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Auger, Peter

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Astrological Description in Spenser and Du Bartas

Past discussions of Spenser's relation to Guillaume de Saluste Du Bartas (1544-90) have understandably centred on Urania. She is the classical astronomical muse who, in Du Bartas' poem *L'Uranie*, becomes the Christian muse telling poets to reject trivial courtly poetry and address spiritual and scriptural themes instead. She is the titular figure of Du Bartas' first collection *La Muse Chrestienne* (1574), though English readers may not have encountered the poem until a second edition came out in 1579.¹ Spenser no doubt had the poem in mind when he refers to how 'gins *Bartas* hie to rayse | His heauenly Muse, th'Almightie to adore' (ll. 459-60) in the 'Envoi' to the *Ruines of Rome*, his translation of Joachim Du Bellay's *Antiquitez de Rome* (1558) that was printed in the 1591 *Complaints*.² That sonnet recognizes Du Bartas as succeeding (but not necessarily superseding) Du Bellay, who gave 'a second life to dead decayes' (l. 454).

It is easy to connect this reference to Du Bartas' 'heauenly Muse' to the other piece of evidence that Spenser knew Du Bartas' work: Gabriel Harvey's remark that Spenser was especially fond of the *Quatrième Jour* (Fourth Day) of the French poet's creation epic *La Sepmaine* (1578), which deals with the formation of the stars, sun, seasons, and moon.³ This comment is found in the flyleaves to Harvey's copy of Thomas Twyne's translation of Dionysius Periegetes' *Surveye of the World* (1572), a book now held at the Rosenbach in Philadelphia. Following a comment that Thomas Digges 'hath the whole Aquarius of Palingenius bie hart: & takes mutch delight to repeate it often', Harvey observes that 'M. Spenser conceiues the like pleasure in the fourth day of the first Weeke of Bartas. Which he esteemes as the proper profession of Urania'.⁴

My own recent reading of Spenser and Du Bartas' literary relation took Harvey's comment as a starting point, using the figure of Urania to help place Spenser within a broad sweep of early modern literary history stretching from James VI and I (Du Bartas' friend) to John Milton and Lucy Hutchinson. I emphasized Spenser's departure from Du Bartas' mode of purely historical or descriptive poetry: 'whereas Du Bartas offered historical knowledge to gloss the divine word,

¹ Peter Auger, *Du Bartas' Legacy in England and Scotland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 30-2 and 74 (Robert Ashley, the earliest known English reader and translator of the poem, was reading the 1579 edition).

² *Edmund Spenser: The Shorter Poems*, ed. Richard McCabe (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 288.

³ See, e.g., H. G. Lotspeich, 'Spenser's Urania', *Modern Language Notes* 50 (1935), 141-6 (143-4).

⁴ The Rosenbach, Philadelphia, EL1.A2e, 3r. Thanks to Jobi Zink and other library staff for supplying images. See also *Gabriel Harvey's Marginalia*, ed. G. C. Moore Smith (Stratford-upon-Avon: Shakespeare Head Press, 1913), p. 161. Accessed online at: <<https://archive.org/details/marginaliacollec00harvuoft>> (all web-links accessed January 2021).

Spenser's poem is "coloured with an historicall fiction" [quoting the Letter to Raleigh introducing *The Faerie Queene*] for the variety and pleasure it brought readers, and the pedagogical efficacy associated with those qualities'.⁵ Specifically, I observed how Spenser diverged from Du Bartas' example in the *Shepheardes Calendar*, the 'Urania' section of *Tears of the Muses*, and the description of the Wandering Wood in the opening canto of *The Faerie Queene*, Book I.

This issue of the *Spenser Review* provides a welcome opportunity to return to the topic with fresh impetus. The next short section re-assesses Harvey's comments in the Rosenbach flyleaves in light of Tania Demetriou's recent demonstration that they are linked to Harvey's note-taking in his copy of Thomas Speght's edition of Chaucer (1598). This re-reading will show that Harvey's notes refer in particular to Spenser's apparent admiration for the learned descriptions of astrological phenomena in Du Bartas' poetry. As valuable as the figure of Urania is for posing questions about the significance of Du Bartas' heavenly poetics for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century verse, we can come closer to what Harvey, and potentially Spenser and other early readers too, understood by the 'proper profession of Urania' if we re-focus our attention onto astrological description.

