

Though the term *feminism* did not yet exist, Artemisia Gentileschi's embrace of the vital force of feminine strength is a distinguishing element to her paintings. The woman painter's life and art were affected by her sex in a time when women were not only considered property but had to deal with the repercussions of an oppressive patriarchal society. From her youth onwards, Gentileschi witnessed women unjustly convicted and punished for crimes that if men had committed these same crimes, the law would have allowed them to walk free.<sup>1</sup> Sadly, Artemisia was later privy to the misogynistic laws herself with the famous rape trial, wherein she was scorned, ridiculed, tortured, and subjected to a demeaning physical examination for evidence of rape. Beyond this, her father sued her attacker on the basis that his property had been damaged and he could not marry off his daughter, but not for the physical or emotional turmoil she was put through. It was a reality that women did not own their bodies, much less property, and were said to be weaker than men in reason, morality, and emotional stability.<sup>2</sup> The patriarchy and those who support it have continued to perpetuate these lies for centuries to further subjugate and control women. With the wake of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, much progress has taken place, but there are prevailing similarities between modern day to Renaissance Italy with the presence of double standards, objectification, misogynistic practices, and cases of sexual violence principally against women, seen in recent examples such as the #MeToo movement.<sup>3</sup> As Mary Garrard, an art historian who has done much work with the life and art of Artemisia Gentileschi, states, "full equality between men and women remains a dream".<sup>4</sup> With context of Artemisia's experiences of sexual assault, the strength of her female figures depicted in her paintings become ever more powerful and inspiring to women who feel the oppression of men keenly in their own lives, both today and in Gentileschi's time. In a review of Mary Garrard's book, *Artemisia Gentileschi, and Feminism in Early Modern Europe*, art historian Gary Schwartz calls this idea the "transhistorical community of women".<sup>5</sup> Through the combined methodologies of biography, feminism, and semiotics/structuralism, various critics exhibit Artemisia Gentileschi's difficult experiences as a woman in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and how they influenced her stylistic choices. When her paintings—such as *Susanna and the Elders*, *Lucretia*, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, and others—are seen through the perspective of modern day, Gentileschi continues to be a relevant model for women who struggle with the prevailing frustration of the female experience and the universal damages of

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: Feminism in Early Modern Europe*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2020) 13.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: Feminism in Early Modern Europe*, 68.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: Feminism in Early Modern Europe*, back cover.

sexism, which can manifest itself in the discrimination of lives and careers of women, hypocrisy, sexual harassment, and violence.

Scholars such as Mary Garrard and others offer comprehensive criticism regarding the biography of Artemisia Gentileschi. The precocious painter was born in Rome on July 8, 1593.<sup>6</sup> She was the eldest and only daughter among three sons born to Orazio Gentileschi and Prudentia Montone, who later died when Artemisia was ten years old.<sup>7</sup> Under her father's tutelage, Artemisia grew to be prodigious in painting and by age nineteen, she had no peer equal to her talent, or so Orazio had stated of his daughter in a letter to the Dowager Grand Duchess in Florence.<sup>8</sup> In the time and place she was born and raised, Artemisia would have had no other way to access the artistic profession other than for her own father to teach her, for male masters were not allowed to educate female apprentices. She began her training as early as 1607, when the talented artist was fourteen years old. From a very young age Artemisia was surrounded by the world of art through her father. She was in the presence of Orazio's colleagues including the Baroque artist Caravaggio, the inventor of tenebrism, whom she emulated in many of her own paintings, though he died in 1610. Unfortunately, other peers of her father came to be close to Artemisia, and in a time which was especially harsh and dangerous for women, it was difficult to avoid sexual opportunists such as Agostino Tassi—painter and colleague to Orazio.<sup>9</sup>

