Artemisia Gentileschi's Female Subjects: Susanna, Judith, and Danaë in Baroque Painting

Sarah Bartolotta
sbartolotta_01@arcadia.edu

Arcadia University has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters. Thank you.

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.arcadia.edu/senior_theses

Part of the Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture Commons, European History Commons, Fine Arts Commons, History of Gender Commons, Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons, Painting Commons, Women's History Commons, and the Women's Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.arcadia.edu/senior_theses/34

This Capstone is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Research at ScholarWorks@Arcadia. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Capstone Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@Arcadia. For more information, please contact gordonl@arcadia.edu.
Artemisia Gentileschi's Female Subjects:

Susanna, Judith, and Danaë in Baroque Painting

by

Sarah Bartolotta

April 12, 2018

Jill Pederson, PhD, Associate Professor of Art History
Arcadia University, Department of Visual and Performing Arts
Art History
I. Introduction

Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1654) grew up in Rome during the late sixteenth, early seventeenth century. She was unable to study art at the academy because she was a woman. Her father, Orazio Gentileschi, was an accomplished artist who taught his daughter to paint. In 1610, Orazio hired Agostino Tassi, another successful artist who had worked with Orazio before on various commissions, to teach Artemisia the rules of perspective. In 1612, Tassi was charged by Orazio with the destruction of property. It was discovered that a year prior, in 1611, Tassi forcibly deflowered Artemisia before beginning a regular sexual relationship with her. He promised Artemisia marriage which kept the Gentileschi family quiet about the matter. Tassi then reneged on that promise and Orazio, fearing the possibility of a ruined reputation, brought him to trial.¹

Despite this, Artemisia became a successful artist during her time. For centuries, however, Artemisia was overlooked in history as many of her works were wrongly attributed to male artists after her death. In the late-twentieth century, with the emergence of feminist scholarship within the field of art history, scholars began to argue for her authorship of a number of paintings, causing Artemisia to receive the recognition she deserves. This scholarship also heavily focused on her early biography and made the connections that the female figures Artemisia depicted were self portraits: either literally or figuratively. I will instead be visually analyzing Artemisia’s Pommersfelden Susanna and the Elders, Uffizi Judith Beheading Holofernes, and St. Louis Danaë in comparison to paintings of similar themes by her male contemporaries (figs. 1, 2, 3). I will demonstrate that Artemisia painted her works differently

than the male artists in that her work was more sympathetic to the female characters, did not
displaying them in overtly sexual manners, and she painted them as powerful figures.

II. Susanna

Artemisia Gentileschi’s *Susanna and the Elders* draws inspiration from the Old
Testament apocryphal story of Susanna. In this story, Susanna, the wife of Joachim, a wealthy
and respected member of the community, was known for her faith, virtue, beauty, and chastity.
One day when her husband was away, two Elders approached her while she bathed in her garden.
The two men threatened her, saying that she must submit sexually to them or they would tell the
community that they witnessed her engaging in an affair. Susanna, being a chaste and virtuous
woman, refused the Elders’ advances. They held true to their threat and told the community of
her fictitious affair. She was put on trial, and it was her word against the two prominent male
members of the community. She was found guilty and sentenced to death. Just before she was
executed, Daniel had a vision from God that told him Susanna was innocent. Daniel decided to
cross examine the Elders individually. Upon his examination, he discovered that the Elders
differed in their story. The Elders were found guilty of lying and were executed.

The lower left corner of the Pommersfelden *Susanna* is signed and dated “Artemisia
Gentileschi 1610”. One would think that an artist’s signature would aid scholars in their research,
attribution, and dating. However, the dating of the painting has been questioned. The problem
with the dating and attribution arises with the belief that Artemisia was born in 1597. Later, it
was discovered that Artemisia was actually born in 1593 making her 17 at the time of the
execution of the Pommersfelden *Susanna*. However, nothing before the *Susanna* of 1610 has

---

University, 1999), 3, 193.
been attributed to Artemisia, making the Pommersfelden *Susanna* the first evidence of Artemisia’s artistic talents.

There are three main theories regarding the attribution of this painting. The first theory is that Artemisia’s father, Orazio, created this work and encouraged Artemisia to take credit in order to propel her career. The second theory is that Artemisia created this work entirely on her own. This theory seems the most ambitious considering this work is her earliest work, and it appears sophisticated for such a young artist. The third theory, is that the Pommersfelden *Susanna* was a collaboration between Orazio and Artemisia. I believe this latter theory is the most plausible because it is nearly impossible that she undertook such a large scene as her first solo painting. This, of course, operates under the notion that there is currently no earlier work attributed to Artemisia.³

However, following the third theory another distinction must be made relating to the extent of Orazio’s involvement. If Orazio was responsible for the majority of the creation of the *Susanna*, and he encouraged his daughter to take the credit in order to launch her own career as a painter, then the belief that this work had any connection to Artemisia’s own biography, which some scholars uphold, would be eliminated. I argue that Artemisia was the main contributor of the Pommersfelden *Susanna*, and the work is sympathetic to the female character rather than the male characters.

