Nicole Schrader

Mini-Research Art History / Humanities

Mrs. Schrader

October 28, 2021

Artemisia Gentileschi: A Female Empowerment Artist

Growing up in a celebrated artist's house is no guarantee that you too will be famous. Fortunately for Artemisia Gentileschi, she also had the ability to learn directly from the master and had the skills to keep up.  Gentileschi was an apprentice to her father Orazio, who at the age of 37 met Caravaggio and fully embraced the young man's theories on color, lighting and theme (O'Neill). Passing that influence on to Artemisia, she became a voice to what would later be called the Braque time period. The skill that blossomed well before any tragedy could shape her as an adult.  In fact, her father stated in 1612, "(she) has in 3 years become so skilled that I can venture to say that today she has no peer" (Mead). Such fine compliments were not often used on women, even the few that decided to live by their abilities in art. She pushed her talent to represent women not as weak and as damsels waiting to be saved, but as strong heroes of their own stories, much as she herself was in her own life.

Women were not truly considered to have the capability to be great artists when Artemisia was a girl.  Though Orazio, her father, believed enough in his daughter to train and recommend her, he did not allow her to live as freely as the men he trained.  As per the lifestyle of the day, Gentileschi was not allowed to leave her home except to attend church, so her exposure to other artist were limited to her father's studio, which was in their home and the church (Mead).  Of course, this is more training than most women had during the time period, and clearly it would inform her style as her exposure to other choices in color and theme were thus limited, but as her father was so successful as an artist it seems to matter little. As early as 1611 she was painting works that were of a high quality as seen in her creation of Susanna and the Elders (O'Neill).  Not only do we see the skill she has acquired at the age of 16, but her choice of themes is important to illustrate her true self. She chose the story of Susanna, who was found by two men (elders) while she was bathing. They try to blackmail her into having sex with them. She however risks everything to keep her virtue and is often seen as a powerful woman. Gentileschi paints her with inner strength as well as she does not appear to be seductive or weak. She has been caught in the painting, but she does not look as coquettish as many of Gentileschi’s contemporaries depicted her. Her own good name however could not be so easily protected. The same cloistered home where she was painting this master piece was the sight of her eventual rape by one of Orazio's fellow artist, who often visited the studio.

There are over 3000 documents connected to the rape of Gentileschi, so there is little question of her feelings about the even or the actual events surrounding it (O’Neill). By all accounts it was violent, but what seems to be most shocking is where the trouble for her rapist actually began. it was not the assault, but his unwillingness to marry Artemisia after wards (Mead). That’s right once her father found out, he demanded her rapist marry her. perhaps even more shocking is the fact that Artemisia consented to intercourse with him after the rape because she too believed he was going to marry her and that it was part of her duty to him (O’Neill). Modern readers must consider that in this time period it was considered acceptable to have pre-martial sex as long as there was to be a wedding in the near future so no resulting child would be illegitament. By that rationale, you could rape your wife, so there were no real damages. The other thing that must be understood is that one couldn’t sue for rape, but for damage to the family’s reputation, which is exactly what Orazio did. (Mead).

We know due to the records given through historical records that Gentileschi herself looked at the events more as disrespectful than a violation. During the course of the trial, when she was being tortured to see if she was telling the truth (Mead) as her testimony reflects “this is the ring that you give me and these are your promises.” (Mead). Does this sound like a woman who can’t let the violation to her body go? Does this sound like a woman who would get her most recognition by revisiting the story Judith so often? I suppose if you look at Judith’s story as one of revenge rather than a women’s empowerment then you might think that about Artemisia. In fact, the trial didn’t even keep her from marrying. Immediately following the trial she married and moved to Florence to escape the scandal of the dishonor to her family name. (O’Neill). Anyone who does not see Artemisia as a strong woman, who painted strong women is terribly mistaken. She did not cloister herself afterwards, she did not hide herself from other sexual and marriageable partners. She wanted to see seen as equal and that is what she painted as well. Judith, like Gentilschi’s early paintings of a woman that men wanted to see destroyed, rises beyond the damsel who through circumstance survives. Her subjects are heroes in their own right.

Gentileschi went on to make a name for herself, both in her own time and in ours. She is marked as representing the Baroque time period at the same level and quality as Caravaggio, a contemporary and a man of her time. To reduce her to a woman scorned and bitter, is to not truly understand the paintings that she created. She began by painting women who knew who they were as see with “Susanne and the Elders” and she continued that through her many visits to Judith and Holofernes. Judith is never seen as weak or fearful. Much like Gentileschi herself, she confronts her task and what is necessary to save herself and her people. Gentileschi does not painter her as a punisher of men. She is a victor for her people. The man who tried to destroy her, humiliate her, where is he to history, to art? Quite honestly he disappears other than as a footnote in Artemisia’s story.

Annotated Bibliography

Mead, Rebecca. *A Fuller Picture of Artemisia Gentileschi*. The New Yorker. September 28, 2020.   [https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/10/05/a-fuller-picture-of-artemisia- gentileschi.com](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/10/05/a-fuller-picture-of-artemisia-%20%09gentileschi.com)

Rebecca Mead has worked for the New Yorker for over thirty years; the New Yorker being an established scholarly magazine.  Mead does a true overview of the artist’s life even encompassing why she fell from favor and her rediscovery in modern time. She does a fair job discussing Gentileschi’s rape, but then goes on to discuss how modern historians view her work. Through analysis of her work and new letters, recently discovered, the rape seems to have less to do with forming her as an artist than has previously been believed. This view will be a central point in my paper.

Nairne, Eleanor. *Blood, Passion and Captivity: Gentileschi’s Life is in Her Paintings*. New  York Times. October 5, 2020.  [https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/05/arts/artemisia- gentileschi-national-gallery.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/05/arts/artemisia-%20%09gentileschi-national-gallery.html).

Nairne contributes often to the New York Times for their art and culture section. This brief article is being written in response to a new exhibit in London of Gentileschi’s works. She does at times use bias to show the disrespect given to female artists.  It gives details on the rap and incidents surrounding it ironically suggesting too often this is the only focus while looking at Gentileschi.  Little new information on her is included, though some interesting quotes can be used to elevate my paper.

O’Neill, Mary. *Artemisia’s Moment*. Smithsonian Magazine. May 2002.  <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/art-sculture/artemisias-moment-62150147.com>

O’Neill is an art appraiser who has lectured often on art history and has contributed often to this magazine. The article gives a brief history of Artemisia’s rise in popularity in contemporary times. After explaining her father’s rise to fame and his influences, the rap of Artemisia is addressed. It concludes with an over view of her life touching on several of her major works and focusing on her success. The elements around her depiction of Judith will be a main source of information in my paper.

Work Cited

Mead, Rebecca. *A Fuller Picture of Artemisia Gentileschi*. The New Yorker. September 28, 2020.   [https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/10/05/a-fuller-picture-of-artemisia- gentileschi.com](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/10/05/a-fuller-picture-of-artemisia-%20%09gentileschi.com)

Nairne, Eleanor. *Blood, Passion and Captivity: Gentileschi’s Life is in Her Paintings*. New  York Times. October 5, 2020. [https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/05/arts/artemisia- gentileschi-national-gallery.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/05/arts/artemisia-%20%09gentileschi-national-gallery.html).

O’Neill, Mary. *Artemisia’s Moment*. Smithsonian Magazine. May 2002.  <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/art-sculture/artemisias-moment-62150147.com>