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# Oh, Susanna: Exploring Artemisia's Most Painted Heroine

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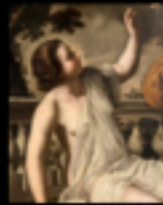
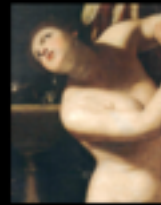
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# Oh, Susanna: An Exploration of Artemisia's Most Frequently Painted Heroine



Kerry Kilburn, Art Department  
ODU Undergraduate Research Symposium  
Spring 2016

## Artemisia Gentileschi: 1593-1656?



Jérôme David, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, ca. 1627, engraving. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

- \*Artemisia was a rarity among Baroque artists, first because she was a woman,
- \*And second because she was a woman who had a successful career making large history paintings
- \*Biographically, she is best known for her rape at the age of 17 and the very public trial that followed at her father's insistence.
- \*Artistically, she is known for her creating series of paintings of Biblical heroines, including . . .

## Judith



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, 1611-12. Oil on canvas.



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith and her Maidservant*, 1625. Oil on canvas.

## Bathsheba



Artemesia Gentileschi, *David and Bathsheba*, 1640-45. Oil on canvas.



Artemesia Gentileschi, *Bathsheba*, 1640-45. Oil on canvas.

## Mary Magdalen



Artemesia Gentileschi, *Conversion of the Magdalen*, 1625. Oil on canvas.



Artemesia Gentileschi, *Penitent Magdalen*, 1625-26. Oil on canvas.

## Susanna



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1610-1652. Oil on canvas.

- \*Among these series is one of 8 “Susanna and the Elders,” of which 5 are currently known
- \*The Susanna series is unique compared to others:
  - \*Largest number of paintings
  - \*Painted over the longest period of time
  - \*No duplication of image types

## Artemisia and Susanna



Simon Vouet, *Portrait of Artemisia Gentileschi*, ca. 1625. Oil on canvas.

\*I will show that, although unique, the series can be understood in terms of several signature features of Artemisia's style, including:

- \*Her growth as an artist over time
- \*Portrayal of heroic female protagonists
- \*Narrative originality

\*I will also ask whether Artemisia's potential identification with Susanna has allowed her to create this series of such rare insight and nuance

## Susanna's Story



Jacopo Tintoretto, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1555-1556. Oil on canvas.

- \*Susanna's story is told in the Book of Daniel
- \*Susanna was the wife of a wealthy man and used to walk in her gardens every day at noon
- \*Two elders, who met daily with her husband, saw her there and lusted after her.
- \*They confided their desire to one another and conceived a plan to surprise her while she was alone.
- \*One day, when she decided to bathe in her garden, they hid and waited until she sent her maids to the house for supplies.
- \*They demanded she have sex with them or they would tell everyone she had committed adultery with another young man.
- \*Because she was a virtuous woman, she told them she would rather "fall innocent into their power than to sin in the eyes of the Lord."
- \*She called for help, the elders carried out their threat, and she was tried for adultery.

## Susanna's Story



Untitled, 14<sup>th</sup> Century Franciscan Missal

- \*Unable to speak in her own defense, she called upon God for justice.
- \*Young Daniel, sensing something wrong, questioned the two elders separately and found a discrepancy in their story.
- \*Susanna was acquitted, the elders were convicted instead, and they were put to death.

## 1610 Pommersfelden



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1610. Oil on canvas.

- \*Artemisia's "Susanna" paintings span nearly entire career
- \*First autograph painting is 1610 Pommersfelden painting (note names refer to current locations)
- \*Starkest and most Caravaggesque of the series

## 1622 Burghley House



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1622. Oil on canvas.

- \*1622 Burghley House differs in style and content
- \*Another painting was made in 1627, subsequently lost

1636 London



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1636. Oil on canvas.

\*1636 London followed by 2 more lost paintings from 1630s

1649 Brno



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1649. Oil on canvas.

1652 Bologna



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1652. Oil on canvas.

- \*Last in the series
- \*One of last paintings
- \*No more than 4 years before her death, possibly less

## Stylistic Changes: Caravaggism to Classical Idealism

Pommersfelden 1610



Burghey House 1622



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1610 vs. 1622. Oil on canvas.

\*Artemisia's style clearly changed across the series

\*And they represent a shift from her early Caravaggism to her later more classical idealism

## Stylistic Changes: Caravaggism to Classical Idealism

Caravaggio 1594-95



Pommersfelden 1610



Caravaggio, *Penitent Magdalen* 1594-95 vs. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1610. Oil on canvas.

\*We can recognize her early Caravaggism by comparing Caravaggio's *Penitent Magdalen* with the 1610 Pommersfelden *Susanna*.

\*Artemisia echo's Caravaggio's stark lighting and devotion to depicting realism and intense emotion over classical beauty.

## Stylistic Changes: Caravaggism to Classical Idealism

Pommersfelden 1610



Bologna 1652



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1610 vs. 1652. Oil on canvas.

- \*Artemisia's changing artistic choices derive from influential interactions with artistic and literary circles in Vienna, Florence, and Naples over the course of her career.
- \*And they reflect Artemisia's growth as an artist during a time when artistic tastes were changing and diversifying

## Susanna's Erotic Appeal

Tintoretto 1555



Burghey House 1622



Jacopo Tintoretto, *Susanna and the Elders* (det), 1555 vs. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1622. Oil on canvas.