In 1611, Artemisia was forcefully raped in her bedroom by Agostino Tassi, after he had been asked by Orazio to teach his daughter perspective and he had become familiar with the household.<sup>10</sup> Tassi flirted with Artemisia many times, despite her continued dismissals, going so far as to trail her around the city rendering her uneasy and afraid before he forced sexual intercourse on her.<sup>11</sup> In testimony of the rape trial, Artemisia recounts the incidents in front of the judge, her father, her assailant, and numerous other witnesses, saying the following

“...when we were in front of the bedroom door, he pushed me inside and locked the door. He then threw me on to the edge of the bed, pushing me with a hand on my breast, and he put a knee between my thighs to prevent

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<sup>6</sup> R. Ward Bissell, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Authority of Art*, (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania, 1999) 2.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991) 1.

<sup>8</sup> Bissell, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Authority of Art*, 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> R. Ward Bissell, “*Artemisia Gentileschi—A New Documented Chronology*,” *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 50, (no. 2), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3048529>, 153.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art*, 415-417.

me from closing them. Lifting my clothes, which he had a great trouble doing, he placed a hand with a handkerchief at my throat and on my mouth to keep me from screaming...having previously put both knees between my legs with his penis pointed at my vagina he began to push inside.”<sup>12</sup>

After the rape, the perpetrator deceived Artemisia by promising marriage after having taken her virginity, though he had no intention of following through. Consequently, she would continue to have sex with him under the false notion of impending marriage, events she would later defend with the following quote: “What I was doing with him I only did so that, as he had dishonored me, he would marry me.”<sup>13</sup> Certainly, if the marriage promise had been genuine, it would have spared her reputation and the pains of a trial. This degradation continued until March of 1612, when Orazio brought Tassi to trial, accusing him of deflowering his daughter while refusing to marry her, thus bringing shame to the Gentileschi family.<sup>14</sup> Artemisia testified under oath that she had been forcibly removed of her virginity by Tassi. She obliged to prove this through a sequence of painful and humiliating procedures, including physical examination that she was in fact no longer a virgin by midwives, and enduring torture of a *sibille* to confirm her legitimacy.<sup>15</sup> However, Tassi blatantly denied these charges of rape, accusing Artemisia of promiscuity even with her own father. Tassi offered stories so inconsistent and implausible, he was convicted of bearing false testimony, but not regarding the rape of young Artemisia, and he never carried out a sentence.<sup>16</sup> Soon after the trial, Artemisia was married to a Florentine apothecary, Pietro Antonio Stiattesi. The marriage was arranged for the purpose of restoring the Gentileschi family honor.<sup>17</sup> The couple settled in Florence and Artemisia gave birth to five children, though only one survived. Artemisia took steps to establish herself as an independent artist and businesswoman, and effectively separated herself from the rape trial.<sup>18</sup> Gentileschi continued to be a successful painter from that point onwards, though it is not known exactly how long she lived, or what she ultimately died from as there is not much written about her later years. Unfortunately, from her entire life, only thirty-four paintings and twenty-eight letters survive.<sup>19</sup> However, what scholars do know and what is available to them

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<sup>12</sup> Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art*, 416.

<sup>13</sup> Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: Feminism in Early Modern Europe*, 23.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: Feminism in Early Modern Europe*, 24.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Bissell, “*Artemisia Gentileschi—A New Documented Chronology*,” 154.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art*, 138

paints a picture of a strong-willed and competent woman in a time where women were thought not capable of such qualities.