The rest of this essay then looks for points of contact between astrological descriptions in Du Bartas' *Quatrième Jour* and Spenser's late poems, namely the proem to Book V of *The Faerie Queene* and Canto vii of the *Mutabilitie Cantos*. This emphasis on the late poems provides an opportunity to engage with Patrick Cheney's argument in *Spenser's Famous Flight* (1993) about why Spenser turned to writing divine poems like the *Fowre Hymnes* late in his career:

By concluding his career with divine poetry, I suggest, Spenser is not doing anything revolutionary; none the less, what is new is his careful imping of the Augustinian career model of Du Bartas (turning from courtly to divine poetry) onto the Renaissance version of the Virgilian model popularized by Petrarch (pastoral, epic, and love lyric).⁶

Du Bartas may not be as prominent in Cheney's more recent work on Spenser (e.g. in *English Authorship and the Early Modern Sublime* (2018)), but both Cheney's earlier writing and Harvey's comments (which, Demetriou shows, cannot have been written before 1598) nonetheless point to the value of assessing the similarities – and significant differences – between the style and epistemological value in Du Bartas' verse and Spenser's late poems.

⁵ Auger, *Du Bartas' Legacy*, pp. 89-100 (p. 100).

⁶ Patrick Cheney, *Spenser's Famous Flight: A Renaissance Idea of a Literary Career* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 1993), p. 199.

Harvey's thoughts about Spenser, Du Bartas, and 'the proper profession of Urania' are preceded in the Rosenbach flyleaves by the remark about Digges reading Palingenius, and followed by a note that 'Axiophilus [i.e. Harvey] makes the like account of the Columnes, and the Colonies of Bartas' (3r, the 'Columnes' also deals with celestial phenomena). An introductory paragraph explains the wider point that Harvey is making:

Other[s] commend Chawcer, & Lidgate for their witt, pleasant veine, varietie of poetical discourse, & all humanitie: I specially note their Astronomie, philosophie, & other parts of profound or cunning art. Wherein few of their time were more exactly learned. It is not sufficient for poets, to be superficial humanists: but they must be exquisite artists, & curious vniuersal schollers. (2v)

Joseph M. Levine takes the final sentence as evidence that Harvey 'took an interest in science partly because he believed that the description of nature was necessary for good poetry'.⁷ Mike Pincombe picks up on the pejorative use of 'humanists', explaining that: 'As far as Harvey was concerned, at least in the long years of his retirement from public life and letters, humanism was essentially "superficial" in comparison with other arts which he deemed "profound" (astronomy was one of his own particular interests).'⁸ Two sentences later, then, we should understand Harvey as indicating that Spenser is responding not only to the heavenly subject matter of Du Bartas' poetry, but to its scientific learnedness. Subsequent annotations bear out this reading as Harvey praises Du Bartas for excelling in astronomical poetry ('in hoc astronomico genere poetæ', 4r) and for his 'astrological descriptions' (4v), and, by contrast, reports that Spenser is aware that he lacks knowledge in this area: 'Spenser himself is ashamed, though he is not completely ignorant of the globe and the astrolabe, of the difficulty he has with astronomical rules, tables, and instruments' (5r, translated from Latin).⁹

Although Harvey makes two references to the 'The Shepheardes Kalendar' (6r, after a blank leaf) later in the flyleaves, we now know that Harvey had read *The Faerie Queene* when he wrote

⁷ Joseph M. Levine, *Humanism and History: Origins of Modern English Historiography* (Ithaca, NY; London: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 140.

⁸ Mike Pincombe, *Elizabethan Humanism: Literature and Learning in the later Sixteenth Century* (Harlow: Longman, 2001), p. 3 (see also p. 12).

