

## **“The Lord Struck Him Down by the Hand of a Female!”: Seventeenth Century Artists Depicting Judith in the Renaissance**

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*This paper explores seventeenth century artists’ interpretation of Judith and Holofernes, a story about a female who subverted the contemporary norms by defeating a male. Focusing on the Baroque artists Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, Orazio Gentileschi, and Artemisia Gentileschi, the paper explores, through visual analysis, how each artist addressed the story’s reversal of gender roles their artwork. The Catholic Bible narrative of Judith is discussed along with two primary sources about gender roles that were widely read in the period. Additionally, the paper discusses how the Counter-Reformation and the Catholic Church’s assertive stance for the purpose of art affects how images of Judith are painted.*

### **The Story of Judith**

A woman wields a sword to behead a man to save her people. This event is at the heart of the story of Judith as told in the Catholic Bible. A virtuous woman goes against the male elders of her community to save her people from destruction. The repeated portrayals of the story of Judith in several mediums—prints, textiles, engravings, sculpture, and paintings—point to the story’s popularity. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, many artists chose to portray the heroine, even though patriarchal hierarchy defined Renaissance society (Varriano 94). Reading the story of Judith and Holofernes in the context of the Renaissance era, the text clearly discloses intrinsic tensions of gender norms of the time. The story itself subverts the gender norms because it reveals a strong female heroine who openly contradicts the social strata by defeating a man.

During the seventeenth century, three prominent Baroque artists executed paintings of Judith: Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, Orazio Gentileschi, and his daughter, Artemisia. When comparing these artists, especially when looking at Judith as a subject matter, differences in the way male and female painters chose to depict the same subject can act as criteria for analyzing the work. However, I argue that a more effective method is to visually examine the artists' approach—their formal strategies such as lighting, pose, gesture, and figure placement—to elicit details that convey how each artist makes specific choices of representing a heroine defeating a man when it was counter to their societal gender norms. Additionally, it is not my desire to do a comparative analysis of the quality of the paintings. All three artists and their artwork are still recognized today, centuries later, because of their artistic skill. Instead, I focus on the stylistic choices these artists made in their paintings and how they approached the inverted power relationship between men and women inherent in the story of Judith.

My analysis refers to the religious text of Judith found in a 2011 version of the Catholic Bible. Although there are differences in texts over time, I use this reference to identify the overall story for the reader. To clarify the gender norms during the Renaissance and a woman's subordinate role in society, I review two widely read primary sources published during that period. Additionally, I examine the Counter-Reformation and how the Catholic Church took an assertive stance on the purpose for art. Lastly, I focus on several paintings of Judith rendered by Baroque artists Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, Orazio Gentileschi, and Artemisia Gentileschi.

The story of Judith is about a poised heroine who ingeniously concocts and executes a plan to save her people. How each artist chose to portray Judith's heroism reveals which gender receives credit for the heroism. All the paintings discussed are rendered realistic versions of the narrative. I concentrate on how the artists approached the problem of the inverted gender issue based on their utilization of light, figure placement, and gestures in their compositions.

### **The Story of Judith and Primary Resources**

The tensions within the story of Judith emerge from its presentation of gender relations that departed from early modern norms. The Book of Judith is divided into five segments (*New American Bible* 469-482). The first two sections discuss King Nebuchadnezzar's orders for Holofernes, one of his top generals, to conquer any civilization that resisted capture and how Holofernes carried out the king's wishes. The other three tell the story of how Judith, a female

villager, conquered him. The narrative begins by retelling how Holofernes and his army spent their time murdering, plundering, burning crops, and destroying fortified cities until he reached the mountainous city of Bethulia, where Judith lived. When the citizens of Bethulia refused to surrender, Holofernes chose to control the flow of water so the citizens would die of dehydration (Judith 7:8-17).

Upon hearing their intended fate, Bethulia citizens gathered together and attempted to convince their leaders to surrender. One of their leaders, Uzziah, calmed the crowd by convincing them to rely on their faith rather than physical force. After learning of the meeting, Judith, a respected widow of the community, met with the town leaders and stated, "My brothers, let us set an example for our kindred. Their lives depend on us and the defense...rests with us," (Judith 8:24). She proceeded to tell the men, "Listen...I will perform a deed that will go down from generation to generation among our descendants...the Lord will deliver Israel by my hand," (Judith 8:32-34). She concluded by insisting that the elders not inquire about the details until her plan is accomplished.

