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Painting Lucretia: Fear and Desire : A Feminist Discourse on Representations by Artemisia Gentileschi and Tintoretto

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PAINTING LUCRETIA: FEAR AND DESIRE

A FEMINIST DISCOURSE

ON REPRESENTATIONS BY ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI AND TINTORETTO

by

Amy L. Endres

A Thesis Submitted in

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ABSTRACT
PAINTING LUCRETIA: FEAR AND DESIRE
A FEMINIST DISCOURSE
ON REPRESENTATIONS BY ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI AND TINTORETTO

by

Amy L. Endres

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2013
Under the Supervision of Professor Tanya Tiffany

The myth of the Roman heroine, Lucretia, celebrates feminine ideals of virtue and chastity and is considered pivotal to the establishment of the Roman Republic. Yet, her rape and suicide is also the fulcrum of uncomfortable tension about notions of female sexuality, morality, patriotism and heroism.

My thesis is a comparative discussion of two intriguing and radically dissimilar paintings of Lucretia: *Tarquin and Lucretia* by Tintoretto and *Lucretia* by Artemisia Gentileschi. These paintings function as visual counterpoints that reflect the diverse literary and historical interpretations of her legend.

Tintoretto and Gentileschi depict two different, yet pivotal and dramatic moments in Lucretia's story. Tintoretto portrays the chaos of the rape, juxtaposing erotic imagery and traditional iconography associated with female virtue. The disparate themes, female sexuality versus female chastity, create tension and ambiguity in interpreting Lucretia's legend. Tintoretto's image is compelling because he acknowledges the possibility of Lucretia's own complicity in her rape.

By contrast, Gentileschi does not depict Lucretia's violation, but captures the psychological aftermath of the rape as she struggles with its implications and

consequences. Gentileschi's interpretation is intriguing because both artist and subject share the intrinsic connection of a traumatic rape experience.

Contemporary feminist scholarship that examines relations between Lucretia's historiography, societal legacy and image will provide the framework for my discussion. I also build upon feminist scholarship that considers Artemisia Gentileschi within 17th-century Italian painting and culture. Mary Garrard's and Griselda Pollock's dialogue on the notion of 'female agency' in Gentileschi's paintings has initiated an important, polemic debate within contemporary critical discourse. I will deconstruct both scholars' analyses of Gentileschi's *Lucretia* to illustrate their contentious, yet highly-nuanced and insightful interpretations of her painting.

It is important that I discuss ancient literary sources of Lucretia's myth that inform later Christian readings, Renaissance notions of the feminine ideal and shape the literature of Humanist authors. Seventeenth-century sources are also germane to my argument because they affected the historiography of the artists and subsequent scholarly discourse on Gentileschi.

In this analysis, I will also consider 'female agency' in my comparison of Artemisia's and Tintoretto's paintings by examining their artistic choices to see how they differ and how they might reveal indications of Lucretia's female perspective. In Gentileschi's case, it may also reveal something of her own perspective or agency as well. I hope that my study of these paintings, *Tarquin and Lucretia* by Tintoretto and *Lucretia* by Artemisia Gentileschi, will contribute insight to this important feminist discourse and will help to shed light not only on Artemisia Gentileschi, but also on Renaissance interpretations of the story of Lucretia.

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*All images obtained from www.ARTstor.org unless otherwise noted.

“All that remains to the historian are conflicting rumors, for so obscure are the greatest events, as some take for granted as any hearsay, whatever its sources, others turn truth into falsehood, and both errors find encouragement with posterity.”

Tacitus, *Annals*, III.19

This frank observation by Roman historian Tacitus aptly describes the shifting historical representations of many female figures throughout history. However, few women are thus more precisely described than the iconic and controversial cultural heroine, Lucretia Tarquinius Collatinus. Lucretia, a Roman aristocrat lauded for her unrivaled beauty and virtue, bravely committed suicide to restore her honor, prove her innocence and avenge her rape by a prince. Beginning in ancient Rome, historians mythicized her death in 509 BCE as the pivotal event that triggered the overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of the Roman Republic.

The legend of Lucretia, provocative and poignant, tragic and heroic, has captivated the imaginations of artists and historians for more than 2500 years. It is a titillating tale of sex, violence, honor, sacrifice, revenge and redemption. Her myth celebrates lofty ideals of ‘feminine virtue’ and ‘triumph over adversity.’ Yet it is also the fulcrum of uncomfortable tension and ambiguity about notions of female sexuality, power, misogyny, morality, patriotism and heroism. Historically, images of Lucretia reflect these complex and shifting attitudes. Sixteenth and seventeenth-century Italian paintings of the theme represent the apex of her problematic interpretation and imagery.

Imaging Lucretia’s Legend

In this thesis I will focus on two intriguing visual representations of Lucretia:

Tarquin and Lucretia (ca. 1578-80) (Fig. 1) by Tintoretto and *Lucretia* (ca. 1621) (Fig. 2)

by Artemisia Gentileschi, paintings that reflect the diverse literary and historical interpretations of her legend. I will examine the many myths that make the heroine and address how her historiography has affected her reputation and role through time. I will locate the paintings by Gentileschi and Tintoretto within their late 16th and early 17th-century literary and pictorial contexts.

I have chosen these paintings by Gentileschi and Tintoretto because they are radically dissimilar visual interpretations of Lucretia's legend. They depict two distinctly different, yet pivotal and dramatic moments in Lucretia's story. Tintoretto's painting portrays the chaos of the physical assault and invites the viewer to witness (and perhaps even to participate in) the rape. Gentileschi's version captures the psychological aftermath of the rape as Lucretia struggles with the implications and consequences of this event. These paintings function as visual counterpoints that clearly illustrate the different interpretations of Lucretia's story and characterize the complex historical narrative of her myth.

Lucretia as Portrayed by Tintoretto and Gentileschi

Tintoretto's painting is exemplary of 16th and 17th-century representations of the Lucretia theme. His painting explicitly illustrates the conflicting ideas that figure into Lucretia's legend by juxtaposing erotic imagery and traditional iconography associated with female virtue that considered together, conflate archetypal notions of her as a martyr and an adulteress. Visually navigating these disparate themes, i.e. female sexuality versus female chastity, creates tension and ambiguity in interpreting Lucretia's legend.

Furthermore, Tintoretto's image is unique and especially compelling because he acknowledges the possibility of Lucretia's own guilt with regard to her rape.

By contrast, Artemisia Gentileschi's *Lucretia* is distinctive among 16th and 17th-century artistic depictions of the theme. She does not depict the rape or the brutal act of suicide as is seen in most variations during this period, rather, Gentileschi focuses on Lucretia's contemplation of this life-altering event instead of the violent physical aspects her story. Furthermore, Gentileschi's interpretation of the Lucretia theme is especially compelling because both artist and subject share an intrinsic connection; each suffered a traumatic rape experience.

Creation of a Myth: The Sources on Lucretia's Narrative

My study of *Tarquin and Lucretia* by Tintoretto and *Lucretia* by Artemisia Gentileschi is rather unique because there are few *comparative* discussions of different iconographical variations of the Lucretia theme. Although there is a significant body of work devoted to her historiography, scholarship on representations of Lucretia primarily traces the visual sources and iconography associated with a specific image. These studies frequently focus on images of either Lucretia's rape or her suicide. However, when considered together, these paintings effectively illustrate the complex social, cultural, and historical ideas embodied by this heroine. Furthermore, they provide an ideal case study to examine the evidence of polemic interpretation in her historiography and imagery.

Contemporary feminist scholarship will provide the framework for much of my discussion. I will address current critical discourse that examines the relationship between Lucretia's historiography, her societal legacy and her image by key scholars

engaged with feminist theory. Ian Donaldson, Stephanie Jed and Melissa Matthes deconstruct the temporal political and socio-cultural aspects of the formulation of the myth of Lucretia, while Mary Vaccaro, Rona Goffen, Elizabeth Cropper, Linda Hults and Elizabeth Cohen offer other interesting feminist perspectives. Sabrina De Turk provides a particularly compelling critical analysis of Tintoretto's painting of Lucretia. In her discussion she addresses female sexuality, misogyny, pornography and the psychology of male anxiety, issues that interact with key ideas put forth by several pioneering feminist scholars.¹

My work also builds upon important contemporary scholarship that attempts to locate Artemisia Gentileschi within the traditions of 17th-century Italian painting and culture. This careful study of her life and oeuvre through the feminist lens has engendered much original thought and interpretations that fuel an extraordinarily spirited and polemic debate within contemporary critical discourse. At the forefront of this discipline are historians Mary Garrard and Griselda Pollock, who have initiated a groundbreaking dialogue on the notion of 'female agency' in Artemisia Gentileschi's paintings.² Garrard and Pollock consider the profound psychological complexity of Artemisia's dramatic depictions of heroine themes with respect to her personal history. I will deconstruct both scholars' fascinating analyses of Gentileschi's *Lucretia* to illustrate their contentious, yet highly-nuanced and insightful interpretations of her painting.

In this study, I will also consider the notion of 'female agency' in my comparison of Artemisia's treatment of the Lucretia theme with Tintoretto's version. To quote

¹ Sabrina De Turk, "Illicit Arousal: The Erotic Subtext of Tintoretto's *Tarquin and Lucretia*," *Aurora* 2 (2001): 1-21.

² Mary D. Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989). and Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (London: Routledge, 1999).

Pollock, I intend to “read for inscriptions in the feminine” by looking for “those traces of unexpected articulation through the interplay of social identities and psychic formations within histories.”³ In other words, I will examine Gentileschi’s artistic choices to see how they differ from Tintoretto’s as well as how they function to reveal or obscure indications of her female voice, that is, her *possible* experience or perspective (in so far as the conceit allows that one’s authentic perspective could ever be truly understood or accurately expressed). As I unravel the specific ways in which Tintoretto’s and Artemisia’s pictorial interpretations engage with Lucretia’s complex historical narrative, it may also be possible to identify indications of Lucretia’s own ‘female agency’ (or lack of) that infiltrates these images. My goal is to ascertain exactly how Lucretia’s and Artemisia’s representations in the historical record have influenced our perception of them and affected their individual cultural significance.

A Look Back from Posterity

In order to examine the images by Tintoretto and Gentileschi, I will begin by looking at strikingly different interpretations of Lucretia’s story by important literary sources from antiquity. These authors include philosophers, theologians, poets and art historians who rehearse central themes that create the myth of Lucretia; they defend or refute Lucretia’s virtue, her innocence and complicity and discuss the merit of her suicide. I will discuss the most influential Latin classical accounts by Livy, Ovid and Plutarch and compare them to later Christian readings that appropriate Lucretia’s stories’ central themes. Notably, the early-Christian theologian, St. Augustine, provided an influential discussion of Lucretia’s plight. These early interpretations of Lucretia’s

³ Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 1-38.

narrative shape the philosophical, political and popular literature of many Renaissance Humanist authors such as Boccaccio, Coluccio Salutati, Ludovico Dolce and Machiavelli. Furthermore, an essential component of my study of Lucretia will be to consider Renaissance notions of the feminine ideal as discussed by Petrarch, Castiglione, Firenzuola and Aretino, whose writings inform and reflect many cultural ideas about Lucretia's myths.

Seventeenth-century sources on Artemisia herself are also germane to my argument. Particularly enlightening are the Gentileschi vs. Tassi trial records, testimony and court documents from the lawsuit Orazio Gentileschi filed against Agostino Tassi for the rape of his daughter, Artemisia. These records and Artemisia's personal correspondence, along with 17th-century art criticism played a vital role in shaping her historiography and subsequent scholarly discourse on Artemisia Gentileschi.

Ultimately, I hope that my study of these paintings, *Tarquin and Lucretia* by Tintoretto and *Lucretia* by Artemisia Gentileschi, will contribute insight to this important feminist discourse and will help to shed light not only on Artemisia Gentileschi, but also on Renaissance interpretations of the story of Lucretia.

History of the Myth

“One night, during the siege of Ardea (509 B.C.) the noble soldiers, in the midst of their lavish eating and drinking, get into an argument over which of their wives is most worthy of praise. Collatinus, the husband of Lucretia, convinced that he will win the argument, persuades the others to go that night and see what their wives are up to when they expect their husbands to be absent. All of the wives are found reveling except for Lucretia, who is found spinning. Lucretia thus wins the chastity contest.

Sextus Tarquinius, the son of the tyrant, is so impressed by Lucretia’s chastity on the night of the husbands’ unexpected visit that he resolves, on that occasion, to return soon and rape her. A few days later, he goes to Lucretia’s house alone. Lucretia shows him gracious hospitality and puts him up in a guest chamber. In the middle of the night, he comes to Lucretia’s room with his sword drawn and tries to seduce her. When he finds her unmoved by his entreaties, Tarquin threatens to kill her, place a servant beside her in bed, and claim, if she will not yield to his desire, that he has discovered them in adultery. Fearing his threat to her chaste reputation, Lucretia yields, and Sextus enjoys her and leaves.

Lucretia immediately summons her father and husband, who arrive accompanied by Publius Valerius and Lucius Junius Brutus (the ancestor of Marcus Brutus, Caesar’s assassin.) Lucretia tells them what has happened and asks them to promise to punish the rapist. Her kinsmen try to convince her that although her body was violated, her mind remains chaste; but Lucretia insists that she must kill herself as proof of her efforts to preserve her chastity and because her chastity is no longer intact. While Lucretia’s kinsmen are paralyzed with grief and tears by her suicide, Brutus takes the knife from her breast and swears by it that he will vindicate her honor by expelling the Tarquins, thereby liberating the Romans from their suffering under tyranny. Lucretia’s body is carried to the forum, where Brutus urges the populace to help him make good on his word. After liberating Rome from tyranny, Brutus founds the institution of the Roman Republic and is hailed as a hero. He and Publius Valerius become the consuls of Rome.”

This excerpt from Stephanie Jed’s book, *Chaste Thinking: The Rape of Lucretia and the Birth of Humanism* provides a succinct yet evocative summary of Lucretia’s narrative by the ancient Roman historian, Titus Livy.⁴

⁴ Stephanie H. Jed, *Chaste Thinking: The Rape of Lucretia and the Birth of Humanism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 9-10.

Her dramatic narrative has been the source of many conflicting interpretations and much impassioned debate, however, the legend of Lucretia is not one story, but many, told and retold through time. First written more than 250 years after her death, Lucretia's narrative must be duly considered with skepticism and lenience, in equal measure. Like most great myths, Lucretia's has recognizably been embellished and altered by the temporal landscape of its scribes' own social, moral, and political pressures. Although these early texts are recognized as our most valuable sources in Lucretia's narrative history, they are still rhetorical histories and must be approached as such. I will begin by looking at different interpretations of Lucretia's story by important literary sources from antiquity (philosophers, theologians, poets and art historians) who rehearse central themes that create the myth of Lucretia; they defend or refute Lucretia's virtue, her innocence and complicity and discuss the merit of her suicide. I conduct this survey of critical ancient texts and later interpretations of Lucretia's myth to illustrate their compounded effects on her narrative through history and thus, within the images of her theme by Tintoretto and Gentileschi.

Ian Donaldson's book, *The Rapes of Lucretia* (1982), provides a useful critical examination of the evolution of her narrative. He addresses important stages in that history, focusing on versions that are clearly formative, especially interesting and have particular bearing on the broader issues. Donaldson's study considers changing perspectives on the trauma and ethics of suicide and rape from Roman to Christian society. He discusses this in connection with Roman ideas of heroism and moral conduct as well as various political interpretations of Lucretia's narrative. And, while exploring these interconnected themes, Donaldson investigates the relationship between the creative

and philosophical process as reflected by artists' and writers' engagement with their contemporary debates on the subject.⁵

Unfortunately the oldest classical sources that recount the story of Lucretia have survived only in fragments and brief references in later retellings. There is much debate about the validity of Lucretia's story, that is, whether it was an actual historical event or a fictional invention: the repetition of earlier cult legends in the form of a socio-political fable. Scholars also argue that Lucretia's myth is simply a Roman version of a conventional ancient Greek topos; the story features the overthrow of an evil tyrant as the result of an unsavory sexual transgression, either his own or that of a close relation.⁶ Whatever its true origins, the most influential surviving account is by historian Titus Livy and dates from the late Roman Republic period, published between 27-25 BCE. His writing, *Ab Urbe Condita*, documents the early history of Rome and is our earliest full recitation of Lucretia's narrative. However, it remains unclear whether he based his work on extant early texts.

Ian Donaldson doubts the literal historical credibility of Livy's narrative of Lucretia saying, "Though the story may well contain elements of historical fact, these elements—along with others which are clearly fictitious—appear to have been fashioned into a powerful aetiological myth, intended to rehearse and to explain the origins of certain fundamental Roman ideals."⁷ It functions as much as political metaphor as a morality lesson; the virtuous woman assaulted symbolizes a people and their ideals under persecution followed by the eventual and righteous defeat of unjust rule. Donaldson

⁵ Ian Donaldson, *The Rapes of Lucretia: A Myth and Its Transformations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).

⁶ Ibid. It is similar to the Greek myths, Harmodius and Aristogeiton and Dido, and will be rehearsed again in the Roman story of Virginia.

⁷ Ibid., 8.

explains Livy's version saying, "It is a story about public and political behavior, and about private sexual behavior and about the relationship between these two kinds of behavior. It is a story about the nature of liberty: liberty for the state and liberty for the individual."⁸

Melissa Matthes investigates these concepts further, exploring feminist connections between rape and the establishment of republican governments in her book, *The Rape of Lucretia and the Founding of Republics*.⁹ She considers Livy's as literary history, rather than annalistic, intended to "facilitate the resurrection of Roman greatness" arguing that "Livy often casts historical events as moral episodes in order illuminate particular truth. It is in the construction of the episodes themselves that Livy takes the greatest pains and liberties for achieving compelling moral drama."¹⁰ For example, Matthes performs a close reading of Livy's particular presentation of Lucretia's narrative. In it, she deconstructs the subversive psycho-social role that women and sexual violence against them plays in the formation of ancient republican society. Her scholarship is germane to my discussion of Tintoretto's and Gentileschi's visual interpretations of Lucretia's myth and aligns with Griselda Pollack's important feminist arguments, which I will address later in this study.¹¹

Nonetheless, Livy's story of Lucretia provides at minimum, an ancient record which codifies the narrative as well as evidence of personal and cultural perspectives from Livy's period. It is one of the earliest full accounts and has been the source from which many later discussions originate. Livy crafted his engaging prose and dialogue

⁸ Donaldson, *The Rapes of Lucretia*, 8.

