Artemisia



A discussion of Judith Slaying Holofernes, circa 1620, by Artemisia Gentileschi Painted for Cosimo II de' Medici in Firenze¹

> Originally Written Feb 25, 2002 For Fina 241-Art History IV During a Fine Art diploma at OUC

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¹ I am not being pretentious. I just prefer the sound of Firenze to Florence, so I am not translating Italian cities into English.

1.02 Introduction

Artemisia Gentileschi chose a history painting when she painted the story from the book of Judith. Women artists typically were expected not only to be less talented than men, but they were also expected to paint the lesser genres of portraits and still-lifes. (Jordan, 22) Nevertheless, this story of Judith was depicted five times (Hartt, 775) by herself as well as by many other painters. Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506) of Padova, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1573-1610), fiorentino Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564), her father, Orazio Gentileschi (15627-1639), and Elisabetta Sirani (1638-1665) are only a few examples of those who painted the theme of Judith.

2.0 Artemisia: Her Life

Artemisia lived from about 1593 to about 1653. It is bizarre that her death date is not fixed. Had she been a man of lesser talent, a date for her death would have been known. Her father died in 1639. There has also been uncertainty with her birth date. It was believed up until 1968, that she was born in 1597 when R Ward Bissell established her birth date as 1593. (Garrard, 183) Other sources list her birth date as 1592. (York, 499)

Artemisia's father, a "moderately successful painter" (Cohen, 48) was toscano Orazio Gentileschi (15627-1639). Her mother died in 1605 leaving Orazio to raise one twelve-year-old daughter and three younger sons in Roma³. He taught all of his children the family craft, and Artemisia proved gifted. (Cohen, 49)

With a married women neighbour, Donna Tuzia, as her companion and chaperon, Artemisia painted with Agostino Tassi who taught her perspective. (Garrard, 23) On one occasion, with Tuzia on an errand, Tassi raped Artemisia. Trying to make amends, he later proposed marriage which she accepted. (Cohen, 49) She knew nothing of the existence of Tassi's wife who Tassi later claimed to be dead. Orazio was incensed and demanded a trial. (Garrard, 403)

Artemisia was tortured with thumbscrews⁴ and was publicly examined (Nordland, 55) to ascertain the truth. It is not fair to judge the past by present standards, but it is hard not to come to the conclusion that Artemisia was victimized by the rape and by the trial. She and her virtue were put on trial with the aggressor, Tassi. Giovanni Battista Stiattesi, a relative to Artemisia's future husband, falsely told the court that Tassi had murdered his wife who, in fact, was dead. (Garrard, 404) The result of the sevenmonth trial was that Tassi was released from prison within a month of the trial's conclusion. He received a little more than time served which amounted to less than nine months in prison. (Garrard, 406) He never did marry Artemisia.

The day after the trial, (Spike, 17) Artemisia married Pierantonio di Vincenzo Stiattesi, a painter of no significance and moved with him to Firenze by 1613. (Cohen, 50) After 1622, she never saw her "ne'erdo-well" (Cohen, 50) husband again. Her paintings supported herself and her two daughters. (Cohen, 50, footnote 13) She was technically a very accomplished painter, but she was also gifted in securing

² Engineers are not really happy until they can number everything.

³ Garrard on page 21 wrote four sons not three.

⁴ Garrard called it sibille.

commissions. (Cohen, 50) However, this was out of necessity as she was struggling to survive. (York, 509) She painted in Roma, Genova, Venezia and Napoli. She also traveled to England and painted with her father in the court of Charles I. Like Holofernes (circa 538 BC) many years earlier, Charles I lost his head in AD 1649. Artemisia had to leave England prior to the Civil war starting October 23, 1642. Artemisia died an internationally lauded artist in Napoli in 1652 or 1653. (Cohen, 50)

3.0 If Shakespeare had a creative sister called Judith (Woolf, 48)

Did **his**tory just ignore women or did the circumstances just preclude women from being creative? Virginia Woolf (née Adeline Virginia Stephen) (1882-1941) investigated this question in her novel, <u>A Room of One's Own</u>. In order to be creative, one must have, above all, dined well. (Woolf, 20) After all, thinking is hard to do with hunger pangs impinging on one's mind. Furthermore, one must be creative in the "white light of truth" not in the "red light of emotion" (Woolf, 34) and certainly not in a rage (Woolf, 68 and 70). To be truly creative, one also needs a room of one's own to be free from scrutiny and interruptions. (Woolf, 27 and 103)

Shakespeare⁵ lived from 1564 to 1616, producing most of his works after 1594 and in fact, had four sisters, not one named Judith⁶, and three brothers. Woolf (51) stated that "any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at." Virginia Woolf hoped (107) that one "will possess oneself of money enough to travel and to idle, to contemplate the future or the past of the world, to dream over books and loiter at street corners and let the line of thought dip deep into the stream." If one can do these things, creativity, if present, will flourish.

