

# **Artemisia Gentileschi from Baroque to Neo-Baroque: Reimagining Female Biblical Figures and the Female Gaze**

By Maya Ramirez

Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1653) has redefined feminism in art through her participation in creating art pieces within an artistic era defined by momentary interpretations of classical stories. This led to the reimagining of female biblical characters, a feat which has allowed Artemisia to gain popularity in the modern day. Artemisia Gentileschi, despite being confined within a society and professional field dominated by men, was able to define the female gaze through her art. It is typical to find biblical stories in Western paintings, however, the vast majority are created by men, for the expression of male voyeuristic desires. Gentileschi encountered these common interpretations through her iterations of classic figures, like Susanna, Judith, and Mary Magdalene. These figures took on strong roles as heroic, virtuous, and capable women. Gentileschi's reimagining of historical figures is vastly different from the same narratives produced by her male counterparts, like Caravaggio (1571-1610), an incredibly respected male painter during the Baroque period in Italy. Besides being a fundamental part of the artistic scene in Italy, Gentileschi also heavily participated in female activism which became prominent due to female authors like Lucrezia Marinella. Through Gentileschi's art, it is evident that her motive to make art pieces for the consumption and gaze of women has allowed her to become a feminist icon of the modern day. Her art still holds relevance, although being centuries-old, due to the ways it can relate to female voyeurism, a topic frequently discussed in film and media studies. Gentileschi's art and life can provide a clear and concise view of

what constitutes the female gaze in art, and how female-dominated biblical narratives tie into these interpretations.

Gentileschi holds relevance in a variety of feminist movements, which has caused controversial and problematic scholarship to be attached to her name. It is important to recognize that the feminist movement at the time did not define themselves as feminists, but rather were authors of their own activist ideals. Gentileschi cannot be placed in a frame of first or second wave feminism, instead she fits into modern feminist ideals by illuminating figures of power and action within her art. Since feminism was undefined in the 17th century, Gentileschi instead participated in an era where gender relations and perceptions of women were evolving.

In the Neo-Baroque or modern day, feminism has become focused on the empowerment of women, a mold which Artemisia has proved useful in filling. Within the popularity of fourth wave feminism, Artemisia has become a prominent figure, primarily due to the sexual violence she endured at a young age. The fictionalization and romanticization of Gentileschi's life are not only common in the media, but are also frequently exhibited in academic writings. This has created a problematic marking on Gentileschi's life and image as she is commonly defined by her rape case. The use of her past to justify her painting's prolific narratives has created a paradoxical effect on the understanding of her life as an artist and activist. Instead, it is imperative to view Gentileschi's art pieces not as reflections of sexual violence, but testaments to her activism, artistic talent and advanced perceptions of spectatorship and gender.

Artemisia Gentileschi's art and transformation into a feminist figure of the modern-day illuminate her impact on spectatorship and gender in art. This is evident through her

depictions of strong females in biblical stories and in the comparison of her artworks to other male artists of the time. By analyzing the reinstating of power to female bodies in art, and Gentileschi's problematic role in Western feminism, Gentileschi is able to ameliorate the definition of what constitutes the female gaze and redefine modern understandings of feminism and art.

### **Artemisia Gentileschi; Feminism Through Painting**

Artemisia Gentileschi was born in Rome on July 8, 1593. Her father Orazio Gentileschi was a classically trained painter who studied under and alongside Tassi and Caravaggio.<sup>1</sup> Growing up, Artemisia was the legal property of her father, as were all the women born in Italy at this time due to the perception that women were weaker, and more unstable than men.<sup>2</sup> The understanding that women were not as virtuous as men due to biblical references like Adam and Eve allowed men to dominate an incredibly patriarchal system.<sup>3</sup> This was also very common in the writings of male authors like Guiseppe Passi, who wrote *The Defects of Women* to perpetuate misogynistic ideas regarding the lack of morality women have.<sup>4</sup> Feminist authors like Lucrezia Marinella fervently fought against narratives outlined by male authors like Passi. During this turbulent time of women being frequently confined to the regulations of male domination, Gentileschi was subject to increasing amounts of attention due to her and her father's 1612 court case against Agostino Tassi who was accused of raping Gentileschi in his studio.<sup>5</sup> This case further sustained the ideas of Gentileschi being property and lacking her own sense of

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<sup>1</sup> "Gentileschi, Artemisia (c. 1597 - c. 1652)." In *The Penguin Biographical Dictionary of Women*, edited by Market House Books Ltd.. Penguin, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Mary D, Garrad. *Artemisia Gentileschi and Feminism in Early Modern Europe*. London: Reaktion Books, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> "Gentileschi, Artemisia (c. 1597 - c. 1652)." In *The Penguin Biographical Dictionary of Women*, edited by Market House Books Ltd.. Penguin, 1998.

independence. Despite this, Artemisia sought to restore her image and when Tassi proposed marriage she accepted the sexual relationship. Under oath, Artemisia claimed Tassi forced sexual acts onto her and even underwent physical examinations as evidence.<sup>6</sup> Tassi's poor reputation, along with multiple scandals already attached to his name like the disappearance of his wife, resulted in him being charged for the case. Despite being a subject of controversy and lacking a female artistic group, Gentileschi began defining her own artistic style. Instead of following the form of those her and her father studied under, Artemisia sought to redefine female biblical narratives. Soon after the case, she married Pierantonio Stiattesi, in order to recover her family's reputation.<sup>7</sup> These forms of gender inequality and societal injustices which became all too real for Artemisia Gentileschi and many other women began taking center stage socially.

