Lecture: Judith & the Cross

Here’s a Riddle:

I’m a strange creature, for I satisfy women, a service to the neighbors! No one suffers at my hands except for my slayer.
I grow very tall, erect in a bed,
I’m hairy underneath. From time to time a good-looking girl, the doughty daughter of some churl dares to hold me, grips my russet skin, robs me of my head and puts me in the pantry. At once that girl with plaited hair who has confined me remembers our meeting. Her eye moistens.

It has (at least) 4 answers—
How many can you guess?

3 Contexts + 3 Judths = 3 [Mis]Readings

• Biblical/Apocryphal Judith (mid 2nd century B.C.E.)
• OE Judith (c.7th-10th century)
• Judith & Holofernes c.1621-22)—a violent variation on a familiar theme by Artimesia Gentileschi (1597-1651)
In OT, Judith is a widow who rebukes the faithless elders of Bethulia & conceives her own plan: deliberately seduces and kills Holofernes; uses her “ravishing” sexuality to confound her would-be ravisher:

“She removed the sackcloth she had been wearing, took off her widow's garments, bathed her body with water, and anointed herself with precious ointment. She combed her hair, put on a tiara, and dressed herself in the festive attire that she used to wear while her husband Manasseh was living. She put sandals on her feet, and put on her anklets, bracelets, rings, earrings, and all her other jewelry. Thus she made herself very beautiful, to entice the eyes of all the men who might see her. . . . God has sent me to accomplish with you things that will astonish the whole world wherever people shall hear about them. . . . Then Judith came in and lay down. Holofernes' heart was ravished with her and his passion was aroused, for he had been waiting for an opportunity to seduce her from the day he first saw her. . . . She came close to his bed, took hold of the hair of his head, and said, “Give me strength today, O Lord God of Israel!” Then she struck his neck twice with all her might, and cut off his head.

(Judith 10: 3-4; 11:16 according to the New Revised Standard Translation)
Historical setting is a fiction that reflects current events: Overthrow of Antiochus IV by Judas Maccabeus in the second century B.C.E.

- A kind of allegory, as also in OE Judith: Jew/Gentile – Christian/pagan

- The gentile (Assyrian/Babylonian/Roman) overlords in the OT become, in OE, pagan Danish invaders of Christian, Anglo-Saxons

Judith is a virgin/virago (not a widow); she overcomes rather than exploits her sex. The widow morphs into a virgin, who successfully—and manfully—foils a would-be ravisher, inverting traditional roles, rising above victimhood by becoming a man:

What produces the differences between the two versions?

Why tell a story in such an oblique way?
Here is an illustrative passage from the OE Judith:

Swiftly, then, they brought the sweet lady to bed. Then they went, hard-hearted heroes, to tell the tyrant that the true-hearted woman had been taken to his tent. The mighty man, sacker of cities, then grew merry of mood: he meant to defile the dear lady, despoil her with filth. But that the Shepherd of heaven’s host, Our Leader, would not allow; rather the Lord, Ruler of all, kept Holofernes from acting.

So this fraudulent fiend, licentious and lecherous, went with his servants to seek his bed—where he was to lose his life swiftly, within the one night: he then came to his violent end upon earth, such as he had long deserved, the ruthless ruler over men, while he lived in this world under heaven’s roof. The great man collapsed in the midst of his bed, so drunk with wine that he was sunk in oblivion. . . .

Then the Savior’s splendid handmaid prayed, thought long and hard how she might best, most easily, deprive the monster of his life before the foul villain, full of corruption, awoke. Then the ring-girt girl, the Maker’s maiden, grasped a sharp sword, hardy in storms of battle, and with her right hand drew it from its sheath.
Then she greeted heaven’s Guardian,
The Savior of all the world’s living souls,
and spoke these words:

“God of creation,
Spirit of comfort, Son of the One who Rules All,
Give your grace to me, I beg you,
in my need, Majestic Trinity.
My heart is anguished, my mind is grieved
and much afflicted with anxieties.
Give me, Lord of heaven, victory and true faith—
that with this sword I may destroy this dealer of death.
Grant me safe deliverance, stern-minded Prince over men.
Never have I had greater need of your grace.
Avenge now mighty Maker, glorious Giver of fame,
That which makes me bitter, burns in my breast.”

(Lines 54-69, 73-94) [4]

The OE *Judith* is the “same” story as the biblical one, but
with radically different, in a sense opposite, meanings.

What are the common themes in the two stories?

