12. The Aestheticization of Tyrannicide: Du Bartas’s *La Judit*

Robert Cummings
12. The Aestheticization of Tyrannicide: Du Bartas’s *La Judit*

Robert Cummings

The modern editor of Du Bartas’s *La Judit*, André Baïche, plausibly dates to 1564 its commissioning by Jeanne d’Albret, mother of Henry of Navarre. It was supposed to celebrate an analogy between the relief of besieged Bethulia by Judith’s assassination of Holofernes and the relief of the besieged Orléans, in 1563, by the assassination of the ultra-Catholic François Duke of Guise, by Jean Poltrot de Mére. The preoccupations of the biblical narrative were congruent with those of Du Bartas’s French Protestant readers, a minority under siege morally and politically from the insinuations of a corrupt Catholic hegemony. The extent of the Protestant peril was demonstrated by the St. Bartholomew Day’s massacre in 1572, the year also when the besieged Protestants of La Rochelle played Catherine de Parthenay’s now lost *Judith et Holoferne*. Du Bartas’s poem, a vehicle for Protestant anxieties from its first publication in 1574, became, says Margarita Stocker, “the most important single catalyst of Judith’s symbolic centrality for Protestantism.” But in its definitive 1579 version, little altered from the first, it was dedicated to the Catholic wife of Henry of Navarre.

The Calvinist Simon Goulart’s prefatory argument (given in editions of *La Judit* after 1582) identifies the story as a perpetual allegory of the victory of the Reformation. The modern editor of Du Bartas’s *La Judit*, André Baïche, plausibly dates to 1564 its commissioning by Jeanne d’Albret, mother of Henry of Navarre. It was supposed to celebrate an analogy between the relief of besieged Bethulia by Judith’s assassination of Holofernes and the relief of the besieged Orléans, in 1563, by the assassination of the ultra-Catholic François Duke of Guise, by Jean Poltrot de Mére. The preoccupations of the biblical narrative were congruent with those of Du Bartas’s French Protestant readers, a minority under siege morally and politically from the insinuations of a corrupt Catholic hegemony. The extent of the Protestant peril was demonstrated by the St. Bartholomew Day’s massacre in 1572, the year also when the besieged Protestants of La Rochelle played Catherine de Parthenay’s now lost *Judith et Holoferne*. Du Bartas’s poem, a vehicle for Protestant anxieties from its first publication in 1574, became, says Margarita Stocker, “the most important single catalyst of Judith’s symbolic centrality for Protestantism.” But in its definitive 1579 version, little altered from the first, it was dedicated to the Catholic wife of Henry of Navarre.

The Calvinist Simon Goulart’s prefatory argument (given in editions of *La Judit* after 1582) identifies the story as a perpetual allegory of the victory of the Reformation.
of the Church over its enemies.4 The faithful are tried and God preserves them; but the faithful of any color can lay claim to Judith’s part or they can have it wished upon them. In his *Annals* for 1584, Camden gives an account of the plot to secure the English throne for the imprisoned Catholic Mary, Queen of Scots, sister-in-law of the assassinated Guise.5 “The detestable malice of the Papists” was manifested in books and pamphlets exhorting Queen Elizabeth’s subjects “to doe by her as Judith to her immortal fame dealt with Holofernes.”6 He is thinking of the printer of Gregory Martin’s *A Treatise of Schisme* (1578), brought to trial in 1584, who unavailingly denied any treasonous intention when he published the advocacy of Judith as a model for pious ladies “whose godlye and constant wisdome if our Catholike gentlewomen would folowe, they might destroy Holofernes, the master heretike.”7 When Thomas Hudson translated *La Judit* into English in 1584 as *The Historie of Judith*, he dedicated it to the young Protestant King of Scots, James VI, the unsympathetic son of the treacherous Mary.8 The application should have been sorely tried, but in the event the poem seems untrammeled by the political anxieties it might have provoked. This paper offers reasons why the ideology apparently implicit in the poem should have proved ineffectual.