In response to oppressing actions, outspoken female writers in the 17th century began expressing their own opinions on gender roles. Understanding the gender relation undertones during the time of Gentileschi's life makes her involvement in the movement increasingly evident, and also illuminates the kind of female activism Gentileschi is a part of in the modern day. It is important to remember that forms of activism in the 17th century were very different from modern day feminism. In truth, there was no such movement in the Italian Baroque period, instead, female activism began through the rewriting of male dominated gender narratives. Lucrezia Marinella, author of *Exhortations to Women and Others if They Please*, outlines the ideals which were prevalent within Italy, especially Venice. In her book, Marinella examines the ideas of women in secrecy and solitude, various societal apparatus of control, gender differences and God. Women's societal roles

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<sup>6</sup> Garrard, Mary D. *Artemisia Gentileschi and Feminism in Early Modern Europe*. London: Reaktion Books, 2020, 24.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 25

are heavily outlined through Marinella's portion on domestic confines as well as the differences between men and women;

“Therefore we maintain that women were kept within domestic walls not by men's evil desire to dominate them or by some other external force, but by God and Nature....God, who built the universe with wisdom and providence, gave natural and different tasks to the male and the female. He knew that if they were assigned the same task, they would not achieve a perfect life.<sup>8</sup>”

Marinella's interpretations of gender roles did not fight against the injustices which occurred towards women, and had an increasingly passive approach to the preservation of the women's role in society. Marinella still maintained her female activist position through her writing of how crucial women were to the functioning of their society, when male perceptions of women were misogynistic and damaging. Instead, Marinella focused on preserving the virtuous roles women played in domestic settings through her writing to counter the ideas that women did not have godly values, and did not play crucial parts in the functioning of society. This is also evident in her passage regarding women's time in the home;

“It is inside the home that the results of their activity must be witnessed, and here also that their reputations, which are based in preserving wealth with prudence and wisdom and without complaint, must be kept. They must consider that had God, the Great Master, formed men and women of equal

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<sup>8</sup> Marinella, Lucrezia. *Exhortations to Women and to Others if They Please*, (1645), ed. And trans. Laura Benedetti (Toronto, 2012), 51

physical strength such that both were capable of traveling and conducting business and neither ruled over wealth and acquisition all gain would be in vain...while men were granted strength and vigor, that they might make their household happy and prosperous with their toil and with women's help, prudence and skills.<sup>9</sup>

This passage can easily characterize the kinds of ideals of the time; women played crucial roles in society no matter their domestic confines. Despite these ideas being thought of as sexist in the modern lens, Artemisia Gentileschi was a part of these perceptions in a new way. In the reinventing of female biblical characters, Gentileschi expressed that women were not only prominent and crucial to domestic areas of life, but were also professionals who affected all aspects of society. Gentileschi's female dominated narratives created a new discourse within this movement, one regarding female power and outlining women outside of the home. Gentileschi's women broke the typical confines of female activism within Italian 17th century society, and began to redefine the portrayal of female heroes and bodies through the female perspective.

When speaking on feminism there are many subcategories which arise. As expressed by Marinella, the Baroque time in Italy was not forgiving towards women's independence or the building of a respectable reputation. Female activists like Marinella were looking at redefining the current perceptions of their roles in society. Gentileschi's image within the modern day however, has been used to further understand women's ability to change the narrative and examine injustices. One way Gentileschi is able to do this is through her paintings' ability to exhibit the female gaze. The paintings' narratives are tailored to the pleasures and understandings of women, creating an empowering space for the character and

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 52

viewer.

The female gaze is a topic frequented by feminist film scholars, however, the ideas of gender and the gaze are prevalent in painting as well. Voyeurism, or the pleasure that comes from looking, has been the root of many of the visual arts we have today. The body of woman has remained a common topic as the pleasure of looking in an erotic way has led to the formation of new spaces and conversations in how viewers consume art. The possession of women through the gaze is an idea analyzed by Mary Ann Doane, a feminist film scholar and author of *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*. Within her book Doane not only deconstructs film theory as well as the epistemology of the gaze, but also analyzes the roots of voyeurism and gender. The accessibility of women as well as the sexualization of women's bodies creates a trope which is easily enjoyed and digestible to male audiences. This ties into the apparatus which positions the spectator on the side of illusionary identification.<sup>10</sup> The identification mentioned is the separation between subject and viewer, corresponding with voyeuristic practices. These forms of looking affected the art world greatly, even if the modes of recognizing them were not attainable to those at the time. The sexualization of female figures, especially biblical characters, was incredibly common within Western art. Women's bodies were utilized for erotic consumption within the paintings and enjoyed by male viewers as well. Art produced to satisfy the male gaze was revered; women who looked away from their assailants, who tempted the men with non-confrontational looks were favored among male audiences and art critics. The accessibility and inaccessibility of women allowed men to dismiss the representations of danger while simultaneously presenting pleasure. This is mentioned by Doane as the woman

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<sup>10</sup> Mary Ann, Doane. *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory and Psychoanalysis*. New York: Routledge, 1992, 82.

trope, ““He was, he dresses this castrated woman. He was, he dreaded this castrating woman. He was, he loved this affirming woman.”<sup>11</sup> The psychoanalytical forms of “looking” in relation to gender presents the discourse of the threats women have in their basic form.

