

## Kvindens vrede i barokkens billedsprog set gennem Artemisia Gentileschi



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Titel	Kvindens vrede i barokkens billedsprog set gennem Artemisia Gentileschi
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## Indledning

Kunst forstås i bred forstand som et spejl for det samfund vi lever. Kunsten påvirker og påvirkes af ideer og tendenser i samfundet.<sup>1</sup> Det er således relevant at forsøge at opnå forståelse for samtiden gennem kunstforståelsen. I de seneste år har der været et udbredt opgør med kønslige følelser, heriblandt vreden, som i lyset af #MeToo-bevægelsen er blevet central for nutidens ligestillingsdebatter. Vrede, en universel følelse<sup>2</sup>, er tit blevet forbundet med maskulinitet.<sup>3</sup> Vreden har således gennem historien tilhørt manden, men hvad sker der når kvinder tager ejerskab over den? Hvordan udtrykker den kvindelige kunstner sin egen vrede?

I seksten århundredes Italien malede Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1653) voldsomme billeder af kvinder der udøvede en vold lige så brutal som mænds. Hun var selv blevet udsat for en mands brutalitet gennem voldtægt og som malerinde forsøgte hun at bryde igennem i barokkens mandsdominerede samfund.<sup>4</sup> Hun malede med stor brutalitet den bibelske heltinde Judith, der med en mands voldsomhed slår den Assyriske general Holofernes ihjel. Gentileschi maler to versioner af dette motiv: det ene, efter retssagen mod hendes voldtægtsmand og det andet 7 år senere efter benådningen af den selvsamme.

Det er ekstraordinært, at en kvinde på så tidlig en tid tog kontrol over eget narrativ og udfordrede samtidens konventioner om den kvindelige dyd og stoicisme. Således kan denne undersøgelse kaste lys over, hvordan kvinder, og andre marginaliserede grupper historisk set har taget ejerskab over arketyper og skabt modfortællinger til de etablerede narrativer.

## Problemformulering

Judith er i den senmoderne kultur blevet set som en figur der repræsenterer kvinders modstandskraft. I den klassiske bibelhistorie ses Judith først og fremmest som et redskab for guds vilje og repræsenterer således ikke en kvindes vold, men guds vold, "the Lord our God slew him by the hand of a woman."<sup>5</sup> I senere år har dette blik på Judith ændret sig, til noget nærmere et feministisk ikon.<sup>6</sup> Jeg vil undersøge, hvordan denne udvikling fra helgen til kvindelig modstandskraft ses i kunsten. Dette gør jeg gennem en analyse af Gentileschis to malerier sammenholdt med udvalgte personlige hændelser i hendes liv. Jeg vil således betragte afbildningen af Judith gennem en nutidig og kønnet linse. Helt konkret lyder min problemformulering:

*Hvordan kan Gentileschis to versioner af Judith ses som en tidlig kunstnerisk udfordring af patriarkalske magtstrukturer og det som i dag benævnes female rage?*

Ligeledes er det spændende i konteksten af min samtid at kigge på

*Hvad kan disse to malerier af Gentileschi lære os om nutidige fremstillinger om kvinders raseri?*

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<sup>1</sup> Lau, Sekules & Thøfner 2013

<sup>2</sup> Williams 2017

<sup>3</sup> Malonda, Llorca, Zarco, Samper, Mestre 2023

<sup>4</sup> Art Institute Chicago 2013-2014

<sup>5</sup> The Holy Bible: Douay-Rheims 1609 Judith 13, p.1317

<sup>6</sup> Milne, 2015

## Afgrænsning af projekt

Judith og Holofernes er et yndet motiv blandt kunstnere gennem alle tider. Der findes således mange spændende vinkler inden for dette enkle motiv, dog vurderer jeg, at Artemisia Gentileschi er særlig interessant i forbindelse med repræsentationen af kvindens vrede. Gentileschi portrætterer i højere grad kvinders indre vrede fremfor at portrættere kvindens raseri gennem et maskulint blik, ligesom hendes samtidskunstner Carravaggio (1571-1610). Jeg har valgt at sammenligne med den samtidige Carravagios maleri af samme motiv. Gentileschi har kendt hans værk og har formentlig således fået inspiration herfra.<sup>7</sup> Ydermere kan han ses som en repræsentation af samtidens maskuline syn på kvindes raseri.

Der findes mange versioner og oversættelser af det gamle testamente. Jeg har taget udgangspunkt i Douay-rheims, da dette er standarden.

Jeg definerer i denne opgave patriarkatet som en struktur der opretholder mænds systematiske dominans over kvinder både i offentligheds- og privatsfæren.<sup>8</sup> Dette er en nutidig definition, men jeg vurderer, at den er relevant for projektet.