After the elders conceded to her wishes, Judith prepared herself to go meet Holofernes by bathing and adorning herself with jewelry. Once Judith arrived at the enemy's camp, she was given permission to meet with Holofernes. As soon as Holofernes was introduced to Judith, he "marveled at the beauty of her face" (Judith 10:23). Judith explained that she came to Holofernes for refuge. He consoled her by promising safety in his care. She gratefully replied and foretold the outcome of her visit by stating, "God has sent me to perform with you such deeds as will astonish people throughout the whole earth who hear of them" (Judith 11:5). Holofernes is pleased with everything Judith says and states, "No other woman from one end of the earth to the other looks so beautiful and speaks so wisely" (Judith 11:21).

On the third night, Holofernes invited Judith into his tent for a banquet. Upon her entering, Holofernes was enamored with her beauty and was "burning with the desire to possess her, for he had been biding his time to seduce her from the day he saw her" (Judith 12:16). The two spent an evening eating and drinking together. After a while, Holofernes' attendants departed, leaving the two alone. Judith was alert, but Holofernes was in his bedchamber sprawled on his bed, drunk and passed out. Judith immediately recognized this as the ideal opportunity to execute her plan and knelt by the bedside praying, "Oh Lord, God of all might...look graciously on the work of my hands for the exaltation of Jerusalem. Now is the

time...for carrying out my design to shatter the enemies who have risen against us” (Judith 13:4-5). Finding a sword hanging on the bedpost, she took it in her hand, grasped Holofernes’ hair, and cried out, “Strengthen me this day, Lord God of Israel!” And then, with “all her might, she struck his neck twice and cut off his head” (Judith 13:7-8). Immediately, she called to her maidservant, handed Holofernes’ head to her, and the two departed into the wilderness. Judith returned triumphantly to the city and, while holding the head of Holofernes, exclaimed, “The Lord struck him down by the hand of a female!” (Judith 13:15).

A generally accepted summary of the story articulates a message about a powerful confident woman who was the vessel that accomplished God’s will. It also teaches that Judith used both her strength and reliance on the Lord for her plan to succeed. The preface of the 2011 edition of *The New American Bible* notes that the Book of Judith was included in the canon at the time of The Council of Trent in 1546. The story is assumed to be written around 100 BC, but cannot be verified as factual because there is no known city named Bethulia (*New American Bible* 469). The first century pope, Saint Clement of Rome, advocated the story as one of “courageous love” and Saint Jerome used Judith as an example of a holy widow and type of the church (*New American Bible* 469). During the Renaissance, the standard interpretation was that Judith was God’s vessel accomplishing His will.

When comparing the biblical message of Judith to widely read primary sources written by Heinrich Kramer and Baldesar Castiglione during the Renaissance, complex tensions begin to surface. Reading circulated publications and reviewing visual imagery from the seventeenth century, generalizations can be drawn about societal attitudes towards gender. In both genres, it is possible to root out attitudes that confronted women and the precarious positions they found themselves because of their subordinate role to their male counterparts.

Heinrich Kramer posed and answered questions in his *Malleus Maleficarum* to develop an argument about how women, as a gender, are prone to practice witchcraft because they have a natural disposition for evil. In defending his position, he exploited Bible verses and famous authors to substantiate his accusations. From Seneca’s *Tragedies* he quoted, “A woman either loves or hates: there is no third grade. And the tears of woman are a deception, for they may spring from true grief, or they may be a snare. When a woman thinks alone, she thinks evil,” (Kramer 62). Then, in his next sentence, he revealed how women should search the Bible for good models to emulate and cited Judith as one of the prominent examples (Kramer 62). Kramer

elucidates the predicament women faced during the Renaissance era. Because he insisted on dividing women into two polar groups, good or bad, honest or distrustful, women were unable to balance a middle ground. Remarkably, Kramer cited the role model of Judith as one of the prime examples for women to emulate; yet, the story contradicts the negative qualities he argued against women. If women's ability to think on their own only comes to avarice, then, based on what he suggested, it appears impossible for women to follow the example of Judith. She is a biblical female heroine, who singlehandedly devised a plan to save her people without the help of the male elders of her land.