⁹ Melissa M. Matthes, *The Rape of Lucretia and the Founding of Republics: Readings in Livy, Machiavelli and Rousseau* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 45-46.

¹¹ Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*.

using somewhat imprecise language that allowed for various readings. Thus, later scholars carefully scrutinized the words and actions of Livy's Lucretia and produced different interpretations or critical analyses of the narrative—versions which are also filtered through their own temporal values or perspectives.

Another important source, penned several decades later than Livy's history, is Ovid's *Fasti* (ca. 5 BCE) which also provides an account of Lucretia's legend. His work of narrative poetry elaborates on the origins of Roman religion and customs based on the annual calendar. Stylistically it draws on Greek and Roman discursive poetry traditions and, according to Donaldson, provides a romanticized version of Lucretia's story. Donaldson claims Ovid's poetic format necessitates embellishment of the emotional and sensual aspects of the story, although there is continued dissention about which historical renditions are more or less literary than others.¹² However, it is Ovid's interpretation of Lucretia's narrative that Donaldson dissects in direct comparison with Livy's throughout his book.

Contemporaneously, the Greek historian and rhetorician, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, narrated Lucretia's legend in his books on the history of Rome, *Roman Antiquities*, ca. 7 BCE. Valuable for a certain *assumed* textual fidelity, his history also admittedly sought to honor his adopted culture and justify Roman rule over Greek.¹³

Finally, among early texts, Plutarch treats the subject of Lucretia in his comparison of noteworthy Greeks and Romans, *The Parallel Lives: The Life of Publicola*,

¹²Arguments on the literary nuances of Livy's and other classical versions that conflict with Donaldson's assessments are found in Melissa M. Matthes, *The Rape of Lucretia and the Founding of Republics: Readings in Livy, Machiavelli and Rousseau* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000). and Stephanie H. Jed, *Chaste Thinking: The Rape of Lucretia and the Birth of Humanism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

¹³Donaldson, Ian. *The Rapes of Lucretia*.

authored in the late first-century AD. This influential text provided a key resource for later Humanist studies with which to analyze and reconcile ancient classical philosophical, political and cultural ideals. In his interpretation, Plutarch is especially concerned with the problem of heroic action in Lucretia's narrative. Plutarch focuses less on the moral issues associated with her rape and suicide but rather on the political implications of the event and sees Brutus as the central figure in this narrative. Plutarch's moral considerations target Brutus' behavior rather than Lucretia's; he assesses Brutus' choices regarding family versus country and his role as *exemplar pater patriae*, leader of the new Republic. Plutarch argues that the central point of contention is 'glory' in this narrative, for both Brutus and Lucretia. He is concerned that they have been glorified for their honorable actions, however that those actions may be suspect because they were motivated not by selflessness, but by lust for worldly glory.¹⁴ This argument is closely aligned with later Christian discourse. It heralds the transition from classical philosophy and moral attitudes to the eventual appropriation of these concepts into the Christian-centered perspective.

A pivotal moment in the evolution of Lucretia's narrative occurs in the fifth-century, when the early-Christian theologian, Saint Augustine considers this theme. In *The City of God against the Pagans*, he debates Lucretia's status as a model of virtue and chastity for Christian women. Augustine struggles to appropriate and justify classical, pagan mores into the paradigm of Christian morality. He is challenged to reconcile these questions, "If she was free from guilt, why *did* she commit suicide?" and "As Christians, why then, should we venerate her *because* she committed suicide?" Augustine further argues:

¹⁴ Donaldson, *The Rapes of Lucretia*, 121-123.

“If...the story that there were two and only one committed adultery instead, one in open attack and the other secretly consenting, then she did not kill herself innocently and therefore the learned defenders can say she is not in the lower world among those ‘who guiltless laid fatal hands upon themselves.’ But then the case is reduced to a dilemma: if the murder is less heinous, then let the adultery be confirmed: if the adultery is extenuated, the charge of murder is aggravated; and there is no escape from the dilemma, when you say: ‘If she was made an adulteress, why has she been praised; if she was chaste, why was she slain?’”¹⁵

As articulated by De Turk, Saint Augustine has raised this concern, “...on the other hand, her choice of suicide raises the disturbing possibility that she knew herself to have experienced some pleasure in the sexual act and thus to have been an adulteress.”¹⁶ Saint Augustine’s suspicion that Lucretia may have secretly enjoyed her sexual experience with Tarquin, even if the circumstance was rape, was carried forth in Renaissance attitudes and unease about women’s sexuality.

Notions of the ‘Feminine Ideal’ in Renaissance Literature

During the Renaissance, scholars continued to engage in the discourse on Lucretia’s merit and Humanist literature reflects the same concerns about her morality and chastity. Furthermore, Humanist literary culture was consumed by the contemplation of heady notions of a ‘feminine ideal.’ Although this notion incorporates Renaissance moral attitudes about female virtue and chastity, more broadly it also concerns ideal

¹⁵ De Turk, “Illicit Arousal: The Erotic Subtext of Tintoretto’s *Tarquin and Lucretia*,” 15. Here she footnotes Saint Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*. Translation by George McCracken. Cambridge, 1957, I, 89, i, xix.

¹⁶ Ibid.

physical attributes, temperament, poise, mannerisms and attitude. Accordingly, this ideal played a critical role in Renaissance interpretations of Lucretia's narrative as well.

Lucretian literature reproduced her story in all genres, often metaphorically and sometimes satirically, but always pointedly evoking the controversial issues and themes of her legend. The profound influence of this literature in early-modern culture contextualizes the socio-intellectual environment in which Tintoretto and Artemisia Gentileschi painted Lucretia.

Considered one of the earliest Humanist scholars, Francesco Petrarca (anglicized Petrarch), first articulated the nebulous qualities of beauty and virtue embodied by the elusive, ideal woman in his poems entitled, *Il Canzoniere* (ca. 1327-1368). It is unclear whether his poetry was inspired by a real person, Laura, the object of his unrequited love or was a metaphorical and linguistic construct with which to elaborate this model of perfection. Nevertheless, his inspirational, eloquent verse in the Tuscan vernacular profoundly influenced Renaissance literature and cultural attitudes about women for centuries to come. And like his contemporaries, Dante, Boccaccio and Salutati, Petrarch also addressed the theme of Lucretia in his collection of poetry, *Canzoniere*. Poem number 262 is translated as follows:

'Life is dearest, and next it seems to me
true chaste behavior in a lovely woman.'

'Reverse that: there was never anything
dear or lovely without chaste actions:

and she who lives deprived of her honor,
is no lady and no longer living: and if she
seems so, yet her life is harsh, her path
is worse than death, with more bitter pain.'

'I only wondered at Lucretia in this,
that she must kill herself with a dagger,
that her grief alone was not enough.'

'However many philosophers came to speak

of it: all their wisdom would fall to earth:
and we would see hers soar above them.’

In this poem, Petrarch proclaims that virtue and honor are more valuable than life without them. Yet he questions whether Lucretia’s grief at having lost her honor wasn’t punishment enough. However, Petrarch ultimately lauds her suicide and pays deference to her wisdom in that decision.¹⁷

Musings on Lucretia’s Virtue in Renaissance Literature

Concerns about Lucretia’s morality and her worthiness as a model of virtue and femininity first raised by Saint Augustine continued to trouble Renaissance writers, in particular, Coluccio Salutati and Ludovico Dolce. In his treatment of the theme, written while Chancellor of Florence in the late 14th-century, Coluccio Salutati’s rhetorical Humanist treatise, *Declamatio Lucretiae*, echoes Augustine’s discussion of Lucretia’s chastity, moral purity and merit in suicide. In a fictitious dialogue between Lucretia and

¹⁷ Francesco Petrarca, *Petrarch: The Canzoniere, or Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta*. Translation into verse with notes and commentary by Mark Musa, introduction by Mark Musa with Barbara Manfredi. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, c. 1996). Following is the Italian which is translated above in my text:

Cara la vita, et dopo lei mi pare
vera honestà, che 'n bella donna sia.
L'ordine volgi: e' non fûr, madre mia,
senza honestà mai cose belle o care;

et qual donna si lascia di suo honor privare,
né donna è piú né viva; et se qual pria
appare in vista, è tal vita aspra et ria
via piú che morte, et di piú pene amare.

Né di Lucretia mi meravigliai,
se non come a morir le bisognasse
ferro, et non le bastasse il dolor solo.

Vengan quanti philosophi fur mai,
a dir di ciò: tutte lor vie fien basse;
et quest'una vedremo alzarsi a volo.

the witnesses to her suicide, he negotiates the moral and patriotic issues at stake in her narrative and also resonant in the tempestuous cultural and political climate of Renaissance Florence. By employing this rhetorical device, he cleverly equates the great Roman Republic with his own Republic of Florence, invoking long-held notions of heredity and proud associations between them.

Stephanie Jed's, *Chaste Thinking*, is an astute study of the socio-political implications of Lucretia's myth.¹⁸ Jed structures her discussion of Lucretia's narrative within a legal framework, staged "in the courtroom of Salutati's text."¹⁹ She maintains her approach is historically consistent because beginning with Livy's version, Lucretia has repeatedly been placed on the stand for judgment. Jed asserts that her book is not about Lucretia's Rape, but rather, a study of how in the Humanistic tradition of literary texts are handled and/or interpreted by looking at the reading and writing practices which reproduce the incident, i.e. "the rape of Lucretia as a literary topos."²⁰ Jed's scholarship provides a valuable feminist interpretation of Renaissance perspectives on legal, social and political implications of rape in Humanist narratives. She provides an interesting dialogue with which my study of Artemisia Gentileschi will engage later in this study.

Whereas Salutati doubted Lucretia, Giovanni Boccaccio commends her. In his *Declarius Mulieribus* (completed 1374), a compendium of biographies of famous historical women, Boccaccio, popular literary author and Salutati's contemporary, openly

¹⁸ Jed, *Chaste Thinking*. Notably, Salutati's original text is reproduced, transcribed and translated here.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

praises Lucretia, saying, “She cleansed her shame harshly and for this reason she should be exalted with worthy praise for her chastity, which can never be sufficiently lauded.”²¹

And later, the Venetian, Ludovico Dolce (1508/10-1568), provided another critical reading of Lucretia’s narrative. He was a prolific Humanist scholar, art theorist/critic, editor and translator of classical texts. Thus, he was well-acquainted with earlier writing on Lucretia. He is best known for his *Dialogue on Painting*; however, he authored many texts, including a discussion of Lucretia in his *Dialogo della Institutione delle Donne*. His perspectives on the value and necessity of virginity and chastity for women are efficiently summarized by De Turk; he neither condemned nor applauded Lucretia’s suicide, holding it separate from the issue of her chastity. Yet de Turk argues that Dolce “maintained an important distinction between the corruption of the body and the corruption of the soul and noted that a woman can hold her chastity intact within her soul, despite the violation of her body.”²² She points out that his main objective then, “was to identify a division between the actions of the body and those of the spirit, and to encourage women to maintain that purity of mind, heart and soul which is necessary to the maintenance of chastity.”²³ He was highly esteemed in Renaissance culture and his moderate perspectives offered a benevolent and edifying interpretation of Lucretia’s myth for early modern society to assimilate.

In the spirit of Petrarch’s text, a codification of the feminine ideal, Renaissance authors continued to proselytize on his model. The prominent nobleman, Baldassare Castiglione, published an important cultural treatise, *Il Corteggiano* (Book of the

²¹ De Turk, Sabrina. "Illicit Arousal: The Erotic Subtext of Tintoretto’s *Tarquin and Lucretia*," 15. Here she footnotes Giovanni Boccaccio, *De claris mulieribus*. Translation by Guido A. Guarino, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1963), 103.

²² De Turk, Sabrina. "Illicit Arousal: The Erotic Subtext of Tintoretto’s *Tarquin and Lucretia*," 16.

²³ Ibid.

Courtier), in 1528. This text was a manual of etiquette as well as a frank appraisal of the physical attributes and manner embodied by the perfect courtier. It offered an ideal model for men and women of Italian Renaissance nobility toward which to aspire. Many of the feminine qualities celebrated by Castiglione are borrowed from Petrarch's text and likewise, in it he deliberately speaks to Lucretia's narrative. Castiglione recounts the story of a girl who, after having been raped drowned herself rather than live with the dishonor. It is a clear allusion to Lucretia's myth and reinforces the cultural importance placed on chastity for 16th-century women.

Another influential Petrarchian text is Agnolo Firenzuola's, *Dialogue on the Beauty of Women*, published in 1541. Firenzuola, a celebrated Venetian connoisseur of beauty, love and style, wrote prolifically on these subjects.²⁴ His writing captures the complex interplay of real and esoteric qualities that illustrates how a concrete definition of the feminine ideal remained elusive, even in the minds of Renaissance authors. Rona Goffen discusses Castiglione's and Firenzuola's ideas on this ideal in her study of the problematic visual representation of these qualities in Renaissance images of women. Her essay illuminates the polemic interpretation of Lucretia's narrative with regard to this notion of the feminine ideal in her analysis of Lorenzo Lotto's (ca. 1533) painting of the theme.²⁵ Goffen's discussion is salient to my study because it provides relevant insight on the challenge of depicting Lucretia in Renaissance culture. Furthermore, Lotto's

²⁴ Elizabeth Cropper, "On Beautiful Women, Parmigianino, Petrarchismo, and the Vernacular Style." *The Art Bulletin*, 58, no. 3 (September, 1976): 374. Firenzuola's two-part *Dialogue* is narrated by the character, Celso Selvaggio, who elaborates on the perfect physical characteristics and esoteric qualities of ideal feminine beauty. Cropper considers his prose "...the most complete exposition of the beauty of the ideal woman among the multitude of sixteenth-century treatments of the theme, being concerned not only with her perfect features, but also with her colors, proportions, and such elusive qualities as her *vaghezza*, *leggiadria* and *grazia*."

²⁵ Rona Goffen, "Lorenzo Lotto's Lucretia: Questioning Traditional Patriarchal Definitions of Woman, Female Chastity and Sexuality in Renaissance Italy." *Renaissance Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (1999): 742-781.

painting is an apt example of Renaissance images that exploit the ambiguity inherent in Lucretia's narrative and a possible visual source with which Tintoretto and Gentileschi might have been familiar when they painted their versions.

Finally, the acerbic political theorist, Niccolò Machiavelli wrote one of history's best known satirical versions of Lucretia's myth in his 1518 comedy, *La Mandragola*.²⁶ In his rhetorical narrative, he simultaneously engages in 16th-century discourse on Lucretia's moral virtue and chastity while flouting the political and spiritual "corruption of Renaissance Florence when compared with ancient, republican Rome."²⁷

Machiavelli's scholarly treatises, *I Discorsi* and *Il Principe*, elaborate his moral and theoretical perspectives on ancient Roman history, government and the socio-political machinations of Florentine Humanist culture. The play rehearses the central themes in Lucretia's narrative and functions as a comedic interpretation of Machiavelli's texts. In Machiavelli's comedic version of the story, Lucretia is not raped, but rather, seduced and does not commit suicide, but negotiates a "happy ending" for all.²⁸ This clever device echoes Machiavelli's theoretical approach to interpreting history, which rests on the notion that in all matters, exist the possibility that the "right conclusion" essentially depends on how one judges.²⁹ In her study of *La Mandragola*, Melissa Matthes argues that, "Tellingly, the mandrake (a poisonous root with both aphrodisiac qualities and destructive powers, that correlates to the phallus/dagger in Lucretia's myth) functions in Machiavelli's play in much the same way as Lucretia's rape and suicide function in

²⁶ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Comedies of Machiavelli*, ed. and trans. David Sices and James Atkinson. (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1985).

²⁷ Matthes, *Founding of Republics*, 60-61.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

Livy's version."³⁰ However, in contrast to Salutati's version, Matthes argues, Machiavelli suggests the undecidability of meaning through the seduction rather than the rape of Lucretia."³¹ She further suggests that Machiavelli's facetious portrayal of Lucretia surreptitiously advocates unprejudiced judgment and interpretation of her myth.³² Furthermore, Matthes maintains that Machiavelli's satire "could easily be read as a manifestation of Renaissance men's anxieties about feminine power." However, she argues, the play demonstrates that feminine power is potent—at least in the world of appearances—because in it, appearances have become real.³³

Together, these examples of 16th-century literature indicate not only the number and breadth of writing on female virtue, but also elucidate the central role and problematic nature of Lucretia's narrative in Renaissance culture.

The History of Images of Lucretia's Myth

As in literature, Lucretia was a common theme in Renaissance pictorial tradition, however, representation of the inherent sexually explicit aspect of her narrative proved equally as problematic. In the 16th and 17th-centuries, Lucretia frequently appears in one of several ways. The first approach emphasized the righteous or edifying aspects of Lucretia's story, eschewing less-than-decorous associations. Botticelli's *Tragedy of Lucretia* panel (ca. 1500/01 Boston, Elizabeth Stuart Gardner Museum) (Fig. 3), which dramatically illustrates the entire sequence of her narrative, is just such an example. This imagery was often painted on early-Renaissance dowry chests called *cassoni* to celebrate

³⁰ Ibid., 80-81, 89.

³¹ Ibid., 76.

³² Matthes, *Founding of Republics*, 91-97.

³³ Ibid., 90.

and reinforce Lucretia as an ‘*exemplum virtutis*’ for a proper wife in the marriage context. By contrast, Marcantonio Raimondi’s engraving, *Death of Lucretia* (after a drawing by Raphael, ca. 1510, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts) (Fig. 4) demonstrates the other typical representation which features Lucretia as a singular-figure, in a classical-statuesque pose. She is modestly draped, exhibiting the serene expression and bearing of a Roman Goddess, while gracefully aiming the dagger at her breast. It evokes notions of honor, virtue, sacrifice, and patriotism, altruistic ideals that were the cornerstones of ancient and Humanist Renaissance culture.

In many familiar interpretations of this genre, Lucretia appears nude and in others fully clothed; regardless, they all feature the singular figure of Lucretia poised to enact her suicide. Well-known examples include Raphael’s drawing of Lucretia (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art) (Fig. 5), an engraving by Agostino Veneziano (London, British Museum) and paintings by Lucas Cranach the Elder (Fig. 6) and Younger, and Paolo Veronese (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum) (Fig. 7). Also representative of this format is an enigmatic interpretation by Lorenzo Lotto (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum) (Fig. 8).

