

# ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI'S VENETIAN PAINTINGS, BETWEEN THE *QUERELLE DE FEMMES* AND MELODRAMA CHARACTERS: AN INTERTEXTUAL STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

The Italian painter Artemisia Gentileschi's (1593-c. 1653) Venetian period, dating from c. 1627 to 1630, is the least-known phase of the artist's life, due to a lack of documentary evidence and the few works that may be attributed with certainty to these years of her career. Recent research has allowed art historians (Garrard, 2020; Locker, 2021) to identify the reasons why the painter moved to Venice, the works she completed and the cultural milieu with which she engaged. Drawing from theories of intertextuality (Steiner, 1985), this article discusses how Artemisia's paintings were impacted by the changes in women's social status in early modern Venice, and considers the reciprocal influences between Artemisia's works, the cultural debates on the relation between sexes, and her innovative representations of female protagonists. I argue that Artemisia played a central role in defining a new idea of femininity in her paintings. Her works emphasised the strength of women's voices, contested the traditional association between luxury and female frivolity, and proposed new models of 'exemplary' heroines.

## INTRODUCTION

Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-c. 1653) is among the best-known female painters of early modern Europe (ffolliott, 2021), renowned for the powerful and often violent heroines that her paintings, completed in Rome, Florence, Venice, London and Naples, depict. Her ground-breaking representations of female characters exerted a deep impact not only on the visual arts but also on literary and theatrical production. This article investigates the links and reciprocal influences between Artemisia's Venetian paintings, treatises on women's worth, and melodrama scripts featuring strong female protagonists of the early seventeenth century. It also considers how these new depictions of femininity intersected with social and economic changes in early modern Italy, regarding women's new roles and status.

Despite the significant attention dedicated to her life and *oeuvre*, Artemisia's sojourn in Venice, dated approximately between 1627 and 1630, is less known to art historians. Only recent studies (Garrard, 2021; Locker, 2021) have uncovered new information regarding the reasons she moved to the city, the works she completed there, and the artists and intellectuals with whom she engaged. These new findings have allowed art historians to speculate that Artemisia's paintings led to a new way of depicting women in contemporary Venetian arts. For example, Locker (2021) suggests that Artemisia's works influenced the complex and nuanced female characters of melodrama – a new theatrical genre that combined acting, singing and music – invented in the same cultural *milieu* to which the painter belonged. Such a hypothesis is based on the clear similarities between the themes and motifs in the artist's paintings and contemporary melodrama plots. Both featured 'ancient queens and powerful women who must make tragic decisions, rampant cross-dressing, women who are driven to infanticide, suicide and duplicity' (Locker, 2021, p.97). In addition, representations of strong and fearless heroines in Artemisia's works, as well as in melodrama scripts, belonged to a larger debate on women's nature and worth, which stemmed from social and political changes and from an attempt to redefine power balances between sexes in early seventeenth-century Venice (Heller, 2004; Cox, 1995).

This article argues that Artemisia's Venetian paintings were the result of the artist's complex interaction with the social context

of contemporary Venice; the cultural debates on women's nature; and the literary texts, melodrama scripts, and paintings by other artists active in Venice, featuring innovative representations of female characters. The main objective is to show how Artemisia's artworks played a prominent role in redefining contemporary ideas of femininity, gender boundaries, and the behaviours and moral values traditionally associated with the female and male sexes.

This research analyses the intersections and reciprocal influences between different artistic expressions by adopting some of the theories gathered under the term 'intertextuality' (Allen, 2011; Baron, 2020), posited by the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (e.g., 1973) and introduced to the field of linguistics and literature in the 1960s. From the 1980s, these theories were also employed for art-historical analysis (Steiner, 1985). Intertextual studies reject the idea of language (including the artistic one) as a set of abstract norms that bears no connection to the context in which it is employed. Instead, authors like Bakhtin and Steiner maintain that language is rooted in and shaped by a specific social and cultural reality and by the other cultural discourses with which it comes into contact. As Steiner (1985, p. 58) observes, 'it is only by viewing paintings in light of other paintings and works of literature, music, and so forth, that the "missing" semiotic power of pictorial art can be augmented'.

