For his audience of nuns, however, what would have been of more interest is the manner in which Aldhelm plays with sexual conventions and identities: the virgins of Christ, the most perfect of women, are urged to fight against sin with manly courage and to shun the timidity associated with their sex. Although for Aldhelm virgins, like angels, transcend gender, spiritual courage, as Sinead O'Sullivan observes, "is equated with masculinity. They reject female activities and become male. ... Aldhelm's female heroes become male warriors."24 There is more to this gender reversal than simply Aldhelm's admonition that the virgins overcome fear. Aldhelm's language also opposes "masculine" forceful activity (lacertosus virilitas, nauter) with "feminine" sluggishness and passivity (nauter). The proposed dichotomy also underlies the Ornea-translator's characterization of the inactivity of the Roman consuls as "womanly." It seems to have struck a chord with later Anglo-Saxon readers of Aldhelm, as well. The connections between courage, gender, and the active/passive binary implied by Aldhelm are brought out more explicitly by the eleventh-century glossators of this text. Thus nauter, which is usually translated as "industriedly," is glossed with airiliter uel fortier, that is, "manly or bravely," and muliebriter, "womanlike," with enereuter et earilehe, implice, that is, respectively, "feebly" and "shamefully" or, in this context, "cowardly."25

For Aldhelm and his eleventh-century readers, the virgins of Christ were not simply depicted but, in terms of the energy and courage with which they opposed sin, "manly" women. The tension between female and masculine traits and virtues manifested in Aldhelm's martial metaphor for virginity's war against sin appears also in ninth- and tenth-century poetic portrayals of female heroism, most notably in the Old English Judith. Aldhelm included the widowed Judith among his Virgins because she "kept the honor of her modesty intact," despite her use of feminine wiles to ensnare Holofernes. Aldhelm excuses and praises Judith because the motivation for her pretense was grief and "affection of compassion" for her threatened kinsfolk during the "close siege" of Bethulia.26 The metaphor of the war against vice is here made concrete, and


23 'Ideoque virginitas Christi et timorcula ecclesiae contra horridam superbiae heremam simulacrum contra huius viriliorum septem uriturum bilias. . . lacertosus virilitas dimicandum est et quam aetherius ferocissima berberorum legiones, quae manipulum titroni Christi testudinem strophos fossa wallia quater non cessat, spiritus armaturae spiculis et ferratis uriturum usnasibus nauii tertani, ac nullatem tumore uborium milium horridum bello et classicis salpigsonibus muliebriter meteantur sanitatis hostibus scamplarum terra pro siccaturum umbitibus seignior praecepsittii! Aldhelmis Malachumbris Prose De Virginitate, ed. Scott Gwara, Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina CCXLIV A (Turnhout, 2001), 129-33. I have followed the translation of Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren, Aldhelm, The Prose Works (Cambridge, 1979), p. 68, with two significant changes, altering their translations of nauter and segnirer from, respectively, "zealously" and "sluggishly" to the more usual "industriously" and "slackly."


26 Prose De Virginitate, ed. Gwara, ch. 57, pp. 731, 733; trans. Lapidge and Herren, Aldhelm, p. 127: "You see, it is not by my assertion but by the statement of Scripture [sentent in Jud. 10:3] that the adornment of women is called the depreciation of men! But because she is known to have done this during the close siege of Bethulia, grieving for her kinsman and not through any disaffection from chastity, for that reason, having kept the honour of her modesty intact, she brought back a renowned trophy to her fearful fellow-citizens [mataculous municipibus] and a distinguished triumph for these timid towns-folk [applicitas residiantium] — in the form of the tyrant's head and its canopy." Aldhelm's explanation of Judith's motivation differs significantly
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Judith’s extreme act is excused by military necessity and the fear and timidity of her countrymen. Alchelm contrasts Judith’s willingness to act with the passivity of the Hebrew males, to whom she “brought back a renowned trophy . . . and a distinguished triumph.” The contrast is underscored by Alchelm’s omission of any mention of the Hebrew army’s subsequent slaughter of the leaderless Assyrians. Alchelm’s Judith is simultaneously a masculine warrior hero and a feminine seductress. That Alchelm was disturbed by the complexities of this image is suggested by his characterization of Judith’s motivation as arising from womanly compassion and affection. The Judith-poet faced the same problem of reconciling the male and female qualities of his heroine. The challenge was to present Judith as an exemplar of heroism while still maintaining her essential femininity. He accomplished the former, as Jane Chance has shown, through his choice of imagery and diction. Thus the poet characterizes her as courageous (ellenoph: lines 109 and 146), proud (collenferide: line 134) and bold (modig: line 334; and ellenbrite: line 133), terms usually reserved for male heroes but justified in Judith’s case by her heroic decapitation of a cruel and terrifying (egesge: line 21) warlord while in the midst of the enemy camp, an act that no man dared. Judith, however, remains a woman, though in some ways the poet’s Judith is less womanly than Alchelm’s. The poet focuses on her chastity and wisdom rather than her beauty. Thus it is Holofernes who orders that she be adorned with jewelry and brought to his bed so that he can pollute her purity with his lust, rather than Judith who seeks to seduce him through her feminine allure. The poet also emphasizes, in typical heroic language, the valor of the Hebrew army, inspired by Judith’s act, in confronting and slaughtering the Assyrians, while Judith remains at home awaiting the return of the victorious men. In this respect the poet’s Judith is more passive than Alchelm’s and remains more womanly. As Hugh Magennis persuasively argues, the poet successfully struggled to limit the transgression of traditional gender roles threatened by Judith’s heroism, and presented her actions “in such a way that Judith may take on the heroic role without losing her femininity, without becoming either monstrous or some kind of honorary male.”