⁹ 'Pudet ipsum Spenserum, etsi Sphæræ, astrolabijque non planè ignarum; suæ in astronomicis Canonibus, tabulis, instrumentisque imperitiæ.' Translation from R. M. Cummings (ed.), *Spenser: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 50.

those remarks. Tania Demetriou has recently shown that the notes on the Rosenbach flyleaves are an extension of the annotations in Harvey's copy of Thomas Speght's edition of Chaucer (1598), i.e. 'the Rosenbach annotations [...] not only postdate Harvey's reading of the 1598 Chaucer, but are closely linked with it'.¹⁰ This is why Harvey was thinking in the above quotation about the 'profound or cunning art' of Geoffrey Chaucer and John Lydgate, with whose erudition Du Bartas' learning was comparable. Indeed, Harvey underlined words from Francis Beaumont's approving comments in the 1598 Chaucer that this edition was giving the English poet the kind of critical attention previously reserved for poets writing in other European languages: 'not onely all Greeke and Latine Poets haue had their interpretours [...] but the French also and Italian, as *Guillaume de Saluste seigneur du Bartas*, that most diuine French poet'.¹¹

The Rosenbach flyleaves recycle phrases that Harvey had used to mark descriptions in his copy of Speght's Chaucer, especially those relating to astrological and astronomical matters. Indeed, the very first comment in the flyleaves introduces the theme: 'Notable Astronomical descriptions in Chawcer, & Lidgate; fine artists in manie kinds, & much better learned then owre moderne poets' (1r). Shortly before the key passage comparing Spenser and Du Bartas, for example, Harvey recollects 'the description of Winter, in the Frankleins tale' and, shortly after, 'the artificial description of a cunning man, or Magician, or Astrologer, in the Franklins tale' (both 2r). Turn back to 'The Franklin's Tale' in Harvey's Chaucer, and we indeed find that Harvey had noted the magician's arrival with a similar phrase ('A cunning man, & arch-magician') and underlined the phrase 'in the cold frostie ceason of December' on the next page.¹² Commenting on Harvey's reading of Chaucer, Demetriou writes that 'to see only the scientific side to Harvey's excavation of the poems is to miss the fact that he is looking for poetic descriptions of these things' (39).

Demetriou also observes that 'generational comparison and citation of testimonies carry over [from Harvey's Chaucer] as critical tools in the flyleaves' (41). Sure enough, two longer notes at the back of his Chaucer edition had already compared the great Ricardian poet with Spenser and Du Bartas. Harvey observed that there were 'not manie Chawcers, or Lidgates [...] in those dayes' and then names Spenser and Josuah Sylvester (Du Bartas' chief English

¹⁰ Tania Demetriou, 'Tendre Cropps and Flourishing Metricians: Gabriel Harvey's Chaucer', *The Review of English Studies* 71 (2020), 19-43 (29).

¹¹ British Library, Add MS 42518, a4v (4v in British Library Image Viewer). Accessed online at: <http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add_MS_42518>.

¹² British Library, Add MS 42518, K3v-4r (79v-80r).

translator) among a handful of notable poets ‘in this pregnant age’; both are also named in another list in a second long note:

And now translated Petrarch, Ariosto, Tasso, & Bartas himself deserue curious comparison with Chaucer, Lidgate, & owre best English, auncient & moderne. Amongst which, the Countesse of Pembrokes Arcadia, & the Faerie Queene ar now freshest in request: & Astrophil, & Amyntas ar none of the idlest pastimes of sum fine humanists.¹³

These sentences resonate with Harvey’s comments about ‘the proper profession of Urania’ in the Rosenbach flyleaves. There, too, we can now hear Harvey suggesting that Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* is a rare contemporary work that deserves to be talked about in the same breath as Du Bartas’ and Chaucer’s poetry as a genuinely learned work that is more than ‘the idlest pastimes of sum fine humanists’.