However, another method frequently used to depict Lucretia’s legend employed the conventional Renaissance practice of eroticizing classical themes—a treatment generally reserved for the rape episode. Titian’s celebrated versions of *Tarquin and Lucretia* (Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum and Bordeaux, Musée des Beaux-Arts) (Fig. 9 and Fig. 10), speak to this approach. Although these interpretations are erotically charged, they still clearly emphasize Lucretia’s resistance to the act; they demurely retain

her physical modesty and highlight her chastity, thereby visually absolving her of any wrongdoing.

Both of the paintings I examine in this study can be aligned with one of these approaches. While Artemisia Gentileschi's representation of Lucretia is that of the singular-figure format poised for suicide, Tintoretto's painting is most similar to Titian's interpretations of the theme. However, given their broad artistic educations, combined with their late-Renaissance cultural milieu, both Tintoretto and Gentileschi would have been well-versed in the problematic history of literary sources and familiar with many of the aforementioned art works. Certainly, therefore, a variety of factors guided and informed each artist's unique approach to painting Lucretia's myth.

Tintoretto's Portrayal: Lucretia's Challenging Narrative

Tintoretto's remarkable interpretation of Lucretia's myth reflects the complex historicity of her narrative and the difficult task of negotiating its themes in Renaissance visual culture. At first glance, Tintoretto's painting *Tarquin and Lucretia* (ca. 1578-80) is exemplary of 16th and 17th-century representations of the Lucretia theme. However, Tintoretto's image is unique and especially compelling because he acknowledges the possibility of Lucretia's own guilt with regard to her rape. It is a bold expression of a controversial subject that merits a closer look at his artistic approach.

Tintoretto painted two remarkably similar versions of the Lucretia theme in the second half of the 16th-century. The one I am considering in this study resides in the permanent collection at the Art Institute of Chicago. His other painting of Lucretia was

last documented at the Kunsthaus Lempertz in Cologne Germany in 1952. Unfortunately its current location is unknown.

Tintoretto's image is typical of the painting genre characterized by eroticized mythical and historical images; his painting features a dynamic composition with overtly erotic imagery (a sexualized female nude in her bedchamber physically engaged with a nearly-nude man) as well as traditional iconography associated with womanly virtue, chastity and marital fidelity. Tintoretto's juxtaposition of the imagery and iconography of disparate themes, i.e. female sexuality versus female chastity, creates tension and ambiguity in interpreting Lucretia's legend.

Not only does he portray the chaos of the physical assault and invite the viewer to witness (and perhaps even to participate in) the rape, but simultaneously implicates Lucretia herself. Tintoretto's unique portrayal of Lucretia as well as the iconography within the painting functions on multiple levels. Together this interpretive subterfuge suggests Lucretia's culpability, perhaps as an active participant, if not a willing victim. The image cultivates uncertainty through Lucretia's suggestively posed, fully-exposed body and arm gestures that either embrace or repel Tarquin, and it is further enhanced by Lucretia's remarkably calm facial expression. These strategic devices make her role in the sexual encounter difficult to ascertain. The resulting ambiguity confounds both the viewer's understanding of the story and the artist's intent because it conflates archetypal notions of Lucretia as a martyr and an adulteress. In this way, Tintoretto's painting explicitly illustrates the conflicting ideas and profound unease that figure into Lucretia's legend.

Sabrina de Turk explores the ramifications of Lucretia's possible complicity in her article, "Illicit Arousal: The Erotic Subtext of Tintoretto's *Tarquin and Lucretia*." De Turk discusses how Tintoretto's singular interpretation speaks to current feminist theories that identify Lucretia as the bearer of multiple meanings. She asserts that the image is enticing because it simultaneously implicates the viewer *and* the victim in her rape. Thus, Lucretia functions as the intersection of fear and desire in the male psyche. De Turk argues that it is the subversive nature of those instincts that exerts such power and exposes late-Renaissance male-anxiety about the implications of female sexuality.³⁴

Tintoretto's scandalous implication that Lucretia may have consciously allowed and enjoyed the physical encounter compels one to consider (given the subsequent course of events) that perhaps Lucretia even directed her own narrative. Building on the notion that Lucretia may have exercised free-will, choice and control over her narrative, it is my position that Tintoretto actually portrayed, perhaps unwittingly, visual evidence of female agency.

In this chapter I focus on Tintoretto's approach and expand on his juxtaposition of disparate themes, which employs iconography with multiple meanings to confuse Lucretia's identity and illicit ambiguity in interpreting the painting. I will address contemporary feminist scholarship on its inherent psychological implications with regard to the late-Renaissance patriarchal society. Furthermore, I will offer my own observations and conclusions on how Tintoretto's painting speaks to the notion of female agency. These are the central issues on which I focus my discussion of Tintoretto's interpretation of Lucretia.

³⁴ De Turk, "Illicit Arousal: The Erotic Subtext of Tintoretto's *Tarquin and Lucretia*," 1-21.

Tintoretto's Biography

Jacopo Comin Robusti, familiarly called Tintoretto, was born in Venice in 1518. Tintoretto, or 'little dyer,' was so nicknamed because his father was a prominent Venetian silk dyer. We know very little about Tintoretto's life from 16th-century sources. Those that do survive are primarily commission contracts and payment documents, which simply help to corroborate his whereabouts and verify his oeuvre. The vast majority of information we do know about Tintoretto is filtered through his biographer and champion, Carlo Ridolfi. Ridolfi provides invaluable biographical insight, although his reliability on certain information, (unsubstantiated and/or circumstantial knowledge and factual embellishment) has been questioned. Nonetheless, Ridolfi provides crucial insight into the critical literary context of early modern Venice. Published in Venice in 1642, almost fifty years after Tintoretto's death in 1594, Ridolfi's *Vita di G. Robusti ditto il Tintoretto* provides a compelling and detailed account of his life and character. Ridolfi's effusive critical admiration for Tintoretto's art combined with recollections and impressions of the artist's unique personality traits and quirks conjure a remarkably vivid picture of Tintoretto's life.

Although the story remains unsubstantiated, Ridolfi asserts that Tintoretto briefly served as an apprentice in Titian's studio. He claims that after having seen Tintoretto's student drawings, Titian recognized his innate talent and immediately fired him, envious of his skill and fearful of commission competition. This relationship of jealousy, rivalry and contempt between Tintoretto and Titian thereafter, has become almost legendary. However compelling the story of their extreme enmity, it is likely unfounded. Through it Ridolfi rehearses a conventional 16th-century topos of the artist whose remarkable talent

and genius threatens to, if not eventually eclipses his master's.³⁵ It was a clever device to elevate the stature of the artist. By aligning him with the commonly accepted master and cultivating their rivalry in artistic merit through critical discourse, one could manufacture recognition and a certain celebrity in posterity.

Tintoretto did, however, undertake his own training to become a professional artist. Whether Tintoretto ever actually served as an apprentice in his studio, he was indeed, a student of Titian's manner of painting. His paintings reveal certain aspects of Titian's influence in style and technique—preference for dynamic composition, vibrant, saturated color and spontaneity of brushstroke. However, Tintoretto's hand remains characteristically his own. His uniquely personal approach is distinctive and reflects his conscientious study of Titian as well as other influential artists of the period.

His paintings illustrate his application or adaption of many of the formative artistic conventions and innovations in the milieu of sixteenth-century Venetian art and beyond. By his own acknowledgment, Tintoretto also embraced many wider influences; he absorbed and appropriated aspects of various painting traditions and innovations, such as oil painting, from around Italy and Europe. He often characterized his own work as an amalgamation of the contentiously debated Roman and Florentine theoretical approaches, *disegno*, and his own Venetian *colorito* tradition. He also experimented with Lombard mannerist conventions and dramatic Northern European illumination techniques, *chiaroscuro* and *tenebrist* effects.

³⁵ Eric Newton, *Tintoretto* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972).

Imaging the Complex Narrative: Formal Analysis

Tintoretto's painting depicts the chaotic moment of Lucretia's rape in the tragic sequence of her narrative. The image captures the intimate setting of a darkened bedchamber in disarray. The tangled, nude figures emerge, illuminated from the deeply shadowed background, suddenly exposed in the rakish light. The strong contrast between light and shadow concentrates focus on their bodies at the image's center. The placement of Tarquin's and Lucretia's figures forms a strong diagonal from the upper left corner down to the lower right of the image. A precariously unbalanced Lucretia leans backward, supported on just one leg as Tarquin reaches downward to drag her up from behind. The visual effect is powerful; it creates palpable dramatic tension as the figures slash the canvas with their dynamic falling struggle. The fabric canopy falls and the bedding slips off with the force of their exertion, echoing the diagonal composition. Lightening-like zigzags highlight the folds and creases of the fabric and reinforce the directional momentum of the figures.

In this painting, Tintoretto employs his characteristic pinwheel compositional technique. The radial arrangement of converging angles creates dynamic movement within the painting, and directs the viewer's eye to the central action in the image. The visual trajectory travels from the top left to the lower right of the central figures and the dagger marks its endpoint. Its blade abruptly redirects the eye upward along Tarquin's outstretched leg, to the center of the image. The large statuary-bedpost lies at a jarringly sharp right-angle to the central diagonal. Facing downward, it is a figural inversion of Tarquin and Lucretia, which echoes the sensuality of their nudity while enhancing the effect of their violent struggle. Tintoretto's image simultaneously reflects conventional

Renaissance pyramidal composition as well. Together, the figural arrangement, voluminous drapery and peripheral objects form the base and direct the eye up toward the pinnacle of the image. Tarquin and Lucretia's violent interaction culminates at their heads, encircled by their ambiguous but emphatic arm gestures. Tintoretto's composition skillfully blends characteristically Venetian expression and movement with the grace of central Italian balance and structure.

Like Titian, Tintoretto is renowned for his loose, energetic brush strokes as well as his rapid painting execution.³⁶ His gestural, painterly technique, with visible daubs and flourishes, unsubtle highlights and semi-impasto application heighten the sense of dynamism and is particularly suited to evoke the frenetic drama of Lucretia's rape. Tintoretto uses the deep, rich colors of Venetian *colorito* that enhance the emotional drama of the narrative. They contrast with his luminous flesh tones to project the figures to the forefront of the image.

Tintoretto juxtaposes Tarquin's power and virility with Lucretia's sensuality and vulnerability by expressively distorting anatomy and space, accompanied by dramatic lighting. Depicted from above, displaying exaggeratedly rippling muscles and a darker complexion relative to hers, Tarquin dominates Lucretia. However, Lucretia is the true focal point of the image and Tintoretto undeniably presents her as an object of sexual desire. He showcases her entire body in a full-frontal pose that exhibits her smooth alabaster skin. Lucretia's flawless complexion is suggestive of her moral purity and chastity and symbolizes the unblemished quality of the ideal female nature. Allegedly, it was these of Lucretia's many virtues with which Tarquin was most besotted.

³⁶He was once criticized, but is now admired for the spontaneous quality of his canvases. Tintoretto experimented with innovations in the traditionally lengthy oil painting technique in an effort to speed up the process.

Tintoretto paints Lucretia essentially nude; her breasts are exposed and the drape that ostensibly conceals her modesty is so transparent that rather, it serves to highlight her pubic region. She is unbalanced, falling backward and her awkward posture strikes an uncomfortable note in the image. Perhaps this ungainly position suggests her struggle against submission or symbolizes her succumbing to carnal weakness, that is, her moral descent into debauchery and adultery.

However, the most problematic visual element in the painting is the ambiguous gesture of Lucretia's left hand which reaches up toward Tarquin's head. Disconcertingly, it appears as either Lucretia's effort to repel his advances or perhaps her reach to embrace him. And, paradoxically, Lucretia's expression is not that of terrified anguish, it is calm despite the violence and the profoundly tragic implications of this act.

Meaningful Content in the Painting

Tintoretto's depiction of the story is characteristic of 16th and 17th-century art that features sensual images under the pretext of painting ancient classical subjects. Furthermore, it makes the complicated history of Lucretia's myth visually apparent. Tintoretto's interpretation is not subtle; he painted a deliberately confusing erotic image of Tarquin and Lucretia. The image is infused with ancient and Renaissance pictorial and literary references (both high-brow and low). This literature: popular writing, poetry and scholarly texts guided Renaissance sensibilities and informed their apprehension of the painting. His allusions to the many concerns and multiple meanings associated with Lucretia's story would have been easily recognizable to his contemporary audience. Indeed, to the cognoscenti, the allure and sophistication of this painting lay in its

interpretive multiplicity—the knowledge that many naturalistic elements within it are rich with symbolic meaning.

One significant element laden with symbolism is the dagger at Lucretia's feet. Most obviously it foreshadows Lucretia's eventual death by the blade, and references the honorable, ancient Roman custom of self-sacrifice, while simultaneously symbolizing the phallus. The phallus, in turn, naturally evokes notions of penetration, intercourse, rape and its parallels in suicide by this instrument.³⁷ Lucretia's only adornment, a pearl necklace, also bears multiple meanings; it speaks to her ambiguous status as a chaste woman or promiscuous harlot. Depending upon the context in late-Renaissance culture, pearls possessed a variety of associations and acquired layered meaning. While they were initially symbolic of purity, chastity and virtue they became emblematic of the finery and sexual liberty of the courtesan.³⁸ Sabrina De Turk discusses the pearls in her article, "Illicit Arousal: The Erotic Subtext of Tintoretto's Tarquin and Lucretia." In it she contends that Tintoretto intentionally obscures the meaning of the pearls in his painting of Lucretia. She argues that when considered together with her suggestively open pose and unclear gestural intent toward Tarquin, the iconography of the pearls becomes especially suspect. De Turk maintains that Tintoretto's inclusion of the pearl necklace further enhances the ambiguity and unease of her status as a wife, courtesan, adulteress or victim. What is more, Tintoretto depicts Lucretia's necklace as a broken strand of pearls, clearly a device laden with symbolism, of Lucretia's broken virtue and its implications. Moreover, the individual pearls fall in a visual line that caresses the

³⁷ For a discussion of the central role of the dagger in Lucretia's narrative and its analogous role in Renaissance visual representations are explored at length by Ian Donaldson in his chapter on the Shaping of the Myth. Ian Donaldson, *The Rapes of Lucretia: A Myth and Its Transformations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 17.

³⁸ Eddy De Jongh, "Pearls of Virtue and Pearls of Vice." *Simiolus* 8, no. 1 (1975-76): 69-97.

contour of her body and land near the blade of the dagger. Notably, one is suspended in the folds of the transparent drape over her pubis, which directs the viewer's gaze and heightens its intended titillating effect.³⁹

I argue that the presence of the fallen statuary bedpost can also be understood as a potent symbol. It reinforces how the sexual act itself will knock Lucretia off her virtuous pedestal and result in her status as a fallen woman, regardless of her intentions. And here, it is the ambiguity of her intentions that are in question; as a result, her myth evokes fear of the degradation of society through the subversion of the patriarchal paradigm. Furthermore, the toppled classical statue reminds us that Lucretia's demise represents the eventual overthrow of the state.

Tintoretto's painting of Lucretia is extraordinary because he challenges the conventional boundaries of late-Renaissance erotic imagery. Like Titian, he eroticizes a rape scenario by offering Lucretia as a sexual object for visual consumption. In contrast to previous artists, however, Tintoretto entices the viewer to experience this rape encounter by depicting Lucretia as offering little resistance and by making scant reference to the moral and ethical issues surrounding the rape. Allusions to her chastity, virtue and honor exist as mere details—the dagger, pearls and the quality of her skin, which cleverly, are ubiquitous symbols with multiple meanings. These elements, paired with Lucretia's ambiguous hand gesture, rather *overtly* suggest Lucretia's complicity in the sexual encounter, thereby amplifying its provocative impact.

³⁹ Sabrina De Turk, "Illicit Arousal: The Erotic Subtext of Tintoretto's *Tarquin and Lucretia*," 1-21.

The Role of Erotic Material in Tintoretto's Lucretia

Late Renaissance painters were often influenced by subversive topics and provocative imagery that pervaded secular culture which belies merely academic sources and inspiration for their artwork.

In her article, Sabrina de Turk conducts a careful analysis of the visual sources that likely influenced Tintoretto's representation of this theme. She constructs a compelling argument illustrating how Tintoretto's presumed access and exposure to Venetian engravings, particularly erotic illustration, influenced his image of Lucretia. De Turk explains the role Venice played, as the epicenter, in 16th-century production of erotic paintings and engravings. She discusses the development of this erotic genre citing the influence of Pietro Aretino. Aretino was a popular Renaissance cultural figure who gained fame as a gifted poet, playwright and brilliant satirist. His wildly popular, provocative tale, *La Corteggiana* (1525), parodied Castiglione's earnest discursive text, *Il Corteggiano*. However, Aretino was especially infamous for authoring a collection of lewd sonnets, *I Sonetti Lussuriosi* (or Lust Sonnets), which accompanied a series of illustrations by Giulio Romano called *I Modi* or "the positions" (graphic images of various positions for sexual intercourse) (Fig. 11). The project was incredibly scandalous and as a result of their widespread notoriety, Aretino became inexorably associated with sexually explicit material (now called *pornographic*).⁴⁰ He narrowly escaped Papal condemnation in Rome and continued to produce literature imbued with his characteristically witty and scathing socio-political commentary in liberal Venice. Notably, the entire collection was later executed by the engraver, Marcantonio Raimondi

⁴⁰ Sabrina De Turk, "Illicit Arousal: The Erotic Subtext of Tintoretto's *Tarquin and Lucretia*," 10-14.

(Fig. 12). Raimondi was the same artist who, by contrast, also produced the iconoclastic image of Lucretia, both heroic and chaste, in his engraving after Raphael.

De Turk demonstrates the connection between Aretino and Tintoretto arguing that they were actually acquaintances in Venice after 1527. She cites a letter to Tintoretto from Aretino; in it Aretino compliments Tintoretto's artistic skill after receiving two early paintings from the artist. She suggests that Tintoretto was exposed to erotic illustration in Venice through this and other connections and was quite likely influenced by it. Moreover, Tintoretto would have certainly seen Giulio Romano's paintings in the Palazzo del Tè in Mantua, which have been linked to his designs for *I Modi* (Fig. 13).⁴¹ Tintoretto, who was commissioned by the same patron, the Duke of Mantua, travelled there to install his work shortly before he painted *Tarquin and Lucretia*. She argues that despite that Romano's paintings were protected "under the veneer of mythology it is notable that they functioned as images of sexual play...and thus, they have a role in erotic discourse in the Renaissance."⁴²

She recognizes that as sources, what both Romano's mythological paintings in the Palazzo del Tè and his *I Modi* engravings have in common with Tintoretto's painting of Lucretia is their "employing similar patterns of representation" and "swirling sexual tension."⁴³ Yet De Turk cites an even more specific visual source for Tintoretto's *Tarquin and Lucretia*, in Jacopo Caraglio's erotic engravings, *The Loves of the Gods* (Begun 1527) (Fig. 14). Couched in mythology in hopes of escaping the scandal and censorship suffered by *I Modi*, these engravings differ from Romano's essentially

⁴¹ Sabrina De Turk, "Illicit Arousal: The Erotic Subtext of Tintoretto's *Tarquin and Lucretia*," 12. Here she references Bette Talvacchia's study of Renaissance erotica, pg. 32-37.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

because the Gods aren't engaged in the act of sexual intercourse. However, they still feature sexually explicit poses intended to expose the Gods' genitals in full view.