Mary Garrard, among other scholars, offers comprehensive feminist criticism of Artemisia Gentileschi's paintings. Artemisia created a whole collection of large-scale paintings with biblical or historical themes in which women play a central role, and in many of them she focuses on sexual threats posed to women by men.<sup>20</sup> Of the few paintings known to be made in her early years, two can be attributed as her earliest works including *Susanna and the Elders* and *Lucretia*, both of which dealt with difficult topics relating to female victims of sexual violence.<sup>21</sup> *Susanna and the Elders* (Figure 1) painted in 1610, shows a woman in obvious distress. Susanna in this depiction is not capable of defending herself and is shown as a victim. It is illuminating when placed in the context that only a year later the rape of Artemisia would occur. Mary Garrard offers the interpretation, based on other scholar's writings, that perhaps Orazio or even Artemisia herself etched in an incorrect date to separate it from the trial.<sup>22</sup> This is a compelling argument as the Susanna figure seems to parallel the young Artemisia who suffered the events of rape, an unjust trial, conflicting testimonies, and was most likely subject to men's harassment before and after these events.<sup>23</sup> Garrard also brings up the compositional choice of Artemisia to show the men whispering to one another in a conspiratorial unity of scheming to ruin the girl's reputation.<sup>24</sup> Artemisia's reputation was also at stake with the rape trial, further cemented by the fact she was quickly married off to a man in Florence to avoid public scrutiny. Artemisia, just like Susanna, also had two assailants. Through testimony of the rape trial, it is known Agostino Tassi was joined in his attempted conquest of Artemisia by Cosimo Quorli, who on one occasion attempted to rape Artemisia as well but was luckily unsuccessful.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, with these parallels between chosen subject and real life, it is tempting to draw conclusions that Artemisia chose this subject on purpose.

The biblical character, Susanna, was a figure of female virtue and resistance to male sexual aggression.<sup>26</sup> The chaste Susanna was the wife of a

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<sup>20</sup> Rolf Toman, ed. *Baroque Architecture, Sculpture, and Painting*. (Germany: Tandem Verlag GmbH, 2004) 394.

<sup>21</sup> Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: Feminism in Early Modern Europe*, 22.

<sup>22</sup> Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: Feminism in Early Modern Europe*, 84.

<sup>23</sup> Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art*, 204.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art*, 414-415

<sup>26</sup> Pollock, Griselda. "Review: Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art by Mary D. Garrard" *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 72 (no. 3) pg. 499-505. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3045754>, 502.

wealthy Jewish patriarch, and while bathing in her private garden she was accosted by two elders. They conspired to force her sexual submission by blackmail. They told her that if she did not yield, they would spread the word she was caught in the act of adultery with a young man.<sup>27</sup> This would mean certain death by execution. Despite this, she refused the old men's demands and was put on trial for adultery and sentenced to die. Thankfully, her innocence was proven when inconsistencies were found in the elders' stories.<sup>28</sup> In the context of Renaissance Italy, just as with the biblical story, the society prevailed as an oppressive patriarchy where a woman's virginity was her primary virtue and was essential to prove to prospective husbands that she had not lain with other men.<sup>29</sup> The elders in the story were convicted and executed for false testimony, but not for the threatening of a young woman. This is reminiscent of Agostino Tassi's conviction though he ultimately walked free. Artemisia's portrayal of Susanna is first and foremost a highly concentrated presentation of human distress.<sup>30</sup> This was much unlike other portrayals of Susanna at the time by male painters, who focused on her bewitching beauty which drove the men to commit the crime. Examples include a family friend of the Gentileschi's, Giuseppe Cesari, and his *Susanna and the Elders* (Figure 2) from 1607. This portrayal of Susanna is seductive. Her gaze directly confronts the viewer while she combs her hair with naked breasts exposed and legs outstretched alluringly. To enhance this erotic picture, a sexually suggestive fountain is echoed by a curve of drapery between Susanna's bare thighs.<sup>31</sup> Despite its moral theme, the subject was often used by patrons and viewers for voyeuristic opportunities of the female nude and the erotic notion of conquest.<sup>32</sup> As scholar Mary Garrard states, Artemisia recaptures the original story, a story of trauma, sexual aggression, and a victim in distress. In Artemisia's painting, Susanna twists uncomfortably away from her assailants, as she thrusts her arm out in alarm or disdain and clenches the other arm against her chest in an instinctual gesture of defense.<sup>33</sup> Her assailants loom above her menacingly. Her head is bent at an uneven axis in her attempt to break away. Her face is distorted into an expression of disgust and fear. With this compositional choice, the subject shifts to a story of a woman's anguish and away from the men's pleasure.<sup>34</sup> Even more interesting is the consideration that Artemisia's depiction of *Susanna* features more of her nude body than in other depictions of the time, even including aureoles around the nipples that most male artists did not

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<sup>27</sup> Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art*, 185.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: Feminism in Early Modern Europe*, 70.