This is evident by the way in which the figures are rendered. Susanna twists her body to look away from the Elders in disgust and fear. The Elders extend over the wall into Susanna’s space in an attempt to quiet her. Susanna is painted nude, but not in an erotic display because the

nudity follows the story and her posture combined with her facial expression conveys fear rather than flirtation. In determining the extent of Orazio’s involvement, we can look to the compositional structure. The artist painted the two Elders in a way that makes them appear as one large unit that forcibly enters Susanna’s space. This arrangement conveys both the physical and psychological power that the men have over Susanna. Bissell argues that this composition is laid out in a traditional mode of Orazian style of centralization and compactness.\(^4\) The Elders create an overarching semicircle hovering over Susanna. Bissell gives the examples of Orazio’s *Saint Michael Overcoming the Devil* (c. 1605) and *David Slaying Goliath* (c. 1605) (fig. 4, 5). In the latter painting, David’s torso and arms posed to the right while his head is twisted to the left in a similar way Susanna’s body in contorted in the Pommersfelden *Susanna*. Christiansen and Mann note the similarity, but also call attention to the likeness Susanna’s posture is to that of Michelangelo’s Adam in *The Expulsion from Paradise* on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel (c. 1510) (fig. 6).\(^5\)

However, this vertical arrangement is not something typical to Orazio as he generally prefers a horizontal compositional structure over a vertical one. Orazio’s *Christ Crowned with Thorns* (c. 1613-15) is arranged in a horizontal style with three figures such that Christ is positioned in the center and a man flanks him on either side (fig. 7). His *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* (ca 1620-22), created much later than the Pommersfelden *Susanna* but shows Orazio’s continued preference of such arrangement (fig. 8). Throughout my research, I have not discovered evidence of a similar compositional style that Orazio employed that would explain his reasoning for choosing the arrangement of the Pommersfelden *Susanna*. Yet, Artemisia used

---

\(^4\) Bissell, 3.

\(^5\) Christiansen and Mann, 298.
a similar arrangement for her Lincolnshire *Susanna* (1622) and both the Florentine and Neapolitan *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (figs. 2, 9, 10).

Susanna symbolized chastity, humility, faith, and devotion to God. However, Susanna also began to represent the opposite during this time as being a model of temptation.\(^6\) I believe this is because of gender views during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Women were expected to be chaste. They were to remain virgins until marriage, but even after marriage they were expected to stay faithful to one man, their husband. The proposal of marriage from a man to a woman was considered appropriate for sexual intercourse. However, the woman’s honor was at stake. If the man refused to commit to his promise, the woman’s honor was sullied, and she was shamed by her community and family. On the other hand, no such retribution was to be faced by the man. A man could only lose honor to other men. The practice of men promising marriage, with no intentions of following through with their pledge, in order to have sex with a woman was so common there was even a phrase to describe it: “dare la burla, gettare la burla” (to play, or throw the trick).\(^7\) Such is the case with Artemisia and Agostino Tassi. Agostino promised her marriage to keep her compliant during and after the assault. The trial occurred when it was discovered by Orazio that Tassi had no intentions of marrying his daughter.

Garrard believes that Artemisia’s works were created in reaction to her assault. She argues that there are many sensual, sometimes even downright erotic representation of Susanna and the Elders painted throughout the Baroque period such as that of Cavaliere d’Arpino’s (1607) and Alessandro Allori’s (1561) (figs. 11, 12). d’Arpino’s *Susanna* features a beautiful Susanna wearing a sheer robe, her legs are spread open as she sits brushing her hair.

---

\(^6\) Christiansen and Mann, 308.
looks out coyly to the viewer as the Elders are pictured in the background. Allori’s *Susanna* depicts Susanna seated on fine cloth, jewels in her hair, and a dog playfully biting at her comb. The Elders surround her and grab at her waist and arm. Her face looks unsettled as she grins and looks into one Elder’s eyes. Tintoretto’s *Susanna and the Elders* (1557) depicts what Garrard argues are the differences between the male and female views (fig. 13). Susanna is painted nude sitting next to a pool of water as the two Elders look on. Tintoretto’s painting is quite lovely with the lush garden setting. Susanna is idealized and adorned with jewelry. Therefore, Garrard believes that Orazio’s involvement was minimal at most.8

Bissell, however, argues that gender bias prevents Garrard from agreeing that a man could also empathize with Susanna in her situation. A print executed by Annibale Carracci (ca. 1595) depicts a male representation where the Susanna portrayed is one of a victim, not a seducer (fig. 14). Bissell argues that Carracci’s work even attempts at covering the naked body of Susanna more than Artemisia’s, who appears sensual though still not sexual.9

I believe that a male artist/viewer is capable of sympathizing with Susanna, though maybe only a man with contemporary views of today and not of seventeenth-century Rome. Moreover, Bissell used “empathize” when discussing male artists and viewers in relation to the story of Susanna, where I believe the more appropriate term would be “sympathize.” While a male viewer or artist during the seventeenth century could feel sympathy for Susanna in her plight, I do not believe they would be able to empathize with her. This has to do with the men not being brought up with the same expectations as women. In seventeenth-century Italy, women

---

8 Jesse Locker, *The Language of Painting* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2015), 48. Locker also agrees with Garrard, believing that Artemisia painted the Pommersfelden *Susanna* with Orazio only acting as supervisor.

9 Bissell, 7.
were subservient to men (be it their father, brother, or husband), and women were to obey the men in their lives. Above all, women were expected to be chaste. In the story, Susanna is a model of chastity, loyalty, and faith: all virtues the Jewish people valued. Susanna was one of many personified figures of the perfect human, and her reward for being such was execution. She was saved only by a man, Daniel, who spoke for her and whom the community believed over her.

Garrard points out the absent story in Susanna which is the fact that Joachim, Susanna’s husband, risked losing his honor due to the threatening of the male bond between himself and the Elders of the community. By putting the blame on the Elders, this story then pits man against man. To combat this, according to Garrard, male artists portrayed Susanna as the seductress, the initiator of sexual advances. This portrayal then brings the shame back onto the female subjects.

In the Pommersfelden Susanna and the Elders, Susanna is seated on a bench and flinches from two older men, who lean over the wall of the bench. The elder in the red cloak holds his left index finger to his lips as if quieting Susanna, not wanting her to make noise or draw attention. The elder in the brown and maroon garb stands on the right side of the first elder and leans into him as if whispering something. In line with the story, Susanna appears as if she is preparing for a bath since she is nude with only a white cloth that is fixed between her thighs and draped over her left leg. However, there is no evidence of a bath or water. Rather, the setting of this scene is quite empty with the bench and wall occupying about two-thirds of the background. The final third of the background features a blue sky. Artemisia does not include evidence of the garden.

