“The Spirit of Caesar in the Soul of a Woman”
An Analysis of Artemisia Gentileschi’s Seventeenth-Century Gender and Patronage
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Abstract: It is regrettable that the brilliant Italian Baroque painter, Artemisia Gentileschi, is perhaps best known for her rape by Agostino Tassi, or as her father’s student. It is notable and disturbing that even the briefest of references tend to place Gentileschi in a passive role: as a person who was raped, a person who was taught. Men have long dominated Gentileschi’s story, though art historians have begun to question this profoundly sexist narrative. Untangling the artist’s personal agency has been a difficult process because so little information about her has been unearthed beyond her visual art and her rape trial. In this paper I will address a typically overlooked treasure trove of information that sheds light on Artemisia Gentileschi’s career: the records of her patronage and personal business dealings across Europe. These records reveal not only a talented and highly sought-after artist, but also a woman who acted on her own agency, meeting the obstacles of gender and navigating them.

— Introduction —

Throughout art history there were few women artists who scholars and collectors considered as great artists or masters of their profession; this gender bias persists even into contemporary times. However, there are a few women who went against the societal expectations for their gender in the arts, and ultimately achieved high levels of recognition and patronage. One of the most notable of these women was the brilliant Italian Baroque painter Artemisia Gentileschi.1 Artemisia was born July 8, 1593 in Rome and was the daughter of a professional artist, Orazio Gentileschi. Artemisia adopted her father’s interest in the work of Caravaggio and remains one of the only women to practice Caravaggio’s artistic style with psychologically violent realism and shocking subject matter.2

Artemisia retained commissions from the Medici family, King Charles the I of England, and numerous wealthy noblemen throughout her lifetime, yet scholars and contemporary popular culture inextricably link her career and deliberate stylistic conventions to a sensational rape trial in 1612, further diminishing the artists’ active role and agency. Artemisia’s trial has compelled the interest of biographers and scholars

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1 To avoid confusion with her father, who was also an artist, I will refer to Artemisia Gentileschi by her first name throughout this presentation. Please note this decision does not reflect any disrespect or lack of acknowledgement of the artist’s talent or reception.
2 Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1510) was an Italian painter best known for his paintings that combine realistic observation of the physical and emotional human condition. He is perhaps most recognized through his use of dramatic light called chiaroscuro.
ever since the end of her lifetime. Perhaps this fascination lies within the events of the trial itself, during which she experienced torture under oath, her rapist (Tassi’s) witnesses were bribed, and the reputation and respect of famous artists, namely Tassi, Artemisia, and her father, Orazio were questioned. As a consequence, Artemisia’s artwork has frankly become consumed by the narrative of rape, and her paintings interpreted in the light of her presumed reaction to that experience. The idea of art as self-expression, however, is a modern notion, and one not necessarily applicable to the seventeenth century. Moreover, it remains vital to note that artistic commissions during the seventeenth century were primarily based on the tastes, subjects, and general preference of the receiving party. Artemisia would have carefully selected subjects, style, size, and medium based on location and the tastes of her patrons. Scholars can easily speculate that Artemisia might have shared a personal connection with the women she depicted, but in numerous ways, this diminishes her astonishing career and her self-conscious choices to successfully manipulate her artistic style, gender expectations, and aristocratic patrons.

Contrary to popular assumptions, evidence illustrates Artemisia was not a prisoner of her psyche. Rather, she acted as a pragmatic woman of some agency, who shrewdly manipulated her patrons, adopting specific subject matter, styles, and business strategies throughout her artistic career. This paper utilizes documentary evidence to undercut the myth of the woman as a creature ruled by untethered emotion and uninhibited passion. However, untangling the artist’s agency remains a complicated process because historians have unearthed little information about her beyond her visual art and rape trial. Only through recent scholarship has Artemisia’s career been re-evaluated as not just a footnote to Caravaggio’s style, but as a significant exception in art history. A final vital note: the study of Artemisia’s artistic practice and life are still emerging through contemporary scholarship. Therefore, this thesis utilizes all of the available sources, but recognizes that there are several aspects of Artemisia’s history that remain elusive and unknown to scholars. Ultimately, Artemisia earned a reputable, but not an exceptional sum, especially for a mature artist with aristocratic patrons, as

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3 Agostino Tassi (1578-1644) was an Italian painter who specialized in large landscapes. He is perhaps best known in contemporary times as the rapist of Artemisia Gentileschi. Tassi was found guilty of this crime through a Papal Court trial in 1612. Garrard, Mary D. *Artemisia Gentileschi: The image of the female hero in Italian baroque art*. (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1989). Appendix B: Complete trial translated into English.


6 Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1510) was an Italian painter best known for his paintings that combine realistic observation of the physical and emotional human condition. His style is perhaps best recognized by the use of dramatic light called chiaroscuro.

7 Current Professor at the University of Campania’s Department of Literature and Cultural Heritage, Riccardo Lattuada asserts, “The state of Artemisia scholarship is such that a single document or individual painting can alter our understanding of her work and her career substantially.”
proven through surviving correspondences, properly attributed paintings, and documented commissions.

The quest to discover the network of patronage Artemisia operated within begins with a letter written by the artist to friend, Galileo, in 1635. This letter was one of the earliest letters from the artists and reveals insights into the seventeenth century aristocratic Florentine patronage practice. The following section contains multiple letters written by Artemisia to Neapolitan patron Don Antonio Ruffo. Artemisia’s artistic practice and her status among contemporary fine art collectors were discussed throughout these correspondences. The final case summarizes all the documented payments to Artemisia during her lifetime and compares her commissions to her male counterparts, including her father, Orazio. Despite the complexities of Artemisia research, scholars agree that she achieved an exceptional level of recognition and patronage for a female artist in her lifetime.

