An Argument and Survey on Artemisia Gentileschi’s Allegory of Fame

Rachel Done
Portland State University

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/studentsymposium

Part of the History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons


This Event is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Research Symposium by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. For more information, please contact pdxscholar@pdx.edu.
An Argument and Survey on Artemisia Gentileschi’s *Allegory of Fame*
By: Rachel Done
The Allegory of Fame is a recently rediscovered painting that is attributed to Artemisia Gentileschi. As is common with all of Artemisia’s paintings, there come certain questions among scholars such as, is it truly her work? When was it made? Who was it made for? This particular painting also features a rare subject for Artemisia--an allegory. Allegory of Fame is unusual for Artemisia in terms of size and composition as well. I was attracted to exploring these questions and peculiarities around such a unique painting by Artemisia. Due to the controversies around the timeline and provenance of this work--depending on where it was established in Artemisia’s career--it could widen up her oeuvre and scholars consideration of whom her patrons might have been. Unfortunately, due to how recently the painting has been rediscovered, this piece has very little research or scholarship regarding it. Most of the literature on the Allegory of Fame regard the work to have been painted during Artemisia’s first period in Naples (1630-1637) before her trip to London in (1637 or 1638 and 1642). My argument is two fold in that I think the Allegory of Fame was either painted in Naples and sent out to a royal patron in England, or was painted in London. My research has led me to believe that this piece is potentially part of a larger composition that scholars are not aware of today; so therefore it is problematic to categorize the subject as an allegory of Fame. Yet, even in supplying evidence of when and where Allegory of Fame was created, this leaves

---

1 See Appendix, Figure 1. I assume the painting has been newly attributed due to so little has been written on it, and what has dates to 2011.
2 See Appendix, Figure 2. For further research look into her Allegory of Inclination, and Self Portrait as Allegory of Painting by Artemisia.
a number of questions such as, where is the rest of the work this painting was a part of? Was this mysterious work completed solely by Artemisia, or was it another one of her collaborations with contemporary artists? Why was *Allegory of Fame* separated from the rest of its composition? These inquiries will have to be solved in another article after more intensive research has been done in archives and the piece has been examined chemically or by x-ray for more clues. One must also take into account that these questions might never be answered; as is the unfortunate way with some of Artemisia’s work.

Before one can fully analyze a painting by Artemisia, it is imperative to find evidence that the work is by her. There have been several paintings over the years that have been attributed to her that scholars disagree on. One argument against this work being hers is that there is no signature on it; but it should be noted that it was not unusual for Artemisia to refrain from signing her works as she was sporadic in doing so. A lack of signature therefore does not rule out the *Allegory of Fame* as being Artemisia’s. To determine if the work is hers one must turn to the stylistic and technical skills observable in the work. In favor of *Allegory of Fame* being an work of Artemisia there are several pieces of evidence. The figure wears the same shade of rich red that Artemisia favored that is seen in *Clio, Muse of History* and was copied by her admirers,

---


as well as there being a high degree of polish in the handling of the colors.\textsuperscript{7} The fabric has a solidity to it, and the lace at the collar appears to have the weblike painterly effect Artemisia adopted in Venice, and the classic triangular shape she favored. \textsuperscript{8} The subject has a physiognomy that is typical of Artemisia’s later career where her more robust figures have become more elegant and slender.\textsuperscript{9} There is no landscape which is typical since she struggled like Orazio with perspective.\textsuperscript{10} With these stylistic themes and technical skills evident in \textit{Allegory of Fame}, it is reasonable to consider the piece done by Artemisia.

To understand the \textit{Allegory of Fame} it is necessary to understand the subject’s iconography and the ways it has been depicted. Though scholars have shown that Artemisia gained some writing skill later in life, it is unknown to what degree she read.\textsuperscript{11} She most likely still used visual models from other paintings and prints, what she knew from conversations with those at court, and oral performances at the time to inform the iconography and depiction of her subjects.\textsuperscript{12} The most direct source for depiction of Fame available at the time was Cesare Ripa’s \textit{Iconologia}, the second edition featuring

\textsuperscript{7} See footnote 4. Locker, Jesse. “Artemisia in the Eyes of the Neapolitan Poets.”

