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Sarah Paul
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

Artemisia Gentileschi, a female Baroque Artist from the 17th century, was an exceptional artist who dealt with difficult themes and female subjects. While there has been a plethora of analysis of her Judith series, there has been less focus on her Lucretia. I look at Artemisia Gentileschi's "Lucretia" (c. 1621), through the various narratives of Lucretia and the history of sexual violence to analyze the strength and female agency that is emphasized. I argue that the strength and musculature in the hands of Lucretia emphasize her female agency and autonomy to make a choice following her sexual assault. I highlight Gentileschi's previously under-acknowledge depiction of strong and musculature hands.

Keywords

Art History, Artemisia Gentileschi, Sexual Violence

Disciplines

Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture | History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology | Women's Studies

Comments

Written for ARTH 400: Seminar in Art History

**Lucretia's Hand: The Influence of Myth and Sexual Violence on Artemisia Gentileschi's
Lucretia**

Sarah Paul
Professor Felicia Else
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Introduction

Lucretia, the legendary heroine of ancient Rome, has been discussed by both historians and artists since the first written record from the early sixth century BC. The legend of Lucretia is a story filled with violence, rape, revenge, and sacrifice. This myth and the idea of Lucretia as heroine rests on the belief of feminine virtue and sacrifice. But this is not all that it is. Instead of focusing on previous held notions of feminine virtue and sacrifice, I will focus on the darker part of the legend which is about violence against women and how such women responded with strength and courage. Traditionally, depictions of Lucretia show the dramatic moment when she is raped by Sextus Tarquinius.

In this paper, I will focus on the painting, *Lucretia*, c. 1621 by Artemisia Gentileschi and compare it to traditional representations of Lucretia from the Renaissance and Baroque. This painting, made during the Italian Baroque (late sixteenth-century to early eighteenth-century), depicts a pivotal moment from the story of Lucretia. Gentileschi shows a woman (Lucretia) in distress in a dark room as she looks upward. She is depicted in three-quarter view with light highlighting her face and breast. Her exposed chest, the blade of a dagger, and disarray of her clothing reference a violent attack. Unlike previous depictions of Lucretia, Gentileschi does not focus on the violent moment of the rape by Sextus Tarquinius. Instead, she reimagines the tradition of depicting the subsequent suicide by showing the physical and emotional strength of Lucretia as she grapples with the psychological aftermath of such a violent assault. Lucretia's strength is emphasized through her powerful hands as they clutch her breast and dagger, juxtaposing the strength of Lucretia with symbols of female chastity. This painting, like many others of Lucretia, was influenced by various iterations of the myth as well as the prevalence of sexual violence during the Renaissance and Baroque. Biblical and Ancient heroines such as

Susanna and Mary Magdalene also influenced the way in which Gentileschi depicted Lucretia. In this paper, I will investigate the role that female agency and strength plays in the way that Gentileschi depicts Lucretia through her hands.

Different Versions of Narrative of Lucretia

The story of Lucretia's rape and suicide has many different iterations that have been rewritten and retold throughout history. Ian Donaldson's book, *The Rapes of Lucretia*, examines the various tellings of the myth of Lucretia from Ancient Rome to the Renaissance. The ancient Roman historian, Titus Livy (64/59 BCE – 17 AD), was one of the first to provide a narrative of Lucretia's story.¹ It was published between 27 and 25 BCE and was most well-known account of the early history of Rome and description of Lucretia's rape set around 509 BCE. Stephanie Jed provides the following summary of the story of Lucretia in her book, *Chaste Thinking: The Rape of Lucretia and the Birth of Humanism*.²

“One night, during the siege of Ardea (509 B.C.) the noble soldiers, in the midst of their lavish eating and drinking, get into an argument over which of their wives is most worthy of praise. Collatinus, the husband of Lucretia, convinced that he will win the argument, persuades the others to go that night and see what their wives are up to when they expect their husbands to be absent. All of the wives are found reveling except for Lucretia, who is found spinning. Lucretia thus wins the chastity contest.

Sextus Tarquinius, the son of the tyrant, is so impressed by Lucretia's chastity on the night of the husbands' unexpected visit that he resolves, on that occasion, to return soon and rape her. A few days later, he goes to Lucretia's house alone. Lucretia shows him gracious hospitality and puts him up in a guest chamber. In the middle of the night, he comes to Lucretia's room with his sword drawn and tries to seduce her. When he finds her unmoved by his entreaties, Tarquin threatens to kill her, place a servant beside her in bed, and claim, if she will not yield to his desire, that he has discovered them in adultery. Fearing his threat to her chaste reputation, Lucretia yields, and Sextus enjoys her and leaves.

¹ Titus Livy and Valerie M. Warrior, *The History of Rome, Books 1-5* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub., 2006), vi.

² Stephanie H. Jed and Coluccio Salutati, *Chaste Thinking: The Rape of Lucretia and the Birth of Humanism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 9-10.

Lucretia immediately summons her father and husband, who arrive accompanied by Publius Valerius and Lucius Junius Brutus (the ancestor of Marcus Brutus, Caesar's assassin.) Lucretia tells them what has happened and asks them to promise to punish the rapist. Her kinsmen try to convince her that although her body was violated, her mind remains chaste; but Lucretia insists that she must kill herself as proof of her efforts to preserve her chastity and because her chastity is no longer intact. While Lucretia's kinsmen are paralyzed with grief and tears by her suicide, Brutus takes the knife from her breast and swears by it that he will vindicate her honor by expelling the Tarquins, thereby liberating the Romans from their suffering under tyranny. Lucretia's body is carried to the forum, where Brutus urges the populace to help him make good on his word. After liberating Rome from tyranny, Brutus founds the institution of the Roman Republic and is hailed as a hero. He and Publius Valerius become the consuls of Rome."

This summary of the narrative of Lucretia states that her rape and subsequent death led to the Roman revolution and the establishment of the Roman Republic. Donaldson looks at the different iterations of Lucretia's narrative and provides an important analysis of the political importance of her rape and suicide. He believes that certain elements of the Livy's story of Lucretia "have been fashioned into a powerful aetiological myth, intended to rehearse and to explain the origins of certain fundamental Roman ideals."³ This means that Livy's narrative was meant to function politically as the rape led to the overthrow of the Tarquinius' and a more just government. Because of this, the focus was more about the freedom of Roman citizens rather than the safety or virtue of a Roman woman.

Rather than focusing on expanding on the violence of the actual rape itself, Livy focuses on the leadup to her rape and the aftermath of her suicide where Lucretia's father and husband urged the Roman people to take up arms, resulting in the founding of the Roman Republic. For Livy, the story of Lucretia is most important in leading to the Roman rebellion rather than issues of sexual assault and violence against women. Livy sees female sexuality rather simply, either that the woman is or is not chaste. Because of this, he describes the suicide of Lucretia in greater

³ Ian Donaldson, *The Rapes of Lucretia: A Myth and Its Transformations*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 8.

detail than the rape.⁴ Sandra R. Joshel expands on issues of sexuality in her chapter, “The Body Female and the Body Politic: Livy’s Lucretia and Virginia,” and it provides a critical analysis of Livy’s story of Lucretia in terms of sexuality and the female body in Ancient Rome. She states that during the time in which the book was written, “the adultery law made sexual relations between a married woman and a man other than her husband a criminal offense.”⁵ This law from the late 1st century BCE resulted in Lucretia killing herself because of immorality and lack of honor. Despite the sexual relations being under force, Lucretia still believed that she had lost her chastity and honor, a belief that wasn’t held by her father and husband. In Livy’s account of the rape of Lucretia, Rome is politically transformed by the rape of Lucretia and the subsequent action that men took to restore their honor.⁶ This suicide removes the loss of chastity that resulted from the sexual assault.

Whereas Livy focused on the suicide and the chastity of Lucretia, Ovid’s *Fasti* (c. 8 CE) focuses on the role of women in Ancient Rome.⁷ Ovid’s account of Lucretia focuses on the domestic role of women in Ancient Rome, making her character’s ultimate suicide a result of the rules by which females must live by.⁸ Ovid’s story provides a dramatized version that builds up to the ultimate moment where she kills herself due to the shame of no longer being pure. He focuses on the emotional aftermath of the rape and the emotions that one must deal with after going through such an ordeal.⁹ Unlike Livy, Ovid focuses on the emotional aspects of the story, providing detail about her discussion with her family and her suicide.

⁴ Sandra R. Joshel, “The Body Female and the Body Politic: Livy’s Lucretia and Verginia,” in *Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 120.

⁵ Joshel, “The Body Female”, 114.

⁶ Joshel, “The Body Female”, 117.

⁷ Ovid and James George Frazer, *Ovid’s Fasti (Book II)*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 111-119.

⁸ A.G. Lee, “Ovid’s Lucretia,” *Greece and Rome* 22, no. 66 (1953): 112.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/s001738350001189x>.

