

A detail from Artemisia Gentileschi's self-portrait as Judith. She is depicted from the chest up, wearing a rich orange-red robe with a white lace-trimmed neckline and a gold brooch. She holds a sword in her right hand and a palette with brushes in her left. A circular medal is visible on her chest. The background is dark and textured.

Artemisia Gentileschi

THE LANGUAGE OF PAINTING

Jesse M. Locker

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Artemisia Gentileschi



*For Sophie and Gabriel,
and for Carmen*

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It is the guiding premise of this book that Artemisia Gentileschi's work, even if created in solitude, gained a new fluency and sophistication through dialogue with her contemporaries. Likewise, my own work never would have come to fruition without the ideas, support, and interest of scholars, collectors, colleagues, and friends all over the world.

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Introduction

Artemisia Gentileschi is the grand exception in the history of art—a successful woman painter in an era in which art was dominated by men of the caliber of Caravaggio, Rembrandt, and Rubens. Women had of course been painters previously, but they typically limited themselves to portraits, still lifes, and domestic-themed devotional pictures, which were considered characteristically feminine subjects. In contrast, Artemisia chose the most ambitious category of picture, the *istoria*—multifigure narratives of subjects taken from the Bible and mythology—and within this category selected deliberately shocking subjects—female nudes, grisly beheadings—for realistic portrayal.¹ Under the tutelage of her father, Orazio Gentileschi, she learned to apply the methods that had been pioneered by Caravaggio, such as painting directly from the model and introducing dramatic contrasts of light and dark. Throughout her long career she moved with some frequency between Rome, Florence, Venice, London, and finally Naples, where she spent most of the last twenty years of her life. Over the decades, her style also changed, becoming more polished and idealized and further from her Caravaggesque beginnings. Although in her later years she continued to paint her hallmark representations of powerful women, she also turned to small-scale devotional works, altarpieces, and erotic female nudes. Despite financial and personal turmoil in her last decades, she nevertheless achieved a level of recognition and independence unprecedented for a woman artist.

It is unfortunate that perhaps the single best-known fact about her today is that, in the process of her training, she was raped by her teacher, and friend of her father, Agostino Tassi. In some ways, this emphasis is not surprising, given that many of her early paintings express such immediacy and vigor that we cannot help but speculate about the nearness of what she experienced as a young woman to the compelling violence and victimization she often depicts. Indeed, Artemisia's story is a gripping one. It is a story of nearly insurmountable odds: overcoming illiteracy, sexual violence, and being a woman in what was considered a man's profession, to become a successful artist.

In recent years, Artemisia has been transformed from a footnote in the history of Caravaggism into one of the most beloved artists of our time. This drastic and unforeseeable transformation is due largely to the efforts of Mary Garrard, who sought to redress the neglect of the artist in mainstream art historical scholarship in *Artemisia Gentileschi*:

The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art.² Since the publication of that book in 1989, Artemisia has been the subject of two major exhibitions, a feature film, two documentaries, and a stream of art historical studies, in addition to innumerable articles in psychoanalytic and medical journals and popular magazines.³ It is a surprising but undeniable fact that, along with Caravaggio and Rembrandt, Artemisia is now one of the few seventeenth-century artists widely known to the general public. Despite this overwhelming interest in the artist, the study of Artemisia is still a relatively new phenomenon in the field of art history. She is thus in a unique position of being a new “Old Master,” possibly more beloved by the general public than Ingres or Raphael, even though many key aspects of her biography, artistic output, and critical reception are only beginning to emerge.

In the wake of the major exhibitions in New York and St. Louis in 2001–2, Milan and Paris in 2011–12, and Pisa in 2013, the emergence of new paintings, documentary sources, and methodological tools has come at a rapid pace, leaving little time for absorption of new material or reflection on how it changes our conception of the artist. As Riccardo Lattuada observes, “The state of Artemisia scholarship is such that a single document or an individual painting can alter substantially our understanding of her work and her career.”⁴ Many such findings have not in themselves been especially dramatic or monumental—a painting, an inventory reference, a stanza of poetry, technical analysis of her working methods, and so on—but when considered cumulatively they suggest a picture of the artist that is increasingly difficult to reconcile with earlier conceptions of her. Indeed, Francesco Solinas acknowledges: “The art, like the biography of the woman, still largely remains to be discovered.”⁵

ARTEMISIA'S LIFE AND ART

Although this book focuses on the period of Artemisia's artistic maturity, from the 1620s on, when she finds herself in Rome, Venice, and Naples, a basic understanding of the arc of her career is essential.

