Book Reviews

ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI: TEN YEARS OF FACT AND FICTION

“I find myself with a female daughter and three other sons, and this daughter, as it pleased God, having been trained in the profession of painting, in three years has become so skilled that I dare say she has no equal today, for she has made works that demonstrate a level of understanding that perhaps the leading masters of the profession have not attained.” With these words, in mid-1612 Orazio Gentileschi (1563–1639) assured Cristina di Lorena, the Dowager Grand Duchess in Florence, of the talent of eighteen-year-old Artemisia (1593–ca. 1653). “In the proper time and place,” he added from Rome, he would show Her Serene Highness that what he said was so.1

Nearly four centuries later, art historians, novelists, playwrights, and filmmakers remain focused on issues raised by Orazio’s brief pledge: the father-daughter relationship; Artemisia’s artistic education; whether she was a prodigy and thus capable of painting on her own a Susanna and the Elders inscribed with her name and dated 1610; her standing compared to the leading (male) masters; Orazio’s managing of her career; and, above all, what Orazio emphasized through redundancy, that, although an artist, Artemisia was “una figliuola femina,” a woman. What he did not mention, however, has proven to be even more captivating in the modern mind: the rape of Artemisia a year earlier by Orazio’s artist-associate, Agostino Tassi; the resultant trial that was still under way when Orazio was writing to Florence; and Artemisia’s penchant for painting powerful, often-nude female protagonists.

Among the various myths surrounding Artemisia Gentileschi is that she was badly neglected by writers of her time (as this essay attests, there has been a compensatory outpouring during the past decade thanks to the women’s movement, so much so that attention can be given only to representative titles).2 It is true that she was not discussed by Mancini, Scannelli, Bellori, or Passeri, and that she deserved mention because she worked for some prominent clients in Rome, Florence, Naples, and London. But it is important to bear in mind that, as a woman, she predictably painted no frescoes and scarcely any altarpieces (not one in Rome or Florence)—that is, those works that were the most obvious signs of a history painter’s significance and success. Other biographers—Baglione, Sandrart, Baldinucci, and De Dominici—nevertheless took notice of her career. Thereafter little of substance was written until Roberto Longhi devoted a youthful essay (1916) to “Gentileschi padre e figlia.”3

It is ironic, if seldom noted, that Longhi, who is credited with resurrecting Artemisia from scholarly oblivion, was mistaken in fully two-thirds of his attributions to her (generous allowance must be made for the primitive state of research on Italian Baroque painting then), and especially that his discussion of Artemisia’s work, as Laura Benedetti recently emphasized, was full of sexist criticism, notably with regard to her dramatic versions of Judith Decapitating Holofernes (Fig. 1): “This is a terrible woman! How could a woman paint all this? We beg for mercy. . . . Unbelievable, I tell you!” and more such ranting.4

In time, Longhi’s primitive catalogue of Artemisia’s work was slowly corrected and enlarged, often by Longhi himself, although a firm documentary basis for understanding her career awaited Ward Bissell’s fundamental “New Documented Chronology,” published in this journal a generation ago.5 A few years later, six of her best pictures were selected for the exhibition Women Artists: 1550–1950 (1976), which for the first time offered the modern public an opportunity to see what a good painter Artemisia could be.6

Mary Garrard’s Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art appeared a decade ago and changed the discourse entirely. Except for Ann Sutherland Harris’s perceptive entries in Women Artists: 1550–1950 and a section of Germaine Greer’s The Obstacle Race (1979), the art historical literature on Artemisia had been fundamentally conventional, meaning that it dealt fore-
most with attributional, chronological, and iconographic problems from a traditional perspective, and was biased by androcentric, often misogynist, rather than feminist values. Garrard overwhelmed that tradition by adopting what she called “a line of investigation...” whose premise [is] that women’s art is inescapably, if unconsciously, different from men’s, because the sexes have been socialized to different experiences of the world."

Working from the premise that Artemisia’s imagery reflects her gender and more specifically her suffering of sexual harassment and rape, Garrard replaced traditional connoisseurship with what might be called “gendered expression” as an attributional basis. Thus, “while the formal differences between Artemisia and her father are subtle, the expressive differences are vast. Hers is an art of energy and drama, not mood and poetic silence. And although Artemisia’s female characters may superficially resemble those of Orazio, they respond and act in an entirely different way.” From this perspective, one can interpret human behavior, one theoretically can distinguish between narratives designed by men and by women.

Another characteristic of Garrard’s method, which is noted only as background for discussion of the literature under consideration, should be kept in mind—namely the assumption that Artemisia borrowed many motifs from earlier art with complex, high-minded intentions, and that by recognizing such purposeful imitation of, and identification with, esteemed models, her own worthy place in the canon and genital status are confirmed.

When I refer to “the literature under consideration” I mean more than numerous scholarly articles, a Florentine exhibition catalogue of 1991 devoted to Artemisia’s work, and Bissell’s recent monograph (which will be discussed in detail in the third section of this essay). I am interested, too, in exploring the relationship between Artemisia’s rape and modern approaches to Artemisia, is that, “given the artist’s unusual biography, and given the validation by modern psychology of the Aristotelian principle of catharsis, it is surely justifiable to interpret the painting of Judith Decapitating Holofernes, at least on one level, as an expression of the artist’s own experience and perhaps repressed, rage.”

As a writer who has adopted a psychoanalytic approach for studying Guido Reni’s imagery, I have a stake in defending the validity of this working premise, though only stating my bias begs the question of which psychoanalytical method is most suitable for Artemisia, and how persuasive analyses have been. I vacillate between opposing this subject for two reasons. Not only cannot its methodological complexities be considered in the scope of this essay, but by opening the question of the relationship between Artemisia’s rape and imagery at all, which has dominated and sensationalized the literature and Artemisia’s fame in a way that CNN should envy, I am adding further weight to an already bloated discourse, inescapably becoming party to what Mieke Bal calls a “problematic of the politics of citation,” in which endless discussion, no matter how well intended, ends up with a negative effect.

Despite Garrard’s apt warning against “sensationalist fiction with the melodrama of Artemisia’s rape” and oversimplification of Judith Decapitating Holofernes “purely as an expression of revenge against a rapist,” a lot of psycho-babble has distorted both Artemisia’s art and the worth of psychoanalytical investigation. I will leave aside amateurish writings on the subject in favor of summarizing three linked articles that focus on Judith Decapitating Holofernes, all published during the 1980s in American Imago, the official journal of the Association for Applied Psychoanalysis. Then their approach can be contrasted with more recent studies.

The central idea, advanced by Marcia Pointon in the first of these articles, is that “Artemisia reorganized Caravaggio’s composition in such a way as to render the murder of Holofernes through the imagery of childbirth.” Her argument hinges on what she calls a V-shape formed by Holofernes’s arms, which is “characteristic of the V formed by the open thighs of a woman at the point of giving birth.” Holofernes’s “gaping mouth” becomes a vagina surrounded by a “mass of beard-like pubic hair.” Judith attends to the “delivery,” while her maid Abra “appropriately exerts pressure on the abdomen. Their positions... are precisely those of midwife and assistant.” Viewers thus become witness to this shocking conjunction of birth and death.

With good reason Bissell characterized this interpretation as a misreading of the visual evidence, essentially because there is no real V-shape to begin with.

Another aspect of the debate—a crossing of arms over Holofernes’s inverted head—probably was derived from a lost painting by Rubens anyway (where Holofernes’s arms are more spread open), and thus was not invented by a woman. Still less convincing is Pointon’s strained notion that “it is not improbable that a painter whose sex tended to protect her from the immediate experience of murder and brutality on the battlefield, might view childbirth as an equivalent source of empirical knowledge, especially if she was a follower of Caravaggio,” and that, by reversing sex roles, Artemisia “punishes” Holofernes though the pain of childbirth: it is a “sadistic inversion of the natural order.”

Building on this improbable analysis, Joseph Slap saw unlikely symbols in Artemisia’s late version of Judith and Her Maidervant (Capodimonte Museum, Naples): “the objects on the table may represent the valued products of this event—castor oil, for example—if castration, then these objects represent the genitals of the murdered general. And, it may be argued, the round helmet by virtue of its shape is symbolic of a scrotum and the plume is symbolic of pubic hair; the cuisse would then represent a phallus.”

With regard to the first Judith Decapitating Holofernes, Graeme Taylor added in the third article that “on close inspection the anterior folds of Holofernes’s neck resemble a woman’s labia... the scene suggests an act of castration.” For him, the painting is not only suggestive of childbirth, but “Artemisia has exploited the unconscious mechanism of displacement so that the powerful arms of Holofernes resemble thighs and the scene suggests an act of castration.” Thus, by these eloquent echoes of Panofsky and Freud, it is a short step from Pointon’s conclusion that “Artemisia creates the image of Judith’s vengeance through the sexuality that she has used to achieve her end”—it is vengeance because “the act of birth is woman’s curse”—to Judith-Artemisia as the archetypal castrating virago.

