

Article

“Grand Narratives” and “Personal Dramas”: (Re)reading the Masterpieces by Artemisia Gentileschi

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Abstract: This article discusses the oeuvre of Artemisia Gentileschi, a prominent Baroque painter who was rediscovered by art historian Roberto Longhi in the 1910s. Today, her art is interpreted through various lenses, including art theory, women’s studies, and psychoanalysis. Gentileschi’s paintings are often “read” in close reference to her painful biography, with a focus on the “chiaroscuro” of trauma and its overcoming. Significantly, such biography-oriented approaches seem to be predominant in scholarship on art created by women. The argument presented is that Gentileschi’s works require a thorough re-reading free of “compulsive biographism”, as postulated by Salomon. The focus should shift from an empathic *Einfühlung* (or empathic projection) towards an objective analysis based purely on art-historical or sociological criteria. This article also explores the presence of the socially mediated and *mediatised* figure of the artist in fine literature (novels by Banti, Lapierre and Vreeland), cinematic biographies (*Artemisia*, directed by Merlet, documentaries (*Artemisia Gentileschi: Warrior Painter*, directed by River), anime (a series titled *Arte*, directed by Takayuki Hamana), and graphic novels (Ferlut and Baudouin; Siciliano). In this artistic constellation Artemisia is labelled as an art/feminist “icon”, a female genius, and as in numerous scholarly texts dedicated to her, “a victim”. I propose that the discussed literary and visual texts related to Gentileschi be interpreted as *symptomatic* (in line with Panofsky’s concept of ‘iconology’) of the contemporary mentality, which is filtered through feminist and subaltern thought.

Keywords: Artemisia Gentileschi’s iconography and iconology; mediatization of art; literary and cinematic interpretations of Baroque paintings; great female artists’ biographies; women’s studies in the arts; the motif of the victim (and victimisation); psychoanalytic explorations in the arts; the trauma of rape and sexual violence; the biblical figures of Judith and Susanna



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1. Introduction: *La grande pittrice*

In the Kensington Palace pinacotheca, currently owned by King Charles III, there is a small-scale canvas that is both an allegorical representation of the art of painting and a (presumed) self-portrait of Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1653), an Italian Baroque *pittrice*¹ now included among the most prominent Caravaggisti. This painting, interpreted by modern sensibilities as a kind of artistic credo, was painted around 1638 in London. Gentileschi, who was then in the prime of her life, an artistic “celebrity” feted at European courts, came there to assist her father Orazio in his last paintings, commissioned by Charles I. *Autoritratto come allegoria della Pittura* (Figure 1) fulfils (almost) all the requirements detailed by Cesare Ripa in his canonical work on *Iconology* (Cesare Ripa [1593] 1764; see also, e.g., Mary D. Garrard 1980; Anna Reynolds 2016).² The Artemisia’s props fit into the allegorical convention: a stately, shining robe, a palette and paintbrushes, and a mask pendant crowning a gold chain around her neck. Nevertheless, a significant detail here deviates from visual orthodoxy. In this type of depiction, the mouth of Pittura (Painting) is usually obscured by a blindfold to emphasise the fact that painting is a silent and contemplative art.³ In contrast, Gentileschi leaves out the cloth, as if she “refused to be silenced” (Breeze Barrington 2020; see also: Emily LaBarge 2020). This omission strongly

stimulates the imagination of contemporary viewers, particularly in the context of the painter's biography.

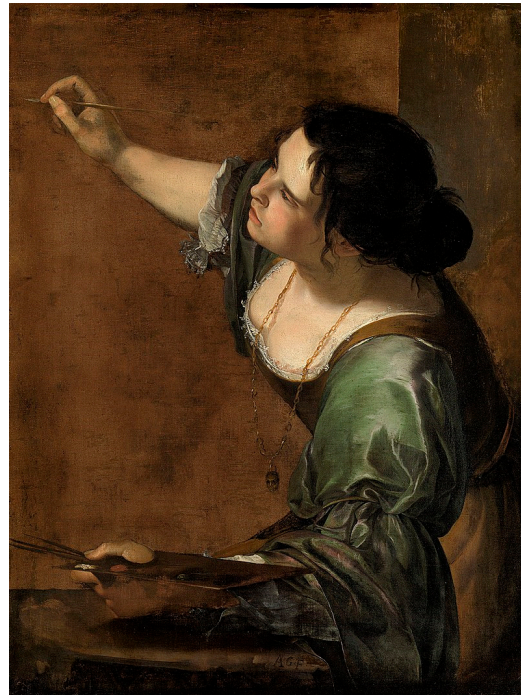


Figure 1. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Self-Portrait as an Allegory of Painting*, ca. 1638–1639, oil on canvas, 98.6 × 75.2 cm, Royal Collection, London. Wikimedia Commons.