If Judith’s heroicism posed problems of gender-role transgression, so did the failure of men to act decisively and violently. The problem of definitions of masculinity in the early middle ages has been tackled by Janet Nelson, who posits that Carolingian monks promoted among the lay aristocracy a new, gentler ethos that rejected violence and sex and exalted compassion, humility, and chastity, qualities that had been previously associated with femininity. The adoption of these values by certain pious laymen, notably Alfred the Great and St. Alfred of Aurillac, created anxieties and inner conflict that manifested itself in illness. The challenge to the “masculine” warrior ethos of honor and vengeance presented by Christian teaching is highlighted by Bede’s account of the murder of St. Sigibert, king of the East, by his own kinsmen, who “were angry with the king and hated him because he was too ready to pardon his enemies, calmly forgiving them for the wrongs they had done him, as soon as they asked his pardon.” A contemporary of this royal saint, King Sigiberto the East Anglians, shared the martyr’s name and fate. Sigiberto had retired into a monastery he himself had founded, where he “made it his business to fight instead for the heavenly kingdom.” But when the East Anglians were

from that in the Vulgate’s Liber Judicis 8:11–9:14, where Judith puts aside her mourning for her dead husband in order to defend God’s sanctuary and tabernacle. Alchelm’s treatment of Judith is discussed in relationship to the Old English Judith by Jane Chance, Woman as Hero in Old English Literature (Syracuse, New York, 1969), pp. 58–60.


28 Chance, Woman as Hero, p. 40.

29 R. E. Kaake observes that early in the poem Judith’s wisdom is contrasted with Holofernes’s power. However, Judith “is inspired with strength” (line 95) when Holofernes lies before her in a drunken stupor. She is elevated to the status of hero in counterpoint to Holofernes’s reduction to the status of beast. The poet underscores this by characterizing Judith as brave and bold as well as wise (e.g. lines 145–46). “Sapiens et fortitudine in the Old English Judith,” in The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in Honor of Morton W. Bloomfield, ed. L. D. Benson and S. Wenzel (Kalamazoo, 1982), pp. 13–29 and 264–68. Mark Griffith, “Introduction,” in Judith, ed. M. Griffith, pp. 87–88. Although the Vulgate’s Judith also remains behind, unlike her counterpart in the Old English poem, she acts as war leader by devising the strategy that the Hebrew troops are to follow, ordering them to draw up their lines before the Assyrian camps as if to offer battle, but refrain from attacking until the enemy discovered the decapitated corpse of their commander so that, terrified, they would flee rather than stand and fight (15:1–5). The poet’s Judith sends the warriors to battle with the simple admonition to “play their leaders with gloating (or blood-stained) swords, their doved chief” (lines 194–95: “fyllan folcgotan fagum swordum, / fage frumgras”). In seeing the poem’s Judith as inspiring the troops rather than devising strategy, I agree with C. Fee, Judith and the Rhetoric of Heroism in Anglo-Saxon England, English Studies 78 (1997), 401, 405. For an opposing interpretation, see Kelly Glover, “The Old English Judith: Can a Woman be a Hero?” York Medieval Yearbook: MA Essays from the Centre of Medieval Studies 1 (2002), 9–10. (http://www.york.ac.uk/teaching/history/paper/pap/judith.pdf), which interprets Judith’s exhortation to kill the Assyrian leaders as “specific instructions as to what they should do, rather like a military commander formulating a battle plan” (p. 9).


