

JUDITH SLAYING HOLOFERNES: ARTEMESIA GENTILESCHI'S FEMINIST EXPRESSION OF REVENGE VIOLENCE?

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Today's level of cross-sourcing and scholarly review shows that sources making claims about an artist's intentions or the artist's life present biased information. The blurriness of these sources' reliability leaves a lot of freedom for analysis. Therefore, there is a danger of over-assuming things from one source and asserting them as the truth. In his notorious essay, *The Death of the Author*, Roland Barthes rejects the common practice of interpreting a work through the biographical lens and instead advocates for the separation between the artwork and its creator.¹ However, as is often the case in feminist scholarship, biographical studies are necessary to fully contextualize works by marginal figures. How should a piece of artwork be viewed when both scholarly approaches appear necessary? The consequences of projecting the artist's biography onto their work is evident in recent feminist analyses of the 1620 Artemisia Gentileschi painting *Judith Slaying Holofernes* which over-prioritize the artist's biography and subsequently impose limiting narratives on the painting and the artist (fig. 1). In this case study, biographical scholarship is shown as important in helping reclaim an artwork from the margins of history, but the sole reliance on this methodology runs the risk of oversimplification. Therefore, biographical scholarship should be read as means to an end instead of an end in itself.

Judith Slaying Holofernes illustrates a biblical scene from the Book of Judith. When the mighty warlord Holofernes besieges the city of Bethulie, the young and beautiful widow Judith presents herself at his camp in an effort to save her city and people. Seduced by her outstanding beauty, Holofernes lets his guard down and drunkenly passes out. Judith takes this moment as an opportunity to behead the oppressor with his sword, thereby liberating her nation.² The scriptural text is embellished in Artemisia Gentileschi's realization of the beheading by explicitly portraying the murder as an act of teamwork instead of a mere solo effort by Judith. Abra, Judith's maidservant, acts as an equal participant in Judith's overpowering of Holofernes by restraining him against his bed with all her weight. Judith grabs Holofernes' hair with her left hand while the right one, armed with the victim's blade, slits his throat. In his last breath, the condemned Holofernes attempts in vain to grab the maidservant with his clenched fingers. There is not an ounce of pity in Judith's cold and determined gaze focused on her target. However, Artemisia avoids an overly theatrical *mise en scène* and exaggerated expressions. The use of *chiaroscuro* suffices to render the dramatic intensity of the scene. The entirety of Holofernes' body is bathed in light while the two assassins appear to rise from the shadows. This composition gives the painting a dimension of movement which reflects the speed of the assassination. Red dominates the colour palette. Holofernes' arterial spray is highlighted by its contrast with the white sheets, the pallor of Judith's neckline, the

golden details of her dress, and the cadaverous hue of Holofernes' arm. The enhancement of the red makes the brutality of the scene noticeable at first glance. Gentileschi's depiction of the murder is unapologetically violent. Reluctantly sinking into the throes of death, Holofernes tips his head back with the lights of his eyes near extinguished and engraved with terror.

Despite the graphicness of that story, the book of Judith fathered many interpretations based on its content across various mediums. However, representations of Judith in action are rare.³ It is more common to see her stationary and holding the sword, preparing for the execution, or triumphantly carrying the head of her victim rather than portraying the crucial moment of murder that Artemisia Gentileschi chose to illustrate. Judith is a remarkable biblical figure because she is devoted to her people and led by her faith. She took the responsibility of dirtying her hands for the liberation of her peers. Representations of Judith tend to honor her courage and generalship. As she comes back to Bethulie, holding the head of the enemy, she is a symbol of salvation. The greatness of the deliverance eclipses the barbarity of the deed that led to it. Judith is not widely represented as a killer because it doesn't highlight her virtues. The character of Judith is well represented in Artemisia's work, as she created four paintings inspired by the Book of Judith: two different versions of Judith Slaying Holofernes but also two of Judith and her Maidservant, one in 1608 and one in 1623-25, both representing their flight after the crime. However, Gentileschi's representations of Judith's return do not carry the same impressions of alleviation and reassurance that the other depictions of Judith returning to Bethulie do. In these representations her face is tense, hiding behind curtains. Aware of the danger she is facing, she is gathering the courage she will need to discreetly leave the site. Gentileschi is never picturing Judith as a reassuring mother figure but rather focuses on the masculine and militaristic qualities she embodies, hence the representation of Judith decapitating her enemy. However, it is remarkable to note that to the contrary of what we might expect in works dealing with such a subject, neither Judith nor the servant appear to be proud, hateful, or triumphant; instead, they are in tense focus on the duty of their execution.