Jeg undersøger hvorvidt malerierne er et udtryk for det vi i dag kender som kvindeligt raseri eller den mere populære senmoderne betegnelse *female rage*. Det defineres som vrede udtrykt i kvinder som kommer fra et liv levet i systematisk undertrykkelse. Altså er *female rage* en direkte respons til patriarkatet. Det er et ekstremt udtryk for vrede ofte gennem vold og brutalitet.<sup>9</sup>

## Teori og metode

Jeg anvender en kombination af billedanalysemetoder, herunder form- og ikonografisk analyse. Formanalysen vil tage udgangspunkt i Lise Markes teori, som giver en struktureret tilgang til at undersøge værkets visuelle elementer. Den ikonografiske analyse tager udgangspunkt i Erwin Panofsky og vil fokusere på en afdækning af symbolik og betydningen af de visuelle elementer i en kulturel og historisk kontekst.<sup>10</sup> Dette gør jeg, da det er den metode jeg vurderer som bedst til at udvinde viden fra et visuelt medie. Det ikonografiske aspekt er særligt vigtig i denne analyse, da malerierne tilhører barokperioden, hvor der oftest trækkes på religiøse og historiske motiver. I denne opgave helt konkret Judiths historie fra Det Gamle Testamente. Artemisia Gentileschis billeder er derfor dybt forankret i både katolsk ikonografi og samtidens kønsdynamikker, som jeg vil belyse gennem denne metode.

Jeg bruger en komparativ tilgang til Gentileschi to malerier af Judith og Holofernes, samt en perspektivering til Carravagios maleri. Denne metode giver mulighed for at afdække udviklingen i hendes kunstneriske udtryk over tid og sætte det i kontrast til den samtidige maler Carravagios version af Judith og Holofernes. Caravaggios værk tjener som repræsentant for den maskuline fortolkning af kvindeligt vold og raseri, hvilket skaber et interessant spændingsfelt til Gentileschis kvindelige blik. Den tydeliggør således konkrete forskelle mellem malerierne, til trods for det delte kildeområde.

Jeg kontekstualiserer værkerne i deres historiske og sociale samtid, særligt i forhold til Gentileschis personlige oplevelser, herunder hendes voldtægtssag, som jeg mener påvirkede hendes kunstneriske stil. Konkret ønsker jeg

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<sup>7</sup> Camara 2013

<sup>8</sup> Ali & Naylor. 2013

<sup>9</sup> Min definition er en kombination af: Pettersen 2023, og Roy 2022

<sup>10</sup> For formanalyse se: Marke 2020, For ikonografisk analyse se: Panofsky 1955

at bruge Gentileschis egne ord, ved form af det vidnesbyrd hun gav ved sin retssag. Ved at trække på både historiske og biografiske kilder placeres værkerne i en bredere samfundsmæssig diskussion, dette vil blandt andet inkludere blandt andet brevveksling.

Det hele lægges ind i en teoretisk ramme af kønsteori. Kønsteorien tillader mig at se på køn som en central faktor, for hvordan vold og vrede bliver fremstillet i kunsten. Det er dog her vigtigt at være opmærksom på bias. Jeg skal i særdeleshed holde mig for øje at konklusioner om female rage og patriarkalsk kritik i højere grad afspejler min egen samtids diskussioner om køn og magt og i mindre grad Gentileschis egne overvejelser. Dog mener jeg stadig det er vigtigt at udforske synet på kvinder i Gentileschis tid, blandt andet gennem Decameron.<sup>11</sup> Denne viser, hvordan patriarkalske strukturer prægede Gentileschis samtids forståelse af kvinders rolle og deres handlemuligheder. Denne kulturelle kontekst kan være med til at belyse, hvordan Gentileschis værker både reflekterer og udfordrer tidens normer. Kønsteorien skal således ikke kun bruges som en nutidigfortolkningsramme, men også som et middel til at forstå Gentileschis baggrund for værkerne og kritikken i disse.

## Projektets udførelse

Jeg ønsker at gennemføre en komparativ analyse af Gentileschis malerier, *Judith Beheading Holofernes* og *Judith slaying Holofernes*, og kigge nærmere på, hvordan hendes arbejde med motivet adskiller sig fra den mandlige samtidskunstner, Caravaggio. Caravaggio er yderligere interessant da han var en af de største kunstnere i perioden og således kan stilles som repræsentant for denne tids malere. Arbejdet ligger i analysen af malerierne samt at placerer dem i en kontekst af deres tid og kultur.

Jeg antager, at projektet vil forløbe over en periode på et halvt år. Den første fase vil være den indledende analyse, hvortil jeg har lavet en pilotanalyse. Fase to vil være at rundrejse til henholdsvis Firenze, Rom og Napoli hvor de tre malerier befinder sig, for at kunne se værkerne in situ og i deres helhed samtidig med mulighed for at studere detaljen. Her vil jeg også søge hjælp i en italiensk studentermedhjælper som kan hjælpe med italienske kilder.<sup>12</sup> Sidste fase vil foregå tilbage i Danmark som efter behandling og en konklusion.

## Budget

Jeg skal bruge midler til udførelsen af projektet. Disse vil blandt andet gå til bøger om emnet, udgifter ved rejsen til de tre byer, ansættelse af en studentermedhjælper samt gaver til de mennesker der hjælper mig undervejs. Fordelingen af midler kan ses i skemaet her

Budget for projekt	
Udgift	Beløb
Rundrejse til Firenze, Rom og Napoli <sup>13</sup>	15000, -
Løn til studentermedarbejder under ophold	2500, -
Køb af bøger <sup>14</sup>	2000, -
I alt	19500, -

<sup>11</sup> Payne 2007

<sup>12</sup> Dette er grundet, at jeg ikke snakker italiensk og meget eksisterende forskning er skrevet på italiensk.

