THE CHALLENGES FACED BY A WOMAN ARTIST: ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI IN FLORENCE (1614-1620)

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Rezumat: Artemisia Genitleschi a fost una dintre cele mai renumite artiste italiene din perioada barocă. Acest articol va trata perioada de început a carierei artistice a Artemisiei în Florența, având ca studiu de caz primul autoportret realizat de ea. Prin analiza iconografică a acestei picturi realizate la Florența, în momentul în care artista s-a mutat din Roma, orașul său natal, vor fi dezvăluite normele sociale si provocările pe care o femeie artist a secolului al XVII-lea era nevoită să le înfrunte. Atmosfera culturală și patronii artei din Florența au reprezentat un factor-cheie în succesul de care se va bucura Artemisia, un personaj cu o personalitate puternică, al cărei trecut tumultos ar fi putut avea consecințe devastatoare pentru cariera sa artistică.

Keywords: women artists, fame, social climate.

In 1611, Orazio Gentileschi (1536-1639) decided to go to the governor's office in Rome and make a complaint regarding the assault that his daughter had suffered, which was a rape. He was a middle-class painter, widower and father of four sons and a daughter, Artemisia (1593-1652), the only one who had inherited his talent and passion for the art of painting. A trial of 8 months followed, which quickly became publicly known. Fight for the truth, claiming back one's honor, lies, deception, torture, and no punishment for the assaulter were part of this event.

This article intends to show if and how the status of a middleclass woman painter in the 17th century Italian society, namely Artemisia Gentileschi, changed after a public event in her life (a rape trial), considered a humiliation even in today's society. Did such an event impact her artistic career? This research comes as a response to a major problem when talking about Artemisia as an artist; her work continues to be sensationalized, mainly because of the rape, and this raises an issue – the danger of confusing this phenomenon with the understanding of the symbolism of her work, as art historian Elizabeth Cropper warns us (Cropper, 2002, pp. 263-281). Because of this, my theory is that her credibility as an artist was not altered, in spite of her trial, as the sentence was given in her favor, and her art did not completely carry the scars of the event. I will use her first self-portrait made in Florence as a case study, after which I will expand on the cultural and social situation of Florence and Rome in order to demonstrate the favorable atmosphere of Florence for a woman artist, rather than that of Rome.

Becoming a successful woman artist was not as difficult as it is thought nowadays. This does not mean that women's roles in society were equal to those of men, but in the artistic field, women tended to pursue the same path to success as men did, and in most cases, they obtained it. That included having a master, having their own studio and trying to gain commissions from wealthy patrons,

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by whatever means necessary. The fact that female artists were not as popular and successful as male artists is a myth, which should be debunked. It is enough to look into historical sources on artists such as Lavinia Fontana (1552-1614), Sofonisba Anguissola (1535-1625) or Judith Leyster (1609-1660), for this to be assessed.

Artemisia Gentileschi, a born Roman, relocated to Florence after being raped by her father's associate, Agostino Tassi. I will focus on the period of 6 years that she spent in Florence (1614-1620), which was the first stage of her artistic career. The move to the city of Florence, a place that launched her career as a renowned artist and the years she spent there were of primordial importance. One can say that if the relocation had not happened, she might have gone into obscurity. The help offered to

Fig. 1 *Self-Portrait as Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, 1615, oil on canvas, National Gallery, London (detail)

Artemisia by Christina of Lorraine, Grand Duchess of Tuscany, through her father's interventions, resulted in her move to the city and her success at the Medici court. She also got out of her father's shadow and developed her own style of painting. It is safe to conclude that Florence was the reason behind her success as an artist.

At the time of her arrival in Florence, Artemisia did her first self-portrait. It was made at the debut of her career and rediscovered recently, in 2017, being acquired by the National Gallery in London (Fig. 1). There are approximately six self-portraits made by her, and other several mentioned in documents that have not been discovered yet. On this particular self-portrait, I am using both a hermeneutical approach with the help of her letters, and an iconographical analysis. As this was painted at the time of her arrival in Florence, it also gives details on her struggles as a painter in a foreign city.

At first glance, one can see a woman, standing in three-quarters, gazing directly into the viewer's eyes. She is wearing modest clothes, a red dress and a mustard shawl wrapped around her, and a white scarf around her head, with a crown and a halo. In her right hand, she holds a palm and she leans her left hand on a wheel with iron spikes. The obvious conclusion is that it is a representation of a saint. Here, she chooses to represent herself as Saint Catherine of Alexandria, daughter of the governor of Alexandria from the 4th century B.C., who was tortured and killed because of her Christian faith and her protests against the persecution of Christians, during the reign of Roman Emperor Maxentius. The legend says that she was sentenced to death and the spiked wheel by which she was to be killed broke when she touched it, and she was then beheaded. These events started to become known in the late Middle Ages, with her depictions spreading rapidly, going through Early Renaissance (Filippo Lippi and Lavinia Fontana chose Saint Catherine as a recurring model). In her interpretation, Artemisia leans on a broken wheel with iron spikes (the torture instrument), wears a crown (symbol for her nobility) and a halo (status of a saint), and holds a palm frond (symbol of the martyrs).