<sup>30</sup> Bissell, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Authority of Art*, 2.

<sup>31</sup> Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: Feminism in Early Modern Europe*, 74.

<sup>32</sup> Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: Feminism in Early Modern Europe*, 76.

<sup>33</sup> Bissell, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Authority of Art*, 3.

<sup>34</sup> Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: Feminism in Early Modern Europe* 76.

include in portrayals of breasts, and still managed to make the composition about the woman's distress and not about her body.<sup>35</sup> Another interesting detail in the composition are the elders themselves. Usually, in depictions of *Susanna and the Elders*, both men are depicted as aging. However, Artemisia makes the decision to paint one of the men as an attractive young male. His face is somewhat hidden in the composition, but the inclusion of a younger male shows that no matter the age or appearance of the men, Susanna's refusal is a matter of consent—a concept which is difficult for some men to comprehend even in the modern day.

The idea that women were expected to suffer because they had been raped, or “spoiled” for marriage to anyone—their social identities changed forever—was a concept which Artemisia had to grapple with before and after the rape trial—as did other victims of sexual assault at the time.<sup>36</sup> This idea is also found within artistic narratives such as the story of Lucretia. Artemisia's painting *Lucretia* (Figure 3), completed between 1612 and 1613, endures as a figure of protest for the injustice of women who had been sexually assaulted and were then shamed for it. The story of Lucretia is more disastrous than Susanna's, though both narratives revolve around chastity and rape. In the story, the beauty and virtue of Lucretia aroused Sextus Tarquinius to sneak into her bedroom. He threatened to kill her if she did not yield to him. When she refused even in the face of death, he then threatened to kill her and one of his slaves and put their naked bodies in bed together so it would appear as though they had been caught in the act of adultery. Faced with possible disgrace, Lucretia gave in to the rape.<sup>37</sup> The next day, she told her husband, family, and friends of the event. Though they pardoned her, she ultimately takes a knife and stabs herself in the breast so that no unchaste woman could use her story as an example to get away with adultery.<sup>38</sup> In Gentileschi's portrayal of *Lucretia*, the heroine is seated in a dark setting, knife in hand, seeming to be in the moment of the decision to take her own life.<sup>39</sup> Her naked shoulders, breasts, and knee are all exposed by the style of *tenebrism*, the strong contrast of lights and darks, which Caravaggio invented. Lucretia holds a dagger in one hand and her breast in the other, while looking upward as if to seek God's help.<sup>40</sup> As Mary Garrard states, in contrast to other portrayals of the period, Artemisia's *Lucretia* seems to hesitate and question the necessity of what she is about to do. She holds the dagger in an upright position, hesitating. In contrast, other Lucretia's of the time were depicted as solemn and determined, often

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<sup>35</sup> Ann Sutherland Harris, *Seventeenth Century Art & Architecture*, (New Jersey, Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005) 52-53.

<sup>36</sup> Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: Feminism in Early Modern Europe*, 90.

<sup>37</sup> Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: Feminism in Early Modern Europe*, 86.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: Feminism in Early Modern Europe*, 89.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

aiming the dagger at their breast as if there was no need for contemplation or doubt. This expectation for women to suffer or be punished for being a victim of sexual aggression is a concept which Artemisia dealt with herself and would have resonated with her in the time of the trial. It seems to be no coincidence that *Lucretia* was completed shortly after these events.