A more recent essay that focuses on the
relationship between Artemisia’s art and rape and raises issues of audience response should be mentioned as well. George Hersey proposed that what “fascinated Artemisia and the patrons who commissioned these pictures were the possible inversions, the possible role-and gender-reversals, that rape could undergo, and the different fatal outcomes it could have.” Accordingly, nearly all of Artemisia’s “worthy women” are involved in rapes, or reverse rapes as Hersey calls them, meaning that “women turn sanguinary violence against males who have sought their favors.” Artemisia’s work as a whole “explores women’s demands for sexual justice” and should elicit guilt from men. “Artemisia’s by no means dishonorable, indeed rather dashing enterprise, then, was to play the beautiful defamed rape-victim by painting unsettling protest pictures about rape, its variations and antitheses.”

Because Freud was the product of 19th-century Vienna, it does not follow, as some skeptics would claim, that either the patterns of human behavior he recognized or psychoanalytic methods are anachronistic when applied to the Seicento. Earlier manifestations of what later were codified and named were no less real for want of study and terminology. The problem with these essays is not their aim to read Artemisia’s imagery psychoanalytically, but that they cling to outdated, reductive, androcentric premises, instead of profiting from a wealth of post-Freudian and feminist theory. Moreover, they fail to contextualize Artemisia’s experience and unironically assume that the rape and trial were the most consequential events of the artist’s long life.

The basis of the trial was the charge of violent rape (stupro violente), whose implications were very different from the way modern law interprets and punishes rape. For instance, the marital status of the victim mattered. If married, the charge was not rape but adultery, and the case was heard in another court. This logically follows from the understanding that stupro violente meant violation of a virgin. The archival work of Elizabeth Cohen on trials of young virgins in Rome from 1602 to 1604 makes clear that the legal and social dimensions of violent rape centered on questions of family and marriageability, in which women resembled (male) property for exchange. Indeed, the rape of nonvirgins seldom was prosecuted in the venue of Artemisia’s trial, the governor’s court, where usually poor girls sought not the rapist’s imprisonment or abstract justice, but either his hand in marriage or payment of a dowry. Cohen’s microhistorical study suggests that evidence of the girl’s resistance, the presence of blood, and the defendant’s promise of marriage were crucial for conviction.

Artemisia’s testimony in support of Orazio’s accusation of stupro violente fits this pattern so perfectly that Cohen raises the possibility that Artemisia’s deposition was prepared in advance. It was Orazio who filed the complaint, inasmuch as it was his family honor that was at stake, as Merlet recognizes in her film when she has Orazio tell Tassi, “You have to marry her . . . you can’t do this to me!” and as Humphrey, too, understands when in her play she has Orazio remind Artemisia, “You forget. I am the wronged party here, daughter. This case involves property.”

Another documented case brought by “Anna” against “Sebastiano” parallels Artemisia’s, at least in that Anna “was to allow [Sebastiano] further sexual favors,” as Artemisia allowed Tassi, undoubtedly with the hope of marriage, which collapsed only when it was revealed at the last minute that Tassi’s wife still was alive. “I hoped to have you as my husband,” Artemisia testified at trial, “but now I don’t, because I know you have a wife—it’s two or three days I’ve known you have a wife.” And she said, “we didn’t bring suit earlier because something else had been arranged so that this disgrace would not become known.” Marriage, it must be emphasized, rather than rape, was the core substance of the litigation. The social framework of Artemisia’s rape and trial was very common, and in significant ways distant from our understanding of sexual assault and violence against women, whose psychological effects are determined by physiological and sociocultural factors alike. Vestiges of its Seicento setting, which marginalized the victim in favor of family interests, actually have lingered in modern Italian politics of rape. In 1985, Italian feminists still had to demonstrate in Rome against the government’s proposed alteration of the definition of rape as a crime against a person, to rape as a crime against “social morality.”

Efforts to discredit psychoanalytical methodologies persist through the sweeping allegation that it is subjective and speculative, a particularly retrograde view when the inevitability of authorial bias is widely recognized and the link between objectivity and knowledge weakened. As Foucault noted, the visual discourse of one’s time determines what one sees. In his monograph on Artemisia, Bissell accepts the position that “there are not enough facts to permit informed conjecture concerning the impact upon Artemisia Gentileschi of the circumstances of her early life,” one cannot make “a fully satisfactory psychoanalytical case for the connection between her known traumatic experiences and her paintings.” What would constitute “enough facts,” or count as a “fact,” is vague, let alone what would be “fully satisfactory.” Reluctantly, Bissell discloses that, although he is “convinced that special caution is imperious, I am certainly not dissuaded from the presumption that experiences in the real world might well inform creative acts.”

Regardless of this naive admission, Bissell implies that his “factual” approach produces more positive, satisfactory results, a contention that will be examined below. With regard to Judith Decapitating Holofernes, it is “highly debatable,” he says, if it bears any reference to Tassi or reveals Artemisia’s bitterness toward men. “That the picture owes its very being and character to these supposed hostilities and/or to this presumed ideological bent is unacceptable.” Allowing that the images of Judith, Susanna, Lucretia, etc., “might not be devoid of sexual appeal,” Bisell ducks the key psychosexual questions and thus conclusion that “eroticism” does not “prevail over meaning.”

II

There are other, more psychoanalytically informed critiques of the Artemisia literature that do not separate sex and meaning. Griselda Pollock in particular, drawing on Lacanian concepts and Julia Kristeva’s work (“like Julia Kristeva, I think that historical materialist and psychoanalytical theories can be, and indeed must be, put in joint harness in the analysis of cultural texts”), has tried to expand the way Artemisia’s imagery is read, by which I mean that she, like Roland Barthes and Mieke Bal, privilege audience response over authorial meaning. “For my money Gentileschi’s painting of Judith and Holofernes has nothing to do with her life experience . . . What is being so calculatedly decapitated here is the art of these artistic ‘fathers’ in the act of aesthetic space-clearing and self-definition as a painter among painters, but ‘in the feminine.’ Gentileschi borrows the heroic mould of the political conspirator Judith to define, within the world of public representation, a figure or identification for woman as self-creating artist. Of course, mine is just a different story and no more ‘true’ than any of the others.”

Odd as it is to suggest that the anxiety of influence has nothing to do with life experience (nor do I see why the painting can’t reflect Artemisia’s documented experience of harassment and her artistic anxiety), there is an important lesson here for all of the authors concerned with Artemisia (or any other subject for that matter): Pollock’s critical self-awareness as author, and her recognition of the contingencies of interpretation. “How do I know what I take to be the curious case of a woman’s consciousness at work are not merely the imposition of culturally stereotyped ideas of social femininity and that have shaped me, that define ‘woman’ in my own time and culture, in my own class and ethnic background?”

Hence she perceives a conflict between hers and other feminists’ readings on the one hand, and on the other “the historical conditions of production” when “elite masculine taste” prevailed, and therefore that Artemisia “could not have functioned as an artist on the public market” were she the rebel intent on challenging masculinist authority she often is made out to be (for example, making what Hersey called protest pictures). Still, could Artemisia’s art, while calculated for male tastes and desires, also offer “traces of an other economy of meaning,” traces, as Pollock calls them, “in the feminine” with “inscriptions of difference”? “Which meaning will prevail ultimately depends upon the desire of the viewer. That desire is gendered, hence it is always political.”

Some constants of Pollock’s position al-
ready were stated in her review of Garrard’s book, namely that a painting does not “express,” but is a “productive site”; that to deal with the fictive category “woman” flattens out history and human diversity; and that an image is a site of social, economic, and ideological power.  

In her recent discussions of Artemisia, those same ideas persist, all the while she practices “social semiotics” by deciphering and processing signs in Artemisia’s work, for instance, with regard to the paintings of Cleopatra, as they point to maternal loss. She rejects the psychoanalytical notion of “a vicarious therapeutic violence” in Judith Decapitating Holofernes because what she calls the expressive model of art history fails in the “understanding of the psychic mechanisms that defend us against the pain of trauma by symptomatising it, and also by not understanding what it takes to ‘work through’ to representation of it.” That is, rather than inciting verbal or visual discourse, trauma inhibits the victim from dealing with the unspeakable.

Pollock further challenges the equation that narratively Artemisia can equal Judith, that biographically the biblical story is even apt, because Judith’s killing of Holofernes “results from a disturbance created by pleasure, sexual arousal, jouissance and not from rape.” (Bal observes that rape cannot really be visualized anyway because the experience, physically and psychologically, is inner: “in this sense, rape is by definition ‘imagined’; it can only exist as experience and memory, as image translated into signs, never adequately objectified.”)  

With regard to sexual pleasure, Pollock acknowledges Kristeva’s ideas, which allow one “to explore not a woman’s intent, what she is expressing because she is a woman, but rather feminine desire and feminine pleasure that can be realised only being inscribed somewhere and somehow, masquerading (or rather passing within the conventions) and transgressive (disturbing them) at the same time.”

Resuming her Blooming argument, Pollock suggests that Artemisia had to cast off her fathers—Caravaggio and Orazio—who were both figures of necessary identification and professional rivalry. It required a specifically feminine, filial engagement with the “anxiety of influence.” . . . These paintings were a working through the place of being a daughter—painter—a woman in a genealogy of father figures, who have much to offer and yet must be vanquished for fear they deny the daughter her creative space. That space would have to be hollowed out from a visual world already occupied and figured by their artistic inventions and freighted images.

Thus, “the painting Judith is not about revenge, it is about killing. But it is a metaphor, a representation in which the literality of killing a man is displaced on to a mytheme wherein the action is necessary, politically justified, not personally motivated. There would be my difference. Not in her tragic biography, ‘expressed’ in the violent scene of revenge on seducers and rapists. ‘Judith’ could become a means to structure a desire for a certain kind of artistic identity, that of an active woman who can make art.”

Pollock also challenges the feminist assumption that pertains more to Artemisia’s representations of Susanna and Cleopatra than to Judith: that men paint beautiful women for their own and the patrons’ satisfaction (I am reminded of Dudley Carleton’s reference in 1618 to a Susanna by Rubens that would be “beautiful enough to enamor old men”), while female artists “are ruggedly prosaic or realistic vis-à-vis the body.” This is an “impoverished way of looking” at art by women—it “does not allow for desire, or fantasy. . . . I have no real idea, however, why, as women, we should favour the prosaic real of wrinkles over idealised perfection which is as much a fantasy we carry in our heads and discipline our own bodies to conform to—and, besides, we want her to be an artist able to compete on equal terms in the art world.”

Roland Barthes and Mieke Bal also adopted semiotic approaches to Judith Decapitating Holofernes. In his short essay “Deux femmes/Two Women,” Barthes makes no reference to Artemisia’s life whatsoever, given that biography is extraneous to his semiotic analysis. Rather, he is interested in the story of Judith as a rare union of a strong narrative (recit fort) and an available structure (structure disponible), that is, the union of fixed events in a solid narrative with ever-changing psychological motivations. But unlike literature, a painting “cannot define the meaning of the episode because it cannot represent the before or after, but only a moment. As an example, Barthes reads Artemisia’s carefully rendered bed as the biblical lectulus, which can be a table, a funerary bed, or a nuptial bed. Through this (and other) multivalent signs, the scene forever oscillates between narration of butchery and love; it “checkmates” any interpretation.

Artemisia’s life is irrelevant to Bal’s “cultural analysis,” too, which foregrounds “reconstructing the original ideology, literary genre, formal background, and intertexts” of Artemisia’s work. “The goal of cultural analysis is not archeological reconstruction [which is the art historian’s task] but analysis of today’s culture as the messy, by no means straightforward product and respondent of the past.” With even more opacity and more self-indulgent writing than Barthes’s or Pollock’s, Bal describes Judith’s story in a way that is compatible with Pollock’s, and likewise applies Lacanian theory. Bal terms Judith’s an ide/story, meaning “a narrative whose structure lends itself to be the receptacle, or projection screen, of different, often opposing ideologies which the narrative appears to emblemize.” So, too, are Susanna’s, Cleopatra’s, and Lucretia’s stories, in which the ideological social ideas persist, not so much so that dichotomies are established as if ‘naturally.’ Their fabulas are open enough for opposing ideologies to be projected in them with ease. Ideo-stories are not closed but extremely open; yet, they appear to be closed, and this appearance of closure encourages the illusion of stability of meaning.

The signs on the surface elicit multiple takes as Bal looks and relooks at Judith Decapitating Holofernes and discovers its Barthesian indeterminacy. It creates “cognitive anxiety.” A “focus of confusion, Judith” as a topos of thought and representation challenges so many of our most dearly held certainties that she/s its fears many of us out of our wits.” Part of the confusion is created by “the resemblance between Holofernes’ arms and thighs. . . . This confusion emphasizes the resemblance between three major jobs in women’s lives according to the tradition to which ‘Judith’ belongs: life-giving, life-taking, and, in between, hard work.” Thus, ignoring Artemisia’s life (and without any reference to the earlier publications that see the image in terms of childbirth), Bal finds in it conflicting signs of birth and death.

A more extended passage characterizes Bal’s writing about Artemisia’s Judith Decapitating Holofernes and her book Double Exposures in general:

Gentileschi’s work radiates a contained and serious, almost organized passion that enhances the sense of efficacy of the work being done. This is the feature that for me underlies the confusion, which can then be spelled out as: a serious and passionate commitment to confusion, to opacity over clarity, to mobility over fixity, to collusion over collision, to intersubjectivity over objectivity. This gives the struggle an epistemological slant. It puts knowledge, as it is traditionally construed, at risk.

Bal hopes that her semiotically based cultural analysis “might be of crucial importance to the understanding of contemporary culture” and that it has “a lot to offer in the important area of reflection on the condition of knowledge.” My concern is that all of the literature summarized in this section, regardless of its stimulating ideas, is too “self-involved” in the sense that the philosopher Martha Nussbaum defines a category of writing which is so remote from most people that its efficacy as political activism, if so intended, is seriously compromised. In other words, not just the problems of Artemisia, but the problems of women, in self-involved writing become the problems of theory.

III

What if, after all this learned discussion, we discover that the invention (the conception of the story) of Judith Decapitating Holofernes is not Artemisia’s? This is exactly what Mario Modestini and John Spike decided after seeing it in the exhibition curated by Roberto Contini and Gianni Papi at the Casa Buonarroti in 1990. Spike, who also suspects that the Susanna and the Elders of 1610 “is best seen as a collaboration directed by Orazio,” published their conclusion that the picture in Naples is by Orazio and only the later variant in the Uffizi (Fig. 1) is by his daughter. To my knowledge, their opinion has found no support (nor do I endorse it), though the Florentine exhibition hardly provided the right fo-
A more egregious failing of the Florentine exhibition was its cavalier dismissal of Gar- 

rado’s reading of Artemisia’s career. By simply ignoring it, Contini and Papi wrongly imply 

that Artemisia’s sex is irrelevant to art historical 

inquiry. (The actress who plays Artemisia in Merlet’s film, Valentina Cervi, similarly maintains 

that, “il fait qu’elle soit une femme n’a jamais aucune importance [the fact that 

she is a woman has no importance].”)

At the least, we can acknowledge that there was a 

strong market for images of female protagon- 

ists from Artemisia’s hand and that it war- 

rants explanation.

In his recent monograph with the first 

catalogue raisonné of Artemisia’s paintings 

(there are no known drawings by her, nor by 

Orazio either), Ward Bissell aims to address these 

and other shortcomings. He discusses in 

five chapters the artist’s life and work, paying 

particular attention to attribution, chronol- 

ogy, formal sources, financial arrangements, and Artemisia’s artistic relationships in 

Flor- 

ence and Naples. A sixth, concluding chapter, 

entitled “Myths, Misunderstandings, and Mus- 

ings,” evaluates the prior literature, including 

feminist and psychoanalytic studies.

Four appendices provide a very thorough 

regulatory attention, including a new transla- 

tion from the Roman stato delle anime (spring- 

time census data); a careful review of the 

evidence about Artemisia’s daughter(s), with 

speculation that one was born out-of-wedlock in 

Naples (with regard to Artemisia’s difficult 

life in Florence, notice that she was pregnant 

more than 50 percent of the time, thirty-six 

of seventy-one months, and she may even have 
had a fifth child between the first two); an 

appendix of supplemental documentation; and 
a most interesting inconclusive discussion by 

Melville Holmes of the Gentileschi’s paint- 
ing technique and use of amber varnish as 

mentioned in the Mayerne ms., the most impor-

tant 17th-century source on materials and 
techniques.

Mayerne actually tells us that he got his recipe for amber varnish from Nicho-

las Lanier, who in turn “had the recipe from 

Signora Artemisia . . . who paints extremely 

well.” In her novel, Lapierrre picks up on this 

and Richard Symonds’s remark that Lanier 

was “inamorato di Artemisia Gentileschi,” to 

construct a passionate affair between Lanier 

and Artemisia.

When a catalogue of Autograph Paint- 
ings, Incorrect and Questionable Attribu-
tions, and Lost Works constitutes the heart of 

Bissell’s monograph, which unapologetically, 
in method and plan, is altogether traditional. 

The book is well produced, well indexed, and 

richly illustrated, with a generous number of 

color plates (twenty-seven). Its greatest value 
is the impressive compilation of opinions and 
data, although its stilted prose and tiring some- 

graduate seminar syndrome of rehearsing 
everyone’s opinion make it overweight. Cer- 
tainly it will be indispensable for future study, 

but only in tandem with Garrard’s book, 

which uniquely has a full (English) transcrip- 
tion of both the trial and Artemisia’s letters, 

and generally is a more stimulating read. 

Moreover, some of the descriptive passages in 

Garrard’s book are unsurpassed in Bissell’s or 

any other writings.

Nonspecialists might choose to turn to 
chapter 6 of Bissell’s book, though to do so 
would overlook some important information, 
opinions, and conclusions, which I summa-
rize selectively:

- Bissell rejects the lingering suspicion that 

Susanna and the Elders, signed and dated 1610, 

should be read 1619 instead, and he dismisses 

Spivek’s thesis. Concerning 

the painting’s execution, he concludes after much 
vawering that it “came substantially from the 
brush of Artemisia Gentilesci,” though he 
repubidates the notion that it reflects Artemi-

sia’s erudition and knowledge of patristic 
literature. Nor is there any “justification for 
believing that personal concerns dominate” 
the image (thus Bissell disagrees with an 
assumption that has informed many feminist 
readings of the picture, as well as Slap’s 
probable idea that the painting “deals with 
a eadip girl’s struggles against yearnings 
for her father . . . her wish to display her 
pretty body and win him from her mother . . . 
and that Susanna [found the pair of old 

lochers as tempting as they found her]”).

- A clear, reliable summary of the trial is 

provided in R. R. Humphrey’s The 

Artemisia trial, 1619 (1966), and I would recom-

mend this over Bissell’s account. Both agree 

that probably seven of the ten known commis-

sions were for the Queen’s House at Greenwich, Artemisia’s 

relationship to Florentine taste reveals 
its relationship to Florentine taste reveals 

influential connections, the sentence was re-

vised to read: “ACCAD. Ne’Desiosi” in Jer6me David’s engraving after 

that it refers to the Roman Accademia dei 
Dei’s, which would explain the puzzling reference “ACCAD.” 

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One of Bissell’s most controversial decisions, based on an intricate reading of documents and judgment of physiognomy, is that the famous Self-Portrait as Painting in the Queen’s collection is an allegory of painting by, but not a portrait of, Artemisia. He believes that the “Artemisia gentiliseco. done by her selfe” inventoried at Hampton Court in 1649 is lost. While I agree that the features of the woman in the Queen’s picture are not securely Artemisia’s, I see a stronger resemblance with her known likeness than Bissell does.

Bissell argues that renewed exposure to Orazio’s art in London deeply affected Artemisia’s work upon her return to Naples. With a few minor exceptions, none of the latest pictures is seen as depicting a heroic woman performing a brave deed; instead, “the sexual appetites of men are often indulged, not in the least avenged” in the representations of Bathsheba, Susanna, Judith, Diana, and Galatea.

Artemisia’s extant and lost paintings from 1640–52 number twenty-four; in more than half of them nude female bodies are “put on display, first and last, for the delectation of the men depicted within and without who ordered” them (this high percentage of female nudes repeats a pattern Bissell discerned in the 1620s, too).

The style as a whole lacks “genuine expressiveness,” a concept used to disparage some of the Florentine works as well. But Bissell’s judgments—“too carefully choreographed,” “ornamental and rhetorical grand manner,” “‘false air,’” “‘more demonstrative and less genuine,’” and similar critical terms of approbation—are unhistorical, privileging the author’s taste for the “natural” over the rhetorical and intentionally artificial. Bissell disregards his own caution against “imposing our standards of beauty upon the past.”

Throughout the text, Bissell bends over backward to respect Garrard’s and other scholars’ interpretations, so much so that he often equivocates, possibly because new critical strategies seem to have been insufficiently assimilated. This pertains not just to psychoanalytic approaches, but to more recent feminist theory, though Bissell’s basic disagreement with Garrard’s analysis of Artemisia’s work is evident. Above all, he rejects the idea that Artemisia should be called a feminist, even by 17th-century standards, whether on the basis of the imagery itself or because the women’s movement in early modern Europe generally occurred away from where Artemisia was active (it would be more accurate to refer to feminist voices reacting to misogynist texts than to a movement as we know it).

The great majority of early feminists were French and English. The most important Italian feminist of Artemisia’s time was the Venetian poet Lucrezia Marinella, but there is no compelling evidence that links Artemisia to any of those women. And even if one assumes that she absorbed their views while in Venice or London, her imagery thereafter is conspicuously less, not more, “feminist.”

Bissell breaks the only early tie with feminism proposed by Garrard, namely that, by painting Anne of Austria as Minerva around 1615, Artemisia became familiar with Marie de’ Medici’s orbit of powerful women. Convincingly, he argues that it is not a portrait of Anne of Austria and probably dates from ca. 1635–36 instead.

Besides Garrard’s, there is a host of similar feminist analyses of Artemisia’s life and art: Judith Mann’s explanation of the gendered narratives of Danaë, Cleopatra, and Mary Magdalene; a related, improbable reading of Danaë “as a metaphor for the physical subjugation of prostitution” by Jeanne Morgan Zarucchi; two slight paperbacks (neither is in Bissell’s bibliography) that recapitulate the earlier literature, one by Francisca Pérez Carreño, which is richly illustrated in color, the other by Tiziana Agnati and Francesca Torres; an ambitious but no more original monograph by Susanna Stolzenwald; and Janice Jaffe’s strained comparison of Artemisia’s Lucretia with a manuscript Hieronymus Bosch-inspired nun Sor Juana, which are said to be similarly revelatory of “how early women of genius expressed their concerns for women’s rights.” Rejecting such ideas, Bissell reads Artemisia’s imagery as fundamentally the result of the artist’s competitive response to market conditions, not to feminism.

This does not preclude the importance of Artemisia’s sex. To the contrary, Bissell follows the views of other 17th-century scholars who have emphasized that Artemisia’s success with private patrons resulted from her unusual position as a woman able to cater to male desires for images of women, whether because she had easier access to female nude models and could paint them better; had been channeled into her specialization by commissions for frescoes, altarpieces, and even subjects like Christ were rarely given to her; or because for male viewers there was a special frisson in knowing that a woman made the work (“I believe that as far as the male viewer was concerned it was the painter not the painting that titillated” says Hersey). In her play, Humphrey turns these thoughts into the words of Artemisia’s early patron (“a dirty old man,” the painter calls him), who admits with regard to her use of models, “it’s so fascinating to think of a beautiful young woman such as yourself gazing upon the nakedness of four other women,” and who then offers to pay Artemisia double if he could watch her paint naked women “while you are also unclothed.”

The Subject Matter of Artemisia’s Pictures constitutes an important part of Bissell’s final chapter and should be studied with care. Of the 57 works he catalogues (6 are lost), 52 are portraits. Of those, 49 “feature women as protagonists or, occasionally, give them equal billing with men.” Of the same 52, more than half (30) are variations on seven themes: Judith (7), Bathsheba (7), the Magdalene (6), Susanna (3), the Madonna (3), Lucretia (2), and Cleopatra (2). Surprisingly, there are 21 Old Testament and Apocryphal subjects, but just 4 from the New Testament, including the Madonna, plus 10 of saints. Altogether, only 11 known works might be said to depict women who “directly control or directly attempted to control men,” while 15 depict women as “subjected to male control or male lust or otherwise owe their fates to men.” More than half of the known subjects of Artemisia’s paintings (excluding portraits) “carry implications of sexuality,” and more than a third of those contain female nudes.

Of course, these are raw statistics, dependent on one’s definition of what constitutes control, what is a sign of sexuality, and so on, and they are subject to multiple interpretations of what it means when a woman depicts women “subjected to male control or male lust.” However, Bissell’s general conclusion is echoed by Ann Sutherland Harris: Artemisia’s “willfulness to depict what 20th century feminists have labelled woman as sex object” would seem, I think, to preclude any feminist awareness on her part of a kind we would now regard as elementary.

Other parts of “Myths, Misunderstandings, and Musings” dispel the notion that Artemisia was given her name in reference to ancient women worthies (she was named after her godmother, Artemisia Capizucchi); that she excelled, as Baldinucci maintained, in still-life painting (Bissell speculates that this might have been a mix-up with the artist Giovanna Garzoni, but Costa has called attention to evidence that Artemisia in fact made “a book of drawings with a great variety of flowers and plants”); and that, despite her own testimony in 1612 that she “could not write and could read very little,” she became literate and even had good linguistic skills. Bissell allows that she might have learned to read and write a bit, though he emphasizes that her known letters were written by scribes, reveal no linguistic sophistication, and are entirely practical rather than theoretical or feminist (“her own words do not buttress the case for Artemisia as a woman of feminist convictions”). The question of 17th-century artists’ education in general and Artemisia’s in particular has been addressed in a provocative essay by Ann Sutherland Harris, who also concludes that Artemisia might have learned to read some simple texts but little more, and that there is no reason to assume that her “visual intelligence” required much literacy.

In studying Artemisia, Bissell apparently contracted an art historical virus, influences, which thrives on the supposition that artists are so inventive that a formal source, or preferably multiple sources, must be found for virtually any posture, and that there is something meaningful in pointing out these alleged influences. The bug is widely spread. Although Garrard’s contention that Artemisia borrowed many motifs with complex intensions has been doubted, at least there is a clear purpose, a feminist agenda, behind her claims. But not for Bissell, who writes, “I take it as a truism that the search for prototypes, justified by the venerable custom of receptivity among
artists to the creative acts of others, is consistently more rewarding and leads to more defensible conclusions when it is focused upon examples of the same or related subject matter.” While I am skeptical that the latter point about subject matter is sound for the study of 17th-century Italian art, the more serious problem is the confusion, the lack of differentiation, between considered Imitation and unmotivated “borrowing.” This results in a proliferation of “prototypes” for Artemisia’s designs that are improbably numerous, turning her art into a mosaic of quotations, many of which are nothing more than approximate formal analogies.

For instance, Bissell rejects (as did I and other reviewers) Garrard’s proposal that Artemisia had the Orestes sarcophagus in mind when designing her Susanna and the Elders. For Garrard it was one of various ways that Artemisia used antique gestures freighted with tragic significance to “restore to the Susanna theme the tone of high seriousness that it surely deserves.” Yet, for this relatively uncomplicated if highly effective design, which uses common gestures, Bissell allows that the Orestes sarcophagus was transmitted to Artemisia by way of Orazio’s previous citation of it, and that compositions by Rubens and d’Arpino were instrumental as well (the proposed connection with d’Arpino is especially far-fetched). Likewise, we are led to believe that, in composing Judith Decapitating Holofernes, Artemisia was not just challenging Caravaggio and his Judith (which surely she was), but that three other paintings by Orazio, Rubens, and Elsheimer were all “mined in effecting this considered synthesis.”

With regard to these and similar cases of motif hunting for “obvious links” that are “indeed relevant” with “relationships too patent to be fortuitous,” Bissell maintains, “the exercises in prototype identification to which these three works by Artemisia Gentileschi from the years 1611–12 have just been subjected prove to be invaluable . . . they underscore Artemisia’s independence of mind.”

Inasmuch as Bissell’s and all analyses depend on what Artemisia painted, the reliability of his catalogue raisonné, thirty-five years in the making, obviously is of primary importance. Its entries are exhaustive, based more on library work, it would seem, than dogged looking at the objects, for, by my count, he has not studied firsthand eleven, or a fifth, of the pictures he accepts as autograph. Some might be difficult to see in private collections, but others that are in public museums also were catalogued from photographs.

Garrard, who did not aim to catalogue the paintings, included about 54 originals in her book; Bissell has 57, of which 6 are lost. Garrard rejected 3 he includes, and doubted 3 others. Thirteen paintings in his catalogue of authentic works were discovered or entered the Artemisia literature during the past decade or so. Just 5 are new to the literature, 2 of which are lost and recorded only in prints, and 2 of which I think are problematic. Bissell modifies Garrard’s chronology of some individual pictures by a few years; 4 are adjusted more radically. He catalogues 42 rejected works, 8 of which were accepted by Garrard. The final section of the catalogue includes 108 lost works, though most of their attributions are late. In sum, taking into account only the works published a decade ago, Bissell and Garrard agree on attributing to Artemisia 26 paintings. While Bissell’s catalogue contains twice that number, there are no unproblematic, important new discoveries.

Whether one chooses Bissell’s practice of traditional connoisseurship or Garrard’s “gendered expression” as the basis for assigning paintings to Artemisia, problems remain, of which a few representative examples might be cited. A Cleopatra formerly with the dealer Morandotti (Fig. 2), for instance, is pivotal in feminist readings of Artemisia’s depictions of nude women. Like most writers, Pollock ascribed to Cleopatra, 1.18 x 1.81 m., oil on canvas, formerly Milan, Amedeo Morandotti, herself is “in the position to adjudicate” attributions. She nonetheless notes that if another Cleopatra (formerly with Matthiasen, London) is also by Artemisia (as many authors assume), then the idea should be dismissed that one can tell that they are by a woman because they are so dissimilar.

Judith Mann’s feminist reading of Danaë in St. Louis is dependent on Artemisia’s authorship of the Morandotti Cleopatra, too, whose design it replicates. Bissell, however, assigns both the Morandotti and St. Louis paintings to Orazio, not to Artemisia, concluding that it was he, not she, who about 1612 “inaugurated the Gentilesean line of reclining nude women.” For Mann, however, the Danaë “undoubtedly” is by Artemisia. This consequential disagreement possibly will be resolved if all three works are available for study in the forthcoming Gentileschi exhibition.

Three other paintings Bissell catalogs as being by neither Artemisia nor Orazio will be in the exhibition, with good reason. He doubts the Bolognese-inspired Susanna and the Elders at Burghley House, which is fully signed and dated by Artemisia. He also rejects a Madonna and Child and Saint Cecilia in the Galleria Spada, without realizing that both pictures were described and attributed to Artemisia in 1637 when the artist was alive. Garrard, too, doubted the Susanna at Burghley House (its inscription was unknown to her), but she accepted both of the paintings in the Galleria Spada.

Bissell and Garrard have isolated Artemisia’s hand from Orazio’s in the Greenwich commission. On the basis of a recent inspection of the canvases, however, Gabriele Finaldi decided that their poor condition precludes making any such distinctions. Still more unsettling is his reasoning that Artemisia could not have worked on the ceiling at all. Because it was installed no later than September 1638, and because there is no mention of Artemisia when Orazio drew up his will the following January (he left his estate to his three sons),
then it is unlikely that Artemisia had yet arrived in London. No early sources, he observes, say that she helped Orazio with the commission.

The last example of connosseurial problems pertains to replicas, typically the most difficult category of works to sort out. In Artemisia’s case, however, there is direct testimony from the painter herself. In 1649 she declared that she “never repeated her inventions, indeed not even a single hand.” Bissell rightly observes that there are no exact copies attributed to Artemisia, yet this begs the question of the many close variants that, in fact, repeat inventions, and certainly replicate much more than single hands. Like Garrard, Harris, Lapiere, and others, Bissell speculates that some of the late, repetitive works, some of which are signed but often show a decline in quality, are studio products, possibly by Artemisia’s daughter, Prudentia. One of these, a late Baksheba catalogued by Bissell as autograph, is a conspicuous pastiche of three figures from three different pictures, two by Artemisia, one by Orazio.55 My sense is that the multiple versions attributed to Artemisia still await clarification, and that some of them, like a Penitent Bissell, which replicates a picture in the Cathe- dral of Seville, are early copies.54

IV

This final section separates novels, plays, and film from all of the foregoing titles that deal with facts, or in any case are never thought of as fiction. Before turning to the work by Lapiere, Clark, Humphrey, and Merlet, however, my next division should be questioned: what constitutes a fact about Artemisia Gentileschi? One of her easel pictures? Perhaps in some cases, but obviously not many. Art historians preparing catalogues or other monographic studies therefore prefer to start with firmer, more positively knowable things, such as evidence from historical documents and scientific data. Three examples problematize even this method with regard to writing about Artemisia, and thus the supposition that analysis of her life and work based on facts is a priori truer.

My examples come from bedrock data for the study of old pictures: the artist’s signature, her own testimony, and laboratory analysis. The data has been cited already, though without emphasis on how adaptable they might be. The first case pertains to Susanna and the Elders at Burghley House, which bears Artemisia’s full name and a plausible date (1622) in the original paint layer, according to conservation reports. Troubles have arisen, however, because it conforms neither to Garrard’s conception of Artemisia as a feminist who should depict this scene of male harassment, nor Bissell’s more traditional, Morellian style criteria. Therefore both authors have rejected a work that is signed and dated.56

Artemisia’s recorded statements are no less susceptible to varied readings. She said that she “could not write and could read very little,” and even a witness for the defense at the trial testified, against Tassi’s interests, that Artemisia could read some, “ma lei non sa scrivere” (“but she doesn’t know how to write”).56 Still, her literacy has been expanded to fit a more intellectual profile. Likewise, she stressed that she did not repeat her compositions, yet very scholar, when confronted with the visual evidence, refuses to believe her. And the extensive court records, which are central to understanding Artemisia’s life, are exceptionally hard to interpret because of the conflicting testimony and high stakes involved.

The third example concerns a much-discussed painting of Galatea recently acquired by the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Bissell catalogues it as a collaborative work by Artemisia and Bernardo Cavallino (I discern only one hand, Cavalli- no’s), and more specifically a commission documented in letters from Antonio Ruffo to Artemisia dated 1649, and cited again in a Ruffo inventory of 1673. But Ruffo’s painting had five tritons, not the four in the preserved picture, and it was much bigger. The logical explanation, that the canvas was cut down later, is flatly rejected by conservators who examined and restored it (I agree with their judgment.) In defense of his view that it is Ruffo’s painting anyway, Bissell writes, “while great respect must be accorded evidence gathered from conservation procedures, it need not perforce take precedence over the conclusions of connoisseurship.”

My purpose in citing these few examples (there are countless more) is not to refute the authors’ interpretative strategies or conclusions when faced with unwelcome evidence, but to emphasize that what is true about Artemisia depends upon who is asking the question.58 And to emphasize that boundaries between the vero and verosimile, the true and the plausible, inescapably are fluid, as 17th-century historians understood better than most authors.

But not Anna Banti, which is one reason her novel Artemisia works so well as she slips back and forth from her own life as a creative writer in modern Florence (living in the shadow of Longhi) to Artemisia’s story. In an excellent analysis of the book, JoAnn Cannon observes that it “is informed by the Manzo- nian notion of the verosimile” as Banti builds on the historical record and captures “the fato supposto,” the conjectured fact. Yet, Banti confesses, “it is impossible to recall to life and understand an action that happened three hundred years ago, far less an emotion.”

Banti was acutely aware of her authorship, that she was constructing, not discovering, a life (weaving “its rhythms and images together in a joint collaboration, active and shared” according to the feminist insight that I find entirely persuasive, she under- stands Artemisia’s life as exemplifying the rupture between woman and artist, the tension between living as daughter-mother- wife and professional painter. That tension justifies Banti’s illusory failure to give Artemizia adequate agency: not only is Artemisia’s mind forever occupied with her father and husband, but her creative energy derives from Orazio’s inspiration. “Oh Lord,” she declares when reflecting back on her life, “a lover, a father, brothers, a husband: of one of these, in the end, does a woman have need.”59 Likewise or not, this is wholly verosimile.

Before discussing what form her writing on Artemisia should take, the French novelist Alexandra Lapiere did extraordinary research. In order to substantiate and expand the known information, she checked published transcripts while combing through archives for new documents. To do so, she learned Italian and Latin, and studied paleogra- phy. She haunted the places where Artemi- sia and her associates lived and worked. When writing her book, she took care to adjust for the calendars of England, Florence, and Rome, and to recognize the differing values of money and dimensions from place to place.

The extensive notes in her Annexe record which literature she read, which archives she searched, and when she fabricated episodes.60 “And still, I came to discover that this research did not suffice. To tell their story, I had to try to put Orazio and Artemisia back into the historical, religious, social context of the world they had crossed.” The novel seemed to be “the only form suitable for reconstructing the multiple-shaped reality I wanted to account for.”

Lapiere’s research paid off handsomely. She found new evidence concerning Tassi and his circle of friends, and onetime friends, such as the minor artist Valerio Ursino, whose prosecution of his former friend in 1618 resulted in Tassi’s banishment not just from Rome but from all the Papal States. The sentence, however, was annulled the next day with a general absolution, which revoked the sentence from the rape trial, too. Other discov- eries suggest that Tassi’s nickname, “lo Smar- giasso,” the bully or braggart, was more than warranted (he was accused of criminal activi- ties in Pisa, Livorno, Naples, and Lucca, aside from Rome, including incest with his sister-in- law and arranged murder of his wife).61 There is new information on Artemisia’s godmother Quorli, who came from an illustrious Ro- man family. She was well connected in Tus- cany because her Florentine husband’s family was noble, belonging to the Order of Malta and San Giacomo (it did not escape Lapi- erre’s sharp eye that, much later in Naples, Artemisia’s out-of-wedlock [2] daughter mar- ried a cavaliere of the Order of San Giacomo). Lapiere also found copious material about the mysterious Vatican paymaster Cosimo Quorli, whom Artemisia named at the trial as having tried to seduce her but failed, where- upon in a Susanna-like scenario he said he’d boast about it anyway and tell everyone. But Quorli died before he could testify or respond to the notify G. B. Stiattesi’s assertion that he, Quorli, claimed that Artemisia was his daugh- ter. (Stiattesi’s graphic query is preserved: “Can it be possible that you would brag that she is your daughter and yet you wanted to fuck her?”). While concluding that Quorli indeed was closely involved with the complex case, Lapiere conjectures that Stiattesi was
the one who really “pulled the strings” in the whole affair, essentially because he wanted to settle accounts with his enemy (and first cousin) Quorli. Among the new information concerning Pier Francisco Stiattesi, Artemisia’s enigmatic husband, Lapi erre discovered that he was nine years older than his wife, was G. B. Stiattesi’s brother, and was a painter in his own right. He returned from Florence to Rome with Artemisia but disappeared from the stati delle anime in 1623. The same year a Spaniard filed a complaint against him for assault, which Lapi erre speculates could have been a set-up by Artemisia in order to get rid of her husband.

All of this rich information and more is woven into the novel, but unfortunately Lapi erre is not as refined a writer as Banti is, or half as skilled in moving from the vero to the verosimile: nor does she recognize lengthly historical digressions as extraneous to her plot. Ironically, the fruits of her research cripple her storytelling, for she seems unable to decide if she is writing as an art historian, a biographer, or a novelist. As a consequence, her shifting viewpoints break the fictive spell.

The long novel starts and ends in London, because Lapi erre’s Artemisia is obsessed with her father, but over half of it takes place in Rome before 1613. In a sense there is a parallel with Banti’s story here, which also stops in England, with the depressing notion that “whether she stayed here or went back to Italy Artemisia knew that her task was to die.” Banti, however, was not as caught up in the story of the rape or the intrigue among the trial’s characters.

Nor did Banti conceive of her book as an oedipal tale. The subtitle of Lapi erre’s Un duel pour l’immortalité refers to Artemisia’s artistic-filial struggle with an indecisive, paper-thin Orazio, who wants his daughter to transform a woman into an artist. Thus, referring to Orazio, Tassi tells Artemisia, “He’s treated you like a son. He’s taught you his craft and art, Tassi. I’m not your little girl, anymore. I’m something else. Something truly unspeakable. An artist! GOD DAMN YOU!” For Clark’s Artemisia, it takes rape, humiliation, and understanding the facts of (male) life to transform a woman into an artist. Thus, referring to Orazio, Tassi tells Artemisia, “He’s treated you like a son. He’s taught you his craft and art, Daddy. I’m not your little girl, anymore. I’m something else. Something truly unspeakable. An artist! GOD DAMN YOU!”

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To her credit, Lapi erre recognizes that Artemisia’s early loss of her mother might have had a profound effect, yet the story’s emphasis remains solely on daddy (Orazio opposes the marriage to Stiattesi and declares, “Choose, Artemisia! Choose between smallness and grandeur, between nothingness and immortality, between him and me!”); on other men who rule her life; and on the birth of a son, which ultimately gives Artemisia self-confidence and control of her work. Her paintings of femmes feres are given an entirely new twist as expressions of resistance to father, not to Tassi. With Orazio’s burial, Artemisia no longer needs to paint them.

Two other women have published novels about Artemisia during the past decade, Maria Angeles Anglada (writing in Catalan) and Rauda Jamis (a Franco-Mexican author writing in French). Like Lapi erre’s book, Sally Clark’s and Olga Humphrey’s plays, and Agnès Merlet’s film, their novels raise complex questions at the core of all these inquiries: the source(s) of Artemisia’s creativity (the men in her life? her experiences as a woman? her sexuality? market forces? which combination of these and other factors?), and whether an author is ethically obligated to tell a story according to the historical record. Clark’s play and Merlet’s film particularly have provoked sharp criticism for altering events.

In Clark’s two-act Life without Instruction, one actress plays Artemisia and Judith, one actor Tassi and Holofernes, as the scenes move back and forth from Old Testament Bethulia to 17th-century Rome. All of the modern action is compressed into the year “1610” and deals exclusively with the rape and trial, when Artemisia erroneously is said to have been seven years old. The film’s distribution at the film’s premiere and posted on the Internet. Shortly after (May 1998), a protest symposium at the Richard Feigen Gallery in New York included the historians Leonard Barkan, Mary Garrard, Rona Goffen, Simon Schama, and Bette Talvacchia.

The protest was not against the distortion of history in the abstract, but Merlet’s abuse of her subject and failure to inform her public of the truth. As Garrard expressed this advocacy position, “the real story is much more interesting than the film version [and] it is also more genuinely feminist. . . . The film raises troubling questions about the responsibility of art to truth . . . this misrepresentation, this dishonoring, of Artemisia Gentileschi matters very much because she has been an important cultural role model for women, especially artists.”

The first time I saw the film I couldn’t escape my historian’s critical role. Its inaccuracies were as obvious as its sex-and-nudity box-office appeal. The chronology of Artemisia’s work is thrown to the wind; painting techniques are misunderstood; nude female models are ridiculously paraded beneath Orazio’s scaffolding in the Casino of the Muses; Artemisia cries out to Tassi, when the thumbscrews are applied, “I love only you” instead of the transcript’s “this is the ring that you give me, and these are your promises”; under Tassi’s spell she takes up painting scenes—to cite just some examples of gross distortions. On a second and third viewing, I became more conscious of the beauty of the film, its wonderful costumes, the admirable original music, and how well it is cast and acted. I rethought the basis not only of Garrard’s criticism, but also Benedetti’s and Pollock’s. Like Garrard, Benedetti objects to Merlet’s rendition of Artemisia’s relationship with Tassi as loving, the rape as successful (measured by its amorous and artistic outcome), and generally that the film “oversimplifies the historical complexities of Artemisia’s predicament.”
within the Orazio-Artemisia-Tassi triangle (in Merlet’s story Orazio breaks up the affair).

Pollock’s more nuanced reading recognizes that Merlet’s *Artemisia* “was never intended as art history,” but instead should be assessed “in relation to cinema’s mostly unhappily history of the artist’s biopic—the point where ideologies of biography and the creative individual collide with the demands of fictional narrative cinema.”

The film’s premise, as identified by Pollock, is that Artemisia’s sexuality was part of her creativity—“a scenario that founders on the historical reality of the inequities of gender embodied in contemporary institutions: the convent, the papacy, the academy, the law.” The prototypical Hollywood notion of the great artist as a mythical, unfettered genius, as sexually driven and socially unrestrained, does not work for a woman in 17th-century Rome. Merlet’s film onanizes that Merlet’s Artemisia “was never inasmuch as Artemisia herself seized the opportunity to capitalize on male voyeurism, the sex-and-beauty attraction of Merlet’s film is ironically apt.

Merlet moreover depicts Artemisia as an impassionately committed artist. She moves and talks with obvious determination. She is resolute at all costs to master anatomy (“I’ll never get anywhere if I can’t paint naked men,” she argues in defense of her sexual transgressions). Whereas Orazio states pragmatically that “I paint for those who buy my paintings,” Artemisia declares, “I paint for myself.” While one of this is knowable or necessarily likely, it is empowering behavior, and exceptional in the works of fiction, including Banti’s, for giving Artemisia that much emotionally and professionally.

I do not believe, however, that it is because this fiction “plays into one of the most damaging of stereotypes for women,” namely “the idea that a female artist is the product of a male mentor,” that it is also “dangerous nonsense.”

Certainly it is far from *verosimile*, and courting offense, to portray Artemisia after the trial as absorbed with her deceitful rapist-lover. Yet it is altogether *vero* historically to accept that she had, indeed, had to have, a male mentor, predictably her father, especially if she wanted to become a competitive historian and not only a specialist in still life or portraiture. Merlet’s story, like all of the fiction discussed here, neglects what I think is the most remarkable aspect of Artemisia’s life: that after the rape and trial, and despite persistent serious family and financial problems, she had the talent and guts to find her way within a male discourse of image-making and marketing.

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Spike, John, "Review of Artemisia at the Casa Buonar-


Notes

1. Bissell, 1, and 393, n. 1, for the Italian. Full citations for all of the literature under review are provided in Frequently Cited Sources.

2. Garrard, 3, is not alone in taking the view that Artemisia "has suffered a scholarly neglect that is almost unthinkable for an artist of her caliber." In this essay, "Garrard" without a qualifying date always refers to Garrard, 1989. I will basically discuss the literature and publication of her book, leaving out numerous masters' theses, honors papers, as well as video tapes.


4. Benedetti, 44-44, though she is not quite fair to Longhi by extracting only his misogynist bars and ignoring his laudatory remarks.


6. It was organized by Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1976; Artemisia’s paintings, nos. 10-15, notably included Susanna and the Elders of 1610 (Pommerenfelden) and Judith and Abra with the Head of Holofernes (Detroit).


10. Garrard, 311.

11. See my The Divine Guide: Religion, Sex, Money, and Art in the World of Guido Reni (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), especially part I and, for discussion of psychohistory in particular, 4-11. With reference to Garrard’s analysis, Goldberg distinguishes between interpretations that depend on “personal and intuitive psychological insights” and those that are backed up with “reference to the literature or methods of clinical psychoanalysis,” without which “the reader is . . . hard put to confirm or deny her findings.”

12. Bal, 274. See Salomon’s apt remarks on the (mis)use of Artemisia’s biography (Salomon criticizes Vasari for lumping together all Northerners as faunimenti, but she falls into the same reductive trap with her use of the category “women”).

13. Garrard, 279. Perhaps the least responsible of pseudo-psychological readings of Artemisia’s life and imagery is Rose, in Spike and Rose.


15. The usual view that Artemisia was a follower of Caravaggio is challenged by Mann, 1997a, who argues her case from the dubious premise that iconography can be separated from style in the production of “meaning.”

16. Elizabeth S. Cohen, “No Longer Virgins: Self-
representation by Young Women in Late Renais-
sance Rome,” in Refiguring Women: Perspectives on

Gender and the Italian Renaissance, ed. Marilyn Migiel and Juliana Schiesari (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 45-67, by overcoming this important publication, mistakenly suggests that Artemisia’s "was the first documented rape trial in western history.

17. Whether there is a further parallel cannot be known. Possibly Anna and Sebastiano had flirted on earlier occasions and the rape was not so unpro-
voked as it was portrayed," Cohen speculates, for "surely the girl would wish to present the girl in the role of victim.”

18. Cited by Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, Liberation della donna/Feminism in Italy (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 220.

19. Bissell, 126-31, for his views on psychoanalyti-
cal methodology.

20. Bissell, 8.


22. Ibid., 1990.

23. Ibid., 108ff.

24. Ibid., 290-81.


26. Ibid., 145, 146-47, which see also with regard to Kristeva’s theories.

27. Bissell’s essay, which has been often re-
printed and translated, was part of an exhibition project of 1979 that invited writers and artists (among others, Daniel Buren, Sarah Charlesworth, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, Jannis Kounellis, and Julian Lo Barbara, Junichi Misas, and Czwomblaw) to respond to Artemisia’s Judith Decapitating Ho-
lofernes in the Uffizi; the resultant book/catalogue is not cited by Bissell.

28. Bal’s discussion of Artemisia’s work appears in her chapter entitled “The Missing Head,” 283-111, which includes brief discussion of Freud’s treatment of -ism of Freud’s treatment of theory, but critical only of authors whose writing is based on psychoanalytic readings of Artemisia’s life. See, e.g., Cropper, 1989.

29. In varying ways, these factors have been empha-
sized by Cropper, Gash, Harris, Haskell, and Spear, among others. I might note with regard to the conspicuous absence of paintings of Christ by Artemi-

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31. From my remarks above and what follows below, it should be evident that I am not distrustful of theory, but critical only of authors whose writing and ideas are accessible to a small, privileged circle of like-minded academics. For another example in which Artemisia’s work is primarily a vehicle for discussion of (aesthetic) theory, see Anita Silvers, “Has Her(oine’s) Time Now Come?” in Feminism and Traditions in Aesthetics, ed. Peggy Zemlicka and Carolyn Korsmeyer (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 279-304. By con-
trast, as a national bestseller Carroll Holborn’s ‘Writing a Woman’s Life’ as in n. 22) must have opened the eyes of more women and men about how patriarchal culture has shaped or suppressed women’s lives than all self-involved criti-
cism put together.

32. Bissell, 1991, with caution, though his re-
attribute to the brand of Spike and Rose, 12-13. Another unexpected judgment is that Artemisia “only came into her artistic maturity, and then she produced most of it, and which work, without any link with The Deluge of Lusiad,” in the lower portion of Michelangelo’s ‘Lorenzo de’ Medici’ (Mann, 1997a).

33. The exhibit was sponsored by the Metropolitan Museum, which together with Judith Mann of the St. Louis Art Museum, is organizing the show, for sharing with me the preliminary loan list of about thirty paintings by Artemisia and for Byz on Grace. The exhibition is scheduled to open in Rome in October 2001, in New York in February 2002, and in St. Louis in June 2002.

34. As cited by Benedetti, 48.

35. See Cropper, 1993, for the documentation of Artemisia’s and Pierantonio Stiattesi’s children, only one of which survived (Prudencia/PMitra), as well as of the couple’s financial difficulties in Florence, due in part to Fazio’s running up large debts.

36. See the complementary essay by Ana Sanchez-

37. For example, apropos Judith Decapitating Ho-
ofernes, she has written (925): “Artemisia establishes her heroine as a fully-sexed, mature woman, who is physically without being beautiful, a rare female character who escapes the stereotypes of maiden, virago, and crone. This Judith is plausibly the sexually experienced widow of the biblical account, whose sexuality could be drawn upon in the entrapment and conquest of Holofernes but was not accessible to others—not even the connoisseur.

38. See Lapiere, 214-15, 456-57, and the dis-
cussion below of her archival work.


40. All scholars remain indebted to Joan Kelly’s pioneering study, “Early Feminist Theory and the Querelle des Femmes, 1400-1789,” reprinted in her Women, History and Theory (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 65-106. For unlike Jaffe, 145, the F-Foolery of the painting is not based on the character of the Artemisia’s paintings assumes that “they represent strong evi-

dence that she was well versed in the subject of the

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trast, as a national bestseller Carroll Holborn’s ‘Writing a Woman’s Life’ as in n. 22) must have opened the eyes of more women and men about how patriarchal culture has shaped or suppressed “famous” women’s lives than all self-involved criti-
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attribute to the brand of Spike and Rose, 12-13. Another unexpected judgment is that Artemisia “only came into her artistic maturity, and then she produced most of it, and which work, without any link with The Deluge of Lusiad,” in the lower portion of Michelangelo’s ‘Lorenzo de’ Medici’ (Mann, 1997a).

43. Bissell cat. nos. 1, 25, 153, and 60. The pictures published after her
book appeared are cat. nos. 7, 9, 11, 15, 19, 21, 23, 28. It has been reserved, regardless of the autograph status of about a quarter of all the works Bissell accepts as autograph: they include cat. nos. 1, 17, 18, 21, 26, 29, 43-47, 49, 52-55, through the degree of my doubts varies greatly and is seriously compromised by not having seen all of the pictures, some of which purportedly are signed and might be authentic though studio products.

47. Bissell, 1997b, 9, no. 2 and 3, lists the scholars who have attributed Darnai to Orazio versus those who say Artemisia. Darnai will be in the exhibition; whether the ex-Marthensien Clenatrua and/or ex-Morandotti Cleopatra also will be included is unknown at this time. To judge from good photographs, Garrard's suspicion that perhaps neither Orazio nor Artemisia painted Darnai is understandable.

48. Bissell cat. nos. X42, X19 and X28, respectively. For the document regarding the two Spada pictures, the well-known d'Artemisia Gentilesca con un puto in "braccio" and "Una Santa Cecilia della medesima sone un leuto simile grandezza"); see Maria Luzcrecia Vicini, "L'eredita Veralli e Rocci," in Palazzo Spada e Storia, ed. Roberta Cannazà (Rome: Bonignori Editore, 1992), 44, and Papi, 198-99 (neither publication is cited by Bissell).

49. Bissell cat. no. 46 (cf. his figures 180, 182, and 188).

50. Bissell cat. no. 17; from photographs it looks to me like a stiff copy of cat. no. 16.

51. As noted above, the inscription was unknown to Garrard, who kindly informs me that her forthcoming coming book, Artemisia Gentileschi around 1622: Two Case Studies in Identity Formation (Berkeley: University of California Press), focuses on the Burghley House picture (as a work begun by Artemisia but finished by another hand), and the two versions of the Pentimenti Magdalene referred to above.

52. Menzo (as in n. 37), 151.
53. Bissell cat. no. 49, with an exhaustive review of the document and other scholars' opinions.


55. I have drawn on Cann's sensitive discussion in these remarks. For the passages quoted from Banti's Artemis, see the translation by Shirley D'Ardia Caracciolo (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 95, 109, 111. Further, Banti has Artemisia declare, "to be the daughter of this gentleman, to lightly place her hand on his sleeve, to talk only in monosyllables like a high-class young lady, this was enough to make her feel exonerated from every memory of [the rape and trial], from every obligation." When considering going to Florence with a husband chosen by her father, Artemisia "would forget her painting, look after her family instead." Once there, "she no longer remembered that she was a Gentileschi, artist and daughter of an artist. She was redeeming old debts that were owed to her, debts of family love, of family respect. She had—and the word continued to fulfill her thoughts—she had a husband." Then, having painted Judith Decapitating Holophernes, "an immense feeling welled up in her breast, the awful pride of a woman who has been avenged, in whom, despite her shame, there is also room for the satisfaction of the artist who has overcome all the problems of her art and speaks the language of her father, of the pure, of the chosen" (ibid., 37, 46, 64).

56. She also cites any evidence behind her fictive episodes. An exception is the letter by Lanfranco she quotes (p. 376), which in fact is adapted from a real letter he wrote to Ferrante Carlo from Naples in 1637 (when Artemisia was active there) and published by Giovanni Bottari and Stefano Ticozi, Raccolta di lettere nella pittura, scultura ed architettura. . . I (Milan: Giovanni Silvestri, 1822-25), 504-6, no. CVIII. With reference to an earlier work of his own, Lanfranco is clearly not the author, as he had not been judged to have been painted by a woman, Lanfranco writes with irony that, were it by a woman, then it'd be worth three times as much, presumably meaning that it’d be a rarity, a marvel, by equaling a mediocre Lanfranco. I am grateful to Donatella Sparti for discussing with me the text of this interesting if opaque letter.

57. In addition to Lapierre’s notes on Tassi’s criminality, see Cropper, 1992, and the appendix of documents in Patrizia Cavazzini, Palazzo Lancelotti ai Coronari (Rome: Istituto Poligrafico e Zecchia dello Stato, Libreria dello Stato, 1998).

58. For example, the document Lapierre discovered containing Tassi’s sentence introduces the verdict as pro rather than contra the accused; in the novel her authorial voice disruptively wonders why that occurred.

59. Banti's subsequent play (Corte Savella, 1969) devotes more attention to Artemisia's amourous relations and the trial (see Benedetti, 57-50).

60. Pollock, 1999, makes the point that the psychological impact of maternal loss has been neglected, though Garrard, 21, and Cropper, 1992, offered astute observations on its consequences for Artemisia.

61. For a brief characterization and discussion of Anglada's and Jamie's novels, see Benedetti, who deals with these broader questions, too, I might note how the familiar pattern in Jamis's long book: half of it takes place up until the time of the rape, by which date Artemisia had painted little, while only a small portion is concerned with Artemisia's post-Florentine career, when she produced the majority of her pictures.

62. See Benedetti for criticism of Clark's play on the latter grounds.

64. Tassi, however, is too good looking, to judge from his sister's description at the trial: "E questo mio fratello è piccoloistrato grossato, di poca barba" (Lapierre, 433).


66. For Merle's own comments on the film, see her: "Director's Note," at http://www.imrimax.com/ mm_front/owa/mp.entryPoint?action =2& midStr=559, and also the interview with her published by Villien.

67. On the question of agency, see, e.g., Joan E. Hartman, “Telling Stories: The Construction of Women’s Agency,” in (En)gendering Knowledge (as in n. 58), 11-34.

68. For example, Benedetti, 49.


70. After the film closes with Artemisia on the beach emulating Tassi, a series of texts scrolls by. The first reads, "Artemisia never saw Agostino again." Others include the false statement that she "was the first woman in the history of art to be commissioned for her work," and the belated recognition that "Artemisia Gentileschi's paintings bear witness to her genius and singularity as a woman and as a painter."

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Vision and Meaning in Ninth-Century Byzantium: Image as Exegesis in the Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. 561 pp.; 177 b/w illus. $95

One of the art historian's greatest joys is spending large chunks of sanctioned professional time in the company of visually interesting things. These are not just the objects in which one has a deep professional stake: the Rembrandt scholar is free to wander into the 20th-century galleries of a museum and spend as much time there as she wishes. This happy situation does not hold for students of illuminat-