---

10 Bissell, 85.
This scene appears as if it could have taken place anywhere because it is so minimal. The reason for this may be because this is Artemisia’s earliest work.

Susanna appears naturalistic, fleshy, and weighty in line with the Caravaggesque style by which both Artemisia and her father Orazio were influenced. Susanna appears to have been painted from a live model because she is not idealized. There is evidence of uneven skin tone due to sun exposure on her ankles, arms, and cheeks. Even with this, Bissell argues that Susanna is sensual, without being overly sexual. Susanna is completely nude with only a white cloth draped over her left thigh and groin. Her right arm covers over her right breast, but her left nipple is directly centered in the composition. Bissell discusses how this composition ties together the sexuality and desirability of Susanna, which was expected at the time and the fear and uncomfortability that would have been felt by someone receiving such unsolicited attention while bathing.\(^{11}\)

Susanna is seated on a stone bench with the wall of the bench separating her from the Elders. While the wall of the bench blocks the Elders from Susanna, the wall also blocks any view of scenery that hints at a location and also traps Susanna. This abstraction of scenery creates a painting that forces the viewer to focus on the figures centered in the composition and offers no distraction for the viewer. Stone as a material for a bench would be uncomfortable, adding to the sense of discomfort experienced by Susanna.\(^{12}\) The stone bench appears archaic with cracks and notches missing and the addition of the decorative acanthus leaf relief that harkens to an ancient artistic tradition. Even with the damage, the bench is overall quite sparse.

\(^{11}\) Bissell, 3.
\(^{12}\) Ibid.
and occupies over half of the composition, thus creating a stark contrast to Susanna’s flesh and the vibrant hues the Elders’ clothing.

Along with other representations of Susanna and the Elders, such as the ones done by Cavaliere d’Arpino, Tintoretto, and Alessandro Allori, it is possible that Artemisia drew inspiration from other painted narratives. For instance, Bissell compares Cavaliere d’Arpino’s *Diana and Actaeon* (c. 1606) to the Pommersfelden *Susanna* (fig. 15). The nymph in the center, behind Diana (identified wearing the headpiece adorned with a crescent), appears in a similar position to Susanna with her left arm outstretched and right arm covering her chest. Actaeon wears a blue shirt and a red cape, same as the right elder in Susanna. Even the theme of male voyeurism of female bathers in Arpino’s *Diana and Actaeon* is similar to the theme *Susanna*. Cavalier d’Arpino was close to the Gentileschi family. In 1594, he was in attendance of Giovanni Battista’s (Orazio’s son and Artemisia’s younger brother) baptism. It is possible that Artemisia saw his work, including the *Susanna* and *Diana and Actaeon* which could have inspired her *Susanna*.

Along with her Pommersfelden *Susanna*, Artemisia created multiple versions of the story of Susanna and the Elders throughout her career such as the Pinacoteca *Susanna and the Elders* (1652) and the Brno *Susanna* (1649) (figs. 16, 17). Most important is the Lincolnshire *Susanna* (1622). Though most historians agree with the attribution of the Lincolnshire *Susanna* to Artemisia, Garrard does not support the work as an autograph Artemisia. Garrard believes that the Lincolnshire *Susanna* is painted in a different style that of Artemisia. Scholars wanting to attribute a work to an artist do so with as much evidence as possible. Historical documentation is

---

13 Bissell, 5.
extremely important, but rarely available. Other ways to attribute works is through connoisseurship or stylistic similarities. However, this assumes the artist maintained the same style throughout his/her artistic life. This is doubtful especially if the artist had a long and prolific career which Artemisia did enjoy. In 1622, Artemisia was living and working in Naples when she created the Lincolnshire Susanna. During this time, the regional tastes were moving away from the heavy and dramatic naturalism of Caravaggio, towards a lighter, more idealized style of paintings by artists such as Guido Reni and Domenichino.\(^\text{14}\) I argue that this was the reason for Artemisia changing her style from her original Roman style from more than a decade before. Garrard argues that the Lincolnshire Susanna upholds a more masculine ideals of women, rather than Artemisia’s previous depiction of Susanna in 1610.\(^\text{15}\) She compares the two paintings, noting the awkward positioning of Susanna in the 1610 version as she turns away from the Elders, believing this to be a more naturalistic reaction to harassment. However, the awkwardness that Garrard discusses can also be caused by Artemisia’s lack of experience in rendering multiple figures in a large work of art. Garrard believes that the 1610 Susanna reveals a new depiction of the protagonist, as an emotional victim. Erasing the previous notions of Susanna as being a temptress and flirt that seduced the Elders. Garrad argues that the 1622 Lincolnshire Susanna is more in line with this latter characterization, where her sensuality and beauty are more dominant. The Lincolnshire Susanna places the scene in the traditional setting of a garden, lovely and romantic, decorated with putti, dolphins, and fountains. Susanna covers


her body, but more in a playful way. She turns her gaze towards the Elders with “come hither” eyes, conveying what Garrard believes to be the truth, but counteracting her body language.\textsuperscript{16}

Garrard briefly mentions that an anonymous reader analyzed the painting of the Lincolnshire \textit{Susanna} and argued that Susanna was actually looking upwards in prayer rather than playfully at the Elders. Garrard stood firm in her belief that this may be the case in other paintings by Artemisia of Susanna, but that with the other evidence of flirtation and seduction this is not the case for the Lincolnshire \textit{Susanna and the Elders}.\textsuperscript{17} I agree with Garrard that the Pommersfelden \textit{Susanna} depicts Susanna in dynamic repulsion to the Elders, but I argue that the Lincolnshire \textit{Susanna} also depicts a woman uncomfortably experiencing harassment, just not as energetic.

