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# The Link Between Artemisia Gentileschi's Biography and Her Artistic Oeuvre

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Keldorf

Western Civilization 102

16 February 2016

EQ: How did Artemisia Gentileschi reflect her gender, life experiences, and adversity in her art?

### The Link Between Artemisia Gentileschi's Biography and Her Artistic Oeuvre

In order to recognize the importance of women artists throughout history, one must first recognize their dearth. A majority of Western history was documented by men, therefore representing solely the male perspective. Italian Baroque artist, Artemisia Gentileschi's work shows the forgotten, therefore unknown world of female empowerment in the Baroque Period, which lasted from the 17th to mid-18th centuries. Using her art, she defies the numerous norms and expectations, which have held back nearly every woman over the course Western European history. Gentileschi battled myriad setbacks, most made possible by her gender. She was raped, tortured, and trivialized by her male contemporaries, and captured these experiences in her art by turning to a relatable feature of everyday life: popular narrative. Artemisia Gentileschi's use of heroines from familiar stories in her art allowed her to effectively convey her adversity and life experiences as a woman in the Baroque Era.

Artemisia Gentileschi was born on July 8th, 1593, in Rome. She was the first child of Orazio, a painter who gained a mild amount of success. After seeing that Artemisia showed more talent than her younger brothers, Orazio trained her from an early age and introduced her to prominent artists, particularly Caravaggio, whose work heavily influenced her own ("Artemisia Gentileschi"). He did so exclusively in the family quarters of their apartment and only did so

because of Artemisia's intense passion for painting. Besides her father's teachings, she had little training when starting out as a painter, yet proved to have amazing skills. Despite her evident talent, the idea of a woman becoming an artist seemed inane, so her father tried to convince her to become a nun many times. Yet Artemisia insisted to continue painting (Silvers 4). However, because both craftsmanship and academia were reserved for men, she was denied admission into art academies, which prompted her father to hire his contemporary, Agostino Tassi, to tutor her in compensation, and allow her to continue with the craft.

In 1612, when Artemisia was only 19 years old, her life took a sharp turn when Agostino Tassi raped her, defaming her name and work. Throughout her trial, she was shamed, succumbed numerous vaginal exams, and was even tortured. She began to be recognized for her sexuality, rather than her talent (Garrard 1). Although Tassi was convicted for the crime, he never confessed and even attempted to accuse Artemisia and her father of committing incest. The rapist only served one year in prison (Garrard and Steinem) and was later pardoned by the Grand Duke of Tuscany (Glover). The rape trials warped her artistic reputation, defining her work in primarily sexual terms (Garrard 22-23). Scholars believe that this event prompted Artemisia to paint *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, a piece so striking that it earned her admission into the Accademia del Disegno (Academy of Design) in Florence in 1612. She was the first woman to ever attend the institution. That same year, her father had arranged for her to marry Pierantonio Stiattesi, an artist whom she outshone, to salvage her reputation. The couple moved to Florence, where she began her education and had four children ("Artemisia Gentileschi").

Although she was married with children, Artemisia Gentileschi was unusually active for a woman in 17th-century Italy. She was also one of the few working women during her time, and

was considered the head of her household after her marriage with Stiattesi failed (“Artemisia Gentileschi”). She was determined to paint, yet was not considered an artist until she had finally gained admission into the academy. It was after this that her career as an artist truly began, as she had raised her status up to the elite rank of artists in an era where women’s opportunities in the art world were limited. Yet, Artemisia defied these odds when she became the first woman to paint major historical and religious scenarios. She served as a prominent figure in the Baroque movement of art, which consisted primarily of dramatic themes, commonly influenced by Christianity. Her work embodied these traits, for she used primarily Biblical themes that followed the stirring elements of Caravaggio, at times including both passion and violence.