31 As is often the case with Old English biblical poems, the Judith-poet greatly elaborates upon the Hebrews’ victory in battle (lines 199–320), depicting the heroic deeds of the Hebrew warriors and the grisly nature of the slaughter in far greater detail than his source (Liber judicis 15:3–8).


34 Bede, Ecclesiastical History of the English People, 3:22.
Scandinavian saga and legal sources, however, repeatedly draw the connection between cowardice and effeminacy. The terms associated in medieval Scandinavian sources with cowardice or lack of prowess in war—*nib*, *argr*, and *ragnr*—also connote willingness to be used sexually by other men. These labels were so offensive that the *Gulathing Code* and *Grágas* allowed the insulted party to refuse monetary compensation and redeem his honor by killing the slanderer.⁵⁹

Although written by a Norman cleric in the early eleventh century, Warner of Rouen’s scatological Latin poem *Moruiht* may shed light on Viking attitudes toward sexuality and shame. Warner depicts his monstrous protagonist, the inept Irish poet and grammarian Moruiht, as falling into the hands of Danish pirates while searching for his captive wife:

> He is subjected to insults and then in place of a wife he is forced by the Vikings [Danes] to perform the sexual services of a wife Moruiht, dressed in furs like a bear, is stripped, and before the sailors, bear, you unscrupulously sport and strike. Yet not unwillingly does he play Ravista for everyone with his arse. Struck by a penis, he groans, alas the unfortunate!⁶⁰

The irony of Warner’s characterization of the hypersexual Moruiht as “unfortunate” is underscored by the grammarian’s willingness to be sodomized. Just as clearly, Warner believed that Danish vikings would “sport” with a captive, in particular one so lacking in martial and masculine attributes as Moruiht, in this manner, underscoring their contempt, as well as the shame that the poet ought to have but did not feel. One wonders whether this fictional account reflects what may have occurred—or what Warner’s audience feared would occur—when monks and clerics fell into Viking hands. Medieval Scandinavian law codes and sagas cannot be read as transparent windows on to the culture and ethos of the Viking age, and Scandinavian mythology is more ambiguous in its attitudes about gender than these sources might suggest.⁶¹ Nevertheless, the equation

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⁶¹ Odin was accused of *egr*, passive homosexuality, because of his practice of womanly *svip* magic and divination. Loki in the guise of a mare, according to *Grímnismál*, stanza 44, gave birth to the eight-legged stallion Sleipnir. This is alluded to in *Lokasenna* where he and his blood-brother Odin swap charges of perversion. Even Thor cross-dresses in the Eddic poem

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³⁶ Asa, *Life of King Alfred*, ch. 38. As Ruth Mazo Karasz pointed out to me, Gerald of Aurillac’s biographer, Otto of Cluny, uses the term “*vīllītēr*” to describe how his hero strove against the *vīcest*, see *Sanctuarium, October VI, De S. Gerardo, Comite Aurillacensi Confessore*, p. 315.

³⁷ Asa, *Life of King Alfred*, ch. 74.


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²⁴ Richard Abels

attacked by the pagan Mercian King Penda, they dragged an unwilling and protesting Sigiberto to the battlefield to lead the troops, “in hope that the soldiers would be less afraid and less ready to flee if they had with them one who was once their most vigorous and distinguished leader.” Sigiberto, true to his monastic profession, carried only a staff into combat. He was killed and his army scattered.¹⁸ The fate of King Sigiberto and the criticisms that Bede offered in his letter to Bishop Egbert of York about laymen who adopted monasticism, unlike Sigiberto, insincerely, and abandoned their duty to defend the kingdom with arms, perhaps indicates a measure of ambivalence on Bede’s part. It certainly implies that many eight-century aristocrats found the Christian monastic values of forbearance, forgiveness, and restraint at odds with their military ethos.