In light of Bakhtin and Steiner's theories on intertextuality, this article considers how fuller understanding of Artemisia's artworks emerges from the analysis of their complex interactions, influences, and responses to the socio-historical and cultural context of early seventeenth-century Venice. This approach also enables refutation of the traditional interpretation of Artemisia's works as the exclusive result of her personal experience (Garrard, 1989) and restores their complexity in light of the specific *milieu* to which they belonged.

## ARTEMISIA'S ARRIVAL IN VENICE

One of the main difficulties in assessing Artemisia's Venetian period is the lack of documentary evidence illuminating her stay in the city. Only recently, Lapierre (2000) discovered several documents that allow us to date the artist's time in Venice between 1627 (Barker, 2022, p. 78) or 1628 (Locker, 2021) and 1630, when Artemisia left the city to flee the plague spreading

throughout Northern Italy. It remains difficult, however, to determine the reasons why, at the height of her career and fame among Roman patrons, Artemisia left the papal city to transfer to the *Serenissima*, Venice. Garrard (2020) suggests that the painter may have been driven by the desire to meet the Venetian female writer Lucrezia Marinella (1571-1653), known for her proto-feminist treatise *La Nobiltà et l'Eccellenza delle Donne* (The Nobility and Excellence of Women) (1600), in which the author celebrates the accomplishments of the female sex and its superiority to the male. Artemisia may have encountered Marinella during the latter's visit to Rome in 1624, or she may have read her texts, which reached widespread circulation in contemporary Europe's flourishing Venetian print industry (Di Filippo Bareggi, 1994).

Before arriving in Venice, Artemisia also seems to have come into contact with another prominent female writer of the early seventeenth century, Arcangela Tarabotti (1604-1652). A Benedictine nun in the monastery of Sant'Anna in Castello, Tarabotti is best known as the author of *La tirannia paterna* (Paternal Tyranny), in which she denounced the condition of female enforced submission to patriarchal society and laws in contemporary Venice, with particular attention given to girls forced to take the veil against their will (De Bellis, 2000). Tarabotti's brother-in-law, Jacopo Pighetti (d. 1646), was among the first, and one of the few attested, of Artemisia's patrons in Venice. According to Garrard (2020, p. 47), Tarabotti, who was well-informed about literary and artistic novelties of her time, could have suggested to Pighetti the purchase of one of Artemisia's paintings, or may have even favoured the painter's arrival in the city. Artemisia's other acquaintances in Venice included the actress and singer Virginia Ramponi Andreini (1583-1630), who became famous for her interpretations of abandoned women, a recurrent theme in Artemisia's paintings (Wilbourne, 2016), and the singer Anna Renzi (born c. 1620), considered the first prima donna of Italian theatre. In Venice, Artemisia must have been attracted to a centre bristling with innovative female writers, singers, and actresses who promoted innovative representations and lively

debates on women, in which the artist herself participated actively through her works.

## THE ARTWORKS

A key challenge for scholars investigating Artemisia's time in Venice is the lack of paintings ascribed with certainty to the years 1627-1630. The attributions that art historians have suggested so far (listed briefly below), are based on stylistic or thematic comparisons with contemporary works and with Artemisia's previous productions, although the dates proposed still lack irrefutable documentary evidence. In addition, a significant amount of the works Artemisia completed between 1627 and 1630 are now lost (Toesca, 1971).