⁹ Anthony Bowen, *The Story of Lucretia: Selections from Ovid and Livy*, (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1987), 41-42.

In the late first century CE, Plutarch (46 – 119 CE), wrote about Lucretia in his book, *The Parallel Lives: The Life of the Publica*. This book contained several biographies of famous pairs of Greeks and Romans, where he drew comparisons of both their physical appearance and moral character.¹⁰ Like Ovid’s interpretations of the myth of Lucretia, Plutarch was interested in the issue of Roman virtue as well as the political actions that took place by Brutus because of this rape and suicide. In Plutarch’s book, he focuses on Brutus, the man who led the rebellion against the Tarquins, as the main character as he “finds Brutus’s behavior more deeply perplexing.”¹¹ In this account, Plutarch wavers between condemnation and praise for Brutus in restoring glory to his family but is also concerned that this attempt to restore honor to his family was motivated by his want for acclaim rather than to avenge Lucretia.

The story of Lucretia moved away from the classical to a more Christian theme under Saint Augustine in his book, *The City of God* (c. 426 CE). In this Book I, chapter 19, he uses the virtuous Lucretia to defend the honor of Christian women who had been raped in the sack of Rome in the early 5th century. Despite her being seen as a model of virtue and leading to the Roman Republic, Augustine argued that “in killing herself, Lucretia was killing the chaste and innocent.”¹² Assuming that she did not consent to the rape, Lucretia was innocent, and her suicide was not necessarily due to her innocence. Augustine questioned whether she may have been guilty or complicit in the rape as she committed suicide. Stephanie Jed argues that the question of the validity of her suicide was important because during the Christian era, “the

¹⁰ Plutarch, John W. McFarland, Audrey Graves, and Pleasant Graves, *Lives from Plutarch: The Modern American Tradition of Twelve Lives* (New York, NY: Random House, 1967).

¹¹ Donaldson, *The Rapes of Lucretia*, 122.

¹² Peter Highland, “Ian Donaldson, ‘The Rapes of Lucretia. A Myth and Its Transformations’ (Book Review),” *A.U.M.L.A.: Journal of the Australasian Universities Modern Language Association*, (Melbourne: Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association, 1984), 245.

Church Father stressed the difference between rape and adultery.”¹³ As Lucretia was from pagan Rome, Augustine has difficulty interpreting her story under the ideals of chastity and virtue of Christian woman who were raped and did not commit suicide during the 5th century sack of Rome.

During the Renaissance, writers continued to discuss the narrative of Lucretia and the importance of chastity and honor, but this time under the umbrella of Humanism. Humanist literature during this period emphasized the Renaissance belief in female virtue and chastity. These beliefs about the ideal and chaste female were reflected in literature by Salutati, Boccaccio, and Petrarch. Petrarch’s poem number 262 from his 14th century collection, *Canzoniere* addresses the theme of Lucretia and investigates her suicide and honor.¹⁴ In the poem from *Canzoniere*, Petrarch “agonized over Lucretia,” wondering whether her “actions were splendid or were they deeply flawed?”¹⁵ He wonders whether Lucretia’s suicide was not necessary because she was not complicit in the act. Ultimately, he states that all the philosopher’s wisdom would fall “and we would see hers [Lucretia’s wisdom] soar above them” as her suicide was the right choice and showed her wisdom in believing that her virtue was more important than her life.¹⁶ Humanists like Petrarch were much more sympathetic to the pagan Lucretia’s action due to their interest in reviving antiquity. This belief was not held by all during the Renaissance due to the sexist belief in the feminine ideal and the importance of female virtue and chastity. Like Petrarch, in *Declarius Mulieribus* Boccaccio argued that Lucretia’s suicide was just as it protected her honor and chastity. Boccaccio stated that “she cleansed her shame harshly...she

¹³ Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 218.

¹⁴ Petrarca, Francesco and Mark Musa, *Petrarch the Canzoniere, or Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1996), 366-367.

¹⁵ Donaldson, *The Rapes of Lucretia*, 149.

¹⁶ Petrarca, *Petrarch the Canzoniere*, 367.

should be exalted with worthy praise for her chastity.”¹⁷ Unlike St. Augustine and his contemporary Salutati, Boccaccio believed that Lucretia not only did what was necessary to preserve her chastity and restore honor, but that others should follow her example and see her as the ideal of chastity.

However, other texts from the Renaissance raised questions about whether Lucretia should be seen as the pinnacle of female virtue. Colluccio Salutati’s essay, *Declamatio Lucretiae*, written between 1367 and 1391 expanded upon St. Augustine’s argument that Lucretia should not be seen as the ideal of chastity as she was complicit.¹⁸ Salutati provides an imagined conversation between Lucretia, her father, and husband just before she commits suicide. In this conversation Lucretia states that “unless by the strength and courage of dying, my wretched self-will conserve the shameful disgrace of infamy, that I preferred to live as an adulteress rather than to die chaste...I will be established as a disgraced woman.”¹⁹ This conversation provides the reasons that Lucretia gave for her suicide whilst also allowing the sociopolitical climate of Renaissance Florence to have a say. The cultural expectations of women and the importance of the chaste female and familial ties during the Renaissance allowed Salutati to question whether the suicide was just or whether she was complicit in the rape.

Niccolò Machiavelli used Lucretia’s myth throughout his comedies to discuss Lucretia’s chastity whilst also criticizing the sociopolitical climate of Florence.²⁰ In these writings he used the story of Lucretia to highlight Ancient Roman culture and the effect it had on Lucretia compared to his own society in the Renaissance. In his interpretation, Machiavelli does not state

¹⁷ Giovanni Boccaccio and Guido A. Guarino, *Concerning Famous Women*, (New York: Italica Press, 2011), 101-104.

¹⁸ Jed, *Chaste Thinking*, 149-152.

¹⁹ Jed, *Chaste Thinking*, 150-151.

²⁰ Niccolò Machiavelli, Mark Jurdjevic, and Meredith K. Ray, *Machiavelli: Political, Historical, and Literary Writings*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).

that Lucretia was raped but instead said that she was seduced. Machiavelli's sexist and facetious view of Lucretia argued that this seduction and subsequent fornication led to an outcome that was common of women during the Renaissance who engaged in extramarital affairs. Despite this commentary, extramarital affairs by women during the Renaissance were not common.

Machiavelli used the myth of Lucretia to provide a commentary on the issues of female chastity and virtue during the Italian Renaissance. Overall, the plethora of interpretations of the myth of Lucretia from the Renaissance highlights the important role that female chastity and virtue played. Throughout these narratives, there was a mixture of emphasis on blame, intent, strength, and virtue that was influenced by the sociopolitical climate in which it was created and their views towards women. These narratives influenced artists who chose to depict Lucretia. Such fluid meanings will inform Artemisia Gentileschi, another Roman woman and artist, who chooses to emphasize the strength of Lucretia through her hand.

Sexual Violence Against Women: Antiquity to Baroque

To understand how Artemisia depicted Lucretia, it is important to understand the history of sexual violence from antiquity to the baroque. Throughout history, sexual violence against women has been prevalent and this violence has been translated into art. To understand the way in which sexual violence was committed during the Italian Renaissance and Baroque, one must first understand the sociopolitical sphere in which it was committed and the legality of rape. During the Renaissance, rape carried very different implications from today, as "intercourse without consent was incorporated into discussions of other offences, such as adultery or

defloration.”²¹ Defloration or coerced consent was categorized according to Ancient Roman definitions of *stuprum* and *raptus*. During the historical period of Rome, “*stuprum* referred to when one person was used by the other to gratify his lust.”²² Because of this, *stuprum* was not usually thought to as forcible sex outside of a wartime context and had to be qualified in other cases. Outside of war, it was difficult for *stuprum* to be quantified. Because of this, *stuprum*, in the case of Lucretia, did not fully apply despite the question of whether she consented to the rape. According to Livy, Lucretia only ‘consented’ to the rape over threat of murder against herself and her servant.²³ This means that Lucretia only let this happen because she was scared for her and her servants’ lives. *Raptus* meanwhile “did not itself actually denote, a sexual act...its primary meaning was forcible abduction.”²⁴ This eventually included a sexual act from the Classical Period onward to the Renaissance and Baroque.

During the Renaissance, “rape was defined as any sexual act outside marriage, and in particular applied to sexual intercourse with virgins,” yet it did not apply to consensual acts.²⁵ The focus on virgins who were forcibly deflowered had a much different meaning than those who consensually had sexual intercourse outside of marriage. Despite these definitions that dated back to Ancient Rome, in the sixteenth century, “the definition of rape was widely discussed by lawyers, on the basis of Roman law and former jurisprudence.”²⁶ The government and lawyers

²¹ Nicholas Davidson, “Theology, Nature, and the Law: Sexual Sin and Sexual Crime in Italy from the Fourteenth to Seventeenth Century,” in *Crime, Society, and Law in Renaissance Italy*, (Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 83-84.

