

Defining 18th century gender roles

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The Renaissance spirit of inquiry renewed the debate about the role of women in society, a theme, which resonated in the visual arts of the era. Traditionally, "chastity, compliance, delicacy and modesty" were the qualities ascribed to a truly virtuous female, whom was essentially excluded from a real participation in society. Scholars and painters alike glorified male power and achievement in the social sphere, while "the greatest female accomplishment lay in obedience, rather than intellectual pursuits".

Artemisia Gentileschi, was one of the first female artists to challenge the traditional monopoly over the passive female ideal, as her life and art redefined feminine accomplishment in terms of the conventional masculine standards of achievement. Many have thus interpreted Artemisia as a pioneer of modern feminism; however, the legitimacy of this assertion is questionable. One of her most infamous paintings, *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, provides insight into the consequences of her bold confrontation with conventional female gender limitations.

The piece explicitly depicts two heroic female subjects imbued with traditionally masculine characteristics. The women are thus afforded a position of power, which would have otherwise been inaccessible to them. While, Gentileschi thus succeeds in creating a feminine 'power outlet', in her depiction of Judith and her maidservant, she markedly fails to acknowledge a feminine virtue which is unique and distinct from the traditional masculine ideal.

Artemisia's painting does courageously challenge the conventional societal perception of the feminine role, however, her prescribed solution undermines

the validity of the feminine perspective, as it asserts that 'greatness' is achieved through a possession of solely masculine virtues. In view of the fact that Artemesia's work, undercuts the legitimacy of 'feminine' achievement, it should consequently be denied recognition as early feminist art. This essay will provide an in depth critical analysis of Artemesia Gentileschi's Judith Beheading Holofernes within the context of the painter's particular life circumstances.

Firstly, the archetypes of eighteenth century femininity and masculinity will be explicitly defined, in order to determine the influence such social pressures had on women of this era. Artemesia's biography will then be placed within the context of the prevailing gender roles, as an illustration of her unique confrontation with the patriarchal societal structure of her day. Finally, an evaluation of, Judith Beheading Holofernes, will shed insight into Gentileschi's artistic challenge of traditional feminine ideals, as well as her ultimate failure to acknowledge the value of a purely feminine perspective.

Defining 18th Century Gender Roles According to Bridget Hill's Anthology of Seventeenth Century Women the characteristics generally attributed to the ideal woman of Gentileschi's era were: "modesty, restraint, passivity, compliance, submission and most important of all chastity." (17) These accepted social views were widely circulated and espoused, and would have thus been tremendously difficult to ignore or challenge. Accordingly, "The vast majority of middle class women unquestioningly conformed to the role assigned to them" (3)

The first significant characteristic of the feminine ideal, worthy of discussion is that of restraint and modesty, as this trait necessitated an alienation of women from the social sphere, and even themselves. Proper ladies were expected to avoid public attention, and conversation in a social setting. Moreover, " it was indelicate for women to have to view their own naked bodies, just as all references to bodily functions and even pregnancy were taboo. "(17) The following passage constitutes a primary account of a father's advice to his daughter concerning the importance of modesty to the female temperament:

One of the chief beauties in a female character is that modest reserve, that retiring delicacy, which avoids the public eye, and is disconcerted even at the gaze of admiration... When a girl ceases to blush, she has lost the most powerful charm of beauty... That modesty, which I think is so essential in your sex, will naturally dispose you to rather silent company, especially a large one. (19) The feminine ideal of modesty and restraint thus primarily confined women to the private sphere of social relations, allowing them little to no voice in public reality.

The influence of women within the private or domestic sphere was also muted by the subsequent feminine virtue of submission and compliance. According to the constraints of this womanly asset, a virtuous wife would have been expected to obey her husband, while allowing him the authority to harmoniously govern his household. She... who marries ought to lay it down for an indisputable maxim, that her husband must govern absolutely and entirely, and she has nothing else to do but please and obey.

She must not attempt to divide his authority, or so much as dispute it, to struggle with her yoke will only make it gall more, but must believe him to be wise and just and in all respects best, at least he must be so to her. She who can't do this is in no way fit to be a wife. (20) The preceding passage illustrates the limitation of control, which women of this time period were expected to contend with (even within the private sphere of social influence). As, all of the decisions of the virtuous wife were expected to be in concurrence with her husband's asserted authority.