\textsuperscript{8} See Appendix, Figure 3. Locker, Jesse. “\textit{Donne forti ed intrepidi}: Artemisia and Venetian Painting,” from \textit{Artemisia Gentileschi: The Language of Painting} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 73, 75. See also Lattuada, Ricardo. “Artemisia and Naples,” 384-85. The picture is detail picture of the figure of Esther. There is some degradation, but one can the evidence of her technique.

\textsuperscript{9} See Appendix, Figure 4 and 5. Marshall, Christopher R. “The Spirit of Caesar,” 20. Compared to Artemisia’s early works, by her late Neapolitan period the painter adopted more slender and idealized figures.

\textsuperscript{10} Locker, Jesse. “\textit{Donne forti ed intrepidi},” 75-76. The underpainting supports that Artemisia had problems with background and perspective, which her father Orazio struggled with as well. As being taught the skills of painting from her father and unable to attend male painters academies this would make sense.

\textsuperscript{11} Sutherland Harris, Ann. “Artemisia Gentileschi; The Literate Illiterate of Learning from Example” in \textit{Docere, Delectare, Movere: Affeti, devozione, e retorica nel linguaggio artistico del primo barocco ramano} (Rome, 1998), 105-09.

illustrations which was published in Rome (1603) while Artemisia was a little girl. The illustration of Fame in the 1603 and 1709 edition of *Iconologia* is the male Mercury. In turning to depictions from the generation prior to Artemisia and her contemporaries, a peculiarity arises. Nearly all of these artists depicted the allegory as female. Yet these feminine figures carry the instruments of Mercurial Fame including the trumpet(s), angelic wings, wearing a winged helmet, or a caduceus (although not the horse, for some reason.) The explanation that seems the best fitting is that the artists seem to have blended the iconography of Ripa’s Mercurial Fame with the Roman/Greek goddess of Fama/Ossa who was also a messenger for the gods. From the start of depicting Fame there seems to be a blending of their figures with others. One can see this habit of blending the figure of Fame continue on in works such as Jan Van Der Straet’s *Allegory*, Bernardo Strozzi’s *Personification of Fame*, and Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione’s *Allegory in Honour of the Ruling Couple of Mantua.* Another point to consider is that the figure of Fame is rarely depicted alone and is commonly used as visual rhetorical device where they “announce” fame. This is observable in both the works of the generation prior to Artemisia and her contemporaries, such as Battista Angolo del Moro’s *La Fama*, Hendrik Goltzius’s *The Allegory of Fame and History*, Jacopo De Barbari’s *Allegory of Victory and Fame*, Peter Paul Reuben’s *Equestrian Portrait of the* 

---

14 See Appendix, Figure 6. Noted exception to this pattern are observable in Figures 7, 10, and 14.  
16 Modesti, Adelina. “Il Pennello Virile,” 131-142. I also think it is possible blending of the figures is also due to the word “fame” in Italian is the feminine “fama.”  
17 See Appendix, Figures 8-10.
Duke of Buckingham (1625) and Michele Parrasio Allegory of the Birth of the Infante Don Fernando (1575).17

What of Artemisia’s own renditions of the subject? She has painted allegories such as Inclination and Painting, but there appear to be some indirect debates that she painted several other versions of Fame.18 One of these debates is that Artemisia helped her father Orazio paint Peace and Arts Allegories in London.19 It does not seem unlikely for Artemisia to have helped in father Orazio’s endeavor; even if she was not physically there it could have been possible for her to send a canvas as small as the Allegory of Fame to him as her contribution. If it is true that Artemisia helped and/or completed her father’s work in London it encourages one to study the subject of the allegory of Fame depicted in the composition of Peace and Arts Allegories. The figure of Fame in Peace and Arts Allegories is similar to Artemisia’s Allegory of Fame in its Caravaggesque style of realism in the lack of wings and wreath around her head. There seems to be a weightiness and an air of refinement to the figure in London that Artemisia’s allegory shares even if it is a half figure.20 Both works also share a simplicity in regards to the figure holding only one trumpet. This simplicity is enough so that it can make one doubt if both figures are even Fame. In Orazio/Artemisia’s ceiling, there is another figure who is depicted similarly and holds a trumpet. There appears to be nothing in their iconography that distinctly distinguishes the two figures from each