So Harvey’s comments suggest that Spenser, too, held Du Bartas’ astronomical and astrological descriptions in high regard, and that it was not just the fact of Du Bartas writing about the heavens that interested him, but how well he accomplished it. Citing Spenser’s fondness for Du Bartas’ *Quatrième Jour* was not a random observation, and was probably made in the historic present tense, i.e. referring to Spenser’s past reading.¹⁴ This re-assessment encourages us to look for traces of such learned description in the later books of *The Faerie Queene* and to note similarities to the poetics of Du Bartas (and, for that matter, Chaucer), while also being alert to where Spenser’s style departs from it.

Spenser offers extended astrological descriptions in two places in *The Faerie Queene*: the proem to Book V and Canto vii of the *Mutabilitie Cantos*. I will briefly consider how, where, and why Spenser’s style adopts Bartasian characteristics in each case, and where it diverges. In these examples we see Spenser not only turning to heavenly themes, but also adopting a descriptive poetics that follows the style as well as the content of Du Bartas’ *Quatrième Jour*. Both sections are, nonetheless, distinctively Spenserian in how meditations on mortal impermanence accompany the poet’s skyward thoughts. This is the same juxtaposition that we saw in the ‘Envoi’ to *Ruines of Rome* where comments about the ‘heavenly Muse’ are placed next to ideas from Du Bellay’s poetry.

¹³ British Library, Add MS 42518, 3Z5v and 3Z6v (421v and 422v).

¹⁴ See Demetriou, ‘Tendre Croppes’, 30.

For Heather James, the proem to Book V is ‘relentlessly gloomy’.¹⁵ It begins with a characteristically Spenserian description of the world’s decay: ‘Me seemes the world is runne quite out of square, | From the first point of his appointed sourse, | And being once amisse growes daily wourse and wourse’ (V.Pr.1.7-9).¹⁶ In the fourth stanza the poet underpins this moral insight with an astrological observation: ‘the heauens reuolution | Is wandred farre from, where it first was pight’ (ll. 6-7). A. C. Hamilton’s note records that it is unclear what Spenser means here: the phrase ‘may refer either to the effect of the precession of the equinoxes, i.e. the apparent shifting of the constellations of the zodiac though their astrological “signs” remain the same [over a cycle of roughly 25000 years], or to trepidation’ (p. 508). Writing in the *Spenser Encyclopedia*, J. C. Eade argues that the now-discredited notion of trepidation, the supposed oscillation of the heavenly spheres over a shorter 7000-year cycle, better fits Spenser’s emphasis on how much the stars ‘at randon roue | Out of their proper places farre away’ (6.5-6).¹⁷

In any case, the next stanza expands upon the central conceit that the poet finds dislocation, not divine order, in the skies:

For who so list into the heauens looke,
 And search the courses of the rowling spheares,
 Shall find that from the point, where they first tooke
 Their setting forth, in these few thousand yeares
 They all are wandred much; that plaine appeares.
 For that same golden fleecy Ram, which bore
Phrixus and *Helle* from their stepdames feares,
 Hath now forgot, where he was plast of yore,
 And shouldred hath the Bull, which fayre *Europa* bore. (stanza 5)

In the voice of *The Faerie Queene*’s narrator, we might take the phrase ‘that plaine appeares’ as a hollow or ironic endorsement of how star-gazers observe that Aries (the Ram) has ‘shouldred’ or pushed against Taurus (the Bull). All the same, what is being described here is in marked contrast with Du Bartas’ account of how Aries moves in sequence alongside neighbouring signs of the zodiac:

¹⁵ Heather James, ‘The Problem of Poetry in *The Faerie Queene*, Book V’, *Spenser Review* 45.1.1 (2015). Accessed online at: <<http://www.english.cam.ac.uk/spenseronline/review/item/45.1.1>>.

¹⁶ Quotations from *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton *et al* (Harlow: Longman: 2001).

¹⁷ J. C. Eade, ‘Astrology’, in *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, ed. A. C. Hamilton *et al* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 1990), p. 73.