In short, despite a good deal of recent scholarship, several aspects of Artemisia’s life and artistic career still remain obscure. This paper will adopt a contemporary approach to addressing a usually overlooked treasure-trove of information that illuminates Artemisia’s career: the records of her patronage and personal business dealings across Europe. These records reveal not only a talented and highly coveted artist but also a woman who operated on her agency, successfully meeting the obstacles of gender and navigating them. This research also utilizes sources written within the last twenty years of scholarship, with the exception of Linda Nochlin (1971) and Mary Garrard (1989), who remain foundational in research on women artists. Therefore, the thesis complements contemporary scholarship on Artemisia’s career and employs an archive of letters as primary sources that shed light on seventeenth century Italian patronage customs.

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**Education, Artistic Training, and the Question of Gender in the Arts**

In seventeenth century Italy, children from upper and middle class households traditionally experienced their initial educational foundation at home under the instruction of their mother or ideally, humanist fathers. Beginning in the Renaissance, humanist fathers cultivated and encouraged increasingly Classical models of education for their entire household, dubbed household academies. From the inception of these household academies an alternative conception of virtue based upon education, revolutionized former dominant cultural and social ideals of feminine virtue. Religious morality determined feminine virtue prior to the rise of humanism; for women virtue

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8 Sarah Gwyneth Ross. *The Birth of Feminism: Woman as intellect in Renaissance Italy and England.* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2009). 1-3. Household Academies thrived from 1400-1585 and encouraged a “Classical” education which revolutionized education. The Household Salon (1580-1680) became the popular mode of education afterwards, which offered women more opportunities to be directly involved with education and cultural traditions of the time. This information is further detailed throughout the introduction in Part I and Part II, 3-16.
was often dictated by chastity. With the rise of humanism, however, the Christian ideals of chastity amalgamated with Classical ideals, and created a new ambiguous definition of virtue among both sexes.9 If male virtue and education are interconnected, then the same applied for women.

Interestingly, an educational technique integral for all fine artists during the Early Modern period was predominantly reserved for males in academic institutes, this being the study of a nude model. For women of this period the opportunity to study from a nude model rarely occurred, resulting in a longstanding form of institutional discrimination directed towards women artists, as Gender Studies and Art Historian, Linda Nochlin addressed in “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” Through a feminist critique of art history, Nochlin boldly asserted that there have been no “great women artists” due to institutional, ideological, and societal obstacles.10 Nochlin successfully demonstrated how a woman could never, in Western eyes, become a great artist due to reigning gender ideology and institutionalized sexism.11 From the Renaissance into the nineteenth century, any great artist had to obtain the technique of figure illustration, ideally from a nude model. Imperatively, the highest paid genre of this time was historical paintings, which required detailed anatomical knowledge.12 Remarkably, Artemisia was able to study from the nude model early in her artistic upbringing through her father’s studio. Artemisia’s artistic portfolio evidences her knowledge of the nude model. At the age of seventeen Artemisia painted Susanna and the Elders (1610) and the use of models continued throughout her artistic career was documented in letters and physical paintings, which remained a rarity for a seventeenth century woman artist.

Further information about the qualities of historical paintings is essential to properly contextualize the magnitude of intimate anatomical knowledge derived from observation and illustration of the nude model and the exceptional case of Artemisia’s portfolio. Historical paintings traditionally featured numerous full-bodied figures who resided in significant landscapes in an attempt to portray a historical event, often comprised of one large canvas. Fortunately, artistic academies and apprenticeship programs offered the technical skills required to create historical paintings. However, these academies had a predominantly male population.13 During the seventeenth

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9 Ross, 3-10.
11 Ibid, 5-9. Nochlin described the “golden nugget of artistic genius” and the “syllogism” that, “If women had the golden nugget of artistic genius, it would reveal itself.” 8-10.
13 Nochlin, 24-27. Information about institutional discrimination regarding the nude. Nochlin further stated, “To be deprived of this ultimate state of training meant to be deprived of the possibility of creating major art—or simply, as with most of the few women aspiring to be painters, to be restricted to the ‘minor’ and less highly regarded fields of portraiture, genre, landscape, or still-life.” 25.
century a majority of women would rarely pursue fine arts, yet Artemisia manipulated her artistic practice to suit the demands of aristocratic patrons across Europe throughout her lifetime. Artemisia remains the most well-known female to pursue the highest caliber genre of Italian historical painting, called istoria. istoria paintings traditionally featured multiple figure compositions of Biblical or mythological narratives, portrayed in a deliberately psychologically illuminating and realistic style. Other female painters typically pursued genres that required less technical training including still-life, landscape, and devotional images. However, under the advisement of her father, Orazio, Artemisia acquired the rare technical knowledge of the nude and significant insights into the socio-cultural aspects of the seventeenth century fine art patronage system.

In the High Renaissance and Baroque period, the question of gender in art remained a controversial topic. The problem of a woman artist can be traced all the way back to the Aristotelian ideology. All women were connected to the fall of man. According to this mode of thought, which was dominant through much of Western history, the woman was defective, dangerous, unnatural, and inferior to man in every way. Women often had to create sweet, delicate, or work appropriate for their sex, which often complied with the lower artistic genres and craft. Yet most of Artemisia’s works defy Aristotelian ideology through subject, technical excellence, and their ability to subvert the male gaze. Artemisia’s most shocking subjects were also women who disobeyed Aristotelian thought: they displayed heroic strength, courage, and selfless action. Historian Julie Hardwick published an article that states people in Early Modern Europe viewed gender and family patterns as integral elements of authority structures. Failure to adhere to the familial and societal authority structures could negatively impact the individual and their associates.