²² Angeliki E. Laiou, *Consent and Coercion to Sex and Marriage in Ancient and Medieval Societies*, (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1993), 46.

²³ Titus Livy and Valerie M. Warrior, *The History of Rome, Books 1-5*, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2006), 110.

²⁴ Angeliki E. Laiou, *Consent and Coercion*, 50.

²⁵ Daniela Lombardi, “Intervention by Church and State in Marriage Disputes in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Florence,” *Crime, Society, and Law in Renaissance Italy*, (Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 152.

²⁶ Elena Fasano Guarini, “The Prince, the Judges, and the Law: Cosimo I and Sexual Violence, 1558,” *Crime Society and Law in Renaissance Italy*, (Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 140.

disagreed on how to define rape due to various religious, sociopolitical beliefs during the Italian Renaissance. This led to difficulty defining the crime itself and prosecuting it if people cared enough to do so.

Sexual violence during the Italian Renaissance and Baroque was an incredibly common occurrence that often wasn't seen as all that important or problematic. This was because "sexual assault against women was seen as just another sort of assault" in a long list of assaults that were common during the sixteenth century.²⁷ Violence against women including sexual assault during this period was seen as typical of sexuality and common. Because of the sociopolitical climate and the prevalence of violence against women, rape prosecution was dependent on a woman's age and status. For example, "the victimization of children was treated with a stern hand" whilst "unmarried girls of marriageable age, found their rapists penalized with little more than a slap on the wrist."²⁸ This meant that wealthy men who sexually assaulted women of a lower class got away with it while more attention was drawn when upper-class women were assaulted.

In cases that involved women of a higher class or children, rape was sometimes prosecuted. Yet, the low rate of prosecution of rape during the Renaissance emphasizes how it was not regarded as an important crime. When sexual assault crimes against women were brought before the court, they often were for those who were well-off. Wealthier families were the only ones that were brought to court due to the higher dowries, marriage ties, and loss of reputation associated with the rape of a virgin. In these cases, it was more about the fathers or men of the family restoring their honor and getting their money back. To gather evidence in these cases, "the Roman courts would depose the parties involved – the family, the neighbors, the victims,

²⁷ Nicholas Davidson, "Intervention by Church and State," 84.

²⁸ Guido Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros: Sex Crime and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 90.

the accused” to piece together the facts.²⁹ What was problematic in cases like this, is that men had more credibility due to their gender and the patriarchal society. During the Italian Renaissance and Baroque, the court often employed torture techniques to establish credibility.³⁰ Due to the fact that young women were seen as second-class citizens and that many of these women had engaged in sexual intercourse, no matter that it was coerced, they were not trusted as credible witnesses. Cases that concerned sexual assault were uncommon during the Renaissance and Baroque and often led to outcomes that were less than satisfactory.

Through court rulings as well as outside the court, young unmarried women who were of age and raped often were provided with reparations that were meant to undo the wrongdoing if the courts found the accused guilty. In the marriage system in Italy, dowries were especially important in securing a good match. The dowry is “a sum of money or other, usually fungible, assets handed by a wife’s family, most often by her father, to her husband.”³¹ These dowries were a marriage custom, and it was expected that the young woman would be a virgin. If the women were not virgins, their dowries often had to be larger to get the males family to accept. In cases of upper-class women who were raped, “dowries could be secured by individuals to right a sexual wrong, to restore honor, and to grant a maiden a chance at a stable life.”³² During this period, the judicial process required the “man who was guilty of non-violent rape to either marry or to give a dowry to the woman.”³³ In the case of Artemisia Gentileschi, she was granted a dowry and then married another man just after the case to remedy this rape and loss of virginity.

²⁹ Sarah McPhee and Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Bernini’s Beloved: A Portrait of Costanza Piccolomini*, (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2012), 50.

³⁰ Sarah McPhee, *Bernini’s Beloved*, 50.

³¹ Thomas J. Kuehn, Review of Isabelle Chabot “La dette des familles: femmes, lignage et patrimoine à Florence aux XVe et XVIe siècles, (H-Italy: H-Net Reviews, February 2014), 1.

³² Sarah McPhee, *Bernini’s Beloved*, 32.

³³ Daniela Lombardi, *Intervention by Church and State*, 153.

This directly benefitted her father as he was able to marry her off to well-off family even though she was no longer a virgin. This referenced old rules of Roman law that allowed the assaulted women to still have a good marriage following the loss of virginity. Overall, the dowry and marriage were more important to protect the honor of the father or family rather than to avenge the woman.

In 1611, Artemisia Gentileschi was raped by the painter, Agostino Tassi, who was a friend of her father, Orazio Gentileschi. The following year, Orazio Gentileschi sued Tassi for Artemisia's loss of virginity and achieved a dowry to secure her a marriage. The importance of the chaste young woman and sexual violence during the Renaissance is reflected in the narrative of Lucretia. Gentileschi's experience as a young woman who was a victim of sexual assault as well as the following trial influenced the way she depicted Lucretia as a strong female and not a passive victim when she prepared to kill herself.

Renaissance Images of Sexual Violence

Visual images of rape dating before or during the time of Gentileschi were portrayed by artists such as Sandro Botticelli, Lucas Cranach the Elder, Raphael, Paolo Veronese, Titian, and Tintoretto. Images of Lucretia featured among other pagan subjects like the Sabine Women, Europa, and Judith. The abducted figures as well as those who were sexually assaulted were meant to be depicted in a certain way. In his book, *On the Art and Life of Collective Sexual Violence in Renaissance Italy*, Yael Even states that in narrative paintings, "the figures had to express the cries, fear, pain, and surprise" and "these figures should be in postures of defense, melancholy, and sorrowful."³⁴ Even's structure on how to depict abducted and raped persons was

³⁴ Yael Even, *On the Art and Life of Collective Sexual Violence in Renaissance Italy*, (New York, NY, Vol. 23, No. 4, 2004), 7.

translated into depictions of the Rape of Lucretia such as Titian's Tarquin and Lucretia and Botticelli's Story of Lucretia. In each of these scenes, Lucretia was depicted in fear and pain as she was sexually assaulted by Tarquinius. Traditional depictions of Lucretia from the Renaissance and Baroque eroticized the violence and fear on Lucretia's face as well as her sexual body.

Such images of rape and sexual violence were used to make a promote sociopolitical ideals and make a statement about the importance of a women's chastity and the ideal virtues of a bride. According to Yael Even, in sixteenth-century Italian art, images of rape "such as the Rape of Sabine were used, first privately, as lessons for virtuous brides and, then publicly, as promotional governmental tools."³⁵ To promote these ideals, scenes of rape and the women themselves were glorified and eroticized no matter whether they were pagan or mythological subjects. In the book, *Images of Rape: The Heroic Tradition and Its Alternatives*, Diane Wolfthal states that Titian's *Rape of Europa*, like many other paintings of rape, deliberately eroticizes women who were victim of sexual violence. This can be seen in the nudity of the victims as well as their idealized feminine attributes. In this image, like other Renaissance paintings of Rape, Titian eroticized Europa's behavior and posture through her open legs and breasts falling out of her dress to highlight her sexual desirability. In addition, "the disarray of clothing or hair" eroticized the rape scene by showing the aftermath of a sexual assault.³⁶ Heroic rape imagery from the Italian Renaissance and Baroque often eroticized the sexual assault itself. This results in an extremely problematic imagery that was translated to various depictions of Lucretia. Because

³⁵ Yael Even, *Commodifying Images of Sexual Violence in Sixteenth-Century Italian Art*, (New York, NY, Vol. 20, No. 2, 2001), 13.

³⁶ Diane Wolfthal, *Images of Rape: the "Heroic" Tradition and Its Alternatives*, (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 21-22.

of this eroticized imagery, the focus of images of rape from the Italian Renaissance and Baroque was problematic and was more focused upon the importance of the chastity and virtue of women.

Images of Lucretia during the Renaissance and Baroque

The rape of Lucretia was a common theme in painting since Ancient Rome, but representation of the narrative was particularly popular during the late Italian Renaissance and early Baroque period. These representations of the rape of Lucretia glorified sexual violence and heroic suicide in her narrative. During this period, there were several different ways in which Lucretia was represented. Botticelli's 1500-01 painting, *The Story of Lucretia*, shows the entire narrative of Lucretia as seen in ancient writings (Figure 2). It is made up of "three episodes, beginning at the left with the sexual assault...to the revolution that created the republic...and on the right the suicide of Lucretia."³⁷ Botticelli dramatically depicts the entire story as gathered from various historical sources. Paintings that depicted the entire story were often placed on cassoni, or marriage chests.³⁸ The placement upon cassoni resulted in the emphasis on honor, chastity, and sacrifice that were believed important throughout Ancient Rome and the Italian Renaissance. Cassone's were "large, decorated chests that contained a bride's dowry or was given as a wedding present."³⁹ These chests often depicted scenes from the bible, classical history or mythology that contained a lesson or moral for the couples. The depiction of the story of Lucretia and the belief that she was the emblem of virtue emphasizes the importance of a chaste and respectful marriage.

