

## Sovereign Poetics: from Exception to Apocrypha

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### ABSTRACT

*This essay suggests an aesthetic solution to the problem of foundation in Carl Schmitt's Political Theology by reading that work in relation to the Old English poem Judith.*

This is an essay that analyzes the dynamics of beginnings (those that are overt and locatable together with those that are concealed and irrecoverable). I myself begin by asking what might be gained by reading the Old English poem *Judith*, whose own beginning has gone missing, as a prelude to political philosopher Carl Schmitt's *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. *Political Theology* is a text whose famous opening hovers suggestively between gnomic aphorism and clear definition: "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception."<sup>1</sup> Unlikely as the pairing of *Judith* and *Political Theology* might at first seem, I argue that this juxtaposition helps us think through the problem of what Kathleen Davis, following Schmitt, has described as the "absent foundation of sovereignty."<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, I propose that the philosophical problem that Schmitt's theorization of the sovereign exception poses has an aesthetic solution in the fragmentary *Judith*.

Although his theories of political life have been influential to both conservative and radical thinkers in recent decades, it remains the case that Schmitt is most often remembered for his association with Hitler's totalitarian regime. Yet Schmitt objected to constitutional politics throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries because of their pretense to organic totality, not because of their failures of authority. Specifically, Schmitt critiqued liberalism's failure to acknowledge any "outside" to itself. As Richard Wolin explains, throughout his career Schmitt "is concerned with demonstrating the impossibility of understanding the legal order in *exclusively rationalist* terms."<sup>3</sup> Or, as Seyla Benhabib, puts it, Schmitt "drove home the rationalist fallacies of liberalism until its 'limit concepts'—*die Grenzbegriffe*—were uncovered. These limit concepts, in Schmitt's view, constituted the secret and *unthought* foundations on which the structure of the modern state rested."<sup>4</sup> Sovereignty is one of liberalism's "limit concepts," to which there can, and indeed must, always be an "exception." "Modern" politics, Schmitt argued, has a structural and historical connection to its theological past, hence "political theology."<sup>5</sup>

A complex and disquieting tension between the concrete and the abstract is therefore essential to the functioning of sovereignty: the foundation of this authority is necessarily tenuous, even otherworldly. The opening line of *Political Theology* calls immediate attention to this aporia. *Political Theology* helped establish Schmitt as “as one of the most trenchant critics of the liberal democratic project,” and throughout Schmitt repudiates the vagueness and abstraction that characterize liberalism.<sup>6</sup> Against his predecessors, he insists on discussing sovereignty in its “concrete application”—that is, in terms of “who decides in a situation of conflict what constitutes the public interest or interest of the state.”<sup>7</sup> As Antonio Negri explains, for Schmitt the decision stands as “the maximum of factuality.”<sup>8</sup> At the same time, however, both the definition of sovereignty, as well as specific examples of sovereignty or particular instances of decision or exception, are markedly absent from his analysis. Matter-of-fact as *Political Theology* is, concerned as it is with “actual interests,” the only way that Schmitt attempts to represent sovereignty, exception, or decision is via his own distinctive mode of descriptive analysis. Schmitt’s rhetoric manages to be at once methodical, dry, phlegmatic, and, *at the same time*, provocative, ambiguous, disquieting. Utterly nonrepresentational, *Political Theology* offers few examples, no anecdotes, and no stories—it offers, in short, no particularity.

The question of how a sovereign decision on the exception might be represented or particularized proves a tantalizing challenge. Though it is itself ungrounded and unbounded, sovereignty, via a decision on the exception, enables all foundations and boundaries. Schmitt explains, “there exists no norm that is applicable to chaos. For a legal order to make sense, a normal situation must exist, and he is sovereign who definitely decides whether this normal situation actually exists.”<sup>9</sup> The only thing “applicable” to chaos, capable of reining it in and providing workable norms, is the sovereign decision. Schmitt moreover makes it clear that he does not restrict his discussion to legal order, but insists that it is applicable to any order: “Like every other order, the legal order rests on a decision and not on a norm.”<sup>10</sup> How would one produce a sufficient representation of that which, by definition, exceeds (and indeed precedes) any norm, code, or expectation? Historical “examples” of sovereign decision(s) on exception are unsound as representations of the concepts and processes Schmitt describes, because their essentially normalizing effect instantaneously disallows the possibility of access to the radical ground from which they arose.

It may be that any adequate representation of sovereignty, exception, and/or decision must, in fact, *be* the thing itself, and hence not a representation at all. Nevertheless, I want to press the question, and challenge this seeming-impossibility of representing sovereignty, exception and decision by juxtaposing an archaic and religious poetic mode to Schmitt’s mode of descriptive analysis.<sup>11</sup> The unknown Old English poet’s Judith—a figure who, taking action as an individual, saves her city and its inhabitants from almost certain destruction by acting out of accord with all precedent and convention—in certain ways fulfills Schmitt’s definition of the sovereign. At the

same time, reading *Judith* in relation to Schmitt helps resolve some problems with his theorization of sovereignty, problems that have been explored by a range of thinkers, including Walter Benjamin, Karl Löwith, Hannah Arendt, and, more recently, Antonio Negri. As Davis explains, Benjamin's work "returns us to the paradox of the sovereign decision, which must be made—and can only be made—in the face of its own undecidability: technically, representation is impossible."<sup>12</sup> Therefore rather than reading *Judith* as a narrative representation of Schmitt's sovereign decision, I argue instead that reading *Judith* next to, or, rather, reading *Judith before* Schmitt—as a poetic epigraph or preamble to *Political Theology*—offers one way of responding to the challenges presented by Schmitt's presentation of sovereignty as the ungrounded means by which authority grounds itself.

Both rhetorically and from a theoretical perspective, the problem of sovereignty writ large is a problem of foundation, of beginnings. From a conceptual standpoint, the question of how authority is grounded—of where authority comes from—is the essential question of sovereignty. Looked at as a challenge to representation, the rhetorical question becomes how to proceed in the task of representing the inherently unexpected (and, indeed, unexpectable) triad of exception, decision, and sovereign power. How, in short, might such a representation successfully begin—what would be the first steps toward building such a representation? And how might it introduce itself, or make its approach to its audience?

In addressing the rhetorical side of this problem, it is useful to pause over the interpretive question of how beginnings influence or compel certain interpretations of what follows from them. Consider, for instance, the quintessential beginning in the Western tradition: Genesis. In his modern translation, Robert Alter renders its initial line as "When God began to create heaven and earth, and the earth then was welter and waste;" whereas than the more familiar King James begins, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth."<sup>13</sup> The King James translation brings God and creation out of nowhere, and so offers a concrete, definitive sense of beginning—a perfect beginning, complete in itself. Alter's translation, on the other hand, situates creation within an existing course of events. "When God began to create" suggests not only that God may well have been doing something else just before, but also that creation itself was a process, a process that started at a certain point, and proceeded along temporal lines. Alter's opening sentence further disturbs the idea of a truly decisive beginning by immediately suggesting the existence of something prior to creation: "the earth was *then* welter and waste" (my emphasis). King James conveys something similar with "And the earth was without form, and void," but subordinates this information in a second sentence, and without the temporally ambiguous "then." From these two beginnings, then, we can plausibly infer that Alter's version sets up a text that concerns itself with the worldly, the temporal, and perhaps even the everyday, while the King James translation asks for a reading that focuses on ethereal matters—perfection, and finality. And indeed these varying

emphases are precisely what distinguish these two translations. In both translations, Genesis grapples with how to begin from nowhere—with a sovereign beginning. King James occludes the unknown antecedent that Alter’s translation gestures at, though it gestures at it precisely as something that is hidden. Neither opening offers any suggestion as to what might have come before and enabled the beginning. But where King James marks beginning with the definite article: “in *the* beginning,” Alter’s version welcomes the prospect of hazy origin, embracing it with a construction that suggests a progression from an unknown to the time “when God began to create.”

Addressing the theoretical side of the problem—the question of how authority establishes itself—Negri posits a distinction between a radical “constituent power” and an institutionalized “constituted power.” He praises Schmitt for articulating the profoundly unstable nature of constituent power in his theorization of sovereignty, but argues that Schmitt ultimately “gets entrapped in the irrational overdetermination of the conception of sovereignty.”<sup>14</sup> Schmitt negotiates the paradox of the ungroundedness of established authority “by predisposing the sovereign decision to the state.”<sup>15</sup> As Davis explains, “Negri grapples with Schmitt as he attempts to theorize the possibility of a radically democratic ‘constituent power’ that is never closed down by, or recuperated as, ‘constituted power.’ He wishes, in other words, to develop an understanding of power that suspends law without turning into yet another foundation for law.”<sup>16</sup> For Schmitt, sovereign power is the route via which the state grounds and re-grounds itself, and this link to the state renders a decision on the exception “not a ‘decision’ at all in his own terms, and this is the most potent critique of Schmitt.” Constituent power, by contrast, is:

an act of choice, the precise determination that opens a horizon, the radical apparatus of something that does not yet exist, and whose conditions of existence imply that the creative act does not lose its characteristics in the act of creating. When constituent power sets in motion the constituent process, every determination is free and remains free. On the contrary, sovereignty presents itself as a fixing of constituent power, and therefore as its termination, as the exhaustion of the freedom that constituent power carries[.]<sup>17</sup>

In contrast to Schmitt’s desire for definitiveness, Negri embraces the hazy conception of beginning and the radical possibilities that it enables. In *Political Theology*, Schmitt identifies this notion of origin conceptually, even as he resists it rhetorically.

By working through these approaches to beginning as differences between what I will term an ungrounded poetics of apocrypha—hidden and in some ways suspect writing that nevertheless remains a cultural force—and a poetics of exception, which actively seeks a solid foundation, I argue that the fluid content of *Political Theology* ultimately unravels Schmitt’s apparent intransigence. Despite the apparent rigidity of Schmitt’s rhetoric, his thought opens onto a politics

(and, finally, a theology) that is more supple and capacious than it is than autocratic and exclusionary. The rhetoric of Schmitt's opening salvo thus has important implications for the theory he outlines, while the lacuna with which the Old English *Judith* begins enables a more successful confrontation with the material ground of authority than does Schmitt's foundation-laying beginning.

Throughout *Political Theology*, Schmitt attempts nothing other (and nothing less) than an explication of this initial pronouncement: "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception." On the one hand, this mode of beginning succeeds in proffering an incisive and pithy "Definition of the Sovereign," as the chapter heading promises. At the same time, however, this beginning does little more than set up the three questions that Schmitt will address in the rest of the chapter, and build on in the remainder of the book. (Who is sovereign? What is a decision? And what constitutes an exception?) This initial statement, then, stands as a cornerstone to the work as a whole. At the same time, however, the definition is self-referential and consequently fails to, in itself and by itself, actually *say* anything. It proves a troubled foundation precisely because of its apparent precision. This tension in Schmitt's beginning, between a desire for a solid foundation and a persistent vacuity, has implications for the work of *Political Theology* as a whole.

The entirety of *Political Theology* demonstrates the same careful rhetorical choices that characterize its opening line. Schmitt builds systematically toward his central claim that the category of the political functions according to the logic of theology, and that we must recognize an indissoluble structural link between the two. The eponymous third chapter of *Political Theology* begins with the most urgent foundational assertion of the book: "All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts—in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver—but also because of their systematic structure."<sup>18</sup> Despite his emphasis on the enduring nature of this connection, Schmitt's method is nonetheless more etiological than transcendent, focusing on the growth and development of politics out of theology. Working backwards from twentieth-century Germany, via history and philosophy, Schmitt endeavors to theorize the origins of the modern state in the workings of theology. Rather than drawing out and extrapolating interpretations from a particular beginning (as with the textual example of Genesis), Schmitt instead works backwards to infer and argue for a particular beginning on the basis of what has, on his view, culminated in the present moment—on the basis, in other words, of the conclusion. What motivates Schmitt to work from within what is arguably a formal, textual, even literary rubric in order to reconstruct and locate what are essentially lost beginnings? And how does he proceed in this endeavor: what rhetorical tools are needed to narrate this kind of conclusion-driven "beginning," and what are the implications of such a method for Schmitt's larger project?

A more diffuse form of foundationalism undergirds *Political Theology* and edges the work toward paradox. As Schmitt works through the pivotal “Political Theology” chapter, he continually stresses that “the ‘omnipotence’ of the lawgiver, of which one reads in every textbook on public law, is not only linguistically derived from theology,” but also shares the same logical structure as theology.<sup>19</sup> Schmitt implicitly concedes that politics and theology do indeed appear different, but argues that every one of the “significant” concepts of the juridical, modern democratic state operates according to this theological logic. The metamorphosis Schmitt describes is therefore superficial, and theology’s new political incarnation would seem entirely immaterial to its content. The clothes have changed but the body remains the same. Like God in Genesis, giving form to chaos, Schmitt asserts that theology has from the very beginning given shape and structure to what modern society calls “politics” (shape and structure that is for Schmitt not “only” linguistic but also metaphysical and ontological).

Given Schmitt’s sense of the superficiality of the shift from theology to politics, and the abiding fact of politics’ deep connection to theology, it comes as no surprise when Schmitt asserts in no uncertain terms that:

Whoever takes the trouble of examining the public law literature of positive jurisprudence for its basic concepts and arguments will see that the state intervenes everywhere [...] There always exists the same inexplicable identity: lawgiver, executive power, police, pardoner, welfare institution. Thus to an observer who takes the trouble to look at the total picture of contemporary jurisprudence, there appears a huge cloak-and-dagger drama, in which the state acts in many disguises but always as the same invisible person.

This situation is inescapable. Theology’s structural influence inevitably overcomes what Schmitt sees as modern jurisprudence’s pretension to self-sufficiency. Yet Schmitt’s insistence that the modern state is powerless to change the fundamental operations of political life (/theology) does not diminish the urgency of his description. His choice of the figure of the “cloak-and-dagger drama,” and repeated descriptions of spatial ubiquity and temporal persistence (“intervenes everywhere,” “always exists,” “acts [...] always as the same”) all work toward the sense of exigency that *Political Theology* cultivates. So too does his all-encompassing list, “lawgiver, executive power, police, pardoner, welfare institution,” raise the alarm.

While the pressing nature of Schmitt’s concern may be apparent, it is less far less clear what Schmitt hopes to effect by uncovering the submerged originary link between modern politics and theology.<sup>20</sup> As we can see in the quotation above, the rhetoric of *Political Theology* implies and assumes that the intimate relation between politics and theology needs to be brought out into the open rather than “cloaked” and “disguised.” If the same engine inevitably drives modern politics

and theology, what does Schmitt hope to effect by unmasking the theological underpinnings of the modern state?

A brief look at *The Concept of the Political* (1932) helps answer this question. Here, Schmitt offers another gnomic opening: “The concept of the state presupposes the concept of the political.”<sup>21</sup> In his response to this text, “Notes on *The Concept of the Political*,” Leo Strauss asks: “Against what opponent does the political emerge as the basis of the state?”<sup>22</sup> Where my reading of *Political Theology* wonders what is at stake in uncovering the relationship between politics and theology, Strauss’s reading of *The Concept of the Political* raises the related question of why Schmitt feels compelled to argue for *politics* as the basis of the state. What is at stake in arguing that the political is the state’s necessary ontological precursor? Who or what does Schmitt feel is challenging this conception of the state? Strauss goes on to explicate Schmitt’s text as a polemic against liberalism, defined here as the failed attempt to “bring about the foundation of the state or, more accurately, the establishment social relations” through a neutralization and negation of the political.<sup>23</sup> Strauss goes on:

The circumstances of this failure are as follows: Liberalism negated the political; yet liberalism has not thereby eliminated the political from the face of the earth but only has hidden it; liberalism has led to politics’ being engaged in by means of an antipolitical mode of discourse. Liberalism has thus killed not the political but only understanding of the political, *sincerity regarding the political* (65 ff.). In order to remove the smokescreen over reality that liberalism produces, the political must be made apparent as such and as simply undeniable. The political must first be brought out of the concealment into which liberalism has cast it, so that the question of the state can be seriously put.<sup>24</sup>

Thus Strauss suggests that Schmitt’s project is a ground-clearing one that aims to precede and enable a “serious” posing of the question of the state. Put this way, the aim of Schmitt’s project begins to sound like the logic of sovereignty itself: a determination that a crisis point has been reached, and a decision to begin again.

In much the same way, *Political Theology*’s attempt to enable a “sincere,” serious posing of the question of sovereignty relies on recognition that the concept of the political presupposes the theological, rather than allowing theology to continue working “undercover.” Thus, for Schmitt, the problem of sovereignty folds back upon itself with the realization that there is finally no “significant” difference between the posing of the question of theology and the posing of the question of sovereignty. A clear vision of politics facilitates a greater proximity to (because fuller understanding of) God. Brought to its logical conclusion, however, the vision of theology that this

unmasking uncovers is one in which order is enabled by an individual decision on a collective situation of crisis, a universal disorder.

The individual is paramount here, but so too is the tenuousness of foundation upon which, for Schmitt, even theology itself rests. On the one hand, Schmitt wants to emphasize that the sovereign decision is made on the basis of some state of affairs: it does not emerge from nowhere. At the same time, however, he wants a beginning that is definitive, unquestionable, and solid—a “true” beginning on the order of King James. This tension remains unresolved, manifesting itself as what we might think of as a poetics of exception, a rhetorical mode that insists on (and manifests itself via) that which is definitive and concrete, even as it reveals the ineluctability of tenuousness and abstraction.

A reading of Schmitt therefore benefits from a shift of focus: from exception to what we might think of as a poetics of apocrypha. The word “apocrypha” derives the late Latin adjective *apocryphus*, used to describe those writings that were “hidden,” “of unknown authorship” and therefore potentially “spurious.”<sup>25</sup> Such writing could be said to haunt its descendants, since it retains its cultural significance in part because of its indeterminacy. Though Genesis is of course not itself an apocryphal book of the Bible, the hazy origins that mark Alter’s translation of its opening lines stand as an example of such a poetics.

Like *Political Theology*, the Old English poem *Judith* embodies the tensions between the abstract and the concrete that come into play in the attempt to represent exception. But in contrast to Schmitt’s sharp and decisive—if troubled—beginning, the *Judith* we have inherited lacks any beginning at all. What we have of the poem are three hundred and forty-nine lines, and there has been some disagreement regarding its original length.<sup>26</sup> Parts ten through twelve are extant in their entirety; hence our poem “begins” with the last fourteen lines, of (what may be) part nine of its original.<sup>27</sup> Some critics have argued that in fact very few lines are missing, but for reasons I outline below I am more persuaded by David Chamberlain’s argument that number of missing lines is significant—and that indeed the political efficacy of the poem relies on an absent, hidden, or lost beginning.<sup>28</sup> Ultimately, however, I am less interested in how the poem was originally composed, or its historical fate, than I am in what we can say about the extant version. Like other iterations of the Judith story, its significance lies largely in the fact that the poem remains cloaked in some degree of uncertainty.

When Schmitt identifies sovereignty as a “borderline concept,” he stresses once again that he does not mean a “vague” concept, but rather one pertaining “to the outermost sphere,” a concept that is at once general and fundamental. Sovereignty is not artificial, but inherent to the theory of the state; yet it is defined by its association with the exception, rather than the routine.<sup>29</sup> Like this conception of sovereignty, Judith’s story often occupies a liminal position, included through its exclusions. The biblical Book of Judith has never been canonical for Jews, and has been consigned



to the Apocrypha by Protestants; the Old English fragment survives in the Nowell Codex, the so-called “book of monsters” that comprises works which are in some way marked by the miraculous and supernatural, such as *Beowulf* and *The Wonders of the East*. Modern retellings of the Judith story include the epic poem “Judith” by Maria Gowen Brooks, or *Maria del Occidente*, a nineteenth-century American poet whose frankly sensual verse and focus on strong, even paternal heroines placed her outside the traditional sphere of nineteenth-century women poets. Through Judith’s appearance in works by poets as disparate as Brooks, Catherine Jemmat, John Greenleaf Whittier, Adah Menken, Hart Crane, John Crowe Ransom, and Adrienne Rich, she has endured as a figure whose place has more often than not been borderline, apocryphal—included as an exclusion—in canons both sacred and secular.<sup>30</sup>

The Old English *Judith* is remarkable for its powerful and lively verse form, for its sheer exuberance of its style,<sup>31</sup> and its “strategic” use of hypermetric meter.<sup>32</sup> The poem situates itself in the hazy space between the ethereal and the material by figuring the tension between the characters of Judith and Holofernes as a tension between the abstract and concrete. Thus, like *Political Theology*, Judith attempts to represent the exceptional by means of an unsettling apposition of the concrete with the abstract. Holofernes’s absorption in the material world is emphasized repeatedly in the remaining bit of section IX, and throughout section X, the first full section of this fragmented poem. Whereas the first stanza of the fragment indicates that Judith is clearly focused on God and heaven, “she kept ever steady her faith in the almighty Lord” (lines 6–7), Holofernes eagerly commands his men to attend a lavish feast.<sup>33</sup> The poet describes the entrance of the warriors into the feast hall, and dwells on descriptions of the physical objects there: “deep bowls” and “pitchers and cups [...] full for the revelers” (18–19). Holofernes, “the gold-friend of men” (23) is loud, his voice projecting such that “the sons of men for miles could hear” (24). Drunk himself, he orders that his guests keep drinking: “he drowned his attendants all, as if dropped in death they were/ emptied of any lingering good” (31–2). They wind up looking like what Holofernes is about to become, a corpse, stripped of all but their most material being. Again emphasizing the degree to which he “remained in *this* world/ here under the roof of heaven” (66–67, my emphasis), Holofernes commands that Judith, adorned with jewelry, be brought to his bed. In one sense, we might say that Holofernes, “so drunk with wine that he had lost all wisdom/ in the chamber of his mind” (68–69), is already a dead man when Judith kills him and leaves his soul “bound for the abysmal cliff” (113).

In sharp contrast, Judith, far from being Holofernes’s whore, is in fact “the Lord’s/ glorious servant” (73–4). Her voice, raised in prayer rather than intoxication, is said to reach the Savior, rather than the “sons of men.” Her strengths are “glorious,” not of this earth. Yet even as the poem stresses Holofernes’s materiality against Judith’s ethereality, it makes the strange move of verbally aligning Holofernes—not Judith—with God. The language of the poem tends to confuse and conflate God and Holofernes by rendering the referents of nouns and pronouns unclear in the Old

English text. This confusion evokes a struggle between Holofernes and God, a struggle that God wins via his true ally, the ethereal Judith.

The conflation of divinity with a character that asserts himself through definitive, concrete language speaks to tensions I've noted in Schmitt's theorization of sovereignty, namely his desire for an unmistakable, solid grounding for authority. Schmitt's rhetorical rigidity requires that this stand simply as the paradoxical result of the impossible attempt to represent the unrepresentable. But the task of representing sovereignty requires a negotiation between fluidity and fixity. Juxtaposing these texts brings to the fore *Judith's* warning to be wary of invitations to conflate solidity with power: it is her feminized ethereal action that eviscerates her opponent's material, masculine strength.

*Judith* retains *Political Theology's* emphasis on the importance of the individual, although Judith's individual act is important insofar as it enables collective triumph of the Hebrews and reflects the glory of God. Thus I disagree in certain ways with Edna Purdie, a German literature scholar and Schmitt's contemporary, who argues that a traditional emphasis on heroic assertion of individuality is downplayed in *Judith*:

The heroic activity of the epic commonly implies the assertion of individuality—as in *Beowulf*, or in the heroes of Homer. In *Judith* we find this activity made powerful by the surrender of the personal, individual will to the will of God. It becomes in this way superhuman; the courage derived from religious conviction plays the role of the legendary supernatural strength attributed to *Beowulf* and other heroes.<sup>34</sup>

Purdie's suggestion—that rather than asserting individuality as such Judith surrenders her personal will to God's will—downplays Judith's actual course of action. Judith responds actively—as a sovereign individual—to the material situation at hand. While Purdie is no doubt correct in seeing a connection between Judith's courage and her religious conviction, it is important to remember that rather than waiting for and trusting in God, passively hoping for salvation (a course of action that the Biblical *Judith* argues would be an irreverent *testing* of God), Judith makes a decision and acts on it. God may be said to set the scene for Judith's action, but she is quite explicitly “sorely mindful/ of how she might take the monster's life most effectively” (74–76). The poet's visceral description of her act solidifies the sense that Judith is the hero of this story. After she “took hold of the sword [...] and drew it from the sheath with her right hand” (79–80), Judith (though as clearly a Jew in this version as in its predecessors) offers a prophetic invocation of the Trinity, then “took the heathen man/ firmly then by the hair, and with her hands drew him near” (98–99) and finally “struck/ the fiendish enemy full of menace/ with hostile sword and hacked his neck/ straight to the middle so that he lay in a stupor/ drunk and wounded” (103–107) and then again

“struck terribly a second time/ the heathen hound so that his head rolled/ along the floor” (109–111). This series of active verbs and careful description leaves no doubt that the victory is Judith’s. The opening of section XI brings the message home: “Though victory given to her by God [...] Judith in hard/ battle had won abounding glory” (122–123). The fact that Judith as an individual attained mastery is of course granted by God, but nonetheless Judith herself “won abounding glory” with her bloody decapitation of Holofernes and by the way she uses her remains as a “sign of her success in battle” (175), and an inspiration for the warriors’ own imminent triumph. “The prudent maiden then hastily pressed/ the bloody head of the battle hunter/ into the pouch [...] and gave it gory with blood [...] to carry home” (125–132).

In writing about the Judith story in its nineteenth- and early twentieth- century permutations, Purdie suggests: “To say that there has been a progressive disbelief in miracle is to touch on one aspect of the transformation of the story. That the explanation was formerly so easy has also perhaps conduced to the preoccupation of modern writers with the subject; the minds lured to destructive criticism have also been stimulated to creative effort.”<sup>35</sup> Here again I would suggest that Purdie misses some of the texture of the Old English *Judith*. In this poem the miraculous is only conspicuous in its absence. Judith’s act, as I have argued here, is very much her own. Yet Purdie’s position aligns with Schmitt’s contemporary philosophy, and puts critic and theorist very much on the same page.

In *Political Theology*, Schmitt notes that the modern constitutional state was born alongside Deism, a system of religious thought that eschewed what it saw as non-rational belief in direct, divine intervention in favor of an understanding of God as “watchmaker,” a now-distant creator who designed, set in motion, and subsequently absented himself from the world. Most importantly for Schmitt, Deism “banished” the miracle. At pains to distinguish his own “systematic analogy” from a mere “playing with ideas,” Schmitt posits that the *exception* in Western political life is analogous to the *miracle* of the pre-Enlightenment era.<sup>36</sup> The exception in modern politics, the sovereign’s ability to intervene directly *without* invalidating an existing legal order is analogous to the miracle in theology, in which the divine transgresses without overturning the laws of nature. Both the miracle and the exception can suspend, albeit briefly, the normal course of things.

Both Schmitt and Purdie narrate a historical shift from miracle to reason. Although Schmitt’s analogy brings miracle and exception into a relation of similarity, it also inevitably suggests a difference. A decision is a source of authority, where the miracle produces faith. The line between power and wonder is indeed a thin one, but there remains some distinction. Although *Judith* in many ways sets up the expectation of a miracle, Judith’s violent act bears a greater resemblance to a decision on the exception. The miraculous suggests passivity among human participants or onlookers—a type of passivity that it is Judith’s role, indeed the role played by her particular brand of faith, to shun. As I have shown, however much Judith’s act might be girded by her belief in giving herself over to the savior, it is nevertheless expressly an *act*. The sword does not move of

its own accord, with Judith as witness. Instead in the poem the act is described in all its tangible detail—in all its gory realism. In the pre-Enlightenment world of the Old English poet, Judith's action is more exceptional than it is miraculous. Yet the approach to the line between terror and awe, decision and exception that we see in *Judith* is more nuanced than what we find in either Schmitt or Purdie. The decision on the exception that we see in *Judith* is *also* miraculous insofar as it makes possible a subsequent victory in battle. As Judith herself recedes into the background, the Hebrews overcome the Assyrians. The victory is not Judith's own; it belongs to the community of which she forms a part, her *sigefolce* ("victory-folk") (150).

The Hebrew army triumphs, and returns bearing treasures and weaponry for Judith, including "the gory helmet of Holofernes/ and his sword [...] all the riches [...] belonging to him alone [...] they gave to the radiant and most judicious lady" (336–341).<sup>37</sup> The final stanza of poem concludes with a series thanksgivings. Richly rewarded in material possessions, Judith likewise no longer doubts her "reward in heaven," as she had doubted of "**gifts in this wide earth**" in the fragment's opening line. "Because she kept true faith/ ever in the almighty Lord, indeed at the end she lacked not/ the reward she had long desired" (344–346). But, just as the emphasis of the dénouement of the poem had been on the community's collective triumph rather than Judith's individual success, so too the poem's final line belongs not to Judith but to God:

	For this to the dear Lord
Who through his favoring grace	fashioned wind and sky
The firmament and the wide lands,	as also the wild seas
And the glad joys of heaven	may glory be forever. (346–349)

As Chickering explains, Judith "gives thanks to them [the Hebrew warriors] and to God to whom her success is due. The poet gives thanks to God in similar language."<sup>38</sup> By the end of the poem, the world of the possible has been deepened and broadened through Judith's decisive action. But at the same time the ending echoes back to the fragment's beginning. The way this ending navigates between ideas of opening up new possibility and language that circles back invites us now to return, by way of conclusion, to *Judith*'s unrecoverable beginning.