De son estoillé vase une onde blonde-perse,
 Et fait (qui le croira?) naistre de ses flambeaux
 Pour les suyvens Poissons un riche torrent d'eaux.
 Les alterez nageurs courent vers ceste source,
 Mais le fleuve à plis d'or s'enfuit devant leur course,
 Ainsi que les Poissons fuyent tousjours devant
 Le celeste Belier qui les va poursuyvant.¹⁸

In whose [i.e. Aquarius'] cleere channell mought at pleasure swim
 Those two bright *Fishes* that doo follow him;
 But that the Torrent slides so swift a way,
 That it out-runnes them ever, even as they
 Out-run the *Ram*: who ever them pursues,
 And by returning yearly, all renues. (trans. Josuah Sylvester)¹⁹

Spenser matches Du Bartas' precision, even though their cosmic visions diverge. He also adds references to classical mythology: to Phrixus and Helle (who were rescued from their stepmother Ino by a flying ram), and Europa (carried away by Zeus in the form of a bull). Consciously or not, he is also correcting the Fourth Day's astrological knowledge. Had Spenser been reading Pantaleon Thevenin's commentary on the *Semaines* (first printed with the poem in 1585), he could have noticed Thevenin's correction to the passage that mentions the skies' 7000-year cycle:

Et c'est pourquoy on tient que ceste tente riche,
 Que l'immortel Brodeur, d'une dextre peu chiche,
 Parsema d'escussions ardemment reluisans,
 Employe en son voyage environ sept mil ans. (I.iv.343-6)

It's therefore thought, that sumptuous Canapie
 The which th'un-niggard hand of Majestic
 Poudred so thicke with shields so shining cleere,
 Spends in his voyage nigh seven thousand yeare. (I.iv.363-6)

¹⁸ *The Works of Guillaume De Salluste Sieur Du Bartas*, ed. Urban Tigner Holmes, Jr *et al*, volume II (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1938), I.iv.252-58 (p. 314).

¹⁹ *The Divine Weeks and Works of Guillaume de Saluste Sieur Du Bartas*, trans. Josuah Sylvester, ed. Susan Snyder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), I.iv.271-6 (p. 214).

Thevenin notes that by the French term ‘son voyage’ we should understand the movement of trepidation; Du Bartas is apparently confusing trepidation with the longer cycle of precession here.²⁰ Whether Spenser noticed this error or not, we still observe his proem adopting the descriptive mode characteristic of Du Bartas while updating it in a way that exposes its limitations. Spenser’s ‘plaine’ description here (and in the descriptions of Gemini, Cancer, Leo, then the planets that follow) shows a world that seems out of joint, which is why we need mythology and allegory to assist our comprehension of it.

Using astrological description to discern universal instability and changeableness becomes a central element of the seventh canto of the *Mutabilitie Cantos*, the final completed canto that we have. Ayesha Ramachandran points to how the Book V proem foreshadows this aspect of the *Mutabilitie Cantos*, and considers how another French writer, Michel de Montaigne, may have contributed to Spenser’s scepticism: wholly unlike the theology and politics of Du Bartas’ poetry, the *Cantos* ‘are consumed by the struggle to cope with a new sense of a cosmic loss of authority, with the apprehension that the old, tangible centers of power are disappearing and may never be recovered’.²¹

In *Spenser’s Famous Flight*, Cheney encourages us to keep Du Bartas in mind at the opening of this Canto so that we are alert to the poet’s decisive turn to Urania at this late moment in his writing career: ‘By recalling Du Bartas, we may recover the original lens through which Spenser wishes us to view the troubling conclusion of his epic. We are to see here the New Poet’s transition to divine poetry.’²² Cheney argues that ‘thou greater muse’ invoked in the first line is most likely Urania, though his more recent work gives added weight to earlier readings that find that Spenser’s muse is either Calliope or Clio who ‘assumes the role of Urania’ (Hamilton) or ‘seems to take on the function of Urania’ (Thomas P. Roche, Jr) in the second stanza.²³ Either way, it is indeed Uranian for a muse to ‘kindle fresh sparks of that immortall fire, | Which learned minds inflameth with desire, | Of heauenly things’ (VII.vii.2.4-6).