Asa’s complex presentation of Alfred as “ever victorious warrior” and saintly invalid perhaps ought to be read as an attempt to maintain his hero’s masculinity while insisting upon his embrace of a monastically influenced Christian ethos manifested by his divinely granted illness, love of learning and desire to make peace with his enemies. Asa’s otherwise puzzling account of Alfred’s behavior at the battle of Ashdown makes perfect sense if this was the author’s intention. The natural hero of this story should have been King Æthelfred, who, like St. Gerald of Aurillac, refuses to engage the heathen enemy until he has finished his prayers. Asa instead focuses upon the *ætheling* Alfred, who rather than awaiting his brother, instead rushes into battle at the head of his contingent, “acting courageously, like a wild boar, supported by divine counsel and strengthened by divine help.”¹⁹ Here prayers take second place to courage and audacity, although Asa’s emphasis upon Alfred’s divine favor maintains the monk’s theme of Alfred’s piety. God’s favor and Alfred’s ambivalence about his masculinity lie at the heart of Asa’s presentation of Alfred’s mysterious adult affliction. Asa tells it, this illness came as a result of the “comely” young man’s prayer that God replace his earlier infertility, piles, with a more suitable and bearable affliction that would not be outwardly visible and make him contemptible or useless, but would still restrain his libido. Asa’s Alfred here and elsewhere is a man fighting to restrain his strong sexual drives.³⁷ His illness gives him the means to do so without emasculating him or weakening him as a warrior.

While there is some evidence, then, that among the Anglo-Saxon’s cowardice was associated with effeminacy, there is none that would link it with passive-homosexuality.¹⁴ The Anglo-Saxon word *eargr* does not appear to have had the strong passive-homosexual connotation of its Norse cognate, *argr.*
between cowardice and effeminacy raises an intriguing possibility, especially given the Christian masculinity advocated by English churchmen and fostered by Alfred in his court. If vikings regarded men who sought peace by paying tribute in coin rather than earn it in battle as shameful and “womanly” and the Anglo-Saxons did not, and if Anglo-Saxons regarded the breaking of Christian oaths securing truces and peace treaties as perfidious and pagan vikings did not, then the attempts by English and Frankish rulers to make peace with vikings would have been undermined by the two parties’ profoundly different cultural conceptions of peace-making and cowardice.  

Eargiugr could imply unmanly/effeminate behavior and, in the case of the Scandinavians, passive-homosexuality, because of the word’s secondary meaning of sluggishness. The gendered-binaries active/passive and strong (resolute)/weak are crucial here. Orosius’s Roman consuls were earg and wiflic because they were too intimidated even to order that the walls of Rome be defended. They were “womanly” because they responded to danger and challenge with passivity rather than “manly” resolution and action. To Aldhelm “raw recruits” in the army of Christ who turn their backs on the enemy and flee are “womanly,” not only because they give into their fear of the horrors of war, but because they act slackly rather than with the muscular resolution expected of a “warrior of Christ.” This returns to my point that what we would call courage or bravery is often represented in Old English texts as resolution to make good on one’s words and to fulfill duties and obligations to a lord, the proper behavior of a retainer – his side of the exchange of gifts for loyal service.

Anglo-Saxon authors most often labeled commanders and warriors as earg, sarne, or wac when they were perceived as failing to fulfill their duty to their lord or showed unwarranted reluctance or sluggishness in battle. This is clearly the case in the two most famous Anglo-Saxon heroic poems Beowulf and the Battle of Maldon. A climate of fear pervades Beowulf, though, as my colleague John Hill pointed out to me, the only one who is said to flee out of fear is Grendel (lines 755–57). The essence of Beowulf’s heroism is that he boldly seeks out the monsters rather than shrinks into passivity or shameful resignation, in contrast to Unferth and Beowulf’s hearth-troop in his last battle with the dragon. When Unferth “lent his sword to a better warrior” rather than “risk his life under the warring waves,” he forfeited his glory, his name for valor because he failed to make good on the boasts he made when drunk. Unferth’s gesture is both generous and shameful at the same time; it completes Beowulf’s earlier victory in verbal combat by conceding that the hero is the greater swordsman. The poet is more critical of the moral failure of Beowulf’s hearth-troop to come to his aid in his fatal combat with the dragon, even though he had ordered them to remain in safety. Rather than “choosing battle (hilde-cystum), they fled to the wood to save their lives.” For the poet these men are battle-late (hild-lutan), false to their oath (trow-logan), and weak (tynde). Even more than Unferth, Beowulf’s retainers, with the notable exception of Wiglaf, are shamed by their sluggishness in fulfilling their duty to their lord. They fail to make good on the great promises of love and loyalty they had made to Beowulf in the great hall when they drank his mead and accepted his gifts. The ethos of reciprocity is violated and the moral universe of the Geats shattered, as gift fails to call forth the expected loyalty and service owed the ring-giver. Wiglaf does not fear the dragon’s fire less than his companions do. Nonetheless, conscious of duty to lord and kin, mindful of the gifts he accepted, he chooses to push aside the fear and make good promises he earlier made in comfort and safety.

