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Art History

**Artemisia Gentileschi:
Baroque Master and the Preeminent Caravaggisti**

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Question

Why wasn't Artemisia recognized as a Preeminent Caravaggisti and Baroque master during her lifetime, and why isn't she recognized as one today?

Abstract

There was then and continues to be, a double standard for women artists based on structural gender bias in society going back thousands of years. A Comparative Analysis of Artemisia Gentileschi's and Caravaggio's Artistic Interpretation of the Biblical Story of Judith and Holofernes offers strong evidence of such bias; although Caravaggio and Artemisia had similar, tumultuous life experiences that can be argued are reflected in their artwork, Caravaggio has been lauded for such inclusion while Artemisia has been unfairly criticized for acting out her vengeance. An objective analysis of Artemisia's Judith reveals her mastery of female anatomy, chiaroscuro, history painting, and originality, making her a Baroque master and the preeminent Caravaggisti.

Introduction

Petrarch's resurrection of Cicero's orations from antiquity initiated the Renaissance and re-opened the West to rationalism, empiricism, and classical Latin, followed by a cultural revolution that witnessed artistic creations by da Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael, Titian,

and Caravaggio. Unfortunately, gender bias, rooted in ancient thought and advocated by Greek philosophers including Plato and Aristotle, remained steadfast in Renaissance society, playing a significant role in denying Italian Renaissance women artists of immense talent from receiving much-deserved recognition. One such artist is Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1653). While many male artists have been credited with advancing Caravaggism, Artemisia perhaps deserves the most credit. She battled significant gender barriers and possessed immense technical skills that rivaled the male masters, but more importantly, she created original interpretations of Caravaggio's Realism that championed not only his style but also his spirit, as both artists channeled violent life experiences into their art. Paradoxically, while Caravaggio was "romanticized" for the gritty Realism that critics argued stemmed primarily from his turbulent life, Artemisia's vicious life experiences have been criticized as limiting the impact of her artistic talents. Such criticisms are not surprising given that female artistic contributions have been significantly ignored throughout history. The institutions governing the art world have been male-dominated; "most artists were men, most patrons were men, and most writers of critical texts were men,"¹ leading to biases against female aesthetics.² A comparative analysis of similar themes painted by different artists demonstrates the prejudices faced by Artemisia. One artistic Renaissance theme was the Biblical story of Judith and Holofernes painted by masters including Michelangelo, Rubens, and Caravaggio. Artemisia's version of the violent encounter is arguably superior; it's powerful and highly technically evolved, but most importantly it provides a stunning, original interpretation of the spectacle that proves her worth as a Baroque master and history's preeminent Caravaggisti.

Artistic Creation Theory and Gender Bias

Philosophical Theory Regarding Procreation and Artistic Creation

Even though Western civilization's political and social institutions have been patriarchal for thousands of years, artistic and literary history has witnessed a reasonable balance between the feminine and masculine.³ Nevertheless, significant artistic gender barriers prevailed in ancient times as the concept of "creation," the central tenet of artistic endeavors,

¹ Wendy Slatkin, *Women Artists in History, From Antiquity to the Present*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2001), 10.

² Ibid.

³ Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, "Feminist Art History and the Academy: Where Are We Now?," *Women's Study Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 1/2 (Spring-Summer 1998): 219, www.jstor.org/stable/40005432.

was considered solely patriarchal. Starting with the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, and continuing through to leading Renaissance theorists, art creation was deemed similar to the conception of fetuses, man's sole domain.⁴ The principle dictum was that artistic ideas originate in man's mind as do ideas to procreate, both requiring the same steps in the phases of generation.⁵ Plato, in *Symposium Dialogues*, describes how artists desire to invent in the same manner that men desire to perpetuate their memory through offspring.⁶ Aristotle, in *Generation of Animals*,⁷ claims that there are four distinct and independent causes involved in procreation, only one of which can be credited to women.⁸ He argued that men are responsible for the original idea to procreate, that which gives human form to matter, and the intended goal (the child), while women are only responsible for matter (menstrual blood) that receives the form;⁹ accordingly, men generate life.¹⁰ Aristotle also argued that because the production of art (the creative process) involved the same four steps, the female played the role of the artist's material,¹¹ implying that only men are capable of distinguished artistic creation.

These ideas remained dominant two thousand years later during the Renaissance and comprise one of several barriers faced by Artemisia. At the Renaissance's commencement, scholar Marsilio Ficino proffered that ideas, including the desire to procreate, originate in a superior being's (man) mental act.¹² Venetian physician Giovanni Marinello argued that the only role of the woman in procreation is that her womb holds the child; the man's role is more "divine."¹³ Such beliefs remained

⁴ Robert J. Bauer, "A Phenomenon of Epistemology in the Renaissance," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (April-June 1970): 281-83, www.jstor.org/stable/2708551.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 281.

⁶ Plato, *Great Dialogues of Plato*, trans. W. H. D. Rouse (New York: Penguin Group, 2015), 109-15.

⁷ Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, trans. A. L. Peck (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1942), 3, 13, 129-33, 165-71, 185, 189.

⁸ Frederika H. Jacobs, "Women's Capacity to Create: The Unusual Case of Sofonsiba Anguissola," *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (Spring 1994): 78-87, www.jstor.org/stable/2863112. The four interdependent causes are: (1) efficient cause, or the impetus; (2) formal cause, which is what provides form to the matter; (3) material cause, which is matter that receives the form; and (4) telic cause, which is the goal of the process.