Artemisia’s Pommersfelden \textit{Susanna} followed a tradition of painting the story of the female heroine. Her painting was similar in that it featured the three figures. Besides that, her work was different than other versions of the subject. Artemisia’s painting is compositionally bare, no garden and no bath. Susanna is completely nude except for a cloth over her lap. She is not adorned with any jewelry and her hair is not tied up. Susanna turns away from the Elders in disgust and throws her hands up in defense. Even though she was relatively young when she painted this work, I believe that she was the main contributor. There is evidence of Orazio’s influence, but this would naturally occur since Artemisia was most familiar with her father’s work. Painting \textit{Susanna and the Elders} was common during the Renaissance and Baroque periods, as was including a female nude. What sets Artemisia’s work apart is the way in which she depicted her \textit{Susanna}. Susanna is not a flirt or a tease who seduces the Elders. The antagonist

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 86.
\textsuperscript{17} Mary D. Garrard, 1991, 147.
is not Susanna, rather she is portrayed as the victim of sexual harassment, which was not a common way of depicting Susanna during the early modern period. Artemisia paints Susanna in such a way that the viewer feels sympathetic towards the female character in her plight against two deviant men.

III. Judith

The scene Artemisia depicts in *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (c. 1614) is described in the Old Testament Apocrypha Book of Judith (12:10-13:10). The story is considered more allegorical and is related to the Old Testament, but has been rejected as original cannon. The story tells of a general for the Assyrian army, Holofernes, who intended to attack the Jewish people of Bethulia. A brave Jewish widow, Judith, comes up with a plan to save her people. She wore her best dress and adorned herself with jewelry to seduce Holofernes. He became infatuated with her and invited her to his banquet. Over the course of the evening, Holofernes became inebriated. He then invited Judith into his tent, where he intended to sleep with her. Intoxicated, he laid down on his bed when Judith took advantage of his weakened state and attacked him. Along with her maidservant, Abra, Judith took Holofernes’s own sword and decapitated him.

Judith was a common iconography in European art during the Renaissance and Baroque periods. Judith symbolized chastity, humility, faith, and devotion to God; sometimes considered

---

a precursor for the Virgin Mary. However, similar to Susanna, Judith also began to represent the opposite during the sixteenth century, being a model of temptation and the duality of power, or lack thereof, of women. More often than not, these artistic representations of Judith show her, and sometimes her maidservant, in the moments after the slaying of Holofernes, where his severed head is displayed like a trophy. Botticelli’s *Judith Returns to Bethulia* (c. 1472) and Lavinia Fontana’s painting *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* (c. 1600) are both examples of this (fig. 18, 19). Unlike these representations, Artemisia painted the scene where Judith is in the midst of decapitating Holofernes.

Eve Straussman-Pflanzer argues that Artemisia created one of the most violent paintings of Judith in all of art history. Artemisia painted Judith and Abra wearing contemporary costume, brutally decapitating a seemingly defenseless man, in a composition that appears almost theatrical with its use of dramatic light and minimal background. The costume, lighting, setting, and climatic scene all relate to the Caravaggesque Baroque style, as well as the dramatics desired by the Medici family the likely patrons of the painting.

The Medici family ruled Florence during the period when Artemisia resided there (between the years of 1613 and 1620), and they were active patrons of the arts. The Medici family was an extremely wealthy and powerful family that prefer art that reflected their status. It is likely that Artemisia changed her style to accommodate her patrons. Not much is known about the exact provenance of the Florence *Judith*, but ties to a Florentine origin appear the most

---

20 Straussman-Pflanzer, 16.
21 Christiansen and Mann, 308.
22 Straussman-Pflanzer, 12.
23 Ibid., 11.
plausible. What is not known is the patron and reason for the commission. The leading possible theory is that it was commissioned by Cosimo II or given to him as a gift.

Artemisia signed the Florentine *Judith* differently than her works in other locations. Her signature reads: “I Artemisia Lomi made this picture.”24 Lomi was the surname of Orazio’s father, who was a goldsmith. Orazio’s brother and paternal uncle were also artists named Lomi. Gentileschi was the surname of Orazio’s mother and Orazio probably chose this as part of his signature to differentiate himself from his father, brother, and uncle. On the other hand, Artemisia most likely chose to sign her work as Lomi while she was in Tuscany in order to exhibit her familial ties to the region or even, to separate herself from the trial in Rome.

Artemisia also made another depiction of Judith slaying Holofernes in Naples that most likely predates the Florentine work. The Naples *Judith* is smaller than the Florentine version. However, the current dimensions are not original. The canvas was cut after it was finished possibly due to damage or resizing. The two figures are nearly identical in composition, in fact it has been suggested that the Florentine version was created by tracing a cartoon or some preparatory drawing of the Neapolitan version. Pflanzer suggests that the Florentine holds more “grandeur” in comparison to the more “earthbound” Neapolitan version and believes that this is due to the patrons who commissioned these works.25 As previously mentioned, the Florentine work was created for the powerful and wealthy Medici family. There is more drama and gore in the Florentine version. The blood spurts out in arcs, soaking into the bed, pooling in the folds of the sheets, and even marking Judith’s chest. Knowing her patrons favored dramatic works, the striking and climatic scene of the Florentine *Judith* reflects the personal tastes of the patrons.

24 Ibid., 23.
25 Straussman-Pflanzer, 19-22.
During this time, where artists generally painted with patrons in mind, would change their styles to fit the tastes of these patrons to gain commissions.

It is theorized that Artemisia painted herself as Judith, in either a literal way with a self-portrait or in a metaphorical way as a symbol of her revenge on Tassi. Garrard believes that Artemisia was influenced by revenge while painting this work and painted a portrait of Tassi as Holofernes. Therefore painting herself as the heroine Judith seeking revenge on Holofernes/Tassi for his attack. This is why, according to Garrard, this depiction of Judith slaying Holofernes is so violent and bloody. Artemisia used her own emotions and experience to inspire her painting. However, including oneself, either in literal sense with a self-portrait or through a more emotional connection, was not uncommon for early modern artists. Caravaggio, whose art was influential on Artemisia included self-portraits in his works such as David, Medusa, and Bacchus (Figs 20-22). On a metaphorical level, the painting represents Artemisia’s strength as a woman and her equally strong skills in painting.