What are the different ideas & values expressed in each?
• Here is another version of the story—a third answer to that Riddle:

• *Judith & Holofernes* c.1611-12)—a violent variation on a familiar theme by Artimesia Gentileschi (1597-1651) [5]

What is the story of Artemisia’s painting? What does it mean?

Two equal and opposite ways to go allegorically wrong:

• The Rape of Artemisia by [Agostino] Tassi.
  An actual portrait of Tassi? Well . . . no. [6]

• Aesthetic—merely an unusually “realistic” & powerful variation on a traditional theme:
  “As with much of Artemisia Gentileschi’s work, scholars have tried to explain the hair-raising Judith Beheading Holofernes as a personal reaction to her ‘date-rape’ trial of 1612, but, in truth, her point of departure was far more visual than psychological. Her *primary source* [emphasis added] was undoubtedly Caravaggio’s Judith (Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Antica, Rome) from some ten years earlier. The intense violence of the slaying, the lack of decorative details and even Judith’s stiff parallel arms are all reliant on Caravaggio.”
How would you read Artemisia’s version of the story?

Finally, The Dream of The Rood:

A Brilliant Example of Phallic Christianity
in the OE Heroic Style:

Then the young warrior, God Almighty,
stripped Himself, firm and unflinching. He climbed
upon the cross, brave before many, to redeem mankind.
I quivered when the hero clasped me,
yet I dared not bow to the ground,
fall to the earth. I had to stand firm.
A rood was I raised up; I bore aloft the mighty King,
the Lord of Heaven. I dared not stoop.

(Lines 40-47) [7

As you can see, this poem is also a forth answer to the
riddle with which I began.
Notes:

1] The first image that was shown on the screen is the south face of the Ruthwell Cross (7th -8th century; extant manuscript dates from the 10th century), an 18-foot stone cross, or rood carved with images from the Christian Gospels. In addition to these images, the Rood of the Dream contains runic inscriptions, some in Latin, some in Old English. (Runes are the letters of the Germanic alphabet.) The Old English inscriptions reproduce portions of The Dream of the Rood.

2] The first of five Old English riddles, trans. Kevin Crossley-Holland, printed in The Longman Anthology of British Literature, Volume IA, p. 157. In case you missed the lecture, the first and second answers to the riddle are (1) phallus and (2) onion; the 3rd and 4th answers are indicated in the lecture notes.

3] If your Bible does not include the Apocrypha, you can find Judith at: http://www.hope.edu/academic/religion/bandstra/BIBLE/JDT/JDT0.HTM

4] This translation is my free adaption of a prose translation in The Longman Anthology of British Literature, Volume IA, p. 122. I have referred also to the verse translation in your Northon Anthology and to the Old English text found in Bright’s Old English Grammar & Reader (New York, 1971), pp. 350-51.

5] According to a Web Gallery of Art “Comment” on this painting, “Artemisia's powerful style - totally different to that of her father - is seen at its most characteristic in paintings of Judith and Holofernes, a subject she made her own. Her predilection for the bloodthirsty theme
has been related to events in her own life. At the age of 19 she was allegedly raped by Agostino Tassi (who was eventually acquitted of the charge) and was tortured during the legal proceedings; thus the fierce intensity with which she depicted a woman decapitating a man has been seen as pictorial ‘revenge’ for her sufferings.”

http://www.kfki.hu/~arthp/index1.html

6] According to one of my Research Assistants, Carmen Ortiz Henley (email dated 9/7/2003): In her recent study, Artemisia Gentileschi Around 1622: The Shaping and Reshaping of an Artistic Identity (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2001), Mary Garrard relates that the 1998 French movie (made by Agnes Merlet) departed from the truth of Artemisia’s life, and the film is guilty of a “mendacious handling of Argemisia’s biography.” Garrard further notes that the film is “saturated” in gender stereotypes. Regarding the film’s treatment of Artemisia’s rape, Garrard writes: “[Agostino] Tassi could not help himself, Merlet has the film say, because Artemisia was sexually provocative. Here was a pure reapplication of the Susana-as-seductive-woman topos to the painter’s own life. In the film, the creation of the Uffizi Judith is staged as Artemisia’s seduction of Tassi, her model for Holofernes [emphasis mine]; the painting matters only as a sign of their love affair” (p. 122).

7] The translation is (again) by Kevin Crossley-Holland and can be found in its entirety in The Longman Anthology of British Literature, Volume A, pp. 126-30. Compare these lines with the prose translation found on p. 28 if The Norton Anthology of English Literature.