

MISREADING ARTEMISIA

*A STUDY OF ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI'S "JUDITH SLAYING HOLOFERNES"
AND RAPE'S INFLUENCE ON CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS OF ART*

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“Judith Slaying Holofernes” by Artemisia Gentileschi



Artemisia Gentileschi has been labeled in numerous ways by scholars and popular culture alike over time – she is a feminist icon, a Caravaggista, a rape victim, daughter and wife – but she is first and foremost an artist. Her artwork, characterized by strong, large figures, and the same intense light and realism that made Caravaggio famous, is often deliberately interpreted to relate to her supposed hatred of and anger at men, ignoring both the social and religious atmosphere of her age and consequently missing a more complex interplay of symbolism and story. One of Gentileschi's most famous works, "Judith Slaying Holofernes," is a complicated blending of biblical legend, religious zeal, and empowerment of both women and Christians.

Born on July 8, 1593, Artemisia was daughter to Orazio Gentileschi – an accomplished artist in his own right – and Prudentia Montone. Her mother died early in Artemisia's life, leaving Orazio to raise Artemisia and her three brothers himself. He taught all four of his children his craft regardless of sex, and when Artemisia showed promise and talent, she was brought to labor in his workshop, assisting with Orazio's works and producing sellable pieces on her own. Orazio worked and shared a large circle of friends with Agostino Tassi, whom he hired to teach Artemisia perspective and other painterly skills, and it was during the course of these sessions that Artemisia was repeatedly raped by Tassi. Only the promise of eventual marriage – a promise Tassi had no intention of fulfilling – kept Artemisia quiet and within his grasp. However, once Orazio learned of this betrayal, he brought trial against Tassi, leading to an exaggerated legal battle that cast aspersions on Artemisia's purity, personality, and quality as an artist, as well as leading to humiliating examinations and torture when Artemisia continued to deny the slander. Tassi was eventually convicted and sentenced, and one month after the

conclusion of the trial, Artemisia married a Florentine artist, Pietro Antonio di Vincenzo Stiattesi. She gained fame and patronage in Florence – in fact, one of her most influential patrons was Grand Duke Cosimo II of the renowned Medici family, for whom she painted a large number of works.¹ She was successful in her time, eclipsing her husband, and became one of the few women to ever enroll in the Academy of Design, an accomplishment rarely mentioned in many of her biographies. During this time, she painted the first of her many renderings of the Judith story, “Judith Slaying Holofernes.”

In both mood and color, this painting is dark. The background is only a notion of black fabric that serves to highlight the three figures struggling in the foreground, and despite the high contrast of skin and shadow, the use of chiaroscuro to mold form, the chosen palette is muted and earthy to the point of looking entirely brown. Even the deep red of the bed sheet draped over the central horizontal figure, Holofernes, lacks vibrancy, though it does draw the eye’s attention merely because it is more color than the rest of the painting possesses.

From this sheet, the eye comes to the focal point of the painting, where Holofernes is held down on his back by two women, Judith and her maid. Their positioning is awkwardly intimate, a tangle of limbs and blood that is at once uncomfortable anatomically and emotionally. Holofernes’ right hand grasps the maid’s collar with what appears to be very little strength, while the other is forced against his own chest, leaving his elbow jutting out from his body at an inelegant angle while Judith’s hand clenches in his hair and pulls his head back for her sword. His expression is vacant, mouth relaxed and eyes open, regardless of the way the rest of his limbs resist. It is hard, at first, to visually

¹ Bissell, Raymond W. *Artemisia Gentileschi and the Authority of Art: Critical Reading and Catalogue Raisonne*. Penn State, 2001. Print.

untangle the way that the maid's arm crosses Holofernes', the color of the maid's dress being close to flesh tone, and the sword and shadow obscuring detail behind.

Compositionally, the figures are clustered together, visually attached to one another through the crossing of arms and fabrics rather than spread apart. Without the light reflecting off the pale bed, the figures form a horizontal line across the picture plane, taking up only half the available space within the painting and giving the audience a sense of completed, fully presented figures, despite the fact that both women's lower halves are mostly in shadow or obscured. The way the paint is applied is deliberate and precise; there is no haze or smokiness about the figures, but instead a crispness of definition.

The gore itself is stiffly rendered, appearing to resemble branches more than liquid spray, and the mattress below Holofernes shows small rivulets of blood both where it is appropriate – as below the blade and his shoulders – and where it seems less so – further to the left as though coming from under the sheet, though Holofernes seems to suffer from no other injury. In spite of this mess of blood, Holofernes himself is clean of it for the most part. Judith and her maid are unsullied as well, except for two small drops on the maid's arm, and a few placed delicately on Judith's breast and clothed chest.