²⁰ *La Sepmaine* (1585 edition), 3C2r; Isabelle Pantin, *La poésie du ciel en France dans le second moitié du seizième siècle* (Geneva: Droz, 1995), pp. 445-6.

²¹ Ayesha Ramachandran, ‘Mutabilitie’s Lucretian Metaphysics: Scepticism and Cosmic Process in Spenser’s *Cantos*’, in *Celebrating Mutabilitie: Essays on Edmund Spenser’s Mutabilitie Cantos*, ed. Jane Grogan (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), pp. 220-45 (p. 221).

²² Cheney, *Spenser’s Famous Flight*, p. 210.

²³ Patrick Cheney, *English Authorship and the Early Modern Sublime: Fictions of Transport in Spenser, Marlowe, Jonson, and Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 89; Hamilton (ed.), *Faerie Queene*, p. 701; Thomas P.

Once more, though, it is rewarding to look past the figure of Urania to see how Spenser's descriptive practice resembles and departs from Du Bartas'. The central stanzas of this canto are given over to descriptions of the four elements (17-25), seasons (28-31), months (32-43), day and night (44-5), and the planets (50-53). It is not just the subject matter that is familiar from Du Bartas (both the Fourth Day and 'Columnes' from *La Seconde Semaine*), but how astrological details are incorporated into his poetry. This stanza about February, the final month of the year, merits comparison with the first passage from Du Bartas quoted above:

And lastly, came cold *February*, sitting
 In an old wagon, for he could not ride;
 Drawne of two fishes for the season fitting,
 Which through the flood before did softly slyde
 And swim away: yet had he by his side
 His plough and harnesse fit to till the ground,
 And tooles to prune the trees, before the pride
 Of hasting Prime did make them burgein round:
 So past the twelue Months forth, and their dew places found. (stanza 43)

There are technical similarities with the passage from the *Quatrième Jour*, especially in Sylvester's translation: in how the fishes are given agency (to which Spenser adds personification of February), in the development towards a final line about how the cycle begins again (not in the French), and also the verbal resemblance in 'slides so swift a way' in Sylvester's translation and 'softly slyde | And swim away' in Spenser.

The Spenserian challenge to Du Bartas' description (with particularly strong contrast with Sylvester's later version) is, once again, that what we see reveals change, not eternal truth. Mutabilitie alludes to either trepidation or precession again when observing 'alteration' and 'mutation' (55.4, 8) in the skies: 'within this wide great *Vniuerse* | Nothing doth firme and permanent appeare, | But all things tost and turned by transuerse' (56.1-3). Mutabilitie told the planets that: 'The things | Which we see not how they are mov'd and swayd, | Ye may attribute to your selues as Kings, | And say they by your secret powre are made: | But what we see not, who shall vs perswade?' (49.1-5). For this reason, divine poetry needs to do more than simply describe the world and heavens as they appear to us. This claim has a scriptural basis: as

Roche Jr, 'Spenser's Muse', in *Unfolded Tales: Essays on Renaissance Romance*, ed. George M. Logan and Gordon Teskey (Ithaca, NY; London: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 162-88 (p. 186).

Hamilton notes (p. 709), the biblical answer to Mutabilitie is that ‘the things which are not sene, are eternal’ (2 Cor 4.18).

The visible world does not offer direct insight into divine truth in the *Mutabilitie Cantos*, as it does in Du Bartas’ scientific poetry. Du Bartas’ descriptive mode is central to Spenser’s aesthetic at this moment. It demonstrates that the poet is serious and genuinely learned, not a ‘superficial humanist’ who has spent too long impressing others at court and not enough time studying the world. With Harvey’s admiration for Chaucer in mind, it is even more striking that Spenser too should recall ‘old *Dan Geffrey* (in whose gentle spright | The pure well head of Poesie did dwell)’ (9.3-4) as a key precedent for astrological description of the kind found in the seventh Canto, alongside Alain de Lille.²⁴ John Guillory finds that Spenser’s reference to literary tradition is an essential part of how he constructs poetic authority here, all the more so since – as the Canto describes – we cannot hear what the eternal may be trying to tell us: ‘Until or unless a voice on the other side speaks again, the human word remains its own authority, built up out of past voices that declare their continuity with the present merely by continuing to speak.’²⁵ The poet builds on Chaucer’s and Du Bartas’ past examples to seek a more authoritative and authentic human voice, aware that descriptions of seen phenomena at best show Nature turning closer to perfection since all things ‘by their change their being doe dilate’ (58.5).