A question arises: why did she choose this allegory? A lot of answers were given, but I will only mention two, which I find to be closer to the truth. Firstly, the period when it was done is vital: the Counter-Reformation. Back then, there was an increase of paintings devoted to female heroines, killed because of their Christian faith, from Esther and Judith to Mary Magdalene, as these were examples of female virtue and redemption. The Catholic Church needed to win back some of its subjects lost to Protestantism and visual representations were understood by anyone. As a result, this was a famous subject treated by artists, which Artemisia addressed as a devout Catholic and a follower of Caravaggio. Secondly, it has an autobiographical message – she sees herself as a survivor, elevated to the status of martyr. Professor Katherine McIver stated that *self-portraits can tell us so much about the artist, how they saw themselves and how they wanted the world to see them – always with a message, a story to tell* (McIver, 2019). Artemisia chose to depict herself as a woman and as an artist, advertising her talent for her prospective patrons. Therefore, a piece of her personal and intimate story was inserted into this canvas.

In general terms, this was an approach used by artists. Every artwork that came out of an artist's hands was truly personal, as he/ she left a personal mark on it. It can be defined as a universal practice that transcends time. The fact that Artemisia hinted at an event in her life was not uncommon. Examples were everywhere: Caravaggio (1571-1610), Sofonisba Anguissola, Diego Velázquez (1599-1660) or Rembrandt (1606-1669), just to name a few. In *David with the head of Goliath* (Fig. 2), Caravaggio depicted himself as Goliath, so as to reveal his fear and anxiety as a fugitive; Velázquez (Fig. 3) was proud of having received the Order of Santiago and wanted the viewers to be aware of that (he is seen on the left, wearing the red cross of the order on his chest); Sofonisba (Fig. 4) had a close relationship with her master, who showed his respect for her as an artist, by painting her; and Rembrandt compared himself to St. Paul (Fig. 5), a figure who fascinated him perhaps because Paul's writings were the most important source for Reformation theology.

Fig. 2 *David with the head of Goliath*, 1610
Oil on canvas, Galleria Borghese, Rome
(detail)

Fig. 3 *Las Meninas*, 1656
Oil on canvas, Prado Museum, Madrid
(detail)

Fig. 4 *Self-Portrait as being painted by Bernardino Campi*, ca. 1559
Oil on canvas, Pinacoteca Siena (detail)

Fig. 5 *Self-portrait as Apostle Paul*, 1610
Oil on canvas, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam
(detail)

Besides her self-portraits Artemisia seems to have frequently used her own image in works she produced in Florence – a number of works are known and others are recorded in seventeenth-century inventories. New to the city and keen to demonstrate her talent, she may have painted these in a conscious act of self-promotion. Many of Artemisia's paintings, in particular those depicting a strong female heroine, have often been read in biographical terms. In this particular case study, the choice of representing herself as a Saint who underwent both psychological trials and physical torture may have been made at Artemisia or her patron's initiative, but nothing is known of the circumstances in which this painting was commissioned. Saint Catherine's facial features, the turn of her head and three-quarter pose, are all closely related to those in Artemisia's *Self Portrait as a Lute Player* (Fig. 6).

Fig. 6 *Self-Portrait as a Lute Player,* 1616
Oil on canvas, Wadsworth Atheneum
Museum of Art, Connecticut (detail)

With ingenuity and bravery, she managed to handle the complex networks of artistic patronage in Florence and eventually in all the cities that she travelled to (Rome, Venice, Naples, London). She used her brothers as agents and her friends to ask for favors in obtaining the attention of a patron or for payment.[2]

There are two tendencies of looking at her: as a hero or as a victim. However, something is missing from this: the artist; the look upon her, first and most importantly, as an artist, which is what she always fought for and wanted, as it is revealed in a letter to one of her clients, Don Antonio Ruffo:

You feel sorry for me because a woman's name raises doubt until her work is seen; I shall not bore you any longer with this female chatter. The works will speak for themselves; and I will show Your Most Illustrious Lordship what a woman can do, hoping to give you the greatest pleasure. You will find the spirit of Caesar in this soul of a woman.[3]

It is clear that she wanted to be appreciated for her talent, and not for her gender, which could have been perceived as a weakness in the time. She even went as far as comparing herself to Caesar, which implies that a woman's work can be as strong and powerful as a man's (in terms of its impact on the viewer). She intended for her work to be seen as powerful, impactful art and as good or even better than any of her peers. She fought for intellectual and artistic equality. This does not mean