Additionally in a chapter titled, “Evolving the History of Women in Early Modern Italy: Subordination and Agency,” Elizabeth Cohn argued that Early Modern women should not consist of a universal category. Instead, she provided two models to

15 Jesse M. Locker. Artemisia Gentileschi: the language of painting. (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2015). 1, 27. Nochlin described this in reference to the technical skill of illustrating the nude model and what denying that opportunity lead women to pursue “the ‘minor’ and less highly regarded fields of portraiture, genre, landscape, or still-life.”
understand historical women: subordination and agency.19 The subordination model highlighted women’s vulnerability and dependence, like Artemisia’s letters to patrons for basic goods, like gloves and slippers. While the agency model focused on what women could do or say within gender norms, which Artemisia frequently exploited.20 Within the model of agency, Cohen drew upon networks and showed how patronage created alliances of protection and shared interests, like Galileo and Artemisia’s friendship. She also addressed motherhood, marriage, work, intellectual and artistic life, bodily matters, politics, place and local identities. She concluded with the notion that only through shuttling between the models of subordination and agency can scholars approach change and causality that occurred with gender in Early Modern Europe.21 Artemisia successfully alternated between the models of subordination and agency, as evident in her letters to patrons and her artistic portfolio.

As previously mentioned, women’s involvement in the arts prior to Artemisia frequently complied with the lower artistic genres typically depicted in a soft and delicate style, acceptable for their gender.22 There are however some significant women prior to Artemisia who received their artistic knowledge and techniques from their humanist fathers such as, Sofonisba Anguissola (1532-1625), Catherina van Hemessen (1528-1588), Catherine of Bologna (1413-1463), Esther Inglis (1571-1624), Marietta Tintoreto (1554-1590), Lavina Fontana (1552-1614), and Fede Galiza (1578-1630).23 All of these women navigated discrimination and obstacles within the Early Modern sociocultural gender constructs.

Returning to her artistic portfolio and visual evidence, it is obvious at a mere glance that Artemisia frequently defied the expectation for women to paint only what society considered delicate or otherwise appropriate to their gender. For example, Artemisia’s most well-known painting, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, remained shockingly violent and directly contradicted the Aristotelian notion of woman as a docile and weak version of man.24 The second version titled *Judith and Holofernes* was gifted to the Medici family. However, the Medici duchess, “banished this masterpiece to a dark

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20 Ibid, 328-329.

21 Ibid, 344-352.


23 Ibid, 30-37.

corner of the Uffizi, where it remained until the late twentieth century.”25 The vivid imagery and psychological torment displayed in this composition likely inspired the duchess’ actions. Although Artemisia completed numerous versions of Judith throughout her lifetime, these versions remain the most known and studied versions of Judith.

Importantly, the women in Artemisia’s compositions display clear intentionality and sheer determination to complete the bloody feat. Artemisia also magnifies the significance of Judith’s maidservant’s contribution, making her an active participant in the gruesome event. Artemisia’s maidservant aids Judith through the act of physically restraining Holofernes as Judith commences the beheading, in contrast to Caravaggio’s Judith’s maidservant who merely observes the ghastly sight from a distance.26 In fact, Caravaggio’s maidservant seemingly attempts to obscure her view of the ghastly sight.


26 Image #3. Judith Slaying Holofernes, Caravaggio, 1599, oil on canvas, 145 x 195cm, Palazzo Barberini, Rome.
with a cloth bag, intended for Holofernes’ freshly removed head, as is she was fully
detached from Judith’s malevolent act. In contrast, Artemisia’s Judith and maidservant
dominate the canvas, their muscular arms powerfully pin Holofernes to his death bed
while his body writhes and anguished face contorts from the traumatic event unfolding.
As his large hand desperately grasps the maidservant’s collar, Judith remains steadfastly
determined as she forcefully thrusts a massive sword through Holofernes strained neck.
Significant alterations between the 1612 and 1621 Judith highlight Artemisia’s ability to
adopt local styles and tastes. For example, the detail of blood spurting in an arch of the
1621 Judith is strikingly different than the earlier Judith. The dramatic alteration of
blood splatter could possibly be linked to Artemisia’s friendship and correspondences
with Galileo Galilei and his scholarship on parabolic trajectories.27

In an effort to work towards an increasingly focused analysis of gender in
Artemisia’s life, it is vital to note her significant alterations of artistic style and artistic
patronage practice throughout her lifetime. A 1635 letter written to friend, Galileo,
documented the frustration and confusion Artemisia experienced after gifting the
Medici’s two large canvases and not receiving any acknowledgement of the paintings. In
the correspondence Artemisia interestingly mentioned “a painting of Judith.” Perhaps
this letter referred to the 1621 Judith and Holofernes supposedly gifted to the Medici’s
earlier? Regardless, Artemisia’s words offer tremendous insight into seventeenth
century Italian patronage and the practice of courtly language. Throughout the letter
Artemisia refers to her Medici patrons as “His Serene Highness” and Galileo as “Your
Lordship.” She also calls on classically inspired humanistic elements like “virtue” and
“honor” to further her impassioned plea for assistance. The letter stated:

“And I do this all the more spontaneously because another situation has
developed similar to the one concerning the painting of Judith which I gave to
His Serene Highness the Grand Duke Cosimo of glorious memory, which would
have been lost to memory if it had not been revived by Your Lordship’s
assistance. By virtue of that assistance I obtained an excellent remuneration.
Therefore, I beg you to do the same thing now, because I see that no one is
mentioning the two large paintings I recently sent to His Serene Highness with
one of my brothers. I don’t know whether he liked them; I only know, through a
third person, that the Grand Duke received them, and nothing else. The
humiliates me considerably, for I have seen myself honored by all the kings and