Lavinia Fontana also painted Judith with the Head of Holofernes (1600). In this version, Judith stands in the foreground holding the sword in her right hand and Holofernes’s severed head in her left. This scene depicts the moments after Judith committed her violent act that defeated the army and saved her people. As was stated previously, this decision to paint a scene after the beheading of Holofernes was more popular than the gruesome scene that Artemisia chose to depict. Fontana painted Judith wearing a lavish, expensive brocaded gown. Breaking with the tradition where the maidservant is depicted as an old hag, Abra is of a similar youthful

26 Mary D. Garrard, 1989, 208
27 Ibid., 278-79.
28 Straussman-Pflanzer, 28.
age to Judith. The trope of depicting Abra as a hag was a common representation and was usually used to highlight Judith as a young and virtuous beauty. In Fontana’s work, the maidservant is slightly hidden as she is painted partially in the shadows of the background. The background is painted black and there is no evidence that could lead the viewer to determine a setting. This makes it appear as if the maidservant had nothing to do with the violent act herself, as she carries the basket with the hidden head of Holofernes. As for violence, Judith is clean of any blood that would have definitely splattered. Judith has a neutral expression on her face, which contrasts with her maidservant’s sinister gaze. With this painting lacking the brutality and emotion present in Artemisia’s work, I cannot agree that Artemisia painted this way simply because of her gender. There does not appear to be any inherent feminine style that connects the two paintings.

Caravaggio painted his *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1599) for the banker Ottavio Costa (fig. 23). Although Caravaggio was criticized for being so violent, Artemisia’s work is much more gruesome. Even though Artemisia did add more blood to her composition, it is not only the added blood that makes this work more violent. I believe it is the emotion that can be seen on Artemisia’s figure’s faces that makes her work more brutal and even more naturalistic. Comparing Caravaggio’s to Artemisia’s work, one can see the lack of strength and force in Caravaggio’s Judith, who is depicted as a young and beautiful woman, as well as being quite dainty. She holds the sword in her right hand and in her left hand she loosely grips Holofernes’s hair, holding his head back and exposing his neck. The angle at which Judith holds the sword is awkward as she bends her wrist at a position that would not give her much leverage. Holding a

---

29 Straussman-Pflanzer, 18
heavy sword at this angle, not to mention being tasked to cut through a human neck muscle, bone and all would prove extremely difficult even for someone who possessed more strength.

A sword would have been extremely heavy and tiresome for a model to maintain elevated for an extended period of time. It is possible that the Judith model held a prop, something much lighter, or possibly nothing at all. The further issues of naturalism, such as the spacing between figures in the composition, may be accounted for by the practice in which Caravaggio painted. Caravaggio believed in painting from life, meaning that he relied on live models. He also painted alla prima, meaning that he painted without preparatory drawings, and he generally painted one model at a time. This caused some awkwardness in his spacing once his composition was completed with all of his figures. This could be the reason Judith is spaces so far away from Holofernes.

Artemisia’s female figures in Judith Beheading Holofernes are expressive, whereas in Caravaggio’s composition, Holofernes is the most expressive of the group. In Caravaggio’s painting, Holofernes’s facial expression conveys terror, excruciating agony, and perhaps even shock. Judith appears hesitant and even a little confused or skeptical. It is Abra that appears to be the determined one, ready for the difficult and dangerous work. In Artemisia's work, Holofernes appears as if he has already succumbed to his lethal injuries. Judith appears determined, as if she has no qualms about the task she is performing. Abra is just as involved in the work, she does not stand off to the side to act as little more than a porter that only holds the head after the deed is done.

The angle at which Judith holds the sword in Artemisia’s work allows for more force to sever the head. Artemisia’s Judith also tightly grips Holofernes’s hair with her left hand. This
Judith ia also leaning forward, putting her weight into her task rather than Caravaggio’s Judith who leans away. Artemisia’s maidservant is very active in Artemisia’s composition, helping out her employer Judith, rather than waiting on the sidelines. Artemisia’s maidservant is also much younger than Caravaggio’s figure, which is more traditional by depicting the maidservant much older.

Orazio Gentileschi painted a representation of *Judith and her Maidservant* (1608) that is similar to Artemisia’s Palazzo Pitti *Judith and her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes* (ca. 1618) (figs. 24, 25). Orazio’s composition depicts two women silently and carefully looking, trying to sneak out of the Assyrian camp after killing the general. Artemisia’s composition shows the instant, automatic reaction of the two women, probably a reaction to them hearing a noise. Pflanzer argues that the horizontal orientation of Orazio’s painting persuades the viewer to focus on the relationship of the two women in the painting. Whereas Artemisia’s vertical formatting relates more to the narrative than the relationship, I disagree with this argument and believe that the extreme closeness of the figures in Artemisia’s Palazzo Pitti *Judith* brings to the viewer’s attention the relationship of Judith and Abra. Although in both Orazio’s and Artemisia’s composition the emphasis is on the figures and the background is mostly in shadow, there is more of a background evident in Orazio’s work giving the idea that the women are still in the tent, trying to escape.

Artemisia’s Uffizi *Judith* also followed the tradition of painting the story of the female heroine. Similar to the theme of Susanna, the iconography of Judith was common during the Renaissance and Baroque eras. These two women’s portrayal was also altered during this period.