⁹ Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, 3, 13, 129-33, 165-71, 185, 189.

¹⁰ Jacobs, "Women's Capacity to Create: The Unusual Case of Sofonsiba Anguissola," 79.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 79-80.

¹² Bauer, "A Phenomenon of Epistemology in the Renaissance," 281.

¹³ Jacobs, "Women's Capacity to Create: The Unusual Case of Sofonsiba Anguissola," 80.

in the late Renaissance.¹⁴ In 1549, leading humanist Benedetto Varchi pronounced that art creation begins in the imagination and is transformed onto canvas as an intellectual exercise.¹⁵ Leading Renaissance theorists believed that art was an intellectual and spiritual creation; given that women were assumed intellectually inferior, female art creation was believed to be unnatural.¹⁶ These views were the underpinning of ideological gender barriers faced by Renaissance women.

Tangible Gender Barriers

Women also faced tangible obstacles as Renaissance art posed extensive gender-based impediments. The central tenet of Italian Renaissance art involved Biblical interpretations focused on multi-figured human forms, often portrayed three-dimensionally with perspective. This art form, called “history painting,”¹⁷ was considered superior to portraiture and still life as it involved the complexity of mastering anatomy and the science and mathematics of perspective, and required expertise in humanist subject matter including history, religion, and philosophy to effectively interpret Biblical stories.¹⁸ Patrons possessed substantial influence over art creation and primarily demanded history paintings.¹⁹ Painting humans in physical and emotional states required intensive anatomical analysis;²⁰ the study of nudes primarily occurred in guild-controlled workshops (also called studios)²¹ that included a master and multiple apprentices,²² and sometimes academics.²³ Italian women were prohibited from workshops²⁴ and most

¹⁴ Bauer, “A Phenomenon of Epistemology in the Renaissance,” 281.

¹⁵ Jacobs, “Women’s Capacity to Create: The Unusual Case of Sofonsiba Anguissola,” 85.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁷ Patrizia Cavazzani, “Artemisia in Her Father’s House,” In *Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi*, ed. Keith Christiansen and Judith Walker Mann (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001), 283.

http://www.academia.edu/12514182/Artemisia_in_her_fathers_house_from_the_exhibition_Orazio_and_Artemisia_Gentileschi_available_on_the_Metropolitan_Museum_website.

¹⁸ Nancy Heller, *Women Artists: An Illustrated History*, 4th ed. (New York: Abbeville Press, 2004), 13.

¹⁹ Cole, Bruce, *The Renaissance Artist at Work, From Pisano to Titian* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1983), 55. Patrons included the Church, regional parishes, religious organizations, and wealthy families.

²⁰ Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. Cecil Grayson (London: Penguin Group, 1991), 72.

²¹ Cavazzani, “Artemisia in Her Father’s House,” 283.

²² Cole, *The Renaissance Artist at Work*, 30.

²³ Mary D. Garrard., *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 34.

academies.²⁵ Even in family-owned studios, conventions denied women access to nude male models, and often females. Studios were also centers of intellectual discourse²⁶ encompassing art-related subjects of history, religion, philosophy, science, and mathematics, all of which elevated Renaissance art forms.²⁷ These obstacles placed even the most talented women at significant disadvantages in history painting, relegating most to portraiture.²⁸

Most women received no formal education.²⁹ Upper-class females were sometimes educated at home with tutors, or sent to convents.³⁰ Spurred by humanism and encouraged by *The Courtier*, written by Italian courtier Baldassare Castiglione (1478-1529), higher societal classes aspired to educate their daughters in classical Latin, literature, history, music, and fine arts.³¹ Northern Italy, particularly Bologna, witnessed the most progressive women's educational movement; it's no coincidence that most professional women artists originated in this sophisticated region.³² If not wealthy or from northern Italy, the female path to artistic prominence was having an artist-father.³³ Moreover, given that there

²⁴ Slatkin, *Women Artists*, 73-74.

²⁵ Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 34.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 349.

²⁷ Walter Isaacson, *Leonardo Da Vinci* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 22-39. Studios also offered opportunities to learn special artistic techniques such as fresco painting that requires collaboration among many apprentices given its unique characteristics and required speed. In fresco painting, wet plaster is applied to walls or ceilings and the artist only has a few hours to sketch and then apply special paint (typically pigment mixed with egg white or lime water) that adheres to the wet plaster. For most fresco painting, the paint needs to be applied to wet plaster for the paint to permanently adhere; otherwise, the paint would peel off over time. Cole, *The Renaissance Artist at Work*, 32-33, 67-68, 72, 76, 88, 90.

²⁸ Heller, *Women Artists: An Illustrated History*, 13. In addition, patrons often awarded commissions specifically to guild-controlled workshops, placing additional restrictions and burdens on professional women artists trying to sell artwork. Cole, *The Renaissance Artist at Work*, 19.

²⁹ Paul F. Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy, Literacy and Learning, 1300 - 1600* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 3-40. Formal schools catered to boys of the wealthy and middle classes as they typically required some familial payment. These formal schools were called communal, independent, and abbaco. *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 93, 96, 98. Many convents taught classical Latin and fine arts, and most catered to daughters of wealthy families as convents typically required dowries.

³¹ Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. George Bull (London: Penguin Classics, 1967), 211, 215-17, 219-20, 225-27, 240.