Artemisia Gentileschi was born in Rome in 1593 to the Tuscan painter Orazio Gentileschi (1563–1639) and a Roman woman named Prudenzia Montoni. Artemisia came from a family of painters who were well known in Pisa, notably her grandfather, Baccio Lomi (c. 1550–1595), and her uncle Aurelio Lomi (1556–1622). Orazio's wife died when Artemisia was twelve years old, leaving him responsible for her as well as her brothers, Francesco and Giulio. Orazio had been moderately successful painting in the late mannerist style that dominated Rome in the late sixteenth century, with emphasis on complex, stylized forms and artificial coloring. Around 1605, inspired by the example of Caravaggio, Orazio rejected this style entirely and began to paint directly from nature, hiring models, placing them in strong light, and faithfully depicting what he saw before him. Unlike other followers of Caravaggio (the *Caravaggisti*), who merely copied Caravaggio's characteristic contrasts of light and dark and his subject matter (bravos, gypsies, cardsharps, and the like)

Orazio was primarily interested in Caravaggio's working method. The emphasis on painting from nature gave his art a new freshness and immediacy, particularly in the sumptuous treatment of fabrics.⁶ This transformation naturally influenced the art of his daughter and most important pupil, Artemisia. Indeed, Artemisia's earliest works, such as the *Judith and Holofernes* (Naples, Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte) of 1612, can be difficult to distinguish from those of her father. Through this training, Artemisia became not only the sole female follower of Caravaggio but in fact one of the most direct heirs of the artist.

Orazio's friendship with the notoriously violent and volatile Caravaggio nevertheless raises serious questions about his own character. Caravaggio and Orazio almost certainly coauthored a number of obscene verses about a rival painter, Giovanni Baglione, who sued them for libel. Far more troubling was his friendship with Agostino Tassi, a master painter of illusionistic architecture and an unrepentant criminal with a long and alarming rap sheet.⁷ In the years 1611–12, Gentileschi and Tassi collaborated on frescoes for the Casino delle Muse, a retreat commissioned by the papal nephew Cardinal Scipione Borghese. In 1611 Orazio hired Tassi to teach perspective to Artemisia, and Tassi, taking advantage of her chaperone's absence, raped Artemisia. This episode and its aftermath are well documented due to the fact that a year later Orazio sued Tassi for "defloration" of his daughter, a crime against the honor of the family. The trial is a remarkable document that richly illustrates social and legal history, reveals the disarray of Orazio's household, and allows us to hear the young artist, and those around her, speak through their own voices. The value of these events for understanding Artemisia's art is a matter of scholarly controversy. The trial itself mentions only a handful of paintings and says very little directly about art, and the testimony adheres closely to the legal arguments that were conventional in such cases.⁸ Can the rape and its aftermath provide psychological insight for understanding the artist's paintings? Did knowledge of the rape follow Artemisia to Florence, Naples, and beyond, marring her reputation and reception?

After the trial, Artemisia was quickly married off to Pierantonio Stiattesi, the brother of a family friend, and in late 1612 or 1613 left Rome for Florence, where the family had roots. She seems to have quickly succeeded in the Florentine court, creating some of her most famous works, such as the riveting *Judith and Holofernes* now in the Uffizi and the *Conversion of the Magdalene* in the Palazzo Pitti (see figs. 6.3, 5.21), and becoming the first woman to be admitted to Florence's illustrious Accademia del Disegno. These works show an artist moving gradually away from the Caravaggism of her father and introducing into her paintings more highly polished surfaces, colorism, and increasingly sophisticated conceits. This greater artistic refinement is likely linked to the erudite circles of poets, painters, and intellectuals with which she connected in Florence.⁹

But Artemisia also seems to have faced personal and financial turmoil in Florence. She gave birth to as many as five children during these years, yet only one of them—a daughter named Prudentia or Palmira—appears to have survived past infancy.¹⁰ Francesco Solinas's recent discovery of a trove of thirty-six letters dating from 1616/17 to 1620

changes our perceptions of her personal and financial life in these years. Most surprisingly they reveal that she had a passionate love affair with a wealthy Florentine nobleman named Francesco Maria Maringhi, a figure whose connection to the artist was previously known only from a passing mention in one of her Neapolitan letters.¹¹ Maringhi was a powerful ally and supporter of Artemisia, and although her husband was well aware of this amorous relationship, he turned a blind eye to it. While the full implications of these letters are not clear yet, they do provide us a vivid sense of Artemisia's personality and her tumultuous private life, as well as a broader, deeper insight into her social circle.

In 1620, debt-ridden Artemisia and Stiattesi fled Florence for Rome, where they were to remain for some six years. The extant paintings from this period are of remarkable quality, including what is perhaps her greatest masterpiece, the *Judith and Maidservant* in Detroit (see fig. 3.7). Recent findings, including Simon Vouet's stunning portrait of her (see fig. 1.7) from the collection of papal secretary Cassiano dal Pozzo, hint at a prominent circle of patrons, artists, and collectors in Rome, yet despite a spate of fascinating letters to Maringhi penned in Rome in 1620, precious little is known about her artistic circles in this period.¹²

For reasons that are not entirely clear, Artemisia left Rome around 1626 for Venice, possibly with Stiattesi. This period is among the least studied moments of her career, and no extant pictures or letters can be traced to this time with certainty, but references to her in Venetian poetry of these years suggest that she was well known in the Serenissima. By 1629 she was in Naples, where she had apparently come at the invitation of the Spanish viceroy, the Duke of Alcalá. Although her Neapolitan works are less known to the general public, recent exhibitions have revealed the early 1630s as an underappreciated high point in the artist's career. Relatively recent discoveries such as *Corisca and the Satyr* and *Christ and the Samaritan Woman* show a lyricism, fluidity, and command of color far from Artemisia's youthful Caravaggism and demonstrate an understanding of the Bolognese artists who were so admired in Naples (see figs. 3.23, 3.24).

In 1639 Artemisia traveled to London, yet why and for how long she was there remain unknown. Beyond a single painting, the celebrated *Allegory of Painting* (see fig. 5.8), and a few scattered literary references, Artemisia's English period remains enigmatic and thus will not be addressed in this book.¹³

By 1640 Artemisia was back in Naples, where she spent most of the remainder of her life. Despite the many new paintings presumably from this period that have recently surfaced, our picture of these years remains murky. Even the works from these years with firm attributions fluctuate dramatically in style and quality. This unevenness may be associated with the economic and political turmoil in Naples in the 1640s and 1650s, the artist's declining health, and increasing dependence on workshop assistants. Nevertheless, Artemisia continued to attract international patrons, including the Duke of Guise and the noted Sicilian collector Don Antonio Ruffo. The date of Artemisia's death is unknown, though the latest date of her documented activity is on a contract from 1654.

Eighteenth-century sources report that she was buried in San Giovanni dei Fiorentini, the Tuscan church in Naples.

THE SCOPE OF THIS BOOK

This project began with a rather modest chance discovery. I found, buried in the brittle pages of the nineteenth-century journal of Neapolitan studies *Napoli nobilissima*, numerous references to poems about Artemisia by Neapolitan poets who seem to have known her personally. The poems praised her in terms that were far more glowing and exuberant than I had come to expect, given the conventional view that Artemisia had been illiterate and ignored or dismissed by her contemporaries. Moreover, it became clear that these writers were not peripheral figures but instead were closely associated with the centers of political and cultural power in Naples—the viceregal court and the illustrious Accademia degli Oziosi. These facts seemed particularly at odds with the conception of Artemisia's Neapolitan period that was presented in earlier literature, in which relocation to Naples was seen as the last resort of a depleted artist.

These apparent discrepancies led me to undertake a systematic investigation of the earliest textual and visual evidence of Artemisia's reception in Venice, Rome, Naples, and Florence. While some of the texts were already familiar to Artemisia specialists, they seem to have been little studied; others, including numerous elaborate tributes to her by Neapolitan poets, had been overlooked entirely. One of the more unexpected facts to emerge upon collating this evidence is that Artemisia cultivated close relationships to leading writers, poets, playwrights, and other intellectuals throughout her career. Although her associations with some of these figures are well known, such as with Galileo and Michelangelo Buonarroti the Younger, scholars have understandably been hesitant to entertain fully the possibility that Artemisia might have been immersed in the literary culture of her day.¹⁴

It has been known for some time that in Florence, between about 1613 and 1620, she was part of a close-knit network of the city's leading poets, painters, and dramatists, including the painter Cristofano Allori and the poet Jacopo Cicognini, as well as Buonarroti.¹⁵ The impact of these erudite associations on her art has only begun to be explored in the literature, but scholars have detected the appearance of unusually sophisticated literary-based conceits in her work that coincide with her arrival in Florence.¹⁶

While she was in Rome, several artists paid homage to her, employing refined and playful poetic visual language. The French draftsman Pierre Dumonstier made an elegant drawing of her hand that included a flattering inscription comparing it to the Homeric "hands of Aurora" (see fig. 1.6). Likewise, Simon Vouet painted a dazzling portrait of Artemisia (only recently discovered) that links her to the ancient queen Artemisia of Hallicarnassus (see fig. 1.7).¹⁷ This evidence contributes to the overall picture of Artemisia's emergence in these years as a painter worthy of praise and admiration, in art as well as in verse.

That Artemisia enjoyed fame and praise from a wide range of intellectuals and artists is also evidenced in her Venetian period. It has only recently come to light that Artemisia spent nearly four years in Venice (c. 1626–30),¹⁸ where the city's poets dedicated close to two dozen poems and letters to her, a number that in fact exceeds those in honor of any other contemporary artist.¹⁹ An engraving tells us that she was also associated with the Accademia de' Desiosi, an academy that included prominent playwrights, librettists, and poets, including Giovan Francesco Loredan, who wrote two admiring letters to her. She also designed the frontispiece for a lesser-known academy called the Accademia degli Informi. Literary evidence suggests that during her stay in Venice the artist was admired not only for her painting but also for her sharp wit, as well as, apparently—and rather unexpectedly—for her abilities as a singer.

In Naples, where Artemisia spent the greater part of the last twenty years of her life she was, as noted, associated with the upper echelons of the viceregal court.²⁰ She was on personal terms with the poets of Naples's most illustrious literary academy, the Accademia degli Oziosi, painting works for them that were repaid with numerous and extravagant poetic tributes.

Moreover, her fame among literati continued well after her death in the mid-1650s, and she is the subject of literary and biographical tributes far later than has previously been recognized; members of the Oziosi academy devoted poetry to her in the 1660s, 1670s, and beyond. Eighteenth-century biographers in Naples and in Tuscany—including her first biographer, the Florentine patrician Averardo de' Medici—extolled her wit and learning, which they detected in both her letters and her painting.

While it may be expected that an artist like Domenichino or Rubens would foster such literary associations, in the case of Artemisia it is remarkable. Not only did Artemisia, as far as can be determined, receive no formal education, but also she stated during the rape trial of 1612 that she did not how to write and could read only a little. Evidence suggests, however, that we must seriously consider the possibility that Artemisia was a far more active participant in contemporary literary, courtly, and academic culture than has previously been suspected.

ARTEMISIA, LITERACY, AND ORAL TRADITION

How is it that a painter who was, by her own account, effectively illiterate, was able to participate in such literary and intellectual exchange? This issue lies at the heart of comprehending Artemisia's relationship to artistic and literary tradition, and, more broadly, it is central to understanding the relationship between word and image in the early modern period.

At the rape trial against Agostino Tassi in 1612, Artemisia stated unequivocally, "Io non so scrivere e poco leggere" (I don't know how to write, and can only read a little).²¹

Although emphasizing this fact was in her legal interest—the Tassi defense had accused her of writing lascivious letters—a defense witness inadvertently confirmed the truth of her claim.²² It is now clear that she did in fact learn how to write at some point: the letters recently uncovered by Solinas—unlike Artemisia's previously known ones that were dictated so she could correspond while painting—appear to be in her own hand.²³

Gaining literacy later in life is known from other examples in early modern Italy: after the Cavaliere d'Arpino was teased for his inability to sign his own name, he taught himself to read,²⁴ and it is possible that, given the extremely low literacy rates among women, expectations would have been lower.²⁵ Artemisia's letters show signs of her having been a late learner; Solinas describes them as "incorrect but profound, ungrammatical but cultured."²⁶ Thus, her level of literacy seems to have been on par with that of her father, Orazio, who confessed he could write but not spell properly ("Io so scrivere, ma non troppo corretto").²⁷ Misspellings and grammatical errors notwithstanding, the letters are remarkable for their references to or paraphrases of the poetry of Petrarch, Ariosto, and Ovid.²⁸ What do these literary allusions tell us about the young artist's education?

Well before the discovery of Artemisia's letters to Maringhi, some scholars had surmised that Artemisia must have gained a fairly advanced level of learning, based both on the elevated literary and intellectual circles with which she associated and on the conceptual sophistication of her pictures. Nearly fifty years ago, in his analysis of Loredan's letters to Artemisia, Nicola Ivanoff observed that the painter must have been able to read.²⁹ More recently, Keith Christiansen has argued that Artemisia's close bonds with Florentine literati and the growing poetic complexity of her Florentine and post-Florentine works suggest a newfound literacy.³⁰ He writes, "Not even in the work Caravaggio carried out for the cultivated Cardinal del Monte do we find such a sophisticated manipulation of realist style in the interest of literary-based conceits."³¹ Judith Mann has also shown an increasing receptivity to the idea of Artemisia as learned,³² and Elizabeth Cropper has suggested that the Maringhi letters finally resolve the debate over Artemisia's culture and education.³³

Yet despite references to Ariosto or Petrarch, we should not treat Artemisia as a *peintre-philosophe*, with a variety of arcane texts at her disposal. Simply being able to write or paraphrase a line of poetry does not signify a humanist education, and despite Artemisia's ability to read and write, she had virtually no formal schooling. Recent research by literary and social historians has revealed that in the early modern world knowledge was overwhelmingly oral (or aural) in nature, whether in the form of poetry composed extemporaneously, canonical works being recited or set to music, histories and mythologies being read aloud, the latest political or scientific developments debated over meals and on the street corners, or lively conversations taking place in courts, academies, and picture galleries. Such communications were not limited to the elite spheres of the courts and academies but formed part of the fabric of quotidian existence in taverns, piazzas, and brothels.³⁴ Indeed the works that she references—Petrarch and Ariosto—were

among the most widely known to the general public. On the other hand, Artemisia's work does betray a complex grasp of poetic conceits and contrapositions held in common with the writers and artists with whom she cultivated close bonds.

The apparent paradox is resolved when we understand that the spoken word was a critical means by which Artemisia was exposed not only to the stories and subjects that populate her pictures but, more significantly, to the poetic and literary conceits and artistic and religious ideals that shaped her art. Through constant exposure to the recitation and improvisation of verse, seventeenth-century artists, including Artemisia, were conditioned to interpret their subjects in light of the oft-repeated tropes, conceits, and juxtapositions characteristic of baroque poetry. In this light, we may see how, despite having little formal education, Artemisia could display a highly polished and sophisticated poetic sensibility in her works.

That illiteracy and learning were not mutually exclusive is illustrated by Michel de Montaigne's report regarding a woman named Divizia in a small village in the Aretine countryside in 1581: "She is a poor peasant woman of the neighborhood. . . . She can neither write nor read. But in her tender youth there was an uncle in her father's house who was always reading Ariosto and other poets in her presence, and her mind was found to be so born to poetry that she not only composes verses with the most wonderful readiness possible, but also brings into them ancient fables, names of gods, countries, sciences, famous men, as if she had been properly schooled."³⁵

The recitation and performance of poetry had a venerable history among the lower classes before Montaigne's day. Setting poetry to song, for example, was one way that it entered the popular consciousness. Dante himself had grumbled about hearing his *Divine Comedy* sung by a blacksmith and an ass driver, complaining, "You sing the book and do not say it as I made it; this is my only craft [*arte*] and you ruin it."³⁶ Early biographers Carlo Cesare Malvasia and Giovan Pietro Bellori both report that the typically earthy and plain-spoken Annibale Carracci, upon standing before Giulio Romano's epic *Battle of Constantine*, recited the opening lines of Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*.³⁷ Artemisia's father, Orazio, seems to have had more than a passing familiarity with lyric poetry, for he and Caravaggio lampooned the genre in their libelous send-up of Baglione.³⁸ Artemisia's own references to lyric poetry in her letters are somewhat jumbled paraphrases, mixing up passages of Petrarch and Poliziano, or echoing passages of Ariosto, in the way that might be expected of someone who had been exposed to them aurally.³⁹ Evidence suggests that, whether sung or spoken, poetry and classical learning circulated widely among a largely illiterate populace.⁴⁰ The boundary between written and oral discourse was a fluid one in an age that cherished conversation, oratory, improvisation, recitation, performance, rhetoric, and wit and in which literacy levels, especially among women, were low.