Most of Artemisia's paintings completed during her stay in Venice feature female protagonists, both from biblical stories and Greek and Roman myth and history, often represented while committing tragic deeds or actions. For example, *Esther before Ahasuerus*, attributed by most scholars to Artemisia's Venetian period (Garrard, 2020; Locker, 2021), depicts the Babylonian queen Esther in front of her husband Ahasuerus; the heroine is begging the king to spare her people, the Israelites, from being slaughtered. Although its heroine, Esther, is fainting, Artemisia represented her in a strong stance, with her right leg supporting her body's weight, along with two servants at her sides. The connections between this painting and contemporary Venetian debates on women's voices and female garments will be analysed below.

In *Lucretia* (Figure 1), which Locker (2020) has dated to the painter's sojourn in Venice, Artemisia represented the Roman noblewoman who committed suicide after being raped by the Roman king's son, Sextus Tarquinius. Lucretia's action would spark the uprising that led to the end of the monarchy in ancient Rome.



Figure 1: Artemisia Gentileschi, *Lucretia*, c. 1627, oil on canvas, 92.9x72.7cm. Los Angeles, Getty Museum.

The theme of women committing suicide was recurrent in Artemisia's Venetian works, as in *Cleopatra* (Figure 2), attributed by Bissell (1998, pp. 230-231) to the years 1627-1630. The scene represents Cleopatra, queen of Egypt, lying half-nude after she had allowed a poisonous snake to bite her, a fatal deed undertaken to escape the shame of being captured by the Roman army.



**Figure 2: Artemisia Gentileschi, *Cleopatra*, c. 1627-1629, oil on canvas, 117x175.5cm. Rome, private collection. {{PD-US}}**

Artemisia not only represented heroic women committing suicide, but also controversial female figures perpetrating violent murders, such as her *Medea*, which Mann (2009) attributes to the artist's Venetian period. According to one of the versions of the Greek myth, Medea, abandoned in Corinth by her husband Jason, kills their children as an act of revenge. The painting displays a brutality and ferocity with few precedents in the history of Western painting, which may have stemmed, as I consider below, from contemporary discussion in Venetian intellectual environments and from the representations of cruel and vengeful women on the melodrama stage (Locker, 2021).

#### **BETWEEN THE ACCADEMIA DEGLI INCOGNITI AND FEMALE WRITERS: THE CULTURAL MILIEU**

The abundance of female characters in the works that Artemisia completed in Venice – while in alignment with her previous works – is also linked to the wider debates on women's worth in early seventeenth-century Venice. A group of intellectuals who proposed an innovative perspective on this theme was the Accademia dei Desiosi, better known as Accademia degli Incogniti ('Academy of the Unknown'). Founded in 1627 by writer Gian Francesco Loredan (1607-1661), the academy hosted artists, poets, musicians, and the first playwrights of melodrama. Artemisia's involvement with the Incogniti is documented by a portrait engraving (Figure 3) by French artist Jerome David (1605-1670), bearing the inscription: Artemisia Aentileschi Romana famosissima pittrice accad nè desiosi ('Artemisia Gentileschi Roman Famous Painter Academic in the Desiosi') (Bissell, 1998, pp. 38-9). Artemisia did not, however, enjoy full status as a member, like most women in the early modern period (Cox, 2016). Nonetheless, the letters Artemisia exchanged with several members of the group (Bissell, 1998) show that she participated actively in the Incogniti's discussions, in particular on the nature of women and their role in society.



**Figure 3: Jerome David, *Artemisia Gentileschi Romana Famosissima Pittrice Accad. Ne' Desiosi*, c. 1628, engraving, 14.1 x 8 cm. London, British Museum. © The Trustees of the British Museum.**

The Incogniti were known for their (so-called) blasphemous views on gender, which transgressed the traditional beliefs upheld by both the Catholic Church and the Venetian Republic. Although their positions on women were essentially misogynistic, the Incogniti proposed an innovative and licentious conception of female sexuality and pleasure, viewed with both fear and fascination (Heller, 2003; Muir, 2007). This irreverent perspective elicited the revaluation of characters traditionally seen as 'donne oscure e laide' ('obscure and obscene [women]') (Garzoni, 1586, p. 130), especially female rulers such as Semiramis or Cleopatra who also became the protagonists of melodrama plots (Cox, 2008).