In Artemisia Gentileschi's paintings, women are depicted as courageous heroes and protagonists, perhaps for the first time in the history of art.<sup>41</sup> *Judith Slaying Holofernes* is a story of powerful feminine strength [a concept which scared many men in Artemisia's time and continues to scare misogynistic men today]. Artemisia often portrayed realistic and shocking subjects of grisly events with the protagonists being notorious women, or *donne infame*—strong-willed and capable, shown to be either fighting against men or smartly outwitting them.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps this is because she felt powerless against men herself. The biblical story of *Judith* begins with the Assyrian general Holofernes, as he attempts to siege the town of Bethulia on the outskirts of Jerusalem.<sup>43</sup> The inhabitants are on the point of surrender when Judith, a widow, volunteers to act in defense for the Israelites. Without explaining her plan to anyone, she goes to the Assyrian camp and asks to speak with Holofernes himself. Under the pretense that she is offering help to the Assyrians and betraying her own city, Holofernes accepts her counsel. On the fourth night of her stay, Holofernes invites Judith to eat and drink with him. As the night continues, Holofernes becomes sexually aroused by Judith, but also becomes noticeably inebriated to the point of falling asleep in his bed. At this point, Judith takes the opportunity to take his scimitar and sever his head from his body. She gives the head to her maidservant who, in turn puts the head into their sack meant for food and they leave the camp to return home.<sup>44</sup> Once back in their city, they are welcomed by their people and present the head of Holofernes, which Judith advises to hang on the outside of the city walls to show everyone what they had done. The Assyrians flee with the knowledge their leader is dead.<sup>45</sup> Artemisia paints this subject more than once throughout her life.

Artemisia's earliest *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (Figure 4) as there was more than one, was painted between 1618 and 1620. In her portrayal of this story, she is unabashedly gory. Within this work, she strengthened her Caravaggesque style with the sharply focused, centralized composition emphasized by using dramatic lights and shadows. However, Artemisia's depiction of the story sharply

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<sup>41</sup> Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art*, 138.

<sup>42</sup> Jesse Locker, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Language of Painting*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015) 1.

<sup>43</sup> Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art*, 280.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

contrasts with Caravaggio's *Judith and Holofernes* (Figure 5), painted in 1598. Caravaggio's depiction of Judith shows a matronly maidservant and a very young Judith, though she is supposed to be a widow. Many things about this composition are amiss. Caravaggio depicts blood as neat parallel ribbons running down the neck, though cutting a neck is an extremely messy business. Judith leans away from her task, repulsed, while also attempting to detach the head with a sword, but the figures are shown in awkward angles which would have made the task impossible.<sup>46</sup> Artemisia's Judith, in contrast, is much more mature. Artemisia shows Judith in the act of cutting off the head of her would-be seducer with a large sword. Her face is fixed in an expression of determination and concentration. Her entire demeanor is reminiscent of an experienced person who understands precisely what she is doing.<sup>47</sup> Artemisia shows a determined, competent, and physically strong woman able to do what she must to save her city from siege of the Assyrians. The maidservant is even seen as a young and competent figure holding down the large man as Judith does her work.<sup>48</sup> Gentileschi shows spurts of blood as it would have appeared in a grisly event such as this. Small dots of blood can even be seen on Judith's arms and breast as she works to remove the head. The painting was a shock and upsetting to many people. Part of the terror was probably the gender reversal of violence, and it symbolized the female defiance of male power.<sup>49</sup> However, some scholars consider that Artemisia's theme of female power could be considered an emphasis on the strength of women when they act in collaboration.<sup>50</sup> Some scholars have speculated that perhaps Artemisia painted the subject to carry out a psychic vengeance against her rapist Tassi, but also to rectify a patriarchal world where men believed women incapable of strength.<sup>51</sup> It seems it was through Artemisia's paintings she was able to create new realities for herself—vengeance against those who have wronged her, fame as a master artist, and a world untainted by male oppression.