At the time, women in paintings were accepted as erotic figures, and critiqued if they were characters with power. Gentileschi participated in the shifting of these commonly consumed women, and reinvented female characters who were dissociated with their stories of action, and more commonly equated to figures of pleasure. This is attainable in Gentileschi’s *Self Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* (1638-39).



Fig. 1 *Allegory of Painting*

Cesare Ripa, an Italian iconographer, claimed that the Allegory of Painting could be characterized by a woman, whose mouth was tied, wearing a heavy and large necklace

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 61

of a face hanging from her neck, with a palette and brush. This bound and shackled female character created by Ripa was rebutted by Gentileschi's own portrait. Within the painting, Gentileschi asserts herself as an active professional, her face uncovered as she gazes towards the canvas in front of her, focused as she raises the brush to the canvas. Her hair looks unkempt, and strands hang to the side of her face, not affecting her deep concentration. The necklace is a dainty size, and hangs around her neck dangling in front of her arm which holds her palette and brushes. This painting is not only a reinvention of the allegory, but also an ode to the professionalism of women and their active nature in paintings and society.

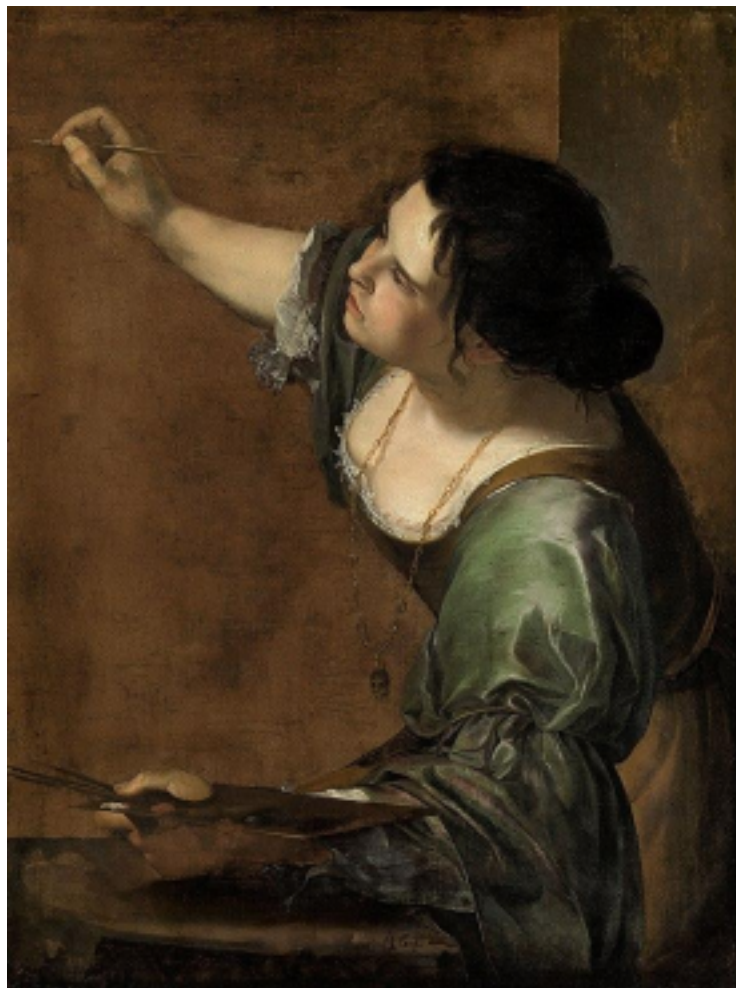


Fig. 2 *Self Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* (1638-39)

Artemisia is able to create substance to the allegory, elevating her identity as an artist while symbolically refuting the sexist behavior of placing women into allegorical confines.<sup>12</sup> By doing this, Artemisia is able to create a depiction of women with power and conviction through a fictive representation. The integration of her body into the piece represents her active participation as well as her psychic integration; although her body may be doing physical work, her mind creates the piece as well.<sup>13</sup> The nobility of artists is also a theme acknowledged by Artemisia through the painting. Even prior to the Renaissance, the status of painters was always in question due to their career being based on physical labor. Artists like Raphael and Michelangelo continuously commented on their importance within their pieces. Similarly, Artemisia claims this elevated status through her portrait, as well as the skill and determination the profession entails.<sup>14</sup> This allows her to transform a sexist narrative into a piece of art that supports her profession and advertises her abilities. Artemisia continues in this assertion of the female as active through the reimagining of female biblical characters.

Biblical stories have been a crucial part of Western art, as depictions of classic historical and religious stories remained prominent in Europe. Even in the salons of France, after Gentileschi's artistic career, history paintings were placed at the top because they were believed to be valued the most due to their inclusion of historical narratives. This is also true throughout a majority of art produced in Italy as large numbers of artists were patronized to create depictions of classical biblical stories, including Susanna and the Elders. The story of Susanna and the Elders follows a married woman who is confronted by

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<sup>12</sup> Mary D, Garrad. *Artemisia Gentileschi and Feminism in Early Modern Europe*. London: Reaktion Books, 2020, 221.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 224

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 225

two elderly men. The men blackmail her, and demand her to perform sexual acts with them, and if she refuses, they will accuse her of adultery, forcing her to be stoned to death even if she did not commit illegal acts. The story, although incredibly disturbing, was often depicted in sexual and playful ways. This is evident in Tintoretto's depiction of the story in *Susanna and the Elders* (1555).<sup>15</sup>



Fig. 3 *Susanna and the Elders* (1555)

In the center of the painting there is a nude Susanna bathing, while two men peer into her space consuming her body with their gaze. Susanna appears to be gazing at herself in the mirror, admiring herself while the two elderly men stand at each corner of a wall separating her from the public view. This invasion of space and privacy is made to appear seductive, sensual and permitted as she allows their gaze to surpass her own physical boundaries. The fetishization of sexual violence was incredibly common among male painters depictions of

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<sup>15</sup> Tintoretto, *Susanna and the Elders*, (1555), (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna).

the event. This can heavily relate to the ongoing assumption at the time that women were not as virtuous as men, and were more capable of committing sins. Authors like Passi wrote heavily on the subject of women and their ability to commit adultery, while Lucrezia Marinella wrote *The Nobility and Excellence of Women, and the Defects and Vices of Men*, to refute the arguments presented by male authors and artists.<sup>16</sup> The hypocrisy outlined by feminist authors is further amplified by Artemisia's *Susanna and the Elders (1610)*. Although Tintoretto's depiction of Susanna was over 50 years prior to Artemisia Gentileschi's interpretation of the story, it can illustrate the change in gender tensions as well as the historical relevance of such perceptions. Artemisia Gentileschi's *Susanna* not only exhibits the female gaze but also the discourses which surround gender and sexuality. Women's seductive capabilities were frequently illuminated in the art produced by men, especially in the 17th century, however, this motif is also prominent within Tintoretto's piece. *Susanna and the Elders* narrative became yet another vehicle for the expression of male voyeuristic desires. Artemisia Gentileschi was only 17 years old when she redefined the male narrative which *Susanna* was confined to.<sup>17</sup> The woman within Gentileschi's painting does not allow her body to be consumed by the gaze of men, as she raises her arms in resistance and turns her head from the men tormenting her. The honest female response to sexual assailants relates to the biblical story itself as *Susanna* refuses the men's blackmail. The narrative which was once dominated by male voyeurism is now shifted to the realistic response of a woman's discomfort.

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<sup>16</sup> Mary D, Garrad.. *Artemisia Gentileschi and Feminism in Early Modern Europe*. London: Reaktion Books, 2020, 71

<sup>17</sup> Artemisia, Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, Oil on Canvas, 1610, (Schloss Weißenstein Collection).

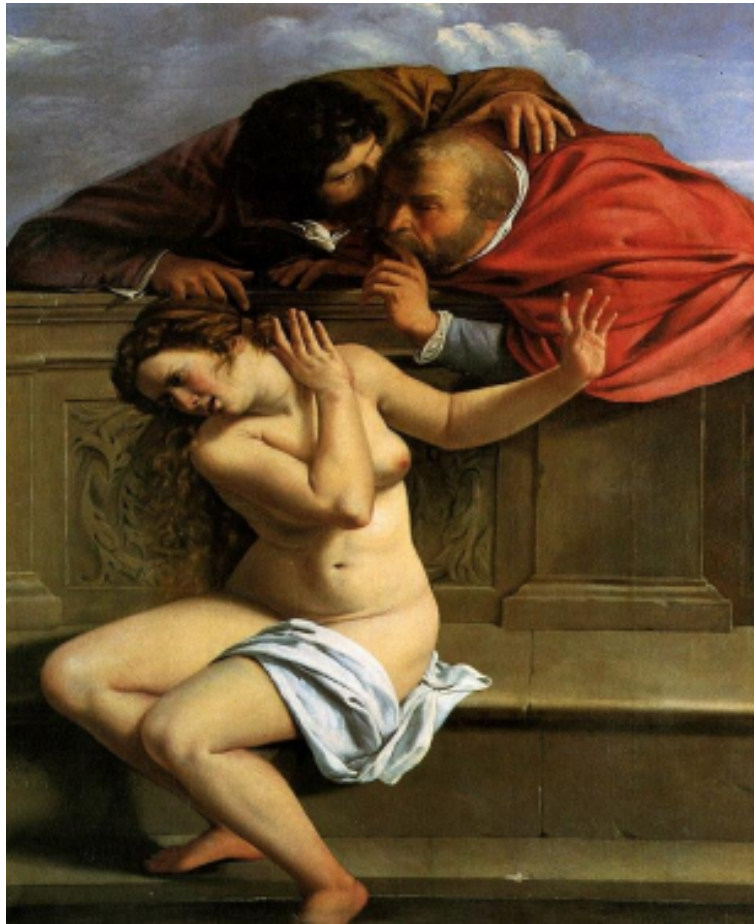


Fig. 4 *Susanna and the Elders* (1610)

This is incredibly evident in the details in Susanna's facial and body expressions, her brow is creased and body twisted away from the men. Her being nude, and her attractiveness being evident, makes her seem vulnerable to the viewer and assailants, despite her resistance. One of the other key differences within Gentileschi's painting is the men depicted. Garrad examines the depiction of an old and young man;

“The younger man with thick dark hair, a somewhat dashing figure...hovers uncomfortably close to Susanna, his hand almost touching her hair and fingers.

The elders are typically presented as bearded old men to whom Susanna would not

normally be attracted..But these pictures are essentially male fantasies, a genre in which women invariably welcome men's overtures."<sup>18</sup>

Artemisia is able to portray women in a heightened realistic sense, since sexual attraction is inherent, even in women who say no. Portraying one of the male assailants as young, she is able to amplify Susanna as virtuous and heroic by refusing sexual acts to protect her honor and refusing to succumb to sexual attraction.<sup>19</sup> Artemisia reinvents Susanna as a real woman, one with sexual desires, limitations and virtues. This depiction of Susanna also examines women's sexuality and sexual identity. Visually, the contrast of Susanna's loose curls, and the tightly confined foliage relief coiffure behind her head, further illuminates the social hypocrisy of being a woman.<sup>20</sup> A woman is meant to feel shame for her beauty and sexuality until it is made legitimate by being given to, or taken by, a man.<sup>21</sup>



Fig. 5 *Susanna and the Elders* (1610) detail

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<sup>18</sup> Mary D, Garrad. *Artemisia Gentileschi and Feminism in Early Modern Europe*. London: Reaktion Books, 2020, 76

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 76

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 78

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 78

The painting examines the social and ideological confines women's minds and bodies are held within, this is visually expressed by the tight space Susanna is held within as well as the architectural frames behind her. The erotic ways Susanna is typically expressed for male desires is redefined by Artemisia's Susanna, who questions the gender imbalances as well as the discourses which surround a male viewer and female subject.

Voyeurism and the fascination with the consumption of the human form is an idea which dominates spectatorship and the visual intake of art. These ideas are examined by Laura Mulvey in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, which evaluates the use of female bodies as erotic pauses within artistic narratives. Mulvey examines the different levels women are expressed as; "traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned in two levels: an erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with the shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen."<sup>22</sup> The idea that women are used as erotic subjects within the art itself and externally is evident in art that is expressed from the male gaze. This was seen in Tintoretto's piece as Susanna is offered for the consumption of the men within the painting, and for the voyeuristic desires of the men looking at the painting. This creates a erotic icon, one which is available for the pleasure of men, while lacking control of the narrative. Gentileschi's Susanna refutes these typical depictions through the action Susanna has within the piece. She does not succumb to the fantasies of the men within the painting or those viewing it, instead she transcends the typical depictions of her as powerless, and instead further insinuates her virtue and ownership over her body and situation, despite her

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<sup>22</sup> Laura, Mulvey. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford UP, 1999, 625

vulnerability. Susanna is reimagined as a woman which coincides with feminist ideals, and in many ways surpasses them as the conversation of sexuality, gender, and ideological confines are brought to the surface.

### **Judith: The Breaking of Male Voyeuristic Desires**

The ideas regarding women as passive members of the narrative is also evident in biblical stories which focus on male desires rather than female power. This is tangible in the story of Judith and Holofernes. Judith is a biblical hero, who beheads the man who invades her town, creating havoc and terrorizing citizens. Judith was a clever widow, and through the seduction of Holofernes was able to behead him and end his terrorizing of her town. Despite Judith being a powerful and action driven woman, her figure was also used to continue the perceptions of women as deceitful and erotic seductresses whom endanger men.<sup>23</sup> The story is one which should exhibit a driven, powerful and heroic female, as she seeks out to defend her town and people. However, male artistic depictions interpret the story as one with erotic connotations due to Judith's entry into Holofernes bedroom. Not only does this create visual pleasure but by eroticizing Judith, it removes her threatening and powerful capabilities, making it more digestible and pleasurable to male viewers. This is incredibly evident in Donatello's bronze sculpture, *Judith and Holofernes (1455)*.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Mary D, Garrad. *Artemisia Gentileschi and Feminism in Early Modern Europe*. London: Reaktion Books, 2020, 128

<sup>24</sup> Donatello , Judith and Holofernes, 1455, Bronze, (Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, Italy).



Fig. 6 *Judith and Holofernes* (1455)

Donatello's depiction of Judith emphasises her as a seductress, and temptress, although exhibiting masculine aspects. Despite Judith still holding power as she yields a knife above Holofernes head, women in Italy during the time did not have the same kind of social and political conviction as the Judith depicted by Donatello. Instead, the statue stood as a reminder of women's power, and the need for men to control it.<sup>25</sup> Besides portrayals of Judith being sexualized, she was also made to look disgusted and passive to the situation; this is evident in Caravaggio's interpretation of the story. Caravaggio's *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (1589-99), made the violent image more tame as Judith stood to the side of the painting, appearing to be young and distressed by the situation.<sup>26</sup> This is evident through her

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<sup>25</sup> Mary D, Garrad. *Artemisia Gentileschi and Feminism in Early Modern Europe*. London: Reaktion Books, 2020, 137

<sup>26</sup> Caravaggio, *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, Oil on Canvas, 1598-1599, (Palazzo Barberini).

facial expressions of disgust as well as her detached stance within the scene. Holofernes remains in the center of the painting, while Judith and her handmaid take a passive stance to the situation.