Artemisia Gentileschi gained a great deal of fame throughout her life for her cathartic, Caravaggesque portrayals of heroines who strayed from the Humanist idea of a ‘feminine ideal’ (Endres 13). She gained notoriety as a woman who conquered a male-dominated field, remaining a controversial figure in the eyes of her male contemporaries, as well as art historians. Amy Lynne Endres, graduate student at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, comments on Artemisia’s reputation in her thesis, titled “Painting Lucretia: Fear and Desire: A Feminist Discourse on Representations by Artemisia Gentileschi and Tintoretto”, by stating,

Despite her artistic talent, Artemisia Gentileschi has always been a controversial figure. The historical record, beginning with her own rape trial, offers polemic interpretations, alternately depicting Artemisia as either a victim or a provocateur. In subsequent literature and scholarship, she has been portrayed as a slut, a pawn, an ambitious market-savvy profiteer, a martyr and a heroine. (39)

Artemisia Gentileschi's reputation continues to be complicated, but several aspects of it are certain. She was a bold individual who shrewdly used the only form of expression provided, painting, to her to convey her perspective, and made history for her efforts to do so. Sadly, after her death, she and her works were disregarded and often attributed to her father. Modern art historians skew the views of many academics by using a sexist bias. This resulted in them poorly documenting her oeuvre, leaving her reputation vague and often false, despite her glorious accomplishments (Garrard 7).

Artemisia Gentileschi's most prominent use of Biblical tales to reflect her experiences as a woman is through the painting *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, which she completed from 1611 to 1612. It portrays the Biblical Judith, a socially liberated heroine, beheading the Assyrian tyrant Holofernes, whose armies had invaded Israel. He had also possibly attempted to sexually assault Judith. The beheading is therefore a glorious act of cathartic retribution, and is believed to serve as Gentileschi's concealed compensation for the oppression and trivialization, which she experienced throughout the rape trials (Garrard 19). The emotionless manner with which Judith slays her oppressor shows her determination to achieve vengeance on the tyrant, much like Artemisia desired retribution for her own rape (Glover). Judith's disposition embodies Artemisia's own passionate attitude about the trials; while on trial, the painter testified to fighting Agostino Tassi's assault, stating, "I scratched his face and pulled his hair and before he penetrated me again I grasped his penis so tight that even removed a piece of flesh" (Van Cleave 430). Her portrayal of her personal struggles is powerful, vengeful, and calculated, while attracting the attention of the public due to the popularity of the story it depicts.

In *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, Artemisia Gentileschi took the Biblical character Judith and portrayed her as a strong, independent heroine to reflect her own experiences, all while defying societal expectations of a woman's behavior. Art historian Mary Garrard poses a similar argument in her book *Artemisia Gentileschi Around 1622: The Shaping and Reshaping of an Artistic Identity*, asserting that the painter used the passionate aspects of her characters' personas, "exaggerating their energy and mobility as if to compensate for the largely passive personalities of women depicted in art and suppressed in life", and therefore "[combats] the cultural definition of woman as passive, offering in its place a fantasy construction of woman as free and heroically empowered" (Garrard 22). By creating *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, Artemisia utilized the norm of painting popular religious scenarios to reflect her own perspective. This placed her in the spotlight, allowing her to prove herself as a dynamic, talented female artist in a society where female authority and capability were deeply demoralized.

Another notable series of pieces in which Artemisia Gentileschi encodes her experiences as a woman is the trilogy of paintings of *Susanna and the Elders*, which portray a Biblical story in the "Book of Daniel". The story includes a beautiful girl named Susanna who attracted a group of elderly men that spied on her daily, lusting after her. One day, the elders decided to join forces and confront Susanna in her garden, stating "we are in love with thee: wherefore consent to us, and lie with us". They then threatened her, stating they would testify against her that she had slept with somebody else. Susanna's response was of exasperation, as she stated, "I am straitened on every side: for if I do this thing, it is death to me: and if I do it not, I shall not escape your hands" (Silvers 10). Artemisia painted the first *Susanna* in 1610, two years before her rape, which proves not all of her art was prompted by her assault. Although the rape plays a

vital role in the development of Artemisia's reputation and oeuvre, it does not define her as an artist. She and her work stand out in the art world because of her ability to state her truth throughout her art, as well as her gender and the setbacks it has caused, not because she was sexually violated (Mann 121). *Susanna and the Elders* is a prime example where Artemisia uses her femininity as a tool to portray a popular story from the female perspective, rather than the usual male. When male painters, such as Caravaggio, portrayed the story, they portrayed the elders' sexual urges and desires (Jones). Susanna, typically an epitome of virtue (Garrard 85), was depicted as an object of the elders' lust. Artemisia shifted this interpretation from their perspective to her own. Rather than portraying the elders' tension, she documented Susanna's anxieties of being watched and threatened into making a decision between forced sex or defamation (Jones).

Artemisia's second *Susanna and the Elders*, painted in 1622 and often called the "Burghley House Susanna", portrays the same tale, but with a new meaning. Years after her rape, the popular story of Susanna possibly resonated with Artemisia for a new reason at this point, for Agostino Tassi, her own rapist, falsely testified that she was deflowered by her own father, rather than by him. She painted the Burghley House Susanna the same year as her separation with her husband, who was unfaithful to her (Silvers 80). To show this, Artemisia injects both Tassi and Stiattesi into her later renditions of *Susanna* by portraying them as the elders, even aging the elders' faces in comparison to the ones in her first *Susanna* to signify a later point in her life. (Garrard and Steinem, Silvers 80). Deborah Anderson Silvers, a graduate student at University of South Miami, examines Artemisia's biographical timeline in comparison

to the three *Susanna*'s in her thesis, titled "Artemisia Gentileschi: The Heart of a Woman and Soul of a Caesar". She arrives at the conclusion that

The 1610 painting shows the fear and shame of the teenage Susanna and Artemisia. Twelve years later in 1622 Gentileschi shows a completely different Susanna, one who invokes the *Venus Pudica* pose of the sexually available female. (81)

Artemisia establishes Susanna's sexuality in the Burghley House version as dominant, rather than shameful, creating a dichotomy between her fear of the elders and her sexual power. Silvers also identifies one way which Artemisia represents herself and her own agency within the paintings, stating she establishes herself as an accomplished painter:

In portraying Susanna in a commercial pose as a beautiful seductress, she also iconographically conveys the image of herself as a successful artist at the top of her career. Taking into account that most of the men in her life were less successful artists, this could definitely be construed as a "gotcha" moment for her. (80)

Therefore, the *Susanna and the Elders* trilogy not only conveys Artemisia's adversity, but also her strength and prestige. The *Susanna* paintings, specifically the first two, are vital to consider when examining Artemisia's work, for both reflect diverse representations of sexuality and purity within Western culture. Through her paintings of *Susanna and the Elders*, Artemisia records not only her own experience with a threatening, predatory man, but also the general female perspective on a situation, creating a dynamic set of works which contradict the misogynistic messages depicted in art throughout Western history.



Along with a powerful heroine and a threatened girl, Artemisia Gentileschi painted a series depicting Lucretia, a Roman matron who had been raped and committed suicide. She created this collection from 1621 to 1643, capturing the woman's trauma as she faces the aftermath of her rape, much like the painter once had to do so herself. The heroine whom she depicts was revered for her suicide by her male counterparts after she committed it to restore her innocence and honor (Endres 38). Men considered this act of the highest moral standard, for she chose to die over living with the shame of being raped (Shang 27). Lucretia is a complex character, depicted both as a provocative woman and as a tragic heroine. Her myth symbolizes the exalted paradigms of feminine virtue while reflecting the shame surrounding rape victims (Endres 1). Lucretia is known for her suicide, yet Artemisia, unlike her male contemporaries, depicts the heroine alone, contemplating her violation. She does so specifically in her first rendition, created circa 1621 and titled simply *Lucretia* (Endres 38-39), portraying the woman with valid and emotions, showing her torment as she confronts both the mental and physical pains of surviving rape (Shang 27).

Lucretia's reputation as both a heroine and a rape victim, a dichotomy in Early Modern Europe, may serve as Artemisia's attempt vindicating her own reputation. In fact, scholars believe Artemisia posed for the character while painting her. The two individuals resemble one another not only through appearance, but also through biographical features. Both women were raped by men close to their patriarchs; Artemisia was raped by a her father's coworker, while Lucretia was assaulted by a her husband's close friend. Both situations resulted in strained relationships between the woman and the men around her. Both took measures to rescue themselves from it. Lucretia committed suicide, while Artemisia was married off by her father

and moved to a new city, away from her dark past. Both women's fates are results of the masculine lust to possess what was restricted from them: young, virtuous girls (Garrard 85).

Through the previously known narrative of Lucretia, as well as Susanna, Artemisia encrypts her own story into her art, portraying her mental torment in a context known to the public.

Although Lucretia is known as a tragic heroine whose story reflects Artemisia Gentileschi's own trauma, her story represents more than her exoneration from the dishonor of rape; more importantly, it illustrates the woman's authority in a misogynistic society. The artist portrays Lucretia as contemplating the aftermath of her rape, recovering from trauma and anticipating the consequences. Scholars agree that Lucretia's tale is one that highlights her amount of agency within this life-altering situation; In *Artemisia Gentileschi Around 1622* author and art historian Mary Garrard calls the character "argumentative", clarifying that she "calls into question the justice (to her) of her self-mandated suicide" (119). Amy Lynne Endres considers Garrard's argument, among those of other art historians, and concurs that Artemisia deliberately portrayed Lucretia's authority over the situation. She states,

Artemisia's interpretation represents Lucretia's *choice* in the matter of her narrative. The artist chooses to diminish the importance of the tragic events that define it, e.g. her rape and her suicide, but rather emphasizes her conscious consideration and willful manipulation of the situation—in other words, Lucretia's expression of female agency. (41)

Lucretia found authority during an agonizing time. It was Lucretia's choice to commit suicide, which she believed was the only possible way to restore her honor in Roman society. She felt violated, tainted by a man's touch, despite her male contemporaries' insistence that her mind was

still pure, even though her body no longer was. Yet she persisted to redeem herself, thereby deciding the fate of her own life.

Artemisia Gentileschi shows Lucretia's choice to end her own life. She therefore portrays Lucretia as a powerful heroine functioning in a society where women were seen as passive, weak creatures that could not be trusted with making their own choices. She shows the matron as a complex character, one disturbed by the violation of her virtue and purity while dreading the actions required to restore them. This version of female representation is rare. The artist uses Lucretia's story to elucidate gender-biased stereotypes while encoding her own biography and essence into her art, making her oeuvre unique to Early Modern Europe.

Artemisia Gentileschi's oeuvre is vital to the world of art history. As a majority of Western history is documented from the male perspective, Gentileschi is one of few who offer a diverse outlook on Baroque society. Her use of popular, cultural stories allows the public not only to understand the situations she is portraying, but also to relate to them. Her coded biography seen in her art provided a new perspective to potentially relatable to women who faced similar experiences, while shedding light on womanhood in Early Modern Europe. An examination of Gentileschi's life and work reflects an obvious inequality between sexes in Western Europe, specifically during the Baroque Period. That divide has not seceded entirely, for art historians still make conclusions about Gentileschi's work based on gender stereotypes, rather than concrete evidence. She is no longer notorious for her defiant expression within her art, staying unknown to most individuals. Yet, her work proves as an important slice of history, offering a window into the complexities of her time, place, and circumstances. Therefore,

Artemisia Gentileschi's work speaks volumes about Western society, establishing the artist as one of the most innovative and dynamic figures of the Baroque Era.

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