<sup>13</sup> Jeg vil flyve til Firenze og herfra tage et tog til Rom og så videre tog til Napoli, hvor jeg vil flyve hjem fra

<sup>14</sup> Blandt andet til historiske kilder som skal danne konteksten

## Pilotanalyse

I maleriet fra 1613 er farverne ikke helt så klare som på det senere maleri fra 1620. Ligeledes er detaljerne i stofferne også langt flere, tæppet over Holofernes er tydelig velour og det gyldne damask i Judiths kjole er mønstret. Farverne i det senere maleri er langt varmere end det tidlige.

Kompositionen har også ændret sig mellem de to malerier, i det tidlige fylder karaktererne mere i billedets ramme, og en stor del af Holofernes krop er klippet ud. I det senere ses alle karaktererne næsten i fuld figur. Det ses tydeligt, at Judith og tjenerinden, Abra, har armene strakt og skal lægge styrke i at holde generalen ned mens de hugger hovedet af ham. Ligeledes drages øjet direkte mod Judiths knyttede hånd om sværdet der skær gennem halsen. Således er fokus på volden. Det ses på røntgenbillede analyser af de to malerier, at det tidlige havde mange ændringer i kompositionen, hvor Gentileschi brugte lang tid på at optimere opstillingen. I modsætning var der næsten ingen ændringer i kompositioner i det senere maleri.<sup>15</sup>

Som det var klassisk for baroktiden og i Caravaggisti stilen bruger Gentileschi med stor succes Chiaroscuro<sup>16</sup> Særligt i det senere ses Gentileschis beherskelse af denne teknik, som skaber drama og giver ideen om et uendeligt eller meget lille rum om karaktererne. Yderligere giver brugen af chiaroscuro en tydelig kontrast der retter fokus på det der ligger i lyset, - Judiths sværdarm.

I maleriet fra 1620 ses Judiths beslutsomheden for at ende hendes folks lidelser tydeligt i ansigtet, i det tidligere værk er denne beslutsomhed ikke afbilledet med samme klarhed. Ligeledes markant er ændringen i blodet, på det tidlige maleri flyder blodet, hvor det på det senere sprøjter.

Maleriet fra 1620's brutalitet fremkaldte store følelser ved afsløringen. Man nægtede at udstille værket og Artemisia Gentileschi blev kun med stort besvær betalt for sin ydelse.<sup>17</sup>

Tjenerinden der hjælper Judith i hendes voldshandling, er en opfindelse af Gentileschi, i den oprindelige bibelhistorie ” Judith spoke to her maid to stand without before the chamber, and to watch”.<sup>18</sup> Nogle kilder beskriver, hvordan Gentileschi beskriver at føle sig forrådt af hendes kammerpiger der havde overladt hende alene til at blive voldtaget, således kan Abra ses som den støtte Gentileschi manglede.<sup>19</sup> På det sene billede er der desuden et guldarmbånd på hendes arm der holder Holofernes arm nede. En af figurerne portrætteret på armbåndets perler ser ud til at være den græske gudinde for jagt og jomfruelighed, Artemis, et slet skjult praj om Gentileschis fornavn, Artemisia.<sup>20</sup>

I kontrast til Gentileschis beslutsomme Judith står Carravagios distancerede Judith der ser på sine egne handlinger med væmmelse. Judith fremstår mere dydig og skrøbelig. Fokus i maleriet ligger ikke på voldshandlingen, men i langt højere grad på Holofernes dødsskrig og blodet der fosser ud. Abra lægger sig i dette maleri sig tættere på den originale bibelberetning, hun er ikke involveret i handlingen og står blot i udkanten og betragter scenen udfolder sig. Hvor Abra og Judith er jævnaldrende på Gentileschis fremstilling er

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<sup>15</sup> Garred 1989

<sup>16</sup> Caravaggisti: Stilen som Carravagios tilhængere tilsluttede sig. Chiaroscuro: Stor kontrast mellem lys og mørke

<sup>17</sup> Le Gallerie Degli Uffizi (u.å)

<sup>18</sup> The Holy Bible: Douay-Rheims 1609 Judith 13, p.1317

<sup>19</sup> Camara 2015

<sup>20</sup> The George Washington University (u.å)

Abra en gammel kone på Carravagios. Handlingen kræver ingen særlig styrke fra Judith, hendes arme er ikke strakte og kun hovedet holdes nede, dette står i stærk kontrast til dramaet og styrken der ligger i Gentileschis malerier.

## Konklusion

Fra min indledende analyse kan jeg foreløbigt konkludere, at Artemisia Gentileschi gennem sine to versioner af Judith og Holofernes viser en udvikling i både sit kunstneriske udtryk og sin kunstneriske teknik, samt at hendes skildring af Judith adskiller sig væsentligt fra hendes mandlige kolleger. Særligt gennem hendes fortolkning af Judiths handling som beslutsom og direkte ses kontrasten til Carravagios, mere distancerede og feminine version.

