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## Artemisia Gentileschi : The Heart of a Woman and the Soul of a Caesar

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Artemisia Gentileschi :  
The Heart of a Woman and the Soul of a Caesar

by

Deborah Anderson Silvers

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Liberal Arts  
Department of Humanities and Cultural Studies  
College of Arts and Sciences  
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## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my husband, Fon Silvers. Nearly seven years ago, on my birthday, he told me to fulfill my long held dream of going back to school to complete a graduate degree. He promised to support me in every way that he possibly could, and to be my biggest cheerleader along the way. He has kept that promise, and gone even farther than I could have dreamed! Since that day we have had many obstacles placed in our path, and many times I thought that it would have been easier to quit rather than continue toward my goal. Fon kept me focused on completing this degree, often at the expense of his sanity and sleep. He held our family together through financial hardship, chronic illness, the stress of children turning into teenagers, and a home renovation. Prior to graduate school, I had been a stay at home parent; when I began this thesis, my husband stepped into my shoes and took over not only his own duties but became the homework parent, the band parent, the teacher complaint liaison, the chauffer, the menu planner, the short order cook, the proofreader, the logistics planner, the calendar keeper, the medical liaison, domestic project manager, bill payer, peacekeeper and dog walker. Words simply cannot express how humbled I feel to know how much he has sacrificed for me to complete this thesis. To dedicate it to him, with love, is merely a pale reflection of the daily investment he continues to make in the tapestry of our life together.

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I never knew that on a night in a Brownie Encampment when discussing my indecision on choosing a major upon my return to school on my fortieth birthday that Dr. Naomi Yavneh's reply that I should choose Humanities would culminate in this thesis. I feel sure that she shares the surprise as well. However, since that time, Dr. Yavneh has steadily encouraged me in my research, advised on more than one major paper and assisted in each and every query put before her, no matter how strange it has been! She has served as a mentor and a model for my writing and teaching; as well as a sounding board. All of the above are acknowledged with greatest appreciation.

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Artemisia Gentileschi:

The Heart of a Woman and the Soul of a Caesar

Deborah Anderson Silvers

ABSTRACT

Artemisia Gentileschi's *Susanna and the Elders*'s trilogy consisting of her 1610, 1622 and 1649 paintings is a self referential series based on the artist's own feelings of betrayal by the men in her life. These works are comprised of her first canvas showing youthful fear, and a very importantly timed work in mid-career symbolizing commercial success. In these, she relates the Apocryphal tale of Susanna and the Elders to events that are happening to Gentileschi at each stage of her life and career, aging the figures of Susanna and the Elders along with the appropriate time in her own life. In the final canvas of the trilogy, Gentileschi brings the work to full circle, using the story to make peace with her past by visualizing a reconciliation with her father Orazio, from whom she had been estranged from her most of her career, both as parent and as artistic mentor.

## CHAPTER 1:

## Artemisia Gentileschi and Susanna

Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1654?)<sup>1</sup> is one of the most prominent female artists of the Baroque period, and because of both her artistic talent and her highly fascinating personal history, she is also one of the most researched as well. Gentileschi is widely known for her portrayals of strong heroines, usually doing bloody deeds to deserving males. In nearly all of her work, women are depicted as virtuous, strong and determined, while men are shown as threatening, diabolical or receiving a justly deserved punishment. This thesis analyzes three portrayals of the apocryphal story of Susanna and the Elders, the first of which Gentileschi completed in 1610 as her debut work. The second work is the Burghley House *Susanna and the Elders*, completed in 1622, and the third is the 1649 *Susanna and the Elders* located in Brno, Czechoslovakia which is the last known canvas

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<sup>1</sup> Lattuada and Nappi state that Nappi recently found in the *Archivio Storico del Banco di Napoli* documents describing a contract for Gentileschi to produce a set of three works together with Onofrio Palumbo dated 10 January 1654, along with a document of the completion payment dated “one and a half months from 31 January, 1654” which effectively negates the historically assumed 1653 date of death for Gentileschi. (Lattuada and Nappi, 93). Taking into account the differing calendars used by the various regions of Europe during the seventeenth century, Nappi in the aforementioned paper notes that “we still must add at least another year to her production, and she could have continued to work still for some time after that date.” Notti refers to Stefano Causa’s paper of 1993 which notes that Palumbo does have a period between 1630 and 1655 where he exhibits a dual *maniere*. Said *maniere* is strikingly similar to the style of Artemisia Gentileschi, so much so that Ward Bissell in his *Catalogue Raisonne* and Stefano Causa (1993, 26) have attributed several paintings as a partnership, including Gentileschi’s 1633 *Cleopatra*. It must be noted that the actual paintings after the 1654 date that would confirm the contribution of Gentileschi have not been attributed to this date, but certain works attributed solely to Palumbo during this time period that fit the description are now under examination.



completed by Gentileschi. I argue that these three paintings reveal three different self-relevatory stages in both the artist's life and artistic development.

To understand the self-relevatory nature of the paintings, one must begin with the necessary background information in order to gain inference into the unique life this female artist conveys through her interpretive themes. The following paragraphs will provide a glimpse of the life Gentileschi led as an Italian artist in the early part of the seventeenth century. I will also provide a synopsis of the Apocryphal account of the Susanna and the Elders tale in order to provide essential background information relating to my analysis of the three paintings.

Artemisia Gentileschi was living in her father's apartment in Rome during 1609 and 1610, in the Artists' Quarter of Piazza Populi. By this time, Orazio had been raising Artemisia and her brothers as a single parent for five years since the death of Prudenzia (Bissell,5), supporting them as an artist. Certainly there is no record of his remarriage. He reared his family with the help of various family friends and neighbors, moving frequently as he took commissions and frequently stayed only one step ahead of bill collectors, (Christiansen, 63). The quarters of his working studio and his home were very loosely separated into public and private domains by a simple staircase (Cavazzini 2001, 287) (Cropper 2001, 266). The downstairs of the apartment contained Orazio's studio, where he would have done his initial drawings, prepared his paints, given lessons, worked with hired models and entertained his admittedly rough artist friends (Cavazzini 2001, 288). Among these friends was the artist Caravaggio, a frequent drinking partner of Orazio's. Many accounts are told describing varying degrees of friendship between the two artists and their companions, but legal records show that the two were at one time

jointly sued (unsuccessfully) by the artist Giovanni Baglione for libel (Mann 2005, 53). Caravaggio did have a great influence on Orazio's art, although the extent is greatly debated; certainly x-ray evidence uncovered by Keith Christiansen in the twentieth century has shown that, unlike previous supposition Orazio did not abandon his lifelong Mannerist principles in order to simply create his work straight on the canvas as a true Caravaggisti would have (Harris and Mann 2005, 137). In this, Artemisia Gentileschi followed her father's training and in the Mannerist style maintained a portfolio of figure drawings and sketches from which she composed her works.

Artemisia had been raised as the oldest daughter in an artist's household and most likely knew well the practical and financial aspects of running an artist's studio; thus needed no instruction in those matters as a typical apprentice might. She would also have been exposed from a young age to other friends of her father including her godfather, Rinaldi, and their art from time to time and been influenced by their interpretations of the commissions they had received. It is likely that she would have taken the opportunity, informally, to question them as to their style and techniques thus gaining for herself a broader base of knowledge than a typical apprentice might have had at the same point in his career.<sup>2</sup> From this perspective Gentileschi's gender may have been a positive aspect, in her familial exposure to other artists, rather than a hindrance, as she was able to have a relationship with the artists that was not based on a student/teacher dynamic; she was merely the curious child of a friend, and thus the artist questioned might be more inclined to answer in a more indulgent, non-threatening manner than if a male student had posed the question.

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<sup>2</sup> See discussions in Cole and Pardo as well as Richard Minor in their discussions on the historical setup of the studio system of the Renaissance and Baroque eras.

Because of Artemisia's gender, however, there was no question of her father allowing her to pursue the typical path toward becoming an artist. It seems that there was never any question that she was a talented artist, as evidence clearly demonstrates she had been trained from an early age (Cavazzini 2001, 291) as seen in trial testimony and in Orazio's letters to the Grand Duchess<sup>3</sup>. Many times, however, Orazio attempted to convince Artemisia into becoming a nun (Garrard 1989, 93), (Cavazzini 2001, 284). When he failed to gain her cooperation with this, Orazio then agreed to train Artemisia in the intricacies and techniques of art. Her instruction began with the traditional subjects most apprentices learn in a master's studio, except that Artemisia's lessons were conducted exclusively in the family quarters of the apartment, or if it were necessary to go to the studio, these would occur only after all others had left for the day (Garrard, 87; Bissell, 208). This isolation is one major difference that Gentileschi's gender enforces between the training of the traditional studio system and her own. The effects of this isolation itself may not be blatantly visible in her interpretation of the theme of her works, due to the fact that she was not completely untrained as an artist. However, the effect of being isolated can be seen in this interpretation of *Susanna and the Elders* (Salomon and Bal 2005, 46) in her departure from the standard interpretation of the theme. Had she been part of the studio apprentice system, able to take part in the group

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<sup>3</sup> Trial testimony included depositions from people who visited the Gentileschi household, such as Giovanni Molli (a model), Bernardo de Francheschi (Orazio's barber), and a Spaniard Pietro Hernandes (his son was Artemisia's godson) who all testified that they had known Artemisia most of her life and had seen Artemisia painting in some fashion since she was a child (Garrard 1989 Appendix B, 415). On July 3, 1611, Orazio Gentileschi wrote to the Dowager Grand Duchess of Tuscany, Maria Cristina in Florence asking for her assistance in keeping Tassi in prison, he states that his daughter has been painting professionally for three years, and has become so talented that she has no peer, a claim in which he has enough confidence to produce physical evidence via sending a canvas with her to Florence, should she offer Artemisia her support with the Medici court (Bissell 1999 Appendix I, 139).

lessons with her male counterparts, I believe she might have made different choices in the manner in which she represents her subjects.

For any scholar of Artemesia Gentileschi, a biography would be incomplete without a mention of her rape and the subsequent trial of her rapist, Agostino Tassi. For the purposes of my thesis, I would like to clarify that the rape did not actually occur until a few months after the completion of the 1610 painting; however, according to trial testimony by Artemisia and others, Tassi was a frequent visitor to the Gentileschi household during the execution of this painting.

Although Orazio continued instructing Artemisia privately in art, he did arrange for one of his friends and co-workers, Agostino Tassi, a noted architectural artist, to tutor his daughter in the art of perspective. Tassi had become a frequent visitor to the Gentileschi household during 1611, the year prior to the rape, and according to many sources, including Tassi himself, Tassi took great pains to set up an elaborate dichotomy whereby he was openly a genial friend of the family in public, but privately had begun the process of “grooming”<sup>4</sup> Artemisia as a sexual conquest. Tassi had come to Rome with a history of rape and sexual harassment, notably of his own sister-in-law (Cavazzini and Mann 2005, 45). In the Gentileschi household he found an accomplice in Tuzia, the family’s chaperone and housekeeper, who lived next door and whose apartment had a separate street entrance, but was connected to the Gentileschi quarters by a staircase and door built by Orazio (Cavazzini and Mann 2005, 36; Garrard 1989). Tassi used this entrance to come and go privately to Artemisia’s room without Orazio’s knowledge or

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<sup>4</sup> While there was no such terminology in use during the seventeenth century, the term coined during the twentieth century provides an eerily accurate description of Tassi’s actions. Samantha Craven and Sarah Brown define sexual grooming as the act by which a sexual predator familiarizes his prey with himself and the sexual act. He will touch and speak in inappropriate ways, encourage a relationship on an adult level, and even ingratiate himself with the prey’s family as a family friend. (Brown & Craven, 287).

permission. Eventually, this unauthorized access to the private family quarters led to Artemisia's rape. Prior to the rape, however, Tassi had showered her with attention by accompanying her on her carefully chaperoned visits to places of artistic merit arranged by her father (where Tassi, abetted by Tuzia, took Artemisia on private side trips), and conversing with her on improper subjects. During this time, trial testimony says that Tassi also took liberties that today would be recognized as grooming or harassment<sup>5</sup>. However, the seventeen year old Artemisia in seventeenth century Rome presumed them to be a prelude to marriage, as the cultural mores of her time directed that they should have been.

Upstairs was the domain reserved for Orazio Gentileschi's family and this was where Artemisia would have been expected to remain. During the seventeenth century, Italian daughters, no matter the socio-economic class, were sheltered and kept from public sight (Cavazzini and Mann 2005, 42). As we know from trial testimony and other records, such separation was Orazio's goal, but his plans did not always come to a smooth fruition (Cavazzini 2001, 284). The testimony given ranged from statements from Artemisia's godfather, Pietro Rinaldi, who said that he had seen her teaching art to some of the apprentices while Orazio was out (thus furthering the idea of her use of the Mannerist method of drawing, then painting) and from her father's models who had seen her downstairs while they were there modeling, which was fairly scandalous, especially

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<sup>5</sup> According to testimony by Tuzia Megdalia, Orazio Gentileschi and Artemisia Gentileschi, Tassi had written erotic poetry to Artemisia and read it to her in private, during his unchaperoned visits to her room. He also conspired with Cosimo Quorli to spread slander about her promiscuity, then told Artemisia that everyone in the neighborhood believed she was sexually available, but that he (Tassi) didn't believe it, and wouldn't care even if it were true. Tassi and Quorli also arranged for Orazio to hear the rumors, alienating father and daughter from each other. Tassi also told both Gentileschi that he was a widower at first acquaintance, available to marry Artemisia.

since Giovanni Molli, the seventy-three year old model for Orazio's *St. Jerome* was modeling while nude from the waist up<sup>6</sup>.

The presence of Artemisia as a young girl even on the premises of the property while this was happening would have been cause for scandal, but for her to have been in the sightline of even a partially nude man, even one old as old as Molli was definitely ruinous to her reputation, had these statements been believed at her trial. Other testimony from Tassi's witnesses included those who said that Artemisia had both painted with her father downstairs and modeled nude for him when he needed a female. Fortunately for both Gentileschi, none of these statements were taken seriously, as will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

### Susanna and the Elders in the Apocrypha

In order for the viewer to understand the iconography used and Gentileschi's self-referential themes applied to the subject, a review of the Apocryphal account is in order, with analytical discussion of said themes to occur during succeeding chapters. The main text I will use is the *Theodotion* version of the *Septuagint*<sup>7</sup> for my analysis, as this is the

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<sup>6</sup> During this time period, the use of live models was strictly regulated by Roman law, and for a female to use a male model was impossible. Male artists were also regulated as to their use of female models, and frequently took the convenient route of using male models and merely superimposing female genitalia on the figures. We do know that Orazio used this technique frequently, and this practice accounts for the masculine musculature of some of his feminine heroines (Garrard 1989, 201). For a young female, such as Artemisia Gentileschi, to use any type of unclothed model would have been completely unheard of, and scandalous in the extreme.

<sup>7</sup> As opposed to the Old Greek, merely because the Theodotion includes more details and verses which are directly related to my thesis, such as the details of the rape. The Old Greek version is more of a morality tale which ends with an admonition to worthy sons. The *Septuagint* itself is a Greek translation of the Scriptures of Egyptian Jewry requested by King Ptolemy II (285-246 BCE), traditionally said to have been translated by seventy-two Jerusalem elders in seventy-two days, thus the term "translation of the seventy" even though the books contained in the translation have grown through the centuries. The current *Septuagint* contains the books of Law, History, Poetry, and Prophecy.

primary source document. However for introductory purposes I find that the version of the Susanna and the Elders contained within the thirteenth chapter of the Book of Daniel in the Catholic Bible is preferable, as it is the version with which Artemisia Gentileschi, not being literate in Greek, would have been the most familiar.

