

Gender and Gentileschi: Exploring the differences in art created by Gentileschi and her male contemporaries.

Student Name: Grace Ghroum

P Number: 1900302

Programme of Study: Illustration

Module: ADAD4019

Word count: 1557

Tutors Name: Jonathan Pugh and Martin Bush

The exhibition will centre around a series of rooms featuring Artemisia Gentileschi's work where three of her paintings will be contrasted against three other pieces of similar subject matter by her male contemporaries, Donatello, Reni and Poussin. It will aim to explore the differences in the depiction of the same stories by a female artist and a male artist, as well as looking into Gentileschi's own life and how that influenced her style and practices. This will allow audiences to fully reflect on the pieces and compare the depictions of subject matter and the female form. Furthermore, each piece will give insight to the history of baroque society in order to shine a light on how women in art have been treated (even when the piece was produced by a male artist), in reference to the lack of "great women artists" (Nochlin, 1971) through which "the criteria of greatness are already male-defined." (Pollock, 1988: 2) Thus it will encapsulate Serota's view of the National Gallery as the exhibition will act more as "more a history book, rather than a cabinet of treasures." (Serota, 1996:7)

In order for the viewers to be able to understand and reflect on the two pieces, the exhibition will be designed to take place in a series of six small rooms, connected by one corridor. This will ensure that the pieces command all the attention as well as the complete focus of the viewer, however it will also allow viewers to develop their own view instead of "relying on curatorial interpretation." (Serota, 1996; 10) Furthermore, with only two pieces visible at a time, the "careful juxtaposition of related compositions" (Serota, 1996;8) will become far more visible to the visitors of the exhibition. The first of the four rooms will feature 3 small sections of writing on the wall about the male artist's work and lives but then a much larger section about Gentileschi's life and work so that the audience may gain insight to "the way in which sexual divisions shape women's consciousnesses" (Gardiner,

quoted by Pollock, 1988; 27) as well as how her “early traumas reverberate throughout her work” (Morrill, 2019; 150) e.g. being raped and tortured in her teenage years is thought to have impacted the graphic and violent nature of some of her artworks. This exhibition would be highly important as even today women artists are swept under the rug, with many if not all the ‘great masters’ being men. An exhibition such as this would not only provide representation of a female artist but would also enable the process of changing “male-defined greatness” (Pollock, 1988;2). Additionally, it is also highly important to question the representation of women in art, as it has so often coincided with treatment of women in society (for example the treatment of Donatello’s statue of Judith which will be discussed further on in the essay), since “it is important to contest the definitions of society’s ideal reality which are produced in art historical interpretations of culture.” (Pollock, 1988;29) we must view the art produced by men and women with a critical eye, being open to both artistic and historical context.

The first two art works in this exhibition depict the biblical story of Judith beheading the tyrant Holofernes, as it will allow audiences a look into the popularity of biblical themes in baroque art but also Gentileschi’s use of chiaroscuro to highlight the main elements of the piece whilst creating a dramatic tone. Gentileschi’s painting of Judith (1620-1621) has been described as a show of “proto-feminist outrage against corrupt masculinity and sexual violence.” (Morrill, 2019; 150) which some believe is influenced by her past as a rape and torture survivor. For example, the spray of blood and Judith, along with her maid, struggling to hold Holofernes down creates a far more graphic depiction of the tale than one may be used to e.g. Caravaggio’s depiction of Judith. Another significant point from Morrill is that

Judith “averts her face but not her eyes from the spray of blood” (2019;150) further highlighting that Judith plays an active role in the murder as opposed to Donatello’s work (1457-1464) where the loath Judith, holding a sword looks at the viewer whilst positioning the head of a sleeping Holofernes, suggests a much less violent tone than Gentileschi’s work. Additionally, “the maid also plays an active role as she restrains Holofernes’ struggling body, Gentileschi’s figures have more energy” (Shang, 1992) than in Donatello’s sculpture. In contrast to Gentileschi’s painting, Donatello, commissioned by the Medici family, created a bronze statue of Judith and Holofernes which as previously discussed has a much more passive tone to the piece as opposed to Gentileschi’s shockingly graphic depiction of murder. However, both pieces are interesting when one considers the treatment of women in art and how that reflects in society. For instance, Gentileschi chose to paint Judith despite the “increasingly passive, silent and marginalized figure” (Johnson and Matthews, 1997;235) of Madonna was far more popular in art, as well as Donatello’s statue of Judith being placed in the centre of the Palazzo Vecchio after the defeat of the Medici’s (to show that “humble cities can overcome tyrants” (Johnson and Matthews, 1997;228) was continually moved further from public view as many felt “it is not fitting that the woman should slay the man” (Messer Francesco, Palace Herald quoted by Johnson and Matthews, 1997;231).