From letters exchanged between Artemisia and Gian Francesco Loredan (Ivanoff, 1965; Bissell, 1998, pp. 165-66), it appears that Artemisia did not share the Incogniti's misogynistic opinions on the female nature. On the contrary, Artemisia most likely endorsed the proto-feminist perspective of contemporary women writers such as Marinella and Tarabotti (Garrard, 2020). Nonetheless, she must have reflected on some of the progressive aspects of the Incogniti's observations on women, in particular the freedom from a moralistic and dichotomic view of female traditional values and expected behaviours that it endorsed. For example, Artemisia's involvement with the Incogniti and their irreverent discussions on female nature may have influenced her decision to represent controversial heroines and female rulers from antiquity, such as Medea or Cleopatra.

## WOMEN IN VENICE: BETWEEN TRADITIONAL STATUS AND NEW ROLES

The innovative representations of women in Artemisia's paintings, as well as the Incogniti's texts and contemporary women writers' treatises, were prompted by profound changes regarding women's social standing in early modern Venice. Venetian society was based on the nucleus of the family, in which the rigid distinction of roles between men and women guaranteed the hegemony of the patrician class (Hacke, 2004). From the second half of the 1500s, however, Venice's economic crisis led to profound changes in marriage strategies and the family's structure. To preserve their wealth, patricians granted a dowry only to the eldest daughter, while younger girls were destined to become nuns, often against their will (Queller, Madden, 1993). In addition, the concentration of the family's inheritance in the hands of a single heir determined an increase in wealth among a few patricians, leading to those families' undisciplined purchase of expensive goods, especially clothing (Allerston, 2000).

Venetian intellectuals, and in particular its women writers, argued against the patriciate's new marriage policy, identifying it as a source of injustice especially for young women. These protests exercised significant influence on the Venetian *querelle de femmes*, a contemporary discussion centred on nature and worth of women. For the first time in Italian cultural history, intellectuals interpreted women's inferiority not as a result of their nature, but rather as the consequence of the political and social choices imposed by the family, the Church, and the State (Cox, 1995). This original perspective would lead to a wider reconsideration of female bodies, gestures, and voices, but also of women's moral values and their right to express themselves, which penetrated literature, theatre, and art, including Artemisia's paintings.

### Voices, bodies, gestures: the eloquence of Artemisia's female protagonists

One of the main characteristics of Artemisia's depictions of women in her Venetian works is the emphasis on the heroines' eloquence and the expressiveness of their movements and bodies. The pre-eminence of her heroines' gestures may have been linked to the new status of female singers and actresses on stage in the early seventeenth century, which became a major topic of debate in the Venetian *querelle des femmes*. At the beginning of the 1600s, Venice was one of the few Italian cities that allowed women to perform publicly (Zampelli, 2001). The presence of professional actresses and singers, who played an increasingly central role in melodrama troupes (Black, 2019) allowed intellectuals, but also melodrama playwrights, poets, and artists to investigate the complex relationship between women's singing, bodies and gestures.

The connection between female voices, music, and sexuality was a well-established trope in early modern Europe. For example, in 1562 the physician and philosopher Giovanni Camillo Maffei (fl. 1560s-1570s) wrote that women's voices stemmed from an irrational and coarse mind, and were thus inferior to men's (MacClintock, 1979; Gordon, 2009). In addition, Maffei underlined how women employed the same organs for both singing and sexual activity, re-enforcing the traditional view according to which female voices represented a dangerous source of erotic seduction that had to be constrained (Gordon, 2009, pp. 41-42). In early seventeenth-century Venice, however, this belief underwent a profound transformation, which led composers to emphasise women's vocality, changing the development of melodrama itself for the decades to come (Rosand, 1990). The same shift emerges in descriptions of female voices in contemporary Venice, in particular among the Accademia degli Incogniti's members. Some of its intellectuals, such as Ferrante Pallavicino (1615-

