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Although all ancient texts must be studied in both their diachronic and synchronic dimensions, some biblical texts and passages have been studied from this dual perspective more than others: the Adam and Eve narrative, the Akedah (Gen 22), Job, the passion accounts. Although in the twentieth century the book of Judith had fallen into near disuse by Jews and Christians, many would be surprised to know that in the medieval period it was fairly popular in Jewish renditions and that during the Renaissance it took on a major significance in political theology and iconography. The Judith tradition also demands this dual perspective, but one of the reasons that it was so neglected in twentieth-century biblical scholarship is likely a lack of communication between diachronic and synchronic approaches. Biblical scholars, with a few important exceptions, only skimmed the surface of what this text might offer for the study of the cultural world of the biblical period, while art historians and scholars of European literature blew open the doors that were isolating and trivializing this text. We are now reaping the fruits of exciting new scholarship on Judith.

This collection of essays will likely be considered a turning point in the rediscovery of a fascinating ancient book. The essays collected here were part of a continuing collaboration
of scholars, members of a “Judith Project” whose research culminated in “The Sword of Judith Conference” at the New York Public Library in the spring of 2008. The conference sponsors have created a wiki at http://workshops.nypl.org/judith, where one can access materials related to Judith, and Open Book Publishers has made the essays available online (http://www.openbookpublishers.com/product.php/28/).

The collection begins with not one preview essay, which is typical, but three introductory essays that are much more than overviews; they are trenchant reflections on the collaborative process of this research and the long arcs in the development of the Judith tradition: Kevin R. Brine, “The Judith Project” (3–21); Deborah Levine Gera, “The Jewish Textual Traditions” (23–39); and Elena Ciletti and Henrike Lähnemann, “Judith in the Christian Tradition” (41–65). They bring together old and new data on the Judith tradition and make important comparisons, setting the tone for the entire volume.

The body of the book is then divided into two major divisions: “Writing Judith” and “Staging Judith.” “Writing Judith” is further subdivided into essays on Jewish texts and Christian texts. The essays on Jewish texts begin with Barbara Schmitz, “Holofernes’s Canopy in the Septuagint” (71–80). Here she notes the symbolic resonance of Holofernes’ canopy—a symbol of luxury and decadence—with similar canopies in Greek texts. The canopy is also the portal of Holofernes’ passive retreat. Deborah Levine Gera, in “Shorter Medieval Hebrew Tales of Judith” (81–95), charts the changes in the medieval Jewish retellings of Judith. In some texts Bethulia becomes Jerusalem, Judith becomes a sister of Judas the Maccabee, and she must defend herself against the accusations of the citizens. Susan Weingarten’s “Food, Sex, and Redemption in Megillat Yehudit (97–125) analyzes a particular Jewish Judith text, the Megillat Yehudit (the “Scroll of Judith”). Like those addressed by Gera, this text associates Judith with Hanukkah and highlights the inclusion of cheese in her food bag. The long list of parallels to biblical figures found in the Judith story is also extended and greatly enriched in this article. Last in this subsection is Ruth von Bernuth and Michael Terry, “Shalom bar Abraham’s Book of Judith in Yiddish” (127–50). In this particular sixteenth-century Jewish text one finds influences of Zwingli’s translation, illustrating the interplay of Jewish and Christian interpretations in the Judith tradition.

The next subdivision consists of essays on Christian texts. First is Marc Mastrangelo, “Typology and Agency in Prudentius’s Treatment of the Judith Story” (153–68), who provides insightful treatment of one of the most important Christian developments in the doctrine of typologies. Judith is equated here with certain virtues and, as a result, becomes a prefiguration of the perfected Mary. This two-part identification of Judith with Virtue and with Mary will define the former’s role in Christian tradition for fifteen hundred years. Next, Tracey-Anne Cooper’s “Judith in Late Anglo-Saxon England” (169–96) suggests
some of the social history behind Anglo-Saxon Judths. Ælfric, for example, surprisingly steps back from the usual typological understanding to describe a more human Judith. John Nassichuk, in “The Prayer of Judith in Two Late-Fifteenth-Century French Mystery Plays” (197–211), notes, among other things, how Jean Molinet and the Protestant Guillaume de Salluste du Bartas depicted a progressively more sexualized Judith. As Judith becomes more politicized in this era, a symbol of freedom over tyrants, the realism of her depiction also sows seeds of ambivalence about her role. Kathleen M. Llewellyn’s “The Example of Judith in Early Modern French Literature” (213–25) and Robert Cummings’s “The Aestheticization of Tyrannicide: Du Bartas’s La Judit” (227–38) continue with some of these issues. Judith was nearly as popular in France as she was in northern Italy, but the social situation was also different, as these three essays demonstrate. Henrike Lähnemann, in “The Cunning of Judith in Late Medieval German Texts” (239–58), also turns to Germany, where similar changes and ambivalences accrue to the character of Judith, and Lähnemann illustrates this with popular texts. Turning to England, Janet Bartholomew’s “The Role of Judith in Margaret Fell’s Womens Speaking Justified” (259–70) charts the surprising appeal of Judith, the sexually provocative assassin, among Quaker women. On a symbolic level, she can represent the right of women to speak, preach, and act.