Baldesar Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* is also an example of the precarious societal expectations women negotiated, albeit expectations based on an idealized image of both genders living at court. Castiglione was from minor nobility, a courtier whose book instructs how the ideal courtier was supposed to behave during the Renaissance era. Castiglione identified the boundaries and balancing act women faced when interacting with men when he outlined the qualities of a woman in court as being:

...a Lady who lives at court a certain pleasing affability is becoming above all else, whereby she will be able to entertain graciously every kind of man with agreeable and comely conversation suited to the time and place and to the station of the person with whom she speaks, joining to serene and modest manners, and to that comeliness that ought to inform all her actions, a quick vivacity of spirit whereby she will show herself a stranger to all boorishness; but with a such a kind manner as to cause her to be thought no less chaste, prudent, and gentle than she is agreeable, witty, and discreet: thus, she must observe a certain mean (difficult to achieve and, as it were, composed of contraries) and must strictly observe certain limits and not exceed them.

Now, in her wish to be thought good and pure, the Lady must not be so coy, or appear so to abhor gay company or any talk that is a little loose, as to withdraw as soon as she finds herself involved, for it might easily be thought that she was pretending to be so austere in order to hide something about herself which she feared others might discover; for manners so unbending are always odious. (Castiglione 151-152)

The passage portrays the characteristics women should possess. She should always be cognizant of her public image, portray modesty, demonstrate kindness, and be willing to entertain intelligently, but discreetly. She should be lively, yet not so much to cross boundaries that would cause others to think poorly of her. Although Castiglione admitted the difficulty a

lady faces when mediating her position, he also stated the importance of staying within the set boundaries. At the same time, when discussing men, Castiglione identified physical attributes as the most beneficial skills male court leaders should obtain. As much as they should be born into the right family and demonstrate modest kindness to those inferior to them, they should also be physically healthy. Men should possess a “manly vigor” that allows him to hunt because it enhances the ability to take up arms in the same manner as soldiers (Castiglione 29). He should be physically fit by enjoying pastimes including dancing, swimming, playing tennis, and horseback riding (Castiglione 29). The greatest challenge men seem to possess in Castiglione’s opinion is the need to “practice in all things a certain *sprezzatura* (nonchalance), so as to conceal all art and make whatever is done or said appear to be without effort and without any thought about it.” In other words, if men of nobility achieve the *sprezzatura* as mentioned, it will appear as if the talents they possess are innate and presumably a God-given inheritance (Castiglione 32). On the other hand, women are expected to balance their positions in relation to the men around them.

### Understanding Different Versions of Judith Visually

Understanding the gender norms during the Renaissance reveals how the story of Judith is fraught with tension. Tension is derived from both the story and how its message relates to the gender norms in the seventeenth century. In a society where women were constantly trying to balance their positions in a patriarchal society, the story reveals a disconnect between what the female heroine Judith represents and how Renaissance women were expected to behave. Judith was a confident, well-respected woman in her community who prophesied with wisdom, had no difficulty countering the male leaders, and assertively accomplished her plan. She exhibited humility and conquered her foe by using intelligence, witty charm, and bewitching beauty. Her courage was proven by her willingness to stand up for the community and singlehandedly kill their powerful enemy. Reviewing two paintings helps clarify how different artists approached the inverted power relationship in the story of Judith and the position they took when rendering who gets credit for the heroic action. Two examples are Sandro Botticelli’s, *Return of Judith from Bethulia* (fig. 1) and Peter Paul Rubens’ *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* (fig. 2). Each artist created different renditions of Judith, revealing who is responsible for the action—deity or woman. Relying on a pictorial tradition, a convention governing how the artist creates their

images, this comparison illustrates the differences between artists in the seventeenth-century. Botticelli chose to depict a narrative moment, whereas, Ruben focused on the dramatic action scene.

Botticelli chose to paint his Judith (fig. 1) after the decapitation is completed and she is returning home to her village with her maidservant. No evidence of violence is represented except for the blood on the sword Judith carries and a few drippings on the maidservant's headdress. Neither woman shows any signs of encountering a struggle. They appear to be gliding across the canvas with their beautiful garments gently flowing in the wind. Judith is depicted as the chaste widow looking meekly downward. The head of Holofernes sits in a sack upon the maidservant's head looking as if he were enjoying an eternal sleep. The lack of violence in Botticelli's painting tells the story of a faithful servant reliant on God who gave her the ability to conquer Holofernes.