\*By 15<sup>th</sup>/16<sup>th</sup> centuries, Susanna imagery stressed her erotic/sensual appeal rather than her chastity and virtue; Artemisia followed this tradition

\*But also used three devices to demonstrate Susanna's commitment to her own heroism in the form of that chastity and virtue

## A Heroic and Virtuous Woman: Turning Away

Pommersfelden 1610



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1610. Oil on canvas.

- \*First most obvious: recoiling/turning away from the elders, signaling her rejection of their proposition
- \*Seen most clearly here: contorted contrapposto shows that she has turned away quickly, while shielding herself from the two men with her arms; pose conveys shame and anguish, but also rejection

## A Heroic and Virtuous Woman: Turning Away

Brno 1649



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1649. Oil on canvas.

\*Similar reaction here: Arms thrown out to shield herself, while head is thrown back as far as it can reach to escape the two men

## A Heroic and Virtuous Woman: Turning Away

Bologna 1652



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1652. Oil on canvas.

\*Similar reaction here, but more subtle: leaning slightly away, with arm up to ward off the elders

## A Heroic and Virtuous Woman: Turning Away

Burghley House 1622



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1622. Oil on canvas.

\*Least subtle: she has turned completely away, showing her back to the two men

## A Heroic and Virtuous Woman: Confrontation

London 1636



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1636. Oil on canvas.

- \*Second device – seen only in this painting – is confrontation:
  - \*One hand calmly in lap, one raised in “no” or “halt” gesture
  - \*Face also calm, without fear, surprise, anguish of the other paintings

## A Heroic and Virtuous Woman: Trust in God

Burghley House 1622



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1622. Oil on canvas.

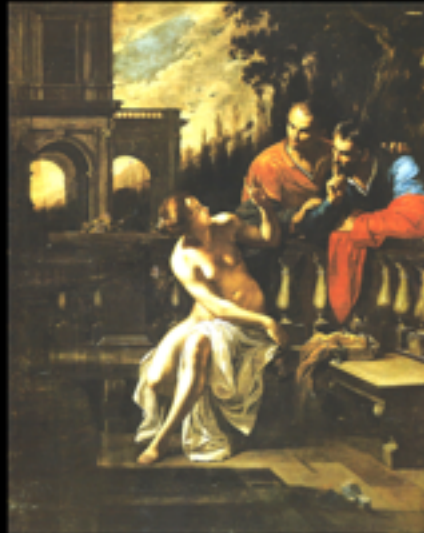
- \*Third device most subtle = conflating 2 moments from narrative
  - \*Moment when elders accost Susanna
  - \*Moment when, during trial, “tearfully she turned her eyes to Heaven, her heart confident in God”
- \*When Susanna rejects elders, she is placing faith and trust in God, knowing he will reward her for her virtue
- \*Babette Bohn credits Ludovico Caracci with this reinterpretation from a painting ca 1598 – Susanna turns her eyes upward to heaven and into the light symbolizing God’s presence.
- \*Best seen in 1622 painting

## A Heroic and Virtuous Woman: Trust in God

Brno 1649



London 1636



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1649 (left) and 1636 (right). Oil on canvas.

\*Also seen in 1649 painting

\*Suggested in 1636: Once Susanna turns away from the elders, she will be looking into the light

## Telling Old Stories New Ways

Bologna 1652



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1652. Oil on canvas.

- \*Artemisia was well known for her narrative originality, which she also exhibited through this series.
- \*Viewed in the order in which they were painted, we can see that no two are sufficiently alike to be called repetitions of the same type
- \*Series can also be read in a different order, one that reveals each painting as a different moment in Susanna's fully heroic narrative
- \*Read this way, story begins with 1652 Bologna painting: Susanna is first startled by the elders' appearance in the garden
  - \*Flings up a hand and leans back, just begins to turn away

## Telling Old Stories New Ways

Brno 1649



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1649. Oil on canvas.

\*Hearing their proposition, she flings back her head in horror . . .

## Telling Old Stories New Ways

Pommersfelden 1610



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1610. Oil on canvas.

\*Before turning away in shame

## Telling Old Stories New Ways

London 1636



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1636. Oil on canvas.

\*Putting her faith in God, she turns back to the elders and confronts them with her decision – her forcefulness makes them back away temporarily

## Telling Old Stories New Ways

Burghley House 1622



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1622. Oil on canvas.

\*Finally, even as the elders press her again, she turns away and surrenders herself to God.

## Telling Old Stories New Ways



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1610-1652. Oil on canvas.

\*I don't intend to suggest that Artemisia set out to create a sequential narrative of Susanna's story.

\*I do suggest that the series points out how attuned Artemisia was to the nuances of the story: each time she painted it, she could envision and realize a unique moment and perspective from the tale.

## Identifying with Susanna?



Simon Vouet,  
*Portrait of Artemisia Gentileschi*, ca. 1625.  
Oil on canvas.



Artemisia Gentileschi,  
*Susanna and the Elders (det.)*, 1622.  
Oil on canvas.

\*What gave her such insight? We can't know with any certainty, but can speculate that her own history of sexual violence allowed her to mine Susanna's story for a longer series of separate, more nuanced moments than she was able to do with, for example, Bathsheba's, Judith's, or Mary Magdalene's

\*Whether autobiographical or not, we must recognize that Artemisia brings a heroic Susanna fully to life through this series.