---

30 Straussman-Pflanzer, 18.
These women were originally the embodiments of chastity and virtue, but during Artemisia’s time, they began to represent temptation and deceit. Judith differs from Susanna in that Judith was not a victim. Artemisia’s Uffizi Judith was portrayed as strong and capable. I believe this is because Artemisia realized that women were powerful too. This sentiment is also evident in her letters to Antonio Ruffo where she writes on August 7, 1649, “I will show your most illustrious lordship what a woman can do” and “will find the spirit of cesar in the soul of a woman” in November 13, 1649. Artemisia painted Judith as a powerful woman whose strength was emphasised over her physical beauty. Judith and Abra worked together to severe Holofernes’s head from his body. They were both active in the composition, much more than other representations from around this period.

**IV. Danaë**

Unlike the Biblical stories of Susanna and Judith, the story of Danaë comes from Greek mythology. Danaë was the daughter of King Acrisius of Argos. King Acrisius learned through an oracle that he would be killed by his grandson, Perseus. The king then took immediate measures to prevent this by imprisoning Danaë and her maidservant in a tower. Zeus, infatuated by Danaë’s beauty, and sympathetic to her imprisonment, took pity on Danaë and transformed himself into a golden shower so that he could be with her. In this form, she was impregnated by Zeus and was later cast out by her father, who feared the oracle’s prophecy.

Artemisia’s St. Louis Danaë (c. 1612) features her nude in a reclined position. Danaë’s hair is undone as her head is tilted up and her eyes are partially closed. Danaë’s left arm reaches behind her head while her right arm clutches coins to her tightly closed thighs. More coins

---

continue to fall from the sky and collect in Danaë’s lap. Behind the bed, a maidservant holds out her cobalt blue skirt as she tries to catch the falling gold coins. The background is dark and gives little clue as to the exact setting of the scene, except for that it takes place in an interior.

Artemisia’s St. Louis Danaë was originally attributed to her father Orazio. There is still some debate over the actual artist of the work. Garrard believes that the St. Louis Danaë was not created by either Gentileschi, but rather by an unknown third artist. Garrard compares this Danaë to Artemisia’s Cleopatra from around 1621, most notably the similarities of the composition and the possibility of the same model (fig. 26). Garrard believes that the brush strokes of the St. Louis Danaë are much more refined and evidence of a more mature artist. Compared to other works done by Artemisia during this time, such as the Pommersfelden Susanna, which was only created a year earlier, the Danaë is technically more advanced.32

Judith Mann believes that this work is unquestionably Artemisia’s and is characteristic of her representation of women. Mann upholds this work as evidence of female sexual freedom, interpreting this painting as Danaë willingly embracing her coupling with Zeus.33 She believes that Orazio was not one to reinterpret narratives whereas Artemisia often did. Mann compared Artemisia’s Danaë to other contemporary versions by male artists and noted that most of the male artists chose the moment just before the copulation. The St. Louis Danaë is painted in a way that suggests the act has already begun and is ongoing. I agree with Mann that Artemisia’s Danaë does differ from male interpretations of the same myth, but I will show that some male artists also painted the act as ongoing.

In the St. Louis painting, Danaë’s pale skin is in stark contrast to the dark, vague background. Danaë reclines completely nude on a plush bed of white and crimson sheets. Her left arm is positioned behind her head as her right hand clutches gold coins on her thigh. Her legs are crossed at her knees and gold coins collect in her lap. Danaë clenches her right hand around coins that are protruding between her fingers. Mann suggests that this symbolizes either the embrace of the sexual union or the reluctance of Danaë to participate with the uninvited god. I disagree with Mann’s original theory that the coins forced between Danaë’s fingers represent sexual ecstasy and side more with Jeanne Morgan, who interprets Danaë’s tightly clenched fist is a sign of violence and anger and is evidence of her unwillingness to engage sexually with Zeus. I believe that her fist and half closed eyes combined with Danaë’s tightly closed legs and neutral facial expression must be read as reluctant acceptance. It is apparent that she is not actively fighting back, but in her position of being chosen by the head of gods she did not have any choice but to lay back and go along with it. This is why the evidence of her unwillingness to participate is subtle. The St. Louis Danaë is painted in a way that represents a woman born to power, imprisoned by her own father, then chosen by a god to bear his child. Artemisia’s Danaë has no choice but to submit to the sexual union.

During the early modern period, gold coins were often painted as a tangible, easily recognized representation of the golden light that Zeus took on when he appeared in Danaë’s chamber. This led to themes of prostitution in visual retellings of the myth. This is because the gold coins were symbolic as they represented Zeus, but they were also a physical compensation

---

34 Ibid. The former theory was originally upheld by Mann until 1999, when the latter theory was suggested by Leo Steinberg.
for sex. In the background, Danaë’s maidservant turns away from Danaë and collects the falling gold coins in her apron. The maidservant has associations with prostitution, appearing as a procuress or madam. In relation to Artemisia’s own life, Donna Tuzia was a friend and neighbor of the Gentileschi household, who acted as a chaperone for Artemisia when Orazio was not with his daughter. During the trial, Artemisia accused Donna Tuzia of facilitating Agostino Tassi’s access to Artemisia as she was paid for aiding Tassi. Like the maidservant, Tuzia was greedy and chose coins over the wellbeing of a young girl. Danaë is situated in a bedchamber (similar to a prostitute) as punishment that was handed down to her by her own father for something that she had no control over: her future son’s killing of her father. The connection to forced prostitution is relevant because it further strengthens the argument that Danaë went along with the sexual act, but was not a willing participant.