In contrast, Rubens portrayed Judith (fig. 2) as a strong female heroine moments after the murder. Judith is in the act of handing over Holofernes' head to her maidservant after the violent act. Her breast is exposed and she is gazing outward directly at the viewer. The dramatic scene is emphasized by the use of a single light source from below by the candle held in the elderly maidservant's grip. Judith is looking outward toward the viewer and her physical appearance appears to be an amalgamation of both genders; her breasts are voluptuous, yet her arms are muscular, like a man's. The overall painting is menacing. Rubens painted an almost femme fatale image or Judith as a woman who demonstrated her victim's demise was due to her irresistible sexuality, rather than strength. The image conforms to the notion that women will use their sexuality to manipulate men.

These are only two of many examples of how artists in the Renaissance chose to represent Judith. The choices made by these two artists indicate how each interpreted the story or the position they took when portraying a woman defeating a man. Botticelli leans towards the classic Renaissance interpretation of Judith being one of God's faithful vessels. Her ability to accomplish her plan comes from her reliance on God. And, by doing so, she returns home victorious, unharmed in the daylight, looking as calm as if she has done nothing more than accomplish her domestic chores. Rubens develops a message that coincides with the scriptural text narrating how Holofernes lusted after Judith from the moment he saw her. If this is the case, it may suggest Rubens also relied on the similar notions as mentioned above by Kramer, that

women can be the downfall of men when given the opportunity to use their erotic gifts because men will succumb to their sexual desires.

### **Impact of the Counter-Reformation**

During the seventeenth century, artists began to alter how they executed painted scriptural stories. After the Counter-Reformation, the Catholic Church's position changed on how art should be rendered and what it should accomplish. The official attitude for religious images, as recorded by Gabriele Paleotti of Bologna, the Archbishop of Bologna who was involved in the Counter-Reformation and wrote extensively on the religious didactic purpose of art in the late sixteenth century, states:

One of the main praises that we give to a writer or practitioner of any liberal art is that he knows how to explain his ideas clearly, and that even if his subject is lofty and difficult, he knows how to make it plain and intelligible to all by his easy discourse. We can state the same of the painter in general, all the more because his works are used mostly as books for the illiterate, to whom we must always speak openly and clearly. Since many people do not pay attention to this, it happens every day that in all sorts of places, and most of all in churches, one see paintings so obscure and ambiguous, that while they should, be illuminating the intelligence, both incite devotion and sting the heart, in fact they confuse the mind...so much so that instead of being instructed one remains confused and deceived (Paleotti 3).

Before the Counter-Reformation, artwork, in the Church's view, was becoming too decorative. The images rendered were too distracting from the scriptural or spiritual messages that artwork was supposed to convey. Paleotti pointed out that an important component to artistic work for religious purposes is to motivate its viewers to worship. Artists using a visual art format should concentrate on representing the scriptural elements in a clear format. He emphasized the importance of conveying doctrinal meaning on a singular moment and with fewer figures shown in a three-dimensional format. The overall composition should be dramatically executed so the stories can be emotionally charged.

### **Carravaggio, Orazio & Artemesia Gentileschi**

The new call by the Catholic Church to execute dramatic images was embraced by Baroque artists, especially Caravaggio and his followers, Orazio Gentileschi and his daughter,

Artemisia. Comparing paintings by these three artists allows for an opportunity to see how different genders portray the tensions of the Judith story and how they approach the problem of a woman overcoming a man. R. Ward Bissell suggested the dramatic physical and psychological states found in the Judith story made it a popular subject among Catholic and non-Catholic artists of the time (Bissell 22).

Caravaggio responded to the dramatic representation by incorporating it into his personal artistic philosophy. Religion, according to Caravaggio, must be applicable to daily life or it is pointless (Bissell 22). Merely broadcasting a Christian message was not Caravaggio's focus. Instead, he wanted his viewers to undergo an experience that testified to the truthfulness by fashioning figures that interacted with life (Bissell 22). The contemporary textiles and objects he incorporated in his compositions were to help his audiences identify with the figures he painted (Bissell 22). He used light to create a religious drama, so that, in addition to seeing the action, a viewer should have the capability to feel it too (Bissell 22).