And it is a biography rich in moments of triumph and pain, brilliance, and shadow; metaphorically speaking, it is a veritable “chiaroscuro” of life. The trajectory of Gentileschi’s artistic itinerary, from her birth in Rome to the courts of Florence, Naples, and London, is punctuated by traumatic and even devastating events. Suffice is to say that only one of her five children, a daughter named Prudenzia, lived to adulthood. But the event that founded the myth of Artemisia, on which her social “persona” (the etymology refers to a “mask”) is based, was her rape by Agostino Tassi, a respected painter, friend of the family, and collaborator of Orazio (see: Elizabeth S. [Cohen 2000](#)). Under 17th-century Roman law, Tassi was not held liable for the crime of rape, but for the “infringement of the personal rights” of Gentileschi’s father, who had sued him in 1612. The archival records of these proceedings were quoted directly by one of Artemisia’s biographers, Alexandra Lapierre, in the appendix to her 1998 biographical novel.⁴ What is significant, is that these archives contain a drastic theme related to what we would now call “secondary victimization”, the torture of Sybil to which the young painter was subjected, involving the gradual crushing of fingers. Interestingly, this procedure was fully within the standards of the time for interrogating all parties to a case, including defendants, witnesses, and victims of crimes “alike without distinction” (Alexandra [Lapierre \[1998\] 2001](#), p. 148). As Lapierre puts it, it was “an exemplary trial” ([Lapierre \[1998\] 2001](#), p. 185).⁵

For nearly three centuries, the Italian painter was excluded from the canon of art history. She was, as one might say, “erased” from it. The restoration of the memory of her works is largely attributed to art historian Roberto [Longhi \(1916\)](#), who in 1916 published in “L’Arte” an essay titled *Gentileschi, Padre e figlia* (*Gentileschi, father and daughter*). Additionally, Anna Banti (née Lucia Lopresti), also an art historian and Longhi’s wife, published the first fictionalised biography of Artemisia in 1947.⁶ Banti’s book follows the convention of the *Kunstlerroman*, and is rich in autobiographical motifs. Its narrative reveals the mechanism of personal projection, considered by psychoanalysts to be crucial in the context of the creation and reception of cultural texts. Banti, somewhat overshadowed

by her spouse, “stands in solidarity” (subconsciously or not) with the forgotten artist, “animating” her, and returning her to the light of day.

The term “projection” is emphasised here intentionally, as “Artemisia of the 21st century” is a *myth* partly woven from narratives used by feminist scholars. For example, Luce Irigaray’s “positive otherness” which leads to (self)liberation (Irigaray 1974) or Hélène Cixous’s figure of the “laughing Medusa” (Cixous [1975] 2003). Most importantly, however, this myth is constructed from various modern clichés of pop-feminism. The artist is often portrayed as “a feminist icon”⁷ who overcomes systemic obstacles and is a survivor and avenger of those who mistreated her. Unfortunately, she is primarily perceived as a victim of sexual aggression who *sublimates* her trauma and *compensates* her loss through artistic activity.⁸

This construct is somewhat “flexible”. Its evolution can be observed, albeit very slowly, in both academic texts⁹ and popular culture products, as demonstrated in the following sections. A new and uncommon approach to interpreting Gentileschi’s art has been heralded in writings by Nanette Salomon, Griselda Pollock, and Patrizia Cavazzini (see Salomon 1991, 2006; Pollock 1999, 2006; Cavazzini 2001). This approach deconstructs the label of victim and places the artist’s works among the most fundamental canon of the Baroque imagery. Nevertheless, it can be challenging to dismantle the preconceptions and projections to which we are accustomed, especially when they are emotionally charged. Ultimately, I add another layer to this rich palimpsest called “Artemisia”, another remediation, another (empathic) reading based on my own experience as a female painter. Using Plato’s metaphor, I sketch the outline of my own shadow projected onto the canvases of the famous Roman *pittrice*.

2. Traumatized Figures: Judiths and Susannas

Before I turn to selected examples of contemporary texts mediating Gentileschi’s work, let me refer to the two most frequently quoted, discussed and paraphrased of her paintings. If we consider that a work of art is a “symptom” of the epoch in which it was created, along with its philosophy of life or mentality (Panofsky 1939, p. 8; Bazin 1986, p. 217), then our aesthetic choices and interpretations relating to the past are equally symptomatic. Longhi, in his monograph on Caravaggio, demonstrated that it is the present that provides colour to the past, (see Longhi 1952; see also Tabbat 1991). The name of this brilliant artist is one of the first to be associated today with the term “Baroque in the visual arts”. The biography of Merisi, a criminal and an expellee who painted some of the most poignant religious works, has been subject to romanticised adaptations; a prime example of this is Derek Jarman’s film of 1986.¹⁰ Rarely, however, have the facts of Caravaggio’s life affected the assessment of his *capolavori*¹¹ by art historians or art theorists. A scholarly reading of Caravaggio’s *Medusa* of 1598 (Figure 2) or *Judith Beheading Holofernes* of ca. 1599 (Figure 3) tends to be free of intrusive psycho-biographism. Merisi’s paintings are considered not in relation to his violent temperament and lifelong transgressions, but rather in relation to the general idiom of Baroque art, to issues of “Dionysian”, bizarre, emotional, sensual style, based on the play of strong contrasts.

As Salomon points out in her text titled *The Art Historical Canon: Sins of Omission*, in the first sentence referring to Giorgio Vasari’s canon-making *Vite*...¹² (1550–1568):

“Whereas Vasari used the device of biography to individualize and mythify the works of artistic men, the same device has a profoundly different effect when applied to women. The details of a man’s biography are conveyed as the measure of the ‘universal’, applicable to all mankind; in the male genius, they are simply heightened and intensified. In contrast, the details of a woman’s biography are used to underscore the idea that she is an exception; they apply only to make her *an interesting case*. Her art is reduced to a visual record of her personal and psychological make up”. (Salomon 1991, p. 229)



Figure 2. Caravaggio, *Medusa*, ca. 1596–1598, oil on canvas, \varnothing 55 cm, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Wikimedia Commons.