According to Ève Straussman-Pflanzer, Gentileschi's version is the most violent representation of the myth.⁴ The fountain of blood and the mercilessness of the execution depicted has shocked critics and art enthusiasts for centuries. Filipe Baldinucci remarked about the piece: "[it] certainly surpass[es] every other work by her in quality and [it is] so well considered and expressed in such a lifelike way that merely looking at it arouses no small measure of terror".⁵ Maria Luisa Medici used the term "ribrezzo" to describe the feeling of repulsion and disgust she felt in front of this painting.⁶ She even deliberately decided to exhibit the work in a secluded corner of the Galleria Degli Uffizi at the moment of its introduction to the collection in the 1780's.⁷ Judith Slaying Holofernes also perplexed other art historians such as Anna Brownwell Jameson⁸ and Roberto Longhi.⁹ For them, Gentileschi being a woman was a particular point of bafflement. Jameson, despite being able to picture what could inspire a woman, filled with revenge, to create such artwork¹⁰, was left speechless when picturing Artemisia never doubting the need for this piece to be finished, despite its

abominable gruesomeness.¹¹ Her hatred towards the painting was such that she wished for “the privilege of burning it down to ashes.”¹² As for Longhi, he exclaimed “what a shock to picture a woman spending long hours passively painting a scene of such graphic violence!”¹³ It is tempting to wonder what inspired Gentileschi to represent Judith’s crime. Jesse M. Locker supposes that this extraordinary violence led modern writers to seek biographical elements justifying the “visceral horror” in *Judith Slaying Holofernes*.¹⁴

The work benefited from the praise of Gentileschi’s contemporaries and peers, but it stayed a marginal artwork. Throughout the 18th century, the work spurred more disgust than inspiration, and it was momentarily forgotten by critics and the public.¹⁵ Later feminist art historians revisited the work. Such analyses began in 1971 with Linda Nochlin’s essay *Why Have There Been No Great Woman Artists?* questioning what caused the absence of women from the restricted club of *maîtres*. Considered a pioneering essay and a mandatory reading for the field of feminist art history, it inspired other scholars to investigate women artworks, for instance Gentileschi’s. Art historians such as Russel W. Bissell offered a new reading of *Judith Slaying Holofernes* using contemporary analytical perspectives that consider elements specific to Gentileschi’s life: the rape she suffered during her youth and the trial that followed.¹⁶ Artemisia Gentileschi learned the art of painting beside her father, Orazio Gentileschi, and his friend, Agostino Tassi.¹⁷ At the age of seventeen, Artemisia was raped by Tassi. Her father made Tassi stand trial for his crime, but no justice was awarded to the victim who was exhausted and traumatized by the trial.¹⁸ Though Tassi was convicted to five years of exile for “premarital sex,” he did not serve his sentence on account of him being a major influence in the city and the Roman Justice’s mercy towards crimes of Tassi’s type.¹⁹ *Judith Slaying Holofernes* can legitimately be read as a cathartic work for a rape victim failed by the justice system. Elements such as similarities between Judith and Artemisia’s self-portrait, *La Pittura*, led scholars to assume she used her own traits for her protagonist. It was a common practice for baroque artists to incorporate their faces or their peers in paintings. Caravaggio, for instance, was particularly fond of this process. Artemisia, being a part of Caravaggio’s school of painting, also indulged in this exercise.²⁰ By giving her own facial attributes to Judith and potentially the traits of her aggressor to Holofernes, Artemisia Gentileschi toys with playing the revenger. However, proofs supporting that theory are insufficient. Judith, indeed, resembles her painter but Holofernes poorly resembles Gentileschi’s aggressor. *Judith Slaying Holofernes* was painted while Gentileschi was struggling to cohabituate with her husband, Pierantonio Stiattesi, who she left when moving to Rome with their daughter in 1621.²¹ Nothing excludes the possibility that Stiattesi was depicted as Holofernes by the painter. *Judith Slaying Holofernes* could, therefore, represent the liberation from a draining marriage rather than a merciless revenge.

Through a biographical reading of *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, Artemisia Gentileschi is a beacon of women’s anger towards men. Before Gentileschi’s painting, *Abra* was portrayed as an old lady to simply call attention to Judith’s youth and beauty. But Artemisia Gentileschi’s decision to involve her servant, approximately the same age as her mistress, in the murder with the same determination as Judith allows the