1644) in his 1642 *Retorica delle puttane* ('The Rhetoric of the Whores'), preserved the traditional association between female voice and eroticism. Other writers, however, such as the poet and playwright Giulio Strozzi (1583-1652), proposed a new interpretation of singers' performances. For example, in his encomium *Le Glorie della Signora Anna Renzi* ('The Glories of Mrs. Anna Renzi'), Strozzi describes Renzi's singing in the following terms:

The action that gives soul, spirit, and existence to things must be governed by the movements of the body, by gestures, by the face and by the voice [...] at times speaking hurriedly, at others slowly, moving the body now in one, now in another direction, drawing in the arms, and extending them, laughing and crying, now with little, now with much agitation of the hands. Our Signora Anna is endowed with such lifelike expression that her responses and speeches seem not memorized but born at the very moment [...]. She masters the scene, intends what she utters, and she utters it so clearly, that ears can [do] nothing but desire (Strozzi, 1990, pp. 428-29).

In this passage, Strozzi withdraws from the traditional and vague description of female singing while providing a detailed account of Renzi's exhibition, including her body's movements. Furthermore, the author, contrary to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century treatises, describes the singer's voice not as a sexualised and threatening entity, but rather as a powerful instrument, which gives a 'soul, spirit and existence to things' (Strozzi, 1990, p. 428).

This new conception of women's voices and bodies that emerged in the Accademia degli Incogniti finds a visual equivalent in Artemisia's paintings, particularly her *Esther before Ahasuerus* (Figure 4). Garrard (2020) highlights how this painting presents significant innovations compared to Esther's traditional iconography. For example, the two main characters are placed at the same height, while previous depictions of Esther, such as Alessandro Padovanino's (1588-1648) homonymous painting (Figure 5), usually presented Ahasuerus in a more elevated position than Esther. Moreover, the queen's energetic pose, with the left leg sustaining her body's weight and the right pointing towards the king, allows the main character to express her strength through her body's torsion.



Figure 4: Artemisia Gentileschi, *Esther before Ahasuerus*, c. 1630, oil on canvas, 208.3 x 273.7 cm. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.



**Figure 5: Alessandro Varotari, called Padovanino, *Esther before Ahasuerus*, c. 1630, oil on canvas, 213 x 317 cm. Private collection.**

Another innovation in Artemisia's painting of Esther is the position of the two servants supporting her, which differs from Padovanino's depiction. In particular, the woman on the left side of the composition directs her lips to the queen's neck, the source of her voice, almost as a sign of homage. The light concentrating on Esther's chest and neck further emphasises this part of her body – where her voice originates – as the composition's main focus, where the spectator's glance also lingers (Figure 6). Finally, Esther's semi-open mouth suggests that Artemisia represented the exact moment in which the queen is about to utter her desperate prayer. Through these compositional choices, the painter emphasised the salvific role of Esther's words for her people. In addition, this composition seems to suggest that Artemisia interpreted women's voices not as a threatening force, nor as a mere instrument of erotic seduction, but as a powerful political weapon that could save human lives.



**Figure 6: Artemisia Gentileschi, *Esther before Ahasuerus*, detail. (see Figure 4)**

#### **Luxury and gender boundaries in *Esther before Ahasuerus***

Another major theme of discussion in the early seventeenth-century *querelle des femmes*, which also emerges in Artemisia's works, were the norms that regulated the choice of garments by both men and women in early modern society. In Renaissance Venice, dress fulfilled a symbolic value, to the point that it constituted the main sign of an individual's political and economic status (Hills, 1999). In the early 1600s, however, the Republic's government implemented a series of sumptuary laws that hindered women's access to expensive clothing and goods. These norms stemmed from the hitherto-unregulated spread of luxury among patricians following the transformations in marriage policies (as above), reflecting the belief that female luxury was one of the main causes of Venetian costumes' decay and a clear sign of women's frivolity and uncontrolled sexuality (Cox, 1995; Allerston, 2000).