4.0 Artemisia had a room of her own, but barely

It is fortunate that Artemisia's father was a painter. This gave her easy access to her father's studio and would have allowed her to develop her skill further than most women of her day. She also would have had opportunity to meet the stream of influential people coming through her father's studio, Tassi excepted. She painted Susanna and the Elders in 1610 challenging scholars to believe that "an unusually accomplished technical performance" had been achieved by such a young painter who according to her father Orazio had only been painting one year. (Garrard, 184) This painting, done before she met Tassi, raises speculation that she had been abused by her father. (Jordan, 22) In the seventeenth century, Orazio was considered the better painter (Hoashi, 8) but in modern times it is recognized that Artemisia eclipsed (Nordland, 55) her "less imaginative father" (Hartt, 775) but she had to struggle to keep her room of her own and food on the table. (York, 509)

⁵ Please allow me this digression. Shakespeare was a contemporary of Artemisia. Perhaps she saw Macbeth which came out in England in 1605-6. Creative people influence each other.

⁶ His kids were Susanna and the twins Hamnet and Judith.

5.0 The Historical Background of Judith slaying Holofernes

It is significant that Artemisia chose Judith and not Delilah or Salome because Holofernes died at the hand of Judith while Salome and Delilah were just a step in the series of events that led to the demise of Saint John the Baptist and Samson respectively. Judith took his sword and actually cut off his head.

King Nebuchadnezzar⁷, ruler of the Assyrians from the city of Nineveh⁸, used his general Holofernes as an instrument of retribution against the western nations because they had not assisted him in his war against Medea, a country in present day north eastern Iran. Holofernes forced all but the Israelites into submission. Achior, the leader of the Ammonites, an ancient Semitic people of present-day Jordan, warned Holofernes that he would be fighting God if he attacked the faithful Israelites. The ides of March were not involved, but he did not heed the warning. He besieged the Palestinian town of Bethulia, near Jerusalem.

Judith, a beautiful God-fearing widow of Bethulia, entered the Assyrian camp on the pretence of informing against her people, the besieged Israelites. She was invited to a feast in the tent of Holofernes who subsequently drank too much and passed out. Judith beheaded him, concealed his head in a bag, and carried it back to Bethulia. This spurred the Israelites onto, what had to have been, a glorious victory. This story is apocryphal because Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 BC, and the story of Judith is supposed to have taken place at the end of the Babylonian Captivity in 5389. History calls Judith a hero¹⁰ but still has to qualify the story with the mention of her duplicity in deceiving Holofernes. She used "strategies that evil women employ against good men as well." (Garrard, 292) Jeanne d'Arc got burned at the stake for her heroism in 1431, albeit by the English, whom she had helped the French defeat, turning the tide in France's favour in the Hundred Years' War.

6.0 Artemisia's Judith Slaying Holofernes, circa 1620

Artemisia Gentileschi was a follower of the Italian Baroque painter Caravaggio who was the "exemplar of naturalist painter of the seventeenth century." (Microsoft Encarta and Hartt, 772-3) Three paintings¹¹ of the decapitation were completed, one of Holofernes screaming his last gasp by Caravaggio in circa 1598 and two by Artemisia completed after her rape and humiliating (at the least) trial. She did one in 1612 to 1613 which is in the collection of the Galleria Nazionale di Capodimonte in Napoli showing the blood-stained sheets (symbolic of her rape or just of a dying man) and the struggling arms of Holofernes about to go slack (Addison, 24).

Was the motivation behind Artemisia's paintings of Judith her rape or was it the seemingly countless number of painters including Caravaggio who painted the same subject? Woolf did not believe that

⁷ Nebuchadnezzar II was king of Babylon not king of Assyria according to Microsoft Encarta.

 $^{^{8}}$ The Assyrian capital Nineveh was destroyed in 612 BC by Nabopolassar, the father of Nebuchadnezzar.

⁹ I am using Microsoft Encarta for the source of the story of Judith.

¹⁰ According to Green on page 636, hero no longer refers just to men, but heroine only refers to women.