**1** Now there was a man that dwelt in Babylon, and his name was Joakim: **2** And he took a wife whose name was Susanna, the daughter of Helcias, a very beautiful woman, and one that feared God. **3** For her parents being just, had instructed their daughter according to the law of Moses. **4** Now Joakim was very rich, and had an orchard near his house: and the Jews resorted to him, because he was the most honourable of them all. **5** And there were two of the ancients of the people appointed judges that year, of whom the Lord said: Iniquity came out from Babylon from the ancient judges, that seemed to govern the people.

According to these verses, we may ascertain the etymology of many traditional elements of Susanna and the Elders works in the Quattrocento and Cinquecento. First, the confirmation of the Elders as truly being older men, and second that Susanna was well-versed in Mosaic law, in addition to being very beautiful. Another observation I would like to make is that although we know Susanna's antecedents, we do not know her age. As I will discuss in later chapters, these are very critical points in Gentileschi's self reflecting interpretation of her *Susanna and the Elders* trilogy.

**6** These men frequented the house of Joakim, and all that had any matters of judgment came to them. **7** And when the people departed away at noon, Susanna went in, and walked in her husband's orchard. **8** And the old men saw her going in every day, and walking: and they were inflamed with lust towards her: **9** And they perverted their own mind and turned away their eyes that they might not look unto heaven, nor remember just judgments. **10** So they were both wounded with the love of her, yet they did not make known their grief one to the other:

**11** For they were ashamed to declare to one another their lust, being desirous to have to do with her. **12** And they watched carefully every day to see her. And one said to the other: **13** Let us now go home, for it is dinner time. So going out they departed one from another. **14** And turning back again, they came both to the same place: and asking one another the cause, they acknowledged their lust; and then they agreed upon a time, when they might find her alone.

As seen in verse 14, eventually the Elders do speak to each other, but for quite some time prior to the actual accosting of Susanna, the Elders watch and plot separately. They each know the other is there, but they do not speak. Individually, they keep their anguish an internal problem, thus Susanna remains safe inside her garden, when they speak and join forces, Susanna becomes a victim of collusive lust. This varies from the typical visual interpretation of the story wherein the Elders are shown as collaborators from the start, usually one on each side of Susanna, working in a concerted effort, if not speaking to each other. The value of teamwork is usually shown as a virtue. Again we see the self referential aspects that would resonate with Artemisia Gentileschi. She was confronted with two men who collaborated against her in 1610 to ruin her reputation. One might easily see where the parallels in this story might appeal to her in order to portray a non-traditional interpretation of the Susanna and the Elders visual theme, which is actually a quite accurate account of the Biblical text.

**15** And it fell out, as they watched a fit day, she went in on a time, as yesterday and the day before, with two maids only, and was desirous to wash herself in the orchard: for it was hot weather. **16** And there was nobody there, but the two old men that had hid themselves and were beholding her. **17** So she said to the maids: Bring me oil, and washing balls, and shut the doors of the orchard, that I may wash me. **18** And they did as she bade them: and they shut the doors of the orchard, and went out by a back door to fetch



what she had commanded them, and they knew not that the elders were hid within. **19** Now when the maids were gone forth, the two elders arose, and ran to her, and said: **20** Behold the doors of the orchard are shut, and nobody seeth us, and we are in love with thee: wherefore consent to us, and lie with us.

**21** But if thou wilt not, we will bear witness against thee, that a young man was with thee, and therefore thou didst send away thy maids from thee. **22** Susanna sighed, and said: I am straitened on every side: for if I do this thing, it is death to me: and if I do it not, I shall not escape your hands. **23** But it is better for me to fall into your hands without doing it, than to sin in the sight of the Lord. **24** With that Susanna cried out with a loud voice: and the elders also cried out against her. **25** And one of them ran to the door of the orchard, and opened it.

**26** So when the servants of the house heard the cry in the orchard, they rushed in by the back door to see what was the matter. **27** But after the old men had spoken, the servants were greatly ashamed: for never had there been any such word said of Susanna.

As mentioned in the trial testimony of Artemisia Gentileschi, upon being told that many people were listening to Cosimo Quorli's slander campaign against her, she replied to Tassi that she said that it didn't matter to her what they were saying because she knew what she was that that she was "*zitella* (Garrard 1989 Appendix B, 414)."<sup>8</sup> As with Susanna, Gentileschi was able to relate to the feeling of helplessness invoked by being accused of something unjustly. Also like Susanna who lived exclusively on the grounds of her husband's estate (Zimmermann 1957, 238), Artemisia Gentileschi was confined to the upstairs of her father's apartment in Rome and could relate to the presumed feeling of isolation shown in the 1610 *Susanna*.

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<sup>8</sup> This context makes it very clear that she was describing herself as a virgin in sexual, not marital, terms. In my opinion, this gives further credence to my argument that Tassi was behaving in an improper manner toward a seventeen year old girl, given that he was a forty year old married man at the time.

And on the next day, **28** When the people were come to Joakim her husband, the two elders also came full of wicked device against Susanna, to put her to death. **29** And they said before the people: Send to Susanna daughter of Helcias the wife of Joakim. And presently they sent. **30** And she came with her parents, and children, and all her kindred.

**31** Now Susanna was exceeding delicate, and beautiful to behold. **32** But those wicked men commanded that her face should be uncovered, (for she was covered,) that so at least they might be satisfied with her beauty. **33** Therefore her friends and all her acquaintance wept. **34** But the two elders rising up in the midst of the people, laid their hands upon her head. **35** And she weeping looked up to heaven, for her heart had confidence in the Lord.

At this point, most visual portrayals of the Susanna and the Elders story end abruptly. With the most casual glance it would seem that Gentileschi's trilogy would end here as well. However with a careful analysis and knowledge of her personal history, it is evident that she continues placing visual iconography to lead the viewer to a more complete understanding of both the Susanna tale and her own self-relevatory path.

**36** And the elders said: As we walked in the orchard alone, this woman came in with two maids, and shut the doors of the orchard, and sent away the maids from her. **37** Then a young man that was there hid came to her, and lay with her. **38** But we that were in a corner of the orchard, seeing this wickedness, ran up to them, and we saw them lie together. **39** And him indeed we could not take, because he was stronger than us, and opening the doors he leaped out: **40** But having taken this woman, we asked who the young man was, but she would not tell us: of this thing we are witnesses.

**41** The multitude believed them as being the elders and the judges of the people, and they condemned her to death. **42** Then Susanna cried out with a loud voice, and said: O eternal God, who knowest hidden things, who knowest all things before they come to pass, **43** Thou knowest that they have borne false witness against me: and behold I must die,

whereas I have done none of these things, which these men have maliciously forged against me. **44** And the Lord heard her voice. **45** And when she was led to be put to death, the Lord raised up the holy spirit of a young boy, whose name was Daniel.

In this passage we are again reminded of the slander campaign against Gentileschi in 1610 which was coordinated by Quorli and Tassi. Although the testimony given in the trial had not yet occurred, the poignant “*e vero, e vero, e vero*” along with her quiet assertion of virginity makes it plain that she was confident in her own knowledge of herself, in spite of other’s attempts to smear her reputation. It is quite possible that knowing Susanna’s life was spared, Gentileschi may have looked to the story as a source of hope or inspiration.

**46** And he cried out with a loud voice I am clear from the blood of this woman. **47** Then all the people turning themselves towards him, said: What meaneth this word that thou hast spoken? **48** But he standing in the midst of them, said: Are ye so foolish, ye children of Israel, that without examination or knowledge of the truth, you have condemned a daughter of Israel? **49** Return to judgment, for they have borne false witness against her. **50** So all the people turned again in haste, and the old men said to him: Come, and sit thou down among us, and shew it us: seeing God hath given thee the honour of old age.

**51** And Daniel said to the people: Separate these two far from one another, and I will examine them. **52** So when they were put asunder one from the other, he called one of them, and said to him: O thou that art grown old in evil days, now are thy sins come out, which thou hast committed before: **53** In judging unjust judgments, oppressing the innocent, and letting the guilty to go free, whereas the Lord saith: The innocent and the just thou shalt not kill. **54** Now then, if thou sawest her, tell me under what tree thou sawest them conversing together. He said: Under a mastic tree. **55** And Daniel said: Well hast thou lied against thy own head: for behold the angel of God having received the sentence of him, shall cut thee in two.

**56** And having put him aside, he commanded that the other should come, and he said to him: O thou seed of Chanaan, and not of Juda, beauty hath deceived thee, and lust hath perverted thy heart: **57** Thus did you do to the daughters of Israel, and they for fear conversed with you: but a daughter of Juda would not abide your wickedness. **58** Now therefore tell me, under what tree didst thou take them conversing together. And he answered: Under a holm tree. **59** And Daniel said to him: Well hast thou also lied against thy own head: for the angel of the Lord waiteth with a sword to cut thee in two, and to destroy you. **60** With that all the assembly cried out with a loud voice, and they blessed God, who saveth them that trust in him.

**61** And they rose up against the two elders, (for Daniel had convicted them of false witness by their own mouth,) and they did to them as they had maliciously dealt against their neighbour, **62** To fulfill the law of Moses: and they put them to death, and innocent blood was saved in that day. **63** But Helcias and his wife praised God, for their daughter Susanna, with Joakim her husband, and all her kindred, because there was no dishonesty found in her. **64** And Daniel became great in the sight of the people from that day, and thenceforward.

The iconography that Gentileschi shows in her work which recalls the final verses of this chapter are found in the 1622 *Susanna and the Elders* painting. We see a large tree pointing diagonally to the Elders in this work, not an Elm tree, not a mastic tree, either of which might provide the viewer a clue as to the identity of Gentileschi's Elders. The leaves on the tree are those of an Elder tree symbolizing with the leftward (sinister) diagonal line that the Elders are not to be trusted. The final *Susanna* in the trilogy, painted in 1649, also contains many trees, which I believe also signify Gentileschi's interest in justice being meted out to the Elders. The manner in which she interprets this theme will be discussed in Chapter 3. Throughout my thesis I will argue the correlations between the nuances of the Apocryphal story and the self-referential aspects Gentileschi reveals to the viewer in her *Susanna and the Elders* series.

### Self Referential Aspects

I argue that her artistic talent has led her to place the events of her life on canvas, as she stood on the threshold between two worlds, that of the career artist and the adult woman.<sup>9</sup> As she reflected on the intersection of these roles at critical points in her life, she used the story of Susanna and the Elders to interpret her feelings on these themes at these life stages. The first one in chronological sequence is her very first work, the 1610 *Susanna and the Elders*.

Many art historians have addressed the issue of whether or not this painting is indeed a reflection of Gentileschi's life at the time of the painting. Anita Silvers (Silvers 1990) vehemently disagrees, arguing that merely the fact of Gentileschi choosing a female protagonist does not mean that she personally identifies with her. She further states that "there is no reason to insist that what is true of an historically documented personage and of the artist manifested in that historical person's aesthetic products must be the same, as these are characters situated in different sorts of narratives, discourses with different functions." Silvers goes on to discuss how this fact continually separates feminist art history from the traditional canon populated by males and calls for any situation to have absolute proof when connecting the personal with a contemporary work (Silvers 1990, 371).

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<sup>9</sup> Many experts including Elizabeth Cropper in her 2001 *Life of the Edge* article, Mary Garrard in her 1989 monograph, and Nannette Salomon in her article *Judging Artemisia* argue that she exorcises her rape by Tassi through painting Judith and Holofernes – I agree and also think that Susanna is another heroine to whom she relates in another area in her life, that of standing up to the men who have betrayed her. Certainly there is a pattern that can be established in her *oeuvre* when considering works such as *La Pittura* and *Jael and Sisera* as self-referential.

Other experts such as Mary Garrard and Germaine Greer completely disagree with Silvers' opinion on this issue. In 1979 Greer stated that Gentileschi was using her femininity to break through a male dominated society to become an exception to the standard (Greer 1979, 234). While this interpretation of Gentileschi's achievements may have been perceived in that light during the Seventies decade, more recent scholarship sheds a different light on her career. Mary Garrard agrees with Greer and takes her argument one step further by advocating the idea that Artemisia Gentileschi is using her natural genius to pour out her feelings about her situation with Tassi, her father, and her frustration at her exclusion from the artistic community due to her gender (Garrard 1989, 104; Garrard and Broude 1982).

I partially agree with both Germaine Greer and Dr. Garrard's arguments, in principle, but as I will show below, new research uncovered since these writings gives us a more complete and deeper understanding of Gentileschi's interpretive process when compared to works in her *oeuvre* throughout her lifetime. Griselda Pollock argues a third theory. She believes that Orazio Gentileschi planned and indeed had a client in mind for the 1610 *Susanna and the Elders* painting and did more than merely guide and instruct Artemisia in its completion. She believes that in a canvas of that size and magnitude, with a large nude figure would more appropriately be attributed to Orazio, at least in a greater percentage, than to Artemisia, and feels that Orazio was probably attempting to take advantage of any business advantage his daughter's gender could bring him (Pollock and Bal 2005, 188).

Ward Bissell, Judith Mann and Ann Sutherland Harris all take a mediated approach to the polarized arguments of Silvers, Garrard and Pollock<sup>10</sup>. Each of these art historians believe that the truth lies in an amalgamation of the three theories. All have published opinions that certainly Artemisia was assisted by Orazio in the composition of the piece. All acknowledge that Artemisia was definitely exposed to influential art in her father's studio and under his supervision, although as a traditional Italian girl she was not given a wide exposure or collaborative opportunities, as other male apprentices were (Harris and Mann 2005, 136). Perhaps Ward Bissell in his *Catalogue Raisonne* stated it best when he opined that while the painting certainly need not be self-referential,

I am certainly not dissuaded from the assumption that experiences in the real world might well inform creative acts...let it be supposed for the moment that by the time the picture was created Artemisia had been sexually besieged, and that this had come to the attention of her father, who upon the death of his wife and Artemisia's mother Prudentia... had taken on full responsibility for the upbringing of his daughter... [T]he *Susanna*, if one were inclined to so theorize, might document Orazio's sensitivity to what Artemisia had been through (Bissell 1999, 8).

Gentileschi began her *Susanna and the Elders* series when she was only sixteen years old, and although the initial composition of the work may have been done by her father, Orazio, the palette and final product were Artemisia's alone. She conceived the idea of the *Elders* in the 1610 painting representing Quorli and Tassi, using iconography which would be familiar to herself, her circle of peers and family, and art historians today. In addition, by use of a palette similar to that of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel,

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<sup>10</sup> With the exception of Pollock, each of these opinions and published works were written prior to Alexandra Lapierre's publication of documents found in 1998-99, which provided conclusive evidence that Tassi was convicted of the defloration of Artemisia Gentileschi and sentenced for the crime. Prior to this proof, art historians were prone to focus more on Gentileschi's notoriety than her artistic ability, particularly those of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, such as Longhi and the Wittkowers. Bissell does address Gentileschi's talent in the postscript to his *Catalogue Raisonne*. One must allow for the fact that had these authors, particularly Dr. Silvers, known of the proof of Tassi's conviction their opinions may have been tempered by the knowledge.

she conveyed a sense of bright, morning light coming into a stark scene of realism. This Susanna, in comparison to both contemporary Susannas and those of the preceding century, was not a sensual, flirtatious figure similar to those portrayed by D'Arpino, Carracci, Rinaldi, etc. To this point in time we usually see the scene from the Elders' point of view, that of two good old boys out for an adventure at the expense of a lovely young woman. Artemisia's Susanna was unique in that she used a feminine perspective to portray Susanna: we see the scene through the eyes of Susanna rather than through the eyes of the Elders.

To be specific, Artemisia Gentileschi uses many different elements to make not only her 1610 *Susanna and the Elders* painting self-referential, she also infuses her known Susanna series, which includes the 1622 Burghley House painting and her 1649 Brno *Susanna* with elements of self-reflection at each stage of her life at the time of the paintings. Each of these works was commenced at a unique stage in her life and reflected her feelings about her circumstances at that time. As many art historians and feminist theorists have noted, Gentileschi's *Judith and Holofernes* works have captured the catharsis of the aftermath of her rape and Tassi's subsequent trial for defloration in great detail.