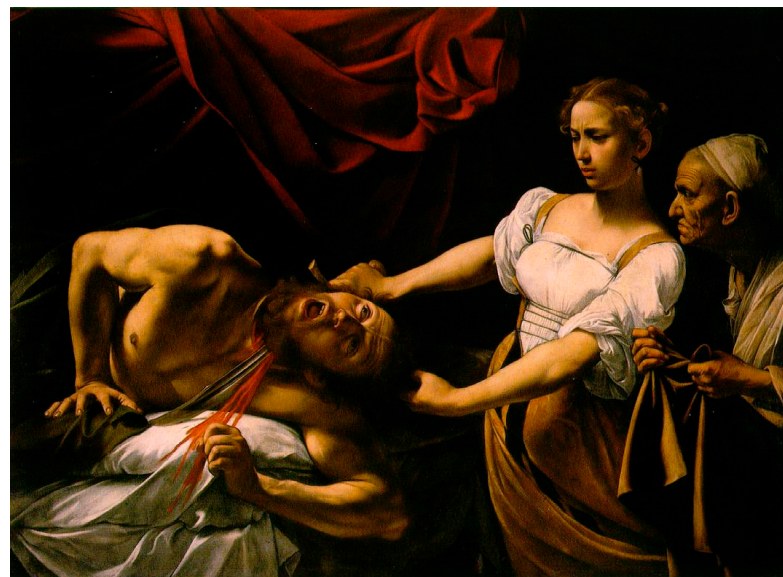


Figure 3. Caravaggio, *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, ca. 1599, oil on canvas, 145 × 195 cm, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica/Palazzo Barberini, Rome. Wikimedia Commons.

In 20th century literature, the modes of interpreting Gentileschi's œuvre are, most of all, influenced by "victimology". The dominant image is that of Artemisia as "donna forte" ("a strong woman"), bravely overcoming systemic obstacles posed by the 17th century art world, and what is more significant, "exorcising" the trauma of rape through subtly woven, painterly narratives, (self)identifying with the culturally charged figures of Judith, Lucrezia, Susanna or Cleopatra, thus taking *symbolic revenge* for her sufferings. It is worth noting that this cathartic and compensatory aspect is also highlighted in many blog entries today. (A Google search for "Artemisia Gentileschi" + "revenge" yields 72,000 results—as of January 2024).¹³ It is in this context that the artist's (alleged) particular predilection for the biblical theme¹⁴ of *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, which she has taken up several times over the years, is accentuated; wherein, the version painted around 1920, found in the collection of Galleria degli Uffizi (Figure 4), is usually considered as the most naturalistic and "brutal".

Here, for example, is how Anna Banti imagines a scene where *Judith* (and Artemisia as Judith) meet their audience. In this multilayered fantasy, or play of projections, ladies gathered in front of the painting are sharing. . .

“... tales of secret, legendary tortures evoking the ghosts of wives who had been cloistered or poisoned, who had disappeared without trace, ghosts who seemed to mingle with this group of living women, subtly goading them into ideas of revenge which, with the smell of the turpentine, made their nostrils flare. From time to time, very rapid, harsh glances were darted towards the model and passed beyond him, glittering. Then the women would turn their back on him, make a show of suddenly and affectionately remembering the artist and her painting, crowding around to note its progress, to admire it in their own way: ‘The sheet looks like silk: was Holofernes a prince?’ ‘Blood from the throat is darker than that’ ‘Is that how you hold a dagger?’ ‘I wouldn’t be able to stick it in’ ‘I would’ ‘I’d love to try’. ‘All that blood...’ They always came back to the blood that Artemisia was painting, a carnage woven, drop by drop like embroidery on the white linen”. ([Banti \[1947\] 2004](#), p. 45)



Figure 4. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, ca. 1620, oil on canvas, 100 × 162.5 cm, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Wikimedia Commons.

Numerous scholarly studies have been conducted on this painting. Thousands of pages have been devoted to the physiognomy of the figures depicted, their gestures and facial expressions (see [Garrard 2006](#)),¹⁵ the trajectory of their gazes, the dynamics of the composition built on diagonal rhythms, the intricately rendered draperies and even the streams of Holofernes’s blood, arranged to suggest that the painter had benefited from achievements of the sciences. This is possible, given that she had a close friendship with Galileo (see: [LaBarge 2020](#)). All these inquiries are of momentous value insofar as they do not reduce Gentileschi’s œuvre exclusively to the “personal drama” of “Artemisia”. (As Marcel Bleuler has shown, the performances of Marina Abramović today are met with a similarly reductionist reception; see [Bleuler 2018](#)).¹⁶ Meanwhile, it should be remembered that the work of the Italian *pintrix*¹⁷ is also, to refer to Jean-François Lyotard’s dichotomy (see [Lyotard 1979](#)), part of the “grand narratives” of its era. In the age of the Counter-Reformation, the chief task of the art of painting was to evoke fascination, horror, and awe, monumental and purifying (cathartic) emotions that were to bring the faithful back to the Church. Hence, for example, there was keen recourse to the Old Testament parables of Judith and Holofernes, Jael and Sisera, David and Goliath. It is in this respect that the Gentileschi canvases should be considered conventional.