Tintoretto's figures of Tarquin and Lucretia echo several of these images directly. For example, Lucretia's open full-frontal pose and indiscreetly veiled pubis is a virtual replica of Caraglio's figure of Venus in his engraving, *Mars and Venus* after Perino del Vaga and Rosso Fiorentino (Fig. 15).⁴⁴

In her discussion, De Turk also cites Tintoretto's own oeuvre for examples of female poses that correspond to Lucretia's. She compares the poses of female figures in Tintoretto's other paintings, *Leda and the Swan* (Uffizi), *Mars, Venus, and Vulcan* (Munich) (Fig. 16), *Suzanna Bathing* (Vienna), and *Danae* (Lyon) with that of *Lucretia*, noting the open frontal pose in each. De Turk remarks on Tintoretto's somewhat unorthodox and frequent use of this position, "especially in mythological figures, notably those who figure in tales of lust and sexual escapades..." She argues that this frontal pose intentionally exploits the female body, providing unprecedented access to view "sexualized regions," i.e. the breasts and between her legs.⁴⁵ She points out that in this image, "Rape became erotic and the viewer is implicated in the desirous nature of the crime." In summary, de Turk considers how Tintoretto's female poses intentionally construct multiple dimensions for viewer engagement, not only as the beholder, but also from within.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Ibid., 12-13.

⁴⁵ Sabrina De Turk, "Illicit Arousal: The Erotic Subtext of Tintoretto's *Tarquin and Lucretia*," 7-9. She concedes that while these paintings do reflect Renaissance precedent in images by Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci and Titian, the role of the viewer is enhanced. The viewer is no longer simply a *voyeur* for whom full visual access is reserved for the parties/figures within the painting, but is now able, even invited, to partake in the visual delectation of the female body.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Why Would Tintoretto Paint Such a Provocative Image?

Sabrina de Turk also considers Tintoretto's bold approach in her analysis of the painting. She asserts that Tintoretto exploits the psychological unease of voyeuristic desire versus active visual participant in the rape. She argues that he takes these ideas further than others, even Titian and in doing so, invokes the pervasive Renaissance male anxiety about female sexuality. She argues that the viewer's confusion over the identity of the woman he is invited to visually possess, either an adulteress or chaste woman, becomes a source of unease about his own role as patron, rapist or moral arbiter.⁴⁷ Linda Hulst raises similar concerns in her article, *Dürer's Lucretia: Speaking the Silence of Women*.⁴⁸ Hulst considers the ways conventional Renaissance depictions of heroic women illustrate a patriarchal agenda. Female subjects are often subversively portrayed in Renaissance images, which renders seemingly straightforward interpretations of a theme, quite ambiguous. Hulst declares, "Even within highly conventional images, Renaissance artists made formal, expressive and iconographic decisions that allowed the particular priorities of patriarchal society to surface differently." She argues further, "...this agenda conflicted with the very idea of female heroism to produce images that ultimately were unable to articulate this idea and thus carried ambivalent social messages, especially to an audience of both women and men."⁴⁹

De Turk posits several theories about why Tintoretto depicted Lucretia's myth in such a provocative way. She focuses on Lucretia's so called, "problematic chastity" in

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸ L.C. Hulst, "Dürer's Lucretia: Speaking the Silence of Women." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society* 16, no. 2 (1991): 205-237. Hulst's discussion is predominantly focused on the notion of heroism in Dürer's and other Renaissance images, a topic that also relates to Garrard's study of Gentileschi's Lucretia, and Griselda Pollock's concerns about heroism in Gentileschi's paintings.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 205-237.

the historical narrative. She claims that there existed “a certain Renaissance unease about women’s sexuality, which rests in part on the belief that women are inherently lustful creatures whose sexuality can be kept in check only by stringent measures for the regulation of chastity.” De Turk traces the historical foundations of the core question, “Was she truly chaste?” and cites specific references from Renaissance literature that speak to it. To illustrate, she points to Lorenzo Valla’s *De Voluptate*, a dialogue on pleasure in which he questions whether Lucretia “was truly unmoved by pleasure or only (fought off Tarquin) because she feared primarily for her reputation.”⁵⁰ Furthermore, de Turk identifies Lucretia as the bearer of multiple meanings. That is, she embodies the qualities most *desired* and most *feared* in the Renaissance male psyche; “the highly sexualized, available figure whose sexuality, if allowed to remain unchecked, threatened to destabilize if not topple patriarchal society.”⁵¹ De Turk discusses how Tintoretto’s painting functions as the site of erotic fantasy, e.g. the intersection of fear and desire, noting that the subversive aspect of that nexus is what makes the image exciting, not unlike pornography or erotica.

According to de Turk and Hults (among others I will discuss later), Lucretia is the embodiment of these concerns: the titillating but disturbing perceived connection between flagrant female sexuality, moral depravity, social corruption and political instability. The intersection of disparate elements in Tintoretto’s image, that is, the ambiguous role of the central figure combined with her explicit sexuality, exposes the precarious psychological structure of the male power paradigm of Renaissance Italy. “The rape of Lucretia was a subject which, with its potential for ambiguities of

⁵⁰ Sabrina De Turk, “Illicit Arousal: The Erotic Subtext of Tintoretto’s *Tarquin and Lucretia*,” 18-19.

⁵¹ Sabrina De Turk, “Illicit Arousal: The Erotic Subtext of Tintoretto’s *Tarquin and Lucretia*,” 18-19.

interpretation embodied that intersection of fear and desire, titillation and disgust, with which the Venetian renaissance patrician regarded the sexually active women. The ambiguity inherent in the Lucretia narrative finds its most compelling representation in the erotically charged painting by Tintoretto, which offers the exciting, but frightening possibility that the viewer's penetration of this voluptuous and forbidden body is secretly desired by the woman."⁵² In conclusion, De Turk's chief argument is that Tintoretto's painting represents Lucretia as a sexual creature who may *want* and *enjoy* this sexual experience. She further contends that this emphasis on Lucretia's self-possessed sexuality is the quality that makes Tintoretto's image so innovative and deeply resonant in late Renaissance culture.

Observations and Conclusions

Sabrina de Turk provides an insightful study of Tintoretto's portrayal of Lucretia; however, she stops short of discussing the representation of Lucretia's agency in his painting. The notion of Lucretia as a sexual being and as such, possibly a conscious participant in the 'rape,' lies at the core of the Renaissance male-anxiety. I suggest that Tintoretto's innovative representation of Lucretia emphasizes those unsettling 'possibilities,' and by doing so, simultaneously acknowledges the existence of Lucretia's female agency. By portraying Lucretia as both embodying and exercising her sexuality and desires, Tintoretto acknowledged—intentionally or not—the female perspective. This feature makes the image special among late Renaissance interpretations of the theme. Tintoretto contrived to illustrate her agency even in the context of a rape situation which would typically obscure any indication of her perspective but it also served to heighten

⁵² Ibid., 20.

the sense of ambiguity within the image. Furthermore, by his acknowledgment of the female perspective, he illustrates her capacity to exercise free-will, make conscious choices and ultimately wield power. It is this sense of potential power—the recognition of it by women and men alike—that is destabilizing to the patriarchal structure exemplified by Lucretia’s story.

“Though I acquit myself of the sin, I do not absolve myself from punishment; nor in time to come shall ever unchaste woman live through the example of Lucretia.”

Livy, *History of Rome*, I.58.10-11

Lucretia as Portrayed by Artemisia Gentileschi

Artemisia Gentileschi’s *Lucretia* (ca. 1621) is a striking contrast to Tintoretto’s painting and is also distinctive among 16th and 17th-century artistic depictions of the theme. Her portrayal of Lucretia’s problematic narrative is equally as complex and interpretively challenging, albeit her expression functions more subtly than does Tintoretto’s.

Gentileschi is known to have painted several versions of Lucretia’s narrative during her artistic career. Her earliest interpretation, painted circa 1621, is in the collection of the Palazzo Cattaneo-Adorno in Genoa, Italy. This painting is the focus of my study because it is a remarkably atypical 17th-century depiction of the ancient Roman heroine and a singularly resonant expression of her theme. Gentileschi’s second interpretation, painted about ten years later (ca. 1642-43), is currently in the Museo di

Capodimonte, Naples, Italy.⁵³ Although this painting approaches the theme using similar modes of representation that emphasize the moment of Lucretia's '(in)decision' about her suicide, it lacks something of the expressive impact of Gentileschi's first version. The Naples painting is more representative of late Renaissance historical interpretations of the myth that reflect an elegant but sentimental style.

Gentileschi's remarkable interpretation is a radical departure from the violent, eroticized versions in which Lucretia frequently appears divorced from the moral and philosophical implications of the assault. Unlike most variations from this period, Gentileschi depicts neither the rape nor the brutal act of suicide, but rather, the psychological aftermath of the rape. She portrays Lucretia in solitary contemplation of the life-altering event, instead of featuring the more violent physical aspects the story. Nevertheless, Gentileschi's singular image of Lucretia adeptly speaks to the diverse literary and historical readings of her legend. Furthermore, Gentileschi's interpretation of the Lucretia theme is especially captivating because it is imbued with the intrinsic connection of a shared traumatic rape experience. This circumstance is germane to my study because historically, both the painter and her subject have been considered solely in terms of and thus defined by their rapes.

Despite her artistic talent, Artemisia Gentileschi has always been a controversial figure. The historical record, beginning with her own rape trial, offers polemic interpretations, alternately depicting Artemisia as either a victim or a provocateur. In subsequent literature and scholarship, she has been portrayed as a slut, a pawn, an ambitious market-savvy profiteer, a martyr and a heroine. Therefore, Artemisia's true

⁵³ While this version is currently attributed to the artist by Garrard, it is not absolutely confirmed in her oeuvre. There is also some speculation about a possible third painting of the theme but lacking concrete evidence, remains uncertain.

identity and legacy remains shrouded in the myriad of conflicting biographical interpretations imposed on her person and her art.

Since the early 1970's there has been a renewed academic and popular interest in Artemisia Gentileschi in keeping with the development of feminist theory in art history. Thus, the careful study of Gentileschi's life and oeuvre through the feminist lens has engendered much original thought and interpretations that fuel an extraordinarily spirited debate within contemporary discourse. This compelling scholarship offers theoretically sophisticated perspectives with which to consider Gentileschi's painting of Lucretia.

In this chapter, I will outline the prevailing yet divergent methodological approaches and unique interpretations argued by feminist scholars, Mary Garrard and Griselda Pollock.⁵⁴ A brief summary of their positions follows: Garrard believes that Gentileschi's interpretation of Lucretia is a *reflection* of the circumstance of her being a woman and having been raped, whereas Pollock contends that Artemisia's image represents the *distillation* of those particular circumstances. I will deconstruct each of their perspectives on the central themes of this discussion (the hero/heroine construct, the patriarchal structure, the canon, and female agency) with regard to Gentileschi's interpretation of Lucretia, paying particular attention to those points on which they are at odds. Furthermore, I will consider other relevant feminist scholarship on these topics in my analysis of Garrard's and Pollock's interpretations.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Mary D. Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989). and Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (London: Routledge, 1999).

⁵⁵ I will approach the discussion by examining specific examples of Garrard's and Pollock's scholarship as well as other contemporary essays, monographs, exhibition catalogues and criticism by art historians whose contributions are equally important to the study and whose perspectives seek to advance, refute or introduce new considerations. Although Mary Garrard argues that women in general and more specifically Artemisia Gentileschi have been effectively absent in art history to this point; however, that claim is not accurate. Vasari as well as other early historians and critics treated women artists in 16th-century Italian

As I engage with this scholarship I offer my own perspectives on these issues and in particular, Artemisia Gentileschi's illustration of female agency in her painting of Lucretia. Artemisia's interpretation represents Lucretia's *choice* in the matter of her narrative. The artist chooses to diminish the importance of the tragic events that define it, e.g. her rape and her suicide, but rather emphasizes her conscious consideration and willful manipulation of the situation—in other words, Lucretia's expression of female agency. Therefore, in choosing to portray Lucretia as a naturalistic, contemporary woman who maintains personal control over her situation and *decides* the trajectory of her life and legacy, Artemisia Gentileschi acknowledges (whether consciously or unconsciously) her own attitudes about her personal life; this painting is her own nuanced expression of female agency.

Finally, from my comparison of their unique and seemingly contradictory interpretations (of Lucretia's narrative), I conclude that both Tintoretto and Gentileschi—

culture. Additionally, certain 17th-century biographers and critics discussed Artemisia Gentileschi, while others did not. But still, she has always existed in her contemporary texts, literature, poetry, trial texts, letters, inventories, patronage and institutional records. It is not really until the early 19th and much of the 20th-century that she virtually disappears. In modern art history, Roberto Longhi's 1916 article, "Gentileschi Padre e Figlia" was the first serious scholarship on Artemisia Gentileschi. He examined her oeuvre in the context of the Caravaggist tradition and distinguished her artistic merit independently from that of her artist father, Orazio Gentileschi. His wife Anna Banti wrote a compelling historical fiction novel on Artemisia Gentileschi in 1953. Then in 1968, the Art Bulletin ran R. Ward Bissell's first published scholarship on her oeuvre, "Artemisia Gentileschi: A new Documented chronology." Feminist discourse in the 1970's fervently began to resurrect Artemisia Gentileschi. Noted scholars working on her oeuvre during that time include, Linda Nochlin, Norma Broude, Ann Sutherland Harris, Eleanor Tufts, Roszika Parker Germaine Greer and Elsa Fine. Garrard and Pollock, central figures in feminist theory, initiated the heated feminist discourse discussed in this study. Important contributions include Garrard's two groundbreaking books devoted to the feminist study of Artemisia Gentileschi in 1989 and 2001 in addition to her feminist art theory book series co-edited with Broude. Pollock's books on feminist theory, published in 1988 and 1999, engage in a spirited dialogue with Garrard on their feminist interpretations of Gentileschi. Popular culture also played an active role in the discourse with the debut of director Agnes Merlet's controversial film, *Artemisia* in 1997. Two important exhibitions of the oeuvres of Orazio and Artemisia contributed to the Gentileschi fervor. The first was curated by Contini and Gianni Papi in 1991 at the Casa Buonarroti, Florence, and the second international exhibition, curated by Keith Christiansen and Judith Mann, opened in 2001. Finally, Alexandra Lapierre's 1998 book *Artemisia: un duel pour immortalite*, created a sensation. Although it has been characterized as an historical novel, it provided both academically rigorous and original scholarship.

inadvertently or otherwise—clearly engage with, even emphasize the potential and autonomy of the heroine while revealing the psycho-sexual-social pathos that underlies her problematic historiography. Therefore ironically, each by their own unusual and gendered expression, both artists illustrate the notion of female agency. Furthermore, in doing so, Tintoretto and Gentileschi's paintings don't merely evoke, but rather capture the essential power and mystique of Lucretia's myth.

Artemisia's Problematic Biography

Born in July, 1593 to the Roman painter Orazio Gentileschi, Artemisia exhibited a precocious talent and passion for art. Eschewing the traditional education of 17th-century women, Artemisia began her formal artistic training in her father's studio; she developed into a promising young artist. In 1611, while collaborating on a fresco cycle with fellow artist and friend Agostino Tassi, Orazio engaged him as Artemisia's painting tutor. The following spring of 1612, Orazio Gentileschi filed a lawsuit against Tassi for the rape(s) of his seventeen year old daughter, Artemisia.⁵⁶ The sexual assaults occurred while Tassi mentored the young woman the previous year. In a sensational public rape trial, Artemisia endured an investigation of her chastity which included intrusive medical and psychological examinations, physical torture and defamatory testimony. Agostino Tassi was ultimately found guilty of the crime *stuprum*, (or 'forcible defloration' of a virgin, the legal 17th-century term) and was exiled from Rome—although his reputation remained relatively untarnished. Despite this ordeal, Artemisia became the most celebrated female artist in 17th-century Italy. Her narrative paintings represent themes that emphasize

⁵⁶ Artemisia was raped by Tassi on at least two different occasions, in May of 1611 and again in March of 1612.

biblical and historical heroines such as *Judith slaying Holofernes* (Fig. 18) and *Lucretia Raped by Tarquinius*. They are emotionally compelling images of passion, violence and psychological angst that have historically been interpreted in terms of her biography.

Like her father Orazio, Artemisia Gentileschi was a student of the Carravaggist school of painting. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, known simply as Caravaggio, was a notorious figure in 16th-century Italian art; he enjoyed spectacular artistic success that was often overshadowed by his scandalous personal infamy. Caravaggio's signature painting style is characterized by extreme tenebrist lighting, a remarkable physical realism and a palpable psycho-emotional tenor, which together, renders a nuanced and naturalistic depiction of the human condition. This pictorial model became the hallmark of early-modern painting and Artemisia's paintings reflect Caravaggio's influence.

Artemisia's Singular Image: Formal Analysis

Artemisia Gentileschi's painting portrays Lucretia as a naturalistic contemporary woman, rather than an idealized figure from classical antiquity. In contrast to so many of the highly sexualized and elegantly didactic portrayals of Lucretia, Artemisia paints a common woman whose physical flaws and emotional vulnerability are readily apparent. In a typically Caravaggist manner, the singular figure of Lucretia emerges from a dark background, starkly illuminated. The close-focus composition heightens the dramatic impact as she is captured halted-in-action; she clutches dagger and breast, arrested in a moment of profound contemplation. This image corresponds with Renaissance interpretations of the heroine poised to enact her suicide. Here, Lucretia is depicted as a monumental seated-figure, in a contrapposto pose. She is semi-nude but remains

modestly draped by disheveled garments that suggest the preceding physical encounter—the troubling event that has led her to this moment.