Jeg forventer i min videre forskning at kunne uddybe den påbegyndte analyse samt at undersøge, hvordan Gentileschis personlige liv, herunder retssagen efter hendes voldtægt, har påvirket de kunstneriske valg. Dette vil give en dybere indsigt i, hvordan værkerne reflekterer hendes egen virkelighed, men kan også bidrage til en bredere forståelse af den kulturelle og sociale kontekst hun levede i. Jeg mener at Gentileschis værker kan bidrage til en forståelse af, hvordan kunst gennem historien har fungeret som middel til at udfordre etablerede magtstrukturer og skabe rum for alternative narrativer. Altså kan mine fund skabe en dialog mellem fortidens patriarkalske strukturer og nutidens kønspolitiske diskussioner.

Mit projekt vil således kunne kaste lys over, hvordan Artemisia Gentileschi som kvindelig kunstner navigerede i en mandsdomineret verden, og hvordan hendes værker kan ses som et tidligt eksempel på en modstand mod patriarkatets normer. Ligeledes kan det fremtidige arbejde med værkerne bidrage til en større forståelse for kvindelige kunstners rolle i kunsthistorien og deres mulighed for at udtrykke personlige og sociale problematikker.

## Tak

Jeg vil gerne takke min forskerkontakt Lise Henriette Hindsberg, Postdoc på institut for Kunst- og Kulturvidenskab på Københavns Universitet for rådgivning og sparring gennem projektets udformning. Hendes ekspertise og interesse har været en enorm motivation gennem hele projektet. En yderligere tak skal lyde til min talentkoordinator Sima Masri som har støttet mig under forløbet. Afsluttende vil jeg gerne takke Anne Jensen for hendes utrolig givende undervisning i Billedkunst som har givet mig inspirationen til at arbejde fokuseret med kunsthistorie.

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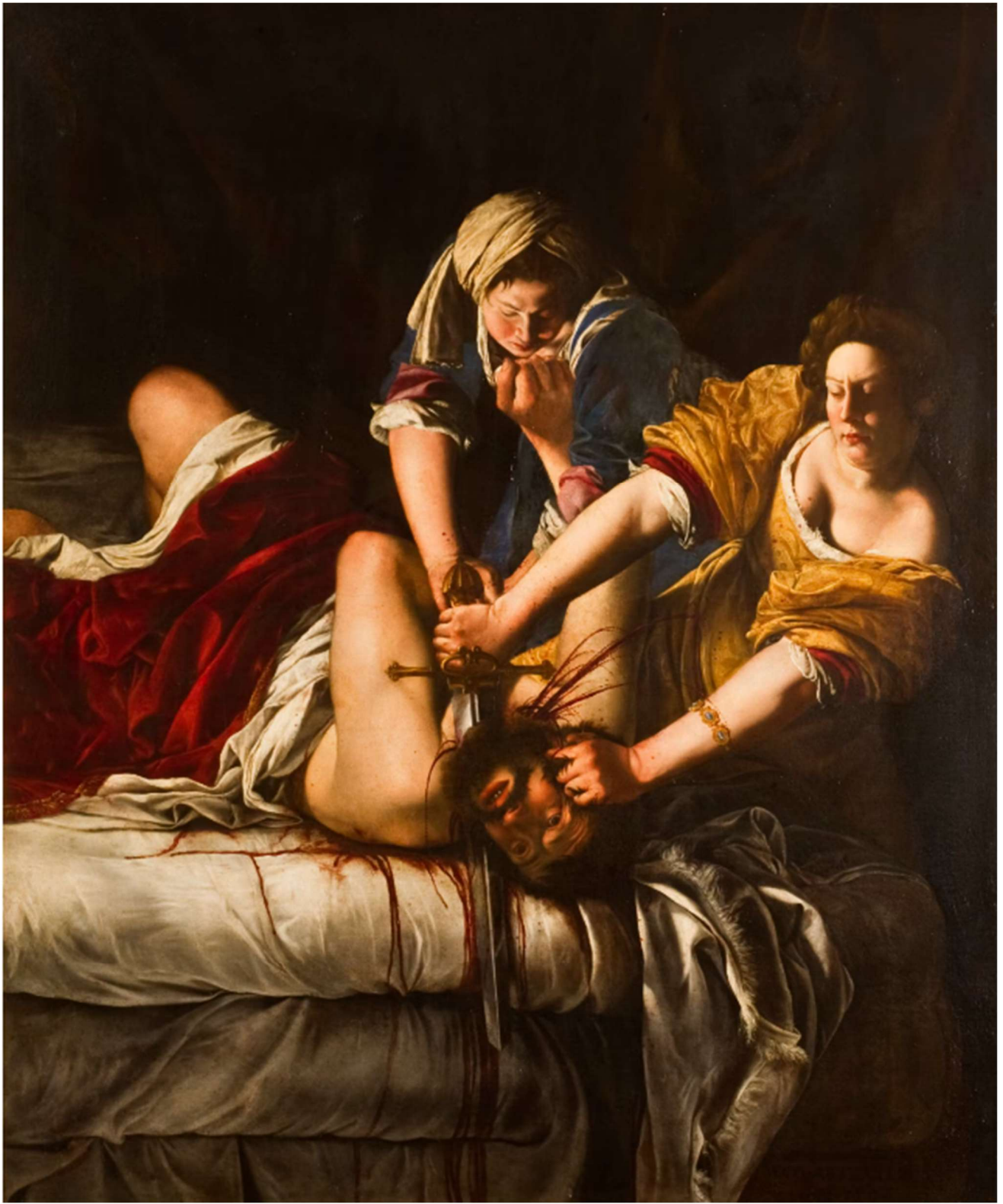
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16.10.2024