The second major division, “Staging Judith,” is subdivided into visual arts and music and drama. The first of the essays on visual arts is Elizabeth Bailey, “Judith, Jael, and Humilitas in the Speculum Virginum” (275–90). The typological understanding of Judith came to be depicted visually: Humilitas slaying Superbia. Bailey also emphasizes the social changes regarding women’s religious communities that lie behind some of the developments. The next essays turn to what has been the most pressing question concerning the history of the interpretation of Judith: How did she rise to such prominence in northern Italy in the fifteenth century and yet fall so hard and so fast in the nineteenth? Roger J. Crum, in “Judith between the Private and Public Realms in Renaissance Florence” (291–306), Sarah Blake McHam, in “Donatello’s Judith as the Emblem of God’s Chosen People” (307–24), Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, in “Costuming Judith in Italian Art of the Sixteenth Century” (325–43), and Elena Ciletì, in “Judith Imagery as Catholic Orthodoxy in Counter-Reformation Italy” (345–68), each treat the first half of the question with new depth and insight (on the second half, see below), in some cases bringing forth new data that has been shockingly unexplored until now.

The first essay on music and drama is by Kelley Harness. In “Judith, Music, and Female Patrons in Early Modern Italy” (371–83), she focuses on the role of women in sponsoring theatrical productions and the presence of Judith within them. Like many of the other authors here, she provides a greater perspective on the more popular presentation of Judith. David Marsh’s “Judith in Baroque Oratorio” (385–96) highlights changes in three hundred years of musical productions of Judith. Paolo Bernardini, “Judith in the Italian
Unification Process, 1800–1900” (397–409); Alexandre Lhâa, “Marcello and Peri’s Giuditta (1860)” (411–30); Jann Pasler, “Politics, Biblical Debates, and French Dramatic Music on Judith after 1870” (431–52); and Gabrijela Mecky Zaragoza, “Judith and the ‘Jew-Eaters’ in German Volksliteratur” (453–67), begin to answer the second half of the question above, that is, how the bottom could have fallen out of the authoritative image of Judith in politics. Every person interested in Judith has pondered this. My own musings have touched on several factors: the demise of typology, the increased realism in depictions that turned an ideal woman into a “real” woman, skepticism regarding the historical basis of the story, and even the new developments in prejudices concerning women (see Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, The Anatomy of Prejudices). But in these final essays we find original insights into this process, a combination of new data and theory that provides a rounded and compelling explanation. Among the new factors explored are the changes brought by the nationalism that was sweeping through Europe, which was not interested in individual, traditional heroes and heroines but emphasized instead the collective voice of the masses. The woman warrior was domesticated as the chorus of (male) voices that made up “the nation” was idealized.

The overall themes of this collection can be charted: the large and small changes in the presentation of the various characters, the relative valuation of the actions of Judith and her character, the agency or lack thereof of the Bethulians. Popular culture and Jewish tradition are also effectively inserted into the mix. New sources are utilized to great effect. Although the book has a feeling of completeness about it—indeed, the real value of this collection may be to sweep up into the discussion the many pieces of Judith tradition that have been strangely atomized or ignored—it goes without saying that other topics are not treated. It is perhaps by choice that some of the figures most talked about in the past—Caravaggio, Allori, Artemisia, the northern Renaissance artists—are given less treatment here so that other overlooked and anonymous figures can be thoroughly integrated into the discussion. The twentieth century tradition of Judith—such as it is!—is barely reflected in this volume, although much of the foundation for that discussion is well laid here. Further, the next important question about the interpretation of Judith may relate to what is totally absent here, the use of Judith in global Christianity and Judaism. (A parallel observation will highlight the problem: the Global Bible Commentary contains essays on each of the books of the Old and New Testaments but none on the Apocrypha, despite the fact that the vast majority of Christians in the world have the Apocrypha in their canon.) With this collection in hand, however, the question of the global interpretation of Judith can now be much more intelligently addressed, as we have here a much fuller description of how Europe interpreted Judith.

This was a truly collaborative project with very impressive results. In a review of a collection of essays it is customary to say that some are more successful than others, but
since these essays cover different aspects of the Judith tradition in a thoroughly complementary way, they all contribute. Readers of the collection may bring a stronger interest in one area over another, but no essay will disappoint. The essays brim with new examples, new insights, new comparisons. For those of us who have been scouring the literature for years looking for scholarship on the shifting interpretation of Judith, it is a quantum leap forward.