A similar binary opposition between fulfillment and dereliction of duty lies at the heart of the discourse on heroism and cowardice in Maldon. The theme is sounded from the beginning. The poet tells us that when Byrhtnoth ordered each man to drive off his horse, depriving him of easy flight, and to advance on foot, Offa realized that the earl would not suffer cowardice/shameful behavior (yhda, a variation on earg) in his troop. What this entailed is immediately made clear. “Edric intended to support his lord, his master in the battle; he set off then to carry his spear to the fray; he maintained good spirit (god gefanc) as long as he was able to wield with his hands his shield and broad sword, he fulfilled his vow [or boast, beor] when he had need to fight close by his lord.” Byrhtnoth then sets about

Drawing up the men there; he rode and instructed, he told the soldiers how they should form up and hold the position. He asked that they should hold their shields properly, firmly with their fists, and not be at all afraid (lines 17–21)

43 Beowulf, lines 2396–99, Chickering, pp. 204–05.
45 Beowulf, lines 2631–50, Chickering, pp. 206–08.
46 John Hall, The Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic: Reconstructing Loyalty in Early English Literature (Gainesville, 2000), pp. 115–28, interprets the choice of Byrhtnoth’s loyal thanes to die on the battlefield as different from and more demanding than traditional obligations arising from the reciprocal relationship between lord and man had been.
Byrhtnoth's admonition that his men face the enemy without fear finds an echo in the poet's characterization of the defenders of the causeway, Ælhere and Maccus, as "fearless warriors" (wigan unforht), line 79). The English under Byrhtnoth's leadership fight well and vigorously until the earl dies in battle. Then "the sons of Odda were the first in flight there, Godric turned from the battle, and abandoned the brave man, who had often made him a gift of many a horse." Godric leaps upon the earl's horse, the only steed on the battlefield, and flees the battlefield, followed by his two brothers. In typical Anglo-Saxon understatement, the poet adds: "they did not care for the battle and sought the wood, they fled into that place of safety and saved their lives." Most of the English troops flee, believing that Godric is Byrhtnoth and the battle is lost. What now follows is a series of speeches in which Byrhtnoth's unearge men (line 206) announce that they will "either lose their life or avenge their friend." (line 211) As in Wigfrid's admonition of his companions, the theme of each speech is matching deeds to words and repaying the gifts that one has received from the lord's love. The latter is underscored by the traitor Godric's choice of horse upon which to flee: the earl's own steed (lines 238-41).

If Godric and his brothers are cowards, what makes them so? Not their flight in itself. Armies admitted defeat by abandoning the battlefield. In the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle defeated armies invariably flee (the expression is fyrd or here gefyrdon) without condemnation. The Judith-poet saw no contradiction in characterizing the fleeing Assyrian host as cynera, brave nobles (line 311). His praise of the defeated enemy merely underscored the magnitude of the Hebrew victory. Nor is it because the sons of Odda are fearful and the earl's unearge men are not. Byrhtnoth's loyal thegns make their speeches in order to overcome their fear, and it is for this reason they urge each other to think only of revenge and forget all else. As the old retainer Byrtwold declares, "The spirit (hige) must be firmer, the heart the bolder, courage (mod) must be the greater as our strength diminishes." The emphasis here is on choice and resolution. The core meanings of the vocabulary of courage in this passage, hige, heorte, and, mod, is "heart"/"mind"/"spirit", and the implication is that toughness of spirit is a matter of conscious resolve. Godric, a member of the earl's own hearth-troop, has shown himself to be aloof and sluggish in fulfilling his obligations to his lord; Byrhtwold chooses to be resolute. The poet gives no indication that Godric and his brothers had shrunk from battle while Byrhtnoth still lived, but it is clear from the poet's presentation that they abandoned the battle while its outcome was still in question. Indeed, it was the manner in which Godric devised his flight, upon Byrhtnoth's own horse, that sealed the

defeat, as many others followed him, believing that they were fleeing with their lord. By doing so, Godric has not only forsaken himself but his lord as well, since Byrhtnoth's own boasts are now made empty. As Ælfih concludes, "Godric has betrayed (bescwicene) us, one and all, the cowardly [the word is eorh] son of Odda." (lines 237-38). The poet does not simply draw a contrast between eorh men such as Godric and unearge men such as Ælfih, Ædfred, and Byrhtwold. He makes a finer distinction between those who abandoned their dead lord on the field of battle and those who believed that they were following him in flight. The latter, like Unferth, may have forfeited their chance for glory, but the inference is that they have not shamed themselves or betrayed their lord.