Fig. 7 *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (1589-99)

The blood spills from Holofernes neck in the opposite direction of the woman within the scene, as Judith tilts his head upward. Judith's disgusted expression and static stance create a passive environment to an active scene. Depictions like this further perpetuate the idea that female power is non-threatening since it is dominated in a male space. Artemisia Gentileschi however, redefined Judith and her handmaid Abra and made them active, powerful, and in control of the narrative in her painting *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1612-13). Gentileschi's elucidation of the scene shifts the narrative of Judith from a temptress to a religious defender.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Mary D, Garrad. *Artemisia Gentileschi and Feminism in Early Modern Europe*. London: Reaktion Books, 2020, 139



Fig. 8 *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1612-1613)

The common trope of the domineering mistress and the sexualization of this theme breaks by the strength expressed by the two biblical figures within Gentileschi's painting. As her handmaid holds down the victim, her sleeves rolled up as blood spews from Holofernes' neck. Both of the women look down, focused on completing the heroic task, there is a dramatic composition as all the characters are central in the piece. Baroque art held the common characteristic of holding momentary qualities, paintings captured fictional

moments in a way which allowed viewers to savor a glimpse inside a longer story. Gentileschi's *Judith Slaying Holofernes* continues these Baroque characteristics while adding energy, action, and a intriguing juxtaposition between the texture of the sheet, the blood staining the bed and the lack of life within Holofernes face compared to the movement and determination of the women who are slaying him. The feminist ideals expressed within the painting are incredibly evident, the illustration of women as heroic, determined, active, and powerful are all portrayed visually and contextually. However, the painting has often been equated to being a violent piece in relation to her rape. This understanding of the painting is immensely problematic, Garrad speaks on these misconceptions;

“The relationship of this violent image to the artist’s experience of rape has been much discussed...It is important to remember that this is art, not psychotherapy. The pictorial revenge that Artemisia took on her rapist was not a defensive psychological reaction by a female victim, but might better be understood as poetic justice— a playful, imaginative expression of retribution she was due.”<sup>28</sup>

The mention of her rape in relation to her art is something which has become incredibly common within scholarship. These mislead conclusions have hurt Gentileschi’s redefining of female figures, and injured her image through the perpetuation of the romanticizing of sexual violence. This has not only left a controversial marking on Gentileschi’s art, but has also lead to the fictionalization and romanticization of Gentileschis trauma and early life, resulting in a harmful portrayal of her as an artist, feminist and, woman.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 140

## **A Woman of the Neo-Baroque: Artemisia Gentileschi's Influence in the Modern World**

Although Gentileschi's rise to being a respected artist happened centuries ago, she has become a unique figure within the modern world, or Neo-Baroque. The Neo-Baroque is analyzed by Angela Ndalians in *From Neo-Baroque to Neo-Baroques?* The Baroque art movement which began in the 17th century revolved around the depictions of moments— a dramatic event attainable to audiences forever. Painters were able to play with perceptions of spectatorship through the momentary appeal of Baroque paintings. In a time of mass media, dramatic displays, and digital desires, this age makes such moments attainable and evident at every corner. The connection between this and the Baroque time period which Gentileschi was involved in is made evident by Ndalians;

“I have explored elsewhere the ‘Baroque’ as a transhistorical state that extends beyond the historical confines of the seventeenth century. Most evident in contemporary entertainment-which is the product of conglomerate industries with multi-media interests and which is now an integral part of contemporary urban life-the Neo-Baroque combines the visual, auditory and textual in ways that parallel the dynamism of seventeenth century Baroque form.”<sup>29</sup>

The Neo-Baroque time period in many ways mirrors the visual representations expressed by 17th century artists. As mentioned by Ndalians, the modern world is now dominated by media interests as well as the visual consumption of technology and images. The kind of momentary appeal held by paintings from the Baroque period mirror the commercials which dance across billboards in Time Square. Voyeuristic desires have a strong hold, as much of

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<sup>29</sup> Angela Ndalians. "From Neo-Baroque to Neo-Baroques?" *Revista Canadiense De Estudios Hispánicos* 33, no. 1 (2008): 267.

the entertainment is through screens.. Despite there being a large transformation between the Baroque and Neo-Baroque, Gentileschi is heavily involved in both of these movements. Besides the obvious artistic parallels, her involvement is in part due to her image being utilized as part of the 'Me Too' movement, which strives to outline the amount of women who have experienced sexual violence. This is part of the newest wave of feminism, which uses the digital age to empower women's bodies, liberties and abilities to not only participate heavily in society, but demand justice for acts of sexual violence. Although feminist sentiments today are starkly different than the ones held in 17th century Europe, one cannot ostracize the visual relevance held within Artemisia's paintings to newly formed feminist movements. The force, intensity and energy expressed by Gentileschi's women heavily align with modern feminism, which has proved itself to be a new stage that highlights Artemisia's relevance to feminist ideals.