³² Heller, *Women Artists: An Illustrated History*, 19. Records indicate women studied at the University of Bologna as early as the thirteenth century.

³³ Prominent Italian Renaissance Women Artists who had father painters include Artemisia Gentileschi, Lavinia Fontana (1552-1614), Barbara Longhi (1552-1638), Maria Tintoretto (1560-1590), and Elisabetta Sirani (1638-1655). Artemisia is the only one whose reputation was based on history painting.

were few women artists, unsigned paintings (most Renaissance artwork was customarily unsigned) and identity theft placed extra pressure on historians trying to ascertain women's art;³⁴ unsigned women paintings were often re-assigned to males under the assumption that women could not produce quality art.³⁵

By Artemisia's birth, northern Italy had produced successful professional women artists like Sofonsiba Anguissola (1532-1625) and Lavinia Fontana (1552-1614), but they were portraitists. Artemisia became the first woman Renaissance artist known for history painting. She was fortunate to have been the daughter of artist Orazio Gentileschi, and their Roman home contained a studio.

Caravaggio and Artemisia Gentileschi

Background

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610), known as Caravaggio after his small birth-town near Milan, dramatically changed Renaissance art. He dismissed the "idealization" of religious figures of the High Renaissance and Mannerism³⁶ espoused by Michelangelo and became famous for the dramatic use of "realism" in a new style called Baroque.³⁷ Known as chiaroscuro (tenebrism), this lighting technique uses forceful contrasts between light and dark, with dark areas forming commanding artwork features,³⁸ adding dramatization through "spotlight" effects.³⁹ Caravaggio became the avant-garde inspirational artist of his time utilizing radical "realism."⁴⁰ His Realism (Christ bare-footed in tattered clothing), combined with chiaroscuro and often violence, was the antithesis of religious idealization.⁴¹ His followers were

³⁴ Isaacson, *Leonardo Da Vinci*, 34. Even Leonardo, who created thousands of pages of notes on vast subject matter, rarely signed artwork. *Ibid.*, 325.

³⁵ Jane Fortune, *Invisible Women, Forgotten Artists of Florence*, 3rd ed. (Florence: The Florentine Press, 2014), 12.

³⁶ Andrew Graham-Dixon, *Caravaggio, A Life Sacred and Profane* (New York: W.R. Norton, 2010), 33-41.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 3-5. This period in history was also during the Counter-Reformation, and a return to religious piety and away from religious idealization. Accordingly, it is not surprising that Caravaggio's style, reflecting religious figures as normal people, became more accepted. *Ibid.*, 55.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 3-8.

³⁹ Lois Fichner-Rathus, *Foundations of Art and Design: An Enhanced Media Edition* (New York: Wadsworth, 2011), 74.

⁴⁰ H. W. Janson, and Anthony F. Janson. *History of Art*, 6th ed. (Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall, 2004), 561.

⁴¹ Graham-Dixon, *Caravaggio, A Life Sacred and Profane*, xxv-xxix. Caravaggio's new artistic style remained controversial for centuries. *Ibid.*

called Caravaggisti and included Rubens and Rembrandt. While it is widely believed that Caravaggio's turbulent life experiences are reflected in his style and can be called "autobiographical,"⁴² some critics of the time were appalled that his style "vivid[ly] captur[ed] poverty and violence."⁴³ Chiaroscuro only increased his theatre. *The Calling of St. Matthew*⁴⁴ superbly demonstrates Caravaggio's mastery, with what initially appears to be an everyday scene that suddenly becomes an eminent religious story.⁴⁵ Caravaggio paints Matthew (tax collector) in colorful clothing in a darkened room, boldly contrasting with the arrival of two poor men, shoeless, in tattered clothing.⁴⁶ A beam of light traverses above these two men shining directly on Matthew. Although it becomes clear that Christ is one of the poor (a faint halo is visible in the light beam as Christ points at Matthew), it is the light's intensity on Matthew that signifies divinity.⁴⁷ Historian Bernard Berenson noted that with "the exception of Michelangelo, no other Italian painter exercised so great an influence" on art's future than Caravaggio.⁴⁸ Caravaggio's paintings can be so dramatic that they "destroy" paintings hung near them.⁴⁹

Two factors drove Caravaggio's artistic style; his turbulent life and exposure to the leading religious Counter-Reformation figure, Milanese Archbishop Carlo Borromeo.⁵⁰ In 1576, when Caravaggio was nearly five years old, Milan encountered the bubonic plague⁵¹ that lasted two years.⁵² Caravaggio witnessed its destructiveness first-hand as men in red robes, responsible for removing dead bodies, placed naked corpses

⁴² Janson, H. W., and Anthony F. Janson. *History of Art*, 561.

⁴³ Graham-Dixon, *Caravaggio, A Life Sacred and Profane*, 6. He portrayed Virgin Mary and Christ as paupers, and used strikingly-real violence. Ibid. He also artistically included ordinary people that critics considered lacking decorum for religious subjects. Ibid., 4-7.

⁴⁴ Caravaggio, (*The Calling of St. Matthew*), oil on canvas, circa 1599/1600, San Luigi dei Francesi, Contarelli, Rome, Italy.

⁴⁵ Graham-Dixon, *Caravaggio, A Life Sacred and Profane*, 6.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Giles Lambert, *Caravaggio, The Artist as Outlaw* (Koln: Taschen, 2000), 15.