This distinction may explain the inclusion of the phrase for his yhrde in Æl Cnut 77, a law concerned with men who desert their lords on campaign, promulgated around 1020: "And the man who, for his yhrde, deserts [the term is fleo, fleces] his lord or his comrades on an expedition, either by sea or by land, shall lose all that he possesses and his own life, and the lord shall take back the property and the land which he had given him." This clause is to be read in conjunction with the one that follows, which orders that "the heir's of a man who falls before his lord during a campaign, whether within the country or abroad, shall be remitted, and the heirs shall succeed to his land and his property and make a very just division of the same." Together they offer a "curse and a blessing" respectively upon those who, like Maldon's Godric, shamefully break their vows of loyalty, thereby forfeiting their claim to life and property, and those who, like Byrhtnoth's loyal thegns, die fulfilling their oaths, thereby confirming their status as thegns and their right to hold their lands and pass them on to their children. Though usually translated as "on account of his cowardice," for his yhrde in Æl Cnut 77 does not necessarily imply flight out of fear. More probably, Archbishop Ælfwulf, the author of Æl Cnut's as well as most of his predecessor King Æthelred's law codes, used yhrde to characterize as contemptible this abandonment of a lord or friends during a military expedition, much as he castigated his countrymen for ealhlice laga and scandice rygdyl.

51 "Maldon," ed. Scragg, lines 313-14: "Hige acs ac heaerdas, heorte ac comre, mod acs ac mere be ure magen lyhtad.

55 Æl Cnut 77 derives from FÆthelred 28/VIÆthelred 35 in the Eadstan code of 1008, which were also drafted by Archbishop Ælfwulf. Robertson, Laws, pp. 86, 87 and 102, 103. There are, however, a number of significant differences. Æthelred's legislation is concerned specifically with desertion of an army commanded personally by the king. The earlier codes differ on the penalty incurred for desertion. In FÆthelred 28 the penalty is to be placed upon the mercy of the king, in VIÆthelred 35, perhaps a draft copy, the penalty is loss of property. The earlier codes also do not use the verb fleo, "flee," to describe the proscribed action but the less dramatic leafe, "leaves" or "departs." The severity of the penalties relates to the final clause of FÆthelred 35 and the first of VIÆthelred, in which all are enjoined (in the language of the former): "And let us loyally support one royal lord, and all of us together defend our lives and our country, to the best of our ability, and from our utmost heart pray to God Almighty for help." Robertson, Laws, pp. 90, 91.
“gracious laws [presumably not the ones he drafted] and shameful tributes,” in his jeremiad of 1014, the “Sermon of the Wolf.”

II Cnut 77, unlike Article 99 of the UCMA, is not concerned with the motivation underlying the “refusal or abandonment of a performance of duty before or in the presence of the enemy.” Similarly, the Enamene code Wulfstan drafted for King Æthelred in 1008 prescribes penalties for anyone leaving an army without permission, without reference to the motivation of the deserter. This seems to be a characteristic of Anglo-Saxon law in general, typified by the well known tariffs levied for causing death or injury based only upon the status of the victim (or, in some cases, perpetrator) usually without consideration of intention. This disinterest in motivation may reflect an aspect of Anglo-Saxon culture profoundly alien to our own: its lack of a fully developed sense of interiority. Why one abandoned a lord in need was immaterial; that one did so knowingly and voluntarily was sufficient in itself to incur shame and punishment.