bilag

bilag 1- malerier af Artemisia Gentileschi:





## Bilag 2 – maleri af Carravaggio



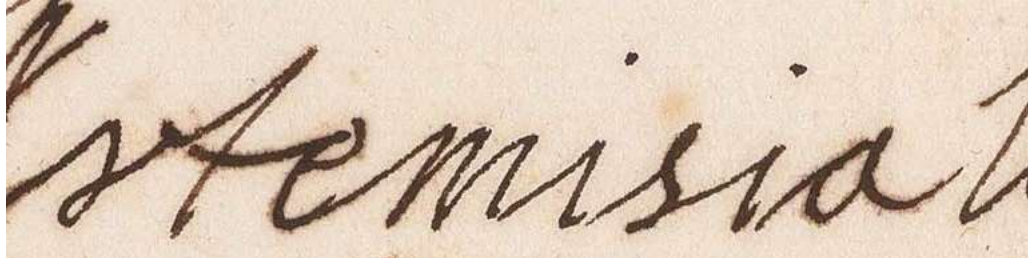
## Bilag 3 – Gentileschis udtalelser

17.10.2024, 09.31

Artemisia in her own words | Artemisia | National Gallery, London

NG200

Past exhibitions | Artemisia | Artemisia in her own words



## Artemisia in her own words

Self-assured and determined, passionate and sometimes vulnerable, Artemisia's voice is brought to life through her words and personal letters

### Testimony at the trial

The first time we hear Artemisia's voice is at the trial that saw the painter Agostino Tassi (about 1580–1644) convicted of her rape. There, the testimony of the eighteen-year-old Artemisia has come down to us in the form of a transcript of the trial's proceedings (conserved at the Archivio di Stato, Rome). In addition to describing the sexual assault, Artemisia repeatedly asserts that she is telling the truth and to test the veracity of her statement she is tortured using the 'sibille' (cords wrapped around the fingers and pulled tight). As the cords tighten, she is recorded as saying:

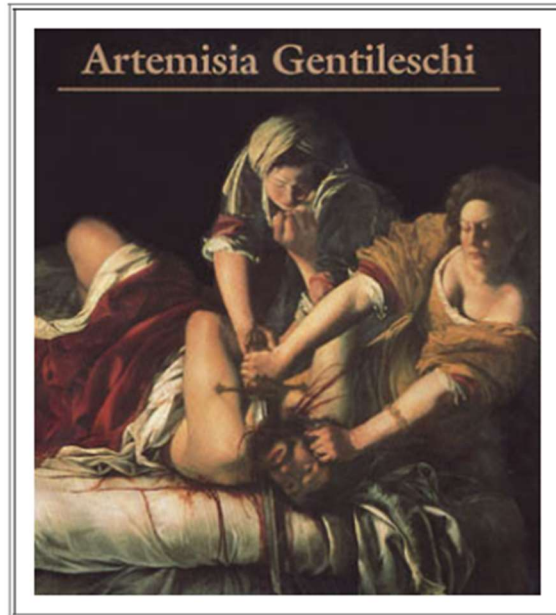
"I have told the truth and I always will, because it is true and I am here to confirm it wherever necessary."

Then, turning to Tassi, who had falsely promised her marriage, Artemisia quips:

"This is the ring that you give me and these are your promises".

From these words that have come down to us, we can already appreciate Artemisia's spirit, resilience and strength of character; traits that also emerge from the letters she wrote later in life.

## *Artemisia: The Rape and the Trial*



### **The Trial and Its Background**

Little is known about the circumstances under which Agostino Tassi was charged for raping Artemisia Gentileschi, but scholars believe that her father heard rumors and confronted them both. Both Cosimo Quorli (who had tried but failed to rape Artemisia, who had stolen one of her paintings, and who had helped Agostino plan visits to her house when her father was absent) were charged. The trial lasted for seven months in 1612, and received considerable publicity.

The transcripts of the trial, included in Mary Garrard's *Artemisia Gentileschi*, reveal that:

- a) Tuzia, supposedly an older friend of Artemisia who lived in the same house as the Gentileschi's, betrayed Artemisia by letting Agostino in to Artemisia's house through her apartment.

- b) Agostino was a convicted rapist, who had previously served time in jail, and had been known to have raped both his sister-in-law and his previous wife. His wife was missing, presumed dead, and everyone believed that he had hired bandits to kill her. Artemisia did not know that he was married until the middle of the trial.