I argue that in addition to the Judith works being self-referential in regards to her rape story, Gentileschi also used the Apocryphal story of Susanna and the Elders as a catharsis for another area of her life: her feelings of betrayal and ill-use by the men whom she trusted. Throughout her lifetime there were documented instances of betrayal and in her self referential portrayals of Susanna and the Elders we are able to complete a visual picture of those instances. Gentileschi left a visual record through iconography



and reference to the astute viewer of this aspect of her feelings at certain stages of her life.

She shows us her feelings toward her sexual harassment by Tassi and Quorli when she was a teenager in the 1610 *Susanna* by depicting Susanna with the “hands of shame” pose seen in by Michelangelo’s Adam, (Figure 1) but also taken from the Orestes sarcophagus’ nurse, (Figure 2) who used the stance in a protective pose. Gentileschi combines the two to show Susanna ashamed of her nakedness, but protecting herself against the Elders, whom she fears.



Figure 1

Michelangelo: 1508-12 *The Fall and Banishment*  
Sistine Chapel (Vatican Palace, Vatican City)  
Art, Archaeology and Architecture (Erich Lessing Culture and Fine Arts Archives)

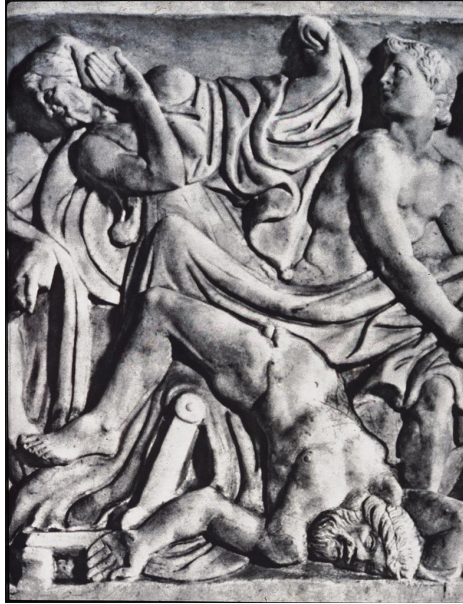


Figure 2

Orestes: 130-134 A.D. *Sarcophagus*  
 University of California, San Diego  
 ARTstor Slide Gallery

In the 1622 Burghley House *Susanna*, the most commercial of the three works, Gentileschi demonstrates that she can, indeed, make her way as an artist in a man's world by representing Susanna from a man's point of view. She does, however, show this Susanna as aging much as Gentileschi has from the 1610 work, and she has also aged the Elders, using them to represent Tassi and her faithless husband, Stiattesi. In portraying Susanna in a commercial pose as a beautiful seductress, she also iconographically conveys the image of herself as a successful artist at the top of her career. Taking into account that most of the men in her life were less successful artists<sup>11</sup> than she, this could definitely be construed as a moment of triumphant pride for her.

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<sup>11</sup> Her father, Orazio; husband, Stiattesi; brother, Franciso; rapist, Tassi; the Roman artist community; Members of the Roman Academies who shunned her (while the Florentines did not).

## CHAPTER 2:

## The Garden

The first element of commonality among the three Gentileschi *Susanna and the Elders* paintings is her attention to the environment in which she places both Susanna, and the elders in the tableau. In each painting, she uses the environment<sup>12</sup> in a unique way to compose her scene around the events in her life at the time. To the casual eye, it may seem as if the scene merely reflects the city in which she was residing at the time of the work's execution, or the influence of other artists with whom she has associated. A careful examination of Gentileschi and her *oeuvre*, however, reveals that nothing in her composition or iconography is ever casual or unplanned. Each element of her works is carefully orchestrated and iconographical, most are self-referential, to a degree that is not readily apparent without copious research.

One basic premise of the Susanna and the Elders story that is common to each depiction through the years is its outdoor setting. Gentileschi interprets this theme differently in each painting. While each has an agrarian setting, this is where the resemblance each painting has to the others ends. Each painting shares environmental elements in common with the others, as Gentileschi's composition retains continuity, but

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<sup>12</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, the term "environment" will be used to mean the outdoor setting and its accoutrements in which the figures of Susanna and the Elders are arranged. This will include organic elements such as water, greenery and atmospheric conditions, along with inorganic items such as fountains and marble walls.

as her journey of self-realization continues these elements change and evolve as the artist herself changes.

The initial progression used by Gentileschi in her *Susanna* series is that of time. She shows this in many ways, as I will argue throughout each chapter. In this chapter, I will address the passage of time in the three works by Gentileschi's use of palette, light and shadow as she follows the sun on its path across the sky.

In the 1610 *Susanna and the Elders*, (See Figure 3) Gentileschi uses the palette to show sunlight as a natural light source coming from the right side of the canvas by highlighting the bright sky on the upper right corner and moving in a diagonal line touching a bright white highlight to the shoulder of the Elder's red cloak, which a seventeenth century viewer would naturally assume to be the clear morning light or close to high noon, indicating broad daylight, a time where nothing can be hidden.

The use of this time of day can also indicate the time in Gentileschi's life, her seventeenth year, when she is just starting both her career and her womanhood<sup>13</sup>. The clear light shows everything with no shadows or artifice, thus promoting a stark realistic depiction of the scene. The time of day chosen correlates perfectly to the place she is in her personal life – not a child, but also not fully a woman; as the sun will inevitably keep going on its path across the sky, so will she mature and follow it. Also symbolic is the reference to her chosen career; with this interpretation of *Susanna and the Elders* she is launching her professional name. She is moving from the metaphorical morning of being her father's apprentice to taking the initial step toward joining him as a peer.

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<sup>13</sup> At this time, no rape had occurred and no matter what else was happening, Artemisia and Orazio Gentileschi were under the impression that Agostino Tassi was unmarried and able to fulfill any promises made to Artemisia.



Figure 3

Artemisia Gentileschi: 1610 *Susanna and the Elders*  
Collection Graf von Schönborn, Pommersfelden

The palette used for the 1610 *Susanna* is one of clear, soft colors, reminiscent of a sunny day. The background of the sky covering the top third of the canvas is a medium bright blue. Gentileschi uses pure white to bring light to reflect off the fluffy clouds on the right to show a beautiful sky. At the top edge of the canvas a small feathering of gray begins to blend with the white clouds as they move to the left of the canvas. At the left edge, a small amount of brown is blended in with the gray to show the progression from a sunny sky to storm clouds over the second Elder's shoulder.

Artemisia uses this deeper contrast to help infuse her piece with greater emotional intimacy than is seen in Orazio's work by giving the figures a greater depth and ability to project emotion, although he does use a similar, though slightly lighter, palette and subject matter. At first glance, the tones chosen by Artemisia Gentileschi resemble the palette used by her father Orazio, in contemporary paintings such as *Holy Family with Infant John the Baptist* (1607-8), *Saint Jerome* (1610), and his 1609 *Madonna and Child*.<sup>14</sup> When observing Gentileschi's selection of colors more closely, however, armed with the knowledge of her carefully supervised visits to Roman artistic sites selected by her father for the advancement of her artistic and technical knowledge, one can clearly see the similarities to Michelangelo Buonarroti's Sistine palette as well.<sup>15</sup> Orazio did not use a palette similar to that of Michelangelo's during these years; his was lighter, with

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<sup>14</sup> In recent years, however, many experts, including Garrard and Bissell have argued for attribution of this painting to Artemisia rather than Orazio. There is nothing conclusive, however, and it has never been placed in her oeuvre.

<sup>15</sup> In both letters and trial testimony we know that Artemisia, Tuzia and members of Tassi's family were all part of the carriages that formed the traveling party making up the expedition to see Maderno's nave and façade of St. Peter's, as well as Arpino's part of the renovations, thus giving Artemisia great exposure to Michelangelo's work, as well as the opportunity to ask technical questions of the group of artists who were employed there, and at the other venues visited (Santa Maria Maggiore, St. Peter's, Quirinale). This provided a young artist with an invaluable opportunity for "on the spot" educational moments. Unfortunately, we also know that Tassi convinced Artemisia to "step aside" with him for parts of these outings, so we cannot be sure which ones were best attended. We do know that Artemisia was on very good terms with Arpino, as she consulted with him on technical issues from time to time (Garrard, 318).

less use of contrast and shadow (Harris and Mann 2005, 132). Artemisia's use of color in this piece differs from Orazio's in her use of brighter tones as seen in the red of the Elder on the right's cape, Susanna's hair, the marble bench, the blue in the sky and the brown used on the left arm of the Elder on the left. Sharper contrasts are seen in the deep shadows of the Elder on the left's rough shirt, the folds of the red cape, the differences in the sky on the right and left of the canvas, the dark and light hair colors of the two Elders, and the play of shadows between the hair, marble and skin tones that form depth at Susanna's waist. She gives more emphasis to the contrast between the shadows created by the natural drape of a cloth or curve of a limb than does Orazio, and uses this contrast to subtly highlight the natural play of light on the skin tones and other surfaces.

The 1622 *Susanna and the Elders* (See Figure 4) painting by Artemisia Gentileschi was completed during the brief period she lived in Rome following her sojourn in Florence. The palette here reflects the influences of the Tuscan styles she was exposed to in the cerulean blues of the sky of the left background, and in the style of the trees on the left mid-line of the scene. During this time, she also developed her signature color, Artemisia Gold, (See Figure 5) which is seen in the drape on the wall separating the Elders from the figure of Susanna. By this point in time, each Artemisia Gentileschi work usually features an item done in Artemisia Gold, and it is used today as a hallmark of identification<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Artemisia Gold is a shade of gold ground and invented by Artemisia Gentileschi sometime after 1614 during the time she lived in Florence. The first time we see this shade is during 1615 in her paintings of *The Conversion of the Magdalene* in the Pitti Palace where Gentileschi uses the shade on the Magdalene's dress and in her *Self-Portrait as a Lute Player* of the same year where the shade is used on the sash and in the head scarf. Throughout the remainder of Gentileschi's professional career, Artemisia Gold was used in each work, sometimes as small as a tassel on a pillow, other times a major figure will be clad in the color but it was used enough for art historians and Gentileschi experts to use the color as a mark of identification of her *oeuvre*.



Figure 4

Artemisia Gentileschi: 1622 *Susanna and the Elders*  
Collection of the Marquess of Exeter, Burghley House, Stamford, Lincolnshire



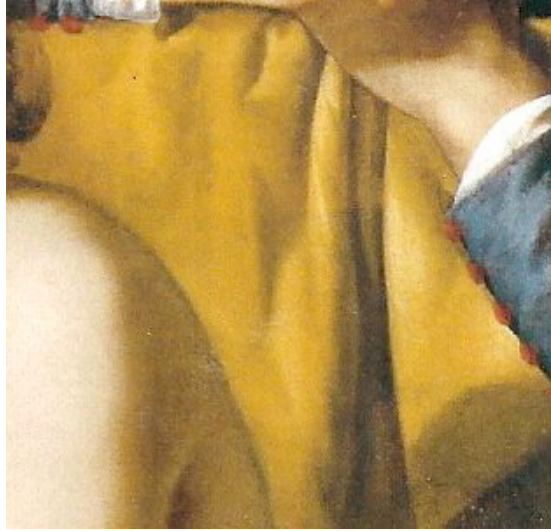


Figure 5

Artemisia Gentileschi: Artemisia Gold  
 from Artemisia Gentileschi: 1622 *Susanna and the Elders*  
 Collection of the Marquess of Exeter, Burghley House, Stamford, Lincolnshire

The passage of time is shown in this scene by the warmer sunlight shown as compared to the 1610 *Susanna*. This painting's palette is created in warmer shades and more muted tones. The angle of the sun is shown as coming from a different place in the sky, signaling a time from noon toward afternoon. This indicates a different Susanna, and also a different Artemisia, both of whom are older, and farther along in their symbolic day than they were in 1610. Gentileschi also shows this by the play of shadows on Susanna's arm and at her neck, the upper Elder's cloak and head, and in the drape of the Artemesia Gold cloth draped over the banquette. The 1622 Susanna is older, and the warmer light is more flattering to her features. Gentileschi symbolically imbues her personal situation into the organic aspects of the canvas next by having the figure of Susanna's legs immersed in water up to the knee. One major reason for the difference in the portrayal of the organic elements is that Gentileschi no longer has the purity of a virgin as she did in 1610, nor is she a dutiful Italian matron, having recently left her

spouse. She uses the warmer colors and light to age everyone in the scene to show that time is passing for all the characters involved; 1610 is gone for everyone. At this time, Gentileschi is 30 years old and has born four children; her Susanna is infused with realism, but it is a flattering realism for the time period.

The greatest passage of time between renditions is that between the 1622 *Susanna* and the 1649 *Susanna and the Elders* (See Figure 6) which resides in Brno, Czech Republic. In this painting, Gentileschi employs the darkest palette of the three: the darkness of Susanna's surroundings a possible reflection of the painting's mood. The colors of the sky are done in darker and deeper tones, which generate more shadows in this piece. In the earlier works the background of the skies had been a sunny blue with a gradual progression of gray turning the sky to dusk. In this work, the sky begins with a paler tone of blue as a background and the clouds are not fluffy at all, while there is not even a hint of the bright noontime sun as was seen in the 1610 and 1622 paintings. Instead, to demonstrate the passage of time, particularly the greater increment that has passed since 1622, Gentileschi uses brown and grays to show the late afternoon sun, closer to evening. The light cast over the shoulders of the Elders, while still coming from the right side of the canvas, is more golden, rather than bright daylight. For the first time in the series, we see Susanna with shadows on her body rather than in pure, clear light. This Susanna is in the late afternoon, the symbolic afternoon or evening of Gentileschi's life. This painting was Gentileschi's last completed canvas and the self-referential aspects should not be ignored, as she was ill at the time and was aware that this would be her final *Susanna*, if not her final work (Garrard, 1989, 88).



Figure 6

Artemisia Gentileschi: 1649 *Susanna and the Elders*  
Moravská Galerie, Brno

Typically, the surrounding environment plays a role in most *Susanna and the Elders* works by symbolizing nature as it equates to the traditional uncivilized atmosphere beyond Susanna's garden in which she bathes<sup>17</sup>. At this point, the different interpretations of the tale vary by artist. All portray the three main figures of Susanna and two older men, usually in some type of natural setting, some, such as Cavaliere d'Arpino include water as an organic element (See Figure 7), others place Susanna inside a wall or room. Many artists such as Tintoretto (See Figure 8) set the entire scene in the outdoors beyond the confines of a civilizing wall, with both elders and Susanna showing the uncivilized side of their natures. This setting became symbolic across Europe of the Garden of Eden, known for the temptation of Eve by the serpent, and for the uncivilized and base nature of the masculine urges inspired by the lack of inhibitions usually placed by civilization and its structured environment. This would seem entirely appropriate, given the Cinquecento and Seicento predilection for placing Susanna in the posture of the ancient Crouching Venus used by the Carracci school, Tintoretto and Dominichino. This pose is one used frequently by artists who are interpreting the theme of Susanna due to the increased sexual availability of the crouching stance (Garrard 2001, 119).<sup>18</sup> Both the Crouching Venus and the Venus Anadyomene are variations of the Modest Venus (Venus Pudica) which has inspired countless works of art since Cosimo de Medici brought it to

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<sup>17</sup> The figure of Susanna herself is known to embody the phrase originated in the Song of Solomon 4:12 "a garden enclosed" interpreted as a wife's beauty is a garden of delights, enclosed by walls, for her husband's exclusive sight and enjoyment. During the Renaissance and seventeenth century, this phrase also extended to artwork inspired by the Virgin Mary, for whom Susanna is also a figure.