The flight of an army upon the death or withdrawal of its leader in an age in which personal allegiance bound warriors to the combat was to be expected, for the death of the lord dissolved the bonds that held the troop together. As one of the sayings in the Durham Proverbs put it, “The whole army is bold when its leader is bold” (Eall halla bi ðæt ðonne lateaw byh hæw). And if a commander proved irresolute it was expected that his troops would go as well. The saying quoted by the author of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle’s entry for 1003, “When the leader gives way, the whole army will be much hindered” (donne se heretoga wacæ ðonne bið ðæt se here swiel), is at least as old as Alcuin, who gave a variation on it in his letter to Archbishop Eanbald II: “If he who bears the standard flees, what does the army do? . . . If the leader is fearful, how shall the soldier be made safe?” (Si dux timidus eru, quomodo salvabitur miles?).

Alfred in his translation of Gregory the Great’s Cura Pastoralis makes a similar observation: “if the general (heretoga) goes astray, the army (here) is wholly idle, when it should be striving against other nations.” For the main chronicler for Æthelred II’s reign, the man described by the C.D.E recensions of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the question was not, however, about weakness or waywardness but disloyalty. This, along with the king’s irresolution and the favoritism he showed to traitors, is the Chronicler’s— and Wulfstan’s— explanation for English defeat. Perhaps this is why the Maldon-poet chose to characterize Godric’s flight as a betrayal. Consider the passage from the annal for 1003 quoted at the head of this paper: “The ealdorman Ælfric was leading the army, but he was up to his old tricks. As soon as they were so close that each army looked on the other, he feigned him sick, and began retching to vomit, and said that he was taken ill, and thus betrayed the people whom he should have led.” The chronicler does not imply that Ælfric (or Eadric Streona) was a coward. The vomiting, rather than a sign of timidity or uncontrollable fear, is passed off as one of his “old tricks,” an accusation of duplicity that starkly contrasts with the United States Army’s initial characterization of the similar reaction of the unfortunate Sergeant Pogány to the horrors of war: “cowardly conduct as a result of fear, in that he refused to perform his duties.”

68 Thomas Hill, “When the Leader Is Brave,” 233, discusses Alfred’s alteration of Gregory’s original text.

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Chronister will not permit his villains the excuse of a timid nature. In this annal and others irresolution and weakness give way to a different and far more damming source of shame, perfidy, oath-breaking. But as I have suggested above, the two were intimately connected, since the weakness or sloth that kept a man from performing his duty to his lord was willful and therefore was in itself perfidious. The author of the entries for Æthelred II’s reign in the C.D.E stock of the Chronicle, because of his theme of treachery, made the connection explicit. Perhaps by pointing out the treacheries of Æthelred’s generals, the Chronicler was critiquing the king’s own failure of courage and will in delegating the responsibility of defending the realm to others.66

Anglo-Saxon “cowardice,” if we may call it that, thus differed from Aristotelian and modern conceptions of cowardice. Indeed, it might be more accurate to say that the Anglo-Saxons did not possess a conception of cowardice as a specific and unique failing of character or action. War leaders and warriors were ashamed not because they possessed timid or fearful temperaments but because they were seen to be sluggish or lazy in fulfilling their pledges and boasts to serve and protect their lord (or, in the case of a king, God). Their deeds, in short, failed to match their brave – and often drunken – words. Janet Batley concluded about the vocabulary of bravery in Maldon, “what bravery words there are in that part of the poem that has come down to us are linked to the hope/expectation/intention of brave behaviour (or braveness of mind), rather than to specific actions of boldness or bravery. Not what people are, but what they need to be.”67 The vocabulary of cowardice, similarly, was linked to a lack of resolution that manifested itself in a shameful failure to fulfill one’s vows in times of danger. What made it truly shameful was that this dereliction was seen as a


66 In the annal for 1013, the Chronicler comments that the people of London would not yield to King Swin’s because King Æthelred and his Danne mercenary captain Thorkell the Tall were inside the borough. In contrast, three years later an army raised by the king’s son Edmund dissolved because Æthelred refused to lead it. Later in that year a second levy came to nothing when Æthelred suddenly left it because of rumors of a plot against him in the ranks. Cf. Ælfric of Eynsham’s homily, “Wychrulares un secgad du be awrian be cynungum,” in Homilies of Ælfric: A Supplementary Collection, ed. John C. Pope, Early English Text Society, Original Series 259-60 (London, 1967-68) 2:723-33, which justifies the practice of King’s depoizing generals to lead their armies, and sees it as being reply to contemporary criticism of King Æthelred. On Ælfric’s general attitude towards war and his concern that the lay nobility perform its military duty, see John Edward Damon, Soldier Saints and Holy Warriors: Warfare and Sanctity in the Literature of Early England (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 192-246.