When viewing Caravaggio's *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (fig. 3), his philosophy and artistic choices become visible. It has been argued this painting is one of Caravaggio's first prominent examples of his renowned stylistic attributes, especially his use of light (Moir 3). Caravaggio developed the artistic technique of *tenebrism*, or the ability to enable forms to emerge from a dark background into a strong light that usually resonates from a single source outside the painting (Stokstad and Cothren 724), creating a focal point that concentrates on the conflict in the story (Moir 8). Light in *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (fig.3) highlights Judith as a petite, young, hesitant woman backing away for the act. Judith appears hesitant as she beheads Holofernes; she almost looks as if she is questioning whether or not to finish the task (Varriano 94). Her maidservant is very old and looks as if she is incapable of assisting with the murder. Holofernes is portrayed with intense emotion, as if he is in shock that Judith has the ability to perform such a treacherous act. Alfred Moir suggested that in *Judith*, Caravaggio began to translate material things as vessels for meanings rather than meaning itself. For example, Caravaggio used hands to be as expressive as facial expressions. The old woman's hands are tensely gripping the sack textile similar to the expression on her face. Holofernes is awake, grasping at nothing with one hand and balancing himself with the other. Judith is tugging her victim's hair at the same time she is attempting to slash his neck (Moir 4). Applying Moir's argument, hands in this painting could also indicate how Caravaggio approaches the gender issue

in the story. The action in the composition is directed towards Holofernes rather than Judith. Holofernes is startlingly aware of the situation, not passed out in his bedchamber like the scriptural text states. His hands are splayed, bracing himself against the violent act. Yet, for Judith, who is captured decapitating Holofernes, her hands are rendered calm. Her hands do not exhibit any noticeable tension. How she is holding the sword is unnatural for someone slicing a head from a living body. The arc of her wrist and the contrast with the straightness of her arm makes it almost physically impossible for her to complete the violent act. Caravaggio relies on the traditional Renaissance explanation to justify Judith's ability to slay Holofernes.

Caravaggio's influence can be traced throughout the seventeenth century by his followers, including the two artists, Orazio Gentileschi and Artemisia Gentileschi (Stokstad and Cothren 725). Orazio Gentileschi is known to be one of Caravaggio's first followers and was almost forty when Caravaggio's paintings began to make an impact on the Roman art community. He quickly realized that his paintings lacked the human experience that Caravaggio's paintings were infused with and he began to alter his style to mimic Caravaggio (Bissell 12). Around 1600, Orazio and Caravaggio became close associates. When considering Orazio's images of *Judith* (fig. 5), Bissell suggested it is a mark of summation of a major phase in his career. This is a point where Orazio mastered the ability to create dramatic force in a characterization that allows for penetrating insights into the human psychology as well as creating a multifaceted relationship between form and content (Bissell 22).

Of the three artists, Orazio does the most effective job balancing the two genders; yet, when closely observing the figures and light in the painting, a subtle bias emerges. In his 1612 rendering of *Judith* (fig. 5) he painted Judith right after she murders Holofernes. By rendering the scene at this moment, the tension is not created by the violent act, but by the women turning outward as if startled by a noise. The light source looks as if it may be a candle just outside the canvas that only emphasizes portions of the figures. It is difficult to see Judith's facial features and, even though her maidservant is at the front of the composition, only fifty percent of her body is visible. Softly defusing the images of the women, the light creates shadows that make the women's figures and Judith's weapon appear as if they are fading into darkness. However, Holofernes' head, in contrast, is rendered with well-defined details forcing the viewer towards him rather than the women. Making Holofernes the focal point in the composition and the

women disappearing into the background exposes Orazio's message focuses on Holofernes' murder and not the heroine who save her people.

Orazio was a big influence on his daughter, Artemisia. Her initial art training began at home in his studio (Garrard 3). Caravaggio was known to borrow props from Orazio and it is assumed that Artemisia would have known him personally (Garrard 14). It is noted that by the age of seventeen, Artemisia surpassed her father in skill (Slatkin 3). Mary Garrard argued that her significant contribution to seventeenth century art is her ability to transform motifs of the day by shifting the narrative focus from her male contemporaries (Garrard 3). The story of Judith emphasizes this ability when comparing Caravaggio's *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (fig. 3) and Artemisia's *Judith and Holofernes* (fig. 4). In both paintings, the light resonates from the left side highlighting the figures, especially Judith. Both compositions have the heroine in the act of decapitating Holofernes with Judith's arms straightened while slashing him with the sword. Caravaggio divides the composition by putting space between Judith and Holofernes. Judith is rendered as if she is trying to back away from the action and her maidservant is positioned even further. Artemisia's version dated 1620, conversely, portrays both women engaged in the murder.