- c) Agostino was obsessed with Artemisia, had prevented her from marrying Modenese, whom her father had arranged for her to marry, had spied on her and hired men to watch her around the clock, and had been known to have many jealous rages in regard to her proximity to other men. He also had bragged to many that he had deflowered her.

d) Since the first sexual encounter, Agostino had been continually promising Artemisia that he would marry her, and continually postponing the marriage, but using his promise as a means of convincing her to continue sexual relations with him.

During the trial, Artemisia was tortured with the sibille, thumbscrews, involving cords of rope tied around her hands and pulled tightly, in order to "prove" that she was telling the truth. During the torture, which of course seriously injured her hands, she was repeatedly asked whether or not Tassi had raped her, and she continually responded, "it is true, it is true."

### **Artemisia's Testimony**

Artemisia testified that on the pretext of looking at a painting near the bedroom, Agostino pushed her into the bedroom, threw her on the bed, covered her mouth so that she could not shout, and forcibly entered her. Resisting, she scratched his face and even threw a knife at him, slightly wounding him in the chest, but was not able to stop him.

Afterwards, surprised that she was a virgin, he promised to marry her. "What I was doing with him, I did only so that, as he had dishonored me, he would marry me," she said in defense of the continuing sexual relationship which Agostino demanded.

Artemisia also testified that she had never been alone with any men outside her family except for Tassi, and said, "I have never had any sexual relations with any other person besides the said Agostino." After she learned he was married, she spoke directly to him, "I was hoping to have you as a husband, but now I don't because I know that you have a wife." Whether she was hoping to marry him only to reclaim her sullied honor or because she eventually fell in love with him is unclear.

### **Agostino's Testimony**

Agostino Tassi's testimony was so blatantly false and contradictory that the judge had to stop on several occasions to ask him to stop lying. First, Agostino stated, "Never have I had carnal relations nor tried to have it with the said Artemisia... I've never been alone in Artemisia's house with her." He then claimed that he visited and kept watch over her house in order to safeguard her honor.

Over a seven months time period, Agostino claimed that Artemisia (who could not write) wrote erotic letters to many men, slept repeatedly with five different men (Pasquino, Modenese, Stiatressi et al.), and had had incest with her father who also sold her once for a loaf of bread. He referred to her, as well as her dead mother, aunts and sisters as whores who catered to a continual stream of men in the Gentileschi house. Agostino also said that he did not stop Modenese from marrying her, but that he had refused to marry her because she was a whore and her house was a bordello.

### **Witnesses**

The primary witness in defense of Artemisia was Giovanni Stiatresi, a confidante of both Agostino and Cosimo, who claimed that Cosimo was angry at being sexually rejected by Artemisia, and helped Agostino plan his visits in accordance with her father's absence so that he could get back at Artemisia through Agostino. Other witnesses testified in regard to the chaste reputation of Artemisia and the morals of her family.

However Agostino brought in a parade of six witnesses who claimed that Artemisia was a



nude model for male artists and a whore, and that her father sold her to men. The testimonies of some of these witnesses was so outrageous that even the judge intervened several times and accused them of lying. Agostino's primary witness however, was Tuzia, who claimed that Artemisia was openly seductive with Agostino and that that Agostino was obsessed with Artemisia. "He tormented me when he could not come in and talk to her," Tuzia declared.

### **The Verdict**

Unfortunately, the last few pages and the verdict of the court transcripts are missing. We can suspect, however, that Agostino Tassi was convicted, as he was held in prison for eight more months after the trial, but then released prematurely by the judge who apparently pardoned him. Her father, Orazio, also filed suit against six of Agostino's witnesses for bearing false witness.

One month after the trial, to salvage her reputation, Artemisia was married to a relative of the witness, Pietros Antonio de Stiattesi, and moved to Florence; she and her husband separated a few years later.

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## Bilag 4 – Art and Virtue

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### Violence and Virtue: Artemisia Gentileschi's



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**October 17, 2013 – January**  
Galleries 202 and 202A

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One of the most famous and skilled painters of the Baroque era, Artemisia Gentileschi was centuries ahead of her time. Among the first women artists to achieve success in the 17th century, she brought to her work an electric sense of narrative drama and a unique perspective that both celebrated and humanized strong women characters. Rediscovered by feminist art historians in the past few decades, Gentileschi has inspired a spate of books, both scholarly and popular, and a number of films. But it is the sensational painting *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (c. 1620) that epitomizes her career. The Art Institute of Chicago, in collaboration with the Foundation for Italian Art and Culture (FIAC), is thrilled to present this stunning work, an exceptional

loan from the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, for its first display in Chicago.

The daughter of painter Orazio Gentileschi, Artemisia trained in her father's workshop and quickly earned acclaim, completing her first signed painting, a dramatic yet sensitive rendering of Susanna and the Elders, when she was just 17. Her style bears some resemblance to that of her father, who was a follower of Caravaggio, but Artemisia's paintings stand out for their theatricality—the raw emotional intensity of a few figures daringly arranged. The younger Gentileschi's work is also distinctive in its focus on powerful heroines, capturing both their vulnerability and strength, a feature many attribute to events in Gentileschi's own life. At the age of 18, she was raped by one of her father's colleagues, Agostino Tassi. He was convicted in a trial a year later after Artemisia was tortured to “confirm” her testimony, but Tassi was never punished. Within months of the conclusion of the trial, Artemisia was quickly married and moved to Florence with her new husband.

The brutal depiction in the monumental *Judith Slaying Holofernes* is often interpreted as a painted revenge for the rape. Unlike other artists who focused on the ideals of beauty and courage evoked by the Jewish heroine Judith, Gentileschi chose to paint the biblical story's gruesome climax, producing a picture that is nothing short of terrifying. As the heroine decapitates Holofernes, the general of King Nebuchadnezzar, to save the Jewish people, her brow is furrowed in concentration, her forearms are tensed, and blood spurts wildly from her victim's neck. The startling naturalism of the scene owes much to the

influence of Caravaggio; Artemisia followed his technique of painting directly from life and employing sharp contrasts of light and dark.

The power of the scene, however, is all her own, and the painting endures as a masterpiece of Baroque art.

*Violence and Virtue* and its accompanying catalogue explore Gentileschi's painting in the context of her remarkable career and the complex responses of Renaissance and Baroque artists to the story of Judith. The exhibition draws on the rich holdings of the Art Institute as well as a private collection in Chicago, putting Artemisia Gentileschi's extraordinary work together with paintings and works on paper by such artists as Lucas Cranach, Jan Sanders van Hemessen, Jacopo de' Barbari, and Felice Ficherelli, thereby enhancing a rare presentation of this truly pioneering and compelling artist.

### **Organizer**

*Virtue and Violence: Artemisia Gentileschi's "Judith Slaying Holofernes"* is organized by the Art Institute of Chicago in collaboration with the Foundation for Italian Art and Culture.

### **Sponsors**

The exhibition is underwritten by the Old Masters Society of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Contributions were generously provided by John and Judy Bross; Scott, Lynda, Jonathan, and Lindsey Canel; and April and Jim Schink.

Artemisia Gentileschi. *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, c. 1620. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, inv. 1567.

# Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*

by [Dr. Esperança Camara](#)

Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, 1620–21, oil on canvas, 162.5 x 199 cm (Uffizi Gallery, Florence). Speakers: Dr. Steven Zucker and Dr. Beth Harris

**Lord God, to whom all strength belongs, prosper what my hands are now to do for the greater glory of Jerusalem; for now is the time to recover your heritage and to further my plans to crush the enemies arrayed against us.** Judith’s prayer before beheading Holofernes (Judith 13:4-5)

Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, 1620–21, oil on canvas, 162.5 x 199 cm (Uffizi Gallery, Florence; photo: [Steven Zucker](#), CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

### The story of Judith

Rivulets of blood run down the white sheets, as Judith, a pious young widow from the Jewish city of Bethulia, beheads Holofernes, general of the Assyrian army that had besieged her city. Moved by the plight of her people and filled with trust in God, Judith took matters into her own hands. She coiffed her hair, donned her finest garments and entered the enemy camp under the pretense of bringing Holofernes information that would ensure his victory. Struck by her beauty, he invited her to dine, planning later to seduce her. As the biblical text recounts, “Holofernes was so enchanted with her that he drank far more wine than he had drunk on any other day in his life” (Judith 12:20). Judith saw her opportunity; with a prayer on her lips and a sword in her hand, she saved her people from destruction.

The story of Judith and Holofernes is recounted in the Book of Judith, a 2nd century text deemed apocryphal by the Jewish and Protestant traditions, but included in Catholic editions of the Bible. Like the story of David and Goliath, it was a popular subject of art in the [Renaissance](#) and [Baroque](#) periods.

### Artemisia and Caravaggio

This particular painting, executed by Artemisia Gentileschi in Florence and now in the Uffizi, is one of the bloodiest and most vivid depictions of the scene, surpassing the version by [Caravaggio](#), arch-realist of Baroque Rome, in its immediacy and shocking realism. Artemisia was certainly familiar with Caravaggio’s painting of the subject; her father Orazio, who was responsible for her artistic training, was Caravaggio’s friend and artistic follower. Caravaggio’s painting inspired, and perhaps even challenged, the young Artemisia.

A comparison between the two reveals not only her debt to the older artist, but also a series of pointed modifications that heighten the intensity of the physical struggle, the quantity of blood spilled, and the physical and psychological strength of Judith and her maidservant, Abra. In Artemisia's painting, the bloody sheets are in the immediate foreground, close to the viewer's space. Holofernes's muscular body projects dynamically into the depicted space as bold areas of light and dark draw attention to his powerful limbs.

And, most importantly, whereas Caravaggio pairs his delicate Judith with a haggard attendant who merely looks on, her eyes wide with disbelief, Artemisia depicts two strong, young women working in unison, their sleeves rolled up, their gazes focused, their grips firm. Caravaggio's Judith gracefully recoils from her gruesome task; Artemisia's Judith does not flinch. Instead, she braces herself on the bed, as she presses Holofernes's head down with one hand and pulls a large sword through his neck with the other. The creases at her wrists clearly show the physical strength required. Holofernes struggles in vain, the thrust of his arms countered by the more forceful movement of Abra, Judith's accomplice in this grisly act.

### **A composition perfected**

The Uffizi *Judith Slaying Holofernes* is Artemisia's second telling of this narrative. The first, executed in Rome and now in the Capodimonte Museum in Naples, introduced the dynamic composition centered on the thrust and counter thrust of extended limbs. Artemisia refined the composition in the second (Uffizi) version. Small but significant adjustments reveal her growth in technical skill, her awareness of the local Florentine taste for sumptuous fabrics, and her thoughtful consideration of the expressive potential of each detail. Awkward passages of anatomy and proportion (such as Holofernes' head) have been corrected, the colors and textures of the fabrics are now richer (notice the red velvet draped over Holofernes and the golden damask of Artemisia's Judith's dress), and Judith's hair is more elaborately curled, in keeping with the biblical text's emphasis on her self-adornment.

Most striking, however, is the portrayal of the blood. The Capodimonte version omits the blood that violently spurts from the neck of Holofernes. Like Caravaggio's, the Uffizi painting places particular emphasis on this detail, and does so with even greater realism.

Framed by Judith's arms, jets of blood now arc and descend in droplets that bespeckle her arms and dress. The pattern described by the spurting blood suggests Artemisia may have been familiar with her friend [Galileo Galilei](#)'s research on parabolic trajectories. Artemisia also modified the sword in the Uffizi version. The sword, here longer and held more vertically, prominently marks the painting's central axis which extends from Abra's arm to the blood that runs down the edge of the bed. This powerful visual axis reinforces the strength of the women and the violence of the deed. It is no accident that Judith's sword-clenching fist is at the very center of the composition; imbued with divine strength, this widow's hand is now the hand of God protecting the Israelites from their enemies.

### **Judith—Artemisia's alter ego?**

Artemisia's unique portrayal of Judith and Abra has prompted scholars to argue that Artemisia identified with the protagonist of the story in a way her male counterparts did not. This association stems not only from their shared gender, but also from Artemisia's own traumatic experience. Artemisia was raped at the age of 17 by the artist Agostino Tassi, a close friend of her father. When Tassi failed to marry her, as the

social dictates of the time demanded, her father sought recourse in court. During the trial, Artemisia describes her struggle against Tassi and her attempt to attack him with a knife. She also recalls the sense of betrayal she felt when she realized her female chaperone had colluded with Tassi and arranged to leave the two alone.



Bracelet (detail), Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, 1620–21, oil on canvas, 162.5 x 199 cm (Uffizi Gallery, Florence; photo: [Steven Zucker](#), CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The first version of *Judith Slaying Holofernes* dates to this difficult period in the artist's life. Especially significant is Artemisia's portrayal of Abra as youthful, strong and fully engaged in the assisting Judith, in striking contrast to the chaperone who purposefully abandoned Artemisia in her hour of need. In the Uffizi painting Artemisia adds a small detail that supports her identification with Judith. One of the cameos on Judith's bracelet appears to depict Artemis, the ancient goddess of both chastity and the hunt.

### **Judith—a symbol of the church militant**

While the story of Judith may have held personal significance for Artemisia, it is important to note its broader cultural valence. The story of Judith was especially popular in the Baroque period, not only in the visual arts but also in literature, theater, and music. An example of the victory of virtue over vice, of God's protection of his chosen people from their enemies, Judith was also seen as an Old Testament antetype of the Virgin Mary and, by extension, as a symbol of the Church. This association partly explains the increase in portrayals of Judith in late 16th through the 17th centuries, when the Catholic Church was engaged in conflicts with both the Protestants and the [Ottoman Turks](#), whose eastern origins facilitated their identification with Holofernes. Artemisia and her contemporaries capitalized on this popularity, frequently portraying not only the moment of the beheading itself, but also [the moment right after it](#), when Judith and her maidservant escape from the enemy camp. The dramatic potential of the story made it an ideal subject for the powerful theatricality of Baroque art.

### **Banished**



Donatello, *Judith and Holofernes*, 1460, bronze, 236 cm high (Palazzo Vecchio, Florence; photo: [Dimitris Kamaras](#), CC BY 2.0)

The Uffizi *Judith* was likely either commissioned by or gifted to the Medici, Florence's ruling family, the same family that commissioned Donatello's famous bronze sculpture of *Judith and Holofernes* in the late 15th century.

Artemisia Gentileschi was clearly proud of the Uffizi *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, signing it in the lower right corner. In it she demonstrated her mastery of the language of Baroque realism, exploiting its emphasis on proximity to the picture plane, strong chiaroscuro, and realistic details to create an especially potent depiction of the story's dramatic climax.

The bold immediacy of this finely-tuned composition succeeded all too well, for in the late 18th century, disgusted by the horror of the scene, the Medici duchess banished this painting to a dark corner of the Uffizi, where it remained until the late twentieth century. To this day, it strikes its viewers with both revulsion and awe at the skill of the artist who so convincingly transformed paint into blood.

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