Though they are unsoiled, there is no denying that both Judith and her maid are wholly involved in the painting, and indeed are firm aggressors. They both sport looks of concentration and near satisfaction: the maid has a fierce furrow between her brows that is defined by the shadow and light playing upon her face, and Judith shows the same in her pinched mouth and forehead. Both are formidable, muscular figures, and Judith especially has strong, large forearms that seem almost as wide across as Holofernes' bicep. She is wearing a fine dress of gold fabric, a gold bracelet, and her hair done up in an elaborate

fashion, but she is looming over Holofernes without fear of ruining her fine things, focus entirely on the act she is committing.

The gruesome nature of this painting, however, belies its original intent as a biblical story of victory and triumph over heretical invaders. Without context, Judith is a cold-blooded murderer and Holofernes an innocent victim; with context, Judith is the savior of her people, justice meted out in God's stead for the crime of worshipping another over Him.

As told in the Book of Judith, Holofernes brought a campaign one hundred and thirty two thousand men strong to bear on the lands that had not become allies to his king and god, Nebuchadnezzar, and slaughtered, looted, and destroyed nations, one after another. The people of Judah heard what Holofernes had done to these nations, and fortified their villages, preparing to stand against Holofernes' might as others had not. When Holofernes' tactics proved too much, and leadership was on the brink of surrender, a young widow named Judith snuck away from her city to Holofernes' camp. She spent three days there, refusing heathen food and going to ritually cleanse herself and pray at the river every evening. On the fourth day, she went to Holofernes and supped with him. Addled by drink, he was in no shape to fight off Judith when she decapitated him. Upon returning to her city and orchestrating the defeat of the Assyrian army, Judith was praised and became a hero to the Israelites.² Great emphasis is placed during the telling of this story in the Bible on the religious purity and piety of Judith, and the profane nature of Holofernes' belief in his god-king.

It is here that many scholars fail to address any other motivation for Gentileschi's painting of this scene other than her tragic early-life rape and coercion at the hands of her

² *Judith. Good News Bible*. Thomas Nelson, 1979. Print.

tutor. While it is likely that her experience sometimes affected the subject matter she chose, and the way in which she portrayed women as heroic victims, to deny any other significance in her painting is to deny Gentileschi's sophistication and maturity as an artist and her strength as a person. By necessity, Caravaggio's lifestyle and experiences affected both the naturalism of his rendering and the coarse nature of his common models, and yet his paintings are not judged solely on these merits; there is still meaning to his work outside of his sometimes tumultuous existence. Additionally, Gentileschi worked in a market based on patronage rather than speculation and would not have always been able to paint according to whim; patrons of the time obviously specifically enjoyed the story of Judith.

According to Ildiko Mohacsy, there is a deeper cultural meaning to the story of Judith that may have influenced Gentileschi's portrayal of the Judith story: "A woman with a sword has historically represented justice, heroism, virtue, strength, and victory... Judith slaying Holofernes symbolizes inquisition and retribution for those deviating from Church teachings."³ In a Europe divided sharply between Catholic and Protestant ideals, this implication is a powerful one. Gentileschi is not enacting a revenge fantasy – or if she is, that is not the painting's sole or most important purpose, as Rachel Campbell Johnston suggests, saying, "Revenge is among the purest and most satisfying of human emotions... Artemisia Gentileschi, battling her way in a male-dominated Renaissance art

³ Mohacsy, Ildiko. "Artemisia Gentileschi and Her World." *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis and Dynamic Psychiatry* 32.1 (2004). Web. 26 Nov. 2011.
<<http://proquest.umi.com/pqdlink?did=629583431&Fmt=3&clientId=17454&RQT=309&VName=PQD>>.

world and raped by her father's trusted friend, took revenge on those who oppressed her by painting a bloodcurdling canvas of the biblical Judith slitting Holofernes' throat."⁴

To ignore the religious and social connotations of the painting at the time of Gentileschi's execution of it is inexcusable. Gentileschi was only one of the many artists of her time portraying gore, death, and murder in her paintings, as the culture surrounding her and fellow painters was one that accepted and demanded these things in their art.

Additionally, she was not far removed from the Protestant Reformation and its resulting backlash within artistic tradition of the Catholic world. Religious fervor in art was prized, and there is little more pious to a Christian than sacrifice and courage in the name of God – a theme that characterizes the story of Judith. She is judge and executioner, fighting not only for the fate of her village and people, but for the honor of God's name and her unshakable belief in her one true lord over all others. Judith is a powerful figure within the painting, intimately and proudly engaged in the beheading, sure of God's support for her.

Judith, symbolically, represents the triumph of Jewish – and, later, Christian – theology over paganism and heretics, but she is also has come to represent in today's world the notion that women cannot be heroes without using their sexuality as a weapon. As it is told in the Bible, Judith resides within Holofernes' camp for a number of days, praying to her God for strength to do what is necessary and right each day, and uses nothing but her outward beauty to sway his trust. He drinks until he is passed out, but Judith gives him no measure of her purity to hurry his slumber along. However, in many descriptions of the tale, Judith is labeled a seductress – a word with varied connotations, none of which is synonymous with heroism. Despite the story's depiction as a triumph for Judith and her

⁴ "A pure emotion taken into creative account." *Times* [London, England] 20 Nov. 2006: 14. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 20 Nov. 2011
<http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA154679176&v=2.1&u=upitt_main&it=r&p=AONE&sw=w>

people, and despite Judith being received as a hero to her village and the very picture of a feminist idol, she is still described by a name she did not earn.

Undoubtedly, Artemisia Gentileschi herself is a figure fit for feminist adulation: she was successful as a woman in her time period, an accomplished and talented painter that is now recognized as an equal to great masters like Caravaggio and Rubens, and who was once called upon by Young Michelangelo for a commission.⁵ She is a strong individual that stands out against the stereotypical view of pure, permissive, submissive women of the time, and it is right to laud her for that. However, reducing her life and work to something as base as revenge is the opposite of feminism in that it is debasing to her as a complex human and as an artist: her life did not end at rape, though it seems her story as told by those who would use her as a feminist icon often does.

To reduce her only to the act of her being raped is to reduce her accomplishments, as if to say she has overcome some disadvantage inherent in herself by continuing to live her life – in short, it is the start of a vicious cycle of victim-blaming and sexual shame. Her womanhood defines her, rather than her individuality, in the scholarship of today. It seems as though the first thing mentioned in any biography or work of scholastic nature regarding Gentileschi, is her rape and the trial associated with it: for example, *The Palgrave Macmillan Dictionary of Women's Biography* mentions her rape and trial before even her birth date, birth place, or status as an artist.⁶ If reading that entry is the first knowledge one has of Artemisia Gentileschi as a person, she will ultimately be defined in one's mind as a

⁵ "Gentileschi, Artemisia." *The Palgrave Macmillan Dictionary of Women's Biography*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Publishers Ltd, 2005. *Credo Reference*. Web. 28 November 2011.

<https://sremote.pitt.edu/entry/macdwb/,DanaInfo=www.credoreference.com+gentileschi_artemisia>

⁶ "Gentileschi, Artemisia." *The Palgrave Macmillan Dictionary of Women's Biography*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Publishers Ltd, 2005. *Credo Reference*. Web. 28 November 2011.

<https://sremote.pitt.edu/entry/macdwb/,DanaInfo=www.credoreference.com+gentileschi_artemisia>

rape victim first and an artist second. The hardships of Gentileschi's life should not be made light of: rape is not petty theft or drunken and disorderly conduct. It is violation and degradation in the purest of forms. However, as Marianne Horney Eckardt points out,

“Artemisia Gentileschi is of interest to us as a remarkable painter of the 17th century, as a remarkable woman, and as the subject of miscellaneous voices in her time and in our time that illustrate our all too human tendency to stereotype minorities, especially women, and our tendency to embrace prejudices that try to explain (away) the challenges of their existence... Artemisia was not only a great painter but also a remarkable woman who coped admirably with the considerable challenges in her life. Mohacsy makes an important point when discussing our predilection to be drawn to a dynamic theory that emphasizes trauma.”⁷

Tragedy should not be made to define a lifetime. Artemisia Gentileschi's “Judith Slaying Holofernes” is not merely a man-bashing revenge fantasy put to canvas, but a reflection of the society surrounding her, the religiosity of art defined by the Catholic Reformation, and a showcase of her unique talents.

Gentileschi, abandoned by her husband some ten years after their marriage, supported her family with her artwork and maintained a successful, if controversial, career as an artist until her death in 1653 at the age of sixty.⁸ Her achievements have launched her into the popular culture of today, inspiring nonfiction and fiction alike – books dramatizing her life, movies like *Artemisia* (1997) becoming cornerstones of feminist dialogue and

⁷ Marianne Horney Eckardt. “Discussion of ‘Artemisia Gentileschi and her World’ by Ildiko Mohacsy.” *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis and Dynamic Psychiatry* 32.1 (2004). Web. 27 Nov. 2011.

<<http://proquest.umi.com/pqdlink?did=629583461&Fmt=3&clientId=17454&RQT=309&VName=PQD>>

⁸ Cohen, Elizabeth S. “The Trials of Artemisia Gentileschi: A Rape as History.” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 31.1 (2000): 47-75. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 Dec. 2011. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2671289>>.

argument – and capturing the hearts and minds of contemporary audiences with her atypical story of triumph in the face of discrimination and adversity. However, modern discussion of her works and life is largely lacking in necessary context and tends to lean towards portraying Gentileschi – and by extension, the women that characterize her paintings – as victimized, helpless against the power of men, rather than as the willful and exceedingly independent figure history says she was. Gentileschi’s “Judith Slaying Holofernes” is representative of both her style of painting and her life: strong women dominate the canvas, just as Gentileschi held dominion over her craft.

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