Furthermore, all of this happened “alongside the increasing interest in controlling and limiting the public roles of real women in this period,” (Johnson and Matthews, 1997;233) which would allow audiences of the exhibition to fully understand that women in art “have not been omitted through forgetfulness” (Pollock, 1988;1) but rather systematic exclusion and popular praise of passive female figures.



The next room of the exhibition will feature works that show the story of Esther before Ahasuerus. Gentileschi's depiction (1620s-1630s) once again utilises chiaroscuro in order to create a dramatic atmosphere whilst showing Esther as the heroine of this tale since she is bathed in light, but Ahasuerus is shrouded in darkness. Additionally, Esther stands out as her colour palette is completely different to that of the background and the king, further signifying her role as the main subject of the painting and this tale. Despite the lack of graphic violence, which is what Gentileschi's paintings seem to be most well-known for, her "version of Queen Esther's triumph over the Persian king Ahasuerus is a pretty unique interpretation." (Lampel, 2020) since Gentileschi shows the moment where "Esther faints in fear as she is about to face the king" (Lampel, 2020). Furthermore, Gentileschi dressed the figures in contemporary clothing which sets it apart from other work featuring the same story as well as making it somewhat relatable to a contemporary audience. Nicolas Poussin's painting (mid 1650's), also depicts the moment when Esther faints before Ahasuerus but this time it appears that Ahasuerus is the main focus point of the piece. This is seen in how

the light illuminates his figure whilst Esther is seen mainly in darkness. This is a curious choice to make since Esther is the heroine of the tale but next to Gentileschi's work in the exhibition, as well as what the audience previously learnt regarding the treatment of women in art perhaps the viewer could interpret that the "male-defined greatness" (Pollock, 1988;20 within art would result in men being viewed as the main subject matter of a story or piece of artwork. Thus, adding weight to Gentileschi's "proto-feminist" (Morrill, 2019; 150) style of work and the treatment of women in art.



The exhibition would come to an end with the final pieces depicting the tale of Susanna and the Elders. Perhaps Gentileschi's (1610) most well-known piece, it will be featured next to a similar by Guido Reni (1640). All three show the story of Susanna and The Elders, the tale of a young woman wrongly accused of infidelity and then sexually assaulted by the two Elders. This section of the gallery is perhaps the most relevant to modern life as in the era of the "Me Too Movement" (Tarana Burke, 2006), it would shine a light on the prevalence of sexual assault throughout history, especially the brutal reality of Gentileschi's own assault and "her desire for revenge through art" (Bolaño, 2016). Whilst this would be simple enough to interpret by viewing Gentileschi's work on its own, the presence of Reni's work

would allow additional information for the viewer. For example, Reni's work is far more subdued with a softer, even romantic light to the piece, as opposed to the bright colours and obviously defensive pose of Susanna found in Gentileschi's. This could be seen as referring to what Susan Brownmiller called "heroic rape" (1974) which "noted the glorified and sterilized depiction of rape in the work of male artists who turned the act into one of romantic desire and conquest." (Racaniello, 2018) Instead the two pieces side by side would allow viewers to appreciate Gentileschi's work and understand "the seismic aftereffects of rape as a physical, emotional, and cultural trauma. (Racaniello, 2018)



In conclusion this exhibition would seek to give a platform to a "great woman artist" (Nichols, 1971) whilst also seeking to establish the difference in depiction of women in art by men and women. Its primary role would be to educate through the context and content of the work.