Through studies of semiotics, scholars showcase that Gentileschi used gestural language in her self-portraits as a method of showcasing her competency as a serious artist in a man's world and in a man's profession; another example of Artemisia's female experience in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Artemisia was a competitive artist, and this was necessary to fight for her place among a history of men. She showcased this spirit of competition through her self-portrait, *Artemisia Gentileschi as the Allegory of Painting* (Figure 6) painted in 1630, and her

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<sup>46</sup> Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: Feminism in Early Modern Europe*, 141.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art*, 278-320.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Toman, ed. *Baroque Architecture, Sculpture, and Painting*, 394.

<sup>51</sup> Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art*, 278-320.

*Allegory of Painting* (Figure 7) painted between 1638-1640. Her self-portrait *Artemisia Gentileschi as the Allegory of Painting* depicts a woman at the easel, gazing directly at the viewer. She holds a paintbrush in one hand with the little finger raised in the air. In Renaissance Italy, this gestural language was meant as a challenge.<sup>52</sup> Artemisia puts herself forward as a competitive artist who challenges her male peers.<sup>53</sup> This idea of establishing herself as a serious artist through ideology and symbolism used in her paintings is also seen in her famous *Allegory of Painting*. Within this painting, the artist is depicted leaning forward with a paintbrush aimed at a blank canvas. She is unaware of her appearance while absorbed into the act of painting.<sup>54</sup> The composition, though seemingly simple, contains several symbols for great masters in art. The figure's unruly hair for instance was a symbol of artistic inspiration and temperament.<sup>55</sup> Even the clothes she wears in the composition allude to her skill as an artist. The gold chain, perhaps the most important detail of all, which dangles around her neck resembles the chains rulers would gift to prominent artists, and as scholars have written about her life, Artemisia felt constantly overlooked and dismissed as an artist because of her gender.<sup>56</sup> Therefore through the inclusion of these details, Artemisia portrays herself as a great master artist on par with her male competitors.

In modern contexts, structuralism studies can be used to see that Gentileschi's work adds to the evolving story of feminism. Feminism has a long history which many people do not recognize, because it has only been in the last century where there have been numerous concrete steps toward equality. It was not until the late nineteenth century when Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth C. Stanton would initiate the campaign for women's suffrage, and Sojourner Truth would speak out at a women's rights convention.<sup>57</sup> It was not until 1920 that women could vote. Since then, each generation has experienced waves of feminism with disappointing backlash, such as contemporary examples have shown with the upheaval of *Roe v Wade*. However, there have been rises and falls for feminism since the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Even in Gentileschi's time, there were women authors who wrote about their experiences and frustrations with the opposite sex. Though Gentileschi lived in a time long before the term *feminism* existed, her paintings suggest a modern way of thinking extremely ahead of her time. Modern reviews of her work inevitably describe the artist's connection to feminism and her experiences as a woman in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In 2001 and 2002,

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<sup>52</sup> Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: Feminism in Early Modern Europe*, 169.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: Feminism in Early Modern Europe*, 222.

<sup>55</sup> Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art*, 339.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: Feminism in Early Modern Europe*, 68.

an exhibition entitled “Artemisia Gentileschi and Her Times” contained more than half of Artemisia’s life’s work, along with work of her male contemporaries.<sup>58</sup> The exhibition travelled to St. Louis, New York, and Venice. Reviews of the pieces called the paintings “Spectacular!”<sup>59</sup> Though there was also discussion of her experiences with rape and the sexually aggressive nature of her paintings. In a review for a different exhibition, Mary Garrard states that Artemisia’s true exceptionality was her ability to convert specific female experiences into art.<sup>60</sup> Artemisia along with countless women across time have uttered these words at least once, “If I were a man, this would not have happened.”<sup>61</sup> With this quote, which is taken from one of her surviving letters, Artemisia cements herself as a feminist figure, beyond simply being an accomplished artist and businesswoman in a man’s society. Some have insinuated that Artemisia’s art has little to do with feminism, however feminism is a basic human response to gender injustice.<sup>62</sup> In one example of modern-day feminist solidarity, in the wake of dramatic congressional hearings in 2018 a Supreme Court candidate was credibly accused of sexual assault, and in response Artemisia Gentileschi’s *Judith Slaying Holofernes* was used as an icon on social media for those who were also victims of sexual violence.<sup>63</sup> This example and others showcase that it is through the modern lens of feminism which allow viewers to understand the true depths of Artemisia’s paintings and allow female viewers specifically those who have also struggled with sexism to find a kindred spirit across the span of 400 years.