In the early 2000's Gentileschi took on a new era of fame, and is even titled an "It Girl" by the New York Times in 2002.<sup>30</sup> Artemisia's new 21st century image nearly transcended the historical figure mold she once fit into, instead Artemisia became integrated in fictional stories, a movement called *Kunstlerroman*. *Kunstlerroman* is an 'artist novel,' or a fictional story based around the life and development of an artist. Tina Olsen Lent outlines the part Artemisia has in *"My Heart Belongs to Daddy": The Fictionalization of Baroque Artist Artemisia Gentileschi in Contemporary Film and Novels*. The Artemisia fictions are brought by women who are involved in the post-modern world, allowing these women to re-write the typical narratives surrounding female figures.<sup>31</sup> Despite the *Kunstlerroman*

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<sup>30</sup> Tina, Olsen Lent. "'My Heart Belongs to Daddy': The Fictionalization of Baroque Artist Artemisia Gentileschi in Contemporary Film and Novels." *Literature/Film Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2006): 212.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 213

focusing more on male artists like Van Gogh, Vermeer and Michelangelo, Artemisia Gentileschi proved an ideal historical figure for these monographs. This is partly due to her incredibly sexualized life story regarding her rape trial with Agostino Tassi.<sup>32</sup> This allowed the authors of these stories to romanticize her sexuality, creativity and life as an artist, creating a focus on her personal love life to define her fame. In 1947, the first fictionalized account of Artemisia was produced, with others recently produced in the early 2000's. These fictional stories would place Artemisia in the context of her rape case against Tassi, her rumored love interests and Orazio's involvement in her life. The stories reiterate the deep control the men in Artemisia's life had over her public image and artistic freedoms. As these stories developed, they modernized alongside the rise of a newer feminist movement looking towards the empowerment of women. However, the sexualizing of her biography is incredibly evident in these fictional written accounts, and even within scholarship.

Inevitably, one can find a great deal of scholarship surrounding the personal life of Artemisia Gentileschi. Despite this, there is still an ongoing search for more information on her life besides the documents from her case. The attachment of an artist's life to the art they created is not uncommon. Similarly to Vincent Van Gogh, who cut off his ear and created a self portrait of the account, paintings are in many ways reflections of the artist, or time period they resided in. Separating art from artists has been an age old debate, yet it is inevitable to tie in historical events to an artist's name. Artemisia does not escape from these connections between her rape case and art. It is nearly impossible to find a single article regarding Gentileschi's art without her rape being attached to it. In the New York Times article *Artemisia: Her Passion was Painting Above all Else*, Gentileschi's ability as a

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 214

woman, and artist is in a problematic light. The article begins; “Artemisia Gentileschi suffered greatly in her life -- after being raped she endured ...”<sup>33</sup> Introductions of Artemisia rely on the sexual violence in her early life to justify the embodiment of a ‘strong female artist.’ Although, the kinds of patriarchal injustices are evident through Gentileschi’s trial, it is unfair to her image, and her biblical figures to equate to reactionary depictions due to the sexual violence she was victim to. Articles, and scholarship which begin with these assumptions, participate in a problematic trope which haunts Artemisia’s image, paintings and female figures—the Valiant Heroine. Her valiance however, comes from the sexual violence she experienced, defining her artistry and overtaking her female driven narratives as reflections of her rape case. As mentioned by The New York Times in their article *Blood, Passion and Captivity: Gentileschi’s Life is in her Paintings*, “How then can we look at the defiant strength of Gentileschi’s paintings without thinking of what she endured?”<sup>34</sup> This question which has overtaken Artemisia’s image and paintings is ongoing in the Neo-Baroque. The painting which falls most frequently to these skewed perceptions outlined by the article is *Judith Slaying Holofernes (1612-1613)*. For obvious visual reasons, many have equated it to being Artemisia’s artistic way of avenging herself from her past experiences with Tassi. These connections remove the narrative which incorporates Artemisia's artistic prowess, and instead replace it with assumptions based on her past. Narratives like these are hard to break. It is inherent to want to find a historical explanation for any revolutionary act, in this case, placing female characters in center stage. This quite

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<sup>33</sup> Roderick Conway Morris, “Artemisia: Her Passion Was Painting Above All Else,” The New York Times (The New York Times, November 18, 2011)..

<sup>34</sup> Eleanor Nairne, “Blood, Passion and Captivity: Gentileschi's Life Is in Her Paintings,” The New York Times (The New York Times, October 5, 2020),

literally took the art world by storm, and continues to create debates. So, how can one separate her case from her artistic endeavours? With a plethora of fictional narratives, Western feminist ideals and controversial scholarship attached to Artemisia's name and art, it is important to look at her pieces from a purely analytical standpoint. Comparative analysis between Artemisia and other male painters of the area and time will illuminate the kinds of modern feminist ideals Artemisia is able to achieve, without the involvement of her rape case.

#### **Fourth Wave Feminism in Visual Analysis: What is Lost Through the Lens of Sexual Violence**

As previously mentioned, Artemisia's image is heavily involved in fourth wave feminism, specifically the Me Too movement. Despite the movement's call to action, the incorporation of a figure who did not identify as feminist has resulted in misleading assumptions of Gentileschi's role in the 17th century. Despite Gentileschi holding obvious feminist ideals, it is important to remember that she looked towards the empowerment of biblical figures to express ideas of female empowerment. This is evident in her portrayal of Mary Magdalene and Musicians. Artemisia's *Self Portrait as a Lute Player (1615)*, allows her to situate herself in a roleplaying form, playing with her personal identity while simultaneously commenting on the fictitious self.<sup>35</sup> This was a form of commentary on a woman's overlapping identity, of one's performative persona or 'true' self. Besides musicians depicted. By Artemisia holding relevance in terms of identity, and empowerment, the dress, stance and representation of the lute player goes back to typical depictions of female gypsies, sybils and even Michelangelo. The headdress worn by the lute player