2. She wrote to Galileo Galilei to ask for help in getting a response from Duke Ferdinand II of Medici about a painting she had sent. For more details, see Mary Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art*, Princeton University press, 1989.
3. The translation of her letter to English was made by Mary Garrard, op. cit. 391.

that as a citizen she enjoyed the same privileges as men did; not even close. That would be an absurd and false affirmation in the context of 17th century society. But when analyzing the written sources of the time, it can safely be concluded that, in the art world, in the 17th century Florentine society a good artist was recognized and appreciated, no matter if it were a man or a woman. The city of the Medici family was known for its openness and patronage of new, innovative artists. The paradox was that there had been no woman accepted as a member of the Academia del Disegno since its establishment in 1563, until Artemisia[4]. So why then and why her, especially since she had a tumultuous history? An answer may be suggested by two possibilities: her friendship with Michelangelo's great nephew, Michelangelo Buonarroti the Younger (1568-1646) and her father speaking to Christine of Lorraine (1565-1637), mother of Cosimo II Medici (1590-1621). Her father, Orazio, asked for Christine's help with the trial of his daughter, and described her as being "unique in this profession". He made sure to establish a patronage relationship for his daughter and then sent her there, to marry a second-rated painter Pierantonio Stiattesi (1584-?), in a new place.

As history indicates, it is likely that, if she had stayed in Rome, she would not have gained popularity, as Pope Urban VIII (1568-1644) infamously belittled the achievements of "girls who painted", insisting that their supporters were overly enthusiastic in their praise of these limited talents (Poole, 2008, p. 41). Orazio had to hire Agostino Tassi to teach Artemisia perspective, as no woman was allowed in the Academia di San Luca in Rome. The painter Lavinia Fontana was banned from Carracci's academy in Rome because of the presence of nude models[5]. The way that society functioned in 17th century Rome should not be disregarded, as it cannot be compared to the world we know today and are familiar with. For example, honor played an important role in the Eternal City. The governor court, responsible for order in the city, was confronted with a lot of cases initiated either by men or women who were looking to re-establish their honor and respect. They were verbally or physically assaulted, or had their properties damaged by some vindictive neighbor or enemy. It is quite interesting to observe the differences in people's attitudes; they were not interested in financial retribution, like it is the case for today's trials for "moral damages", for instance. The matter was resolved if the defendants were proven right and their reputation was restored, even if their assaulter did not suffer any repercussions. It is no wonder that Tassi was not punished for his act and that the Gentileschi family did not insist on this matter; what was of extreme importance, ergo the assessment of her honor, was publicly realized. But, as Elizabeth S. Cohen points out, honor rested not just in a person, but in a family (Cohen, 1992, p. 608). This means that Orazio initiated the trial not only for his daughter, but for the reputation of his household as well; he had a lot to lose, as he was already an established painter in the Italian Peninsula and had a family to raise and protect. This can explain his actions and strategy with his daughter, her relocation to Florence and his correspondence with the Medici family.

4. Ibid. 34.

5. Fontana arrived in Rome in 1603 and gained the attention of Orazio Gentileschi, a sharp-witted businessman, who undoubtedly saw in the highly accomplished Fontana an example for his daughter, Artemisia.

Also, it is worth mentioning the fact that Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), who would become one of Artemisia's close friend, had to request asylum from Duke Cosimo II in Florence, because of the Inquisition against him by the Roman Catholic church in 1616. Therefore, it is safe to say that Rome was not a welcoming place for women artists, or even men with revolutionary ideas. Nevertheless, competition was fierce, not only in the art world, but also in trading, commerce or at the Ducal Courts, when it came to fight to obtain better positions. In this context, Artemisia reinvented herself in Florence, just as many ambitious men did in the 16thand 17th centuries (one example would be the Florentine court artist Baccio Bandinelli[6]). It should not be forgotten that Florence was a status-conscious society, which implies that it all came down to the struggle to obtain commissions and win over wealthy patrons.

The visual analysis and written sources demonstrate that Artemisia's gender and the tragic event in her life did impact her life, but not her beginnings as an artist, represented by her stay in Florence. She did not allow the unfortunate episode to define her, instead, she used it to enhance her independence and dignity, as a tool for self-promotion. However, it did not interfere with her success. It did not act as an obstacle on her path to glory.

It is crucial that research continues when it comes to Early Modern female artists and their artworks. They have long been neglected, placed in obscurity, and are now rediscovered, with their works placed on the same level with those of male artists. The rightfully fascination for their works is increasing. Their visions and creations complete the voids in cultural history and are part of our cultural heritage.

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6. For more details, see Louis Alexander Waldman, *Baccio Bandinelli and art at the Medici court: a corpus of Early Modern sources*, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, 2004.

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