17 See Appendix, Figures 11-15.
other. The confusion between the iconography around this subject is repeated in
Artemisia’s work with *Clio, the Muse of History*. In R. Ward Bissell’s foundational
catalogue raisonné, the *Clio* is labeled a “so called *Fame.*” The labeling of *Clio* as *Fame*
I think occurred for several reasons. One, both Garrard and Bissell look at the inventory
of Abraham Van der Doort taken at Whitehall. The inventory reads of a woman
holding a trumpet in her left hand and a pen in her right, and because of the trumpet the
figure is labeled as *Fame*. Yet, Bissell and Garrard have pointed out that *Clio* cannot be
the same *Fame* in the inventory because of its size. In short, I am suggesting that similar
mislabeleding could have happened to *Allegory of Fame*. Due to its size and composition I
think that this was part of a larger composition such as *Peace and Arts Allegories*. It is
problematic to label this piece as an allegory of Fame without knowing the larger
composition. A point to consider is that in Artemisia’s oeuvre, whenever she has painted
a solitary figure, she has left enough iconography to identify the subject. Unlike
Artemisia’s contemporary Elisabetta Sirani’s *Allegory of Fame*, Artemisia’s piece does
not have adequate iconography to go off on to identify the subject as an allegory of
Fame. That being said, it should be noted how dramatic and unique the composition of
*Allegory of Fame* is, if Fame is truly the subject. Most depictions of this subject are
active and are in the act of announcing fame. The tilted head and pointed gaze, the horn
not quite close to her lips suggests that the figure is waiting for an outcome- as if to see

---

23 See Appendix, Figure 19. One can also consider Artemisia’s depictions of Mary Magdalene for evidence
of how normally the artist leaves enough iconographic elements around a solitary figure to identify them.
who will become famous. This is further evidence that this is an Artemisia painting since her paintings often depicted the quiet tense moments either before or after action.²⁴

*Allegory of Fame* may be part of a larger composition, but the literature on it is so sparse that it does not give much guidance as to where the rest of the composition is. To my knowledge the only piece of literature on it is a single page from Roberto Contini and Francesco Solinas’s *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Story of a Passion.*²⁵ Contini and Solinas put the work being painted in Naples and done during Artemisia’s first period there. Their evidence for this is the Vouet like style that *Allegory of Fame* is painted in and its similarities to *Clio.* Contini and Solinas are cautious but do say that if the painting was done in London it outshined any work Orazio could have done and should not be confused with his work.²⁶

I argue that that this timeline is wrong or their reasoning is over simplified. Either *Allegory of Fame* was painted in London for a patron, or if it was painted in Naples and it was sent to a patron in England- possibly a royal one since due to the Whitehall inventory.²⁷ The supporting evidence for the *Allegory of Fame* is the size. The painting is small, and almost perfectly square suggesting it might have been installed with other works as an architectural decoration. This work is small enough that Artemisia could have reasonably painted it during one of her short stays in London. It is possible after her father’s death Artemisia could have used his studio to paint it in as well. There is also evidence of the subject itself. Royal inventory records at Whitehall

---

²⁴ To see further note Artemisia’s depictions of the biblical characters Judith, Sisera, and Susanna.
²⁶ Ibid.
²⁷ See footnote 21.
show of an Artemisia painting depicting fame. Another point to consider is that in Protestant England, ones sees a gap in depicting traditional Christian subjects -partly a side effect of most of the painters at court and the king being Protestant. Instead of traditional Christian subjects being depicted, artists in England seemed to focused on portraiture and elements from mythology and Classical literature. Poets at court were also interested in these topics as well and it would not be far fetched to think Artemisia could have drawn inspiration from them due to her tendency to befriend poets and intelligentsia at court. There was also a trend to substitute royal and nobles figures for god, goddess, and allegories. Rubens cycle on Marie de’ Medici serves as a perfect example of this. An allegorical depiction at Charles I court would fit right in with the work artists were doing in that period and would be considered ‘in trend’. Artemisia seems to have taken note of the tastes of the court, for the only other work she painted in London had the subject of an allegory as well- the Self Portrait as the Allegory of Painting. It is important to note Queen Henrietta Maria and her involvement with allegories; afterall, she was the one who commissioned Orazio Gentileschi to paint Peace and Arts Allegories. The Queen was also Catholic, and had taken Orazio under care due their similar religious affiliation. The same could have easily happened to Artemisia upon her arrival in London, maybe even more so due to her gender.