Against these oppressive resolutions, Lucrezia Marinella (1621) argued that women were more entitled than men to wear expensive clothing, as they were naturally superior to male counterparts. Arcangela Tarabotti asserted that luxury display was a legitimate right of the female sex, as it allowed them to display their inner beauty and virtue (De Bellis, 2000). In addition, both Marinella and Tarabotti denounced the contradictory nature of sumptuary laws. While these measures limited women's freedom, men, and especially male rulers, languished in frivolous goods, which made them weak and effeminate. Artemisia, too, seems to have taken a strong stance in the debate on female luxury in *Esther before Ahasuerus*, which echoes both Marinella and Tarabotti's positions. Esther is wearing a simple, but refined and bright dress, a sign of her inner royalty and strength. The solemnity of the queen's garments contrasts with Ahasuerus's outdated and dandyish outfit, which ironically resembles the typical clothing of Roma as depicted in the early seventeenth century (Figure 7) or the costumes of comic dress of early modern theatre, such as those designed by Inigo Jones (1573-1652) (Figure 8) (Garrard, 2020; Locker, 2021; Jones, ed. Strong, 1967). Artemisia's representation also appears to echo Marinella's protest against the unjust nature of sumptuary laws:

Under these trappings of courage and valor hide the cowardly souls of rabbits or hunted hares, and it is the same with all their other artifices. Since men behave this way, why should not those women (...) seek to augment the little beauty they possess through artifice, provided it is not offensive? (Marinella, 2009, p. 167).



**Figure 7:** Lionello Spada, *The Gypsy Fortune-Teller [sic]*, 1614-16, oil on canvas, 211 x 158 cm. Modena, Galleria Estense.



**Figure 8:** Inigo Jones, *A Star Masquer*, c. 1613, pen and black ink with watercolours, silver and gold, 31.4 x 17.4 cm. Chatsworth, Devonshire Collection.

The contrast between the two protagonists' outfits in Artemisia's painting also alludes to a shift in the moral values traditionally associated with the male and female sex. The image's focus moves from the emasculated king (whose unstable position on the throne suggests his weakness) to the strong and virile Esther, fully entitled to dress, speak, and act according to her will.

The theme of clothing was also central to another Venetian painting by Artemisia, *Hercules and Omphale*, unfortunately lost. The work is thought to have represented the tale of the queen of Lydia, Omphale, who imprisoned the hero Hercules in her palace, forcing him to dress as a woman and to sew. The Greek myth, widespread in paintings of the first half of the seventeenth century, exemplified the transformative power attributed to clothes and jewels in early modern Europe. It was believed that particular garments or accessories enabled (or forced) those who wore them to gain characteristics of the opposite sex; in particular, men who dressed in refined attires could thus become more feminine (Laquer, 1990; Jones, 2017). For this reason, the spread of luxury in early seventeenth-century Venice led to the frailty of gender distinctions and a 'fear of emasculation' (Melis, 2020, p. 101). The themes of boundary-dissolution between male and female and the spread of cross-dressing – the practice of wearing garments typical among the opposite sex – found full expression in the arts and especially in melodrama. According to Heller (2004, p. 8), this theatrical genre 'provided a fertile ground with which early moderns explored changing notions of gender and sexuality'. Artemisia's *Hercules and Omphale* addresses these anxieties, emphasising, as in her *Esther*, how vanity and excessive luxury weakened men and transformed them into effeminate creatures, unable to exercise power. Though it cannot be proven with certainty, Artemisia's painting may have drawn from the description in Marinella's *The Nobility and Excellence of Women*, in which Hercules is defined as 'vain, soft, and a great flatterer' (Marinella, 2009, p. 170). In the same passage, Marinella also highlights the Greek hero's effeminate taste for luxurious accessories, by reporting his unflattering description by the Latin poet Ovid (43 BC-AD 17):

Look at the necklaces round Hercules's neck, to whom when small the sky was already oppressive: does it not seem shameful to you to have pearl and golf round your strong arms? Would you still like to decorate your shaggy locks with ribbons and fringes? (Marinella, 2009, p. 170).