Re-assessing Harvey’s comment about the ‘proper profession of Urania’ has helped us to see that astrological description was part of Spenser’s toolkit late in his career, one that he used much more than he did in the early poetry of *The Shepheardes Calendar*. Du Bartas provided a standard, an ideal even, for Spenser and so many other poets who thought about the nature of divine poetry. He also provided a model for natural description in verse. Spenser adopts precise astrological descriptions of the kind that Harvey indicates Spenser had found impressive in the *Quatrième Jour*, but places this Bartasian mode within a new, more pessimistic creative vision that found the world before us a transitory illusion that masked the true nature of things. These aesthetic observations correspond to a distinctive theological take on Urania’s importance, as John Steadman helps us see: ‘Spenser associates the muse of astronomy specifically with the

²⁴ See Craig A. Berry, ‘Propagating Authority: Poetic Tradition in *The Parliament of Fowls* and the *Mutabilitie Cantos*’, in *Rereading Chaucer and Spenser: Dan Geffrey with the New Poete*, ed. Rachel Stenner *et al* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), chapter 11.

²⁵ John Guillory, *Poetic Authority: Spenser, Milton, and Literary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 66.

knowledge of heavenly things, and – though she falls significantly short of the heavenly muse of DuBartas and Milton so closely associated with the biblical revelation – she nevertheless bears a close resemblance to natural theology.²⁶

By contrast, Josuah Sylvester's translation of Du Bartas, with its prominent dedication to James VI and I, would continue to affirm the validity of scriptural truth, the value of verse descriptions of the seen world, and the permanence of heavenly and earthly sovereignty. That English translation would not come out until 1605. As well as listening to how much Spenser took from Du Bartas' French, we would also do well to think about how Sylvester's idiom may draw on his English precursor. Several critics have detected traces of Spenser's diction, style, and syntax in Sylvester's translation.²⁷ James Nohrnberg hears similarities between Sylvester's translation and Spenser's *Mutabilitie* too.²⁸ Perhaps Sylvester had read *The Faerie Queene* for a poetic model for descriptive narrative verse in English. Certainly Sylvester was mindful that he was following Philip Sidney, whose translation of Du Bartas' *Sepmaine* is not known to survive, and could well have consulted Spenser to raise the pitch and majesty of his poetic register. If Sylvester took inspiration from the two passages discussed in this essay, then he would have been carrying across stylistic features whilst discarding the uncertainty latent in Spenser's descriptions. In this round-about way, Spenser's astrological descriptions may be the aspect of his poetry that had the most immediate impact on how Du Bartas was read in English and, accordingly, on later English scriptural poetry – this even though seventeenth-century divine poems usually had an ideological frame that was opposed to Spenser's vision of disorder and impermanence, and did not recognize the same limits to the plain description of things.

²⁶ John Steadman, *Moral Fiction in Milton and Spenser* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1995), p. 32.

²⁷ Paul J. Klemp, 'Imitations and Adaptations, Renaissance (1579-1660)', in *Spenser Encyclopedia*, p. 395; *Milton: Paradise Lost*, ed. A. W. Verity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1910), p. lvi.

²⁸ James Nohrnberg, 'Supplementing Spenser's Supplement, a Masque in Several Scenes: Eight Literary-Critical Meditations on a Renaissance Numen called *Mutabilitie*', in *Celebrating Mutabilitie*, ed. Grogan, pp. 85-135 (p. 99).