¹¹ Please see the Appendix.

artistic genius could arise from hate. (Woolf, 34, 68 and 70) However, Artemisia's rape and subsequent fast marriage¹² (Spike, 17) still must have been motivating factors. The bracelet worn by Judith shows the symbol of Artemis, the Greek equivalent of the Roman moon goddess, Diana. Artemis is Artemisia's namesake, and she is asserting her own capabilities. (Garrard, 334) At the age of 56, Artemisia wrote to her patron siciliano, Antonio Ruffo, "My illustrious Lordship, I'll show you what a woman can do." (Addison, 24)

Her painting of the same subject, in circa 1620, painted in Firenze, looks very similar except for the costumes and the parabolic flow of blood from Holofernes' neck¹³. This later version of 1620, now in the Uffizi, was ordered by Cosimo II de' Medici (Garrard, 321). Judith is reported to be a self-portrait of Artemisia herself. (Hartt, 775) Both the maidservant and Judith could be Artemisia from her Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting in 1630¹⁴. The hairstyles are different but that means little. What is most striking about the portrait is the realism of the dying Holofernes. It is very believable. His contorted face, bulging eyes and struggling arms make time look to have been frozen.

7.0 Artemisia Gentileschi and Galileo

Artemisia uses chiaroscuro that Caravaggio perfected in his work. The light appears to have come from a single candle, albeit a very strong candle, and the figures are defined by light and dark. The faces actually appear to be crescent moons. Galileo shattered the view of the moon being a perfectly smooth sphere when he observed the craters of the moon through a telescope. It is presumed that Artemisia who actually corresponded with Galileo would have seen these drawings. (Topper, 10) Topper and Gillis also presumed that she also knew of Galileo's theory of parabolic paths for projectiles. This is because the blood from Holofernes' necks spurts out in parabolic arcs. The blood in Caravaggio's Judith painting shoots out in straight lines. Galileo's theory was for cannonballs and was published in Two New Sciences in 1638. (Topper, 12)

It is never mentioned that a scientific discovery was first made in a painting. Did Artemisia come up with this theory herself or did it come from Galileo? Artemisia was taught painting as a child and not much else. She had to teach herself to read and write as an adult. (York, 505) Galileo wrote of the parabolic trajectory theory in 1608 in his notes, but one must not confuse a lack of education with a lack of intelligence. Her interest and awareness of the moon and the parabola indicated an intelligence which Artemisia certainly possessed.

¹² This was the very next day after the trial had concluded.

¹³ See copies of the paintings appended to this report. They were taken from Garrard's Text. Caravaggio's came from Mark Harden's Artchive.

¹⁴ Please see the Appendix.

8.0 Other Judiths

From the website called "The Chapel Perilous," thirty-two images of Renaissance paintings of Judith were shown on the web page of "Judith, a priestess¹⁵ of man's severed head." Michelangelo shows the dead body of Holofernes with the bloody neck hidden and the head in Judith's hand. Botticelli and Johann Liss show the severed neck, but only Caravaggio and Gentileschi show Judith in the act of cutting. Only Artemisia Gentileschi shows a full strength Holofernes, awake and struggling, with blood spurting from what appears to be the initial cut. In most cases, she is fully-clothed¹⁶ and is carrying a sword and the head of Holofernes. Sometimes her maidservant, Abra, is present. Gustave Klimt in the late nineteenth century also painted a Judith. (Garrard, 301)

9.0 Judy Chicago's Dinner Party, 1974

Something drove Artemisia Gentileschi to paint her masterpieces and it was not through gentle encouragement from society. She was doing exactly what her heart told her to do. She did not conform to how society believed she should act according to her gender. Her story is incredible because she was raped and treated like the criminal and then she became a single mother and produced her paintings to just support herself and her daughters. It was a struggle for her because, in her letters, she often mentions poverty. (York, 509) Artemisia Gentileschi, Judith and Virginia Woolf are three place settings of Chicago's thirty-nine place work of art. Those are compelling reasons alone to mention Chicago's work which she referred to "as a reinterpretation of the Last Supper from the point of view of those who've done the cooking throughout history." (Chicago's website)

10.0 Conclusions

In the 1997 French film, Artemisia¹⁷, written for the screen and directed by Agnes Merlet, Agostino Tassi described to Artemisia what he saw from his prison window, "two hills-one runs into the other. On one side near the hill that's farther away, I see a tree. Our eyes follow its branches up to the sky... in the evening, when the light begins to fade, my hills become greenish gray and lose their depth like paper cutouts."

Artemisia lived in an age when people were judged by things beyond their control, their gender and the social standing of their parents, and not by the quality of their actions. It have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all

¹⁵ This website listed Salome as another even though she only demanded the head of Saint John the Baptist and actually did not do the cutting.