Gentileschi portrays Lucretia as a robust flesh-and-bone woman, with an ample body. Although Lucretia's skin is luminous, she is far from idealized. Gentileschi naturalistically depicts contours, folds and wrinkles, characteristic of a real woman's body, notable at her armpit and in the crease of her arched neck. The backward tilt of her head causes a slight jowl along the jaw line of her full face. Her expression is anguished and conflicted as evidenced by her deeply furrowed brow, supplicating eyes and pursed lips.

The figure of Lucretia forms a strong diagonal from the bottom-right corner to the top-left corner of the painting. Lucretia's muscular leg, purposefully grounded, forms the base of the conventional Renaissance pyramidal structure and at its apex, her head. Her right arm crosses her torso to firmly grasp her left breast in preparation to plunge the dagger with her left hand. This action, together with the draped creases and folds of her garments, which spiral around her body, leads the eye upward toward her face. Lucretia's left hand grips the hilt of the dagger, holding the blade upward rather than aimed directly at her breast, as conventionally depicted. The position of the dagger echoes the angle of her body and also directs the eye toward her upturned face. The visual momentum of these twisting elements creates a sense of frozen dynamism within the image.

The Role of Feminist Theory: Considering Gentileschi's Art

Here, a discussion of contemporary feminist discourse becomes necessary to my study of Gentileschi's Lucretia because this approach interrogates traditional

interpretations of the painting. It also reexamines the iconography within the image and delves into psycho-sexual gender readings that challenge Lucretia's historical narrative and her visual representation.

Feminist art history is based on two essential notions: one, "Being a woman makes a difference," and two, that the entire discipline is established on an erroneous male paradigm.⁵⁷ Furthermore, feminist scholars contend that the art historical canon is a phallo-centric construct in which the inherent gender hierarchy systematically marginalized and excluded women artists throughout history. Therefore, they assume the task of trying to locate and exhume women, to identify their roles, contributions, perspectives and significance in the record.⁵⁸

In 1971, Linda Nochlin's germinal essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" provided the foundation for what is now the feminist approach. This approach reexamines the role of women artists by interrogating the art historical canon to read for traces of the feminine in it. Nochlin's pioneering work (her seminar, exhibition and subsequent scholarship on women artists) ignited the rediscovery and impassioned feminist discourse on Artemisia Gentileschi.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays*. (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., 1988).

⁵⁸ Feminist studies were part of a broader transformative trend toward a new interdisciplinary approach in academia. Feminist art history is as much about "re" as it is about "she." It advocates both *reproach* and *reapproach* within the discipline of art history. It heralds the call to reevaluate, reject, rethink, and reinvigorate... a veritable rebirth or "renaissance," as it were, of the study of women in the history of art. It is now a rich and expansive discipline and is characterized by an exceptionally diverse range of methodological approaches to the study of art. Nevertheless, these are fundamental tenets that most feminist art historians accept which inform and influence the nature of their intellectual inquiries.

⁵⁹ Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" Linda Nochlin's work was pivotal as the Women's Liberation movement was just gaining momentum, and has long been considered the impetus for a radical new approach toward the study of women in art history. Her early "Women and Art" seminar, 1976 exhibition, "Women Artists: 1550-1950" (at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art), and groundbreaking article, originally printed in a 1971 *Art News* series devoted to women's issues were key factors in the renewed fervor about Artemisia Gentileschi.

Nochlin's title posits this loaded question in order to reveal the issues and contradictions that emerge when discussing female artists and feminine agency within the discipline of art history. She argues that in the "field of art history, the privileged-class Western white male position is universally, if unconsciously accepted as the natural intellectual context...which constitutes a significant advantage over women."⁶⁰ She maintains that the unstated domination of male subjectivity is intellectually inadequate and fails art history.⁶¹ But Nochlin argues that we cannot and should not merely insert women into the canon,⁶² but instead, urges women to conceive of themselves as *potentially* equal subjects in order to initiate radical, institutionalized change.⁶³

In her scathing criticism of the discipline of art history, Nochlin dissects the history of the myth of the "great artist" and the topoi that encourage it. She dismisses notions of "feminine greatness" and a discernable "universal feminine style" that allegedly result from the special character of women's situations and experiences. Nochlin criticizes those who diminish art as the direct personal expression of individual experience, the translation of the personal life into visual terms. These ideas become the

⁶⁰ Ibid., 45.

⁶¹ Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?", 146. She claims it fails because it operates in a "series of intellectual distortions that must be corrected in order to achieve a more adequate and accurate view of historical situations."

⁶² Nochlin suggests that there *are* no great women artists, but that we cannot merely insert them into the canon and blames the structure of our institutions and our education. She refers to *education* in the sense that is comprised of everything that happens to us the moment we enter this world of meaningful symbols, signs signals.

⁶³ Ibid. Nevertheless, Nochlin believes that the "engaged feminist intellect can pierce through the cultural-ideological limitations this paradigm imposes to reveal its biases and inadequacies, not only in dealing with the question of women, but in the very *way of formulating* crucial questions within the discipline as a whole." Nochlin questions the validity of the formulation of so-called "problems" in contemporary culture (the Black Problem, Poverty Problem, Woman Problem, etc.) identifying them as mere constructs, conditioned and falsified by the way in which questions are posed. She suggests that a simple reinterpretation of the "nature of the problem" will begin to confront the issue. She argues that asking the right questions will create a new paradigm that will ultimately challenge and destroy traditional divisions of intellectual inquiry because they are no longer adequate to deal with the meaningful questions of our time.

crux of controversy between key feminist scholars.⁶⁴ Linda Nochlin opened the door for feminist art historians to engage in a rich and profound inquiry into the nature, structure and limitations of the discipline and its resulting consequences to women in art throughout much of western history. She introduced many of the central issues Gentileschi scholars continue to grapple with today.

Contemporary Feminist Literature on Artemisia

A number of art historians have lent invaluable insight to the discourse on Artemisia Gentileschi and her 17th-century artistic milieu. R. Ward Bissell has dedicated his career to the study of Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi and his extensive scholarship has produced vital contributions to the discipline.⁶⁵ Bissell's 1999 book, *Artemisia Gentileschi: and the Authority of Art. A Critical Reading and Catalogue Raisonné* was the first comprehensive monograph and catalogue raisonné devoted to the study of Artemisia Gentileschi. Although his scholarship has been criticized for its traditional masculinist approach, i.e. interpreting Gentileschi's art in terms of the canonical hierarchy which privileges male artists and diminishes women's art to a serendipitous anomaly within it, Bissell's book remains an invaluable source of reference and provides an equally important perspective within the discourse.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Ibid., 153.

⁶⁵ R. Ward Bissell, *Orazio Gentileschi and the Poetic Tradition in Caravaggesque Painting* (University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1981). This was his first book, a monograph and catalogue raisonné on Orazio Gentileschi's artistic career as a painter in the Caravaggist tradition of 16th-century Italy. It established the theoretical and aesthetic background that shaped the artistic milieu in which both Orazio and his daughter, Artemisia Gentileschi painted.

⁶⁶ R. Ward Bissell, *Artemisia Gentileschi and the Authority of Art: Critical Reading and Catalogue Raisonné* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999). Published during the height of prolific scholarship and spirited discourse on the artist, Bissell's study is based on exhaustive research include a broad range of reference materials and records including but not limited to extant paintings, 17th and 18th-century texts, inventories, letters and documents as well as later and modern scholarship,

In 2001, the Metropolitan Museum of Art curator Keith Christensen in collaboration with Judith Man, curator at St. Louis Museum of Art mounted a momentous and ambitious international exhibition of Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi's paintings. The catalogue that accompanied the exhibition, *Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi: Father and Daughter Painters in Baroque Italy*. (2001-2002 Rome, New York and St. Louis) set up a polemic discussion that juxtaposed the artists' work and addressed issues of influence, gender and attribution. The exhibition directly engaged the feminist dialogue by exploring the problematic of Artemisia as a female artist in relationship to her father, his art and influence and the implications of these considerations within the art historical canon.⁶⁷ In addition to Christiansen and Mann,

catalogues and translations. Throughout the monograph, Bissell gives particular credit to and liberally quotes Artemisia expert, Mary Garrard, sometimes concurring with her analyses and at other times offering an opposing viewpoint. Many art historians, (feminist and otherwise) as aptly articulated by Elizabeth Cropper and Charles Dempsey, are critical of the traditional monograph and catalogue raisonné approach. Elizabeth Cropper and Charles Dempsey, "The State of Research in Italian Painting of the Seventeenth Century," *Art Bulletin* 69 (1987): 494-509. They consider it anachronistic and suggest that it reinforces the patriarchal system and discredited notions such as the myth of artistic genius. They challenge its intellectual rigor and relevance in contemporary art history. However, Bissell demonstrates that he is indeed fully engaged with the topical issues. He willingly acknowledges and responds to the various concerns and criticisms levied against his work and credits many specific scholars who have influenced his study. Babette Bohn, 17th-century feminist art historian whose work on Artemisia Gentileschi I will discuss later, reviews Bissell's monograph. She presents an objective analysis of the strengths and failings of his study. Bohn offers a generally positive review of his scholarship and acknowledges his book as a valuable contribution to the study of this artist. She praises his thorough exploration into the relationship between Artemisia and her patrons and the ways would have impacted her paintings. Bissell argues against crediting Gentileschi with just the creative invention and genius his critics would accuse him of reinforcing in a traditional monograph. Bohn considers his argument convincing and well-founded, but acknowledges that many scholars will find certain unequivocal rejections of previous feminist interpretations challenging. In conclusion, like Bohn, I found his work to be adequately open-minded, thoroughly engaged with feminist concerns and less entrenched in traditional academic ideology than would critics suppose.

⁶⁷ Several years after the exhibition, Keith Christensen published the article, "Becoming Artemisia: Afterthoughts on the Gentileschi Exhibition." in the *Metropolitan Museum Journal* (2004). In it, Christensen addressed several new issues of attribution between the two Gentileschi artists, still engaged with the ever-evolving scholarship on her oeuvre. He contributed additional research to the field, drawing out conclusions about how inextricably interconnected father and daughter artists' collaborations may have been. Like Garrard, he was concerned with the connection between Artemisia's creative invention in relationship to literary convention and patronage. He offered interpretations on the degree and skill with which Artemisia's painting placed emphasis on the psychological moment rather than the physical drama and its poetic appeal by inverting conventional expectation and metaphor. Christensen concurred with current reattributions, including that of Cleopatra to Orazio and offered new insight into the continuing dialogue about the influence, co-authorship and autonomy exhibited in these artists' paintings.

several influential Gentileschi scholars contributed to the catalogue including Elizabeth Cropper, Richard Spear, Alessandro Zuccari and Livia Carloni among others.

Conspicuously absent, however, were Mary D. Garrard and R. Ward Bissell.

The exhibition received a fair amount of criticism, particularly from feminist circles. Nanette Salomon asserted in her essay, “Judging Artemisia,” that the exhibition perpetuated the traditional misogynistic approach. She argued that it contrived a hierarchical schema of judgment in its side by side comparison of father and daughter’s paintings. Set up as Master versus Student, she claims the exhibition prohibited Artemisia’s work to be considered in its own right.⁶⁸ Mieke Bal offered a similar criticism in her article, “Grounds of Comparison,” which later became part of her collection of essays, *The Artemisia Files: Artemisia Gentileschi for Feminists and Other Thinking People*.⁶⁹ In it Bal adeptly frames the polemic discussion of Gentileschi’s oeuvre and provides a concrete example of how art history as an academic discipline is fully engaged in a multiplistic approach.⁷⁰ This book addresses some of the major conceptual dilemmas facing feminist art historians. It demonstrates the interdisciplinary nature of scholarship; it necessarily draws on particularities of race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, and voice to enrich and contextualize this intellectual inquiry.⁷¹ In each of six chapters respected scholars, Garrard, Salomon, Bohn, Ciletti, Pollock and Bal engage with a different methodological approach ranging from attribution, judgment and personal confrontation to historical contextualization, exhibition, and popular rewriting.

⁶⁸ Nanette Salomon, “Judging Artemisia.” *The Artemisia Files: Artemisia Gentileschi for Feminists and Other Thinking People*. Ed. Mieke Bal. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 33-34.

⁶⁹ Mieke Bal, “Judging Artemisia.” *The Artemisia Files: Artemisia Gentileschi for Feminists and Other Thinking People*. Ed. Mieke Bal. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 129-167.

⁷⁰ Mieke Bal, ed., *The Artemisia Files: Artemisia Gentileschi for Feminists and Other Thinking People* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 11.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

These essays come together as an engagement with an “Artemisia File” to expose the ways the 21st-century has acquired its understanding of the artist. The essays function as an emblem of and testament to inspiring, ever-evolving feminist art history.⁷²

Mieke Bal’s study of paintings of Lucretia by Rembrandt, Gentileschi’s contemporary, in *Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition*, is also particularly germane to the discourse because she explores the traditional boundaries between literary and visual analysis and lends useful insight into complex handling of gender and the representation of women during the 17th-century.⁷³ Her perspectives on the psychology of rape, trauma, gender and patriarchal structure are closely aligned with Griselda Pollock’s in her discussion of Lucretia.

Nanette Salomon’s influential article, “The Art Historical Canon: Sins of Omission” (1991), is also important to the Gentileschi discourse. Her discussion is

⁷² Bal, Mieke, ed., *The Artemisia Files: Artemisia Gentileschi for Feminists and Other Thinking People*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005. The first essay, “Artemisia’s Hand” by Mary D. Garrard, examined Artemisia Gentileschi’s depiction of hands as an expressive convention, an identifiable sign of her authorship and an expression of the her heroines’ female agency. She claims Gentileschi does so by representing strong hands and forearms. Garrard also seeks to resolve controversial attributions informed by “gender biased preconceptions that repressively feminized the artist’s image.” Next, Nanette Salomon addressed the issue of ‘judgment’ in her contribution, “Judging Artemisia.” She discussed the changing conditions of judgment as an art history trope in two critical moments, the late 16th century and in late 20th/early 21st centuries. Salomon focuses on two themes explored in Artemisia’s paintings, *Suzanna and the Elders* and *Judith Decapitating Holofernes* to serve as a test case for alternative approaches to the practice of ‘judgment.’ The third essay, “Gran Macchina e Bellezza: Looking at Gentileschi Judiths,” gave a careful reading of her four different versions of the theme. Elena Ciletti employed a “formal analysis of extended immersion in their materiality and visuality, characterized as an account of visual narrative to direct the viewer’s gaze.”⁷² Babette Bohn’s contribution, “Death, Dispassion and the Female Hero,” takes an historical approach, which contextualizes a single rarely considered painting, *Jael and Sisera* from several perspectives in its time. She argues for Artemisia’s capacity for flexibility of artistic invention, fidelity to biblical text and virtuous depictions of women in a quieter mode when appropriate. In the fifth essay, “Grounds of Comparison,” Mieke Bal interrogates the trope of ‘judgment and hierarchy’ in exhibitions. She examines three cases of comparison by which exhibitions engage with the viewer in diverse ways: how age and authority and/or influence affect attribution, how a rape experience figures into artistic production and the application of judgment to the master/student relationship. The final contribution, “Feminist Dilemmas with the Art/Life Problem,” by Griselda Pollock engages with Agnes Merlet’s film biopic, *Artemisia* to address dual fictions between history and truth in order to stress an ethics of reading rather than a politics of truth.

⁷³ Mieke Bal, *Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition*. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

particularly apropos considering the problematic historiography of Artemisia Gentileschi. In it she traces the historical roots and structuring of the art historical canon from Giorgio Vasari's, *Lives of the Artists*, through H.W. Janson's *The History of Art*.⁷⁴ She argues that Vasari created notions of the artist-genius, art critic and the canon that persist in the discipline of art history today. Salomon investigates the role artists' biographies have played in the very structure of the canon, arguing that they have been used to celebrate masculine 'artistic genius', creating an heroic model and in contrast, have worked to exclude and marginalize women as well as to perpetuate patriarchal as well as hierarchical structures.⁷⁵

Garrard vs. Pollock: A Contentious Discourse

However, Mary D. Garrard and Griselda Pollock assert the two predominant feminist perspectives in the study of Artemisia Gentileschi. Both Garrard and Pollock problematise Artemisia Gentileschi as a woman and a painter in 17th-century Italy. Both address Artemisia's personal story of rape and victimization within her socio-cultural context and examine how it informed and influenced her development as an artist. They discuss how these factors manifest themselves in the aesthetic characteristics, themes and motifs present in her paintings, specifically those of her heroines. Yet key aspects of their highly nuanced arguments stand in opposition to one another which define them as the two most contentious positions within the discipline.

⁷⁴ Nanette Salomon, "The Art Historical Canon: Sins of Omission." (*En*)gendering Knowledge: Feminism in Academia. Ed. Joan Hartmann and Ellen Messer-Davidow. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 222-236.

⁷⁵ Salomon, "The Art Historical Canon: Sins of Omission", 235. Salomon concludes saying, "While conditions have changed, the deeper stratifications of gender, race, and class continue to operate within the culturally expressed power relationships he articulated. Vasari thus furnished the discursive forms that remain potent in Janson's moment-and ours."

Mary Garrard

Mary Garrard, a central figure in the development of feminist art history, is considered the leading Artemisia Gentileschi scholar.⁷⁶ Her book, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art* (1989), examines Artemisia Gentileschi's oeuvre through a feminist lens. In doing so, Garrard endeavored to resurrect Artemisia and her work from her perceived neglect within the art historical canon.⁷⁷ Furthermore, Garrard's study offered radically new interpretations of Gentileschi's paintings of mythological and biblical heroines. During a time when feminist studies were coming to the forefront of academic inquiry, Garrard's book was the first important scholarly attempt of this magnitude to reconstruct and synthesize Artemisia Gentileschi's life and career. Garrard explains her theoretical approach to interrogate Gentileschi's paintings saying, "Women's art is inescapably, if unconsciously, different from men's because the sexes have been socialized to different experiences of the world."⁷⁸ Based on Artemisia's sex and biography of sexual trauma, as such, Garrard

⁷⁶ Mary D. Garrard has been engaged with feminist theoretical discourse since its inception. A session held at the national College Art Association meeting in 1978 entitled, "Questioning the Litany: Feminist Views of Art History," provided the stimulus for her pioneering series of feminist anthologies, *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany* (1982), *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History* (1992) and *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History after Postmodernism* (2005). Editors Mary D. Garrard and Norma Broude wanted a platform on which to present the full scope of the challenge that feminism had placed before art history. Garrard and Broude have spent their careers compiling these volumes of collected papers and essays that trace feminist thought and its challenge to traditional art history. Many influential feminist art historians have contributed to this series, including several addressed in this paper (Nochlin, Bohn, Salomon, Pollock and Garrard) These works along with her studies of Artemisia Gentileschi form a pioneering body of scholarship that crucial to the discipline. Nevertheless, she credits Linda Nochlin (and Ann Sutherland Harris') exhibition, "Women Artists: 1550-1950" in 1976 as well as Eleanor Tufts' book, *Our Hidden Heritage* of the same year with igniting her curiosity in Artemisia Gentileschi. Struck by the wealth of seemingly unrecognized female iconographical complexities in Artemisia Gentileschi's paintings, Garrard embarked on her journey of discovery into the first feminist authoritative study of its kind.