⁴⁹ Graham Dixon, *Caravaggio, A Life Sacred and Profane*, 42-43. It has been argued that Picasso's paintings have a similar "destructive" effect. Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 31.

⁵¹ Ibid., 44.

⁵² Desmond Seward, *Caravaggio, A Passionate Life*, (London: Thistle Publishing, 2013), 7. Plague symptoms included severe fever, vomiting, and the "mark of death," purple tumors from internal bleeding that arose on the skin in the neck, groin, and armpits and emitted blood and pus. Graham-Dixon, *Caravaggio, A Life Sacred and Profane*, 45.

on carts and wheeled them through town as others rang warning bells.⁵³ Before turning six, Caravaggio's father and all male relatives perished.

As Caravaggio entered his teens, life remained challenging. Bloodshed was a daily Milanese occurrence;⁵⁴ murders occurred regularly in daylight.⁵⁵ Nearly all men carried rapiers and daggers. Caravaggio, although apprenticing, was often in legal trouble.⁵⁶ His mother died as he turned twenty; to escape legal issues, he left for Rome where his artistic career started.⁵⁷ Despite being the Church center, Rome was also dangerous. Murder was common, and beggars and abandoned children starving in the streets.⁵⁸ Caravaggio socialized with artists and others who gallivanted at night, engaging in sword fights.⁵⁹ Violent public executions were routine.⁶⁰ After reaching artistic prominence, he killed another man in a swordfight stemming from a lost tennis match and fled for Naples, an equally dangerous city.⁶¹

Barron's philosophy also influenced Caravaggio.⁶² During the height of the Renaissance, leading artists including Michelangelo developed idealized religious styles in what became known as High Renaissance art, along with Mannerism (elongated, stylish human forms), until the late-sixteenth century. The Council of Trent fostered the Counter-Reformation, leading the Church toward new principles for worshipers and artists; artistic ideals of piety replaced religious idealization.⁶³ During Caravaggio's youth, Borromeo pushed this new artistic framework, encouraging artists to naturalistically depict Christ's suffering so worshipers could mentally connect with his experience.⁶⁴ The foundation for artistic transformation was set, and Caravaggio was at the crossroads of life experience and religious history to lead this revolution.

⁵³ Seward, *Caravaggio, A Passionate Life*, 7. At this age, Caravaggio also saw and smelled the smoke from bonfires that burned clothes, bedding, and bandages of the infected dead, and houses marked with crosses that identified infected corpses. *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* Milanese swordsmen (swords called rapiers) have been known through history as highly advanced.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 72-73.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 57. Decapitations and burnings were the most common execution methods. *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 91-95. Critics claim his art turned darker after this murder.

⁶² Graham-Dixon, *Caravaggio, A Life Sacred and Profane*, 31.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

Artemisia was born into this artistic context, the only daughter of Orazio Gentileschi, a respected Mannerist, and later Caravaggisti; his work still fetches higher prices than Artemisia's, despite her extraordinary talent.⁶⁵ Rome was not sophisticated like Bologna, but was the Church center and flush with capital to fund art, attracting a large art community. Despite having an artist-father, Artemisia lacked private tutors in humanist subjects like Lavinia,⁶⁶ and Rome had fewer educational opportunities than northern cities.⁶⁷ At nineteen, Artemisia stated that she could write and read "a little;"⁶⁸ Nonetheless, like Lavinia, the Bolognese portraitist, Artemisia's upbringing was replete with high culture.⁶⁹ Her home was often filled with artists, many from highly-sophisticated Bologna;⁷⁰ Bolognese classicists dominated the Roman art scene.⁷¹

Like Leonardo who also lacked humanist studies,⁷² Artemisia possessed stunning talent. She also had a father-teacher, access to famous artists, and Roman art to experience.⁷³ Although she painted portraits,⁷⁴ Artemisia broke the major barrier and became famous as the first female history painter.⁷⁵ She developed the strongest ability to paint anatomy among women artists, although her females were significantly more advanced than her males.⁷⁶

⁶⁵ Sarah Cascone, "Getty Buys \$30.5 Million Gentileschi and Smashes Artist's Current Record," Artnet Worldwide Corp., January 29, 2016.

<https://news.artnet.com/market/gentileschi-auction-record-sothebys-416612>. Orazio Gentileschi sold the painting "Danae" for \$30.5 million on January 28, 2016, during a Sotheby's auction. The article notes in passing that Orzio had a daughter, Artemisia, also an artist, who once sold a painting for \$1.17 million in June, 2014.

⁶⁶ Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 17.

⁶⁷ Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy*, 78.

⁶⁸ Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 17. Basic vernacular writing and reading was common even among wealthy females. Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy*, 93-102.

⁶⁹ Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 13.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Isaacson, 31-32.

⁷³ Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 18. Leonardo apprenticed in the customary way, starting at age fourteen in a famous workshop run by Andrea del Verrocchio in Florence, immersing in sciences, geometry, anatomy, and even dissection of human bodies at local hospitals to study the intricacies of muscle formation so he could master the reflection of movement and emotion on canvas. Isaacson, *Leonardo Da Vinci*, 33-41.

⁷⁴ Ward R. Bissell, *Artemisia Gentileschi and The Authority of Art* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 44, and Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 61.