<sup>18</sup> The Crouching Venus pose is one seen in Figure ? and is found in many Roman sites, typically the Crouching Venus is crouching on her right leg and is using her right arm to cover her breasts by reaching to her left shoulder as seen in Gentileschi's 1610 *Susanna* and reversed in the 1622 painting. Venus Anadyomene is the term used for the birth of Venus, and is associated with depictions of Venus seen with a shell motif (standing or sitting) or wringing out her presumably wet hair. Venus Anadyomene can be seen sitting, standing and crouching. The aforementioned *Susanna and the Elders* by d'Arpino is an example of a sitting Venus Anadyomene. The Modest Venus pose is similar to both the Crouching Venus and Venus Anadyomene, however she is usually standing or reclining. Modest Venus is also seen associated with the Virgin Mary in many works of art through succeeding centuries.

Florence during the Renaissance (See Figures 9 and 10). The crouching pose of Venus Anadyomene is a classic pose where attempted modesty actually inspires more impure thoughts than an actual blatant showing of flesh might. The association of this sculpture with the bath also imputes its association with many Susanna paintings, before and after Gentileschi's series (Garrard 1989, 108).



Figure 7

Cavaliere d'Arpino: 1607 *Susanna and the Elders*  
Siena, Italy  
Ospedale di S. Maria della Scala



Figure 8

Tintoretto: 1555-56 *Susanna and the Elders*  
 Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, GG Inv. No. 1530  
 Art, Archaeology and Architecture (Erich Lessing Culture and Fine Arts Archives)

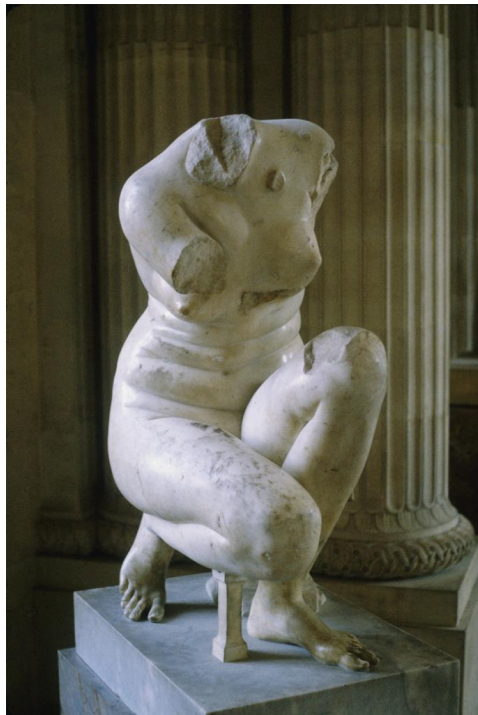


Figure 9

Doidalses of Bithnia: 250-40 B.C. *Crouching Venus*  
 Louvre, Paris  
 Art History Survey Collection

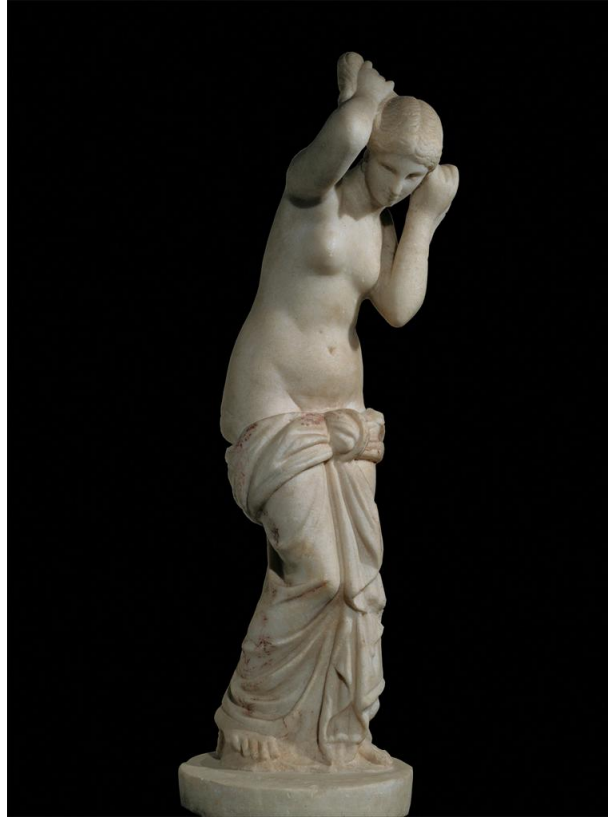


Figure 10

Unknown: First Century CE *Venus Anodymene*  
Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, Naples, Italy  
Art, Archaeology and Architecture (Erich Lessing Culture and Fine Arts Archives)

The colors used in the palette clearly accentuate the setting and apparent theme of the painting, that of a young woman using the opportunity of a sunny, pleasant day to have a bath in the privacy of her own garden. Gentileschi uses the bright blue sky with the fluffy white clouds to show what would seem to be a perfect day...on the surface. However, rather than the typical garden scene that one would expect from a rendering of a traditional Susanna and the Elders tale such as that shown by Tintoretto or Dominichino, this vignette does not show any of the greenery or plantings of a typical garden. Nor does it show any indication of water for Susanna's bath – not even a

fountain or ewer. One only sees half of the right bare foot dipped into an unknown source of water. Could it be a pool? A river? The effluvia from an unseen fountain? The psychological meanings affixed to each of those symbols, if known, could drastically alter the iconographical impact of the work. The drape across Susanna's thigh is the only indication to the viewer that a bath is about to take place, requiring a good bit of supposition or prior knowledge of the Susanna and the Elders story on the part of the viewer, which could be assumed on the part of most seventeenth century patrons.

In the 1610 *Susanna*, we are struck mainly by the lack of any garden. Instead, Gentileschi uses only a single organic feature to represent a garden: a single lily floats above the right hand of the elder on the right. Symbolically, he holds Susanna's fate in the hand with which he makes his oath. This lily is directly in his line of sight and also floats between him and the figure of Susanna. Gentileschi has placed this flower in a central position, directly in the center of the compositional triangle and yet it also becomes the top of its own smaller triangle composed of the left hand of Susanna and the left hand of the elder on the right. Compositionally, this smaller triangle parallels the triangular placement of the three figures of the painting, as well as representing that Susanna, as the lily, can easily be crushed by the hands beyond her control. Nanette Salomon has likened this scene to an abstraction, comparing it to "a visual strategy that removes the event from the lived human experience of a particular time and specific place" by Gentileschi's decision to remove the organic material from the scene (Salomon and Bal 2005, 47). I disagree with her assertion as I believe Gentileschi has carefully selected only the organic elements she wishes to represent symbolic themes in the manner she would like her interpretation to be seen. The lily, not only the translation of



Susanna but also a symbol of purity, may be viewed as the embodiment of Gentileschi's views regarding the traditional garden setting and its equation with temptation and loss of inhibition. At this point in her life, according to trial testimony, the artist was still a virgin but was under duress, rather than temptation (Garrard 1989, 205). She sees herself as the lily, in the hands of Tassi. Therefore, the rest of the garden, and its connotations, are unnecessary to her interpretation of the scene.

The 1622 *Susanna and the Elders*, in turn, was completed during the brief period during which Artemisia Gentileschi lived in Rome following her sojourn in Florence. This work displays the influences of the Tuscan styles to which she was exposed in the cerulean blues of the sky of the left background, and in the style of the trees on the left mid-line of the scene. During this time, the artist also developed her signature color, Artemisia gold which is seen in the drape on the wall separating the Elders from the figure of Susanna; from this period onward, each Artemisia Gentileschi work usually features an item done in Artemisia gold, and the color is used today as a hallmark of identification.

The background of this work shows a typical agrarian bucolic scene with blue skies and trees in both the far and middle distance. The skies far away are a deep, beautiful blue with fluffy white clouds. However, in a foreshadowing of the story, as the clouds move closer to the head of Susanna, they become darker and more ominous. A similar phenomenon happens with the trees: the distant trees are shown in the sunlight, but the tree closest to the foreground of the painting is shown in a direct diagonal line leading straight from a small bare forked branch at the top of the work which begins in the cloudless sky. The viewer's eye then follows the left side of that symbolic branch

then takes a downward diagonal path following the vine covered tree trunk, which points straight to the Elders.<sup>19</sup>

At this point in time, Gentileschi has become a well recognized artist in Florence. In her personal life, the garden and its associated connotations may be a very apt scene for her placement of the elders in relation to Susanna. The landscape of the background certainly resembles the Tuscan hills where Gentileschi had spent the last decade. Unlike the 1610 painting, this canvas contains fully one-third of the surface in landscape. The twentieth and twenty-first century viewer will not escape the Dali-esque double entendre of the tree peeping around the broken corner of the banquette. This is not a friendly nature spirit, rather a menacing face leering around, as a voyeur. One wonders if Gentileschi composed this element as well, with the intention that even nature intruded, uninvited, into what should have been her private space.

The viewer will note the absence of any flowers, particularly the lily in this painting. Gentileschi has moved from the rejection of the garden and its uncivilized connotations, as well as its themes of relating Susanna to Eve and her temptations. She now places the elders firmly in the garden where the base emotions and uncivilized behavior reign, and should the viewer be in any doubt about her intentions, she points the way with an elder tree at a diagonal angle leading toward them. I argue that Gentileschi has become much less idealistic with age and is showing her pain symbolically at the loss of her innocence and betrayals by the men in her life through the use of the garden imagery as shown by the cloudy skies, the voyeuristic tree and the absence of the lily which was present in 1610.

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<sup>19</sup> It is worth noting that Gentileschi painted this as an Elder tree – not Mastic nor Oak which were the two trees that the Apocryphal Elders testified to seeing Susanna fornicating underneath.

In the 1649 *Susanna and the Elders*, the background, which may have been painted by Viviano Codazzi, Gentileschi's protégé and frequent Neopolitan collaborator (Lattuada 2001, 383), is more extensive than the one shown in the 1622 work. The dark trees on the left side of the canvas could almost be called a forest, while the hills that slope up to the right from the center are quite reminiscent of the topography of Southern Italy. Gentileschi was known for hiring others to execute her landscapes, and when one appeared in her work it was usually done by another artist<sup>20</sup> (Garrard 1989, 191; Bissell 1999; Lattuada, Nappi and Mann 2005). Gentileschi no doubt designed the composition for the landscape, but the execution was most likely done by Codazzi under her guidance in her studio<sup>21</sup> (Grabski 1985, 41).

In this painting nature is shown to be much more menacing than in the other two paintings, as shown by the untamed trees in the left side of the painting and the unpopulated hillside in the background. When Gentileschi composed this painting, she was fifty-six years old, and in failing health. While she may not have known it would be her final canvas, she did know it would be her final *Susanna*. For her capstone garden imagery, she shows the shadows and the darkness as being close to the central figures, and places the sunlight and clear skies farther in the background. To the viewer she is showing that the mature *Susanna* sees that danger comes not from the imagery of nature or from the uncivilized things to be found there; but it comes from the darkness of the

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<sup>20</sup> Toward the end of her career, however, she did occasionally do her own landscapes. It is unknown as to the hand of this canvas, as there is no record of its commission, and thus fees for models, subcontracting, etc. (Nappi, 2005, 124).

<sup>21</sup> It is interesting and relevant to the nature of my thesis to note that Codazzi was also a frequent collaborator of Agostino Tassi, who also hired him to paint landscapes. Codazzi and Gentileschi's correspondence indicates that all three parties were well aware that Codazzi gave her work higher priority than Tassi's due to her greater fame and importance. (Lapierre, 487) This must have been a moment of great satisfaction for Gentileschi.

shadows, and from the temptation of the unknown that is found much closer than the unwary might think.

As previously discussed, no water was shown in the 1610 *Susanna* work, merely a suggestion of the right foot dipping off the bottom of the canvas into an unseen area. During the composition of the 1622 *Susanna*, Gentileschi takes a very different view of placing Susanna at her bath, and showing the iconography of flowing water as well. In many cultures water, whether flowing or pooling, is considered to be a symbol of purity. The act of bathing or immersion into water is equated to purification, particularly that of bare feet which are also considered to be icons of purity, hence the religious practice of foot baths (Panofsky 1972, 177).

On the left side of the painting is a very large fountain, the top of which takes nearly half of the width of the top edge. In her book *Artemisia Gentileschi Around 1622*, Mary Garrard opines that a portion of this painting, particularly this fountain, may have been cut off at some point, or repainted, and forensic evidence shows this theory to hold great weight. This is one aspect of Gentileschi's *oeuvre* that is not typical, that of the lack of proportion of the fountain and its decoration. Giving even greater weight to Garrard's opinion and her use of this and forensic evidence for her recent attribution of this work to Gentileschi's *oeuvre*, is the fact that underneath the disproportional part of the fountain was found the signature of "Artemitia Lomi, *fecit* 1622."<sup>22</sup>

The fountain is shown as being made of marble, the top being a disproportionately large circular basin edged with a lip, and tapering down to rest on a square base. The

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<sup>22</sup> This signature is the way in which Gentileschi signed her work at the time, particularly since her time in Florence. Orazio Gentileschi's mother was part of the Lomi family who had ties to Florence, thus making it favorable for her to use that name. Indeed, Orazio was also known to use it from time to time. Also, it may have been seen as a way for Artemisia to distance herself from the notoriety of the rape trial once she was back in Rome.

outside of the basin is decorated with a rosette on the right side which is facing Susanna's uplifted face. The base is sitting on a fluted and ringed column, which is in turn resting upon a plinth which appears to be decorated at the base with acanthus leaves. Under this plinth is a large, rounded urn shape which is surrounded by highly detailed cherubim. Each is portrayed with curly hair and a very intense look on its face. One cherub is shown fully lit from the right while the other cherub is completely in shadow, a testament to Gentileschi's developing tenebrist style. I argue that this is also an intentional symbolic interpretation by Gentileschi on the dual aspects of Eros, or Cupid. Cupid can be both a god of everlasting love, should his arrow strike true, or, according to some accounts should he use his golden arrow. If, however, he uses his lead arrow, or if he should wish ill upon someone, Cupid has an equally dark side and is able to wreak havoc upon their love life (Panofsky 1972, 124).

The small, chubby hands of the putti are shown on the backs of very large snails, in a position of play. According to Panofsky, during the Renaissance snails were known to symbolize a lazy or sinful person, or one who made no move to make a living for himself, preferring to live off the bounty of others (Panofsky 1972, 258). This iconography is in response to the snail's slow pace and its penchant to use another animal's shell as its home. Another symbolism for a snail, however, in Christian iconography is that of resurrection because they seal themselves in their shell during wintertime to emerge in the spring (Panofsky 1972, 258). I argue that both of these definitions are applicable to Gentileschi's self-referential interpretation of the Susanna theme in her 1622 painting. First, her husband had proven to be a gambler and she, out of necessity, was required to be the breadwinner of the family; second, as a result of this

circumstance she had left the marriage and had begun a new life for herself and her child Prudenzia in Rome.

The snails themselves, through their necks and heads, are the actual fountains and are shown spewing water in multiple streams on the left side of the painting. Gentileschi used these streams to fill the bathing pool in which Susanna is shown submerged to just below her knee. In the time since the 1610 *Susanna*, Gentileschi had been raped by one man, married to another, and recently left him prior to the genesis of this painting. The duality of the Cupids shown by bottom portion of the fountain known to be Gentileschi's hand, speaks to the highs and lows of Artemisia Gentileschi's personal life. She has had great commercial success, but her personal life has not kept pace.

Indeed, the Cupids also represent the dual choices Susanna must make in the situation: should she acquiesce to the elders or should she trust God to deliver her? The first option would be tantamount to being shot with Cupid's lead arrow; as an honorable wife, Susanna knows that her body is her husband's alone, thus this option would be a terminus for her. The second option, though terrifying, may be akin to Cupid's gold arrow; a great deal of everlasting love relies on trust, but this means stepping out into the unknown. Coming from the brush and experience of Gentileschi, the choice is as deep and complex as the tenebristic palette and Manneristic composition used to execute this piece.