⁷⁷ Mary D. Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.)

⁷⁸ Garrard, *The Image of the Female Hero*, 5.

concludes that “Artemisia’s art was indeed radically different in expression and in the interpretation of traditional themes from that of her male contemporaries.”⁷⁹

Garrard looks at Artemisia’s oeuvre in terms of the Carravaggist tradition. She argues that Gentileschi’s distinct difference from other women artists of her time was that her painting determined to achieve “expressive or stylistic singularity on a truly competitive level” with her male counterparts.⁸⁰ Garrard thus suggests that Artemisia’s paintings exhibit a complex interaction with “masculine artistic tradition,” combining “transformed formal prototypes,” “male heroic models of antique and Renaissance art” with “imaginative identification with female characters,” to create an “androgynous ideal.”⁸¹ Garrard likens Artemisia’s *heroines*, the expressive quality of this “gender-inverted androgyny,” as approaching that of the canonical Masters, Michelangelo and Leonardo.⁸² She combines unmistakably female characters that display “masculine” vigor and heroic resolve, even as they evoke specific male formal paradigms. Simply stated, they behave as ‘female heroes’ rather than as traditional heroines.⁸³ These seminal ideas form the core of the notion termed, ‘female agency.’ Furthermore, Garrard argues that Gentileschi’s paintings, characterized by her identification with women’s struggle against masculine dominance, demands that the artist be located in the “evolving history of feminism itself, woman’s awakening consciousness that their status was not divinely ordained but man-made, and women’s growing realization that their presumed

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Garrard, *The Image of the Female Hero*, 25.

⁸¹ Ibid., 7.

⁸² Ibid., 8.

⁸³ Ibid., 7.

inferiority was debatable.”⁸⁴ With this, she firmly presents Gentileschi as a proto-feminist.

Garrard’s Reading of Gentileschi’s Lucretia

Garrard deconstructs Gentileschi’s representation of Lucretia to read for alternative meaning reinterpreted by her female artistic intelligence.⁸⁵ She criticizes typical Renaissance portrayals of Lucretia’s suicide as decidedly unheroic and unnecessarily exploitive of the sexually erotic component of the narrative. She argues though, that Gentileschi’s version effectively reintroduces heroic imagery and moral values as well as providing a female perspective on female suicide.⁸⁶ She asserts that Gentileschi’s image of Lucretia is different from other Renaissance examples in two very specific ways: first, she is not portrayed in the act of suicide, but is rhetorically poised, still considering it. And secondly, Lucretia holds her breast in a manner that suggests preparation to nurse, a gesture that recalls the theme from Madonna and Child images. She argues that these features together suggest a completely different interpretative emphasis and from other depictions of Lucretia’s narrative.⁸⁷

Garrard asserts that the painting is novel because it visually posits the question of whether Lucretia *should* commit suicide. By proposing “an altered dilemma,” she confronts more profound human concerns than culturally prescribed moral or socio-political mores. Garrard maintains that this approach effectively recalls the Augustinian moral debate but conveniently skirts the thorny Christian theological issues inherent in

⁸⁴ Ibid., 138.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Garrard, *The Image of the Female Hero*, 216.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 228-230.

Lucretia's myth regarding chastity and suicide. Garrard suggests that Gentileschi's special expression of the theme lies in the juxtaposition of the female breast and the sword. The breast, she argues, "symbolizes female nurture and the ongoing cycle of human nature," while the sword represents "the agent of the suicide that would interrupt the natural cycle."⁸⁸ To paraphrase, Garrard explains that Gentileschi has cleverly replaced the ideal of chastity and the notion of sexual transgression with the biological consequences of rape.⁸⁹ These problems: the "question of pregnancy" and the "question of reputation" are the biological and social consequences Lucretia is left to deal with.⁹⁰ Garrard thus reasons that the options, potential motherhood versus potential suicide, are specifically *female* concerns. Garrard argues further, that the nature of Lucretia's female reproductive concern is not with so-called 'male or patriarchal issues' of "transferred pollution" in potential offspring either, but with sacrificing her role in nature.⁹¹ Ultimately, Garrard claims that the juxtaposition of these two alternatives creates a new dramatic episode in Lucretia's narrative that "changes the terms and broadens the human meaning of her myth." She explains that it becomes "now an *individual choice* of action in a situation where no course of action is without penalty."⁹²

Garrard also asserts that Artemisia would have easily related to Lucretia's dilemma because she had also suffered moral criticism in the aftermath of her own rape. Garrard argues that the vindication Gentileschi achieved in court was accomplished by Lucretia's more brutal suicide, although both resolutions ostensibly saved their

⁸⁸ Ibid., 231.

⁸⁹ Garrard, *The Image of the Female Hero*, 231.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 220.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

reputations.⁹³ Garrard suggests that Gentileschi must have relived her own experience in painting her Lucretia saying, “As an artist, Gentileschi relied upon her own gender identification with Lucretia to transform the character entirely, from a two-dimensional emblem of virtue (or of sexuality) into a naturalistically plausible, living expression of the perpetual dilemma, both physical and metaphysical, social and private, that is faced by women who have been raped.”⁹⁴

Garrard identifies several ways that Gentileschi’s image reflects thematic prototypes such as the iconographical associations with images of the Virgin Mary offering her breast to the baby Jesus. She also suggests that Gentileschi’s Lucretia references the Passion of Christ; Lucretia recalls Jesus’ agony in the garden as he struggles to reconcile his voluntary death for the sake of humanity. She argues that the painting visually reinforces previously established typological parallels between Lucretia and Christ, both martyrs for the greater good.

Garrard observes that through Gentileschi’s singular approach, i.e. her juxtaposition of this specific iconography, she has inverted the semiotic process and thereby changed the meanings generally circumscribed by the masculinist perspective of Lucretia’s suicide, to those in the feminine. She argues that Gentileschi’s questioning Lucretia “opens the way to a new possibility: the heroine’s right to self determination.”⁹⁵ Garrard’s reading seemingly proposes, then, that Artemisia Gentileschi identifies Lucretia’s power of female agency. Melissa Matthes echoes this notion of Lucretia’s right of self-determination or female agency, in her study saying, “Her suicide thus

⁹³ Garrard, *The Image of the Female Hero*, 231-232.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 232.

⁹⁵ Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 238.

becomes a form of female power, a kind of ‘enabling violation.’ Through her suicide, Lucretia determines how her body and life will be read.”⁹⁶

Pollock Challenges Garrard’s Scholarship

Art historian Elizabeth Cropper’s review of Mary Garrard’s book offers a skeptical and lackluster impression of her Gentileschi scholarship.⁹⁷ While Cropper concedes that Garrard’s study is admirable and contributes some meaningful insights to Gentileschi scholarship, she insinuates that Garrard’s ‘feminist interpretation’ lacks academic rigor, therefore, ultimately fails significantly to change the subject’s narrative history.⁹⁸

However, it was Pollock’s review of Garrard’s book that truly inaugurated the diverse and polemic feminist debate about Artemisia Gentileschi within contemporary critical discourse. In it Pollock insists that Garrard’s interpretations remain locked within the masculine paradigm, criticizing Garrard’s study of Gentileschi’s oeuvre as a mere inversion of traditional masculinist readings. She also contends that Garrard is attempting to re-incorporate Gentileschi into the canonical structure. Furthermore, she

⁹⁶ Matthes, *Founding of Republics*, 7.

⁹⁷ Elizabeth Cropper, Review of *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art*, by Mary D. Garrard. *Renaissance Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (Winter, 1989): 864.

⁹⁸ Cropper, Review of Garrard, *The Image of the Female Hero*, 864. Cropper downplays the impact of feminist inquiry into the history of art as a discipline. Ostensibly, these scholars belong to different camps within the discipline: Cropper (undeclared as such) is generally considered a ‘traditionalist,’ Garrard a ‘feminist’ and Pollock, an ‘ultra-feminist.’ Cropper credits Garrard’s portrayal of Artemisia as a truly competitive figure in 17th-century art, but dismisses Garrard’s attempt to elevate the artist’s so-called “androgynous creativity” to the level of Michelangelo. Cropper implies that she considers Garrard’s position an overly heroic interpretation, thereby aligning herself with Griselda Pollock in her critique of Garrard’s scholarship. Cropper identifies several specific failings: she argues that Garrard neglects to engage with or reintegrate crucial texts (letters and trial records) in her study, which exhibits a “serious lack of credible societal contextualization.” And two, she accuses Garrard of having conducted a “less than thorough reading of primary sources.” Cropper also examines Garrard’s position that Gentileschi painted women as empowered protagonists, but finds Garrard’s prototypes in literary and historical visual tradition unconvincing evidentiary support.

accuses Garrard of doing just what feminism struggles against, i.e. projecting her own temporal concerns, desires and ideas onto the past. Her primary concern is that Garrard tends to valorize and heroize Artemisia's artistic skill simply because she is a woman. Pollock also claims that Garrard interprets Artemisia's painting as simple autobiographical expression that reflects her personal response to trauma, citing Garrard's text, "Yet once we acknowledge, as we must, that Artemisia Gentileschi's early pictures are vehicles of personal expression to an extraordinary degree, we can trace the progress of her experience as the victim first of sexual intimidation, and then of rape..."⁹⁹

Furthermore, Pollack accuses Garrard of establishing Gentileschi as a generic and monolithic representation of women and their collective experience.¹⁰⁰ She asks, "Do we distill the specificities of art to arrive at the generalities of Everywoman?"¹⁰¹ Many of the arguments she levies against Garrard are rehearsed again in greater depth in her chapter, "The Female Hero and the Making of a Feminist Canon," from her book, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories*, which I address later in this discussion.¹⁰²

Garrard's Rebuttal

Mary Garrard's sequel, *Artemisia Gentileschi around 1622* (2001), revisits several polemic issues within her scholarship on the artist.¹⁰³ In her introduction, Garrard directly addresses the criticism generated by her previous study. She emphatically

⁹⁹ Garrard, *The Image of the Female Hero*, 208.

¹⁰⁰ Griselda Pollock, Review of *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art* by Mary D. Garrard. *Renaissance Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (Winter, 1989): 499-505.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 501.

¹⁰² Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 98.

¹⁰³ Mary D. Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi around 1622: The Shaping and Reshaping of an Artistic Identity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001).

refutes Griselda Pollock's analysis and so-called misrepresentation of Garrard's reading of Gentileschi's oeuvre. Garrard reasserts her position as having been the original champion of the "power of female agency" in Gentileschi's art, challenging Pollock's claim that these concepts were her own.

Garrard argues that Pollock has "willfully misread" her complex interpretation of the artist's work by suggesting that Garrard has reduced Gentileschi's painting to simple autobiographical expression.¹⁰⁴ Garrard accuses Pollock of over simplifying and ignoring the subtleties of her arguments. Furthermore, Garrard exposes an inherent flaw in Pollock's criticism; she points out that the Pollock has contradicted herself with regard to Garrard's scholarship on Gentileschi's cultural role. Garrard impeaches the logic in Pollock's thinking. She explains how, not only has Pollock has erroneously interpreted that Garrard characterized Gentileschi as a "generic and monolithic representation of women" and their collective experience. But also, Garrard argues, that Pollock has simultaneously accused her of diminishing Gentileschi's significance to one specific personal story "lacking wider cultural significance."¹⁰⁵ Garrard contends that Pollock cannot seem to decide which flaw applies to her interpretations—she asks, "Can Pollock have it both ways?" I will address that question shortly.

Griselda Pollock

Griselda Pollock's alternative feminist approach seeks to resituate Artemisia Gentileschi within her 17th-century social and theoretical context, that is, as a woman functioning as "other" in a masculine world. She interprets Artemisia's painting and

¹⁰⁴ Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi around 1622*, 19.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

artistic career filtered through the challenges presented by this “phallogentric” gaze and the resulting “repression of psychic materials that affect historical subjectivity.”¹⁰⁶

Pollock argues that the canvas, by the artist’s particular choice of representation of a theme, functions as a means by which to work through repressed traumatic experiences that remain indigestible by the subject’s psychic apparatus.¹⁰⁷ Put simply, she contends that an artist’s particular approach toward representing a theme will invariably reflect unresolved issues in his or her unconscious mind.

Pollock is one of the most influential feminist art historians and her groundbreaking scholarship has profoundly affected the historical legacy of women in modern art. Her book, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art’s Histories* (1999), challenges the nature and structure of the art historical canon and is the most extensive and thorough treatment of the subject to date. It expands on Nochlin’s seminal ideas identifying the canon as “a discursive and narcissistic masculine structure within the practice of cultural hegemony.”¹⁰⁸ In it she contemplates the construction of gender and complex Freudian psychoanalytic theories that dissect the masculine paradigm. Pollock identifies her work in terms of ‘feminist interventions’ in the histories of art. Her unique accomplishment is that Pollock offers an innovative theoretical

¹⁰⁶ Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 98.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁰⁸ Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 14 & 67-69. A brief outline of the book demonstrates how her approach engages with these concerns. The first part expands on Nochlin’s seminal ideas. “Firing the Canon,” engages with issues termed ‘culture wars,’ where she identifies the canon as a negative structure, incumbent in the practice feminine oppression. Pollock “examines the theoretical and political issues involved in ‘differencing’ the canon, or exposing its engagement with a politics of sexual difference while allowing that very problematic to make a difference to how we read art’s histories.” In the second part, “Reading Against the Grain,” Pollock reads case studies of Toulouse Lautrec and Van Gogh to explore how feminist reading of canonized artists can yield a different reading of their representations of women, and hence masculinity as an ambivalent psychic position, rather than anti-femininity, of cultural enunciation. The third part, ‘Heroines’ deals with the problematic nature of reinserting women into the historical canon and the psychological construct of heros/heroines. Finally, she considers “the interlacing relations of class, gender, sexuality and race” charted through narrative devices that seek to identify “femininity, modernity and representation, jouissance and difference in paintings by Mary Cassatt and Edouard Manet.”

approach that applies an appropriate Feminist-Desire construct (versus the masculinist-Desire construct) to the study of art history.¹⁰⁹

Pollock discusses various psycho-sexual gender construction theories (including those of Julia Kristeva and Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger in addition to those of Sigmund Freud) to track gender differentiation and its manifestation as Desire. Pollock engages with an analysis of Freudian aesthetic theory by Sarah Kofman to investigate human investment, i.e. the psychological construct of heroes and heroines, in the canon. She aligns feminist with Freudian theory of the human psychological apparatus, “demythifying genius,” that is characterized by conflicting desires (the idealization, identification and separation with the mythified object of that desire). Pollock applies this approach to reading Artemisia Gentileschi in opposition to Garrard. She suggests using Freud’s theories as a vehicle to explore feminine Desire saying,

“I propose that we apply theoretical insights acquired from Freud’s work on ‘the connoisseurs’ to feminist practice. There is a space precisely here for feminist intervention. Even though Freudian psychoanalysis ultimately privileges the place of the Father, seeing all cultural stories as modeled on masculine Oedipal anxieties, and as here, making the Father/Hero central to his analysis of art history, it *theoretically* offers a way to expose the desires and fantasies which have so far made it inconceivable to imagine women in the canon.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. Pollock employs a dual strategy to do so. By “reading selected case studies from early European modernism through the theoretical prisms of contemporary feminist thought, she interrogates those visual representations for insights into the legacy of modernity that itself necessitated a revolt and revision: the feminist modernization of sexual difference.”

¹¹⁰ Pollock, Griselda. *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art’s Histories*. (London: Routledge, 1999), 18. A Note on Freud: In art historical scholarship, Freud’s theory is now frequently characterized as discredited in his field. However his theories should be considered, more accurately, *outmoded*. In the field of psychology, Freud’s theories have not necessarily been uniformly discredited. His psychoanalytic theories are considered groundbreaking contributions to the field. Many of which are still some of the most insightful theories on the structure and function of the psyche. But, like any other field discipline that evolves over time, new approaches and theories emerge that are more self-aware. In retrospect, we can identify the weaknesses or failings of the past. Like our approach to the discipline of art history, we don’t just completely reject ideas what we now consider outmoded, we look at them contextually and recognize their value in the place from where we come and as an indication of what still needs to be done. Griselda Pollock relies on Freudian theory because he offers a language for theoretical psychoanalytical discussion and because to date, the sheer volume of his work devoted the psychoanalysis of aesthetics is unmatched.

Pollock asserts the value of her theoretical models further, explaining,

“Kristeva’s formulation allows us to explore not a woman artist’s intent, what she is expressing because she is a woman, but rather *feminine desire* and *feminine pleasure* that can be realized only by being inscribed somewhere and somehow, masquerading (or rather passing within the conventions) and transgressive (disturbing them) at the same time.¹¹¹

Pollock’s central objective is to “re-read for the inscriptions of the feminine in the texts of the past.”¹¹² She argues that doing so offers a way to discover *difference* in the canon and deconstruct “great artist” myths that impede our understanding of the art of men and women alike. Pollock does however, confront the two dangers of introducing ‘difference’ into the canon: one, that feminist studies undermines itself within art history because of its exclusive and narrow focus on women’s art and two, that feminist studies overly heroize the art of women and produces uniformly critical interpretations of masculine art and culture. Pollock also urges feminist scholars to remain self-aware, cognizant of the potential pitfalls inherent in attempting to reconcile “what feminism brings to art history versus what feminism desires in looking at work by women artists.”¹¹³ The latter two concerns figure quite prominently in her criticism of Garrard’s scholarship on Gentileschi.¹¹⁴ However, Pollock encourages the pursuit of locating the ‘feminine,’ even if in its wake we reach disappointingly non-heroic results (to the chagrin

¹¹¹ Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 146-147. Pollock explains, Like Julia Kristeva, I think that historical materialist and psycho-analytical theories can be and indeed must be, put in joint harness in the analysis of cultural texts. Indeed any feminist project is to an extent defined by the necessity to traverse, theoretically and practically, the field differentially theorized by Freud and Marx.