Tension is created in the action because the women are caught in the act of exerting the physical strength needed to carry out the decapitation. The two artists also capture the gory murder with the inclusion of gushing blood. Caravaggio rendered the blood in the schematic form of straight red lines projecting artificially outward from the wound. Artemisia, in contrast, rendered the violent act with carefully observed realism that could be imagined as the natural splattering of blood on the women and the bedding. The grisly scene captures the nature of the violence, in addition to portraying the story.

When comparing paintings from the father and daughter side by side, similarities and differences appear in their interpretations of Judith. In 1612, both Orazio (fig. 5) and Artemisia (fig. 6) painted the story and the paintings are similar in layout and portrayal. Both artists captured the scene right after the decapitation when Judith has handed Holofernes' head over to her maidservant. Both women are depicted about the same age. Judith's sword is upward. The two women's faces are turned away from the viewer with most their features shadowed. The head of Holofernes is the central focal point in Orazio's version. As mentioned above, the light source is used to softly defuse the women in his painting and demonstrates Orazio's mastery of

Caravaggio's *tenebrism* technique (Bissell 22). The candlelight renders a distinction between the dark and light creating an overall realistic dramatic effect. Artemisia, in contrast, uses the light to render the women with well-defined details. Orazio highlights Holofernes by positioning the basket in the center of the composition whereas, Artemisia places the basket lower in the composition, painting Holofernes in grey, shadowy tones and is significantly reduced in proportion to the female figures.

Orazio and Artemisia each painted several versions of Judith throughout their careers; it is noteworthy to compare their versions painted twelve years later. Orazio is attributed to painting *Judith and her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes* after 1624 (fig. 7). Again, this painting captures Judith and her maidservant after the decapitation. No evident violence is visible except for the sword pointing downward and Holofernes' head nestled in a basket. The three characters are situated in the center of the canvas. The women are looking in opposite directions with the light source resonating from the right side of the painting. Judith is looking upward towards heaven, while the attention of the maidservant is directed outside the space. Details of the painting are vivid. Judith's brocade dress helps draw attention to her face. Holofernes' head is emphasized by light and its central placement in the composition. Artemisia's 1625 version, *Judith and Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes* (fig. 8), depicts Judith now standing as the confident heroine with a look of determination on her face. Rather than looking fearful or acting submissive, Artemisia gave life to a self-assured Judith who understood that her actions meant that she saved her people. Judith stands with her sword in the center of the painting as a focal point, appearing as if in an upward swing and is prepared to use again, if needed. Her maidservant is looking as if waiting for instructions from Judith. In previous versions, similar to her 1612 version (fig. 6), the maidservants are holding the basket containing Holofernes head. Conversely, in the 1625 version (fig. 8), Artemisia painted the maidservant in the act of collecting the general's head. Judith's left hand is lifted in motion indicates the need for the women to freeze, and the creation of a shadow on her face renders an overall dramatic tension in the painting. Freezing the women at this moment also increases the dramatic tension; it illuminates the need the women to escape their predicament.

How each artist portrays Judith's heroism reveals which gender is given credit in the narrative. Hands in Caravaggio's rendition of *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (fig. 3), as mentioned above, are instruments he employed to express emotion. The action in the composition is

directed towards Holofernes instead of Judith. Holofernes is startlingly aware of the situation and braces himself against the brutal murder. Yet, Judith's hands are calm without exhibiting any tension. This interpretation of Caravaggio's Judith hardly looks like the biblical description of the event where it states Judith "with all her might, she struck his neck twice and cut off his head," (Judith 13:7-8). Comparatively, in the painting *Judith and her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes* by Orazio (fig. 7), it has been argued that he painted Judith looking upward and away from the tension because she is awaiting further divine inspiration (Bissell 23). Both artists kept Holofernes in the center of the composition. Caravaggio chose to have Holofernes as the only figure with a full facial view. Orazio made the scale of Holofernes' head larger than both of the female figures. An assumption when focusing on these aspects allows for an interpretation of the spiritual lesson being taught from the story of Judith, which is that God empowers Judith because of her faith. The overall focal point in the paintings lean toward the defeated general Holofernes, rather than Judith as the heroine. When thinking about Castiglione's explanation of the male prowess, it seems natural for Caravaggio and Orazio to focus on the conquered male. As a result, a question arises for the viewer about how a woman defeated a fierce male opponent. If the biblical story is about faith, then the answer can come from relying on an all-powerful divinity. Under those circumstances, it appears both Caravaggio and Orazio relied on the standard interpretation of their day and rendered Judith as a woman who could not accomplish the treacherous act without divine intervention as a chosen vessel of God.