⁷⁵ Slatkin, *Women Artists*, 96-97, and Bissell, *Artemisia Gentileschi and The Authority of Art*, 113.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

Gentileschi's home included a studio but with less activity than most workshops.⁷⁷ While female access to male models was forbidden, even access to female nudes was not widely accepted. The portraitist Sofonsiba used her sisters to study female anatomy, but Artemisia had no sisters and her mother died when she was young.⁷⁸ There is evidence she later had access to female models,⁷⁹ but her early strength in female forms implies she had some access to nudes as a teenager.⁸⁰ While there is no evidence her father allowed her into the studio where models worked (Artemisia lived and worked upstairs),⁸¹ it's likely most of her figure training came from viewing herself in a mirror.⁸²

Orazio initially encouraged Artemisia to become a nun,⁸³ but recognized her immense talent and need for higher-level instruction than he provided.⁸⁴ He wrote that Artemisia at nineteen "has in three years become so skilled that...she has no peer; [and] demonstrate[s] a level of understanding that...even...principal masters...have not attained."⁸⁵ Artemisia quickly developed her style; one early painting, *Susanna and the Elders*⁸⁶ utilizes a complex color scheme different than her father's matrix and closer to Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, indicating she studied important Roman art.⁸⁷ Her identification with Michelangelo could be the result of her friendship with Michelangelo the Younger, Michelangelo's great-nephew.⁸⁸

Orazio hired Agostino Tassi, a friend and Roman fresco artist⁸⁹ known for sophisticated perspective, to teach Artemisia.⁹⁰ Soon after

⁷⁷ Cavazzani, "Artemisia in Her Father's House," 286, 288. In larger studies, it was common for apprentices to board and pay boarding fees to the master as Caravaggio did in Milan; however, the Gentileschi studio was small and did not board apprentices.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 284.

⁷⁹ Bissell, *Artemisia Gentileschi and The Authority of Art*, 120. Later in life she stated that she paid for female models and was unhappy with the price and quality. Ibid.

⁸⁰ Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 17.

⁸¹ Cavazzani, "Artemisia in Her Father's House," 288-89. Given the small size and sparseness of Orazio's workshop compared to Fontana's, it unlikely it possessed body casts, common in larger studies that helped apprentices learn to draw and paint human forms when no models were available. Ibid., 283.

⁸² Ibid., 290.

⁸³ Cavazzani, "Artemisia in Her Father's House," 286.

⁸⁴ Slatkin, *Women Artists*, 94.

⁸⁵ Bissell, *Artemisia Gentileschi and The Authority of Art*, 1.

⁸⁶ Artemisia Gentileschi, (*Susanna and the Elders*), oil on canvas, circa 1610, Schloss Weissenstein Collection, Pommersfelden, Germany.

⁸⁷ Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 18.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 17-18. She also developed unique methods to showcase human features such as knuckle formation, something her father never utilized. Ibid., 25.

⁸⁹ Cavazzani, "Artemisia in Her Father's House," 285.

⁹⁰ Slatkin, *Women Artists*, 94, and Cavazzani, "Artemisia in Her Father's House," 286.

commencing, Tassi raped Artemisia; a long trial ensued that provided much of the scanty-written primary source material available on Artemisia. During the trial, Artemisia was tortured on the stand with devices that tighten around her fingers, an early lie-detector test.⁹¹ Although Tassi spent eight months in jail, the case was eventually dismissed, humiliating Artemesia.⁹² These experiences likely similarly impacted her artistic creations to the way Caravaggio's experiences shaped his.⁹³ Ultimately, it was Caravaggio's style that most influenced Artemisia, and she developed an original Caravaggisti interpretation.

Artemisia married after her trial and moved to Florence.⁹⁴ Impressively, she gained acceptance to the conservative Florentine Accademia del Disegno.⁹⁵ Although such academies offered advanced instruction in nudes and perspective, Artemisia had no access to either.⁹⁶ The lack of perspective in most of Artemisia's work could be the result of lack of training, but as a Caravaggisti, she would not have significantly used technique; Caravaggio's stories were portrayed in small quarters to enhance the drama.⁹⁷ Her rapid success in Florence has been attributed to her friendship with Michelangelo the Younger and her relationship with the Medici who backed the academy.⁹⁸ Nevertheless, she earned a strong reputation in a heavily gender-biased city.⁹⁹

Judith and Holofernes: Artemisia's and Caravaggio's Interpretations

The Judith and Holofernes Biblical story was retold over centuries¹⁰⁰ in several art forms¹⁰¹ including medieval manuscripts, paintings, and plays. It was depicted by Michelangelo (Sistine Chapel), Botticelli, and Caravaggio, and in northern Europe, by Rubens. In the narration, Assyrian general Holofernes is conquering Jewish cities on his drive to Jerusalem when he approaches Bethulia. While its inhabitants consider surrender, Judith, a beautiful widow, volunteers to save Bethulia by feigning the seduction of Holofernes. With her maidservant Abra, Artemisia persuades her way into dinner with Holofernes. Judith

⁹¹ Ibid., 94.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Graham-Dixon, *Caravaggio, A Life Sacred and Profane*, 5, 45-46.

⁹⁴ Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 34.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 34, 109.

⁹⁷ Graham-Dixon, *Caravaggio, A Life Sacred and Profane*, 194-97, 437-42.