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<sup>35</sup> Mary D. Garrad. *Artemisia Gentileschi and Feminism in Early Modern Europe*. London: Reaktion Books, 2020, 97.

mirrors the portrait of Michelangelo, from 1520.<sup>36</sup> The connotations held by the painting express ideas of female identity, as well as artistic status. The incorporation of a variety of female experiences and identities provides ideological depth to the painting.<sup>37</sup>



Fig. 9 *Self Portrait as a Lute Player*

The form in which the lute player takes, displays a visual performance, with the shine of the blue fabric, dramatic chiaroscuro and a captivating stare towards viewers. Her hands appear to be on the brink of playing a chord, while hard shadows and highlights frame her face and breasts. Garrad mentions the correlation of this image to Gentileschi's personal

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<sup>36</sup> Mary D, Garrad. *Artemisia Gentileschi and Feminism in Early Modern Europe*. London: Reaktion Books, 2020, 98.

<sup>37</sup> Artemisia Gentileschi, *Self Portrait as a Lute Player*, 1615, oil on canvas.

life; “Artemisia might have reasoned that it was safe to present a sexualized self-image—a dangerous choice for a woman who had been sexually branded by others...After all, if you present yourself in multiple roles, you can’t be pinned down to any one of them.”<sup>38</sup> The nuances within the portrait are lost if it is simply equated as a reinvention of oneself due to previous sexual violence. Artemisia’s dimensionality is expressed through the visual analysis of her paintings, these understandings are lost if her art is equated as reactions to the sexual violence she endured. Instead, Artemisia’s paintings provoke discourses of gender, identity, sexuality and art.

The ideas presented by her Lute Player are also tangible within her Mary Magdalenes. One of Gentileschi’s most infamous Magdalenes is her *Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy* (1623).<sup>39</sup> Mary Magdalene is a female biblical figure outlined frequently in European art. Usually she is penitent, which can be seen in Caravaggio's *Penitent Magdalene* (1594-1595).<sup>40</sup>



Fig. 10 *Penitent Magdalene*

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<sup>38</sup> Mary D, Garrad. *Artemisia Gentileschi and Feminism in Early Modern Europe*. London: Reaktion Books, 2020, 108.

<sup>39</sup> Artemisia, Gentileschi, *Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy*, Oil on Canvas, 1623, (private European Collection).

<sup>40</sup> Caravaggio, *Penitent Magdalene*, Oil on Canvas, 1594-1595, (Doria Pamphilj Gallery, Rome)

Caravaggio's Magdalene sits with her head tilted downward, only exposing her profile to the viewer. This kind of slow, passive and withdrawn depiction of Mary Magdalene was common during this time. However, Gentileschi's *Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy* (1623) shows the female figure in full action, she is passionate and in movement, becoming an active figure against a deep shadowed background. Similar to Gentileschi, Mary Magdalene is a figure very defined by her sexualized past, making many depictions of her being passive more digestible to viewers.



Fig. 11 *Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy* (1623)

This painting not only breaks the bonds which Mary Magdalene is commonly held to in narrative, but also in visual depictions. There is no ointment jar, skull or cross, symbols

commonly associated with the biblical figure.<sup>41</sup> This painting instead focuses on her, as a figure in herself, sitting alone in the dark, the positioning of her body illuminating a culmination of emotions; sadness, pleasure and bliss. It is true that slivers of Gentileschi are viewable within her depictions, more so however on the various roles, figures, and women she could empower as to outline her fictive self in a daring and creative form. It is evident that Gentileschi's pieces hold a plethora of visual conversations, ones which pertain to gender, identity and empowerment. Analysis which relies on a mixture of visual and contextual findings strengthens the understanding of Gentileschi through her characters and figures. By equating Gentileschi's paintings as by-products of her struggle with sexual violence, it continues the narrative of women being reactionary beings, a sexist ideal held by many during the 17th century, and continues into the modern day. If one is able to understand Gentileschi's paintings through the figures she portrays, Artemisia is able to become a much more dimensional and tangible figure, one who reinvented female characters, and began discussions of gender and voyeurism. Equating Artemisia's life and paintings as reactionary responses to her rape trial continues the Valiant Heroine trope, making her image and historical relevance a supplementation to her legacy of sexual violence. Understanding Gentileschi's talent, strength and innovation through her reimagining of biblical characters allows her legacy to transcend the bounds of a court case or Western feminism, but presents a new way of understanding gender and the power of voyeurism in the development of feminist ideals.

Artemisia grew in the public eye from a young age due to the sexual violence she endured, and as she became defined by a rape trial and the men in her life, she was able to

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<sup>41</sup> Mary D. Garrad, *Artemisia Gentileschi and Feminism in Early Modern Europe*. London: Reaktion Books, 2020, 122.

break the visual bonds of the male gaze, through the reinvention of female figures.

Gentileschi can provide a clear idea of what constitutes the female gaze in art. Yes, she was one woman, but through a comparative analysis of her paintings, one can see how she is able to depict narratives that express female narratives and bodies in a space that is not dominated by eroticism and male voyeurism. Into the Neo-Baroque, Artemisia continues being defined by her young life, creating a problematic legacy which attaches to her paintings and image. The use of her trauma to justify her beliefs and strong female characters, is a skewed and controversial narrative. Situating Artemisia's paintings in a comparative analysis however, not only illustrates feminist ideals but also illuminates Artemisia's deep understanding of spectatorship and gender.

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