¹¹² Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 100.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹¹⁴ Pollock, Review of Garrard, *The Image of the Female Hero*, 500. In her criticism of Garrard, Pollock says, “We must learn to read our own symptomatic inscriptions with critical distance. We react against the violences done to women by art history by representing women artists unproblematically as “good subjects” when they need instead to be studied as complex subjects. . . . As a corollary, the feminine subject must be recognized as being implicated in a socio-symbolic formation that can never be grasped if we only construct either victims or heroines.”

of feminist purpose). She emphasizes that “feminism does not speak *for* women; it politically challenges those constructions of ‘women’ by producing counter constructions that are not based on a nature, a truth, an ontology.”¹¹⁵ Pollock explains, “The feminist project aims to introduce an effective differentiation which would allow the difference(s) of women to be represented imaginatively and symbolically—on the planes of language, philosophy and art where the feminine traditionally signifies only the negative difference from man or his fantasy of his other.”¹¹⁶

In Pollock’s discussion on Gentileschi, entitled “Heroines,” she addresses the sensitive issue within feminist discourse of reinserting women into the art historical canon. This ‘making’ of female heroes is central in her reproach of Mary Garrard’s scholarship. Pollock complains, “Biographical materials certainly provide significant and necessary resources for the belated production of women’s authority. But there is surely a difference between careful interrogation of the archive which includes materials on a lived life and the binding back of paintings on to the Western bourgeois notion of the individual within discourses on biography.”¹¹⁷

Thus, Pollock cites Nanette Salomon’s article, “The Art Historical Canon: Sins of Omission,” to substantiate her assessment of Garrard’s scholarship as a failed feminist revision of Gentileschi in the historical record. Paraphrasing, Pollock says, “Nanette Salomon has pointed out that, while biography has held a privileged place in the modes of art history ever since Vasari initiated the heroic model with his *Lives of the Artists*, in

¹¹⁵ Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 99.

¹¹⁶ Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 99.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 107.

regard to gender, biographical material works differentially.”¹¹⁸ Elaborating, Pollock quotes,

“The details of a man’s biography are conveyed as the measure of the ‘universal,’ applicable to all mankind; in the male genius, they are simply heightened and intensified. In contrast, the details of a woman’s biography are used to underscore the idea that she is an exception; they apply only to make her an interesting case. Her art is reduced to a visual record of her personal and psychological make-up.”¹¹⁹

Pollock triumphantly argues, “Salomon claims that in art history, feminist and otherwise, Artemisia Gentileschi’s works are ‘reduced to therapeutic expressions of her repressed fear, anger and/or desire for revenge. Her creative efforts are compromised, in traditional terms, as personal and relative.’”¹²⁰

Pollock’s Reading of Gentileschi’s Lucretia

Pollock also speaks to the dilemma of negotiating Gentileschi’s *Lucretia*, within the historical canon (rather than simply trying to reinsert the artist). She applies her own psychoanalytical approach to locate Gentileschi’s “femininity as a state of *otherness* by reading for those traces of unexpected articulation...”¹²¹ Of this endeavor she says, “I offer possible readings of her work ‘against the grain’ of both feminist celebration and canonical sensationalism.”¹²²

As a means to contextualize Gentileschi’s painting of Lucretia in terms of her success as a 17th-century female painter, Griselda Pollock thus states her approach to looking at Gentileschi’s art, “Could we, however, begin to trace the point at which

¹¹⁸ Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 106.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 107.

¹²¹ Ibid., 102.

¹²² Ibid.

conflicting interests were negotiated to create an image that simultaneously could be read in conformity—though creatively adventurous in its way of doing this—with dominant *masculine* taste while also insinuating into that official space the presence of competing *feminine* meanings depending on the interests or gender of the viewer?”¹²³ Pollock deconstructs the image, reading *through* it to locate Gentileschi’s ‘inscription in the feminine.’

Pollock conceives of Lucretia’s myth, which holds at its core “a woman’s violated and dying body,” as a trope to serve masculine political power.¹²⁴ To substantiate this view, she cites Mieke Bal who argues, “Rape is language that uses the body of woman as a sign to effect and publish hatred, competition and revenge between men.”¹²⁵ Moreover, Pollock argues that by Lucretia’s suicide, she (meaning the woman—and the myth itself extrapolates this responsibility to all women) “becomes the keeper and executor” of that patriarchal law.¹²⁶ And, concurring with Bal’s assessment that “rape is a metaphoric form of murder (of the self),” Pollock explains how rape equates to murder of the self through suicide, because the necessary conclusion of that act, in Lucretia’s context, is suicide. She considers how rape, furthermore, constitutes the theft of female identity; the victim is robbed of her psychological personhood, the power inherent in her female body, (i.e. sex, birth, nurture) and bereft of her social and legal identity.¹²⁷

With regard to Artemisia’s representation, Pollock argues that the figure’s disarrayed clothing, (which suggests the immediacy of the rape) the close-focus on a

¹²³ Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 145.

¹²⁴ Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 158.

¹²⁵ Mieke Bal, “Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition.” (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

¹²⁶ Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 162.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 158-163.

(seemingly) threatened Lucretia and the presence of the dagger together “compress the traditional narrative into a single image that superimposes the suicide onto the rape.”¹²⁸ She argues that the fulcrum of semiotic interpretation rests on the upturned dagger. The dagger which represents the rapist (i.e. patriarchal power structure), his phallus and the instrument of Lucretia’s death/suicide is impotent in this position. This crucial feature creates an interruption in the narrative and thus “resists canonical logic.”¹²⁹ Pollock concludes that in the image Lucretia acknowledges the traditional scenario as her context, but through this device Gentileschi questions its validity. Pollock also notes that Gentileschi’s Caravaggesque naturalism evokes “an unidealized and individualized portrait” which simultaneously takes away from its effectiveness as a grand myth and returns it to that of a human issue.¹³⁰ Pollock suggests that the way Gentileschi treats the female body in the image, precisely Lucretia’s state of clothedness, could offer a glimpse of biography—an indication of Gentileschi’s own rape. Pollock asserts that “Gentileschi uses relations between being dressed and undressed that allow the body to produce a representation of the action of the theft of her identity.”¹³¹ In other words Lucretia’s ravaged, partially clothed body evokes the effect of rape on her overall personal and social identity. However, Pollock argues, in Artemisia Gentileschi’s unique expression, Lucretia is “exposed” but not “published.”¹³² She observes how Gentileschi constructs “a carefully calibrated balance between body and garments that signifies violence while leaving some degree of self-possession.”¹³³ Furthermore, Pollock points out that her use

¹²⁸ Ibid., 162.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 162.

¹³¹ Ibid., 163.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

of the upturned dagger to also allude to *fighting back*, an action that “reveals subjectivity” and demonstrates her “refusal to be contaminated and annihilated.”¹³⁴ As Pollock asserts, the victim’s response by fighting back, incidentally, was historically central to legal and moral determinations of rape and figured in Gentileschi’s own trial testimony in which she herself claims to have wielded a dagger—even injured Tassi after her assault.¹³⁵ Pollock argues that in these ways, “Gentileschi’s painting refuses complicity with both patriarchal and feminist myths.”¹³⁶ Although Pollock offers many insights on approaching Artemisia to glean something of the woman and her art, Pollock carefully avoids a direct discussion of her female agency. Nevertheless, Pollock’s sophisticated observations and precisely articulated psychological reading of Gentileschi’s *Lucretia*, emphatically affirms her recognition of Artemisia Gentileschi’s agency.

Garrard vs. Pollock: A Comparison of their Readings

A close comparison of several key points in Garrard’s and Pollock’s seemingly divergent perspectives, ironically, reveals many striking similarities between them. In this comparison I explore the sensitive issue between these scholars, of simultaneous ‘universalism’ and ‘specificity,’ with regard to Gentileschi’s art.

In their readings, Garrard and Pollock each acknowledge the expressive merits of Gentileschi’s painting of Lucretia within its own 17th-century context, which speaks to

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 163-164. Pollock offers this concluding remark on, “Perhaps it was the historic conjunction of this 17th-century Roman woman’s dramatic encounter with her culture’s definition of woman—at the trial—with a repertoire of cultural stories dealing with heroic women’s entanglement in masculine imaginations that created the semiotic spaces for a particular negotiation, a specific differencing of the canon.”

the artist's proven commercial success and artistic aplomb. In their analyses, both scholars focus on the fact that Gentileschi's Lucretia is not portrayed in the act of suicide, but poised in an attitude of questioning, still considering it.

Both Garrard and Pollock argue that the image diverges from typical representations as a result of the coalescence of a particular set of elements. Furthermore, they maintain that together these elements "suggest a completely different interpretive emphasis."¹³⁷ Whereas Garrard claims the impact lies in painting a Lucretia who considers the sacrifice of her role in nature, 'progeny,' over the patriarchal agenda, Pollock argues that its significance lies in a Lucretia who questions the validity of that masculine agenda. However, both scholars agree that it is this creative emphasis on the feminine experience that demonstrates Gentileschi's particular artistic ingenuity.

Furthermore, Garrard's interpretation relies on specific iconography, i.e. Lucretia grasping her "fecund breast" and the dagger to invert the semiotic process, and by juxtaposing these elements, she changes the meanings generally circumscribed by the masculinist perspective.¹³⁸ And Pollock's reading is not dissimilar; it relies on the semiotic correlation between the upturned dagger and Lucretia's disarrayed state of half-undress. Pollock suggests that these elements within Gentileschi's Lucretia invert the message from, "This is my tragic but logical solution," to "Is this my logical solution?"

Both scholars also argue that in Gentileschi's interpretation, Lucretia's suicide is distilled to a specific person and her individual choice. Garrard says, "It is no longer...but now an individual's choice of action in a situation where no course of action

¹³⁷Garrard, *The Image of the Female Hero*, 230.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 228-231.

is without penalty.”¹³⁹ Similarly, Pollock asserts, “The fantasy (of the myth) is stayed by the forcefulness of this embodiment of a ravished woman faced with an awful choice, which she has not yet made.”¹⁴⁰

In my estimation, both scholars’ interpretations illustrate how Gentileschi’s Lucretia “opens the way to a new possibility: the heroine’s right to self determination.”¹⁴¹ Although difficult to comprehend from our contemporary perspective, the notion of a woman’s right to self-determination was novel in Lucretia’s time. And, while this was also true in Gentileschi’s day, most remarkably, she was able to conceive of this right and/or was willing to approach it in her painting, a clear demonstration of her female agency. In my opinion, however brave or self-aware, Gentileschi’s greatest achievement, is her ability to illicit a deeply human connection to the *woman* in her images. She strips away the narrative, the myth, the legend, even while acknowledging and engaging with them to reveal the humanity of the woman at its core.

I have observed, however, that Garrard neglected to address something I consider to be a central component of her reading of Gentileschi’s *Lucretia*. Garrard references the dagger as a phallic symbol, but she relates to it only in its negative terms, as the instrument of rape, patriarchal structure and the agent of death. However, for Lucretia, wouldn’t it have also functioned as the ‘instrument of procreation’ in relation to the progeny element within the painting as well? Garrard does not address this iconographical association in her reading of the image. Garrard has suggested that Gentileschi’s portrayal of Lucretia is equally concerned with death as the prevention of potential motherhood as its preservation of honor. Therefore, Garrard should have at

¹³⁹ Ibid., 231.

¹⁴⁰ Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 162-163.

¹⁴¹ Garrard, *The Image of the Female Hero*, 238.

least acknowledged the association of dagger-as-symbolic-phallus, with regard to Lucretia's concern over progeny. Furthermore, it is possible that Gentileschi's positioning of the upturned dagger might reveal that Lucretia possessed a certain ambivalence altogether about the dagger, so laden with complex meaning?

Another concern I have with Garrard's interpretation is corollary to several points I discuss in this chapter on gender specific universalities and contemporary projection onto the past. Garrard's reading of Gentileschi's *Lucretia* hinges on the artist's careful juxtaposition of "potentials:" progeny or death. However, by presenting only these alternatives, Garrard assumes a female biological predisposition toward procreation. That is, she portrays reproduction as an inherent concern for Lucretia, which according to Garrard's reading reflects Gentileschi's own attitudes in her image. Furthermore, it raises the question whether *all* women are uniformly concerned with procreation. Particularly in light of Gentileschi's desire to become an artist, is there any evidence to indicate how Gentileschi felt about having children? Furthermore, did she aspire to having a family, and/or was she concerned it might prevent her from achieving artistic success? Perhaps she viewed it as simply a matter-of-course—an eventuality of life. In fact, Gentileschi declares that she possesses a "male soul" and highlights her masculine qualities frequently in her personal correspondence, so perhaps she is spared those typical female concerns.¹⁴² Alternatively then, Gentileschi may have merely projected onto her Lucretia, what she imagined to be a gender-appropriate interpretation of the narrative. Pollock also remains silent on this topic in Garrard's interpretation. I raise this issue cautiously myself and acknowledge that in fact, it may only become relevant in our contemporary liberated feminist consciousness.

¹⁴² Garrard, *The Image of the Female Hero*, 371-401.

Pollock's interpretation of Gentileschi's *Lucretia*, would be strengthened, in turn, by a discussion that directly addressed particular aspects of Garrard's reading of the painting. For example, something I find curious in Griselda Pollock's in-depth iconographical study of *Lucretia* is that she remains nearly silent on Lucretia's rather emphatic grip on her breast.¹⁴³ As Garrard points out, not only does this gesture recall historical precedent through thematic prototypes in the canon and in Gentileschi's oeuvre, but it is a central component of Garrard's interpretation of the image.

Furthermore, I feel that Pollock's interpretations don't fully escape the disadvantage of being circumscribed within the contemporary male paradigm either. Though different from Garrard's, Pollock's analyses rely on Freud's masculine constructions of gender, trauma and art to articulate the psychological foundations of these issues which are foregrounded in Gentileschi's painting of Lucretia.

Elizabeth Cohen has offered similar critiques of both Pollock and Garrard in her essay, "The Trials of Artemisia Gentileschi: A Rape as History."¹⁴⁴ In it, Cohen confronts the sensitive and challenging issues embedded in the task of understanding Gentileschi's feminine perspective through her paintings.¹⁴⁵ Cohen performs a close study of the witnesses' testimony recorded in Artemisia Gentileschi's rape trial to reveal the inconsistencies and strategies contained within. She assesses the witnesses' intentions and the function of specific statements together with their effective manipulation of precise language to achieve particular goals. She dissects Gentileschi's

¹⁴³ Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 161-162. Pollock merely mentions that Lucretia grips her breast saying, "Pressure is placed on the swelling breast held protectively, possessively and yet in a possibly painful grip."

¹⁴⁴ Elizabeth S. Cohen, "The Trials of Artemisia Gentileschi: A Rape as History." *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 31, no. 1, Special Edition: Gender in Early Modern Europe, (Spring, 2000), 47-75.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

own testimony to expose her personal strategy and to illustrate how she negotiated her 17th-century circumstances. Her goal is to reveal how “anachronistic reading has perpetuated a highly sexualized image of the painter and her work.”¹⁴⁶ Cohen is highly critical of much contemporary scholarship which, she argues, lacks rigorous historical method and projects its own temporal and cultural attitudes about the relations between rape, the corporal body and the socio-cultural context onto its subject. She cautions art historians about “mapping modern ideas about psychology and sexuality, as if timeless, onto people distant in the past.”¹⁴⁷

In her critique of contemporary scholarship, Cohen disapproves of both Garrard’s and Pollock’s methods and their conclusions about Gentileschi saying, “In current scholarly writing...the portrayal of Artemisia as definitively marked by rape endures.” In her critique of Pollock, Cohen mounts a general attack on psychological assessments of Artemisia saying, “Late-twentieth century feminism, while rejecting or revisiting many earlier tenets about gender, continues to treat sex as pivotal. This assumption underlies an influential reevaluation of sexual violence as a defining node in relations between men and women. In this psychological theory of politics, rape becomes an essential enforcer of male hegemony.”¹⁴⁸ To paraphrase, she explains that this approach considers physical and psychological integrity central to a firm sense of self and that “personal autonomy is critical for well-being.” Therefore, rape harms the body and the reputation, but most importantly, attacks the self by violating private boundaries. She asserts that it constructs

¹⁴⁶ Cohen, *A Rape as History*, 48.

¹⁴⁷ Cohen, *A Rape as History*, 48.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

a universalizing ideology of rape that has influenced many scholars' approach to study Artemisia Gentileschi.¹⁴⁹

I find it interesting that Cohen articulates what amounts to a direct criticism of Pollock's work: that Pollock wrongfully assesses Gentileschi in terms of contemporary attitudes. Cohen argues that Pollock uses contemporary methods (psychology) which render her insights confined within the contemporary patriarchal paradigm, are self-serving and therefore inaccurate. As we have seen, Pollock has accused Garrard of essentially the same thing. Cohen argues that the only sure method of redress is to interrogate the written record, i.e. to reexamine trial testimony to reveal Artemisia Gentileschi, something Garrard and Pollock address very little in their studies.

Yet it is important to acknowledge that the act of rape connected Artemisia to her subject in *Lucretia*. Their rapes occurred more than a millennium apart, Artemisia's, in 17th-century Rome, Lucretia's in ancient fifth century Rome, BCE. Each woman experienced a completely different social, cultural, religious and political climate: Lucretia, the pagan ancient-Roman-nobility wife versus Artemisia, the Christian middle-class adolescent female-artist. Beyond the artist and the subject both being women who have experienced raped, there is no connection between them. Therefore, isn't this connection the most fundamental way Artemisia Gentileschi would have related to Lucretia's narrative? Wasn't Lucretia's rape truly the only aspect of that ancient Roman woman's life with which Artemisia could have empathized and more importantly, wouldn't she have consciously brought to her interpretation *her* most useful tool with which to paint her subject?

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 55.

Pollock does not subscribe to that logic. Although Pollock tries to minimize this connection by interpreting Gentileschi's art from a different, psychological angle, I argue that even Pollock cannot extricate those critical factors from Gentileschi's art, and that her interpretation still hinges on these circumstances. Furthermore, the rape happened ten years before Gentileschi painted her Lucretia. How then, do we consider the psychological implications of Artemisia's rape and trial when it happened? Mustn't we also consider that Gentileschi's state of mind or her perspective on these events may have changed over time? Therefore, what do we make of it with respect to the period when she painted the image, as a moderately successful artist, married woman and mother?

