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Criticism: "Judith of Bethulia"

Richard H. Dana, Portland State University

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CRITICISM

"JUDITH OF BETHULIA"

Richard H. Dana, III

You are very right in thinking that a knowledge of the apocryphal story is essential to an understanding of the poem - both for its agreement and differences from that story. It would have been better, though, to introduce this knowledge where it is relevant in the criticism. Through a thought you really 'get the poem,' you have not yet acquired the 'taste' of writing full and detailed critiques which would show your appreciation of the best advantages.
I feel that this is no ordinary poem and because of this I cannot treat it as I have the others.

I intend to divide this criticism into two parts: the Biblical basis; and the technique, discussion, and comparison to the source.

By doing this I hope to achieve a unity and an overall picture of the poem and its method of construction and interpretation.
Part I- The Biblical Basis

Judith of Bethulia is based on Chapter Eight of the Book of Jn. Judith in the Old Testament. The story is as follows:

The Assyrian army led by Holofrenes is besieging the town of Bethulia having previously captured the water supply. The people of Bethulia are dying of thirst and feel that God is against them because it has not rained for thirty-four days. The multitudes prefer to surrender, but Uzziah, their leader, asks them to wait five days more to see if God will send rain.

There was in the town of Bethulia, a widow named Judith. Her husband, Manasseh, had been dead for three years and four months and during that whole time she had worn sackcloth, fasted, and remained in the house. She was wealthy and feared God with her whole heart. When she heard that the populace talked of surrender she had the elders come to her. She counseled them to wait and said that she would, by means of a secret act, enable the Lord to save Israel.

The elders left after praising her pure heart. She then prayed to God to break the strength of the Assyrians, to shatter their force with His anger, and to give her the strength to destroy them. In her prayer she recalled the story of her ancestor, Symeon, who had been able to avenge a raped maiden by means of faith.

Completing her prayer she dressed in festal attire and with her maid left the city. The young men of Bethulia watched her leave, and, seeing her great beauty, desired her. Judith went directly to the Assyrian camp in the valley below the city and told the soldiers there she was escaping from the Hebrews and had information for their leader, Holofrenes.

The soldiers also noticed her beauty and because of this led her
to Holofernes. She praised the leader and told him she would help him capture, not only Bethulia, but Jerusalem without the loss of a man.

Judith's beauty captivated the soul of Holofernes and he allowed her to stay in his camp. On the fourth day he invited her to a feast. She went and as night drew on all of Holofernes' retainers, eunuchs, and attendants left presuming he was to sleep with Judith. Holofernes became very drunk and Judith cut his head off with his own scimitar as he lay prostrated on his couch. She put the head in her food bag and she and her maid left after telling the guards she was going out to pray as she had done on the three preceding nights.

She returned to Bethulia saying, "The Lord struck him down by a woman's hand." She also claimed he had committed no sin with her. The Bethulians, as instructed by Judith, hung the head of Holofernes on the battlements and the next day left the city and routed the Assyrians who were confused without their leader.

After this affair Judith became much reknown and retired to her state of widowhood.
Part II- Criticism

Judith of Bethulia, although completely obscure without the Biblical history, becomes immediately lucid and reasonable with it. The poem begins by stating in a striking simile that Judith has not chosen a new husband who would be, it is implied, a leader to the Bethulians. I do not see just how Judith was in any position to expect or demand such a husband as is realized here. I doubt if she wanted one. Even if she had, I do not believe she would think of a prince.

Her beauty is likened to "a blade out of its scabbard" because it was dangerous to all men who saw her. The old were not even exempt from this craving for her, as the poet wryly observes. Veils cannot hide this amazing beauty and it is this beauty which is "the weapon unruste in her keeping." The parallelism is perfect up to this point where we find Holofernes perishing from her beauty alone. Either the poet has misinterpreted the Bible, which appears very, very unlikely, or, he is being extremely ironical and is poking fun at Judith, and the whole story, while smiling, not broadly, but whimsically.

The poem is subtle; the humour not blatant but restrained; the only restraint used. Does the poet consider this beauty of Judith's as the virtue which is triumphing over evil? I think not; rather, he is amused. When he concludes with the hope that a prince will come to Judith soon, because her beauty is having a devastating effect on the "modesty" of the young Bethulians, I suspect that, although the old men are "chilled with fear" because of her power and "despair" because they can't have her, the poet is indulging in his own private whimsey. The ivory-tower has conquered as the reader is bewildered by the apparent inconsistencies which if taken seriously give the poem a paradoxical and awesome aspect.

The technique, although not at all obvious without close attention,
is highly provoking. The rhyme scheme of ABBACC, DEEDFF, etc., is completely evolved of a modern and startling technique. Assonance and dissonance supply the answer. The slant-rhyme effect is original, and the variety in the metrical pattern is neatly handled. It is this free use of a highly complex, and carefully worked out rhyme scheme which, deceptive at first, makes the poem more interesting at each reading.

The vocabulary is scholarly, elaborate and meticulous. The allusions are fabulous even if sometimes obscure. The combined effect of the vocabulary and the allusions is one of passion and life. The poem is vivid, and vital in every respect. A high sensitivity is shown by the very subtlety of the irony, the gentle, yet humorous, approach. The strength of presentation, the conviction that the poet was imbued with surety, understanding of his subject, and a deep and penetrating process of writing all go to form the final impression.

When I first discovered the irony, which is perhaps the backbone of the poem, I was surprised because it had taken me so long to catch it. There is a lot buried in this poem. It is not what it seems at all. Every line is original, every word radiates power, the mastery of language, the life that is Judith. I also feel that the poet has a keen love for this past he describes so richly; this vanished splendor, the glory that is forgotten. He wants to create not only Judith, the fanatic, the beautiful, but the whole pattern, the entire shroud of mystery and of distance that separates us from the past. My sensations are stimulated; I visualize the scene and the poem is a success for me.