Both Artemisia's and Marinella's works supported the inversion of traditional gender roles and challenged the power balance of patriarchal society, while ridiculing men's behaviour and alleged taste for foolish luxuries.

#### **Adamant women: The revenge of Medea and Octavia**

Venetian discussions centred on gender were related not only to clothing or the infraction of boundaries between men and women but also concerned the moral values seen as typical of the female sex. Since the early Renaissance, pedagogical treatises described the conduct considered appropriate to women minutely. These texts often included descriptions of biblical and mythological characters who exemplified chaste and pious behaviour, which young girls were expected to emulate (Ajmar, 2020). During the first decades of the seventeenth century, however, and especially in Venice, intellectuals refuted the separation of ethical values based on gender while praising heroines who displayed male virtues, such as courage, strength, or leadership. For example, in *The Nobility and Excellence of Women*, Lucrezia Marinella celebrated Queen Cleopatra's ability to rule and strenuously

resist the Romans' attack, while minimising her more controversial actions, such as her suicide (Marinella, 1621, p. 108). Furthermore, several painters active in Venice depicted strong female characters from ancient myth in their paintings. Between 1620 and 1630, for example, Padovanino completed a series of representations of lesser-known ancient queens celebrated for their brave and sometimes cruel deeds (Potterton, 1979; Locker, 2017).

Artemisia's paintings of strong female characters, like *Lucretia*, followed the descriptions of exemplary heroines by Venetian artists and writers. However, her works also represented overtly negative female figures who, as Heller (2004, pp. 98-9) observes, 'no one, not even Marinella or Tarabotti, would have defended'. Instead, Artemisia's representations of immoral female characters intersected with the complex and ambiguous discussions on 'exemplary' women current in the *Accademia degli Incogniti*, whose members' literary works transformed famous female characters from models of modesty and piety to treacherous, manipulative, and erotic figures. These female characters also found space in contemporary melodrama plots, which display 'emblematic women who resist easy categorisation according to modern biological and behavioural norms' (Heller, 2004, p. 42).

It appears likely that Artemisia's depictions of eloquent, ambivalent, and cruel figures provided a model for the *femmes fortes*; the strong female characters of seventeenth-century melodrama (Heller, 2004). A striking example is Artemisia's *Medea* (Figure 9): the woman is depicted in the foreground of the painting and her dress slips along her arm, revealing her muscular shoulder and mighty neck. Artemisia's programmatic intent to emphasise Medea's violent action appears even more evident if one compares the painting to another contemporary depiction of an infanticide committed by a woman, the *Theoxena of Thessaly* (Figure 10) by Padovanino. In this work, the female protagonist is represented in profile, thus hiding both the child's and the woman's bodies and expressions, while Theoxena accomplishes her hideous crime with surreal calm (Locker, 2021).



**Figure 9: Artemisia Gentileschi, *Medea*, c. 1630, oil on canvas, size and location unknown.**



**Figure 10: Alessandro Varotari, called Padovanino, *Theoxena of Thessaly/The Jew mother/Medea kills her children*, c. 1630, oil on canvas, 118 x 102 cm. Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia.**

Locker (2021) suggested a possible connection between Artemisia's painting and Medea's description in Gian Francesco Loredan's *Scherzi Geniali* (1642), which interpreted the ancient myth in an ironic and misogynistic key. The irreverent nature of Artemisia's painting emerges in the child's plump and rascally face, which does not arouse piety but rather a sense of repugnance (Locker, 2021). As Garrard (2020) observes, however, the irony in Artemisia's paintings leads not to the female figure's devaluation, but rather an emphasis on her strength.