For example, in an extensive entry for the catalogue of a 2001–2002 exhibition titled “Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi: Father and Daughter Painters in Baroque Italy”, Patrizia Cavazzini draws a comparison between Caravaggio’s famous *Judith* (Palazzo Barberini, Rome; Figure 3) and Gentileschi’s early interpretation of the same theme rendered “exactly while the trial was going on” (c. 1612–1613, Museo Capodimonte, Naples; Figure 5). Cavazzini warns against the temptation “to read Artemisia’s biography into the picture”:

“Even if Artemisia intended her canvas as a personal vendetta against Tassi, the mood with which she infused it is barely distinguishable from that of Caravaggio’s picture. *The goriness and violence are similar*, as is the distaste for the task shown by the two Judiths. In both, a feeling akin to sadness is combined with a finicky fear of dirtying one’s clothes”. (Cavazzini 2001, p. 290)

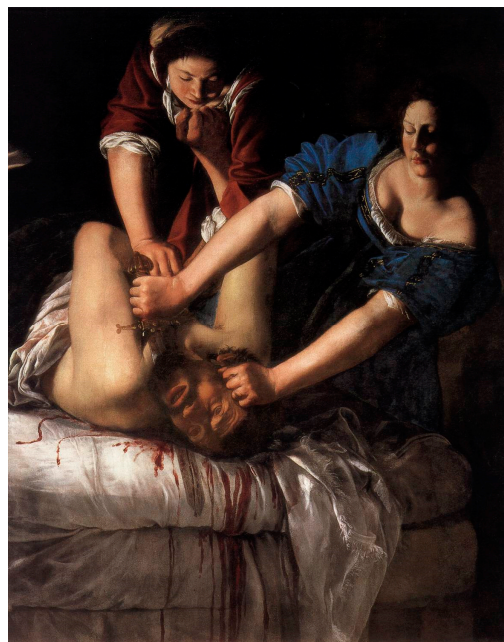


Figure 5. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, ca. 1612–13, oil on canvas, 158.8 × 125.5 cm, Museo di Capodimonte, Naples. Wikimedia Commons.

It is important to note that the decapitation motif, so favoured in the Baroque era, has gained a very particular interpretation in the light of psychoanalytic theory. According to Freudians and post-Freudians it is linked to the castration complex and thus to the metaphor of power.¹⁸ The head of Holofernes appears as the antithesis of the Gorgoneion. Judith and Medusa belong to the same psychoanalytic “bestiary”,¹⁹ and participate together in a (post-)modern mythology inspired by the work of the Viennese physician. (In this context, for example, Luciano Garbati’s sculptural realisation of 2009,²⁰ which was set up in front of a New York court during the trial of Harvey Weinstein, is significant, as is Mikołaj Sobczak’s *Gorgon* of 2020 (Figure 6), directly inspired by Caravaggio’s *Judith* but also, it seems, alluding to Gentileschi).

The Freudian concept of castration complex (in both its male and female forms) has penetrated popular consciousness and imagery profoundly. It is hard to resist the thought that it is the origin of the clichés of victimhood and vengeance cast upon art created by Gentileschi (and other female artists exploring “brutal” themes). Presumably, these clichés or projections are somehow reinforced by cinematic images to which we are now accustomed, such as “rape and revenge” films. This genre, initiated by Ingmar Bergman’s *Jungfrukällan/ The Virgin Spring* (1960), and continued by, among others, Wes Craven’s *Last House on the Left* (1972), has been explored by Barbara Creed in her extensive study titled *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, apparently inspired by Irigaray’s thought (see Creed [1993] 2007). As published in 1993, the book could not account for some

newer productions such as Gaspar Noé *Irréversible* (2002) or David Fincher's *Promising Young Woman* (2020).



Figure 6. Mikołaj Sobczak, *Gorgon*, 2020, acrylic paint on canvas. Courtesy of the artist.

Gentileschi's interpretation of the biblical story of Susanna (see, e.g., [Tilford 2012](#)) is just as frequent as that of the figure of Judith. The most widely discussed version of *Susanna and the Elders* (from the Collection Graf von Schönborn in Pommersfelden, (Figure 7), was painted in 1610, before the tragic meeting with Agostino Tassi. Contemporary readings of this work, again based on gender-biased projections, illustrate perfectly the notion of "preposterous history" defined by Mieke Bal as "the reversal of what came chronologically first ('pre') as an aftereffect behind ('post') its later recycling" ([Bal 1999](#), p. 7). This creative "recycling", the reversal of temporal relations, is exemplified by the work of Kathleen Gilje, a painter and art conservator, titled *Susanna and the Elders. Restored* (1998; Figure 8). The artist's technical skill allowed for precise replication of Gentileschi's work and the concealment of any *pentimenti*, or "repaints", which are only visible through X-rays. This "earlier version" is Gilje's fantasy, a performative projection, an authorial, one must admit: a fascinating footnote to the myth of "Artemisia". In this fantasy, Susanna is armed with a voice and a knife. It is somehow contrary to Lapierre's projective interpretation of Artemisia as vulnerable and mired in the past:

"In her painting, *Susanna and the Elders*, she represented the people who harried her. The head of one of the two men which, earlier, Orazio had mercilessly obliterated, would now wear Agostino Tassi's fine dark curls. Faceless, his eyes hidden, he merged into the other figure, that of an older man—perhaps Cosimo Quorli. Or maybe the grey hair, straight nose and sharply angled eyebrow evoked another likeness: that of Orazio Gentileschi." (Alexandra [Lapierre \[1998\] 2001](#), p. 81)

Griselda Pollock proposed a distinct interpretation of Gentileschi's Judiths and Susannas in a chapter of her book *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (1999). The chapter aims to answer two questions, "what does feminism bring to art history when it intervenes in its discursive field" and "what does feminism *desire* in looking at work by women artists" ([Pollock 1999](#), p. 98). The author's findings on the interrelation between trauma and metaphor are particularly intriguing and refreshing. These findings are supported by Cathy Caruth's research on trauma pathology. According to Pollock, individuals who have experienced the pain of rape tend to *metaphorize* or *symbolize* it through a language of body signs, rather than veristically rendering or reenacting its details using painterly forms ([Pollock 1999](#), p. 109). The subject of Gentileschi's *Judith* is "not a revenge theme", as the author suggests. Furthermore,

"Its biblical basis is the story of a political execution carried out by a widow who puts herself at risk in the camp of the besieging enemy in order to kill the general,

and thus to dishearten his troops and liberate her people from a deadly siege which her slain enemy has mounted". (Pollock 1999, p. 115)

In other words:

"The painting *Judith* is *not* about revenge. Yet it is about killing. But it is a metaphor, a representation in which the literalness of killing a man is displaced on to a mytheme wherein the *action* is necessary, politically justified, *not personally motivated*". (Pollock 1999, p. 123)



Figure 7. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1610, oil on canvas, 170/119 cm, Collection Graf von Schönborn, Pommersfelden. Wikimedia Commons.



Figure 8. Kathleen Gilje, *Susanna and the Elders, Restored X-ray*, 1998, 170 × 120 cm, Gorney Bravin + Lee, New York. Courtesy of the artist.

It is possible to perceive it as an expression of female agency rather than victimhood. This interpretation is further supported by Gentileschi's letters, discovered in 2011, which were addressed to, among others, her artistic patrons. In a letter from 1649, while Artemisia was negotiating a price for her painting with Sicilian collector Antonio Ruffo, a phrase was written that illustrates her character: "With me, Your Illustrious Lordship will not lose, and you will find the spirit of Caesar in the soul of a woman" (after: [Treves n.d.a](#)).

In fine literature, her alleged "fixation" on dark motifs, as stated earlier, ascribed to her unjustly, tends to be explained not only by the trauma of rape, but also by an event from her early childhood, namely, the public execution of the Cenci family, which little Artemisia watched in the company of her father Orazio and Agostino Tassi.

3. The Contemporary Faces of Artemisia

The novel by Alexandra [Lapierre](#) ([1998] 2001) opens with the scene of the execution of Beatrice Cenci and her relatives. Lapierre's work, which spans over five hundred pages, is the result of many years of study, including language studies and multiple visits to Italian and English archives. The extensive appendix at the end of the book can be considered a scholarly text, providing knowledge not only about the Gentileschi family but also about the culture of 17th-century Italy. The narrative rhythm of this classic *Kunstlerroman* is marked by "close-ups" on the two key works described above: Susanna and Judith. We observe how Artemisia, a *figlia d'arte* ("a daughter of art") a girl playing in her father's studio, helping him to rub out pigments, gradually transforms into a young woman trying her hand at art, "a miracle of nature, an extraordinary phenomenon" ([Lapierre](#) [1998] 2001, p. 188), and finally, fully aware of her talent, becomes a famous artist and, at the same time, a matron tired of the hardships of life.

Susan Vreeland also portrays this evolution in the pages of an equally classic and emotional novel, published in 2002. In this case too, Gentileschi's works are the silent "protagonists" around which the story revolves, although the American author places the emphasis differently. For example, this text opens with another element of Artemisia's "founding myth": the Sybil's torture that had been "designed to bring truth to women's lips" (Susan [Vreeland](#) 2002, p. 2). What is more, Vreeland devotes more attention to the person of Orazio. In contrast to the rather unflattering, or at least controversial, image outlined by Lapierre, Orazio in this interpretation is a loving father and grandfather. His genuinely affectionate figure forms the plot buckle: Orazio supports his daughter and sympathises with her in her moment of pain, while in the final passages, it is she, digested with grief, who bids him farewell forever in cold London. In contrast, on the pages of a graphic novel published in 2017 by Nathalie Ferlut and Tamia Baudouin (Figures 9 and 10), a narrative bracket is formed by the motif of motherhood.²¹ Undoubtedly, the merit of this publication is that it considers the figure of Prudence, the artist's mother, who died in 1605, a figure almost absent from other biographies; Prudence, whose name was inherited by Artemisia's daughter. In turn, the motif of *lost* motherhood, that is, the grief and mourning experience following the death of her son Cristofano, is accentuated, in a beautiful, symbolic form, by Gina Siciliano in her ball-pen graphic novel titled *I Know What I Am* (see [Siciliano](#) 2019; see also: [Treves n.d.b](#)).²²

Further comparisons are beyond the scope of this article. Therefore, I will only mention one other significant and symptomatic detail recorded in Vreeland's novel. In the imagined conversation with her daughter that takes place before the image of Judith, the agitated Artemisia, pointing to Holofernes' bed, says: "That's my blood on that mattress, and it's my pain that started this career" ([Vreeland](#) 2002, p. 335). The same prop—a bloodstained mattress—acquires a particularly significant, yet contradictory meaning in the film directed by Agnès Merlet.