³⁷ "The Story of Lucretia," The Story of Lucretia | Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Accessed March 2, 2022.

³⁸ Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

³⁹ Ian Chilvers, "cassone," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Art and Artists*, (Oxford University Press, 2015).

Many depictions of the myth of Lucretia show her as a solitary figure either in the nude or fully clothed as she commits suicide. Examples include Lucas Cranach the Elder's 1529 painting of *The Suicide of Lucretia* (Figure 3), Raphael's 1508-1510 drawing of *Lucretia* (Figure 4), Paolo Veronese's 1580 painting of *Lucretia* (Figure 5), and Guido Reni's 1640-1642 *Lucretia* (Figure 6). Each of these depictions show Lucretia slightly differently but in each, she is depicted as a solitary figure as she pierces her chest with a dagger following her rape by Sextus Tarquinius. Like previous iterations by Renaissance artists, Lucretia is eroticized and depicted in the feminine ideal as she prepares to kill herself.

Another example of the solitary Lucretia is Lorenzo Lotto's 1533 painting, *Portrait of a Woman Inspired by Lucretia* (figure 7). Unlike other solitary figures of Lucretia, Lotto "visualizes the ancient heroine's virtue in the person of a contemporary, living woman."⁴⁰ The modern Lucretia which is the subject of the painting holds two pieces of paper, one with an image of Lucretia's suicide which is reminiscent of the previous solitary Lucretia's discussed above and the last words according to Livy. The use of the contemporary woman who is well dressed according to the standards of a well-off 16th century lady and a drawing of Lucretia's suicide provides a relationship between the virtue of the past Lucretia and the woman represented in the portrait.

Another way that the myth of Lucretia was commonly represented was the depiction of the moment of the rape itself by Sextus Tarquinius. This approach shows the violence of the sexual assault and invites the viewer to witness the act itself.⁴¹ This eroticized and violent act can be seen in Tintoretto's 1578/80 painting of *Tarquin and Lucretia* (Figure 8). In this painting, Lucretia and Tarquin are depicted in a dark bedroom with light highlighting their bodies. The use

⁴⁰ Rona Goffen, "Lotto's Lucretia," *Renaissance Quarterly* (Vol. 52, No. 3, 1999), 745-746.

⁴¹ Diane Wolfthal, *Images of Rape*, 143-144.

of the light on the characters contrasted with the dark bedroom emphasizes the rape scene. This violent rape scene is emphasized through the disarray of the bedsheets, a sculpture falling to the ground, and the broken pearl necklace around Lucretia's neck. Lucretia is depicted as physically resisting the rape as Tarquin tears her clothes off. The contrast of light and dark as well as disarray of the room itself emphasize the violence and chaos of the rape.

Like Tintoretto's painting, *Tarquin and Lucretia* (c. 1571) by Titian, shows the violent moment of the rape itself, yet he also raises the question of whether Lucretia is complicit in the rape (figure 9). He does this through the presence of the servant. The presence of the servant next to the bed as Tarquin rapes Lucretia references the writings by Livy and Ovid. Like St. Augustine's writings on Lucretia, Titian's painting raises the question of Lucretia's culpability in the act itself as she submitted to Tarquin. He depicts the fully clothed Tarquin as he holds a dagger over her Lucretia's head and her naked body. Behind Tarquin is, "the upper part of a maidservant, who is lifting the folds of the parted bed cushions."⁴² The presence of the maidservant alludes to Livy's story which stated that Tarquin would kill Lucretia and her servant if she did not submit to the rape. This reference raises the question of whether Lucretia was willing to submit to the rape to protect the servants and her own life. In addition to the issue of complicity, the servant peering in at this violent scene allows the viewer of the painting to act as witness and implicates the viewer as well as Tarquin in the rape.⁴³ Various writings on Lucretia influenced Titian's depiction of the myth, with him ultimately choosing to show Lucretia's resistance to the violent act.

⁴² Michael Jaffe and Karin Groen, "Titian's 'Tarquin and Lucretia' in the Fitzwilliam," (Burlington Magazine, Vol. 129, no. 1008, 1987), 164.

⁴³ Filippo Pedrocco, Titian, M. Agnese, and Chiari Moretto Wiel, *Titian*, (New York: Rizzoli, 2001), 19.

As seen in Tintoretto's and Titian's paintings, scenes of the rape itself show the violence, Lucretia's resistance to the act, whilst also showing her modesty and chastity, portraying her as the definition of female virtue. Different versions of the narrative of Lucretia as well as the artists own experiences contributed to artists approach to depicting Lucretia.

Artemisia Gentileschi: Lucretia

Like previous paintings that depicted the narrative of Lucretia, Artemisia Gentileschi's *Lucretia* (c. 1621), is influenced by past literature on the myth, the prevalence of sexual assault within society, and the artistic techniques that were prominent during this period. Gentileschi was interested in depicting Lucretia as a strong female instead of a passive victim and did so through the grabbing of the breast and the strong hands.

Throughout her career, Artemisia Gentileschi created several versions of the myth of Lucretia. In all but one of these images she portrayed Lucretia as a strong solitary figure in the moment just before she stabbed herself and committed suicide. This moment is like versions created by Cranach, Raphael, and Tintoretto, yet her depiction focuses on the strength of Lucretia rather than her as victim. The first of this series, entitled *Lucretia* (c. 1621), is currently located in the Palazzo Cattaneo-Adorno in Genoa, Italy. A later version of *Lucretia* (c. 1627), located in the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, shows the solitary figure of Lucretia once again (figure 10). The Getty Lucretia has been attributed to Gentileschi by Garrard, but it has not been confirmed.⁴⁴ It is entitled *Tarquin and Lucretia* (c. 1645-1650) and is in the Neues Palais, Potsdam (Figure 11). Unlike previous depictions, it showed the moment of the rape itself when Sextus Tarquinius raped her in front of a maid.

⁴⁴ Mary D. Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi Around 1622: The Shaping and Reshaping of an Artistic Identity*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 119.

Like other depictions of the narrative, Gentileschi chose to display Lucretia as a solitary figure those in the moments just after her assault by Sextus Tarquinius in the painting, *Lucretia* (c. 1623-25). Mary Garrard argues that the choice to depict her as a solitary figure in the moment just before her suicide changes the meaning of Lucretia “in important respects from those of her male contemporaries and predecessors.”⁴⁵ I believe that Gentileschi takes the traditional depiction of the singular Lucretia about to kill herself and reimagines it through the lens of female agency and strength rather than as victim or martyr. Various scholars have argued that the depiction of various female subjects by Artemisia Gentileschi have been influenced by her own experience of sexual assault and the trauma that followed it.⁴⁶ In her book, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Baroque Art*, Mary Garrard states that Gentileschi’s interpretation is influenced by her own experience as a young woman and having been raped. She is saying that her gender and sexual assault is what allows her to depict Lucretia differently than previous paintings of the solitary Lucretia. I believe that this argument is flawed in that it is not considering other experiences outside of the relationship of the female gender and violence when looking at Gentileschi’s Lucretia. Another feminist art historian, Griselda Pollock, disagrees with Garrard and states that Gentileschi’s depiction is a result of the rape and the tradition of painting violent scenes. When looking at Gentileschi’s Lucretia, I will consider feminist art historical perspectives like Garrard’s and Pollock, yet my focus will be on female agency and the choice to depict a strong singular female character as seen through her hands. I am interested in analyzing Lucretia’s choice to commit suicide and the ways in which Gentileschi shows the strength of Lucretia and her mind to make this decision.

⁴⁵ Mary D. Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero*, 215.

⁴⁶ Letizia Trevez and Artemisia Gentileschi, *Artemisia*, (London: National Gallery Company, 2020), 170.

Artemisia Gentileschi: Background

Artemisia Gentileschi was born in Rome, Italy in 1593 to the well-known Tuscan painter Orazio Gentileschi.⁴⁷ She came from a family of well-known painters from Pisa. Unlike other women from seventeenth-century Rome, Artemisia trained as a painter in her father's studio, where she soon surpassed her father. In 1611, Orazio Gentileschi hired his good friend and fellow artist Agnostino Tassi as Artemisia's tutor.⁴⁸ During this period, Tassi raped Artemisia and promised her marriage leading her to continue in a sexual relationship with him. The following year, Orazio Gentileschi sued Tassi for "the rape and defloration of Artemisia."⁴⁹ During this trial, Artemisia had to submit to a medical and psychological examination as well as physical torture. Females, especially those who were considered unchaste or sexually immoral were unable to achieve much status, resulting in the court resorting to violent means to ensure that Artemisia's testimony was truthful. Tassi was found guilty of the crime, *stuprum* and was exiled from Rome. The classification of the crime of *stuprum* refers to "forcible defloration" and implied that Artemisia had been a virgin prior to her relationship with Tassi as only virgins could suffer *stuprum*.⁵⁰ In 1612, following the trial, Artemisia married Pierantoni Stiattesi and left Rome for Florence where she lived before moving back to Rome in 1620. It was during this time in Rome that Gentileschi created the *Lucretia* which is the focus of this paper.