The centrality of violent women in melodrama plots, and their probable connection to Artemisia's works, emerges, for example, in the *Incoronazione di Poppea* ('The Coronation of Poppea') written by a member of the *Incogniti*, Giovanni Francesco Busenello (1598-1659), with music by Claudio Monteverdi. In its plot, Ottavia – abandoned by her husband, the Roman emperor Nero – finds revenge by ordering his killing, but the attempt fails and Ottavia is sent into exile. In a crucial passage from the first act, Ottavia, echoing the polemical texts by Arcangela Tarabotti (Heller, 2000), laments women's condition of inferiority (Rosand, 1990) and accuses men of tyranny against even their *genetrices*:

Oh, what a miserable sex is woman!

Though by the will of heaven women are born to freedom,

the ties of wedlock made us slaves in bondage.

Though man is born of woman,

what a miserable sex they make us!

We are shaping the limbs of impious tyrants,

we are suckling a murderer, a hangman who will

smite and slay us;

And we are helpless in the hands of Fortune

that takes our bodies to create destruction.

(Busenello, 2010, pp. 35-6)

What both Medea and Octavia share is their refusal to surrender to their destiny. Betrayed and abandoned, Medea finds revenge by killing her husband's son, thereby regaining control of the life (and death) of that which she had borne, in accordance with Octavia's lament. The fundamental difference between the two female protagonists, however, resides in Medea's ability to fulfil her tragic action, while Octavia eventually capitulates and is reduced to silence. The main novelty of Artemisia's works thus comprises 'the foregrounding of an amoral protagonist who breaks social rules to assert a woman's right to independent agency' (Garrard, 2020, p. 194-95).

### CONCLUSION

This discussion has sought to demonstrate how Artemisia's paintings were at the centre of the most important debates on women's nature in early seventeenth-century Venice. It is argued that her representations of women protagonists, as in *Esther before Ahasuerus*, proposed an innovative interpretation of the female voice's strength. Artemisia's works also challenged traditional notions of dress and luxury and challenged the moral values associated with the male and female sexes, for example in her lost *Hercules and Omphale*, and again in *Esther before Ahasuerus*. Finally, her Venetian productions questioned contemporary ideas of female exemplarity with depictions of immoral and cruel heroines, such as *Medea*.

Artemisia's works stemmed from the profound transformations in Venetian society and formed part of a series of depictions of femininity in contemporary art, literature, and theatre. Her paintings intersected with the treatises of female writers like Lucrezia Marinella and Arcangela Tarabotti, the performances of singers Anna Renzi and Virginia Ramponi Andreini, and the irreverent discussions of the poets, scriptwriters, and intellectuals in the Accademia degli Incogniti. As some scholars have suggested (Heller, 2004; Garrard, 2020), Artemisia may have had a leading role in shaping a new type of *femmes fortes* representation. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that her works formed part of a larger network of innovative depictions of women, which shared similar motives, subjects, and themes. The complex *milieu* to which Artemisia belonged shows how artistic language, as sustained by intertextual studies, '[involves] co-ownership, intersecting responsibilities, overlapping agencies and shared origins' (Baron, 2020, p. 275).

The examination of Artemisia's paintings not merely as 'monologic entities' (Allen, 2011, p. 19) but as part of a larger cultural discourse allows us to gain deeper understanding of their meanings. This methodological approach, based on intertextual studies, provides an insight to the paintings' responses to, and influences on, the other artistic, literary, and theatrical works and the broader social context to which they belonged.

*Note: unless otherwise stated, translations from Italian are the author's own. This discussion adopts the recognised designation of Artemisia Gentileschi as 'Artemisia', distinguishing her work and career from that of her father, fellow painter Orazio Gentileschi (1563-1639).*



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