The idea of a community of women across time is a comforting thought to those who struggle with their own experiences, whether it be sexual assault or discrimination, as these incidents can make one feel isolated and hopeless. With context of Artemisia’s experiences of sexual assault, the strength of the female figures depicted in her paintings become more powerful and inspiring to women who feel the oppression of the patriarchy keenly in their own lives, both today and in Gentileschi’s time. Moreover, Artemisia’s example of an accomplished artist and businesswoman in a time where it was difficult to simply exist as a female is an extremely powerful example of what women can accomplish. Therefore, Gentileschi’s paintings such as *Susanna and the Elders*, *Lucretia*, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, and her self-portraits show how through the perspective of modern

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<sup>58</sup> Marjorie Och, “Artemisia Gentileschi and Her Times,” *Art Inquiries*, vol. 17 (no. 2) 213-16. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=aft&AN=13037026&site=ehost-live>>

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Mary Garrard, “Artemisia’s Critics, Painting with Crude Strokes”, *Woman’s Art Journal*, vol. 24, (no. 2) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1358796>, 56.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: Feminism in Early Modern Europe*, 68.

day, Artemisia continues to be a relevant model for women who struggle with the prevailing frustration of the female experience and the universal damages of sexism. Such as with troubling treatments of women like prejudice and discrimination, sexual double standards and sexual harassment and violence. Artemisia Gentileschi embraces the vital force of feminine strength in all her paintings, and women today can relate to her experiences and find comfort in the fact that none of us are alone.

#### Illustrations

(Figure 1) Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1610, oil on canvas



(Figure 2) Giuseppe Cesari (Cavaliere d'Arpino), *Susanna and the Elders*, 1606-1607, oil on copper



(Figure 3) Artemisia Gentileschi, *Lucretia*, ca. 1612-1613, oil on canvas



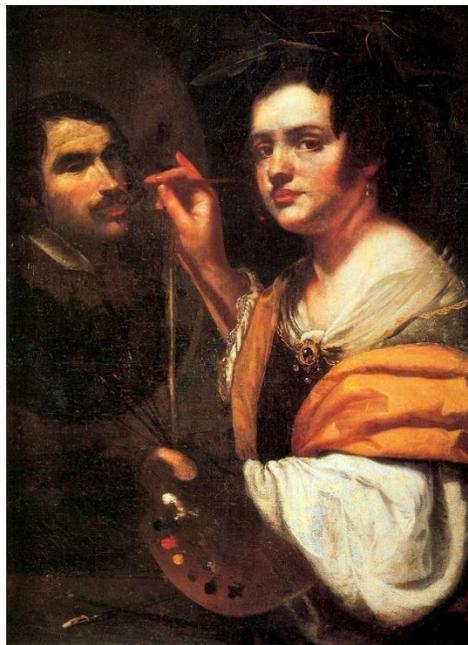
(Figure 4) Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, ca. 1612-1613  
Oil on canvas



(Figure 5) Caravaggio, *Judith and Holofernes*, ca. 1598, oil on canvas



(Figure 6) Artemisia Gentileschi, *Artemisia Gentileschi as the Allegory of Painting*, ca. 1630, oil on canvas



(Figure 6) Artemisia Gentileschi, *Allegory of Painting*, ca. 1638-1640, oil on canvas



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