Early in her career, while she lived in Rome, Gentileschi painted the *Lucretia*, and it was likely influenced by her experiences as a young woman in early 17th-century Rome. Despite her rocky past, Artemisia became a well-known and respected artist in the 17th-century. She was the

⁴⁷ Jesse M. Locker, *Artemisia Gentileschi: the Language of Painting*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 2.

⁴⁸ Eve Straussman-Pflanzer, *Violence and Virtue: Artemisia Gentileschi's Judith Slaying Holofernes*, (Chicago, Illinois: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2013), 12.

⁴⁹ Jesse M. Locker, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 3.

⁵⁰ Elizabeth S. Cohen, "The Trials of Artemisia Gentileschi," 59.

first female member of Florence's state-sponsored Accademia del Disegno and was connected to the Accademia degli Oziosi in Naples.⁵¹ Throughout her career, "Artemisia Gentileschi met all of the conditions of professionalism" that were awarded to well-known artists.⁵² This meant that she had attained a standard repertory of skills, competencies, and technical knowledge under a master artist and could make money off her art. Her paintings often depicted biblical and historical heroines such as Judith Slaying Holofernes (figure 10) and Susanna and the Elders (figure 11). These scenes of violence and strength in the face of a difficult assault have traditionally been looked at through her past rape.

As a follower of Caravaggio, Gentileschi was introduced to Caravaggio's painting style which included extreme contrast between light and dark, realism, and terrifyingly violent scenes.⁵³ Gentileschi's *Lucretia* and many of her other paintings of rape victims reflect Caravaggio's influence through the violence and use of chiaroscuro.

Artemisia: The Strength of Lucretia

The painting *Lucretia* (c. 1621) by Artemisia Gentileschi depicts the moment just before Lucretia's suicide, as Lucretia is in emotional agony over her sexual assault by Sextus Tarquinius and the resulting loss of her honor. Taking cues from Caravaggio's use of chiaroscuro, the highlighted figure of Lucretia is contrasted with a dark background, drawing attention to Lucretia's psychological tension and emotional anxiety as seen in her face and body. The psychological aftermath of the sexual assault is conveyed through the disheveled clothing and her dress falling below her breasts with her right leg poking out. Her visible right leg is

⁵¹ Jesse M. Locker, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 10-12.

⁵² Eve Straussman-Pflanzer, Oliver Tostmann, and Babette Bohn, *By Her Hand: Artemisia Gentileschi and Women Artists in Italy, 1500-1800*, (First Edition, Detroit: Detroit Institute of Arts, 2021), 43.

⁵³ Eve Straussman-Pflanzer, *Violence and Virtue*, 14.

muscular and prominent emphasizing her strength in the face of such a violent assault. The psychological despair is further conveyed through her stiff back, the tight grip of her left hand on the dagger, and the grasping of her breast with her right hand. The close proximity of Lucretia's body to the picture plane results in a relationship between the viewer and the subject, pushing the pain and sorrow unto the viewer as though they were going through the same. The illumination and focus on Lucretia's body emphasizes the dramatic moment which Gentileschi has painted. Her face is contorted in pain and sorrow whilst she grabs her breast with her right hand and a dagger with her muscular left, preparing to kill herself.

Gentileschi's depiction of Artemisia is reminiscent of other depictions of women during the Renaissance as she is depicted semi-nude with her dress falling below her breasts. The falling dress and the overall disarray imply that this is a result of the assault by Tarquin.⁵⁴ The figure of Lucretia takes up almost the entirety of the canvas, with her body in the pyramidal structure that was common during the Italian Renaissance. The pyramidal structure begins at the bottom of the canvas with the horizontal of Lucretia's bent leg, moving up the left side with her back and towards her bent head. Her left hand grasping the knife upwards makes up the right side of the triangle. The use of the pyramidal structure shows the power of this moment and what she must deal with. The strength of Lucretia is further emphasized through her strong and thick hands that are red from the physical force of clutching the knife as she prepares to kill herself.

Instead of depicting Lucretia in the feminine ideal, Gentileschi has chosen to show the wrinkles of her forehead and neck and her unkempt hair.⁵⁵ Lucretia's face is in an expression of anguish and pain as she contemplates her loss of chastity and honor due to her assault. The realism and dynamism of her expressions of anguish differentiate the painting from previous

⁵⁴ Mary D. Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero*, 228.

⁵⁵ Trevez, Letizia, and Artemisia Gentileschi, *Artemisia*, (National Gallery Company, 2020), 171.

idealized paintings of women and the depictions of Lucretia as the victim. Gentileschi depicts Lucretia as a brave and strong woman who is dealing with a traumatic assault as well as the loss of honor and chastity that was commonly associated with women in Ancient Rome. Instead of depicting her as victim or the catalyst for the Roman Rebellion, Gentileschi's painting uses the solitary figure of Lucretia and chiaroscuro to show Lucretia's emotional contemplation and anguish that ultimately results in her using her agency to take her own life.

The painting differs greatly from other versions in that Lucretia grasps her breast as she holds the dagger in her left hand, questioning whether she should go through with the suicide. I believe that the way in which her right hand grips her breast is what truly sets her apart from other versions of Lucretia as her thick and muscular arm and hand is a reference to her power and strength. Following Garrard, I believe that the hands "are an unexamined aspect of Artemisia's distinctive style" and that they are symbols of agency and strength for women who did not usually have that option.⁵⁶

The focus on Lucretia's thick and muscular hands shows the power and strength that Lucretia holds. They show her agency and choice to kill herself and preserve her chastity as hands "are the locus of agency, both literally and symbolically."⁵⁷ For Artemisia, the hands of the heroines that she paints are powerful and can be used to make choices that were not typically afforded to females. In the case of Artemisia, she used her hands to paint strong females while the hands of the females reflected her strength in their actions. According to Keith Christiansen, it is likely that Artemisia Gentileschi "used herself as a model to bring an immediacy and drama to her subject."⁵⁸ She modeled the hands of Lucretia and other female heroines from her own hands that

⁵⁶ Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History after Postmodernism*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 63.

⁵⁷ Norma Broude, *Reclaiming Female Agency*, 64.

⁵⁸ Locker, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 133.

she painted with reflecting her strength as a female Renaissance during the Baroque to the female characters from the past

The focus on the strength of the hands in paintings of women by Gentileschi can be seen in depictions of the heroine Judith as well as Lucretia. Artemisia Gentileschi is perhaps most well-known for her depiction of the Biblical heroine Judith. Gentileschi created several versions of this theme throughout her career focusing on the strength of Judith and her agency as she defeated Holofernes.

The Biblical Story of Judith states that as the Assyrian Army killed in the Jewish city of Bethulia, Judith decided to take matters into her own hand. Under the premise of forming an alliance with Holofernes, Judith entered the enemy camp dressed in her best clothes. Holofernes was so struck by Judith's beauty that he invited her to a banquet where he became drunk and fell asleep.⁵⁹ Judith saw her opportunity and cut off Holofernes' head saving her people. This story of Judith was a popular subject of art in the Renaissance and Baroque periods, yet paintings typically depicted the strength of Holofernes as Judith defeated him. Artemisia instead focused on the strength of the biblical heroine Judith.

In the first *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (c. 1611-1612), Gentileschi depicts the biblical Judith beheading the Assyrian general Holofernes (figure 12). This painting was perhaps one of the most bloody and violent depictions of the story of Judith. Following Caravaggio, Gentileschi used contrasted a dark background with light illuminating the general as Judith kills him. The drunk general is depicted lying on the bed as Judith grabs his hair with one powerful hand and cuts off his head with a sword in her right. Emphasis is placed on the blood that spurts out from the neck of Holofernes. Droplets of blood fall onto Judith's arms and dress as well as the blood.

⁵⁹ Morton Scott Enslin, *The Book of Judith. Greek Text with an English Translation*, (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 12.

Judith's face gazes upon Holofernes with determination as she finishes her task, saving her people from the Assyrians.