Again, Elizabeth Cohen speaks to these challenging questions. Her essay confronts Pollock's modern psychoanalytical interpretation, which Pollock argues, "features the female *body* at the core of a complex narrative around sexuality, trauma, bereavement and imaginary identification."¹⁵⁰ Cohen points out, however, that psychologically, there is a differential between our contemporary notion of personal identity and the historical socio-cultural relationship of the body to self-identity. She emphasizes that this relationship between the corporal body and personal identity is vastly different throughout history.¹⁵¹ Cohen also warns that it is anachronistic to relate contemporary ideas about corporal identity to Gentileschi's experience and points out how equally difficult it is to extrapolate Gentileschi's attitudes back onto Lucretia. Cohen condemns it as an impossible and useless undertaking. She argues, "In the matters of self and gender that are key to interpreting Artemisia, we must consider how early modern Europeans understood the relationships between body, psyche and social

¹⁵⁰ Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 14.

¹⁵¹ Cohen, *A Rape as History*, 48.

persona. The tight linkages between bodily, especially sexual, integrity and psychological well-being that are axioms of modern thinking did not have the same centrality in early modern minds. Social person, in turn was relatively more important to them.”¹⁵² Stephanie Jed makes a similar argument in her discussion of Renaissance perspectives on the legal, social and political implications of rape in Humanist narratives.¹⁵³ And likewise, both Diana Moses and Suzanne Dixon voice similar perspectives in their studies of ancient Roman republican attitudes about the corporal body and rape with respect to the laws and social mores that speak to them.¹⁵⁴

Another crucial point of dissent between Pollock and Garrard is the claim that Garrard overly valorizes Gentileschi’s art simply because she is a woman, and claims her work is not a product of gender, but the result of Artemisia’s filtered life experiences and feminine Desire. However, in my view, this situation *is* fundamentally about gender; Gentileschi’s unique painting hinges on the fact that she is female not male. And, even Pollock’s reading of Gentileschi’s Lucretia doesn’t make sense unless Artemisia Gentileschi is a woman. How *would* we interpret this painting of Lucretia if Gentileschi had been a male artist? Furthermore, Pollock characterizes Garrard’s interpretations of Gentileschi’s art as merely a personal response to trauma and argues the artist is portrayed as a monolithic representation of *Everywoman*.¹⁵⁵ By contrast, Pollock asserts that Gentileschi’s painting reflects unresolved issues embedded in her unconscious mind, i.e. her rape experience, which are filtered and glimpsed through her art. Nevertheless,

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Jed, *Chaste Thinking*.

¹⁵⁴ Suzanne Dixon, *Reading Roman Women: Sources, Genres and Real Life* (London: Duckworth, 2001). and Diana C. Moses, “Livy’s Lucretia and the Validity of Coerced Consent in Roman Law.” Ed. Angeliki E. Laiou. *Consent and Coercion to Sex and Marriage in Ancient and Medieval Societies* (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1993), 39-55.

¹⁵⁵ Pollock, Review of Garrard, *The Image of the Female Hero*, 499-505.

isn't the *product* still a personal response to trauma, which would filter and manifest itself differently through the art of every individual artist?

Furthermore, we should also consider Pollock's own suggestion, "that we approach Gentileschi's paintings by analyzing where conflicting interests were negotiated--that they be apprehended together through a creatively adventurous process that caters to both masculine desire while simultaneously acknowledging feminine meanings "depending on the interests or gender of the viewer?"¹⁵⁶ This statement suggests Pollock's own belief that the gender of the viewer will matter to those interpreting Gentileschi's paintings, and it follows logically that *women* will apprehend her art differently than *men*. Wouldn't all women, then, relate to Gentileschi's Lucretia in a similar way because of their gender? Therefore, couldn't we safely argue that Artemisia's Lucretia embodies *something* of *Everywoman* within her image? Moreover, is Pollock then, not guilty herself of the error with which she accused Garrard? Furthermore, why can't Gentileschi reflect both an individual experience while simultaneously echoing gender-relational aspects of being a human female?

Finally, like Garrard, Pollock also alludes to Gentileschi's own female agency, in her interpretation of the painting. In Pollock's discussion of the unusual way that Gentileschi has portrayed Lucretia's narrative--by interrupting its traditional iconographical schema--she suggests that we glimpse Gentileschi's own biography of rape. However, according to Pollock's logic, because Gentileschi's own rape experience is merely filtered through her painting, the artist is not likely to have consciously manipulated its interpretive possibilities. Essentially, Pollock seems to suggest that the artist's portrayal of Lucretia happened unintentionally, guided by her unconscious and

¹⁵⁶ Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 145.

that she was indifferent to its effect. However, this contradicts Pollock's earlier characterization of Gentileschi as a savvy female artist able to negotiate male taste while insinuating feminine meanings into her art.¹⁵⁷ She articulates this perspective saying, "The historical conditions of production are relevant here. For without acquiescing to a substantial degree with contemporary, and specifically elite masculine taste, Artemisia Gentileschi could not have functioned as an artist on the public market. Artemisia Gentileschi was attempting to function *within* the market."¹⁵⁸ Pollock's confidence in Gentileschi's ability to function as an artist in the dominant masculine world suggests then, that she *must* consciously manipulate the interpretive possibilities of her art. Furthermore, Pollock concludes that perhaps Gentileschi was able to gain a small glimmer of self-awareness through her rape and trial to perceive her role as currency within the patriarchal structure, at least to the extent that through her negotiation of Lucretia's narrative, she might question the male paradigm in her image. Simply stated, Pollock's position argues that the image is not a mirror, but a filter which distills her experience and desire into female agency. Thus, faced with Pollock's contradictory points and murky logic, I am obliged to question some of her assertions about Artemisia Gentileschi. Moreover, I am moved to reiterate Garrard's clever question, can Pollock indeed, have it both ways?

In conclusion, although both Garrard and Pollock offer insightful, compelling arguments, I understand their positions as a matter of nuance: a degree of differentiation, rather than truly opposing perspectives, on the influence and interpretation of Artemisia Gentileschi's rape in her painting as well as in the strength of their illustration of her

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 145.

powers of feminine agency. The issues I have explored here offer just a glimpse into the dynamic feminist discourse on Artemisia Gentileschi.

As we have traced the complex feminist discourse on Artemisia Gentileschi, it becomes ever-clearer how the sheer variety and vastly different interpretations of her contribute to her mystique. The labels that have historically been used to define or characterize Artemisia may be at once both accurate and irrelevant, though none mutually exclusive; she may have been a victim as well as a profiteer or both a pawn and a player. They are however, representative of the challenge feminist art historians faces by attempting to reconstruct and reconcile an artistic identity. As a woman and artist in the 17th-century Italian painting tradition, Artemisia Gentileschi is a complex, enigmatic figure worthy of the serious critical analysis and the ongoing (re)interpretation that characterizes her scholarship and provides art historians an ideal platform on which to conscientiously redefine and reinvigorate our practice of this discipline.

“Behind our sober statements and academic language lurks the passionate wish to see through the veils of representations and read the *woman* obscured by them, even if the one thing on which we all agree is that we cannot.”

Suzanne Dixon, *Reading Roman Women*

Concluding Remarks

Artemisia Gentileschi's *Lucretia*, and Tintoretto's *Tarquin and Lucretia*, are innovative representations within Renaissance pictorial tradition. Their paintings of Lucretia's myth are especially compelling because they acknowledge her choices in the matter of her life's narrative. The artists' transgressive images diminish the historical and

contentious debate about Lucretia's 'truth' and 'merit,' and reduce it simply to the construct with which to explore her autonomy.

Tintoretto's and Artemisia's interpretations illustrate feminine desire in terms of new potentials and unconsidered possibilities within Lucretia's myth that challenge traditional interpretive strategies and invoke masculinist anxiety about her legend. Therefore, it may be precisely at the intersection of these fears and desires that we can begin to read and negotiate its alternative meanings. It is also then, in the delicate balance between unease and alternative possibilities within their images, that Tintoretto and Artemisia Gentileschi achieve their remarkable interpretive resonance. Furthermore, by portraying the heroine as a thoughtful, willful sexual human creature, they imbue Lucretia with the power of female agency.

Reading Lucretia through visual representations of her narrative to learn something about the woman beyond the heroine (and the female artist who painted her) is fraught with the challenges and missteps of both history and feminist revision. However, our mission to locate the feminine perspective where it has been lost, silenced or neglected is a vital and valuable endeavor. Thus, Feminist inquiry offers a way to approach our histories and consider ourselves, collectively and individually, with the hope that we may each achieve recognition and expression of our power of female agency.



Figure 1. Tintoretto (Jacopo Comin Robusti) *Tarquin and Lucretia* (ca. 1578-80, Chicago, Art Institute of Chicago).



Figure 2. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Lucretia* (ca. 1621, Genoa, Palazzo Cattaneo-Adorno).



Figure 3. Sandro Botticelli, *Tragedy of Lucretia* (ca. 1500-01, Boston, Elizabeth Stuart Gardner Museum).



Figure 4. Marcantonio Raimondi, *Death of Lucretia* after Raphael (ca. 1510, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts).



Figure 5. Raphael (Raffaello Sanzio), *Lucretia* (ca.1583-20, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art).



Figure 6. Lucas Cranach the Elder. *The Suicide of Lucretia* (ca. 1533, Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemaldegalerie).



Figure 7. Paolo Veronese, *Lucretia* (ca. 1580-83, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum).



Figure 8. Lorenzo Lotto, *Portrait of a Lady as Lucretia* (ca. 1534, London, National Gallery).



Figure 9. Titian (Tiziano Vecello), *Tarquin and Lucretia* (ca. 1568-1571, Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum).

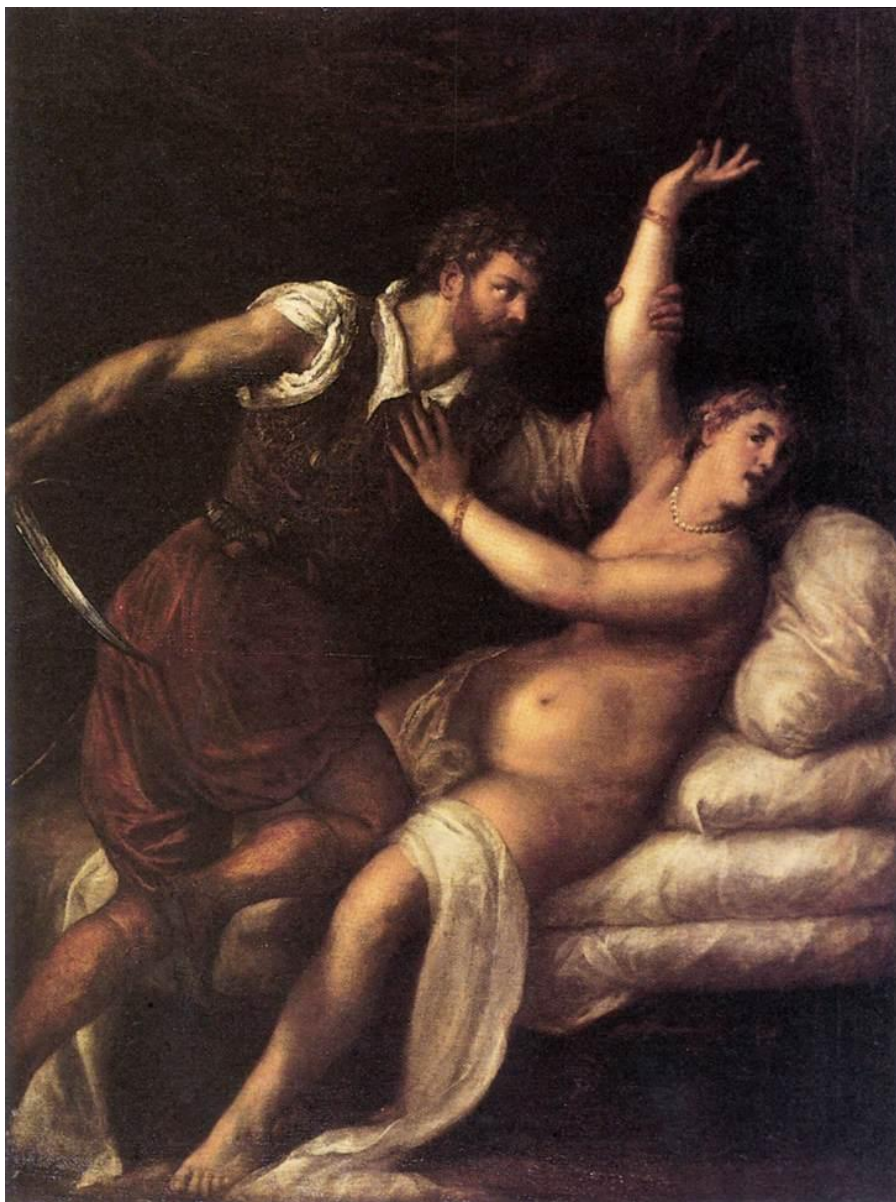


Figure 10. Titian (Tiziano Vecello), *Tarquin and Lucretia* (ca. 1570-1576, Bordeaux, Musée des Beaux-Arts).



O 'L metterete uoi? di tel di gratia,
 Dietro, o dinanzi: io lo uorei sapere.
 Perche farotti io forse dispiacere,
 Se ne'l cul me lo caccio per disgratia?
 Madonna nò, perche la potta satia
 Il cazzo sì, ch'ei u'ha poco piacere,
 Ma quel ch'io faccio, il fo per non parere
 Vn frate Mariano uerbi gratia.
 Ma poi, che'l cazzo in cul tutto uolete,
 Come uogliono i grandi, io son contento,
 Che uoi fate del mio cio che uolete;
 E pigliatel' con man, mettetel'drento,
 Che tanto utile al corpo il trouarcte,
 Quanto c'hà gli amalati l'argomentc;
 Et io tal gaudio sci to.
 A sentir il mio cazzo in mano a uoi,
 Ch'io moriro, se ci fottiam fra noi;

Figure 11. Anonymous, Woodblock edition, *I Modi* with accompanying sonnet by Pietro Aretino, (ca. 1550, after original engraved edition by Marcantonio Raimondi ca. 1524, London, British Museum).



Figure 12. Marcantonio Raimondi, *I Modi*, Surviving fragments from an early edition of engravings after drawings by Giulio Romano (ca. 1524, London, British Museum).

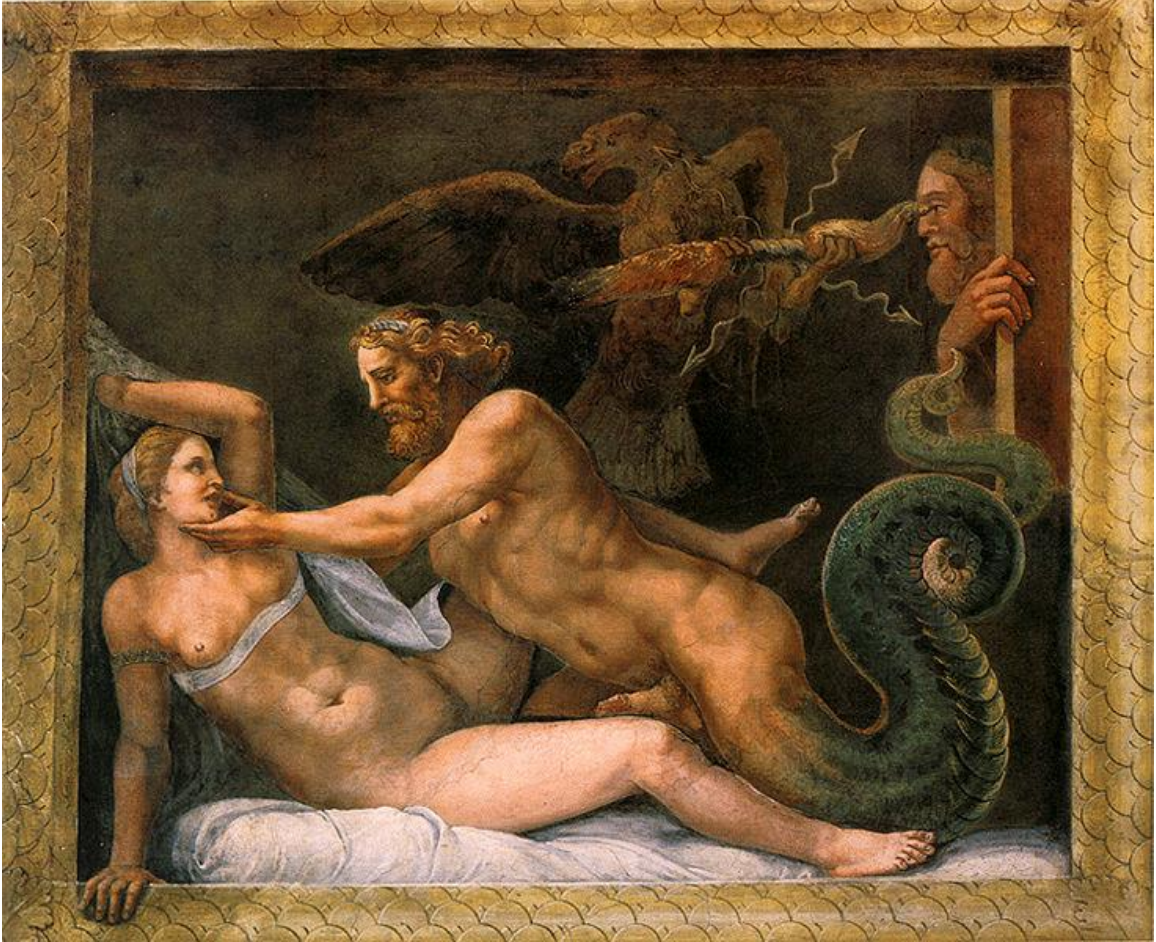


Figure 13. Giulio Romano, *Jupiter and Olympias* (ca. 1530, Mantua, Palazzo del Té).



Figure 14. Jacopo Caraglio. *Venus and Cupid* engraving from the series, *The Loves of the Gods* after illustrations by Perino del Vaga and Rosso Fiorentino, (ca. 1527, Cambridge, The Fitzwilliam Museum).



Figure 15. Jacopo Caraglio, *Mars and Venus* (ca. 1527, Cambridge, The Fitzwilliam Museum).



Figure 16. Tintoretto (Jacopo Comin Robusti), *Mars and Venus Surprised by Vulcan* (ca. 1553, Munich, Alte Pinakothek).



Figure 17. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Lucretia* (ca. 1642-43, Naples, Museo di Capodimonte).



Figure 18. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Decapitating Holofernes* (ca. 1612-1613, Naples, Museo di Capodimonte).

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