The flowing water in this painting also symbolizes a growing sense of change and maturity from the 1610 *Susanna*. The pool is visible and the viewer is able to see both the source of the water and its presumed depth. Susanna is symbolically not just being purified by having her feet washed, she is going the extra mile and being immersed to her

knees (Benedetti 1999, 57)! One might imagine that a virtuous woman, if faced with ruin at the hands of dishonest men, would feel extremely unclean and attempt to cleanse herself to the greatest degree possible, not unlike many modern rape victims taking multiple showers after their assaults (Craven 2006, 294). Gentileschi herself may have felt in need of this type of redemptive cleansing, possibly in the ambiguous way denoted by both an immersive pool to dip the body in for purification and a stream of flowing water that washes everything away. The stream may be symbolic of the new start her move to Rome has given her by leaving her gambling husband behind in Florence, along with the detritus of the unhappy marriage. This stream of water does fill said pool completely to the top of the bench portion of the banquette that separates the bathing area from the gardens.

In contrast to the plentiful water shown in the 1622 *Susanna*, the 1649 painting only shows a shallow ewer that is only half full of water. This round bowl is adorned with even more round handles on four sides, along with very beastly claw feet. The round handles are attached to the bowl by sculpted heads of beasts. In this painting the symbolism of purification by water is ready for Susanna, but she has not yet availed herself of it. Gentileschi, in her dialogue with the viewer, seems to place a priority on first resolving conflict with the Elders, then proceeding with the purification ritual, similar to the teachings of the Catholic Church's order of confession and reconciliation prior to communion.

In both the 1610 and the 1622 *Susanna and the Elders* paintings, the bench and banquette are made of a single piece of marble though each is executed in a different manner, while in the 1649 *Susanna* a patio with a balustrade is used with the figure of

Susanna is sitting on a stool. The balustrade with its regular openings does not provide a bench for Susanna to sit upon. This small stool not only provides Susanna a support for her seated position, it also provides her with a greater means for Gentileschi to position the figure to turn in a tight circle for confrontation with the Elders, as will be discussed in Chapter 4.

In the 1610 painting, with its lack of greenery and water, Gentileschi divides the area between Susanna and the Elders with a very stark and solid barrier, creating an unmistakable inorganic demarcation between the two camps. Every part of the figure of Susanna is on the viewer's side of the marble wall, showing that Susanna is very much a part of structured civilization, and will play by the rules of society.

Nanette Salomon opines that Gentileschi used Michelangelo's *Doni Tondo* for inspiration for the composition of this work, particularly in the placement of the wall and with the figures<sup>23</sup>. She also mentions Raphael's *Holy Family* tondo as another inspirational piece for the wall. I agree, but for different reasons than she listed. She feels that the two Renaissance tondo walls provided a division between the sacred and profane or Christian and pagan antiquity, basically separating realms, and both Michelangelo and Raphael filled the back spaces with putti or lounging nude youths. In the *Doni Tondo* we clearly see the figure of John the Baptist on the right, as a voice crying out from the wilderness. While he may represent wilderness, that does not necessarily correlate with profane or paganism, particularly that of antiquity. Raphael's

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<sup>23</sup> Nanette Salomon in her discussion of the *Doni Tondo* references Mary Garrard and gives voice to an opinion made by Garrard in this article I reference. When I went to the citation (Garrard 1989, 198) this reference was nowhere to be found. I consulted the entire chapter, page 98, 298, the index, the first printing (my copy is the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition) and the 1982 article on which this chapter was based. Nowhere did Mary Garrard mention the *Doni Tondo* in relation to Gentileschi's 1610 *Susanna and the Elders*. My committee chair, Dr. Yavneh, is aware of this discrepancy and I have removed all mention of Dr. Garrard from the discussion of the *Doni Tondo*.



putti are merely arranged geometrically to fill empty space, not as a symbolic abstraction. Dr. Salomon (Salomon and Bal 2005, 42) also believes that the stone wall in Gentileschi's painting is more abstract, and the division is between lust and innocence, actually separating the older male lust from youthful female innocence. Again, I agree with this argument as it supports my theory that this painting is self referential for Gentileschi at this point in time, even as it also correlates with the story. She would have symbolically used the wall as a representation of the strong and rigid societal rules of the time that would protect her from the loss of dignity and reputation she might face if Tassi's intentions weren't honorable. At this time the figure of Susanna is completely protected behind the wall and the figure of the elder on the right will have to cross over the barrier of the wall to attempt communication with her. Iconographically, the wall is serving its purpose as an inorganic barrier between the realms of nature and civilization. Susanna is ensconced on her side, not even looking on the metaphorical other side of the fence, while the elders are completely separated by a wall that bisects the canvas from side to side. Should the elders wish to leave their garden, they will have to go over the top of the stone wall via the intimidation of Susanna.

The elements that make up the garden setting of the Susanna and the Elders story are a very important part of the visual dialogue the artist uses to convey their message to the viewer. Gentileschi uses each element in a carefully chosen iconographical pattern to tell represent her scene prior to the viewer even establishing a relationship with the actual figures. These elements, both organic and inorganic, work together to set the stage for Gentileschi's ultimate denouement: the compositional introduction of Susanna and her relationship with the Elders.

## CHAPTER 3:

## Susanna

An examination of the elements Artemisia Gentileschi uses in her figures of Susanna in the three *Susanna and the Elders* interpretations composed in 1610, 1622 and 1649, respectively, reveals Gentileschi's self reflective vision in the most personal sense extant in her *oeuvre*. Many art historians believe that the artist's *La Pittura* (1638-39) is her only referential self portrait, however I propose that Gentileschi used many works in her *oeuvre* not only as reflections of herself, but also used her own body and face as the working model for certain figures. I theorize that in this trilogy Gentileschi used her own body as the model for the figure of Susanna at the different stages of her life, although probably showing the aging process in a flattering light – she was an artist, after all!

The 1610 painting depicts the figure of Susanna as a nude, seated on a solid stone bench, with only a drape on her right thigh for modesty. Her hips are directly against the back of the bench, but her body is twisted at a three quarters angle to show the viewer the fullest view of her torso and legs. The legs are shown as very full, with well defined musculature and curves. This body type and slightly awkward pose will prove to be an identifying hallmark in later works of Artemisia Gentileschi, separating her from her father and other contemporaries. Susanna's lower body is shown as very muscular and more toned than the bodies in most contemporaneous works produced by male artists.

The drape on her thigh, while covering her genitalia, serve more as an indication of her intention to bathe, since there is no water to be seen, while its whiteness is a symbol of her purity. The only shadow on her white towel is that cast not by the sun, which would indicate the symbolic passage of time, but by the Elder on the right, which will render an altogether different meaning discussed later in this chapter.

The figures are placed in an action pose to show the viewer that while Susanna is seated, she is actively resisting the advances of the Elders. As is typical of Baroque art, Gentileschi utilizes angles throughout her composition to highlight action. Angles are used in the neck leaning toward the shoulder away from the elders, in the triangle formed with Susanna's left arm, ending with her left wrist bending in a different direction. Her right arm forms another triangle, as does the right side of her body from the knee to the shoulder. The left hip, knee and ankle also form another triangle, as does the front of the left ankle joint. In each angle, Gentileschi infuses Susanna with layers of emotion, each of which is seen mirrored on her face. The cry coming from her open mouth clearly illustrates the alarm of being disturbed in what has always been a private place<sup>24</sup>; the shame of her nakedness in front of the Elders, shown by her downcast eyes; the tension she feels at the threats from the Elders, shown by the flush on her cheeks and the tautness of her stance. Her outright fear is evidenced by the position of her hands and arms, placed in a defensive posture by Gentileschi, with the face directly turned away from the Elders.

Many art historians compare the hand placement of the 1610 *Susanna* to that of Michelangelo's Adam in *The Fall and Banishment* in the Sistine Chapel (Figure 1), both

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<sup>24</sup> According to Jewish law (Deuteronomy 22:24) a woman being forced into rape is supposed to 'cry out with a loud voice.'

for the selection of the cool palette and the expression of shame evident in Adam's gesture. Nanette Salomon, however, asserts that a more comparable figure in the same scene would be the seated body of Eve. She states that "with Eve we have the same hopes of a woman in a garden pressured to make a (sexual) decision that will be pressed into the service of Christian morality" (Salomon and Bal 2005, 72). While the pressure of being forced into a sexual decision does ring true in Gentileschi's situation, I must disagree with Salomon's analysis of the visual portion of Michelangelo's work. In this scene, the seated Eve is reaching out toward the serpent wrapped around the tree, who reciprocates by handing her an apple. The figure is resting upon her other arm, with the rest of her body in a position of leisure, her head and neck resting on Adam's thigh. Her hair is neatly tied back and her face does not show any signs of distress. In fact, if one observes the figure of Adam standing next to Eve in this tableau, he is not in a threatening position towards Eve at all. In fact, he is actually reaching over her for his own apple<sup>25</sup>. Nanette Salomon believes another Michelangelo work may have more closely influenced Gentileschi in her portrayal of Susanna, specifically, the *Doni Tondo* (Figure 11). In a continuation of the discussion of other elements from the preceding chapter, she believes that the figure of Mary's outstretched arms may have influenced Gentileschi, and further opines that the figure of Joseph as an aging, balding large male who dominates from above correlates to that of the Elders (Salomon and Bal 2005, 43)<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> When the viewer looks closely at the figure of Adam as he reaches for his apple (as opposed to Eve being handed her apple by the serpent), one may notice a detail that may redefine one's opinion as to why Eve seems unafraid of Adam. He is obviously very close to her, in an aroused state, and she is relaxed and unafraid. She either is familiar with the condition, or knows that she has the power given from the Tree of Life/Knowledge to defend herself. In either case, she is not intimidated by the overwhelming position of Adam in this vignette.

<sup>26</sup> Nanette Salomon in her discussion of the *Doni Tondo* references Mary Garrard and gives voice to an opinion made by Garrard in this article I reference. When I went to the citation (Garrard 1989, 198) this reference was nowhere to be found. I consulted the entire chapter, page 98, 298, the index, the first

I concur with the influence of the figure's outstretched arms having a visual similarity, but see neither compositional nor correlational influence in the theme of the painting. The figure of Joseph may be aging and balding, but as with the figure of Adam, he is not a threatening figure, he is protective; his arms are not visible and no gestures are being made towards the figure of Mary. Even the compositional triangle cannot be said to be equal, due to the presence of the wall. The Holy Family is on the viewer's side of the wall; however, the wall in the *Susanna and the Elders* painting separates Susanna from the Elders in a visual and symbolic dividing line.



Figure 11

Michelangelo Buonarroti: 1504 *Doni Tondo*  
 Galleria degli Uffizi  
 University of California, San Diego

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printing (my copy is the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition) and the 1982 article on which this chapter was based. Nowhere did Mary Garrard mention the *Doni Tondo* in relation to Gentileschi's 1610 *Susanna and the Elders*. My committee chair, Dr. Yavneh, is aware of this discrepancy and I have removed all mention of Dr. Garrard from the discussion of the *Doni Tondo*.

Gentileschi has shown her Susanna to be approximately the artist's own age of about seventeen. Her skin is fair, pale and luminous, with no flaws or imperfections, and her musculature is firm, but not masculine. The one uncovered breast is nubile and firm, the aureole pink. Bissell notes that this one uncovered breast is the exact epicenter of the painting, completely and equally accessible to both sets of voyeurs: the Elders and the viewer (Bissell 1999, 85). Her stomach is firm, and unwrinkled, with none of the ravages that could be expected with age, marriage or hard work. No evidence of aging, such as loose skin, wider hips, a tough, leathery appearance, or the effects of the gravitational pull are seen on Susanna's body.

The body Gentileschi portrays in this painting is obviously not one that has given birth yet, although in the apocryphal version of Susanna and the Elders, we are told that Susanna is definitely the wife of an Elder, not a newlywed, and is the mother of more than one child. The Septuagint version of the Apocrypha states that Susanna had four children, although there are no names mentioned.

22. And the Judean lady said to them, "I know that if I do it, it is death for me, and if I do not, I will not escape your hands. 23. But it would be better for me to fall into your hands by not doing it than to sin before the Lord."

28. So the scoundrels turned away, uttering threats among themselves and lay in ambush so that they might have her put to death. And when they came to the city assembly, where they sojourned, all the sons of Israel who were there deliberated. 29. And when the two elders and judges stood up they said, "Send for Sousanna daughter of Chelkias, who is the wife of Ioakim." So they immediately summoned her. 30. Now, when the woman arrived with her own father and mother, even her servants and maids (who numbered five hundred) came and Sousanna's four children.

31. Now the woman was very refined. 32. And the scoundrels ordered to uncover her in order that they could be sated with lust for her beauty. 33. And all those who were with her and all who knew her wept.

The Apocrypha tells us that Susanna is a very beautiful woman, wise and virtuous. It never, however, mentions that she is a young woman. Indeed, when mention is made of the trial, it says only that she came with her parents and her children. One can only presume that she was young enough for her parents to still be living, yet old enough to have produced multiple children. That provides an extremely wide range of possible ages from which an artist might select his or her portrayal!

As a practical consideration, however, in a traditional Italian upbringing, even an artistic household such as the Gentileschi abode, the daughter of the house would not have had access to ready funds with which to hire a model, nor would it have been practical for her to use one without a chaperone. It might be safe to assume that in the absence of any type of model, the only female body left for Artemisia to copy for her painting may have been her own; thus the beginnings of an increasingly self-relevatory work. In this case, I would argue that it then makes complete sense that Susanna's abdomen in this painting would naturally be free of the ravages that pregnancy would bring, and also free of the resulting stretch marks. How could Gentileschi paint what she, herself, does not see in her model? And how could the model, never having experienced childbirth, be expected to recreate the effects of it accurately on canvas without the benefit of a mother or other woman in her life to provide first hand a view of the female abdomen after childbirth? I would disagree with Mary Garrard's opinion that the 1610 Susanna resembles a woman who is older than her early twenties due to her assertion that Gentileschi infused unflattering realism such as her groin wrinkle, the crow's foot wrinkles at the right armpit and the lines in her neck into the figure and displayed signs of childbirth as mentioned by the pendant breasts and recognizably feminine abdomen

(Garrard 1989, 200).<sup>27</sup> I do not see lax musculature of the abdomen, nor stretch marks, nor do the breasts resemble those which have nursed even once, particularly not four times as Susanna had done at that time (Metzger and Murphy). I do, however, agree with her assertion that the realism shown in the other parts of her body, such as the armpit, neck and groin show that in addition to portraying realism, flattering or not, Gentileschi was showing that the body was something not to be idealized. These elements only strengthen my argument that Gentileschi painted her Susanna from her own body, rather than a model, and will also be further shown in the 1622 and 1649 paintings.

The Burghley House *Susanna*, however, is vastly different from the 1610 painting in nearly every way. This Susanna, while being more true to the exact text of the Apocrypha, is also the most commercial of the three paintings. This painting also reflects the personal situation in which Gentileschi found herself. In the 1622 *Susanna and the Elders*, Gentileschi has just left her arranged marriage and returned to Rome after a decade in Florence. While there, she established herself as a well respected artist and was patronized by both Michelangelo Buonarroti the Younger and the de Medici court. She was also the first female admitted to the Accademia del Disegno, which was an honor unheard of at that time. In spite of these professional accolades, however, her personal life did not sport the same degree of success, and was unfavorably compared to that of her male compatriots. In this Susanna rendition, the viewer sees the mid-life Gentileschi, and how she views her situation. The commercialism of this work may be intended to show that Artemisia Gentileschi could, indeed, paint the theme as well as any male artist of the time, as shown by the Crouching Venus pose taken from the Greek

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<sup>27</sup> Both of these books were published prior to Garrard's attribution of the 1622 painting to Gentileschi, at that time she attributed the 1622 Burghley House work to an anonymous 17<sup>th</sup> Century English artist.



statue, popularized by the Carracci school (Figure 12). This type of Susanna appealed to the commercial market of the time due to its sexualization of the theme. Susanna is shown as more sexually available, due to her placid facial expression and complete lack of resistance to the Elders. From a masculine perspective<sup>28</sup> this gave a great advantage to the moral problem faced by the presumed condoning of cuckolding Joakim, Susanna's husband. By showing Susanna as complicit in her own seduction, she removes the social crime and keeps all the men on the same side (Garrard 2001, 85). The features of this Susanna figure are also less like a Gentileschi self-portrait than others, which led to the late attribution by Garrard and others (Garrard 2001, 86) (Garrard and Broude 1982, 162), including the upturned nose and delicate jaw and chin, used as a reason for non-attribution, given Gentileschi's usual penchant for the typical Italian aquiline features.