In the second version of *Judith Killing Holofernes* (c. 1620), Gentileschi refines the composition of the first from c. 1611-1612 (figure 13). Her advancement in technical skill is seen through the fixing of anatomical errors, richer colors and textures of the fabrics, and more elaborately curled hair. This painting is even more violent and bloody than the first, with the emphasis on Judith overpowering and killing Holofernes through her strong hands. This painting has remained "Artemisia's most famous and talked about Florentine work" and the vivid color and violence translated into her later depictions of heroines such as Lucretia.⁶⁰ Later iterations such as *Judith and Her Maidservant* c. 1613-1614 (figure 14) and *Judith and Her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes* c. 1625 (figure 15) continue to emphasize the strength of Judith as well as her female agency to take matters into her own hands to kill Holofernes and save her people.

The strong hands of Judith and Lucretia in paintings by Artemisia Gentileschi emphasizes the importance of female agency. In the case of Artemisia, "the women exert pressure with their hands" and the "wrist convincingly signifies both agility and agency."⁶¹ Unlike other female hands from the Renaissance, Artemisia's used the hands of Judith to show her power and strength. In this painting, the Judith uses her physical strength, as manifested through her hands and arms, to hold onto Holofernes' head and kill him. This use of female strength as seen through the clutching and use of the dagger in *Judith Killing Holofernes* is translated into the painting of Lucretia as she uses her strength and female agency to take her life and restore her honor.

⁶⁰ Locker, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 171.

⁶¹ Norma Broude, *Reclaiming Female Agency*, 65.

Although different literary iterations of the Rape of Lucretia such as Livy, Ovid, and Machiavelli describe her in the presence of her husband and father right before her suicide, Gentileschi has chosen to depict Lucretia alone. This choice to use a solitary figure of Lucretia highlights strength that Lucretia holds as she dealt with the emotional turmoil and psychological war that follows such a violent event. Her furrowed brow emphasizes her anguish and sense of determination as she clasps the dagger and her breast. Her body is tense as she looks up and prepares to kill herself. The focus on Lucretia's body emphasizes that she is not a passive victim and is rather a woman taking charge of her own destiny and restoring her honor. Overall, Gentileschi's Lucretia differs from previous interpretations as it shows the strength of Lucretia and her use of agency in the face of a psychologically damaging event.

The Hand in Ancient Themes

Although there are very few classical depictions of female heroines by Artemisia Gentileschi, the depiction of the ancient Cleopatra is reminiscent of the stylistic function of the hand and breast of Lucretia as they both prepare to commit suicide. Unlike the suicide of Lucretia, the suicide of Cleopatra was a historical event that took place in 30 BC.⁶² It was described by Plutarch and Dio Cassius. Renaissance and Baroque images of the death of Cleopatra typically focused on the dramatic moment when the snake bites Cleopatra's breast resulting in her death.

Gentileschi depicts *Cleopatra* (c. 1611-1622) in the nude reclining on a bed in a pose that is erotic and reminiscent of other depictions of the lounging female nude.⁶³ The voluptuous Cleopatra reclines on her disheveled bed with her legs crossed, her left arm raised over her head, and her right hand grasping an asp tightly. Like the Lucretia, the highlighted figure of the dying

⁶² Garrard, *Image of the Female Hero*, 247.

⁶³ Letizia Trevez, *Artemisia*, 116-118.

Cleopatra contrasts with the dark background of her bedroom, placing the focus on the calm. The light emphasizes the tenseness of the scene as her eyes remain slightly open while her body is alert as she begins to die.

In this painting, Gentileschi depicts Cleopatra squeezing the asp which she used to commit suicide with her strong hands. The strength of the hands is seen through their thickness while the exposed breasts reference the eroticization of classical subjects. The presence of the exposed breast and the strong hands in a scene of suicide in both Lucretia and Cleopatra stylistically merges a classical story with a historical story. The parallel between Cleopatra holding the asp and Lucretia holding the dagger emphasizes that both these women yielded the weapons that they would use to commit suicide. While Artemisia has chosen to depict Cleopatra in a much more eroticized pose than the Lucretia, the presence of the breasts and the hands show the importance of both heroines using their agency and strength to take charge of their lives.

Grabbing of Breast: Feminine and Biblical

In addition to the hand of Lucretia being a symbol of strength and female agency, the grabbing of her breast with the hand can also be seen as a reference to femininity and fertility. Her hand grips her breast in a manner that is very different than other interpretations. By pressing with two fingers and pushing the nipple forwards, “it recalls a mother’s preparation to nurse a child.”⁶⁴ The theme of mothers nursing their children was a common domestic image that were frequently created during the Renaissance and Baroque. Gentileschi herself created images of the lactating mother feeding her child in the *Madonna and Child* (c. 1609) and witnessed the *Madonna lactans* tradition throughout her life.⁶⁵ In this painting, the Virgin sits in a wooden

⁶⁴ Garrard, *Image of the Female Hero*, 228-230.

⁶⁵ Trevez, *Artemisia*, 130.

chair and holds the Christ Child on her lap as she prepares to feed him. She squeezes her left nipple with the fingers of her right hand while he reaches up to touch his mother's face. The virgin is dressed in a pale pink gown with a blue blanket surrounding her.

The feeding of the baby Christ in *Madonna and Child* and the squeezing of the nipple of the nipple in Lucretia highlights the relation that the breast has to fertility and family life. The squeezing of the nipple as she prepares to kill herself with the dagger creates a moral choice and raises the question of whether she should commit suicide. Since the squeezing of the breast is reminiscent of the nursing of the child, the juxtaposition of the dagger and breast shows how she must choose between death to avenge her family and the child that could follow if she does not kill herself.⁶⁶ The breast as a symbol of nursing versus the dagger emphasizes the femininity of Lucretia and how her choice to commit suicide can change the politics of Rome or her family line.

Lucretia is one of Artemisia Gentileschi's few classical subjects besides Cleopatra, yet she is giving it the character of the Christian female subject. Gentileschi's depiction of Lucretia is influenced by her typical female heroines such as Mary Magdalene, Judith, and Susanna. The way in which Gentileschi depicted biblical females such as Mary Magdalene and Susanna through the clutching of the breast and emotional anguish translated into the Lucretia painting. These influences eventually resulted in Lucretia being seen as an emblem of virtue and strong in the face of sexual violence.

Susanna and the Elders (c. 1610) is thought to be Artemisia Gentileschi's first work that she completed on her own and it portrays a Biblical story from the book of Daniel.⁶⁷ The story

⁶⁶ Mary D. Garrard, "Identifying Artemisia: The Archive and the Eye," in *Artemisia Gentileschi in a Changing Light*, ed. Sheila Barker, (Turnhout, Belgium: Harvey Miller Publishers, 2017), 32-33.

⁶⁷ Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, *Women Artists: 1550 – 1950*, (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1984), 120.

follows a beautiful young woman named Susanna who takes walks in her husband's garden daily. A group of elderly men spy on Susanna and lust after her, until one day they decide to confront her and tell her to have sex with them.⁶⁸ Like Tarquin threatened Lucretia, the elders threatened Susanna stating that they would say she slept with someone else, ruining her image.

Gentileschi depicts the moment when the virtuous Susanna is accosted by two elders while she is bathing in a fountain. The two men lean over a stone wall and bother her from above. The elder on the left whispers to the one on the right. This is a portrayal of the threat to Susanna. Susanna is depicted naked with a piece of cloth wrapped around her left thigh. The elders meanwhile are fully clothed. The contrast between the naked Susanna and the fully clothed elder emphasizes the threat that she is facing. She turns her legs and head away while her torso twists the opposite direction. Her arms are raised in defense of the threat of the elders and the fear is present upon her face.

Like Lucretia, Susanna was seen as the epitome of virtue and chastity resulting in the elder's lust and attempted rape of her. The depiction of Susanna and the Elders shows the "female subject as an anguished victim" who is uncomfortable and distressed by the harassment of the elders as she is in the nude.⁶⁹ Unlike the later painting of Lucretia, the grabbing of the breast emphasizes Susanna's victimization and anxieties of being watched instead of the strength of Lucretia following her sexual assault. Gentileschi shows the emotional agony in the body language and fearful faces of Lucretia and Susanna. Susanna is fearful of the harassment by the elders and the threat to her virtue while Lucretia is in emotional agony over her rape. Although both women are victims, Lucretia is not a passive or weak victim because she takes matters into her own hands instead of succumbing to the shame of losing her chastity. The relationship

⁶⁸ E.L. Doctorow, *The Book of Daniel*, (Toronto Ontario: Bantam Books, 1979), 23.

⁶⁹ Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi Around 1622*, 77.

between the strength of Lucretia and Susanna can be seen in that “Susanna allegorized female virtue and bravery.”⁷⁰ The biblical Susanna was seen as virtuous woman who was the model for other women who lived around her like Lucretia. Since both women were models of virtue, the shame that they felt when threatened and/or sexually assaulted is depicted similarly. Gentileschi uses the shame of being sexually impure along with the bravery of standing up against sexual violence of the biblical Susanna in her depiction of the classical Lucretia.

Gentileschi depicts Lucretia grabbing her breast as she looks up towards the sky as she contemplates whether she should go through with the suicide. The depiction of a figure looking up has a relationship to martyrdom. Busts of females from the 16th and 17th centuries depicted women who wore “disheveled clothing and had emotional upward gazes. These busts were often representations of virtues and martyrs from the bible.”⁷¹ Looking at the bust, *Woman in Anguish* (c. 1515/1520) attributed to Cristoforo Solari, the woman has an anguished face and clothing falling off her body. This bust, thought to be a virtue or magdalen, holds intense emotion on her face that is reminiscent of the Lucretia by Artemisia Gentileschi. Other martyrs from the bible also held this anguished face and disheveled clothing.

Like Lucretia, the Magdalen is complex figure. Mary Magdalene was both a prostitute and follower of Christ.⁷² Although she had been a prostitute and sexual libertine before becoming a follower of Christ, she was still seen as a symbol of the feminine ideal and the chaste female. In the sixteenth-century, artists began depicting the saint, Mary Magdalene as penitent. Following this period, she was depicted as a “disheveled or naked woman, with long, loose hair, with her

⁷⁰ Patricia Simons, “Artemisia Gentileschi’s Susanna and the Elders (1610) in the Context of Counter-Reformation Rome,” in *Artemisia Gentileschi in a Changing Light* (Turnhout, Belgium: Harvey Miller Publishers, 2017), 46.

⁷¹ Alison Luchs. “The London ‘Woman in Anguish’, Attributed to Cristoforo Solari: Erotic Pathos in a Renaissance Bust.” (*Artibus et Historiae* 24, no. 47, 2003), 155-157.

⁷² Erwin Panofsky, *Idea: A Concept in Art Theory*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1968), 246-248.

head tilted up to the right.”⁷³ This depiction of the penitent Mary Magdalene can be seen in Artemisia Gentileschi’s painting, *Mary Magdalene* (c. 1616-1618). This painting depicts a sexual yet virtuous and heroic female that is reminiscent of the Lucretia. Following Caravaggio’s style, the illuminated figure of Mary Magdalene in a bright yellow dress is in front of a dark background. She is depicted in a pyramidal composition. Her head leans back and looks to the upper right corner while she grabs at her breast with her right hand and pushes a mirror away with her left. The mirror is inscribed with the words, *optimam partem elegit*.⁷⁴ The base of the pyramidal composition is made up of a bent strong leg.

The pyramidal composition of Mary Magdalene likely influenced Gentileschi’s later depiction of Lucretia as she attempted to portray the inner turmoil and strength of Lucretia. Mary Magdalene’s inner turmoil is reflected through her furrowed brow while the clutching of her breast and looking up contrasts the virtuous life that she leads versus her promiscuous former life. The presence of the bible quote meaning ‘you have chosen the best part’ emphasizes that Mary Magdalene had made the right choice, yet she still had difficulty reconciling with it.⁷⁵ The grabbing of the breast and looking towards the gods or Jesus in both Lucretia and Mary Magdalene shows the importance of the heroic and virtuous female trying to choose what path to take. For Mary Magdalene, it was following Christ, while Lucretia chose to commit suicide to protect her chastity and honor. In both paintings, Artemisia Gentileschi chose to depict the subjects looking up to the right, in reference to past traditions of depicting the martyrs and virtues in intense anguish. Busts of anguished females like the Mary Magdalene painting often

⁷³ Rosa Giorgio, *Saints and their Symbols*, (New York: Abrams, 2012), 172-174.

⁷⁴ Jesse M. Locker, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 143.

⁷⁵ Jesse M. Locker, “Artemisia Gentileschi: The Literary Formation of an Unlearned Artist,” in *Artemisia Gentileschi in a Changing Light*, (Turnhout, Belgium: Harvey Miller Publishers, 2017), 93-94.

depicted moral exemplars or martyrs. Gentileschi took this tradition and input it on her Lucretia to show her as strong yet morally pure.

Biblical stories of Susanna and Mary Magdalene influenced the way that Artemisia Gentileschi treated her interpretation of Lucretia. Themes of shame, strength, and agency were reflected in both the biblical paintings and the classical painting of Lucretia by Gentileschi. These themes were emphasized through the presence of the squeezing of the breast, the strong hands, and determination of the females.

Unlike previous depictions of the solitary Lucretia, Gentileschi has chosen to focus on the psychological tension and strength of Lucretia rather than sexualizing her as a victim. Despite the similarity of the moment and layout to Cranach's and Raphael's depictions of Lucretia, Gentileschi presents her in the moment just before her suicide not as a passive or weak victim. Instead, she is shown as a strong woman who must deal with the aftermath of losing her honor, ultimately using her agency to make the choice to kill herself and restore her honor. She does this by focusing on her furrowed and determined face and the grasping of the breast.

Other paintings that depicted the narrative of Lucretia included the heroine clutching her breast with her left hand while she held the dagger above her chest with her right. These include Francesca Francia's *Lucretia* (c. 1506) and Leandro da Ponte Bassano's *Lucretia* (c. 1575-1622). Francia's Lucretia is depicted waist-up against a soft landscape background that is reminiscent of Northern Renaissance paintings. She holds her breast with her left hand while grasping a dagger in her right as she stabs herself. As she stabs herself, she looks up to the right. Like the Gentileschi Lucretia, Francia depicts the Lucretia grabbing her breast, yet her hand is much softer symbolizing sexuality and femininity rather than the strength. Bassano's Lucretia is illuminated against a dark background. She is situated close to the picture plane and is in a state

of undress. Her left hand pulls the dress below her left breast while she holds a dagger with her right hand upwards towards her chest. She is depicted in the feminine ideal and appears scared. Unlike Gentileschi's Lucretia, she appears resigned to her fate and her sexuality is eroticized through the presence of her breasts. Although both Lucretia's clutched their breast like Gentileschi's, the meaning of the grabbing of the breast was much more erotic and related to sexuality rather than the strength of Gentileschi's Lucretia.

Conclusion

Sexual violence and various depictions of Lucretia influenced the way that Gentileschi chose to represent her. Gentileschi's choice to show the strength in the hand of Lucretia emphasizes that she believed that Lucretia had the agency to choose to commit suicide following her sexual assault. Rather than focusing on the debate around Lucretia's suicide in literature, Gentileschi chooses to acknowledge Lucretia's choice in her narrative which results in the feminine agency and autonomy.

Different depictions of the narrative of Lucretia are based on the controversy surrounding her in literature. Although Gentileschi chooses to depict the moment of her suicide, she focuses on the strength of Lucretia as influenced by biblical and ancient heroines, the sexuality of the breast, and the muscular hand to give her female agency. By looking at the hand and strength of Lucretia as depicted by Artemisia Gentileschi we can recognize that in the face of countless controversies over her myth and sexual violence during the Baroque, Lucretia still had the autonomy to make a choice and protect her honor.

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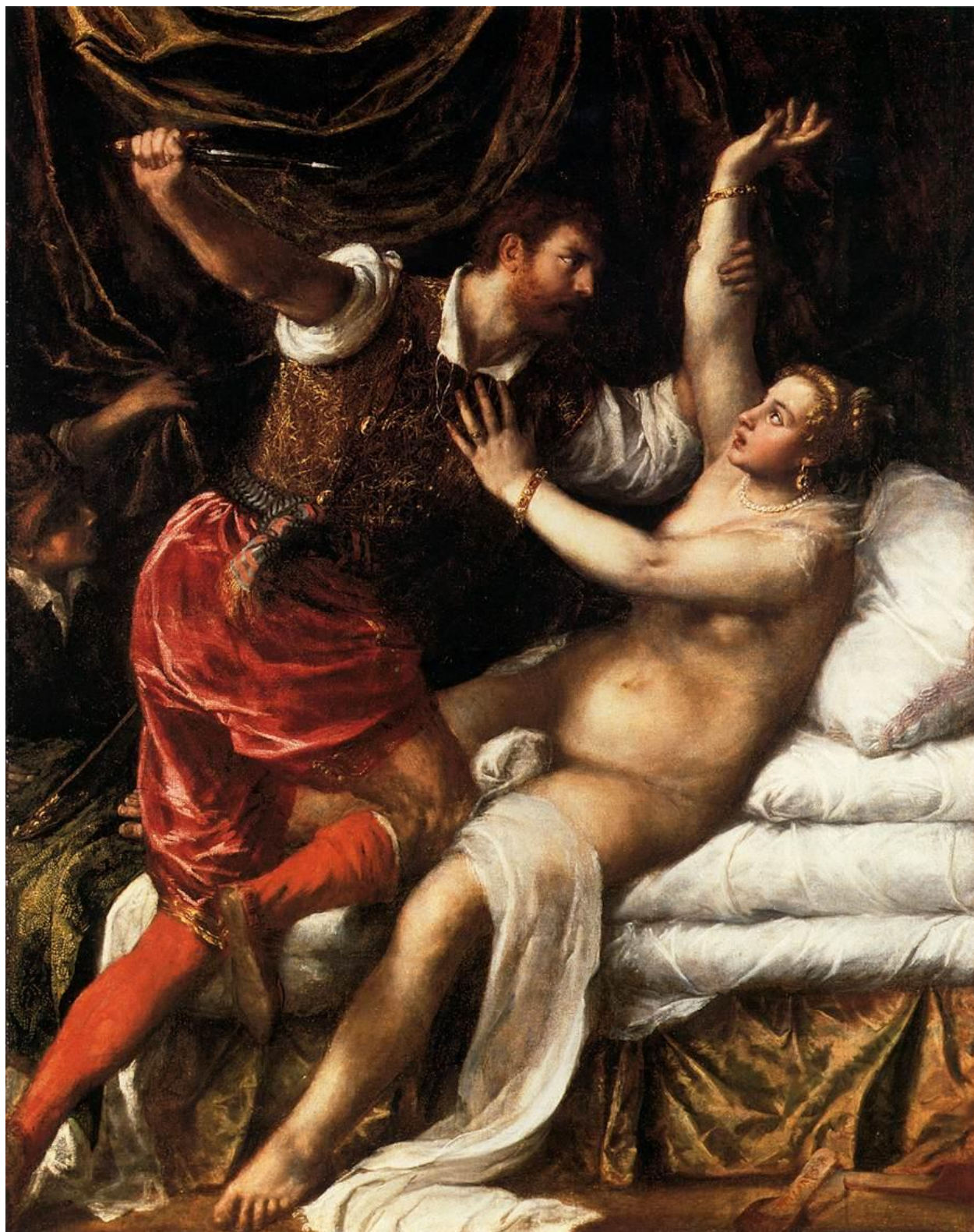