⁹⁸ Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 34-35.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 34. Artemisia's art found more support in Florence than Orazio's, who was criticized for weak composition and drawing. Ibid., 36.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 280.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

encourages Holofernes to drink more wine as his desire increases; he falls asleep. With Abra waiting outside the tent, Judith decapitates Holofernes and gives his head to Abra who places it in a bag. The Assyrians are defeated and Judith becomes a heroine. Most artists did not paint the decapitation, but displayed Holofernes' head in a bag; scholars believed it was humiliating for women to defeat men, so few painted the assassination.¹⁰²

Caravaggio and Artemisia had no hesitation in painting the execution. Caravaggio's single version is called *Judith and Holofernes*¹⁰³ (circa 1598-1599) and Artemisia's two versions are called *Judith Decapitating Holofernes* – one painted post-rape circa 1612-1613¹⁰⁴ and the second painted circa 1615-1620.¹⁰⁵ Artemisia painted at least two non-execution *Judiths* named *Judith and Her Maidservant*.¹⁰⁶

While both graphically depict the beheading, Artemisia's *Judith* is more dynamic and original¹⁰⁷ by introducing Abra as young, attractive, and active. Caravaggio stays true to tradition in relation to Abra's role and appearance. Artemisia's positioning of the figures (Judith, Holofernes, and Abra) in compact, vertical form adds depth and drama compared to Caravaggio's positioning of the figures across a wide frame.¹⁰⁸ Caravaggio's Judith stands far from Holofernes, appearing physically improbable to apply the requisite leverage to decapitate. Artemisia, in a dramatic departure, makes Abra an active participant, kneeling at the painting's apex on top of Holofernes so Judith can apply direct leverage.¹⁰⁹ Caravaggio's Abra stands behind Judith as a passive observer.¹¹⁰ Staying true to sixteenth-century "contrapposto" ideology which encouraged artists to present contrasts in appearance, age, and gender, Caravaggio offers the juxtaposition of a youthful, refined Judith against an elderly, haggard Abra.¹¹¹ Like Rubens' version, an old,

¹⁰² Ibid., 321.

¹⁰³ Caravaggio, (*Judith and Holofernes*), oil on canvas, circa 1599, National Gallery of Ancient Art, Palazzo Barberini, Rome, Italy.

¹⁰⁴ Artemisia Gentileschi, (*Judith Decapitating Holofernes*), circa 1612-13, oil on canvas, Capodimonte Museum, Naples, Italy.

¹⁰⁵ Artemisia Gentileschi, (*Judith Decapitating Holofernes*), circa 1615-1620, oil on canvas, Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy. Unless specifically noted, all references to Artemisia's Judith will be to the Uffizi Judith and not the Naples' Judith, or to *Judith and Her Maidservant*.

¹⁰⁶ Artemisia Gentileschi, (*Judith and Her Maidservant*), oil on canvas, circa 1612, Palazzo Pitti, Florence Italy. This was also painted post-rape.

¹⁰⁷ Slatkin, *Women Artists in History*, 95.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 95-96.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 95-96.

¹¹¹ Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 291.

weather-beaten Abra implies wrong-doing and sexual duplicity while Judith, portrayed with femininity and grace, depicts virtue.¹¹² Artemisia deviated significantly from the story, contrapposto theory, and duplicity. Artemisia took a significant risk by making Judith physically powerful.¹¹³ She also characterized Abra as “Judith-like” – young, vibrant, and attractive, removing implied duplicity. Judith and Abra have intense facial features, more realistic of participating in a violent act. Finally, Artemisia utilizes a creative technique by interlacing the subjects’ arms, drawing attention to the sword moving through Holofernes’ neck.¹¹⁴ Artemisia’s version is significantly more dramatic and original than her male counterparts, also demonstrating female-anatomy mastery, although she uses drapery to cover most of Holofernes, likely masking her relative male-anatomy weakness.¹¹⁵

Gender Bias, Critical Analysis, and Feminist Perspective

Artemisia created exceptional artwork in the face of intellectual and tangible gender barriers, and through history has faced additional criticism. She faced daily a society that adhered to theories propagated thousands of years prior by philosophers who accorded females inferior intellect and creativity.¹¹⁶ Artemisia acknowledged to patrons that women were often relegated to significant repetitions of their artwork,¹¹⁷ evident by painting fifty-eight percent of her known works on variations of only seven themes, all involving female subject matter;¹¹⁸ this supports the argument that patrons helped drive her themes. Many critics fail to account for this art-market dynamic. Ultimately, it has not been ascertained whether her *oeuvre* of strong female characters was primarily the result of patron demand, strength in female anatomy, or a subconscious reaction to her rape;¹¹⁹ however, it is evident that patron preference played an important role in her production.

Artemisia was a successful professional artist with prestigious patrons. She was viewed by many contemporaries as technically gifted and original,¹²⁰ and painted with drama and passion similar to

¹¹² Ibid., 298. Contrapposto is also visible in the dichotomy of a powerful, screaming Holofernes against a mannequin-like Artemisia. Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid., 292.

¹¹⁴ Slatkin, *Women Artists in History*, 95-96.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 96.

¹¹⁶ Bissell, *Artemisia Gentileschi and The Authority of Art*, 115.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 113.

¹¹⁹ Bissell, *Artemisia Gentileschi and The Authority of Art*, 114-18.

¹²⁰ Slatkin, *Women Artists in History*, 96-97. Letters written during this period support this proposition.