Figure 12

Annibale Carracci: 1590-95 *Susanna and the Elders*  
 Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, CA  
 Mr. and Mrs. Marcus Sopher Collection 1986.1.370

<sup>28</sup> Please note that during this time period, men were the primary commissioners and purchasers of art, thus Artemisia would have needed to cater to their tastes to keep a roof over her head, in her new role as sole breadwinner.

This Susanna's sexual appeal may also indicate Gentileschi's own recognition that she, herself is at the pinnacle of her own career as an artist. While in Florence, Gentileschi received many honors and commissions, and was a favorite artist in the de Medici court. (Contini 2001, 315) It is known that she also had many artist friends and took part in court festivities and plays (Cropper 2001, 267), even singing with others while dressed as a gypsy. There is a trial transcript shortly before the end of her time in Florence wherein her husband was arrested for breaking the nose of one of three Spaniards who were serenading Artemisia outside their house one evening (Garrard 1989, 37). One of her first commissions in Florence was the *Allegory of Inclination* (natural talent) in the Casa Buonarroti to honor Michelangelo. It was a joint project with other Florentine artists as a memorial to the great artist designed by Buonarroti the Younger, a great admirer of Gentileschi. The *Allegory* is said to have been Artemisia's self-portrait of a beautiful nude holding a compass. If so, then Gentileschi's reputation as a beautiful woman as well as a talented artist was completely well-deserved, and she portrays this in her 1622 *Susanna* with no hesitation.

A major difference between this painting and the 1610 work, however, is that here, the figure of Susanna is not interacting with the Elders to the same degree as she was in the 1610 work. Rather, she is seated on the bench in a three-quarter pose facing to the viewer's left with her back to the Elders. The Elder on top is looking directly at the top of her head and the lower Elder is shushing her and looking directly at her left breast. Susanna herself is leaning forward, as if hunched to simultaneously cover her nakedness and put as much space as possible between herself and the Elders. Her gown is behind her, draped over the banquette, possibly as another symbol of her virtue that she puts

between her and the Elders. She is draped in her chemise, which is more developed as a garment than the simple drape of the 1610 painting. It is gathered and ruched into a lace trimmed sleeve dangling beneath her right arm at the waterline, and one can see the tied bow on the neckline below her left hip. This chemise wraps around her and is held up by her left hand crossing her body at the left breast and arm at the right shoulder. This pose is also a Modest Venus pose, but can also be related to the Crouching Venus since her leg is bent, as well as the Venus Anadyomene with the addition of the immersion in water. Susanna's head is tilted back and in accordance with the Apocryphal account, her eyes are lifted to heaven in a diagonal motion with her tilted chin. In direct contrast to the 1610 painting though, she does not cry out, as her mouth is closed, and while not smiling, she does not have the same distressed set to her lips. The expression on her face, though pensive, is not one of anguish. She is wearing what has now come to be a trademark of Artemisia Gentileschi artwork – heroic motif jewelry in the form of earrings (Garrard 2001, 149). Along with her use of rich silks and velvets, Gentileschi began to use this jewelry shortly after her appearance in Florence, beginning with the Uffizi *Judith and Holofernes*. In Florence Gentileschi began to work for an upper class clientele, unlike that to which she was accustomed in Rome, and this was reflected in her *oeuvre*.

Unlike the unbound hair on the 1610 Susanna, this Susanna's hair is still up and bound at the back of her head, and it is the same deep reddish gold color in both paintings. She is still in the traditional heavy lower body style that Gentileschi always favors, with sturdy legs. This is obviously the same woman, but Susanna's body has aged in the years between the paintings. Building on my argument that in the absence of the ability to hire a model for Susanna, Gentileschi again used herself as the prototype; it

is also possible that having done this for the first *Susanna* she may have wanted to continue the artistic vision for this painting as well. In either situation, the viewer is clearly able to see the changes in Susanna's maturity as a woman from 1610 to 1622.

Her legs are not as firm as they were, and the calves are wider. The thighs are more ponderous. When Susanna sits on the bench and turns we see that she does not have quite as much flexibility as before. The undraped hips in the 1610 painting are more generous now, and the waist is thicker. We see more flesh on Susanna's frame than before and her stomach musculature shows striations from the birth of at least four children – the number to which both Artemisia and Susanna are reported to have given birth (Metzger and Murphy 1994; Garrard 1989, 34). Her bound hair is the sign of a mature matron, rather than an unwed girl. As Garrard points out regarding the 1610 painting, we still see very specific touches of realism that most people would consider to be unflattering when looking at themselves, but Gentileschi does not hide from them: hands that were delicate and dimpled in 1610 are now worn from work, and the knuckles are large; there are lines on the neck; the breasts are no longer that of a young girl; the arms are no longer firm and thin. Gentileschi is able to convey the idea that looks are not important – Susanna is still able to have what it takes to completely stop the Elders in their tracks whether she wanted to or not. The artist is creating iconography to show that the story of Susanna continues and is applicable to this point in her life, even though the cast of characters has slightly changed.

Twenty-seven years later, Artemisia Gentileschi was fifty-six years old upon the commencement of the final painting in the *Susanna and the Elders* trilogy, and it was her final canvas. Correspondence and records tell us that she was ill and probably knew that

it would be one of her last works (Lattuada, Nappi and Mann 2005, 94). I argue that she purposefully completed her final interpretation of Susanna as a bookend of a self-referential catharsis.

In contrast to the earlier works, the darker tones of the background accentuate the clear light which shines on Susanna, showing her as a virtuous being in her white drape and barely shadowed form. Indeed, the largest shadowed area is on her neck and left shoulder which is the portion of her body that is enduring the gaze of the Elders, particularly the one on the left. Traditionally, the left side, or sinister, is considered to be more threatening or malicious than the right or dexter side.

It could be said that in her mature years, Gentileschi saw the threat posed by the elders as more ominous than her younger self did, and used the darker, more foreboding tones to highlight her disapproval of the manipulation. This Susanna is also wearing Gentileschi's trademark jewelry in the form of lion's head, as is the 1622 Susanna. These earrings show a symbol of protection and strength from an ancient source, possibly pagan, possibly a reference to the Lion of Judah, but definitely a reference to a source of inner fortitude for the woman wearing the jewelry in the painting. Of the three *Susanna and the Elders* paintings, the 1649 work is the one in which the figure of Susanna is wearing a look of anger on her face. Her brows are frowning and her mouth is tightly set. Her face is slightly less than a three quarter view.

Of the three Susannas, the one in the 1649 painting is the only one who is actively resisting the attentions of the Elders. Every element of her stance is shown to be pushing away the elder on the left. Her left hand is extended in a straight line to push on his left shoulder, the first time we see her actually touch either of them, while the right arm is

shown at an angle reminiscent of the “hands of shame” seen in the 1610 painting. Rather than hiding her face from the elders, however, this Susanna uses her hand to support her left arm in its push of resistance. The right arm is also used to cover her breasts. This posture is a powerful statement by Gentileschi, showing a complete departure from the traditional Venus pose. Susanna is hiding her breasts from the viewer’s gaze, as well as from the Elders. This is more than an attempt at modesty, this is a statement that she is taking back control of the visual access to her body, and is using her right arm to assist in the confrontation with the Elders. Her left leg is shown bent at an angle to imply that she might be ready to rise up and turn the push into a shove, this stance is supported by the primary appearance of the right leg, which, although Susanna is seated, shows that her foot is planted and ready to place her weight on it, using the left leg to rise.

Unlike the 1610 and 1622 works, in this painting, Susanna is facing her accusers. She is still in the three quarter pose, but rather than facing to the viewer’s left, she is facing right, and if she were to stand, would be eye to eye with her accusers. Indeed, Gentileschi composed this picture in such a way that should the figure of Susanna stand, it would make perfect sense that the Elders not be directly touching each other, as the figure of Susanna would be centered between the two if upright. Also, if upright, Susanna would be proportionally a great deal taller than either of the Elders and would be able to look down upon them. In fact, her head would be above the top of the canvas.

In this picture, unlike the others, Susanna’s bare foot, including her toes, is fully shown. Usually, the bare foot is symbolic of purity, and in this situation would seem to show that Susanna is, indeed, pure and virtuous, which also indicates a change from the other renditions of Susanna. In the 1610 painting, Susanna is shown with one foot bare,

but off to the side, and with the other hidden, and in the 1622 work Gentileschi has Susanna in water up to her knees. Adding to the appearance of active resistance in this work is the placement of Susanna's drape. Unlike the other two Susannas, the 1649 work shows the drape merely dropped around her hips, trailing on the floor. She is not actively holding up the drape, as in the 1622 painting, nor is the drape as wrapped as that in the 1610 painting. One could see Susanna stand up, and the voluminous drape simply fall straight to the ground, without tangling in her limbs, or restricting her in any way. The impression given is that while the drape is placed for her modesty, the modesty can completely fall by the wayside in the fight for her virtue. Although Susanna is obviously nude, her nudity is a secondary theme to that of her resistance.

As in the other two Susannas, Gentileschi positions the left breast at the epicenter of the painting. Unlike the others, however, in this work both breasts are covered by Susanna's right arm which is assisting her left arm in pushing the Elder away.

In the 1610 painting the breast is also placed in the epicenter but it is there as a very different symbol. For a seventeen year old girl, the breast is a symbol of her budding sexuality, which in Gentileschi's case has been used against her will. At first, a girl believes her changing body to be something pleasurable and beautiful, and complimented upon. Sometimes, however, this growing sexuality and a young woman's natural response to this impulse can be intimidating, especially without information or guidance from a mature source. Most young Italian girls in the Seventeenth Century were taught not to look, touch or even think about their bodies, according to the teachings of the Church (Cavazzini 2001, 291; Wiesner 2000). Artemisia, in particular, did not have the benefit of a mother, aunt or maternal figure to consult with about such things,

thus when Tassi began his predatory overtures she had nobody to turn to for help and advice. I believe the lone left breast in this work symbolizes the loss of both her mother and her innocence along with the shame of her harassment.

In the 1622 painting, Susanna is shown in the more sexually available position of the *Venus Anadyomene*. During this time of her life, Gentileschi, and therefore the image projected by Susanna, was a successful woman. Not only was she a successful artist in her own right, but she could also take pride in the knowledge of her sexual attractiveness. I argue that in this painting Gentileschi symbolizes this by the placement of Susanna's left breast in the epicenter of the painting, as in the 1610 work, this time shown proudly with no shame. In this painting it is a symbol of sexual power that Susanna as a more mature woman now understands and can use as a weapon against the men who have betrayed her.

In the 1649 *Susanna and the Elders*, the figure of Susanna is shown with her right arm covering both breasts. As this was consciously Gentileschi's last Susanna, I argue that she is using this method to assist in finalizing her iconographical treatise to the viewer. Gentileschi covers the décolleté of the breasts with the angle created by the joint of her right arm, which leads the eye up toward the joint of the hand with its identifying dimpled knuckles bracing the resisting left arm just at the right bicep. By placing the arm in this position the artist displays her self-referential maturity; while she still has attractive feminine curves, her priorities lie within her ability to discern the intent of the Elders and forcibly push them away.

Artemisia Gentileschi began the *Susanna and the Elders* trilogy when she was seventeen years old, using herself as a model for the figure of Susanna. She infused this



figure with the emotional distress a teenager would have when confronted with Gentileschi's personal situation, and related it to the Apocryphal tale. Twelve years later, she was also able, by aging the same figure and choosing different iconology, to revisit the Susanna story and update the viewer on Gentileschi's life and the differences that had taken place. In 1649, Gentileschi closed the story of her life by using the same Susanna figure, aged appropriately (though flatteringly) and symbolically painted the wisdom she had learned through a lifetime of painting as a woman in a man's profession.

## CHAPTER 4:

### The Elders

One of the most intriguing aspects of Artemisia Gentileschi's *Susanna and the Elders* trilogy is her interpretations of the Elders in each of the three paintings. If one is to subscribe to my argument that her interpretations of this theme are self referential, then the most intriguing question surrounding this theory would then center around the identity of these men. In this chapter, I will present my argument as to the likely identities of the Elders in each of the three *Susanna* paintings and their role in her life during the period of the painting's creation. I will also explore the manner in which the identities of the Elders change and mature from one *Susanna and the Elders* painting to the next as Gentileschi herself matures as both an artist and a woman.

In the 1610 *Susanna and the Elders*, Artemisia Gentileschi was seventeen years old and composing her first major canvas. Although general acknowledgement is given to her father, Orazio, for his contribution and guidance, most art historians agree that Artemisia Gentileschi is responsible for the majority of the palette, figure placement and features of the figures (Bissell 1968). As discussed in Chapter 3, as a young Italian female, Artemisia was not legally able to hire a model to pose for her as one of the Elders, therefore I argue that these figures were probably also done from either life or a

very recent memory (Cavazzini and Mann 2005; Cavazzini 2001; Cohen and Mann 2005).

The Elders are depicted here as two gentlemen, both well dressed in the current Roman styles, both wearing capes. They are shown in a triangular composition, in close proximity to each other, the left arm of the Elder on the left forming the top of the triangle, his right arm forming the left side. Their whispering heads form an obvious central piece of this triangle, and their hands and forearms, ending in the Elder on the right's red cloak complete the right edge of the triangle. The Elder on the right is wearing a blue suit of clothing over a white shirt with lace cuffs and neck cloth. He is also wearing a voluminous red cloak. He is obviously older than the other Elder by a decade or so, and has thinning hair, a receding hairline and a beard, all of a light brown that might be showing the first signs of graying. The realistic interpretation that flows throughout the painting continues in her treatment of this figure. The viewer is treated to a natural view of a man in his late thirties or early forties, no longer in his youth and not hiding the fact. Gentileschi uses the hard morning light to show the crow's feet at his left eye and the wrinkles that follow through to his temples, along with the red flush on his cheeks that pick up the color from his cloak.

I theorize that this Elder represents Agostino Tassi, who at that time was Artemisia's composition instructor and secret suitor. As we know from trial testimony and from physical descriptions in other legal documents (Lapierre, 104), the physical description is nearly identical to that given of Tassi during the time prior to the rape and during the trial<sup>29</sup>. At the time of this painting's execution, the rape had not yet occurred, but Tassi was spending a great deal of time with Artemisia, both supervised and

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<sup>29</sup> Including the red flush, as Tassi was a known binge drinker (Cavazzini and Mann 2005, 47).

clandestine (Lapierre, 104; Cavazzini 2001; Cavazzini and Mann 2005). During these visits (which were unknown to and unauthorized by Orazio) Tassi had enlisted the aid of the Gentileschi housekeeper, Tuzia, and entered Artemisia's room through Tuzia's side of the house, via an entrance Orazio had constructed for the ease of her employment (Cavazzini and Mann 2005; Cohen and Mann 2005). While I, nor anyone else in the past century who has researched the matter, have any way of verifying the matter<sup>30</sup>, Tassi was a possible model for the figure of the elder on the right.

I believe that Gentileschi further solidifies her representation of Tassi by the iconographical interpretations she uses in the depiction of the Elder. He is wearing a pure white shirt next to his skin, symbolizing that the artist's mind ascribes to him good intentions and thoughts. She may want to believe that he is being corrupted by the whispers that the other Elder is speaking into his ear. His blue suit symbolizes loyalty and the promises that he has made to her. In her seventeen year old naiveté she believes that he will keep his promises and marry her. His bright red cloak can only be interpreted as the icon of passion. Although the rape has not yet occurred, according to testimony Tassi had been taking liberties with Artemisia for over a year prior to the actual rape, and had been a frequent visitor to the house for several months prior to even that close association (Cavazzini and Mann 2005; Lapierre and Mann 2005).