Figure 9. A cover of a graphic novel: *Artemisia* (2021) written by Nathalie Ferlut, illustrated by Tamia Baudouin, translated by Maëlle Doliveux and Andrew Dubrov. Philadelphia: Beehive Books. Nathalie Ferlut and Tamia Baudouin. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 10. An excerpt from a graphic novel: *Artemisia* (2021) written by Nathalie Ferlut, illustrated by Tamia Baudouin, translated by Maëlle Doliveux and Andrew Dubrov. Philadelphia: Beehive Books. Nathalie Ferlut and Tamia Baudouin. Courtesy of the artist.

This cinematic adaptation, made in 1997, is rather controversial as it goes against the usual victimological interpretations of Gentileschi. (The visual beauty of the film is enhanced by Benoît Delhomme's cinematography). First of all, Merlet questions Tassi's guilt. Furthermore, she portrays Agostino and Artemisia as lovers. The bed plays here

the role of a triple prop. This is because it is at the centre of a chamber (camera) shrouded in darkness, which is at the same time: 1. an element of the film set, 2. the theatre of the protagonists' amorous trysts at the beginning of the story and 3. a still life, which on the canvas will become the bed of the soldier of Nebuchadnezzar's army. Significantly, in the film, Tassi poses for a painting, conscious that he is "lending" his physiognomy to the character of Holofernes.

The lawyer interrogating Artemisia poses a confounding question: "Qui est victime de qui?" / "Who is whose victim?" It is unclear how to interpret this peculiar role reversal. Is this thematic "perversion" simply a matter of decorum, as perversity is inherent in the Baroque idiom? Or is it an attempt to escape from the onerous myth of the victim? (In the French language the word *victime* is feminine). Griselda Pollock formulated an intriguing response in an article titled *Feminist Dilemmas with the Art/Life Problem*, included in a volume edited by Mieke Bal (2006). According to the scholar, Merlet's interpretation redefines Artemisia as an active explorer, a "draughtswoman of the male body" (Griselda Pollock 2006, p. 192), and removes the negative connotations of the femme fatale by portraying her as "a seduced and desiring woman, without any thought of revenge" (193). This reading "moves in another direction, making not the rape but the sex the foundation for Gentileschi's art" (193). However, Pollock notes that the female artist is depicted as "a creature revealed to herself by a man's desire" (193),²³ highlighting the objectification of women in art.

Can Artemisia be universally recognised as an artist, without the constraints of gendered perspectives? Even in a recent documentary dedicated to the painter, directed in 2020 by Jordan River: *Gentileschi. Warrior Painter*, the theme of sexual trauma recurs like a refrain. Is her work therefore destined to remain in the cultural "cabinet of curiosities"? Isn't this sexualised view of Artemisia obsolete and anachronistic? (Even a 17th century engraving rendered by Pierre Dumonstier depicts the hand of the *female master*, or genius, not of a female avenger).

Perhaps 2020's *Arte*, a historical fiction anime directed by Takayuki Hamana and based on Ohkubo Tei's manga of the same title (*Arte/Arute*; published since 2013), heralds a new way of thinking about her. Admittedly, this series is only loosely inspired by Gentileschi's biography, as it is set in 16th-century Florence. However, it follows the classic pattern of a formative story. The absence of biographical details makes this anime more universal and readable for any audience, potentially appealing to a younger audience. There is also something endearing about the fact that the Japanese creators, in titling their work *Arte*, have somewhat accentuated the determinism of the name Artemisia.

Orazio, in Merlet's script, states that "We often say too much in front of paintings" / "On parle souvent trop devant des toiles". In my view, it is important to take a step back and reflect on how time can alter our perceptions of art and of ourselves.

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Notes

¹ Italian: "a female painter".

² The allegorical description of La Pittura (Painting) provided by Ripa opens with the following lines: "Donna bella, con capelli neri et grossi, sparsi et ritorti in diverse maniere, con le ciglia inarcate che mostrino pensieri fantastichi, si cuopra la bocca con una fascia ligata dietro a gli orecchi, con una catena d'oro al collo, dalla quale penda una maschera et habbia scritto nella fronte 'imitatio'." (Ripa [1593] 1764). Reynolds in her article dedicated to Artemisia's self-portraits provides the English translation of the above-quoted fragment: "A beautiful woman, with full black hair, dishevelled, and twisted in various ways, with arched eyebrows that show imaginative thought, the mouth covered with a cloth tied behind her ears, with a chain of gold at her throat from which hangs a mask, and has written in front 'imitation'." (after: Reynolds 2016, p. 178). As the author comments: "Although in her self-portrait Gentileschi leaves out the gagged mouth (symbolising that the painting is dumb), the artist's dishevelled hair (representing the divine frenzy of artistic creation) and the chain around her neck, from which hangs the mask of imitation, both echo Ripa's description." (Reynolds 2016, p. 178). It is worth adding that Mary D. Garrard, in her study on body

language, in particular, the “signature postures” characteristic of Gentileschi’s paintings, in a very interesting way analyzes hand movements (especially so called: *dotta mano*, that is: “learned hand” motif) depicted in another *Allegory of Painting* (c. 1630, the collection of Galleria d’Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini) attributed to Artemisia (Mary D. Garrard 2006, pp. 27–28).

Another allegorical work consistent with Ripa’s description, worth mentioning here, is a medal honouring the great Bolognese artist Lavinia Fontana (1552–1614). (Schaefer 1984) The medal was designed by Felice Antonio Casoni and struck in 1611. It is now in the British Museum. At the time of Artemisia Gentileschi’s artistic debut, Fontana was already highly esteemed as a female painter, referred to as ‘*Pictrix*’ in the Latin inscription on the aforementioned medal.

Please note that in this article, I am referring to the Grove Press edition of 2001 (Lapierre [1998] 2001), while the first edition in French was published by Éditions Robert Laffont (Alexandra Lapierre [1998] 2001).

In the *Appendix* to her novel (to its part II, titled *Judith*), Lapierre provides additional notes: “I have made a point of letting the magistrates, the witnesses and the defendants speak exactly as they did nearly four hundred years ago. I have merely clarified the circumstances as necessary, and put them into their historical and legal context (. . .) I had the proceedings of Tassi’s 1612 trial on charges of rape and procurement running through my head day and night. Although substantial extracts have been published by Eva Menzio in her outstanding edition, I felt it was important to go back to the original, and to transcribe and retranslate the whole document.” (Lapierre [1998] 2001, p. 386). See also: (Eva Menzio 1981).

Anna Banti also authored a three-act play inspired by Artemisia’s biography, titled *Corte Savella* (1960). It is discussed in Monica L. Streifer’s article on the “feminist intersections of painting and theater”. “In *Corte Savella*, Banti gives voice to one of the first women recognized in her own time as a master painter, a woman whose story was and often is misconstrued and whose art is often judged in light of the rape she suffered at the hands of her tutor.” (Streifer 2017, p. 1).

“She was the first woman to achieve a stature fully commensurate with her male counterparts. Her story of surviving rape and the public exposure of the trial, alongside scholars’ assertions that her paintings articulate a protofeminist viewpoint, have made her a modern feminist icon.” (Ffolliott 2021).

For example, in the preface to a comprehensive and engaging collective publication that explores the motif of rape in contemporary performing arts-featuring Artemisia Gentileschi’s *Judith* on the cover-Maria Anita Stefanelli discusses art as a form of self-therapy and touches on the mechanism of cathartic compensation: “As a gifted independent female artist with a painful past, that she strove to fully acknowledge, and, above all, to come to terms with, Gentileschi’s painterly skills undoubtedly helped to *heal her wounds*. With the basic principles and mechanisms of spatial arrangement that she had to acquire in order to become a painter, she might also have absorbed, from *Judith*, the strength that she needed to maintain the struggle. Indeed, she did activate those principles and mechanisms of spatial arrangement; she did obtain the power to overcome the violence that she had experienced; she did become a model for other women: a model, if not the model. A woman who tried hard, at her own expense, not to be overcome by circumstances—and to live, if not happily ever after, then at least with her personal dignity intact” (Stefanelli 2016, p. 11).

An outline of the abundance of scientific studies dedicated to Artemisia Gentileschi would exceed the scope of this article. The reader is referred to several recent monographs: (see: Barker 2017; Locker 2015; Baldassari 2016).

Caravaggio, directed by Derek Jarman, Great Britain 1986.

Italian: “masterpieces”.

In his famous *Vite de’ più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori*, (published in Florence, first in 1550, and subsequently in 1568), Giorgio Vasari dedicated a separate chapter to a Bolognese sculptor, Properzia de’ Rossi (ca. 1490–1530). Vasari describes her as *giovane virtuosa* (“young female virtuoso”; Vasari 1568, p. 172). In the context of biography-oriented approaches to women’s art, it is particularly interesting to consider de’ Rossi’s relief depicting the biblical scene of *The Temptation of Joseph by the Wife of Potiphar* (Museo di San Petronio, Bologna). Vasari (1568, p. 173) suggests that this work may have been a reflection, or projection, of Prudenzia’s unhappy love affair. (see: Vasari 1568, p. 173).

Typical comments on “Gentileschi’s revenge” are as follows: “The rape, and the desire to avenge herself, were a parallel to what we know was the inspiration for so many paintings by the extraordinary Baroque artist Artemisia Gentileschi. She didn’t actually murder the man who violated her, but she turned the horror of her own life into scenes of women’s vengeance on the men at whose hands they had suffered. She used biblical stories to portray, in exquisite paintings, her fury at the sexual violence she herself had endured.” (Jenni Murray 2018). The phrase: “the theatre of revenge” appears even on Christie’s website, in Andrew Graham-Dixon’s article published on the occasion of the first major Artemisia’s exhibition held at the National Gallery in London (primarily planned for 3 October 2020–24 January 2021). (Graham-Dixon 2020).