Bibliography

- Bolaño, E. (2016) *Susanna and the Elders: A complaint by Artemisia Gentileschi to sexual harassment*, Historia-arte, 8th May. Available at: <https://historia-arte.com/obras/susana-y-los-viejos-de-artemisia-gentileschi> (Accessed 12th April 2020)
- Brownmiller, S (1975) *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, Simon and Schuster
- Burke, T (2018) *Me Too. About- History and Vision* (Me Too, quoted from 2006) Available at: <https://metoomvmt.org/about/> (Accessed 12th April 2020)
- Camara, E (2015) *Gentileschi, Judith Slaying Holofernes*, Available at <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/renaissance-reformation/baroque-art1/baroque-italy/a/gentileschi-judith-slaying-holofernes> (Accessed 12th April 2020)
- Donatello, M (1455-1460) *Judith and Holofernes*, Available at <https://www.donatello.net/judith-and-holofernes.jsp> (Accessed 12th April 2020)
- Donatello.net (2009) *Judith and Holofernes by Donatello*, Donatello.net, Available at <https://www.donatello.net/judith-and-holofernes.jsp> (Accessed 12th April 2020)
- Gentileschi, A (1610) *Susanna and The Elders*, Available at: <https://arthistoryproject.com/artists/artemisia-gentileschi/susanna-and-the-elders/> (Accessed 12th April 2020)
- Gentileschi, A (1620-1621) *Judith and Holofernes*, Available at: <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/renaissance-reformation/baroque-art1/baroque-italy/a/gentileschi-judith-slaying-holofernes> (Accessed 12th April 2020)
- Gentileschi, A (1628-1630) *Esther before Ahasuerus*, Available at <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436453> (Accessed 12th April 2020)
- Gilje, K. (2016) *Susanna and the Elders, Restored by artist Kathleen Gilje*, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jq2bmbPL7rA> (Accessed 12th April 2020)
- Hermitage Museum (2020) *Esther Before Ahasuerus*, Available at https://heritagemuseum.org/wps/portal/hermitage/digital-collection/01.%20Paintings/36684/!ut/p/z1/jZBNT8MwDIb_Cjv0SOx-pC3coiAxxkamaUDJBXVTIwa1SdWGWVeLXkyEuICj4Zunx68cGCQVIUx61Kp22pmx8_yT TZ8FYGsYcF4LTK2Ris6YbfneNYQKPHwD-UgxB_md-ApDT8YU_FvgLon7FVwpkV7r6XJuDhQJDcrYutXHaqAGKOE3zk4v8lnZzm_m0LZ0L8cAjnnwC0z5615Jx3xIkNKIYxheIeRZISZ6eZJjZxbmX6atD1Vc9ee39l2vnuuEywADHcSTKWtVUZG_bAH8aqe3goPhKQtfeF2_LOb7Q5rhks9k7HqDXHg!dz/d5/L2dBISEvZ0FBIS9nQS_Eh/?lng=en (Accessed 12th April 2020)
- Johnson G.A, Matthews-Grieco S.F (1997) *Picturing Women in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, Cambridge University Press
- Lampel, A (2020) *Esther before Ahasuerus*, Sartle: Rogue Art History (2020) Available at: <https://www.sartle.com/artwork/esther-before-ahasuerus-artemisia-gentileschi> (Accessed 12th April 2020)
- Morrill, R (2019) *Great Women Artists*, Phaidon Press Limited
- National Gallery (2016) *Artemisia Gentileschi*, Available at <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/artists/artemisia-gentileschi> (Accessed 12th April 2020)

- Nochlin, L (1971) *Why have there been no great women artists?* ArtNews
- Pollock, G (1988) *Vision and Difference: Feminism, femininity and the histories of art*, Routledge
- Poussin, N (1650s) *Esther Before Ahasuerus*, Available at: https://hermitagemuseum.org/wps/portal/hermitage/digital-collection/01.%20Paintings/36684/!ut/p/z1/jZBNT8MwDIb_Cjv0SOx-pC3coiAxxkamaUDJBXVTIwa1SdWGVeLXkyEuICj4Zunx68cGCQVIUx61Kp22pmx8_yTTZ8FYGsYcF4LTK2Ris6YbfneNYQKPHwD-UgxB_md-ApDT8Yu_FvgLon7FVwpkV7r6XJuDhQJDcrYutXHaqAGKOE3zk4v8lnZzm_m0LZ0L8cAjnnwC0z5615Jx3xIkNKIYxheIeRZlSZ6eZJjZxbmX6atD1Vc9ee39l2vnuuEywADHcSTKWtVUZG_bAH8aqe3goPhKQtfEF2_LOb7Q5rhks9k7HqDXHg!!/dz/d5/L2dBISEvZ0FBIS9nQSEh/?lng=en (Accessed 12th April 2020)
- Rancaniello, K. (2018) *The Un-Heroic Act: Shiva Gallery*, New York, Art Papers 1st November. Available at: <https://www.artpapers.org/the-un-heroic-act/> (Accessed 12th April 2020)
- Reni, G (1640) *Susanna and the Elders* (1640) Available at: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/guido-reni-susannah-and-the-elders> (Accessed 12th April 2020)
- Serota, N (1996) *Experience or Interpretation, the dilemma of museums of modern art*, Thames and Hudson
- Shang, C.D (1992) *Artemisia Gentilleschi*, University of Southern California