Artemisia, in contrast, focused on Judith, the heroine. She transformed the narrative away from the general to the heroic action Judith accomplishes to save her people. In her 1620 version (fig. 4), her depiction of Holofernes is of a man helpless in pushing back the maidservant. Judith is handling the sword like a professional butcher. Although her arms are outstretched her arched body is realistically positioned to commit the bloody act. In her 1625 version (fig. 8), Artemisia minimized Holofernes. His head is at the bottom of the painting with only a few features visible because of the shadow effect Artemisia employed in depicting the maidservant quickly shoving the skull into a bag. The women in both the 1620 and 1625 versions are depicted as capable figures in complete control of the situation. Artemisia countered gender assumptions by rendering figures that do not exhibit female frailties.

It is significant to note that these artists had ongoing relationships with one another and still decided to approach their compositions differently. They each dealt with the dramatic

transitional environment created by the Counter-Reformation and made stylistic choices when they approached the gender issues in the subject of Judith. Judith's popular subject encouraged a wide range of interpretations because it is not a simple tale of good overcoming evil. If it were, there would not be such divergent interpretations and the subject would not be a contested and compelling one. The paintings discussed render Judith's story with palpable emotional drama, but with undeniable subtle differences. Overall, each artist made stylistic choices that suggest what he or she would consider the least desirable implication of the story. Orazio and Caravaggio demonstrated a need to rationalize how a female overpowers a male by their tendency toward the traditional version of Judith being God's worthy vessel. Artemisia, conversely, approached the gender issue head on. It is impossible for today's viewers to get into the mind of Artemisia, but, because her greatest skill is recognized as transforming the narrative toward the heroine, an argument can be made that she told the story from Judith's point of view. Artemisia transformed the narrative away from the general to the heroic action Judith accomplishes to save her people. In her 1620 version (fig. 4), Holofernes is helpless in saving himself against two impressive women accomplishing a brutal task. In her 1625 version (fig. 8), Artemisia minimized Holofernes almost as non-existent. His head is at the bottom of the painting and only a few features are visible because of the maidservant's act of collecting the skull of the effect of the shadows in the painting. All three versions (fig. 4, 6, and 8) depict capable female heroines in complete control of the situation in the same manner as narrative read in the scriptural text.

The stylistic choices each artist rendered enabled me to focus on their personal choices through visual analysis when approaching the gender problem inherent in the biblical story of Judith. Orazio and Caravaggio stayed true to the traditional Renaissance interpretation of God endowing power to Judith to slay Holofernes. Artemisia, on the other hand, rendered an interpretation of Judith that allows her, as a female heroine, to gain the credit she deserves for saving her people.

## Appendix



**Figure 1: Sandro Botticelli, *Return of Judith from Bethulia*, c. 1467-68, tempera on wood.**



**Figure 2: Peter Paul Rubens, *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*, c. 1616, oil on panel. Herzog Anton-Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig Germany.**



**Figure 3: Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, c. 1597-98, oil on canvas, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte, Rome, Italy.**



**Figure 4: Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith and Holofernes*, c. 1620, oil on canvas. Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy.**



**Figure 5: Orazio Gentileschi, *Judith and her Maidsevant*, c. 1612, Artstor.**



**Figure 6: Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith and Her Maidservant (Judith with the Head of Holofernes)*, 1612, oil on canvas. Galleria Palatina, Florence, Italy.**



**Figure 7: Orazio Gentileschi, *Judith and her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes*, after 1624, oil on canvas. Pinacoteca Vaticana, Rome, Italy.**



**Figure 8: Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith and Her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes*, 1625, oil on canvas, The Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Michigan.**

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