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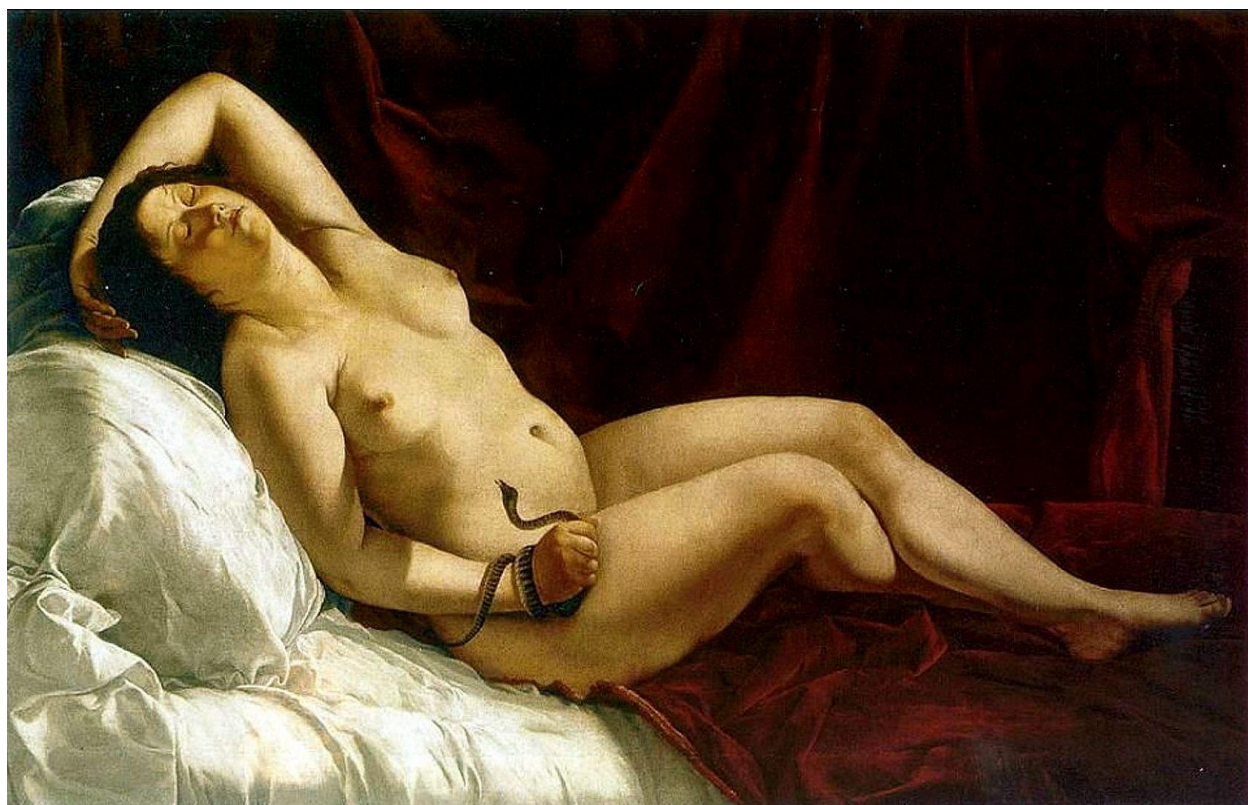


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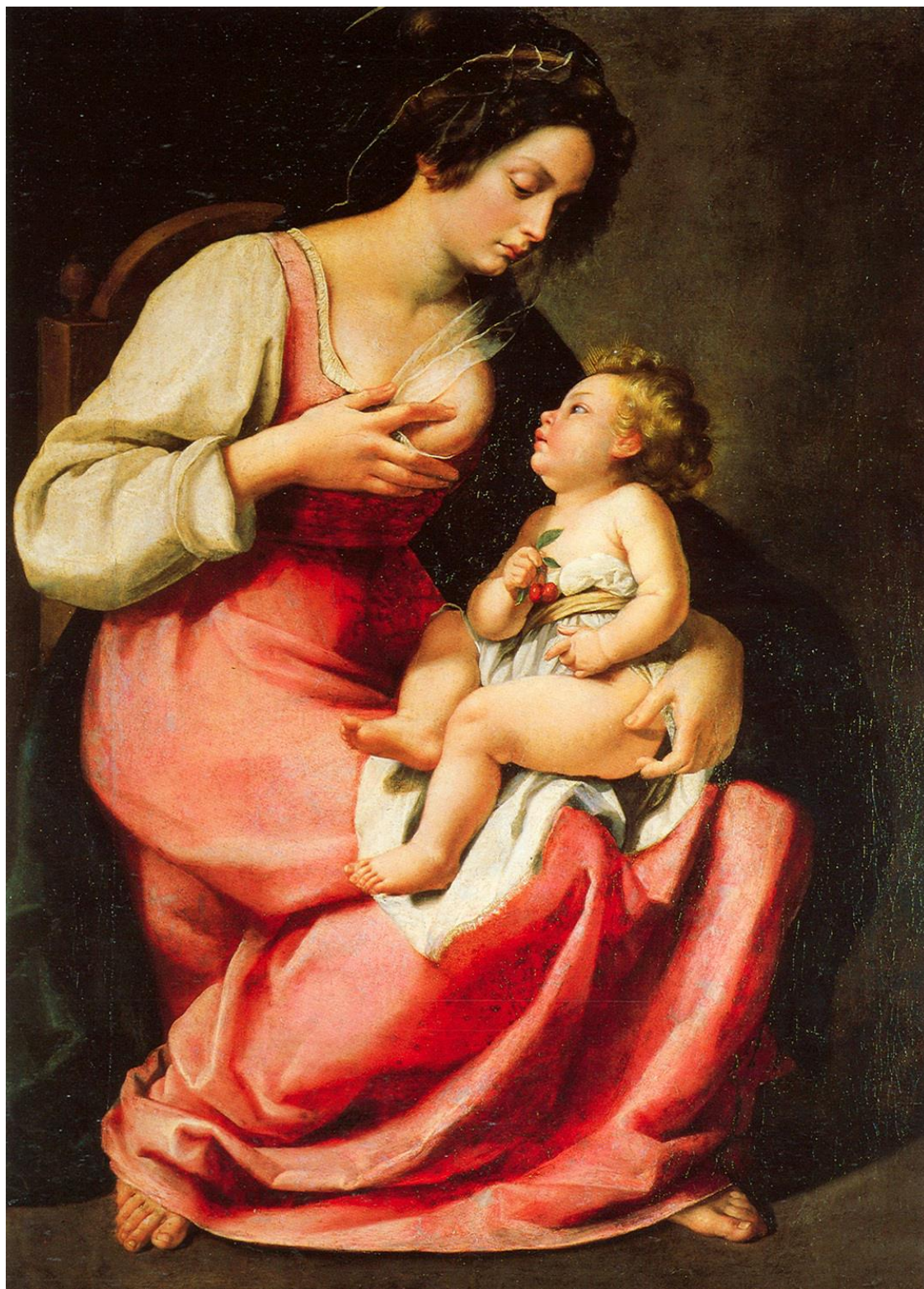


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