The Elder on the left is wearing a brown cloak which covers his entire suit of clothing, only small pieces of his white shirt can be seen on the cuff of his right sleeve.

This Elder is visibly younger than the other, probably in his late twenties, with a full,

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<sup>30</sup> This is an issue where there is absolutely no testimony one way or another in the Archivio del Stato Romano (ASR), because the question was never asked, probably because of the legal and moral issues surrounding a minor, unwed girl using a live male model. However, I submit that the time and opportunity were certainly there, as it would be difficult for a seventeen year old girl to keep a 4' x 6' canvas a secret from her composition instructor.

thick head of dark brown hair, and a full dark beard. While this physical description could describe a good portion of Italian men during this time period, including Artemisia Gentileschi's father and brothers, this is actually an artistic abnormality in *Susanna and the Elders* paintings.

When looked upon in conjunction with prior knowledge of the Apocryphal account which describes Elders in general as older men, along with the prior century's artists' interpretation of the *Susanna and the Elders* theme (See Figures 7, 8 & 12) we see that without exception the Elders are depicted as older men, out to seduce a younger woman. In none of these paintings is there a younger man, particularly one who seems to be in a superior position to the older Elder (Garrard 1989, 204). Again, with the benefit of trial testimony and anecdotal evidence we have a fair hypothesis of the person Gentileschi has chosen to represent the other Elder.

Cosimo Quorli was a twenty-five year old Vatican clerk who held a position of influence with one of the Papal bishops, thus placing him in a socially superior position to many of his artist friends. He did associate with several of Rome's leading artists, as he was the person charged with paying their various accounts through his employment (Lapierre 1998; Cohen 2000). Among his circle of friends were the Cavaliere d'Arpino, Tassi, Orazio Gentileschi, Giovanni Baglione, and a notary public named Giovan Battista Stiattesi who was a distant cousin from Florence. According to all sources his physical description perfectly fits that of the Elder on the left, and additionally his working uniform of a Vatican clerk also correlates with the rough brown overshirt he wears over his white shirt (Cohen 2000).

The superior position in which Gentileschi places him represents not only his social position, but also the fact that, according to Lapierre, Cavazzini and Cohen, Quorli was the mastermind of the harassment scheme against Artemisia. Not only did he spread rumors that he was only one among many who had received favors from her, but he also told those who would listen that he was probably her father, as well (Lapierre 1998; Cavazzini and Mann 2005; Cohen and Mann 2005).<sup>31</sup> Trial testimony states that Quorli was the one who began spreading rumors regarding Artemisia's lack of virtue and virginity well before the rape occurred (Lapierre 1998). During the trial, Artemisia herself testified that he attempted to force himself upon her many times, both before and after the rape, meeting her refusal each time. Her testimony was supported by Tuzia, who testified that Quorli had threatened Artemisia with more slander if she didn't acquiesce to his advances many times prior to the rape (Lapierre 1998; Cavazzini and Mann 2005; Cohen and Mann 2005).

This Elder is shown with his arm around his companion, conspiratorially whispering into his ear. Gentileschi is again showing the parallels to her own life with the image of the slander campaign being waged against her. Again, in prior interpretations of this theme, there have been no previous treatments of the Elders whispering to each other, or even openly conversing. In each rendering, pre-planned stealth, or as Max Rooses describes Tintoretto's 1555-56 *Susanna* (Figure 8) a "gallant enterprise mounted by two bold adventurers" (Garrard 1989) seems to be the order of the day. However, the Apocryphal tale of *Susanna and the Elders* makes reference to the Elders meeting each other at the garden gate by surprise, and then planning their assault

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<sup>31</sup> This was most likely impossible, as Quorli would have needed to be an extremely precocious 11 year old to have accomplished this act with an already married 18 year old Prudenzia Gentileschi.

on Susanna together (Metzger and Murphy 1994), thus providing a feasible scenario for the inclusion of this composition to Gentileschi.

This Elder's gaze is completely focused on the other Elder, and he does not look at all at Susanna. His only connection to Susanna is his right arm, which is touching her hair on the balustrade. The viewer is unable to see his mouth and thus cannot see the expression on his face. One does not know if he is smiling, grimacing or otherwise emoting. Therefore, we must take our visual cue from both the figures of Susanna and the other Elder. The other Elder is simultaneously listening intently to this man, feeling the guiding weight of his left (or sinister) hand on his back, and silencing Susanna. The figure of Susanna, discussed earlier, is rejecting both message and messengers.

While the composition of this painting appears to make both Elders appear threatening, the viewer must ask which of the two the seventeen year old Gentileschi found more threatening. The Elder who represents Quorli appears threatening in that he comes from beyond the balustrade, and looms over her. However, he blatantly ignores her presence while whispering orders into his compatriot's ears. Is this less of an ominous presence than the Elder on the right, whose shushing motion, direct gaze and actual leaning over the balustrade into Susanna's private space make him appear to be more of an actual physical danger to her than the younger and stronger Elder on the left?

Obviously, hindsight provided the viewers and the artist with an answer within six months of the completion of this painting. Or did it? Can the damage that a whispering tongue and resulting gossip can do to destroy a young girl's reputation have more lasting effects than a violent rape and broken promises of matrimony? These are the questions

asked and answered in dialogue between Artemisia Gentileschi and the viewers of her *Susanna and the Elders* trilogy in the last four centuries.

In 1622 Artemisia Gentileschi created another interpretation of *Susanna and the Elders*, this time in a very different manner than her 1610 painting. As befits Gentileschi's life at the time, this *Susanna and the Elders* work represents a more commercial interpretation, similar to that produced by male artists of the period. This twelve year gap was a large one for Gentileschi, both personally and professionally.

Following Agostino Tassi's conviction for defloration of Artemisia Gentileschi in 1612, Orazio Gentileschi quickly married her to Pierantonio Stiattesi, the younger brother of Giovan Battista Stiattesi, the notary public friend of the family who had represented the family in the rape trial.<sup>32</sup> They immediately moved to his family home in Florence where Artemisia Gentileschi took her father's maternal name of Lomi and began to pursue commissions as an independent artist.

While we have no written record of her husband's gainful activities in Florence, we do know that Stiattesi incurred many gambling debts for which he used Artemisia's paintings as collateral (Contini 2001; Spear and Mann 2005). Many times, Gentileschi wrote to her patrons asking for an advance on a painting so that she could pay bill collectors, including one time when she was in bed from childbirth (Garrard 1989). Both Garrard and Bissell opine that Gentileschi's admission to the Accademia di Delsegno may have been hastened by a need for the Accademia to mediate her outstanding creditor

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<sup>32</sup> The Stiattesi brothers were from a large Florentine family of tailors, and were also cousins of Cosimo Quorli. Due to Quorli's influence, the trial was held as part of Vatican proceedings, so as to be favorable to Tassi, who was a favored artist, completing several commissions during the time. The cause is unknown, but Quorli was unable to be brought to trial as he died suddenly and under mysterious circumstances prior to giving any testimony, according to information found by Alexandra Lapierre in the Archivio del Stato Vaticano Romano (ASVR).



disputes (Garrard 1989; Bissell 1999). Although ostensibly an artist, as evidenced by his acceptance to the Accademia with his wife, Stiattesi was never known to have worked by commission in any way, nor did he contribute any known income to the household (Spear and Mann 2005). Although one might imagine the difficulties inherent for a man in a patriarchal society such as that of seventeenth century Italy to be eclipsed in talent and earning capacity by his wife, Stiattesi responded to the predicament by gambling and spending freely on credit (Spear 2000).

By 1622 Gentileschi had decided to leave her husband and the resulting debts he had incurred on her behalf. The marriage had produced four children, but only one had survived, a daughter named Prudenzia. She took Prudenzia and returned to Rome, buying a house on the Via del Corso, near her old childhood neighborhood. She returned to Rome a commercial success, the first female to be admitted to a distinguished Florentine academy, and was able to count Michelangelo Buonarroti the Younger and Cosimo de Medici II among her patrons.

As with Gentileschi's 1610 painting, in 1622 she establishes a triangle with the heads of the Elders and Susanna, thus creating the visual center of attention to draw the viewer's eye. In this work though, the Elders are grouped one on top of the other at the right edge of the painting with the top elder just slightly to the center. The Elder on the top is balding with salt and pepper hair which leads to sideburns and a trimmed beard and moustache. He is slightly older than the other Elder and is wearing a red cloak with a white shirt underneath.

In common with the 1610 painting, this Elder also bears a distinct physical resemblance to Agostino Tassi, Gentileschi's now convicted rapist. One might also

wonder if Gentileschi's choice of the color red for his cloak, symbolizing passion, might also be representational of his role in her life, were she choosing men who betrayed her as candidates for the Elders. Gentileschi has shown him to be visibly older, by approximately the same twelve year age difference as she has aged the figure of Susanna<sup>33</sup>. He is leaning atop the other Elder and looking over his shoulder. This Elder is looking down straight at Susanna at a three quarter profile to the viewer, and the manner in which Gentileschi portrays his face makes it seem as if he is in the act of verbalizing his threats to her. His hands, while not directly touching Susanna, are both lined up with each other pointing toward the top of her head straight down the line of the lower Elder's right arm. The upper Elder's nose and sight line are also aligned with his middle finger to point to the same spot on her head, all leading the viewer's eye to the same spot on the canvas.

Symbolically, portraying this Elder in this way allows Gentileschi to send an unmistakable message to the viewer regarding her feelings toward Tassi and his betrayal of her.<sup>34</sup> By her placement of his figure above the other Elder, she is placing him as far away from her as possible. He may look, he may verbalize, but he cannot touch her from the distance she has placed between them. As a result of this distance, or possibly from the aging process she has portrayed, his figure has also become smaller and less ominous than he appeared in the 1610 *Susanna and the Elders* painting. The viewer must ask "what is this distance?" The distance Gentileschi has placed between them is that of time, which is represented by the wrinkles on his face, and his balding pate; station,

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<sup>33</sup> As she has now moved back into the Via del Corso, it is possible that Gentileschi has seen Tassi since her return, although there is no mention of it in her correspondence.

<sup>34</sup> As the rape, by all accounts, has been adequately addressed in the *Judith and Holofernes* series, I will not address that in this thesis, rather, I will examine the issue of betrayal of trust.

represented by the cloth of Artemisia Gold, her signature color, which symbolizes her meteoric rise to commercial success as an artist, attained against his predictions; and finally, this distance is maturity.

Time has not stood still for Artemisia Gentileschi, she has become a wife and mother, buried three children, run a household, dealt with interfering in-laws and a spendthrift, philandering husband. She has also become a confident and talented artist who is capable of painting joint commissions with the most popular male artists of the time and comparing favorably (Garrard 1989, 106; Bissell 1999, 287). The image of Tassi and the pain of his rape and betrayal do not have the power over her that they once did. In this canvas, she is showing that while still a vivid memory, her commercial success will be the theme of her homecoming.

The Elder on the bottom is portrayed also wearing a white shirt however his is worn with a deep blue overshirt which is decorated with red and black braid. If one follows the idea of Gentileschi using men in her life as symbolic figures this Elder could only stand for her now estranged husband, Pierantonio Stiattesi. Dressed in a deep blue silk overshirt trimmed with red and black braid for fidelity, and leaning on (grasping) the gown of Artemisia gold cloth, as if trying to keep his grip on Artemisia herself, it would make sense that Stiattesi would assume the place that Cosimo Quorli held in the 1610 painting (Lapierre 1998; Salomon and Bal 2005). This figure is only slightly younger than the Elder above him, but still has dark hair with a very receding hairline. At this point in time Gentileschi has also aged him along with everyone else from the 1612 deflorator trial. When this painting was completed, he would have been forty years old (Lapierre 1999, 241). He also sports a beard and moustache. As with his companion,

his face is wrinkled, and we do not see a full view of that face. Gentileschi uses her more refined tenebrist style to show the shadows on the right side of his face near the ear which emphasize the light shining on the forehead. This light brings the viewer's eye in a line from the widow's peak of the hair down to his nose, then to the most crucial point of this figure: his shushing finger. Again we see Gentileschi portray the younger Elder use his finger to shush Susanna. As with the 1610 *Susanna* we must also wonder exactly why Susanna is being shushed so very blatantly.

The question in 1622 is more difficult to answer than in 1610, because Gentileschi is older, more mature, and has more complex issues than a sheltered seventeen year old. One might argue that Gentileschi in 1610 had quite a few emotional issues, and most of them were shown in the *Susanna and the Elders* canvas, however I would argue that the progression of the trilogy becomes more complicated as all parties involved age and mature. Tassi's ability to threaten Gentileschi with a gossiping tongue, or to keep her silent about a clandestine relationship has diminished with time and Gentileschi's ability to rise above his level with her own artistic ability. His place in the structure of her life has now been replaced by her husband, Stiattesi. With the addition of children, artistic careers and the associated egos derived from that field, the partnership between Gentileschi and Stiattesi quickly became a battlefield. As a husband, Stiattesi is now in a position to give orders to his wife, but as his wife is the sole breadwinner, he does not have the moral authority to enforce them. Thus he takes control over what few areas of their life as he is able – he gambles and buys fine clothes as Gentileschi shows by dressing this figure in silk and braid, representing his family's tailor lineage (Garrard 2001). According to many sources, he was also extremely jealous of her, professionally

and personally (Lapierre 1998, 237; Garrard 1989, 84; Greer 1979, 132). For her part, Gentileschi did not go out of her way to reassure him of her fidelity, she became an active participant in the court of the de Medici and was socially associated with Cristofano Allori, Galileo, and several others who may have cuckolded Stiattesi, including the aforementioned Spaniards who serenaded Artemisia one night at their residence (Garrard 1989, 88; Garrard 2001, 104; Cohen 2005, 141).

In this painting, Gentileschi has placed Stiattesi in Tassi's former position of shushing her, but in contrast to the 1610 *Susanna* she has made this an empty threat by directing his gaze downward, rather than directly addressing her. In a self-referential embodiment of *Susanna*, Gentileschi portrays the figure as turning her back completely on both elders, placing both figures to the far side of the canvas, so that her figure is completely central to the scene. In 1622, Artemisia Gentileschi is not deferring to any man, and she lets *Susanna's* appeal to a higher power illuminate her intentions for all to see.

In the years that follow the completion of the 1622 canvas, Artemisia Gentileschi continues to make her living as an internationally known artist. Her works are found in Venice, Genoa, and then Naples where she is found by a messenger from both her father and King Charles I of England asking her to come and complete commissions at the English court. Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi had been estranged since Tassi's defloration trial and Artemisia's marriage (Lapierre 1998, 367), although both had been in communication with Francesco Gentileschi, Orazio's son and Artemisia's brother, an

art dealer who occasionally represented both Gentileschi.<sup>35</sup> At their request, Artemisia packed up her household, which included her second daughter, and departed for England.

While there it is believed that she may have made peace with her father, or at the very least learned to coexist with him again, as they together completed several commissions (Garrard 1980; Benedetti 1999; Bissell 1999). Inventory records show that many of these were destroyed when Cromwell and the Roundheads began England's Civil War in the mid seventeenth century, however the ceiling in the Queen's Dining Room in the Hampton Court Palace remains as a testament to their collaboration (Harris and Mann 2005).

Upon her return to the Continent, she moved her household back to Naples and re-established the studio she had begun during her first residential period in the city. For the first time, Gentileschi began to collaborate with other artists such as Massimo Stanzione, Viviano Codazzi and Bernardo Cavallino (Grabski 1985). Over the next fifteen years she completed commissions in churches and canvases for patrons such as the Cardinals Francesco and Antonio Barberini, Francesco I d'Este, Duke of Modena and her primary patron, Don Antonio Ruffo, with whom she exchanged the bulk of her known correspondence.