27 Dr. Esperança Camara. “Gentileschi, Judith Slaying Holofernes.” Khan Academy. 2018. And Mary
D. Garrard. Artemisia Gentileschi: The image of the female hero in Italian baroque art. (Princeton, N.J:
Princeton University Press, 1989). Pages 38 and 334, provide references to Artemisia and Galileo’s
friendship and knowledge about shadows. Galileo painted the moon shadows in 1610.
rulers of Europe to whom I have sent my works, not only with great gifts but also with most favored letters, which I keep with me.28

This letter demonstrated the demands of aristocratic patronage and the process of artist’s gifting pieces to royal patrons rather than establishing an initial price. Patrizia Cavazzini’s, *Painting as Business In Early Seventeenth Century Rome*, details the notion of artist’s gifting their work to wealthy patrons in anticipation of an increasingly generous payment. The act of gifting also distanced fine arts from low arts, like carpentry or manual crafts that had pre-determined costs or labor-based wages.29 For example, Artemisia gifted the above mentioned paintings in the letter to Galileo to the Medici’s, as she had prior with one of her many depictions of *Judith*. Through the process of gifting, Artemisia, would have likely received a higher sum than that of a previously negotiated price. Artemisia also alternated between models of subordination and agency throughout the letter to Galileo. She implores his assistance while employing Classical notions like virtue and humility. More importantly however, Artemisia concluded her letter with a bold statement, referencing all the honors her royal clientele provided in the past. Further correspondence between Artemisia and thrifty patron, Don Antonio Ruffo, elaborated and demonstrated the intricacies of seventeenth century Italian artistic patronage, and how a woman, like Artemisia, successfully navigated a system intended for men.

— Letters from Artemisia to Don Antonio Ruffo, 1649-1651 —

Some of the most profound evidence of gender induced biases in the seventeenth century Italian artistic market are located in Artemisia’s letters to Sicilian patron Don Antonio Ruffo. Ruffo lived in Messina, located in northeast Sicily, and commissioned work from Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669), Anthony van Dyck (1599-1641), and Jusepe de Ribera (1591-1652). In 1649, Ruffo owned more than 166 paintings and had begun to establish contact with and to commission paintings from Artemisia. Their documented correspondence allows incredible insights into Artemisia’s standing among contemporary collectors as well as her dynamic personality, business acumen, and artistic practice. These letters also provide an intimate window into Artemisia’s professional, artistic, and personal life. Artemisia’s letters are riddled with cultural and societal constructs of gender and patronage from a female perspective in a time of male domination in the arts and artistic patronage.

In the attempt to develop an economic perspective, Patrizia Cavazzini’s *Painting as Business In Early Seventeenth Century Rome*, studies the complexities of patronage

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29 Patrizia Cavazzini. *Painting as business in early seventeenth-century rome*. (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press. 2008). 123-130. States the following, “…no self-respecting Italian artist would have worked for the open market beyond his earliest years.” 124. Pages 20-26 mention the devaluation of art work into craft through setting a price prior to the completion of the work.
and the art market in Early Modern Italy. Richard E. Spear’s and Philip Sohm’s, *Painting For Profit: The Economic Lives of Seventeenth Century Italian Painters* provides a painter’s point of view of patronage in different cities across Italy. Both of these texts function as ideal references for researching patronage practices across Italy, and how they change based on location. These texts are also relevant because most artists during the Early Modern period, including Artemisia, traveled based on commissions and the demands of patronage. In describing the highs and lows of artistic genres, material, size, and subjects, Spear successfully builds context and background for artistic patronage during this period. The scholarship mentioned above illuminates Artemisia’s letters and provides critical insights into the seventeenth century culture and society.

There are thirteen letters of correspondence to Ruffo that span from 1649-1651. Several of these letters are from the year 1649, and these appear to be some of the first negotiations between the Artemisia and Ruffo. Artemisia utilized subversive agency through courtly language in her letters to ensure proper dialogue. Artemisia transparently addressed the question of gender in the arts through this written exchange from when Ruffo attempted to reduce the price of Artemisia’s work after the negotiation occurred. In a letter written to Ruffo on January 30, 1649, Artemisia stated, “You think of me pitiful because a woman’s name raises doubts until her work is seen. Please forgive me, for God’s sake, if I gave you the reason to think me greedy. As for the rest, I will not trouble you anymore.”

Artemisia attempted to validate her price by mentioning her experience in the patronage system, and then further attempted to legitimize her price by reminding him that she had experience in dealing with patrons, even those of higher status than he, cleverly offering him a self-portrait to “...keep in your gallery as all the other Princes do.” This gesture ensured Ruffo could compete with international aristocracy by having Artemisia’s work and more importantly, a self-portrait, in his gallery.

However, Artemisia utilized a desperate tone throughout several letters to patrons and friends, perhaps another example of Cohn’s subordination model. Artemisia’s financial concerns primarily involved health problems and her daughter’s wedding dowry. As a brief aside, it remains important to note that financial difficulties for artists in the seventeenth century did not represent the overall success or posthumous reputation of the artist. In another letter drafted to Ruffo on March 13, 1649, Artemisia claimed that she experienced bankruptcy due to an expensive wedding dowry for her only known daughter. The financial strain of raising a daughter as a woman separated from her husband and being solely financially responsible for her

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household is also documented earlier in a letter to patron Cazziano dal Pozzo in 1637. Artemisia pleaded, “I assure you that as soon as I have freed myself from the burden of this daughter, I hope to come there immediately to enjoy my native city and to serve my friends and patrons.” Artemisia had five children early in her marriage to Strozzi in 1613, but this period of her life remains obscure to historians due to a significant decrease in artistic output and known correspondences. Historians know that four of her children died young and that Artemisia married practically rather than passionately. In Baroque Italy, women who lost their virginity outside of marriage had a negative perception regardless of the circumstance. Artemisia had an expectation to marry after the trial to restore and maintain a positive reputation. She immediately married, moved to Florence, had children, and separated from her husband. Historians believe Artemisia raised her child as a single parent with little to no assistance from her husband. Therefore she was the leading provider for the family, which implied the wedding dowry would significantly alter her life in financial terms.

An example of her financial distress lies in a letter Artemisia wrote to Ruffo of her dependence upon her patrons for simple items like gloves, slippers, and money to fund artistic expenses required to complete the patron’s commission. Further evidence of her poor financial state was in the March 13, 1649 letter; Artemisia stated, “As soon as possible I will send my portrait, along with some small works done by my daughter, whom I have married off today to a knight of the Order of St. James. This marriage has broken me.” The letter continued to plea for future patronage, “...I need work very badly, and I assure Your Most Illustrious Lordship that I am bankrupt.” The letter contained an unusually desperate tone in its entirety, but the letter also offers insight into Artemisia’s personal and financial life. Although she appeared desperate, the letter concluded with a charismatic powerful note:

Further, I want Your Most Illustrious Lordship to promise me that as long as I live you will protect me as if I were a lowly slave born into your household. I have never seen Your Most Illustrious Lordship, but my love and my desire to serve you are beyond imagination. I shall not bore you any longer with this womanly chatter. The works will speak for themselves. And with this I end with a most humble bow.

Artemisia’s words highlight the impacts of gender on her marriage and her finances. The tone in this letter tends to contrast the overall tone in most letters to Ruffo, suggesting a different approach of psychological manipulation. In most letters Artemisia addressed Ruffo in an assertive, confident, and even masculine tone, but this letter seems unusually humble, personal, and even subordinate.

Another common attribute in Artemisia’s letters was Classically influenced notions of religion and virtue. The insinuation of replication or copying appeared in an October 26, 1649 letter addressed to Artemisia by Ruffo, implying there were many craftsmen selling copies of desired images. An acquaintance of Ruffo’s had interest in Artemisia’s work, specifically a large painting of *Galatea*, a composition that the acquaintance saw in Ruffo’s gallery. Ruffo demanded that the piece must be different from the piece she had created under his patronage. Artemisia boldly replied, “There was no need for you to suggest this to me since, by the grace of God and of the Most Holy Virgin, it would occur to a woman with my kind of talent to vary the subjects in my paintings; never has anyone found in my pictures any repetition of invention, not even of one hand.”

Artemisia employed the idea of divinely gifted talents to guarantee her patrons perceived her as a fine artist, not a craftsman. Through divine gifts and artistic virtue, Artemisia ensured Ruffo of her status as a fine artist and inability to duplicate any of her creations, as they were all a unique manifestation of her anointed artistic abilities.

Artemisia continued negotiations by stating she preferred not to discuss the price before she completed the work. However, she noted that if the patron must know the price, “I want five hundred ducats for both: he can show them to the whole world and, should he find anyone who does not think that the paintings are worth two hundred scudi more, I do not want him to pay me the agreed price.” In the Italian Baroque art market, artists did not usually set a price before the completion of a commissioned piece. In fact, pricing a piece before completion could diminish art as a simple craft as Spear, Cavazzini, and Sohm extensively describe. The letter continued with:

As for my doing a drawing and sending it, I have made a solemn vow never to send my drawings because people have cheated me. In particular, just today I found myself in the situation that, having done a drawing of souls in Purgatory for the Bishop of St. Gata, he, in order to spend less, commissioned another painter to do the painting using my work. If I were a man I can’t imagine it would have turned out this way, because when the concept has been realized and defined with lights and darks, and established by means of planes, the rest is

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trifle. Therefore, it seems to me that this gentleman is very wrong to ask for
drawings, when he can see the design and composition of the Galatea.⁴¹

Furthermore, Artemisia warned Ruffo that because of her Roman origins, she followed
Roman customs in regards to pricing and patronage. Each city had their own customs
for pricing and commissioning artwork, but those involved in the art market also knew
of other cities customs based on travel and various commissions across Italy. Artemisia
recognized the price of art varied based on location and customs. In the assertion that
she was Roman, she set a strict tone for negotiation and expectations.⁴² In Rome, the
cost of a painting was more expensive than a price for the same painting in other Italian
locations. Artemisia’s statement also emphasized the notion of artistic property. Her
declaration and accusation of personally experienced gender discrimination holds power
even today. In contemporary times, artistic property and license remains a profitable
legal field. The fact that Artemisia had her artistic property stolen by a male patron and
a male artist sheds light on gender biases induced through the Early Modern Italian
patronage system. It was evident that Artemisia comprehended the gender dynamics of
the competitive seventeenth century Italian art market. She judged these gender biases
as wrong and refused to be robbed of her artistic property, as she had previously. To
gain more knowledge on gender and patronage in the arts it remains important to
understand the system that these letters allude to and document, the system of Early
Modern artistic patronage.

Rarely in this period would a woman negotiate her work, but Artemisia
negotiated and delivered her work. In the Early Modern artistic market, painting
contracts between artist and patron typically occurred between two male negotiators.
The three preferred fundamental pricing mechanisms were gifting, negotiation, and
adjudication.⁴³ Often gifting was preferred form of distribution, as it would benefit the
artist financially and socially. When the artist gifted a piece, the price varied on the
patron’s perceived value rather than the actual value of the work. Therefore, artists
rarely set prices before the completion of the work, and prices could often change.⁴⁴
Gifting paintings involved negotiation on a social rather than commercial scale. When
individuals negotiated prices, the art became a commercial item rather than a social
transaction. However, records of these communications were frequently documented
through letters, receipts, most commonly verbally, meaning there were several
negotiations lost to history.⁴⁵ Fortunately, there are some remaining letters from
Artemisia to prudent collector Ruffo of Naples from 1649 to 1651. These letters provide

⁴² Richard E. Spear, Philip Lindsay Sohm, and Renata Ago. Painting for profit: the economic lives of
⁴³ Spear, et. al., 12-13.
a window into Artemisia's artistic practice and the prevalent gender biases embedded in Early Modern Italian artistic patronage.

Artemisia's letters offer provocative evidence of prevalent gender biases in the seventeenth century patronage system. The letter authored by Artemisia to Ruffo on November 13, 1649 remains of particular interest due to the savvy negotiation tactics through which Artemisia asserted herself directly rather than through a male relative or professional negotiator. The letter addressed to, “My Most Illustrious Sir,” a formal title that Artemisia utilized throughout her letters of negotiation. The letter immediately enters into price negotiations. The artist declared:

With Regard to your request that I reduce the price of the paintings, I will tell Your Most Illustrious Lordship that I can take a little from the amount that I asked, but the price must not be less than four hundred ducats, and you must send me a deposit as all other gentlemen do. However, I can tell you for certain that the higher the price, the harder I will strive to make a painting that will please Your Most Illustrious Lordship and that will conform to my tastes and yours.46

The letter continued in a direct, authoritative tone, detailing another piece that she could not lower the price on any further due to the cost of supplies, size, and models. Artemisia stated, “I only wish to remind you that there are eight figures, two dogs, and a landscape and water. Your Most Illustrious Lordship will understand the expense for models is staggering.”47 The letter concluded with bold use of a historical figure to further assert her independence as a woman negotiating her contracts. Artemisia stated, “I am going to say no more except what I have in mind, that I think Your Most Illustrious Lordship will not suffer any loss with me and that you will find the spirit of Caesar in the soul of a woman.”48 By asserting herself as a woman with the spirit of a dominant male figure, Artemisia ensured that Ruffo would not typecast her as a submissive woman who allows men to negotiate her contracts, like her female contemporaries.49 Artemisia’s statements were extraordinary and bold. Importantly, this letter was not unique. Another letter from the same year, addressed to the same patron, had a similar independent and confident tone.

In an attempt to further the notion of preconceived prices devaluing fine art to the realm of craft it remains vital to understand seventeenth century European culture towards high arts and crafts. The Genoese artist, Giovanni Battista Paggi vehemently defended painting against it being categorized as a manual art, servile, and mercenary.

While following numerous nobles of the time, Paggi argued that the negotiated prices for paintings demean the status of painting in general. Paggi declared, “If one sets a price for a painting from a painter as if one were ordering a from a carpenter, it makes it plebeian because that is what common shopkeepers do who wear smocks.”\(^50\) Paggi continues and claims a painter who agrees to compensation by the day is no better than a stonemason. In allegiance with Artemisia’s position on not wishing to disclose a price before the completion of the work, Paggi also acknowledged the subtle nuances of class association and a noble belief system that money soils the purity of art as well as the artist.\(^51\) Returning to Artemisia’s letters to Ruffo, they continually demonstrate her confidence in her ability as an artist and a negotiator through the implication that she was not a simple craftsman, but a divinely inspired artist incapable of duplicating any artistic invention of her creation. She also stated that she undervalued her work and talent through the assertion: anyone would pay two hundred scudi more for her work.\(^52\)

Artemisia also frequently utilized location to validate her artistic practice. Artemisia continued to allude to Rome, her place of birth, in several letters addressed to her patrons. Artemisia’s letters excellently documented the contrast between Roman and Neapolitan patronage practices. The following letter provides numerous insights into Artemisia’s approach and concepts of seventeenth century Italian patronage. This letter is not long, but Artemisia’s voice, confidence, and intelligence remain powerfully enlightening. Artemisia told her patron Ruffo numerous reasons to ensure the price they agreed upon initially would not decrease. Ruffo notoriously haggled fees with all artists no matter their reputation or talent, but when he attempted to lessen the price of Artemisia’s commission, Ruffo encountered a barrage of well-considered counterarguments. One of the most revealing of these arguments remains, “I must caution Your Most Illustrious Lordship that when I ask a price, I don’t follow the custom in Naples, where they ask thirty then give it for four. I am Roman, and therefore I shall act in the Roman manner.”\(^53\) Artemisia also mentioned the price per figure as another angle to procure the initial agreed upon price. The artist went on:

“In fact, if it were not for Your Most Illustrious Lordship, of whom I am so affectionate a servant, I would not have been induced to give it for one hundred and sixty, because everywhere else I have been paid one hundred scudi per figure. And this was in Florence, as well as Venice and Rome, and even in Naples when there was more money.”\(^54\)

\(^{50}\) Ibid, 137-138.  
\(^{51}\) Ibid, 137-145.  
\(^{53}\) Ibid, Letter #25. 397-398.  
\(^{54}\) Ibid, Letter #16. 390-391.
Artemisia rarely mentioned a price per figure compensation until her late letters, which may imply subtle shifts in the patronage system.