Megan Nolan takes a different angle in her 2020 Art Review article titled *Artemisia Gentileschi Is More Than a Revenge Fantasy*: “It is understandable that long-time devotees of Artemisia’s work may be frustrated by a one-note perception of her in contemporary media, where she is often experienced primarily as an angry woman whose career was a grand act of vengeance against her abuser. In recent years her painting *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (1612–13) has cropped up repeatedly to accompany writings about male violence against women—the figures serve as a sort of ancient relation to recent rape-revenge fantasies in films of wounded women turned mad with wrath (. . .). This is an overly—possibly even offensively—simplistic reading of Artemisia, but it isn’t necessary to instead completely ignore authorship and context. While it would be a travesty to reduce Artemisia to a victim of rape, it is not an insult to consider her particular life when it comes to how we read her work” (Nolan 2020).

- ¹⁴ In his article titled ‘*Artemisia Gentileschi: What Wasn’t in the London Exhibition and Why it Matters*’, Jesse Locker sheds new light on the biblical context of her works, referring to her as a ‘religious painter’. Locker notes that while Artemisia is often associated with depictions of ‘powerful ancient heroines’, her oeuvre extends beyond this narrow categorisation. “So it is easy to forget that many of her works, even if not the most celebrated ones today, are religious paintings. In 1968, R. Ward Bissell even went so far as to suggest that the libertine Artemisia preferred to paint ‘scenes that did not require her to acknowledge the presence of Divinity’. But a significant number of the new discoveries suggest that she was famous in her own time to a large extent because of her treatment of traditional religious subjects”. (Locker 2021). Among these new discoveries there is a beautiful painting of *Christ Blessing the Children (Sinite Parvulos)* of 1626. See also: (Locker 2015).
- ¹⁵ In her commentary on palm gestures in Gentileschi’s *Judith and Her Servant* (ca. 1625, Institute of Arts, Detroit), Mary D. Garrard notes that: “This arresting gesture dramatizes not the women’s power, but their vulnerability. It’s a visual cry of alarm at a moment of danger”. (Garrard 2006, p. 6).
- ¹⁶ In his article on the mediatization of Marina Abramović’s performances, Marcel Bleuler notes that: “It is a popular pattern in the mediatization of female artists to implicitly consider their artistic practice as a compensation strategy”. (Bleuler 2018, p. 141).
- ¹⁷ Latin: “a female painter”.
- ¹⁸ In his 1918 essay, Freud offers an interpretation of the biblical figure Judith. He argues that: “The taboo of virginity and something of its motivations has been depicted most powerfully of all in a well-known dramatic character, that of Judith in Hebbel’s tragedy *Judith und Holofernes*. Judith is one of those women whose virginity is protected by a taboo. Her first husband was paralyzed on the bridal night by a mysterious anxiety, and never again dared to touch her (. . .). When the Assyrian general is besieging her city, she conceives the plan of seducing him by her beauty and of destroying him, thus employing a patriotic motive to conceal a sexual one. After she has been deflowered by this powerful man, who boasts of his strength and ruthlessness, she finds the strength in her fury to strike off his head, and thus becomes the liberator of her people. Beheading is well-known to us as a symbolic *substitute for castrating*; Judith is accordingly the woman who castrates the man who has deflowered her, which was just the wish of the newly married woman expressed in the dream I reported.” (Freud [1918] 1957, p. 207) See also: (Abraham [1920] 1927).
- ¹⁹ A separate extended article has been devoted to the analysis of this psychoanalytic ‘bestiary’, its evolution, and its presence in contemporary fine arts. (Stępnik 2023).
- ²⁰ Luciano Garbati, *Medusa with the Head of Perseus*, 2008, bronze. See, e.g.,: (Stępnik 2023; Julia Jacobs 2020).
- ²¹ In the context of motherhood motif in Gentileschi’s painting, see, e.g.,: *Madonna and Child*, attributed to Artemisia Gentileschi, ca. 1613–1614, Galleria Spada, Rome.
- ²² According to Gina Siciliano, it is necessary to conduct thorough historical research and avoid projecting contemporary perspectives onto historical figures. “The more I learned about 17th-century Europe, the more important it felt to convey this era politically and socially, which led to some wordy / text-heavy areas. But making a wordy graphic novel felt necessary in order to put Artemisia into context. Otherwise, we’re just projecting our own modern mindset onto her.” (after: Treves n.d.b).
- ²³ In her 2001 book, Mary D. Garrard references her critics, including her polemics with Griselda Pollock, as she notes in the preface: “There have been three basic critiques of my Gentileschi studies, which come from several quarters and the most recently rehearsed by Griselda Pollock. First is that I read Artemisia’s art as simple autobiographical expression. Second is that I essentialize her into a timeless figure whose art represents monolithic and historically unchanging woman’s perspective. In fact these two alleged fallacies are in conflict (. . .)”. And, further in the text Garrard reckons that her main argument was that “biographical experience and metaphorical expression are historically and specifically—not universally or deterministically—conjoined in Artemisia’s art, an art that, in its radical departure from masculinist convention, not only may resonate for women in general but has demonstrably done so for many modern women.” (Mary D. Garrard 2001, p. xix).

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