Although this correspondence frequently spoke of her wish to return to her native Rome, this wish was never fulfilled. Naples was her home for the rest of her life, and it was in this city that she created her final *Susanna and the Elders* in 1649. This was

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<sup>35</sup> It must be noted that the relationship between the three was not always cordial. All three parties were prone to be litigious, although there are no records of Artemisia and Orazio filing suit against each other. Each sued Francesco regularly, claiming he cheated them in his dealings with their art. Francesco retaliated in kind. According to my research, this was fairly normal for artist/client relations in the seventeenth century, not particularly a mark of family dysfunction, although this can't be ruled out.

created as she was in her final illness, and she knew during the execution that it would be her final *Susanna* canvas.

In this painting, Susanna is shown as the far left side of the traditional compositional triangle, with the two Elders to the right, each figure nearly equidistant from the other. The Elder in the center of the piece is slightly taller and more imposing than the one on the far right. The Elder on the left has a cloak draped over his right shoulder in the Artemisia Gold that is a hallmark of Gentileschi's paintings, and indeed, was instrumental in the attribution of this painting by R. Ward Bissell (Bissell 1999). The doublet worn by the Elder on the left is made of velvet with slashes in the front in the same Artemisia Gold fabric. According to Kelly and Schwabe, the style of the doublet worn by the Elder on the left was just coming into vogue in the late 1640's, making him a very stylish and fashion conscious gentleman.

Since the very early days of Gentileschi's Florentine period, her *oeuvre* has been known for its rich fabrics and textures. From the time she was exposed to the Medici court, she painted her subjects in the textures and appearances expected of the higher class patrons, rather than those worn by the inhabitants of the Roman Artists' Quarter (Bissell 1999; Harris and Mann 2005). This treatment is one of the major differences between (representation by) Orazio Gentileschi and by Artemisia Gentileschi.

Orazio, while known for his draping fabrics and rich colors, always used simple fabrics and textures. His milieu was simpler, more rustic. Where his daughter sought patrons in royal courts, he sought patrons in religious venues. The two painters' *oeuvres* are very different, but one can easily tell that Orazio was Artemisia's *maestro*. Even at

the end of her painting career, and after his death, one might still see his influence in her work.

It would not be surprising, then that in this *Susanna and the Elders* interpretation that the primary Elder is represented by Orazio Gentileschi. His daughter has recently ended their lengthy estrangement and the two melded their artistic styles to collaborate on the Queen's Dining Hall ceiling in England. After his final illness and death, Artemisia completed the project in his stead. Orazio is shown with his right hand up and index finger and thumb extended, in a shushing gesture. The facial expression shown would corroborate the assumption of his trying to silence Susanna. His left hand is resting on the banister, supporting his weight, and perhaps bracing against Susanna's push against his shoulder. His gaze is directed not at her nude body, but at the side of her face, which is turned from him, with only a single eye rolled in his direction.

In each of these iconographical elements, Gentileschi shows her viewers the resolution of this part of the trilogy, her response to the men in her life who have attempted to silence her both personally and professionally. In her final years, the embodiment of these qualities has come full circle, back to her *maestro*, Orazio. In order to display her independence of his methods, she is pushing him away for the first time. She does not do this with anguish or fear, as the young *Susanna* in 1610 displayed, nor does she show disdain or sexuality as the 1622 *Susanna*. She firmly looks upward, places a supported hand on his shoulder and publicly resists his verbal and physical admonitions.

In response, or perhaps in respect to their recent reconciliation, Artemisia has chosen to dress her father in her signature color of Artemisia Gold, in textures of both



silk and velvet. She has chosen to place him in a doublet of the latest style, something that Orazio would never have worn in his lifetime, even had he the means to afford such luxury (Bissell 1999; Lattuada 2001; Spear and Mann 2005). In true paternal spirit, this Elder is not looking at Susanna in a lascivious manner; his gaze is directly focused on her face.

Another unique element to the Elder in this canvas is his shushing hand. In the 1610 *Susanna* the Elder representing Agostino Tassi used the hand to cover his mouth and part of his face in order to hide his words he was receiving from Quorli from all but Susanna, thus excluding the viewer from the communication. In the 1622 *Susanna* the Elder representing Pierantonio Stiattesi is also using the same method to cover his face and speak directly to Susanna, thus again excluding the viewer from the communication triad. In this final painting, Gentileschi lowers the shushing hand, making the expression on Orazio's face clear for all to see, thus opening the circle of communication four ways – between Susanna, both Elders, and the viewer. This removes the element of secrecy found in the threats of slander and gossip which Artemisia feared from Quorli in the 1610 canvas (Cavazzini 2001), along with the very real insecurity about her father's unstated opinion of her talent (Harris and Mann 2005) and with it the fear and intimidation that accompany the unknown (Craven 2006).

The Elder on the right is different in many ways from all of the other Gentileschi representations of the second Elder.<sup>36</sup> First, he is clean shaven; all of the others have full beards. According to traditional iconography, the full beard is an indication of age or

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<sup>36</sup> As well as those from other historical and contemporaneous artists – I have found neither a beard nor this composition from the Quattrocento through the mid-eighteenth century, despite looking through Italian, English and Continental. I don't profess to have seen everything, but I have consciously researched the subject.

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veneration in a male figure (Panofsky 1972). Is Gentileschi's intent to strip this Elder of the very elements that endow him with the right to be an Elder? I would argue that this is exactly her intent in this painting. By stripping him of these symbols of dignity, she also strips him of the authority needed to formally charge Susanna with a crime. While it may not put the two on an equal footing, it does slightly level the playing field (Zimmermann 1957; Lachs 1978).

In addition, while Gentileschi clearly applied the maturation process to these figures, just as she did to that of Susanna and the first Elder, this figure is curiously untouched by the rough elements of realism seen in the those figures. His skin is more luminous, and not as red and weathered as the other Elder, and while he has less hair, it isn't rough and weatherblown. The lips have a deep pink tint and a more delicate curve than any other elder in any of the other paintings. His hand on the balustrade is more refined than the other Elder. I believe Gentileschi intends to represent this as a more refined gentleman than the Elder's appearance might have one believe. In essence, she has removed not just his beard, but also every other element of masculinity that men of the seventeenth century used to show their machismo (Wiesner 2000).

Secondly, he is not touching the other Elder, although the sleeves are overlapping. In the 1610 painting, the Elders are touching each other and whispering with their heads together. In the 1622 painting, the Elders are grouped together, one atop the other to the extreme right side of the painting, again gesticulating and communicating with each other. He is also not engaging in any type of conversation, nor does he have a particularly lustful expression on his face. His head is turned toward Susanna, his gaze as well as the viewer's travels in a direct line from her resisting hand to her face.

Clearly, Gentileschi feels that merely removing the symbols of authority from this figure were not enough of a punishment for his crimes against Susanna. She feels that vindication for Susanna also requires that the Elder be stripped of his masculine pride, thus one can assume a commensurate loss of testosterone fueled urges may have gained her a measure of comfort in her younger years. I would also like to note that this is also different than any other representation by other male artists of the time who showed both Elders as “dirty old men.” No other artist known to me has ever depicted one of the elders as being not quite as prurient as the other.

In this painting, the second Elder is also not dressed in the style of a rich, prominent elder, he is actually garbed in a plain gray undergarment with a long blue drape made of a simple woven cloth that wraps around his right shoulder and falls over the balustrade down to the floor of the patio. Neither of these garments are rendered in Gentileschi’s usual materials of silk, velvet, or other luxury materials, rather they are strikingly similar to those typically used by her father, Orazio, in his works. Gentileschi goes one step further in each element than the one before. In the manner in which she has clothed this Elder, the viewer first sees the very plain gray undergarment with the blue wrap. The first argument that I will make is that this Elder also represents Orazio Gentileschi. Artemisia Gentileschi has chosen to dually portray him as both the Elder as symbolized by her style of art and as the Elder symbolized by his artistic style. The Elder she chose to portray in Orazio’s style, however, deserves a deeper look. When one looks closely at his garments, the viewer will notice that Artemisia Gentileschi has designed the gray undergarment to very closely resemble a woman’s chemise of the time with the v-neck and long sleeves (Kelly and Schwage, 87). In addition, the long blue cloak that

drapes over the balustrade goes all the way down to the floor, definitely more closely resembling a working class woman's garment than a man's during the seventeenth century (Kelly and Schwage, 59). In this figure Gentileschi has not only completely emasculated the figure representing Orazio, she has also relegated him to the symbolic ghetto via his wardrobe. For Susanna, this completely changes the dynamics of the garden – the odds have changed in her favor and she now has another female on her side for support and protection. For Artemisia, she has, through her artwork, gained the supportive and trustworthy parent she needed in 1610.

In this 1649 *Susanna and the Elders* Gentileschi has taken a self referential work and through the use of symbolism imbued it with more complex layers than the previous *Susanna and the Elders* works. This circumstance is due to the fact that this *Susanna* not only reflects her own feelings toward her art, she has also chosen to include her complicated mix of feelings toward her father.

## CONCLUSION:

From 1610 to 1649

Artemisia Gentileschi began her *Susanna and the Elders* series when she was only sixteen years old, and although the initial composition of the work may have been originated with the assistance of her father, Orazio, in his role as *maestro*, the palette and final product were Artemisia's alone. She conceived the idea of the Elders in the 1610 painting representing Quorli and Tassi, using iconography which would be familiar to herself, her circle of peers and family, and art historians today. In addition, by use of a palette similar to that of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, she conveyed a sense of bright, morning light coming into a stark scene of realism. This Susanna, in comparison to both contemporaneous Susannas and those of the preceding century, was not a sensual, flirtatious figure similar to those portrayed by D'Arpino, Carracci, Rinaldi, etc. During the Quattrocento and Cinquecento the scene normally portrayed is one from the Elders' point of view, that of two good old boys out for an adventure at the expense of a lovely young woman. Artemisia's Susanna was unique in that she used a feminine perspective to portray Susanna: we see the scene through the eyes of Susanna rather than through the eyes of the Elders.

To be specific, Artemisia Gentileschi uses many different elements to make not only her 1610 *Susanna and the Elders* painting self-referential, she also infuses her

known Susanna series, which includes the 1622 Burghley House painting and her 1649 Brno *Susanna* with elements of self-reflection at each stage of her life at the time of the paintings. Each of these works commenced at a unique stage in her life and reflected her feelings about her circumstances at that time. As many art historians and feminist theorists have noted, Gentileschi's *Judith and Holofernes* works have captured the catharsis of the aftermath of her rape and Tassi's subsequent trial for defloration in great detail<sup>37</sup>.

I argue that in addition to the Judith works being self-referential in regards to her rape story, Gentileschi also used the Apocryphal story of Susanna and the Elders as a catharsis for another area of her life: her feelings of betrayal and ill-use by the men that she trusted. Throughout her lifetime there were many documented instances of betrayal and through her timely portrayals of Susanna and the Elders, correlated with the history of her life, we are able to complete a visual picture of those instances. Gentileschi left a visual record through iconography and reference to the astute viewer of this aspect of her feelings at certain stages of her life.

She shows us her feelings toward her sexual harassment by Tassi and Quorli when she was a teenager in the 1610 *Susanna* by showing Susanna in the "hands of shame" pose used by Massaccio's Adam, but also taken from the Orestes sarcophagus' nurse, who used the stance in a protective pose. Gentileschi combines the two to show Susanna ashamed of her nakedness, but protecting herself against the Elders, whom she fears.

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<sup>37</sup> Another noted fact in Gentileschi's *oeuvre* is that she has frequently used herself as a model in various paintings, whether self portrait or self-referential is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, an artist who would paint herself as an iconographically correct La Pittura

In the 1622 Burghley House *Susanna* the viewer sees the most commercial of the three works in which Gentileschi shows that she can, indeed, make her way as an artist in a man's world by showing Susanna from a man's point of view. She does, however, show this Susanna as aging much as Gentileschi has from the 1610 work, and she has also aged the Elders, using them to represent Tassi and her faithless husband, Stiattesi. In portraying Susanna in a commercial pose as a beautiful seductress, she also iconographically conveys the image of herself as a successful artist at the top of her career. Taking into account that most of the men in her life were less successful artists<sup>38</sup>, this could definitely be construed as a "gotcha" moment for her.

In the 1649 *Susanna and the Elders* Gentileschi brings the trilogy full circle and resolves her issues with her father. At the end of her life, she has raised her family, and does not place importance on romantic relationships, only her unresolved loose ends. These ends, personally and professionally, are those dealing with her father, Orazio, who passed away while they were working together in England. She portrays both the personal and professional issues between them by portraying them as two figures in one painting.

In this trilogy, Gentileschi's paintings were divided by the three stages of Gentileschi's life: her youth in 1610; midlife in 1622; and old age in 1649. For the purposes of my thesis, I divided the analyses and arguments into three separate elements of the paintings. Each division is unique with its own separate history, iconography and

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<sup>38</sup> Her father, Orazio; husband, Stiattesi; brother, Franciso; rapist, Tassi; the Roman artist community; Members of the Roman Academies who shunned her (while the Florentines did not).

character. Artemisia Gentileschi used each of these divisions to tell her story through that of Susanna and the Elders in a very unique way in each stage of her life.

The first element explored was that of the environment, or the garden setting. This is traditionally where the scene is portrayed; however in 1610 there is no garden. In 1622, Gentileschi shows a partial garden and in 1649 the full Garden of Eden imagery is back in the scene. Through the use of this imagery, the viewer sees the progression of Gentileschi's journey from a youthful black and white view of innocence in 1610 to the 1649 *Susanna's* full maturity showing the ambiguity of emotional responses.

In the second chapter we see the figure of Susanna herself analyzed in relation to Gentileschi's self referential views. The 1610 painting shows the fear and shame of the teenage Susanna and Artemisia. Twelve years later in 1622 Gentileschi shows a completely different Susanna, one who invokes the *Venus Pudica* pose of the sexually available female. At the end of her life, a mature Gentileschi portrays Susanna as a confident, mature female who pushes back against those who try to manipulate her. I argue that this progression shows the maturity of the woman through the artist.

The third chapter of the thesis dwells upon the element of the two Elders in the apocryphal tale. Examination of these figures reveals Gentileschi's self referential expressions of the betrayal of the men in her life at the periods in time when these paintings were executed. In 1610, she portrayed the two Elders as Cosimo Quorli, the Vatican clerk who masterminded the slander campaign against her reputation and Agostino Tassi, the man who was her composition instructor and clandestine suitor at the time, but would become her rapist within the next year. When the 1622 *Susanna and the Elders* was completed the Elders were representing her recently estranged husband,



Pierantonio Stiattesi and again, her rapist Agostino Tassi. Gentileschi used a unique diagonal perspective to show the men's lack of importance in her life and career in this painting, using the figure of Susanna as central to illustrate the point.

The 1649 *Susanna* is the end of the trilogy and Gentileschi uses this canvas to bring together the beginning and end of her life, as a woman and as an artist. She uses the figures of the Elders to symbolize her complex feelings about her father, as both her paternal figure and as her maestro. To accomplish this she chose to use the figures of both Elders to represent him, the one on the left as the artist in the style of Artemisia Gentileschi – strong, bold, emotional and with nothing to hide. The Elder on the right, however, was painted in the style of Orazio Gentileschi himself. Artemisia selected natural textures, ethereal skin tones, a visual distance from reality, and even placed the figure in feminine garb to underscore the difference between the two styles.

In her selection, she replaced the second figure of the Elder and altered the Apocryphal tale to paint her own version of *Susanna*. In this new version, *Susanna* now has the scales tipped in her favor with only one Elder and two females. This premise would never make sense to the scholar of the Apocrypha, nor to any historian of art, Early Modern Europe, Medieval, Renaissance or Ancient periods, this is understood. However, to the person who has studied Artemisia Gentileschi's life, the self-referential aspects are clearly evident and relevant to complete the trilogy.

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