¹⁶ Versions by Conrad Miet, Hans Baldung

¹⁷ See the web site of Maynez.

¹⁸ This is the message from Martin Luther King Jr's "I have a Dream" speech delivered on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC on August 28, 1963. "I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character."

flesh shall see it together."¹⁹ (King Jr) Artemisia dangled her "line of thought in the stream" and the glory of her masterpieces which "straightened the crooked" gender inequality have stood the passage of time and in her own words, she showed us "what a woman can do." (Addison, 24)

Artemisia was mistreated and then ignored by history. That hardly seems fair. Obviously, the past had its problems, but that does not mean nothing good should be allowed to come from it. Just the trial of Tassi alone was a shocker. The rape victim was tortured during the trial, demanded by her father, of her rapist. Something is not adding up. Do we know the whole story?

Before we convict dead men of the past, do they not deserve a fair trial? There should be evidence presented including possible motivations of those producing the evidence. The accused should be presumed not guilty until proven otherwise. Is the only proof of possible child abuse just one painting? How many true sources are there? Are the different sources referencing each other, so there is only one source? It seems it may be impossible to fairly litigate the past since all people concerned are long dead, and nobody currently alive has even a little blame. We should not even attempt to do so even if our own present-day "houses" are in order.

So, what can we do about it? Nothing, except be thankful a single mother was able to flourish, talk to fellow intellectuals and paint in the court of Charles I. She made a career for herself thanks to the tutelage and opportunities given by her father. People can get mad over something that cannot be changed, but they should instead celebrate the many positive aspects of the life of Artemisia Gentileschi, a painting genius. Genius never has and never will have gender.

¹⁹ Does this make me pedantic as well as pretentious? However, all flesh does mean all flesh. This is an excerpt from Martin Luther King Jr's "I have a Dream" speech.

11.0 References

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This site had thirty-two Renaissance paintings of Judith and Holofernes. I cross verified Gentileschi's paintings with Garrard's text and the majority of the others with Mark Harden's Artchive.

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I have used this site for all four of OUC's Art History courses and I have not had reason to complain about the authenticity of the paintings as of yet.

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This speech is accurate as far as I can tell in the sense of the message delivered and the accuracy of portions of the speech that I have put to rout.

This speech was originally intended for racial injustices in the United States but it also fits to gender and gay pride issues or anytime somebody is not allowed to be who they are because of race, gender, etc.

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http://www.mala.bc.ca/~mcneil/chicago.htm#amaform

I obtained the names of all thirty-nine place settings of the Dinner Party here.

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> I wanted to find out the tombstone information for Elisabetta Sirani. I was surprised to find that Hartt only mentioned Elisabetta Sirani as one line on page 16. I guess her short life (27 years) may explain it.

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p 17, 20, 27, 34, 51, 68, 70, 103, 107.

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12.0 Appendix

Paintings of Judith Slaying Holofernes



Artemisia Gentileschi
Judith Slaying
Holofernes
1612-13
Museo di Capodimonte
Napoli(Garrard, illus. 4)



Artemisia Gentileschi Judith Slaying Holofernes c1620 Uffizi, Firenze (Garrard, illus. 8)

This is the painting I have chosen to discuss.



Artemisia Gentileschi Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting, 1630 Kensington Palace, London (Garrard, illus. 14)



Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio Judith Beheading Holofernes c1598 Galleria Nazionale dell'Arte Antica, Roma (Mark Harden's Artchive)

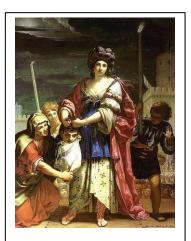


Orazio Gentileschi (from Wikipedia)

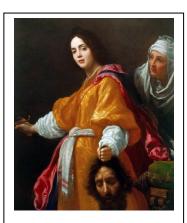


Andrea Mantegna, 1490's

Wikipedia-Judith Beheading Holoferness



Elisabetta Sirani Wikipedia, Elisabetta Sirani



Allori-Cristofano-1613

Wikipedia-Judith Beheading Holoferness



Sandro Botticelli 1470 Return of Judith 2 bethulia

Wikipedia-Judith



Cranach-TheElder-Lucas-1530

Wikipedia-Judith Beheading Holoferness



Judith I Gustav Klimt 1901

Wikipedia-Judith Beheading Holoferness



Gustav Klimt Wikipedia-Judith Beheading Holoferness



Franz Stuck, 1924 Wikipedia-Judith Beheading Holoferness



Michelangelo, Sistine Chapel



Michelangelo, Sistine Chapel