Orazio’s Cleveland Danaë (c. 1621) features a reclining female nude and a putto rather than a maidservant (Fig. 27). This does not follow the traditional narrative, but was a common reinterpretation during the Renaissance and Baroque eras. The putto appears to direct the gold coins to Danaë and the bed with a tapestry. Gold coins representing Zeus fall from the top of the composition in a diagonal onto Danaë. There are no coins on Danaë, indicating this as the instant Zeus appeared (just before copulation). This is different than Artemisia’s painting where several coins are already on Danaë’s body as well as still falling representing the sexual act is ongoing. Orazio’s Danaë lays on sheets of white and gold with a sheer cloth covering her lap. Danaë is set against a dark background similar to Artemisia’s Danaë, which is evidence of both artist’s Caravaggesque training. Orazio’s Danaë lays on her left side with her left arm propped up and her right arm extended, reaching towards the falling gold coins. The act of reaching towards the
gold coins can represent the willingness of Danaë to participate in the union with Zeus, but this can also be viewed as greed. Danaë’s posture is relaxed with her legs together, but not forcefully so. Her left arm supports her weight, but does not hold tension which would hint at her resistance. The only part of her body that suggests possible hesitation is her face which looks a bit nervous at the unnatural visitation. However, her body appears to be turned away from the gold as more of an act of modesty, than rejection.36

In his painting of Danaë (c. 1531), Correggio also painted a putto rather than a maidservant (Fig. 28). Although it appears that the hands of the angel are gripping the blanket, they are actually presenting the blanket to Danaë who places it between her legs as if trying to catch whatever falls from the cloud, in a way, funneling the assumed light between her legs. She is an active participant in this depiction. Unlike the painting by Artemisia where Danaë passively reclines back on her bed. Correggio’s Danaë is seated up and her legs are splayed in opposite directions. Danaë is relaxed as her left leg dangles off of the bed, her position is not rigid as she is elevated by the soft pillows. This depiction of Danaë shows the moments just before Zeus showers her. There is evidence of preparation (exposing herself and using the blanket to catch and funnel Zeus) and the mythical cloud, but there is no light or gold yet. The gold in this painting is not shown as the divine light of Zeus yet, but is foreshadowed by the tapestry, blanket, and wings of the angel.

The Venetian painter Titian also created a series of paintings of Danaë between 1544 and the 1560’s. The paintings have a similar composition, but differ in minor detail such as the inclusion of a dog and different backgrounds (fig. 29). One major difference in the series is that

in some versions, Titian includes a maidservant and in other paintings he includes an angel (Figs. 30, 31). Danaë’s position is nearly identical in all of the paintings as she reclines on her bed. Her right arm rests on a pillow and her hands play suggestively with her bed sheet. Danaë’s left arm is either hidden on her left thigh or is shown between her legs. Her knees are spread and her hips are angled toward the golden shower of light or coins. In Titian’s St. Petersburg Danaë (c. 1553) the face of Zeus can be seen in the break of the clouds (fig. 32). Here Titian also includes a maidservant, who is holding her apron open to catch falling coins in a manner similar to Artemisia’s maidservant. Danaë is nude with her left leg bent to hide her genitals from the viewer. A white cloth is draped between her legs and gold coins are painted as if they are sliding down between her legs. Danaë is positioned as being relaxed as she reclines on pillows. Her right arm is arched over a pillow and she plays suggestively with the red fabric of the canopy.

In yet another version, Tintoretto’s Danaë is seated differently than the other depictions of the subject (fig. 33). She is seated in an upright position with her legs off of the bed. She is completely nude with only jewelry adorning her body. Similar to Titan and Artemisia’s version of the Danaë, it appears that the act of consummation is still ongoing as there are several coins in Danaë’s lap as well as some that continue to fall. She appears to be taking the gold coins and putting them into a wooden box. The gold coins that fall from Danaë’s lap are collected in the apron of her maidservant. The position of the two women mimic the positioning of Mary and Gabriel in many Annunciation scenes. This composition depicts the two views of Danaë, that of an innocent by evoking the memory of the Virgin Mary and that of a greedy woman by collecting and stashing away the falling gold coins.37 This also draws parallels between the

conception of Jesus and Perseus, portraying the act between Zeus and Danaë as somewhat holy and divine, not filled with underlying hesitation as expressed by Artemisia’s Danaë.

It does not appear that Tintoretto’s Danaë follows the model of either the willing participant (as seen in the versions by Titian, Orazio, ad Correggio), but it does not seem to follow the reluctance that Artemisia’s Danaë expresses. Morgan believes that Tintoretto depicts Danaë as weighing the decision of going along with Zeus’s sexual advances. I believe Morgan is correct in characterizing Tintoretto’s painting in a third category, but I believe this Danaë still follows the theme of prostitution. It appears that Danaë is pointing to the gold she is storing away as if conveying to her maidservant that the gold is payment for the sexual act.

Similar to depictions of Judith and Susanna, images of Danaë conveyed a duality: either chastity and innocence or greed and seduction. What is also similar is that when these three subjects were treated by Artemisia, the main female figures took on a sense of innocence. Even with Judith slaying an inebriated man, she took on the role of justice and was empowered rather than demonized. Danaë was painted as reluctantly accepting her fate because she knew she had no other choice. Zeus was all-powerful, and Danaë was imprisoned having no contact with anyone but her maidservant. She went along with the sexual encounter, but subtle signs show her unwillingness.

V. Conclusion

Artemisia faced many hardships during her life because she was a woman. She was restricted in her field, prohibited from studying art at an academic level, sexually assaulted, and tortured during the following trial. After her death, the paintings that she left behind were

---

38 Jeanne Morgan Zarucchi, 13
attributed to male artists. It would take centuries for Artemisia’s name to be associated with her own work. When she was again recognized, the strong female protagonists that were featured in her sacred and secular narratives were realized. Many scholars, including Garrard and Straussman-Pflanzer, connected these women in the stories and drew parallels to Artemisia’s life. I believe it is true that Artemisia handled the three themes differently than her male counterparts. When Artemisia painted *Susanna and the Elders* (1610), one year before the assault, the story follows the theme of unwanted attention and harassment. In her *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (1614) which was painted after the trial, it emphasises the strength of the heroine in defeating a tyrant. Artemisia’s *Danaë* (1612), painted around the time of the trial, features the reluctant acceptance of Danaë in submitting sexually to a man more powerful than her. When these three themes were handled by male artists contemporary to Artemisia, these women took on a role opposite to what Artemisia depicted. Susanna and Judith became models of temptation and Danaë became a model of greed.