II

Undoubtedly Du Bartas and his readers understood the Judith story as stressing issues of unjust rule and resistance to it. Alternative emphases were to a great extent closed off so that, for example, the theme of salvation, celebrated in Judith’s final hymn (Book of Judith 16), is truncated in Du Bartas’s poem (VI.333–60), usurped by a discourse of tyranny. The Septuagint

---

version of the Book of Judith, on which Du Bartas demonstrably relies, does not know the word *turannos*. La Judit, on the other hand, uses the word “tyrant” about three dozen times, and Goulart’s notes exaggerate the impression of its frequency. It comes to designate an enemy presuming on the liberties and traditions of the Hebrew people (I.115) and one to whom Judith on that account owes no loyalty: “Holoferne est tyran, non roy de ma province” (VI.116); “This tyrant is no prince of my province” (Hudson, VI.116). Because a “tyran” is an enemy of God’s people, it signifies an enemy of God (I.299, II.227), such as the modern Turks (VI.207), or Saul of Tarsus before his conversion (VI.196). Goulart’s moralizing margins and his *sommaires*, at least from Book IV onwards, reinforce an opposition of holiness and tyranny, especially in Book VI. In this context, and in French, the notion of “tyrant” easily summons the notion of its virtuously avenging opposite “tyrannicide.” “Jahel, Ahod, Jehu furent tyrannicides,” says Judith as she ponders her mission (VI.120), a line muffled in Hudson’s “For then should Ahud, Iahell, and Iehewe, / Be homicids, because they tyrants slewe” (VI.119–20).

Tyrannicide was an unavoidable issue for Du Bartas, because the French religious wars offered occasions for it, and because the prejudices of classically trained intellectuals indulged a moral culture that encouraged its possibility. The *Politics* of Justus Lipsius, who witnessed the horrors of war in France and the Low Countries, entertained murder as one remedy for tyranny. Lipsius observes, from Cicero, that “the Grecians did attribute like honor as they did to their gods, to him who had slaine a tyrant,” and from Seneca that “there can no more liberall nor richer sacriice be ofered to Iupiter, then a wicked king.” His extensive levying of classical authorities makes the case for tyrant-killing seem part of a general consensus. This consensus reached beyond pagan antiquity. Milton, in a passage in the Tenure of Kings that appropriates Lipsius’s argument, coolly registers the fact that

---

9 Baïche, La Judit, makes clear Du Bartas’s reliance on the Septuagint (pp. clv–clvii). The Geneva Bible (1561) is free with the word “tyrant” to translate Heb. *ârîyts* or *rôgez*, and also to color NT Greek, where at James 2:6 the King James Version has “Do not rich men oppress you?” (katadunasteuô), Geneva has “Doe not the riche oppresse you by tyrannie?”

10 Holofernes is gratuitously designated a tyrant in Goulart’s notes on II.405, III.185, IV.415, V.446, VI.55, VI.317.

11 The English word “tyrannicide” is first attested in Hobbes’s 1650 *De Corpore Politico*.

“Among the Jews this custom of tyrant-killing was not unusual,” citing what might have been the embarrassing case of Ehud. Baïche argues that, in Du Bartas’s poem, Judith’s tyrannicide represents a blow on God’s behalf and effectively disengages the issue from the humanist obsession with classical anti-tyrannical republicanism. But heresy and tyranny are readily identified in the minds of classically educated bigots.

English or Scottish Calvinists in the mid-sixteenth century, acquainted with exile and at home with a discourse of tyranny and tyrannicide, were often noisy advocates of political assassination. “The holy goost reporteth Ahud to be a saueour of Israel,” says John Ponet, and Jael too; John Knox’s friend Christopher Goodman argues that since God’s laws “reproue and punishe tyrantes, idolaters, papistes and oppressors” political resistance is not resistance to God’s ordinance “but Satan, and our synne.” Buchan-an’s partner in his dialogue De iure Regni is brought to applaud the honor done to Greek tyrannicides on something like the grounds that rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God. Buchan-an’s advocacy of tyrannicide was denounced in the Scottish parliament, perhaps at the instigation of his former pupil, King James, and copies were called in by the censors in the very year of Hudson’s translation of Du Bartas. Most of the evidence for biblically inspired fanaticism, at least in Protestant England and among the Protestant French, comes from later hostile witnesses. In the wake of the Gunpowder Plot at Westminster in 1605 and Ravaillac’s assassination of Henri IV in 1610, the arguments of the Catholic apologists for tyrannicide were misrepresented so as to suggest reasonable excesses. The Jesuit Pierre Coton’s Lettre declaratoire de la doctrine des pères Jesuites (1610) was travestied as an apology for tyrannicide. The anonymous Anti-Coton took

on the Spanish Jesuit Mariana as well, whose measured observations on regicide in the *De rege et regis institutione* (1599) had already earned him a rebuke from his order. He is made to commend in colorful terms Jacques Clément, the assassin of the excommunicated Henri III in 1589.\(^{19}\) The *Anti-Coton* further exaggerates the hyperboles of Pope Sixtus V’s *De Henrici Tertii morte sermo* to yield, bizarrely, a parallel between Clément’s murder of the king “with the mysteries of the Incarnation, and Resurrection,” as well as, more intelligibly, the exploits of Eleazer and Judith.\(^{20}\) The true author of the sermon may have been Jean Boucher, whose *De justa Henrici Tertii abdicatione* (1589) is the most celebrated defense of the assassination. In any case the radical councils in Paris were circulating Catholic preachers advising the justification of Jacques Clément by invoking Judith’s example.\(^{21}\)

The *Anti-Coton* says that it was a Jesuit novelty to revive positive views of tyrannicide.\(^{22}\) Coligny, the great Huguenot admiral of France, disparaged Jean Poltrot’s motives in assassinating the Duke of Guise.\(^{23}\) Calvin’s own position is unambiguously negative: “a private citizen who lays his hand upon a tyrant is openly condemned by the heavenly Judge,” meaning 1 Samuel 24:7; and if “we are vexed for piety’s sake by one who is impious,” he argues, “it is not for to remedy such evils.”\(^{24}\) We are to obey and suffer. Vermigli’s *Commonplaces* concludes a vacillating discussion with the short recommendation that “tyrannie must be abidden.”\(^{25}\) The Elizabethan *Homelie against Rebellion* (1570) reminds congregations that Baruch enjoined the Jews to pray “for the life of Nabuchodonosor king of Babylon, and for

---

\(^{19}\) *Anti-Coton*, or *A Refutation of Cottons Letter Declaratorie ... apologizing of the Jesuites Doctrine, touching the Killing of Kings*, trans. George Hakewill (London: [Thomas] S[nodham] for Richard Boyle, 1611), p. 6. The *Anti-Coton* is variously attributed to Pierre Du Coignet, to Jean Dubois-Olivier, and to Pierre du Moulin, and the translation tentatively to the anti-Catholic polemicist George Hakewill (1611).


\(^{22}\) *Anti-Coton*, pp. 1–2.

\(^{23}\) *The Lyfe of ... Colignie Shatilion*, trans. Arthur Golding from the *Vita* of Jean de Serres (London: Vautrollier, 1576), sig. Ciiii’.


th life of Balthasar his sonne.”²⁶ King James himself asserts the legal and moral nullity of “the extraordinary examples of degrading or killing of kings in the Scriptures,” a means, he says, “to cloake the peoples rebellion.”²⁷ Some asseverations may be politic. Others like them are only humane. Lipsius, who could rehearse all the arguments for king-killing, but who changed religion as he changed cities, concluded that “civill warre is worse and more miserable then tyrannie.”²⁸ The consequences of commitment to one religious party or another encouraged more than one observer to abandon strictly confessional positions.²⁹ Montaigne reflected bitterly on his recent experience of atrocities committed under cover of duty and religion and worse than cannibals practice; he commended Epaminondas for scrupling to kill a tyrant.³⁰ Burton lamented to see “a company of hell-born Jesuits, and fiery-spirited friars, facem praeferre to all seditions.”³¹

The mix of classical republican liberty and Hebraic righteousness was widely regarded as toxic, and Du Bartas was embarrassed by it. It was always potentially embarrassing. Even Lactantius, “the Christian Cicero,” in his grisly account of the bad ends of the persecutors of Christians, makes God’s power manifest by having his villains assassinated by their confederates and not by the persecuted, or done away with by disease and not the power of human resistance (De mortibus persecutorum 31). Baïche declares that whatever Du Bartas’s intentions, La Judit is an apology for tyrannicide.³²

The “Avertissement” prevaricates. Du Bartas claims to be no willing advocate of the turbulent and seditious spirits who, “pour servir a leurs passions, temerairement et d’un mouvement privé” (Hudson gives “to serue their temerarious passions and private inspirations”), conspire against

²⁶ Certain Sermons or Homilies (1547) and a Homily against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion (1570), ed. Ronald B. Bond (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1987), p. 215.
²⁸ Lipsius, Sixe Bookes of Politickes, p. 201.
³² Baïche, La Judit, pp. xliii–xlv. Du Bartas commends David’s sparing Saul’s life (Trophées 495–504); Sylvester’s marginal commentary on his translation of the passage notes the contrast between David’s piety and Bellarmine’s supposed approval of the Gunpowder Plot.
the life of even wicked princes. What Ehod, Jael, and Judith did, feigning submission and friendship while plotting murder, merits dreadful punishments. Or it would, he adds in a cautionary note, if they had not been especially chosen by God “pour faire mourir ces tyrans” (“to kill those tyrants” is Hudon’s blunter formulation). But pleading ignorance and weak-mindedness, Du Bartas himself refuses any decision on whether or not the principle of tyrant-killing is just, recommending his readers meanwhile to attempt nothing against their divinely appointed superiors “sans une claire et indubitable vocation” (“without a clear and indubitable vocation”), and never to abuse hospitality, friendship, or kin “pour donner lieu à ses frenetiques opinions et abolir une pretendue tyrannie” (“to give place to these frenetic opinions, so to abolish a pretended tyranny”). Bâiche is insistent that the rationality of Du Bartas’s Judith in the face of her mission, and her history of moral competence, mark her as chosen in this way. But she has to rely on instincts by their nature beyond scrutiny, and it is far from clear that Du Bartas was interested in them. If Du Bartas had wanted to write an apology for tyrannicide it would not have looked like La Judit. And so the poem, despite its necessary concessions to current interest in the issues, is designed to be rid of them.

III

The poem exhibits signs of indifference to the issues that the Judith story supposedly engages with. According to the “Avertissement”, Du Bartas’s commission specifically required him to “rediger l’histoire de Judit en forme d’un poeme epique” (“to reduce the Historie of Judith in form of a Poem Epique” is Hudson’s uncomfortable rendering). This first “juste poeme” in French on a sacred subject was designed to imitate Homer and Virgil “et autres qui nous ont laissé des ouvrages de semblable estofe” (“and others who hath left to vs workes of such like matter”). Unlike Du Bartas’s pretended fidelity to the historical truth of an apocryphal text, this declaration of allegiances was not dishonest; but it is strictly nonsensical. Du Bartas had no firm conception of how to go about adapting the Book of Judith to epic norms, nor indeed what epic norms might be. If the poem

33 Bâiche (pp. xli–xlii) represents Judith as an instrument of Providence, but also as a rational personality with her own reservations and her own motives. But Méniel, Renaissance de l’épopée, p. 456, notes that her courage relies on inspiration from outside (III.428), and sustaining prayer (IV.21–34, IV.433–80, VI. 122–32, VI.140–42).
Robert Cummings

does not meet expectations, it is not, he says, entirely his own fault. We are apparently to blame Jeanne d’Albret, “celle qui m’a proposé un si sterile sujet” (“who proposed to me so meane a Theame or subiect”). He must mean by this that the theme doesn’t of itself generate the sort of material appropriate to epic. This may signify only that Judith is not an exemplary heroine: her achievement is, after all, to lie plausibly and then to murder her host.\(^3^4\) Or it may signify more broadly that biblical subjects leave no room for invention. The book of Judith is in any case generically indeterminate. Its early modern adaptations are indifferently epic, tragic, or comic. The most frequently printed secondary version of the story in England was Cornelius Schonaeus’s Latin comedy.\(^3^5\) Du Bartas’s epic version is haunted by other possibilities.

The machinery of Du Bartas’s poem is epic only in a superficial and dubious way. Its most obvious conformity with the narrative economy of epic poetry is beginning in medias res. But instead of hastening toward an end in view, which is the point of beginning in the middle, Du Bartas’s poem instead recesses Judith’s narrative, and forces it into competition with a range of others: Achior’s history of the Jews (II.31–388), Charmis’s biography of Judith (IV.73–312), Holofernes’s account of Nebuchadnezzar’s wars (V.249–754). Du Bartas constantly brings into focus what is not immediately relevant to the dynamic of the supposedly principal action. Moreover, Du Bartas’s most striking particular debts are to poems whose epic status was, for different reasons, doubtful. His poetic allegiances are with Lucan’s Pharsalia (as Joseph Scaliger observed) and (as Du Bartas himself acknowledged) with Ariosto’s Orlando Furioso.\(^3^6\) The one poem was charged with exhibiting too little invention, the other with exhibiting too much. Whether or not Du Bartas had any kind of moral or ideological design, his method would have got in the way of making it palpable. Sensitive always to the requirements of literary “imitation,” he is drawn into dialogue not with the issues that may have been close to Jeanne d’Albret but with the models he turned to to carry the Judith story.

Goulart closes his prefatory argument to La Judit with the claim that Du Bartas has written with “l’artifice requis” in a work that has ambitions


\(^3^6\) Joseph Scaliger is quoted in Bâiche, p. clxxvi; Du Bartas’s 1574 “Avertissement” specifies Ariosto among his models: see Bâiche, La Judit, p. 89, among the variants.
to permanence, and in describing this “required artifice” he gives the
impression, correctly, that Du Bartas has buried his argument, and with
it his intentions, in an assemblage of digressions, vivid descriptions, and
ornaments. Du Bartas has also buried all questions of his subject’s being
“sterile,” for he is copious. And while sometimes Goulart’s commentary is
moralizing, the interest he encourages is overwhelmingly in set pieces and
rhetorical effects that belong neither to the story of Judith nor to epic poetry.
The effect is as when Claude or Rosa gives a historical title to a painting
and the eye has to search around to find where the history has been hid-
den. Bâiche quotes J. Vianey’s witticism that Du Bartas has applied a sort of
“sauce épique” to his biblical material, made up of such ingredients as the
Assyrian war council (III.135–84), the siege proper (III.253–358), the mili-
tary exploits of Holofernes (V.251–574), the banquet in Holofernes’s tent
(VI.1–54), the final battle when the Israelites descend on the Assyrian camp
(VI.263–290). But such passages are less the sauce than the substance of
the stew. The rhetorical amplifications are the point of Du Bartas’s poem.

For these fashionable amplifications the sources are many, as Bâiche’s
notes indicate. For some of them Lucan supplies a pseudo-epic rationale.
The archaeologically elaborate detailing of battle machinery at III.107–14,
is apparently derived from Du Bartas’s reading of Vitruvius, but it emu-
lates Lucan’s account of the siege of Marseilles (Lucan III.388–496). The
elaborate description of the starving Bethulians under siege (III.239–320)
emulates Lucan’s description of the sufferings of Pompey’s troops in Spain
(Lucan IV.292–315). The satirical description of Holofernes’s banquet (VI.1–
54) is taken from Lucan’s description of the excesses of Cleopatra’s dinner
(table (X.136–71). Ariosto, congenial to the habits of Valois courtly poetry,
supplies a precedent for others. When Du Bartas wants to offer an exact
(and conspicuously irrelevant) description of Judith’s beauty (IV.341–68),
it is to Ariosto’s famous blazon of Alcina that he turns (Furioso VII.11–15)
with a little help from his description of Olimpia (XI.71). The descrip-
tion of Judith preparing herself, exceptionally elaborate in the biblical
account (Jdt 10:3–5, 7), is touched up with an allusion to Ariosto’s Orrigille
(Furioso XVI.7). And it is to Ariosto that he turns to represent Holofernes in

37 Goulart, Commentaires, pp. 269–70.
38 Bâiche, p. xciv, with notes at clxxvi.
39 Méniel, Renaissance de l’épopée, p. 347, from Jean Martin’s translation. Dryden’s
preface to Annus Mirabilis gives Lucan’s precedent for his own use of naval termi-
love (V.1–91), or for the image of the drunken Holofernæ fumbling with his buttons (VI.52–130), taken from Ruggiero’s botched attempts to discard his armor as he tries to rape Angelica (Furioso X.114–115), or for Holofernæ’s fretful anticipation of Judith’s arrival, taken from Ruggiero’s lying awake for Alcina to visit his bed (VII.23–25). And Du Bartas’s recourse to those poets relies on the disintegrative kind of reading for “beauties” typified in Orazio Toscanella’s 1574 Bellezze del Furioso. Ronsard complains of the tendency to poetic fantastication in his 1572 preface to the Franciade, and advertises his anxiety to avoid a poetry beautiful in its details but monstrous in its assembly. 

It is telling that the climactic moment, when Judith cuts off Holofernæ’s head (VI.154–56; Jdt 13:6–10), is reduced to three lines. Du Bartas dispatches him with a flurry of punning: “heureuse elle depart avec l’ethnique lame / Le chef d’avec le corps et le corps d’avec l’ame” (reduced in Hudson to “stroke this sleeping Roy / so fell, that from his shoulders flew his powle, / and from his body fled his Ethniche sowe” [VI.154–56]). But all the circumstances of the act are eliminated: the bedpost, the sword on its hanger, the two strokes of the blade, the general tumbled from his bed. It is a moment the averagely careless reader might miss, contrasting markedly with Gabrielle de Coignard’s description of the same event, its detail filling close on twenty lines (Imitation de la victoire, 1302–20). What even the most inattentive reader would not miss is the mutilation of Holofernæ’s corpse, first the head spat on, its beard pulled, its eyes poked, its tongue torn out (VI.215–24), and then the trunk, its every part distributed among a mob (VI.310–26). There is no biblical precedent for this. Du Bartas allows a ready-made description taken from Claudian (In Rufinum II.400–27) to stand in for a blank that nobody in the history of the story had previously felt impelled to fill. It draws attention from the execution performed by Judith herself and on to Du Bartas’s own manneristic engagement with his poetic antecedents.

The description of the dismemberment is a metaphor for Du Bartas’s procedure. The interest is not in the fact that Du Bartas has borrowed material, nor where he has borrowed his material from, but rather that he has borrowed transferable details, the sort of things that end up in commonplace books, the sorts of things that don’t belong to the matter at hand. The narrative has no more substance than, for example, the vividly ekphrastic

41 In Oeuvres chrétiennes; see n. 34.
passages that interrupt it. Judith’s embroideries (IV.150–72), which include, among their ornamental eagles and elephants, a strange mix of threats and escapes in divine history (the destruction of Sodom, Susanna’s chastity, the chastity of Joseph, the sacrifice of Jephtha), are as real as her own story. The gorgeous tapestries in Holofernes’s tent (V.199–288), filled with the dubious glories of Oriental empire (Ninus and Semiramis, the effeminate Sardanapalus, Cyrus), are as real as his own stories. When a literary culture invests as much in imitation as early modern literary culture did, it becomes indifferent to the specific representational character of descriptions, and the poets resort to indefinitely redeployable descriptive templates. They can be brilliant, and Du Bartas was famous for the convincingness of his illusions. But they are not tied to a narrative or moral context. That is why similes are so important to Du Bartas. Some have not worn well, or seem inept. Anne Prescott finds evidence among early English readers of a fascination with Du Bartas’s comparisons “often in the very places where the modern reader would wince.”42 Some are complicated and “metaphysical.” Some are merely quaint. More striking than any explicatory function is the extraordinariness of the connection between the terms of his similes or the poet’s indifference to it. Du Bartas dissimilates correspondences that a little effort might easily have secured. Goulart, who remarks on many of Du Bartas’s similes in his margins, is anxious for their rhetorical propriety and their moral point. But few of the similes are in any real sense “proper.” They rely on comparisons from experience not too much reflected on, conformable to familiar patterns, sanctioned by ancient or other literary precedents, more often than not transferred from Virgil or Ariosto. They are not particular to the situation Du Bartas or his readers are called on to imagine. And that is in a way the point. They are particular to themselves or their literary sources. Despite Goulart’s insistence on aptness, Du Bartas is concerned, rather, with creating little pictures interesting in themselves but which, if they add up at all, add up to a world removed from biblical Judea.

IV

In the dedication to the Historie of Judith, Hudson reminded the king that his translation had its origin in his after-dinner observations on the impossibility of matching “the lofty phrase, the grave inditement, the facound

termes of the French Salust” – that is, Du Bartas – “in our rude and impollished english language.” Hudson countered with the promise of doing so “succinctly, and sensibly.” The Historie of Judith, “an agreeable Subject to your highnesse,” was the agreed testing ground. Hudson’s effort was apparently corrected by the king (“If I have done well, let the praise redound to your majesty”), whose version of Du Bartas’s Uranie came out in a bilingual edition in the same year and from the same publisher. The enterprise was part of a competition in a culture so driven by literary emulation that King James could forget that his mother was in danger of losing her head for playing Judith’s part against the tyrant Elizabeth. Du Bartas played the same game. By 1585, improbably ravished by its “vives et parlantes descriptions,” he had translated King James’s Lepanto; the original and the translation were published together in Edinburgh in 1591. Neither the author nor his translator could have been much committed ideologically to a poem that celebrated the victory of a Catholic alliance against the Ottomans. But James published Lepanto and its translation with only enough concern for its political implications to make his preface a miracle of embarrassed equivocation. Early in the next century Sylvester took up the challenge in a spirit that suggests he had no interest at all in the politics of Du Bartas’s La Judit. Sylvester addressed his version to Queen Anne and sixteen of her ladies (a predominantly though not exclusively Catholic clique), and in doing so disparaged Hudson’s version, addressed to Queen Anne’s husband, as a betrayal of the poem’s heroine. A narrative of tyrannicide was metamorphosed into a celebration of the virtues of court ladies. This was no doubt by way of a joke, but it is remarkable that it was possible to make such a joke. The poem survives disengaged from any point that its subject or circumstances might seem to dictate.

43 Hudson, Historie of Judith, ed. Craigie, p. 4.
44 His Maiesties Poeticall Exercises (Edinburgh: Waldegrave, 1591), sig. M2’.
45 Poeticall Exercises, sig. H’.