Caravaggio, arguably at least in part resulting from similar life experiences; history has been less generous. Recently, as Renaissance women artist scholarship has increased, especially among feminists starting in the 1970s, some have anointed Artemisia a “critical” Caravaggisti.¹²¹ Nonetheless, while most historians hailed Caravaggio’s personal demons as positive contributors to his revolutionary creations, Artemisia’s art has been viewed as reflections of a scorned woman. Rather than delineating Artemisia’s art as affected in the passionate, albeit positive, manner attributed to Caravaggio, scholars have minimized her compositions by “interpreting her art as an extension of her own experience,” and categorizing her as “an instinctual creature...limited to the parameters of her personal experience for her artistic forms.”¹²² Even though feminist scholars have worked to elevate Renaissance women’s art, many have inflicted unforeseen negative impacts on these artists by tying their work to vengeance against men and playing into critics’ hands, rather than ascribing general linkages between experiences and art as critics have for Caravaggio.

Feminist Germaine Greer supported the positive affirmation of the idealized “tortured” artist in the Caravaggio mold, stating that Artemisia is the female anomaly in the long, romanticized tradition of the tormented, rebellious male artist, indirectly referring to Artemisia’s rape as the defining act.¹²³ Yet, even though Greer argues for Artemisia’s talents, she emphasized that her ranking as a heroine is only because she was able to overcome rape.¹²⁴ Caravaggio faced no such caveats.

Historian Andrew Graham-Dixon recently praised Caravaggio’s *Judith* stating “Once again, the painter brought a scene from the Biblical past into...his own time, but never before had he done so with such brutal, shocking immediacy....[imagining] the whole scene as a fantastically extreme version of the...violent incidents in which he and his companions were often embroiled.”¹²⁵ In contrast, all Graham-Dixon said about Artemisia’s *Judith* was that she placed an “idiosyncratic twist to the theme by using it to take public revenge on the man who had raped her...”¹²⁶ Such criticism, common in seventeenth-century Italy,

¹²¹ Judith W. Mann, “Caravaggio and Artemisia: Testing the Limits of Caravaggism,” *Studies in Iconography*, Vol. 18 (1997): 179, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23924073>.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Germaine Greer, *The Obstacle Race: The Fortunes of Women Painters and Their Work* (New York: Farrar Strauss, 1979), 207.

¹²⁴ Elizabeth Cohen, “The Trials of Artemisia Gentileschi: A Rape as History,” *Sixteenth Century Journal*, Vol. 31, No. 1, Special Edition: Gender in Early Modern Europe, (Spring 2000), 53. www.jstor.org/stable/2671289.

¹²⁵ Graham-Dixon, *Caravaggio, A Life Sacred and Profane*, 182.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 183.

persists. Ward Bissell, in *Artemisia Gentileschi, The Authority of Art* (1999), cautions against ascribing purely feminist intentions to her works solely based on revenge and other gender biases.¹²⁷ Bissell noted that Artemisia was “endowed with special gifts of insight and artistic skill” and “produced...art that makes penetrating observations about humankind by way of women of monumental stature and independent mind.”¹²⁸ He also argued that “while dedication to speaking truth might be called a mission...it is not a mission restricted to women or driven perforce by a proto-feminist ideology.”¹²⁹ This might correct Bissell’s 1968 critique where he offered a derogatory contradiction, first stating that Artemisia was the foremost Italian “woman” artist, but derisively noting that she is defined by her “moral standards,” meaning her rape and attitudes toward men.¹³⁰ While Bissell acknowledged Artemisia’s immense technical talents, he implied she was not as intellectual as her contemporaries, claiming it would be an understatement to say that her art does not contain anywhere near the “profound spirituality” found in Caravaggio’s works, further claiming her “poetry” does not even rise to her father’s level.¹³¹

Historian George Hersey (1993) simplifies Artemisia’s rape as a “youthful psychic wound” that forces her to “mediate on sex, victimization, and sanguinary death.”¹³² He argues that other painters like Caravaggio also experienced personal tragedies and that these experiences only “conditioned their works but their art is not seen as a specific re-staging of those tragedies” like Artemisia’s.¹³³ This fails to consider patron preferences.

Feminist scholar Mary Garrard was a primary target of Bissell’s 1999 argument. Garrard acknowledges that Artemisia’s *Judith* is the most original and “powerful composition” of the story, but in an unfortunate submission to male criticism, Garrard proffers that the performance of the young, attractive Judith and Abra is a “cathartic expression of the artist’s repressed rage” against Tassi.¹³⁴ Garrard goes so far as to say that Artemisia projects herself into Judith and Abra as a supportive

¹²⁷ Bissell, *Artemisia Gentileschi and The Authority of Art*, 125.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ward Bissell, “Artemisia Gentileschi - A New Documented Chronology,” *The Art Bulletin* Vol. 50, no. 2 (June 1968): 153.

¹³¹ Ibid., 159.

¹³² George Hersey, “Female and Male Art: Postille to Garrard’s Artemisia Gentileschi,” *Parthenope’s Splendor: Art of the Golden Age in Naples*, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 330

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 301-12.

companion of similar age for the “vengeful” act.¹³⁵ At least she acknowledged that Artemisia’s *Judith* exceeds Orazio’s version.¹³⁶

In Jansen’s seminal 2004 *The History of Art*, he waits 561 pages to acknowledge women artists, and then references Artemisia, noting her frequent paintings involving Biblical heroines “suggests her ambivalence toward men that was rooted in her turbulent life.”¹³⁷ Over one hundred years earlier, James Jackson Jarves, a Renaissance collector, proffered that women artists are not “predisposed to intellectual pursuits which demand wearisome years of preparation,” so “naturally they turn to those fields of art which seem to yield the quickest returns for the least expenditure of mental capital.”¹³⁸ Not much has changed. In 1975, critic Hugo Munsterberg fanned Jarves’ flames when proffering that Artemisia’s selection of heroines pitted against violent or authoritarian males...was based on her hostility toward men derived from her own experience with...Tassi.¹³⁹ In Alfred Moir’s 1967 analysis of history’s esteemed Caravaggisti, he only mentions Artemisia once, while mostly focusing on her father who himself proclaimed Artemisia superior to himself.¹⁴⁰

Conclusion

Like Caravaggio’s, Artemisia’s electrifying artwork can “destroy” paintings hung near them. Yet, while Caravaggio is romanticized for his turbulent life, for gender reasons, critics have not made similar impassioned connections between Artemisia’s assault and her masterpieces. The double standard is unequivocal. While there is no objective standard to measure how an artist’s experiences should be reflected on canvas, critics have done an excellent job of creating a higher burden for women.

While Artemisia’s rape and trial logically impacted her psychology, she was already a highly talented artist, evidenced by her

¹³⁵ Ibid., 312. Some feminist critics have gone even further in arguing *Judith Decapitating Holofernes* is a vengeance act. Marcia Pointon argues that Artemisia’s repositioning of Judith and Abra are intended to render the decapitation through the imagery of childbirth, which she states is also “bloody and violent.” Marcia Pointon, “Artemisia Gentileschi’s ‘The Murder of Holofernes,’” *American Imago*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Winter 1981): 351. Pointon also associates the decapitation of a male as a similar act to castration. Ibid., 345.

¹³⁶ Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 315.

¹³⁷ Janson, H. W., and Anthony F. Janson. *History of Art*, 561-562.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 184

¹⁴⁰ Ward Bissell, Review of *The Italian Followers of Caravaggio*, by Alfred Moir, *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 21, no. 3 (Autumn 1968): 325-328.

father's testimony and *Susanna and the Elders*, showcasing highly-advanced female anatomy and intricate interpretation. Her violent experience added complexity to an already advanced intellect. Objectively comparing Artemisia's and Caravaggio's *Judith* presents a compelling case for Artemisia's master-level technical expertise and originality. Her *Judith* can be mistaken for a Caravaggio in boldness and lighting with masterful chiaroscuro. Her female anatomy rivals many masters, although her males demonstrate relative weakness. Perhaps Artemisia's re-characterization of Abra as a young, active participant exhibits her true genius, offering a compelling alternative to convention and contrapposto. By altering Abra's role, she accomplished three goals: removing sexual duplicity, thereby supporting Judith's act as if a man had executed Holofernes; creating heightened drama and realism through Abra's assistance; and offering original symbolism by positioning the characters' arms to form a device pointing toward the decapitation. If originality is the critical ingredient to artistic mastery,¹⁴¹ Artemisia succeeded.

Yet, most critics accused Artemisia of lacking originality because her strong female characters "simply" reflected vengeance, the antithesis to Caravaggio's artwork. Critics also claim that her *oeuvre* was narrow, and concentrated on female heroines. Yet, Renaissance patrons largely dictated what stories would be painted and what characters would be included;¹⁴² their requests of Artemisia may have been due to her gender, strength in female anatomy, or reputation related to her experiences, but she did not materially control her creations. Many critics fail to account for economic reality.

Feminist art history scholars have recently shed a positive light on the monumental impact on Renaissance women artists. Nonetheless, many feminine critics have gone too far, attempting to positively interpret Artemisia's paintings as revenge against Tassi, undermining rather than elevating her; while focusing on Artemisia as the heroine and not her art, feminists play into male critics.

Artemisia's reputation is evolving. Historians and art critics consistently list a common group when naming preeminent Caravaggisti: Saracini, Rubens, and Rembrandt. Artemesia should be at the apogee of such a list. She is the only Caravaggisti who shared a tormented life with Caravaggio. While Rubens and Rembrandt are credited with powerful tenebrism, their art lacks the same level of drama and originality. While potential feminist interpretation can sometimes be ascertained from her

¹⁴¹ Slatkin, *Women Artists in History*, 10-11.

¹⁴² Cole, *The Renaissance Artist at Work*, 52-55.

paintings, other times they cannot. It is typically not until viewers know the painter's gender that feminist overtones are discussed. Artemisia also triumphed over significant intellectual and tangible barriers and succeeded in history painting, making her a transcendent artist. She developed elite patrons. When Artemisia moved to Florence, she was credited by some with being the most influential Florentine Caravaggisti¹⁴³ and was accepted into its most prestigious academy. Artemisia's iconography stemming from her technical brilliance, personal experiences, passion, and intellect will one day place her at the epitome of Caravaggism. She should no longer be categorized as a great "female artist," but as a great "artist," a preeminent Caravaggisti, and Baroque master. Unfortunately, she is unlikely to receive such acknowledgment by contemporary critics soon; double standards and structural gender bias remain prevalent in most areas of professional life. While Bissell courageously changed his opinion of Artemisia after decades of study, more historians must continue to challenge institutional bias, and feminist scholars must be more objective.

¹⁴³ Bissell, Review of *The Italian Followers of Caravaggio*, 94-95.

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