\[28\] See footnote 21.
\[29\] See Footnote 19, 227. It should be noted that Orazio did not fully adept himself to the English Court tastes, hence Charles I’s disinterest in his work.
\[31\] See Appendix, Figure 17.
\[32\] See Footnote 19, 227
It would not be far-fetched to think Artemisia was asked to paint a small part of larger composition for either Charles I or Henrietta Maria. It is possible that either one of them discarded Artemisia’s work because the monarchs taste in art was too different, or the rest of the work was simply lost due to the change in the monarchy. The issue with all of this is that there are no records that I know of what Artemisia did in London—except the Self Portrait as the Allegory of Painting—so it is hard to place the work during this period since there is only one work of hers to compare to which is in poor condition. If this work was to be confirmed to have taken place during Artemisia’s time in London, it could set a precedence and timeline on which scholars could start building upon both for more possible works in London, and for her time in Naples.

A second hypothesis is that Artemisia painted Allegory of Fame in Naples and it was sent to a patron in England, possibly a royal one for the same reasons as noted prior; the subject was popular at English court. There was also her ailing father, who was likely struggling to keep up on his commissions, as we see Artemisia do as she becomes older. It is possible Orazio asked Artemisia to paint a small bit and send it since none of his own sons were reliable enough to help him and he was disliked by the court. The painting is also small enough to have been easily shipped as a “token.” Artemisia, like her father Orazio, was in the habit of sending paintings out in order to gain commissions or to seek residency out of Naples and several of her paintings were in

---

33 See Footnote 19, 228-30.
the possession of Charles I. This subject could be seen as a way to cater to English
tastes.

Even though it is debatable when and where Artemisia painted *Allegory of Fame*,
it should not be contested that it was for a patron outside of Naples. If one considers
Sirani’s *Allegory of Fame* and Jusepe Ribera *Allegory* one can see that Artemisia’s
version was painted for different tastes. One sees a typical depiction of Fame in Sirani’s
work. Sirani is comparable to Artemisia being that the piece was done by a critically
appraised female artist of the same time, similar subject, and with a closed in
composition. Sirani handled the subject conventionally by Modern standards due to her
style of Bolognese Classicism. Ribera’s *Allegory of History* bears a striking resemblance
to Artemisia’s *Clio, Muse of History* and her *Allegory of Fame*. It can be seen in the
minimal approach taken to subject, the wreath, the similar outfit, and the colors; if it
were not for the book that Ribera’s figure holds upright, it would probably be labeled as
an allegory of Fame as well. Showing again how easily the lines can be blurred in
depicting the allegory of Fame. Unlike Artemisia’s composition, Ribera’s painting holds
that sense of conventionality in the stiffness of the figure and the color of the props that
was common for Neapolitan painting. Artemisia did not paint *Allegory of Fame* in this
Neapolitan style because of a lack of capability. Scholars know that Artemisia could
paint in this style as she received many commissions during her time in Naples,
suggesting her work was well received and catered to such tastes. The way Artemisia’s

---

37 See Appendix, Figures 19 and 20.
*Allegory of Fame* is composed holds a different impression - that of impending action. She also has only clothed the figure in red, which was not part of her much admired blue, gold, and white formula in Naples. In this way, Artemisia’s painting must have been painted for non-Neapolitan tastes which could arguably have been French and English due to the subject matter. Without knowing the larger composition one can not derive a proper reading of the subject matter, and appreciate the ingenuity of Artemisia’s composition of the subject.

With the *Allegory of Fame* one can see yet another innovative, if problematic piece by Artemisia Gentileschi. It is my hope that this painting will be further studied by other scholars so as to confirm or correct my research that the painting was either done in London, or sent outside of Naples; and that it is potentially part of a much larger composition that is currently unknown to scholars.
Appendix
Bibliography


Marshall, Christopher R. “‘The Spirit of Caesar in the Soul of a Woman’: Artemisia Gentileschi and the will to succeed, 1629-1654.” In Melbourne Art Journal, 8, 2005, 4-27.


Ripa, Caesar. Iconologia. ed. 1 Getty Research Institute. (Rome, Appresso Lepido Facij, 1603), 142-44.

Sutherland Harris, Ann. “Artemisia Gentileschi; The Literate Illiterate of Learning from Example.” In Docere, Delectare, Movere: Affeti, devozione, e retorica nel linguaggio artistico del primo barocco ramano (Rome, 1998), 105-09.