Artemisia’s tactics are enlightening in two regards. First, her comments alluded to the financial difficulties Naples experienced after the revolt of Masaniello (1647-1648), and second, this letter highlighted the claims made by Baroque painters when pressured by their patrons to lower prices.⁵⁵ In Naples, the prices for large complex subjects ranged from 200-300 ducats, while in Rome the same subjects could fetch 400-500 ducats.⁵⁶ The fluctuation in price should not be surprising, since Rome had the highest cost of living in comparison to other Italian cities. In concert with her male contemporaries in seventeenth century Naples, Artemisia often complained about the price of models.⁵⁷

Other letters to Ruffo also centered on the cost of a nude model and the acquisition of a decent model. Artemisia echoed these notions in the same letter written November 1649. Artemisia reluctantly stated a price for two pieces, 500 scudi, and claimed, “I assure Your Most Illustrious Lordship that these are paintings with nude figures requiring very expensive female models, which is a big headache. When I find good ones they fleece me, and at other times, one must suffer their pettiness with the patience of Job.”⁵⁸ The price and procurement of nude models was a common complaint from artists across Italy in the seventeenth century, but Artemisia mentioned the price of models as a frequent counterargument to thrifty patrons. In another letter to Ruffo, Artemisia stated, “When I receive the note I will finish the painting, the expenses are intolerable, because out of fifty women who undress themselves, there is scarcely one good one.”⁵⁹ Artemisia found herself forced to ask for advances, or increased funding to provide the cost for nude models. As mentioned, the price for models must have been staggering, due to the amount and frequency of this specific complaint with both male and female artists. The November 1649 letter from Artemisia fully demonstrated the complex dynamics of artistic patronage during the seventeenth century art market.

Artemisia also employed the economy of gift exchange with patrons like Ruffo, and the concept of it being impossible to reduce the price due to the cost of artistic expenses. For example, Artemisia claimed, “…I cannot give it to you for less than I have asked, as I have already overextended myself to give the lowest price. I swear, as your servant, that I would not have given it even to my own father for the price that I gave you…”⁶⁰ The letter continued to state that once Ruffo beheld the work, he would

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⁵⁶ Ibid, 116-126.
⁵⁹ Ibid, Letter #19, 393.
⁶⁰ Ibid, Letter #19, 393.
immediately understand the cost of the piece and not view Artemisia as presumptuous due to the incontestable superiority of her work. Artemisia frequently claimed that her quotes represented the lowest possible prices and they could not be lowered any further. She also suggested that her patrons get her work appraised by anyone, displaying confidence that anyone could ascertain value in her work. Artemisia’s self-awareness in her prices, talent, work, and reputation radiate through these letters. Economic historian Richard Spear claims it seems as though Artemisia did reasonably well, as she was able to demand a high summation per painting, as far as her Naples commissions, and she did not receive much less than her male equivalents for comparable works.61

Economic historian, Fernand Braudel assessed in the sixteenth century Mediterranean economy below 20 scudi a year signified a meager income, 20-40 scudi a small income, and 40-150 scudi as adequate annual income (Scudi is the plural form of scudo, the silver coin currency of the Papal States until 1866). For example, a family in Rome could live comfortably in 1600 on 90-110 scudi a year, but Rome had the highest cost of living in Italy. Most frequently Artemisia received payment in scudi; however, scholars know Artemisia’s patronage surpassed the boundaries of the Papal States. When considering the vast distance between ordinary wages and the price of art, it would have been impossible for the average person to afford an easel painting, or even a copy, which usually cost 15 scudi.62 It seems as though Artemisia made a respectable living as an artist, even though she never earned as much as her father or her male contemporaries.

— Payments to Artemisia in Comparison to her Male Contemporaries —

Undoubtedly, Artemisia never achieved the same commissions as her male counterparts, including her own father, regardless of her ability to maintain international aristocratic patronage throughout her career. In an attempt to study Artemisia’s economic condition in comparison to her male contemporaries, Spear’s “Money Matters: The Gentileschi’s Finances”, dissected Artemisia’s and Ozazio’s finances in relation to the cost of models, materials for painting, hiring assistants, and cost of living in seventeenth century Italy. The earliest documented payment to Artemisia occurred in 1615-1616 when she earned 20 scudi for an Allegory of Inclination ceiling painting for the gallery in Casa Buonarroti. Twenty scudi was a modest payment for the type of painting and other known commissions from Buonarroti.63

62 Ibid. Includes all the information from Braudel and average incomes in sixteenth century Italy, specifically Rome. 157.
63 Ibid, 147.
The next documented payment to Artemisia occurred later in her artistic career in 1627 and earned a far higher payment than the previously mentioned piece. Artemisia received 147 *scudi* for an unfortunately lost *Hercules and Omphale* commissioned by King Philip VI of Spain.\(^{64}\) This commission was not a lavish sum, in consideration of the complexity and it was notably less than what the king paid the more famous, Domenichino, for comparable work. Domenichino documented payment of 1000 *scudi* for two large canvases that belonged to the same series as Artemisia’s piece proves a pricing discrepancy indicative of gender discrimination.\(^{65}\) Most of the other documented payments derive from Artemisia’s years in Naples (1630s-1650s), when there was a wide range of payments from 17-100 *scudi*. Later in the 1640s, Artemisia painted a large eight figured *Bath Of Diana* for 195 *scudi*, regrettably this painting was also lost or perhaps misattributed to one of her numerous male peers.\(^{66}\) The links of patronage and written letters demonstrated that Artemisia collected a reputable, but not an exceptional sum, especially for a mature artist with distinguished royal patrons.