David Chamberlain argues that *Judith* is a highly political poem, an interpretation that rests on an understanding of a substantial portion of the poem's beginning as lost. Critics including Rosemary Woolf, Stanley B. Greenfield, Bernard Huppé, and C. Enzenberger have argued that in fact only a small portion of the beginning is missing. This is despite the fact that it begins in the middle of a sentence, in a section numbered "X," and lacks the details of the narrative found in the first eleven chapters of the Vulgate "Judith." Those who argue for a short poem do so on aesthetic grounds: they want to see the extant poem as formally complete; for them, the poem works as allegory rather

than political commentary. They attempt to emphasize “unrealistic, unnationalistic qualities of the diction,” but Chamberlain’s argument for *Judith* as nationalistic and political relies on its being fragmentary, on missing its beginning.<sup>39</sup>

For Chamberlain, *Judith* “glorifies a noble woman, emphasizes her faith, prudence, and courage, while offering a religious and political example to the whole audience [...] And the same, I am sure, was true of the long, almost epic, poem that originally existed” (158). *Judith* is not short heroic poem, secular and historical like *Maldon*, but belongs instead with tradition of longer religious or epic narratives.<sup>40</sup> The poem’s emphasis is simultaneously religious and political; as in Schmitt’s analysis of the theological origins of the modern conception of the political, the two are not distinct. Hence Judith keeps the spoils of war, rather than giving them up as in the Vulgate. The language of politics and nation offers a general sense of the poem’s realism, as does the verisimilitude of the battle scene.<sup>41</sup> Chamberlain points to the focus on battle as giving a “national” (rather than personal) emphasis to the events of poem, but notes that this focus does not in any way obscure the fact that Judith enabled this victory.<sup>42</sup> He offers myriad instances of nationalistic phraseology in the poem, including: “The realistic *haeden* is often applied to the Assyrians [...], as it often is to the Danes in the *Chronicle*.” As further examples, Chamberlain offers “*landbuend* [natives], *folcstede* [dwelling place] and *edelweardas* [guardians of the homeland].”<sup>43</sup> Along these lines, my analysis of the common conceptual origins of *Political Theology* and *Judith* suggests that a crisis of leadership, of political foundation, may have inspired *Judith*, just as we know such a crisis inspired *Political Theology*.

Thus for Chamberlain, internal evidence suggests that we should interpret the poem as political. For this reason, we are required to understand it as part of a much longer work, as an epic rather than an allegory. Chamberlain’s political poem requires a lost beginning. Similarly, the lack of a beginning in the extant *Judith*—and its consequent insistence that we begin from the unstable vantage point of what we have left and where we are now—accords with the poem’s nuanced negotiation of the impossible possibility of representing decision, exception, and sovereignty. Positioning *Judith* before *Political Theology* calls attention to Schmitt’s grasping fixation with foundation. Paradoxically, such a shift actually enables Schmitt’s own project by resolving the tensions that Negri has identified. *Judith*’s authority is not exceptional, but apocryphal. The important role of the poem and related retellings of the Judith story in Western culture originates from a place of questionable legitimacy, but enduring significance. It does not achieve its importance by means of an act of founding, and incontrovertible legitimation. For Schmitt, the erecting and assertion of foundations is ultimately a destructive act, a razing rather than a building-up. As I have argued, the question of just what Schmitt wants to do (in terms of positive action) on this newly razed ground is not as clear as his rhetoric and position would seem to imply. Indeed we might consider whether the longevity of his reputation as simply the Nazi’s state theorist is in

some part due to a failure of Schmitt's rhetoric to convey the nuanced sophistication of his understanding of the simultaneous precariousness and necessity of authority.<sup>44</sup>

Theorists inspired by Schmitt, including Benjamin, Werner Hamacher, and, more recently, Samuel Weber, have to varying degrees opposed a philosophical orientation toward “ends.”<sup>45</sup> In his discussion of “targeting” and its role in what he understands as the “militarization of thinking” (any kind of thinking that defines its aim in cognitive terms, and is therefore inseparable from targeting), Weber calls to mind Benjamin's “Critique of Violence” and Hamacher's exploration of that essay. The question these related works explore is that of what “pure mediacy”—in itself meaningless—might have to offer in terms of concrete political change. One of the aims of my essay has been to put such thinking about ends and ending in relation to certain ways of thinking about origins. Taken to its logical (if counterintuitive) conclusion, the insight of *Political Theology* does not compel a struggle against a perceived crisis of foundation via an autocratic politics. Rather, by radically engaging with the transcendently unsolvable problem of foundation, Schmitt undermines the very idea of this kind of crisis, and consequently enables a move toward a politics that could embrace rather than disguise the tenuousness of foundation. As Negri argues, “strength takes shape as constituent power: not to seek institutionality but to construct more being—ethical being, social being, community.”<sup>46</sup> Reading *Judith* alongside *Political Theology* suggests an approach to the problem of sovereignty that looks toward the apocryphal rather than the exceptional and resolves some of the problems in Schmitt's thinking. If “a web of a thousand threads defines the originary radicalness of constituent power,”<sup>47</sup> then a commitment to tracing those threads broadly across time and space might, finally, allow for a fundamental rethinking of politics as always potentially emergent within the material conditions of everyday life.