painting to be seen as a representation of sisterhood and feminine solidarity. Nonetheless, there are flaws in this potentially anachronistic interpretation, which may aspire to correspond to our time and modern representation of sorority rather than to the artist's original intention. Feminist and sororal values have always existed. However, priorities and political engagement were different in Gentileschi's time compared to today. Feminism is a fight with a complex evolution. Just looking at the fundamental differences between the 2nd and 3rd wave of feminism in contemporary history illustrates the changing nature of feminism. Therefore, it is logical that the expression of sorority could have been different four centuries ago. Reappropriation, affixing a novel and more personal reading of an artwork, isn't wrong. In *The Death of the Author*, Barthes advocates for a plurality of analysis with no hierarchization between the ones provided by the author, or artist, and the public. However, it is important to keep in mind the subjectivity and potential jump to conclusions that some analyses carry. Additionally, Judith and Abra aren't merely two women side by side; they are also a lady and a maid working hand in hand, offering a potential reading focusing on power dynamics within 1620's Italy. This reading could also potentially be linked to Artemisia's biography as she both experienced the privileged life of a renown Florentine artiste and the struggle of a modest marriage, crippled with debt due to a poor management of her finances.²²

Other critics interpret the beheading of Holofernes as an allegory for castration. Moreover, this loss of masculinity is perpetuated by his own weapon, the central element of the composition, potentially interpretable as a phallic symbol.²³ But then again, was castration truly the intention of Artemisia Gentileschi? Once informed of that traumatic rape episode and its trial, it is tempting to see Gentileschi channeling her bloodlust through Judith. However, glorifying Gentileschi as a hero by treating her life as a hagiographic text could disservice her oeuvre. Mary D. Garrard considers the notion of catharsis as an explicative element that is superficial and insignificant.²⁴ Catherine Ratelle-Montemiglio synthesizes Garrard's idea by claiming "this highly sensationalist tendency sexualizes the artist's work to the point of connecting all of her art to rape, thus preventing the perception of other forms of identification between the artist and her character".²⁵ Indeed, the biographical analysis is too reductive, and it is dreadful that her work might be perceived only through the prism of this event. Limiting a woman's life and experience to one traumatic event reduces her to a victim status, in addition to constantly bringing it up in discussions about herself and her work. This idea is supported by Mieke Bal who laments that the archives related to Gentileschi's trial have become a mandatory reading in order to analyze Judith Slaying Holofernes and the rest of her work.²⁶ Roszika Parker even considers that process as "proto-feminist" and "missing the point".²⁷

In addition to this clumsy parallel between Artemisia's life and her work, it is often tempting to engage in a comparative study between her representation of this myth with Caravaggio's (1598) (fig. 2). However, the comparison is often reduced to the question of knowing which version has been painted by a man or a woman. According to Nanette Salomon, this question is not relevant because in order to answer it, it requires a critic to rely on biography and stylistic analysis in a selective and uneven manner.²⁸ As Bal previously enunciated, the rape and trial of Gentileschi are

systematically mentioned and used as a base of understanding.²⁹ When it comes to analyzing Caravaggio's *Judith*, it is rarely mentioned that the painter already killed a man with his bare hands. Salomon concludes saying: "it seems irresistible to talk about Artemisia's rape in connection with it even if only to say that the painting cannot be directly related to rape. This compulsive biographism immediately sexualizes the subject and the artist to a degree that no longer allows us to see the painting as a work of art in canonical terms".³⁰ In her book *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories*, the feminist scholar Griselda Pollock interprets *Judith*'s action as being driven less by revenge and more by political consciousness and collective duty.³¹ It appears to be more correct to remember that Artemisia's rage and feminist engagement lies more in the characters she decides to depict. Within her oeuvre, saints and other women sacrificed in the name of their faith are rare. Gentileschi's multiple representations of the figure of Lucretia, who killed herself after her rape by Sextus Tarquinius, may support the idea that she took interest in giving representation to victims as a form of personal catharsis. The psychoanalyst Marthe Coppel-Batsch sees in this choice "A rejection of the victim's position from Artemisia's part".³² However, her catalogue still favors combative and victorious feminine figures such as *Judith*, *Yael*, and *Esther*. These heroines of biblical times or Latin history often function as allegories for Peace and Justice. Nonetheless, the way Artemisia Gentileschi represents her feminine figures differs from traditional depictions of women in paintings. Inspired by the darker and more violent turn baroque painting took with Caravaggio, amongst others, she paints heroines filled with bravery, physical and moral strength, unwilling to submit, and most importantly, women are central and untethered to masculine figures. They own the painting. The art historian, Teresa Alario, states that the rejection of established models of femininity can be considered as a conscious turndown of misogynistic dominance in the field of art.³³

Indeed, the feminist appropriation of the work and the popularization of the theory of revenge allowed *Judith Slaying Holofernes* and its author to be rightfully canonized in the history of baroque art; but nonetheless, a reductive and erroneous analysis is responsible for its successful reappraisal. The scepticism towards the rape theory doesn't strip *Judith Slaying Holofernes* of its feminist aura. It is possible to analyze Artemisia's work with a thesis focusing on her reappropriation of Caravaggio's technique, such as *chiaroscuro*, her admirable presence in the Florentine woman-excluding painters circle, or other events from her personal life. It is a big regression for feminist art history and feminist art theory to consider a woman's work solely through the—positive or negative—influence men had on her life.

NOTES

- ¹ Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," Aspen Magazine, nos. 5/6 (Fall/Winter 1967): n.p
- ² Book of Judith (12:10-20; 13:1-12)
- ³ Eve Straussman-Pflanzer, *Violence & Virtue: Artemisia Gentileschi's Judith Slaying Holofernes*. (Chicago, IL: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2013.), 13.
- ⁴ Straussman-Pflanzer, *Violence & Virtue: Artemisia Gentileschi's Judith Slaying Holofernes*, 14.
- ⁵ Jesse M Locker, *Artemisia Gentileschi: the Language of Painting*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 171.
- ⁶ Locker, *Artemisia Gentileschi: the Language of Painting*, 171.
- ⁷ Locker, *Artemisia Gentileschi: the Language of Painting*, 171.
- ⁸ Anna Jameson. *Characteristics of Women Moral, Poetical and Historical*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 79.
- ⁹ Roberto Longhi. *Gentileschi, Padre e Figlia*. (Roma: Casa Ed. de L'Arte, 1916), 258.
- ¹⁰ Jameson, *Characteristics of Women Moral, Poetical and Historical*, 79.
- ¹¹ Jameson, *Characteristics of Women Moral, Poetical and Historical*, 79.
- ¹² Jameson, *Characteristics of Women Moral, Poetical and Historical*, 79.
- ¹³ Longhi, *Gentileschi Padre e Figlia*, 258.
- ¹⁴ Locker, *Artemisia Gentileschi: the Language of Painting*, 173.
- ¹⁵ Locker, *Artemisia Gentileschi: the Language of Painting*, 173.
- ¹⁶ Richard Ward Bissell, *Artemisia, Gentileschi and the Authority of Art Critical Reading and Catalogue Raisonné*, (University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press , 1999.) 184
- ¹⁷ Griselda Pollock, *Crítica Feminista En La Teoría e Historia Del Arte*, (México, Universidad Iberoamericana -Biblioteca Francisco Xavier Clavijero, 2007) 184.
- ¹⁸ Pollock, *Crítica Feminista En La Teoría e Historia Del Arte*, 184.
- ¹⁹ Straussman-Pflanzer, *Violence & Virtue: Artemisia Gentileschi's Judith Slaying Holofernes*, 23.
- ²⁰ Marthe Coppel-Batsch, "Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1653). Sexualité, Violence, Peinture." *Adolescence* , (2008):.2.
- ²¹ Straussman-Pflanzer, *Violence & Virtue: Artemisia Gentileschi's Judith Slaying Holofernes*, 23.
- ²² Straussman-Pflanzer, *Violence & Virtue: Artemisia Gentileschi's Judith Slaying Holofernes*, 23.
- ²³ Sarah F. Matthews Grieco, *Ange ou Diablesse : la représentation de la femme au XVIe siècle*, (Paris, Flammarion, 1991), 155.
- ²⁴ Mary D. Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi around 1622*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2001), 278.
- ²⁵ Catherine Ratelle-Montemiglio *Femmes et violences dans les œuvres d'Artemisia Gentileschi et d'Elisabetta Sirani (UQAM, 2013)*, 34.
- ²⁶ Mieke Bal, *The Artemisia Files*. (Chicago: the university of Chicago Press, 2005), xi.
- ²⁷ Roszika Parker et Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, (New York, Pantheon Books, 1981) 21.
- ²⁸ Nanette Salomon, *The Artemisia Files*. (Chicago: the university of Chicago Press, 2005), p.52
- ²⁹ Bal, *The Artemisia Files*, xi.
- ³⁰ Salomon, *The Artemisia Files*, 52.
- ³¹ Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon : Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art 's Histories*, (London, Routledge, 1999) 123.
- ³² Coppel-Batsch, Marthe, *Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1653). Sexualité, Violence, Peinture*, 2.
- ³³ Teresa Alario, *Arte y feminismo. Your Body is a Battleground* (Donostia San Sebastian, 2008) 14.

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Figure 1: Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, 1620, oil on canvas, 146.5cm x 108cm., Uffizi Museum, Florence.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:GENTILESCHI_Judith.jpg.



Figure 2: Caravaggio, *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, 1598, 145 cm x 195 cm, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Judith_Beheading_Holofernes_-_Caravaggio.jpg