In comparison to her male counterparts, 195 *scudi* for a sizeable eight-figure canvas remained inexpensive. Artemisia’s patron Ruffo had paid Ribera 225 *scudi* for a large *Pieta*, while the same year Ruffo paid Artemisia half that for a multiple figured *Galatea*.\(^{67}\) Artemisia also made less than her father. Orazio received a commission to paint large public pieces, often religious, which ranged from 150-300 *scudi* for a few months’ work.\(^{68}\) Regrettably, there is a lack of scholarship dedicated to the cost of making a painting in seventeenth century Italy, which had a significant impact on an artist’s gross earnings. The precious pigment ultramarine blue, used most frequently in frescos or altarpieces, cost up to 50 *scudi* an ounce in Rome (1631).\(^{69}\) The cost of a large canvas made of quality materials ranged from 2-8 *scudi*. Artist’s brushes in the seventeenth-century were inexpensive, most cost less than a hundredth of a *scudo*. Spear estimates that Orazio and Artemisia, on average, spent no more than 5-15 *scudi* per painting, dependent upon size and complexity. These numbers do not include the cost of rent for a studio, models, or the cost of assistants.\(^{70}\) Unfortunately, there is not enough data to calculate Artemisia’s income over her lifetime, but what is known that Artemisia earned a relatively high income compared to the broader population. In Rome around 1607, a field worker earned about 50 *scudi* a year and a skilled craftsman about 85 *scudi* annually. In 1627 Artemisia received 147 *scudi* for her *Hercules and Omphale*, when, in comparison, a member of the Swiss Guard earned a quarter of that sum annually. Orazio’s 1605 piece, *Circumcision* eared him 303 *scudi*; although this is not

\(^{64}\) Spear, 149.  
\(^{65}\) Ibid, 148-149.  
\(^{66}\) Ibid. 149-155  
\(^{67}\) Ibid. 149.  
\(^{68}\) Ibid. 153-155.  
\(^{69}\) Ibid. 153.  
\(^{70}\) Ibid. 154-155.
his highest paid commission, this sum still rivaled that of a university professors’ annual income.\textsuperscript{71}

Although Artemisia rose to the level of aristocratic patronage, she never attained the same level of recognition or patronage as her male rivals. Her inability to reach equivalent commissions of male contemporaries may be rooted in gender biases, the demands of the art market, or personal tolls within Artemisia’s lifetime, but the fact remains clear. Artemisia earned considerate commissions, but she could never rise to the same level of patronage as her male counterparts regardless of her aristocratic connections or talent.

\textit{–Conclusion–}

In contemporary times, bankruptcy is often correlated with failure, but that is not necessarily the case with Artemisia’s bankruptcy. In fact, numerous artists in this period struggled financially. The modern notion of the starving artist has deep roots within the artistic tradition. Baroque artists such as Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669) and Adam Elsheimer (1578-1610) experienced significant financial difficulties.\textsuperscript{72}

Historians know that Artemisia took on an assistant in 1653 and still accepted patronage until 1654. Artemisia’s cause and time of death remain unknown, but scholars speculate that she may have died in the plague of 1656.\textsuperscript{73} However, poets continued to write about her into the 1690s. For example, Italian art historian Bernardo de’Dominici (1683-1759) wrote an eighteenth century biography of artists in Naples and featured Artemisia in a prominent position in the development of the city’s artistic painting style, mannerisms, and technique.\textsuperscript{74} In addition, many of her male contemporaries adopted her use of color and included artists Bernando Cacallino (1616-1656), Francesco Guarino (1611-1654), Pacecco de Rosa (1607-1656), and Agostino Beltrano (1607-1665).\textsuperscript{75} Moreover, Artemisia’s style heavily influenced Cacallino’s work to such an extent that scholars still question proper attribution; several pieces are attributed to both because the identity of the real artist remains unknown. It is clear that Artemisia had an impact on artistic culture and style while she navigated a gendered profession.

Artemisia demonstrated agency, intelligence, wit, and use of courtly language when drafting letters to patrons. She remained fully aware of the gender bias that existed when she produced art. Artemisia comprehended that men dominated the Early Modern European art market. Yet in spite of gender obstacles, Artemisia achieved aristocratic patronage and influenced artistic styles of her time. Her use of color is of

\textsuperscript{71} Spear, 157.


\textsuperscript{73} Ibid, 184-185.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid, 185.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid, 121-122.
particular importance as it inspired several male artists to utilize similar color palates. Such views are clearly expressed in a letter addressed to Duke Francesco I d’Este in 1635 stated:

However, it seems to me that for three reasons I rightly should devote part of my meager talent to Your Highness. First, because my most humble house is at the service of your illustrious house. Second, because I have served all the major rulers of Europe, who appreciate my work, even though it is the fruit of a barren tree. And third, because it would provide the evidence of my fame.76

Artemisia remained completely aware of the problem of gender in the arts. All of her letters featured some mention of gender or a gendered perspective of the arts during this period. Maybe Artemisia understood at an early period that she would have no artistic legacy as she referred to her work as the “…fruit of a barren tree…”77 This persistent acknowledgment of gender makes Artemisia’s letters and artwork particularly interesting to contemporary scholarship.

As a brief aside, Artemisia was not the only woman in this period to express resistance against imposed societal gender norms. A Corresponding Renaissance: Letters Written by Italian Women 1375-1650 by Lisa Kaborycha featured letters that contained a similar sentiment in regards to gender as Artemisia’s letters. Some of the letters are quite brazen in their wording and content, and some even more so than Artemisia’s letters. The fact that women wrote and conceptualized ingrained societal, cultural, and institutional gender discrimination at this time requires further investigation. All of these women predate the emergence of feminism by several hundred years yet they still valiantly remonstrate their oppression. Clearly, Artemisia did encounter gender obstacles on an institutional, societal, and cultural level, yet she overcame those biases to become an influential artist not only in her time but also contemporary times. Artemisia remains a true exception to her gender, and to the canon of “traditional” art history.

77 Ibid, Letter #6a. 386.