## Endnotes

1. Schmitt 1985, 5.
2. Davis 2012, 88. Davis critiques the nearly ubiquitous concept of a decisive “break between a medieval and a modern (or an early modern) period” (5). Relying on this periodizing narrative of a sharp “break” between the modern and the medieval, theorizations of sovereignty and subjection emerged “at crucial moments of empire, slavery, and colonialism” to ground “arguments regarding the ‘free’ political subject” (7, 8). Periodization, Davis argues, “facilitated the transference of the problem of slavery from the contemporary slave trade to a brutal past” (8). She admires Schmitt's work insofar as it critiques conceits of “the modern.” Inspired by Davis's call for scholars to resist reifying “a European category to a global category of time” (5), I explore alternative conceptions of the political and put a pre-modern text in relation to a modern one.

3. Wolin 1992, 431.
4. Benhabib 2012, 689.
5. See Chantal Mouffe's important analysis of Schmitt's provocation of radical democratic politics. For example, in the "Introduction" to *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, she calls for a "conflictual pluralism" in which the "tension between the democratic logic of popular sovereignty and the liberal logic of individual rights" would be, first, acknowledged, and then "negotiated in a way that does not destroy the basis of political association" (5).
6. Benhabib 2012, 689.
7. Schmitt 1985, 6.
8. Negri 1999, 8.
9. Schmitt 1985, 13.
10. Schmitt 1985, 10.
11. In Schmitt's later years, he explores the interrelation of aesthetics and politics in an extended work of literary criticism entitled *Hamlet and Hecuba* (1956).
12. Davis 2012, 82.
13. Alter is translating Hebrew, while King James's translation committee was working with Vulgate Latin. Both versions preserve "the distinctive literary experience of the Bible in its original language," but Alter brings a nuanced precision enabled by twentieth century scholarship on ancient Hebrew (xvii). While differences in translation do not reflect divergent "choices" on the part of the translators, they are highly significant in terms of their literary and theological implications.
14. Negri 1999, 8.
15. Davis 2012, 82.
16. Davis 2012, 96.
17. Negri 1999, 21–22.
18. Schmitt 1985, 36.
19. Schmitt 1985, 38.
20. For Agamben, Schmitt's observation is a call to think the world without this logic, whether by thinking past it, or by evoking what human life might have been like before its advent.
21. Schmitt 1996, 19.
22. Schmitt 1996, 83.
23. Schmitt 1996, 84.
24. Schmitt 1996, 84; my emphasis.
25. "Apocrypha" 2013.
26. Critics who have discussed this question include Woolf 1955, Calder and Greenfield 1986, and Chamberlain 1975.
27. See also Mark Griffith, "Introduction" to *Judith* 1997, 4.

28. Chamberlain 1975, 137.
29. Schmitt 1985, 5.
30. See Stocker 1998.
31. See Chickering 2009.
32. See Hieatt 1980; Hartman 2011, 422.
33. All citations are from the modern English translation of “Judith” by Bernard F. Huppé in “Judith” 1970.
34. Purdie 1927, 28.
35. Purdie 1927, 137.
36. Schmitt 1985, 37.
37. For a discussion of the gendered significance of this scene, see Mullally 2005.
38. Chickering 2009, 124.
39. Chamberlain 1975, 157.
40. Chamberlain 1975, 141, 154.
41. Chamberlain 1975, 155.
42. Chamberlain 1975, 154.
43. Chamberlain 1975, 157. Based on parallels to the political situation detailed in the *Chronicle* for those years, Chamberlain argues for a date from about 900–1000: “The intensity of ravaging and the collapse of leadership, with actual flight by leaders just before battle, is strikingly reported in the *Chronicle* (MS C) from 980 to 994, intensifying greatly between 990 and 994, followed by a lull until 997, but four years were enough to have inspired a poem” (158–9).
44. See the concluding pages of *Political Theology*, in which Schmitt laments modernity’s inability to confront the political as such (rather than as “organizational-technical and economic-sociological”). Schmitt fears that in such a climate, anarchy (which is nothing but a “decision against the decision”) and dictatorship coalesce as decisionism is delegitimated (65–66). It is this aspect of Schmitt’s thinking, which seeks to define “the specificity of the political” as distinct from ethics and economics, which Chantal Mouffe and others have sought to bring into focus (1999, 5). For an opposing view, holding that Schmitt’s theorizing is inextricably entangled with his “own political entanglements with the Nazi regime” and therefore “disempowers citizens,” see Benhabib 2012, 705–6.
45. Benjamin wanted to dedicate his doctoral dissertation to Schmitt; as Horst Bredekamp opines: “Walter Benjamin’s esteem for Carl Schmitt is one of the most irritating incidents in the intellectual history of the Weimar Republic” (247). For more on Benjamin’s relationship to Schmitt, see Wolin 2006.
46. Negri 1999, 23.
47. Negri 1999, 23.



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