Finally, the most important feminine asset was considered to be that of chastity. The particular significance of this virtue was grounded in the fact that men were considered naturally un-chaste, and unable to control their passions. Women were thus, responsible for the preservation of their innocence, and the up holding of sexual moral values. Additionally, as the following quote explicitly indicates, the social consequence incurred by a loss of honor was often drastic. A woman who has lost her honor imagines that she cannot fall lower, and as for recovering her former station, it is impossible; no exertion can wash the stain away.

Losing thus every spur, and having no other means of support, prostitution becomes her only refuge, and the character is quickly depraved by circumstances over which the poor wretch has little power, unless she possesses an uncommon portion of sense and loftiness of spirit (30)

Conversely, the eighteenth century masculine ideal, according to John Tosh, author of *A Man's Place* could be associated with the specific attributes of: "reason, authority and resolve." (47) The public sphere of social relations and

intellectual endeavours was thus designated as the realm traditionally, and justly dominated by the influence of men.

The following quote spoken by a woman of the time, suggests that this conception of masculinity was embraced by both men and women alike: "Let men enjoy in peace and triumph the intellectual kingdom which is theirs, and which, doubtless, was intended for them"(47) Biography Artemisia Gentileschi's, life blatantly challenged the passive feminine ideal, as she achieved recognition in the male-dominated world of post-Renaissance art by disregarding traditional gender precepts.

Laura York, author of *The 'Spirit of Ceasar' and his Majesty's servant: The Self Fashioning of Woman artists in Early Modern Europe* thus, defines Gentileschi as, "no ordinary artist and no ordinary woman. She is one of handful of female professional painters in Baroque Italy, who created a successful career in the competitive, masculine world of seventeenth century artistic patronage. In the process, she constructed a self identity virtually unknown in her time: the woman artist"(1-2) Artemisia was born in 1593 to Prudentia Montone and her husband, noted painter Orazio Gentileschi.

Orazio exposed his daughter to art at an early age, and supported her artistic development by providing her with a formal education normally denied to women of her time. As, she would have been unable to join guilds or study with various established masters, Artemisia's training with her father, was her only chance for a real apprenticeship. Although Orazio kept his daughter confined to the house, according to the custom among respectable Romans of the time, "the Gentileschi domicile also functioned as his studio, with its

constant traffic of models, colleges and patrons. Such company allowed Artemisia contact with many influential male artists, yet it also fueled rumors that marred her reputation.

On May 6, 1611, gossip turned to real injury. " Having entrusted his 17 year old daughter's supervision to a family friend, Orazio was away from the house when his business associate and fellow painter, Agostino Tassi entered the home and raped Artemisia. " At the time, rape was viewed more as a crime against a family's honor than as a violation of a woman. The virtual lack of a legal identity in women, often made it very difficult, if not impossible, to obtain any redress for wrongs committed against them. "(137) Thus, only when the married Tassi reneged on his promise to marry Artemisia did Orazio bring charges against him. In the ensuing eight- month trial, Artemisia testified that she was painting when Tassi came into the room shouting, " Not so much painting, not such much painting. " He then grabbed the palette and brushes from her hands and threw them to the floor.

She fought and scratched to no avail, finally attacking him with a knife. To establish her truthfulness, authorities administered a primitive lie detector test in the form of torture by thumbscrews, a common practice of the time. As the cords were tightened around her fingers, she was said to have cried out to Tassi, " this is the ring you give me, and these are your promises. " She must have passed the test; Tassi was convicted and sentenced to five-year banishment from Rome (a punishment apparently never enforced).

Soon afterwards Artemisia married a " well born but debt ridden" young Florentine painter named Pierantonio Stiattesi and moved to Florence with

him. There in the company of luminaries such as Galileo Galilei and Michelangelo Buonarroti, she entered upon a career that would have been the envy of most male contemporaries. Gentileschi rebelled against the dominant model of passive womanhood by cultivating an image of herself as strong, active, intelligent and powerful. Traits, which would have been considered as masculine to the seventeenth century mind.

The following striking statement, uttered by Artemisia herself provides revealing insight into her perception of self. " I will say no more, except what I have on my mind, that I think Your Most Illustrious Lordship will not surlier any loss with me, and that you will find the spirit of a Ceaser in the soul of a woman. "(4) Gentileschi's appropriation of Ceaser's masculine spirit, distances herself from all other woman of her time. Artremesia, does not acknowledge any value within her perception of femininity, and thus choses to conform to traditionally masculine ideals.