Artemisia painted her female figures in a more sympathetic light than her male contemporaries. Even when her female protagonists, Danaë and Susanna, were nude they were not rendered in a way that was overtly sexually suggestive. Susanna was painted leaning away from the men, with a face that conveys discomfort, and arms outstretched as barriers between her and The Elders. Danaë was painted reclined on a bed, which is generally a comfortable position, but her clenched fist, tightly closed legs, and face give the overall appearance of hesitation and unwillingness. Judith is not in the same category as the other two. She is not portrayed as a victim, but rather as a heroine who must perform a physically and mentally demanding task. Despite this, Judith risks her life and put all of her effort into this challenge and thus saves her
people. Artemisia created work that was rooted in the traditional themes that were desired during the Baroque and Renaissance eras, but her work differed from the male artists. Her work did not portray the female figures as sexual objects, even when the narrative was sexually suggestive and/or her protagonists were naked.
**Image List:**

Fig. 1. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1610, oil on canvas, 1.7 x 1.21 m, Schloss Weissenstein, Pommersfelden.

Fig. 2. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, 1620, oil on canvas, 199 × 162.5 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

Fig. 3. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Danaë*, 1611, oil on copper, 40.5 x 52.5 cm, St. Louis Art Museum, Missouri.

Fig. 4. Orazio Gentileschi, *Saint Michael Overcoming the Devil*, 1605, oil on canvas, 278 x 129 cm, Parish Church of Santissimo Salvatore, Farnese.

Fig. 5. Orazio Gentileschi, *David Slaying Goliath*, 1605, oil on canvas, 126 x 98 cm, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin.

Fig. 6. Michelangelo, *The Expulsion from Paradise*, 1509, fresco, 280 x 570 cm Cappella Sistina, Vatican.

Fig. 7. Orazio’s *Christ Crowned with Thorns*, 1613-15, oil on canvas, 119.5 x 148.5 cm, Herzog Anton Ulrich- Museum, Braunschweig.

Fig. 8. Orazio Gentileschi, *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, 1620, oil on canvas, 175.6 × 218 cm, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery.

Fig. 9. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1622, oil on canvas, 161.5 x 123 cm, Marquess of Exeter, Burghley House, Lincolnshire.

Fig. 10. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, 1614, oil on canvas, 158.8 cm × 125.5 cm, National Museum of Capodimonte, Naples.

Fig. 11. Cavaliere d’Arpino, *Susanna e i Vecchi*, 1607, oil on copper, 52.8 x 37.1 cm Fondazione Federico Zeri, Bologna.

Fig. 12. Alessandro Allori, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1561, oil on canvas, 202 x 117 cm, Réunion des Musées Nationaux (RMN), Musée Magnin, Dijon.
Fig. 13. Jacopo Tintoretto, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1557, oil on canvas, 146.5 x 193.6 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien, Vienna.

Fig. 14. Annibale Carracci, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1595, etching, 34.5 × 30.7 cm, The Metropolitan Museum, New York.

Fig. 15. Cavaliere d’Arpino, *Diana and Actaeon*, 1606, oil on copper, 50 × 69 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest.

Fig. 16. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1652, oil on canvas, 200.3 x 225.6 cm Pinacoteca, Bologna.

Fig. 17. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1649, oil on canvas, 205 x 167.5 cm, Moravian Gallery, Brno.

Fig. 18. Sandro Botticelli, *Judith Returns to Bethulia*, 1472, tempera on panel, 31 x 24 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

Fig. 19. Lavinia Fontana, *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*, 1600, oil on canvas, 130 x 110 cm, Museo Civico d'arte Industriale e Galleria Dava Bargellini, Bologna.

Fig. 20. Caravaggio, *David with the Head of Goliath*, 1610, oil on canvas, 125 cm × 101 cm, Galleria Borghese, Rome.

Fig. 21. Caravaggio, *Medusa*, 1596, oil on canvas, 60 cm × 55 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

Fig. 22. Caravaggio, *Bacchus*, 1595, oil on canvas, 95 cm × 85 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

Fig. 23. Caravaggio, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, 1599, oil on canvas, 145 x 195 cm, Galleria Nazionale d'arte Antica, Rome.

Fig. 24. Orazio Gentileschi, *Judith and her Maidservant*, 1608, oil on canvas, 136 x 160 cm, Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo.

Fig. 25. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith and Her Maidservant*, 1614, oil on canvas, 114.4 x 935 cm, Palazzo Pitti, Florence.

Fig. 26. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Cleopatra*, 1621, oil on canvas, 118 x 181 cm, Amedeo Morandorri, Milan.
Fig. 27. Orazio Gentileschi, *Danaë*, 1621, oil on canvas, 161.5 x 227.1 cm, Getty Center, Los Angeles.

Fig. 28. Correggio, *Danaë*, 1531, oil on canvas, 161 x 193 cm, Galleria Borghese, Rome.

Fig. 29. Titian, *Danaë with Nursemaid*, 1560, oil on canvas, 129.1 cm × 181.2 cm, Museo del Prado, Madrid.

Fig. 30. Titian, *Danaë*, 1553, oil on canvas, 192.5x 114.6 cm, Wellington Collection, London.

Fig. 31. Titian, *Danaë*, 1544, oil on canvas, 120 cm × 172 cm, National Museum of Capodimonte, Naples.

Fig. 32. Titian, *Danaë*, 1553, oil on canvas, 120 x 187 cm, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersberg.

Fig. 33. Tintoretto, *Danaë*, 1580, oil on canvas, 142 x 182 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Lyon.
Images:

Figure 1
Figure 7
Figure 13
Figure 30
Bibliography:


