

GRISELDA POLLOCK

DIFFERENCING THE CANON

Feminist Desire and the
Writing of Art's Histories





Fig. 5.1 Pierre Dumoustier Le Neveu, *The Hand of Artemisia Gentileschi Holding a Paintbrush*, 1625, red and black chalk with charcoal, 21.9 × 18 cm. London, Trustees of the British Museum

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THE FEMALE HERO AND THE MAKING OF A FEMINIST CANON

Artemisia Gentileschi's representations of Susanna and Judith

If women set themselves to transform History, it can safely be said that every aspect of history would be completely altered. Instead of being made by men, History's task would be to make woman, to produce her. And it's at this point that work by women themselves on women might be brought into play, which would benefit not only women, but all humanity.

Hélène Cixous¹

A few years ago I was contacted by a researcher in the BBC who was preparing a series of programmes about significant but overlooked women from history. One of their subjects was to be the seventeenth-century Italian artist, Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1653). Artemisia Gentileschi was going to be the only artist in the series. I was very suspicious. With Frida Kahlo and Georgia O'Keefe, she is now one of the most famous of the recovered women artists – but her fame is more a matter of notoriety and sensationalism than of any real interest in or comprehension of 'Gentileschi' as a set of artistically created meanings (Fig. 5.1). Spoken of in art history as a 'lascivious and precocious girl', a woman addicted to 'the art of love' whose story is reminiscent of Fellini's film *La Dolce Vita*,² she has become, like the French sculptor Camille Claudel, the stuff of romantic melodrama at the cinema. A drama documentary about the artist would be bound to focus on the extraordinary trial that followed the rape to which she was subjected by her 'teacher', Agostino Tassi. She was nineteen at the time. The paintings they would focus on would be those whose apparent subject was sexual violence and violation, such as *Susanna and the Elders* (1610, Fig. 5.2), and that could be read as 'expressing' a women's vengeful feelings towards men as a result of a traumatising sexual assault, such as *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1612–13, Fig. 5.4). Life would be mirrored in art and art would confirm the biographical subject – a woman wronged. Gentileschi's art would speak only of that event – indexing directly to experience and offering no problems for interpretation. These paintings were a predictable choice – apparently dealing with sexual assault and violence. I did not want to get involved.

HEROINES

SEEING THE ARTIST OR READING THE PICTURE?

There is a gulf between popular notions of 'art and artists' and the current critical edge of art historical feminist analysis. The programme-makers wanted to bring the biography of the artist to life through the works, whereas the feminist cultural analyst is wanting to make work itself vivid by decoding the dynamic process of how meaning is produced and exploring what kinds of readings its signs make possible.³ In the traditional model, the artwork is a transparent screen through which you have only to look to see the artist as a psychologically coherent subject originating the meanings the work so perfectly reflects. The critical feminist model relies on the metaphor of reading rather than mirror-gazing. What we see on even the most figuratively illusionistic paintings are signs, for art is a semiotic practice. The notion of *reading* art renders the graphic marks and painted surfaces of art opaque, dense, recalcitrant; they never directly offer up meaning but have to be deciphered, processed and argued over.⁴ In art, there is of course something to see. What the eye does in traversing a canvas and searching out its means and effects, however, is a processing of the signs that may produce meanings. Even in the most abstract of paintings the physical events of paint being applied to a surface involve us in some kind of narrativity. This may be only the narrative of the process of the painting's production, the sequence of the maker's marks, the way in which someone has been thinking out a canvas surface and its effects. At certain times in the history of Western art, however, there has been a more explicit narrative intention to make formal process co-operate in the production of narratively decodable meaning.

In this chapter I shall focus on a high point of that highly motivated production of narrative history painting of the Baroque period. I want to use it as a case study to look at the issues posed by a feminist analysis of Artemisia Gentileschi. It will enable me to address the problem – not what is *feminist art history* but what does feminism bring to art history when it intervenes in its discursive field? That depends on broaching another question: What does feminism desire in looking at work by *women* artists? Thus, beyond the critical screen of a semiotic reading, I want to reach back to Freudian aesthetics to discern not my projection on its imaginary screen but the traces of incompletely repressed psychic materials that might index a historical subjectivity, in the feminine, signified not expressed in its complex negotiations of the signs, meanings, fantasies and affects we might call, with Kristevan subtlety, aesthetic practices.

FEMINISTS AND ART HISTORY: WHAT WOMEN?

It is now over twenty years since the revitalised feminist impulse of the later twentieth century began to reshape the possibilities of knowledge in the name of women. But what 'women' are the topic of feminist analysis? White women, women of colour, Jewish women, Muslim women, lesbians, mothers, lesbian mothers, non-mothers,

THE FEMALE HERO

disabled women, women of Europe, Asia, Africa, the Americas, the Middle East and all the diasporas that traverse these impossible geographies? Despite the necessity to insist on the specificity of, and even conflict between, women in the above lists, there remains the problem posed by the category 'women', created by the way societies treat those thus designated. Woman – capital W – is a fiction and a myth. But for the last decades of this century we have organised as *women*, imagining a political collectivity of women in their concrete, social relations. Even this has, however, been radically challenged. The term 'Women', tracked through diverse fields of history, sociology, philosophy, art history and literature no longer offers much security for the critical historian or cultural analyst. Texts, images and discursive practices have to be analysed historically and in their cultural diversity as sites where the category 'women' is *made* by the very discourses and practices which produce and speak this sign as part of the constitution of regimes of class and race as well as gender and sexuality.⁵ Feminism does not speak for women; it politically challenges those constructions of 'women' by producing counter-constructions that are not based on a nature, a truth, an ontology. Thus what it is that we argue for and from is constantly *in the making*.

Analyses of 'women' based on theories of sexual difference refuse anatomy as a basis for the determining fictions of sexual identity. The female body, defined not essentially but as a resource for imaginative, psychological, experiential potentialities, can be invoked theoretically as the repressed source of our radical signification as '*not-women-women*'. Julia Kristeva defines the radical significance of femininity in phallogocentric cultures by this negativity. We may have to use the slogan 'women' to advertise our demands for childcare, contraception and equality at work, yet, Kristeva argues,

on a deeper level, however, a woman cannot 'be'; it is something that does not even belong to the order of *being*. It follows that a feminist practice can only be negative, at odds with what already exists so that we may say 'that's not it' and 'that's still not it'. In 'woman' I see something that cannot be represented, something that is not said, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies.⁶

The feminist project aims to introduce an effective differentiation which would allow the *difference(s)* of women to be represented imaginatively and symbolically – on the planes of language, philosophy and art where the feminine traditionally signifies only the negative difference from man or his fantasy of his other. The female body has come to hold a privileged place in thinking about the material and imaginative resources for differential significations. Some feminist theorists attempt to explore the specific morphology of the female body (which is different from its anatomy) as a resource for the metaphoric invention necessary to a semiotic revolution on behalf of the unrepresented difference of *not-women-women*.⁷ The sexually *jouissant* female body and the maternal body, the body as the site of drives and energy, pleasures and pains, its invisible sexual specificity, it is these *imaginary* bodily elements, which are,

HEROINES

none the less, in critical ways, recalcitrantly material and enigmatic, that fascinate feminist writers. In diverse fashion we have reclaimed the radical importance of corporeality in the struggle of 'not-women' to probe analytically, and to create from the possibilities of femininities that have a bodiliness, but one that is not defined or captured in the patriarchal discourses of philosophy, religion, biological science, art or even existing psychoanalysis.⁸

Such radical feminist theoretical propositions create the means to re-read the inscriptions of the feminine from the texts of the past. We can now, in retrospect, use theoretically conceived insights about femininity as another difference to decipher what women artists might have been doing in their art: i.e. making 'women' in art's histories – creating a differentiation rather than expressing a pre-given difference. In the laboratory of the past, their texts and images offer us, in the present, experimental material through which to explore the differences of femininity(ies) in the pressure to articulate what the feminine might be both within, and in its perpetual transgression of, the phallogentric law of the Same.

Psychoanalysis, however, undermines the idea of the fixed subject with achieved sexual difference. Psychoanalysis hypothesises both the socially desired outcome of sexed subject formation – how most of us become women or men capable of making a range of sexual choices but it exposes in that very process the conditions of a perpetual disruption of such outcomes through the unconscious and fantasy. Psychoanalysis already imagines the inevitable negativity in subjectivity that allows the subject to be considered not as some robotic socially manufactured automaton, gendered and made sexual once and for all, but as a dynamic and contradictory *process*.

Feminist revisions of psychoanalysis argue that such structural and creative instability occurs because the phallogentric regime of the subject – the one Freud and his followers are in fact describing – is based on the repression of *the mother* and with her, the repression of the possibilities of *different* differences that the maternal body, voice and space come to represent in a phallogentric system. Such a mother-repressing system is organised around the authority of the Father, representing the Law that makes separation from the Mother the price of acquiring language, sexuality and thus subjectivity. Throughout our lived life histories we are being made and undone as subjects over and over again in our encounters with language, with others, with culture. The subject is, moreover, split and is, therefore, always undermined, or rather determined, from some other point, namely the unconscious within the individual's history and in the structure of language. This process and its regular instability are differentially configured for the feminine subject because of the asymmetry of the phallogentric regimes of sexual difference in most of our societies. The sign of this difficulty is the *disrepresentedness* of femininity as anything other than the *negated other* of masculinity: i.e. what the masculine is not. This emptied space that is, none the less, named femininity is appropriated as an image in the making of the masculine subject that masks a lack attributed to it and then, in a vicious twist of phallogentric logic, is made to stand for that which might cause the masculine subject to lack. Woman then signifies castration, monstrousness, fatality and so forth.⁹ Thus, without

THE FEMALE HERO

falling back into anatomical or biological essences, we can still talk about the specificity of femininity as something which already negatively exists as a figure in contemporary cultural representations. It gets pictured in these negating and dangerous guises. But it is also to be imagined as that which might be excessive to these limited significations of femininity as not-masculinity, offering *in potentia* another difference. Femininity is both 'nothing' (in phallogentric logic) and everything else that is not yet known in that economy.

One other major insight of psychoanalysis needs to be considered: the unconscious character of subjectivity based on the division of the subject into conscious and unconscious. In Lacanian theory the unconscious is formed by the subject's passage into language and the Symbolic order of culture. Its contents are all that has to be repressed for the subject to misrecognise itself in the positions and terms language offers us. What is repressed is the fantastic, that is, the imaginary relations of the infant to others, especially to the mother's body, voice, gaze and presence, and to its own archaic, fractured body and its polymorphous – as yet unchannelled and free-flowing – drives. Fantasy is the governing register of the Imaginary mode which theoretically precedes accession to the Symbolic, but is always defined by it and co-exists within its signifiers. The Imaginary is thus at once an alternative to Symbolic modes while operating within the subject as a co-present and competing register of meaning. The location of repressed fantasies of maternal and archaic corporeality in the unconscious means two important things. One is that the existing subject is split in the present – the unconscious being the contents of a past made ever present through a particular mode of signification and displacement characteristic of the unconscious which appears in dreams, daydreams, slips of the pen or tongue and jokes. The second is that the subject is always massively unknown to itself.

The analyst listens to and looks for signs of the unconscious traced across the speech and actions of an analysand, disturbing the conscious patterns with its own rhythms and meanings. In a similar vein cultural analysts might be said to read the texts and images of writers and artists to see the traces of this split in subjectivity and the varying registers on which we are able to produce meanings. Thus unconscious meaning is not expressed as, for instance, in a surrealist image by a conscious attempt to replicate or picture the unconscious's contents and modes. Unconscious materials subtly realign the consciously produced text by its own particular symptomology. Thus an image can signify both in a social semiotics of public artistic and literary production, and from this 'other scene', as Freud named the unconscious. In both classic Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis that 'other scene' is often identified with 'Woman', who thus remains repressed as the darkness of the dark continent, the enigma of the unconscious, the forever repressed but determining. But from a feminist revision, 'that other scene' is also a site for the traces of an *other* woman, an *other* femininity identified by feminist desire, interested in the specificity of femininity as something *other* than the cipher of masculinity's self-reinforcing yet monstrous and dangerous Other.

This conclusion poses serious problems for feminists in art history trying to reinscribe into cultural history the stories of women artists. Our whole project has

HEROINES

been committed to restoring to visibility women as artists whose significance for us lies in the difference they might bring to the existing stories of art: to the canon. But we are not on secure ground any more. I suggest we reformulate the project thus. Instead of reading 'for the woman' – for what we anticipate to be gendered experience – we read for *the inscriptions of the other otherness of femininity*, that is, for those traces of the unexpected articulation of what may be specific to female persons in the process of becoming subjects – subjected, subjectified and subjectivised – in the feminine through the interplay of social identities and psychic formations within histories. The latter are inherently complex and unstable and, most importantly, never known in advance or knowable until they achieve some form of articulation or signification.

Feminism, informed by such theoretical insights, becomes, therefore, a struggle around representation itself operating simultaneously on several registers. Commenting on Luce Irigaray's radical attempt to invent a metaphysics of the different female body that has been consistently misunderstood, Elizabeth Grosz argues:

The 'two lips' is not a truthful image of female anatomy but a new emblem by which female sexuality can be positively *represented*. For Irigaray, the problem for women is not the experience or recognition of female pleasure, but its representation, which actively constructs women's experience of their corporeality and pleasures. If female sexuality and desire are represented in some relation to male sexuality, they are submerged in a series of male-defined constraints. Contrary to the objection that she is describing an essential, natural or innate femininity, unearthing it from under its patriarchal burial, Irigaray's project can be interpreted as a contestation of patriarchal representations *at the level of cultural representation itself*.¹⁰

The object is to challenge art history as a system of representation which has not simply lost our past but has constructed a visual field for art in which feminine inscriptions are not only rendered invisible through exclusion or neglect but made *illegible* because of the phallogocentric logic which allows only one sex. To claim creativity for women is to do more than find a few female names to add to canonised lists in surveys of Western art. It is to transgress the major ideological axes of meaning in a phallogocentric culture, to disorder the prevailing regime of sexual difference. For a long time it has been argued that challenging the cultural negation of women's creativity is *more* than a matter of historical recovery. But few of us have really thought through how impossible the task of doing that *more* actually is.

As feminists working in art history, we rediscover the work of women artists – but what do we then say about it? We could judge their art by existing criteria. But since these have been evolved to deal with the work of exclusively white male artists, they may not be relevant. If we then admit there is difference, what would be its signs? How do I know that what I take to be the signs of a woman's consciousness at work are not merely the imposition of culturally stereotyped ideas of social femininity that have shaped me, that define 'woman' in my own time and culture, in my own class and

THE FEMALE HERO

ethnic background? So I must wonder about what I am looking for and what I see in or read into the work of artists who are 'women' when the feminist project is caught in the paradox of deconstructing the category 'women' in the name of 'women' as feminism's object.

When we are trained by canonical art history, we sit through many a class showing images of the sexual abuse of women: the Rape of Lucretia, the Rape of Europa, the Rape of the Sabine Women. I always felt sure that this must be another kind of 'rape' from that which I dreaded happening to me, that which friends had horrifically experienced, when they feared for their lives, and felt in that moment something irretrievably stolen from them and ruined within them. How could we politely discuss artistic genius, formal perfection, compositional innovation, iconographic descent or colour harmony when we were confronted with the crime by which most profoundly men police women?¹¹ Artistic rape was nice, a bit sexy, normal because men do desire women, especially when they sit about with their clothes falling off. But that is feminism for you: always so uncouth and insensitive to aesthetics, and, of course, always bringing things down to the personal level, not being able to keep things like art and society apart.

But in fact, the reverse is true. Art is where the meeting of the social and the subjective is rhetorically represented to us. It happens in ways which mystify that relation, giving canonical authority to a particular kind of experience of subjectivity and social power. What we are doing as feminists is naming those implicit connections between the most intimate and the most social, between power and the body, between sexuality and violence. Images of sexual intimidation are central to this problem and thus to a critique of canonical representation.

SUSANNA AND THE ELDERS

I want to explore – and take issue with – a *feminist* reading of a painting by Artemisia Gentileschi of the subject *Susanna and the Elders* (Fig. 5.2), signed and dated 1610, painted when the artist was seventeen.¹² Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1653) was born in Rome to a painter father, Orazio Gentileschi, and Prudentia Montone. Artemisia was the only daughter in a family of sons, and the only one with any real aptitude in her father's profession. Like many women artists of the period, she acquired her training in her father's workshop and assisted him on major projects such as the decorative schemes in several of the new palazzi being constructed in Rome in the early decades of the seventeenth century. She worked in Rome, Florence, Genoa, Venice and even London and eventually died in Naples where she had settled in 1642. Her beginnings as an artist in Rome coincided with the inspiration provided by the new style and dramatic treatment of psychologically intense subjects by the painter Michelangelo Merisi (1571–1610), known as Caravaggio. Caravaggio made a major impact in Rome with extraordinary paintings in the churches of S. Luigi dei Francesi

HEROINES

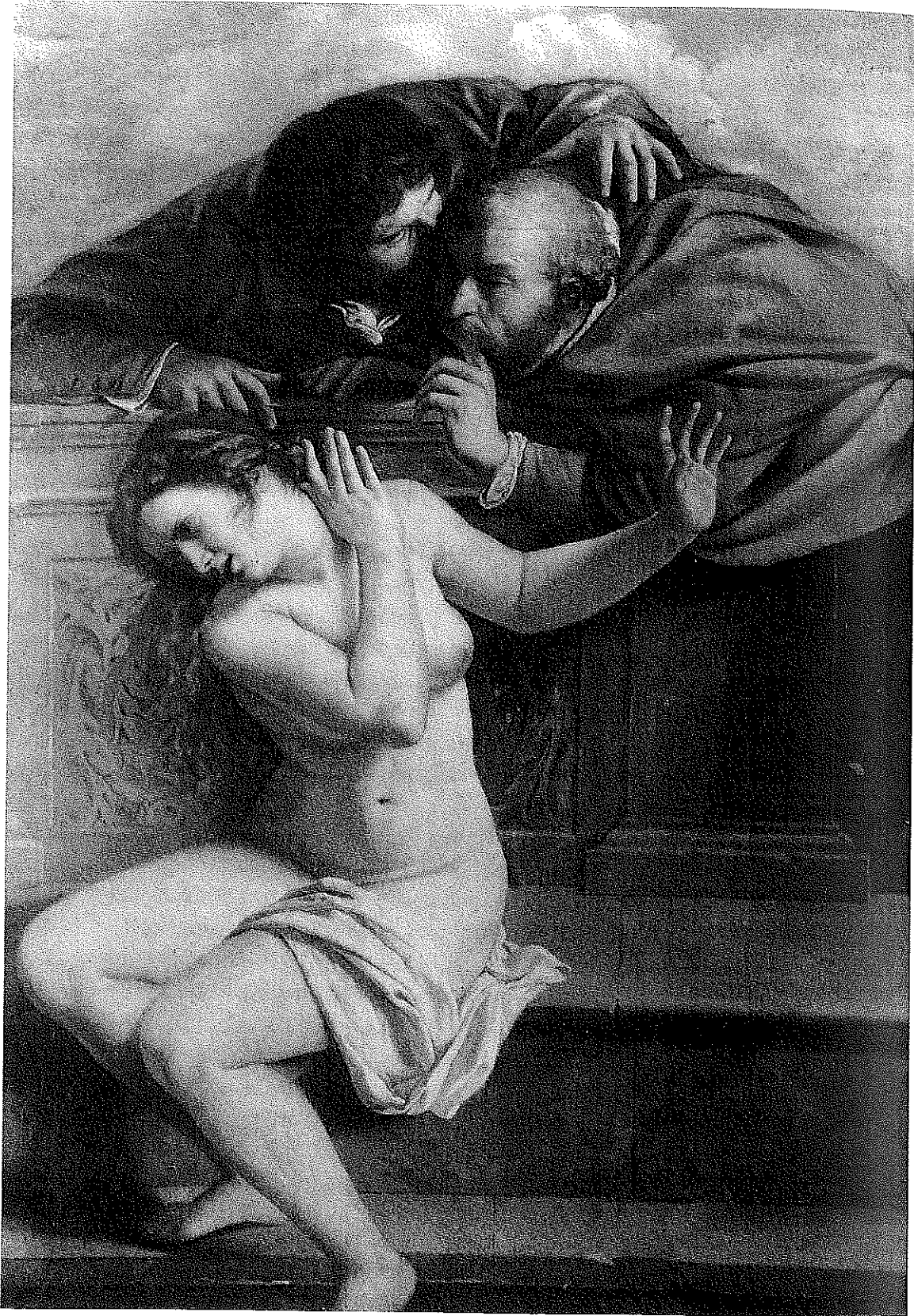


Fig. 5.2 Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1653), *Susanna and the Elders*, 1610, oil on canvas, 170 × 119 cm. Pommersfelden, Kunstsammlungen Graf von Schönborn

THE FEMALE HERO

Gentileschi working with a combination of her father's original Florentine manner and the stronger forms and dramatic simplification developed by Caravaggio and then espoused by her father. Orazio arranged for his talented daughter to study perspective with his collaborator on decorative painting, Agostino Tassi. Tassi raped Artemisia in May 1611, and in March 1612 (after nine months?) Orazio sued Tassi for damages. The trial involved Artemisia being tortured and a series of counter-allegations against the young woman's chastity. Tassi was briefly imprisoned, and Artemisia married and moved to Florence. She had a successful career in Italy and England, though her extant oeuvre numbers only around thirty-four attributed and signed paintings. Many portraits are lost. One of the major landmarks of feminism's challenge to art history is Mary Garrard's monograph on Artemisia Gentileschi which appeared in 1989.¹³ Mary Garrard focuses on Artemisia Gentileschi's major narrative paintings of 'heroic women': Susanna, Judith, Cleopatra and Lucretia.

The biblical story of Susanna and the Elders tells of a young married Jewish woman living in Babylon during the first exile of the Jewish people (after 586 BCE).¹⁴ Susanna is bathing in her garden. She sends her two maids into the house to fetch oil and perfumes for her bath. Two lecherous elders of the community spy on her, conspiring to force her to submit to them sexually. They threaten her that, if she refuses, they will denounce her for adultery with another man, adultery being, according to ancient Jewish law, a capital crime for women. Susanna refuses, preferring the fate of death to the sin they propose. She is then falsely accused by the elders and condemned to death. Daniel, of leonine fame, vindicates Susanna by exposing the elders' mendacity. Interrogating them separately, he asks them under which tree Susanna committed adultery. Each names a different kind of tree. They are then executed for the crime of false witness.

The story is a complex narrative of sexual desire and visual temptation, female chastity and masculine law. During the Renaissance the dramatic focus on the moment of the woman's nakedness while bathing exposed to a lecherous conspiracy emphasised the sexual, voyeuristic and visually violating aspects of the theme, while providing a biblical and even theological justification for the painting of an erotic female nude, a genre that was emerging in this period, shifting the connotations of the female nude from its traditional iconographic association with Truth towards its modern signification of (masculine) desire and its privileged visibility.

For Garrard, Artemisia Gentileschi's treatment of Susanna shifted the 'hard-core eroticism', 'blatant pornography' and 'rape, imagined by artists – presumably also by their patrons and customers – as a daring and noble adventure'.¹⁵ 'By contrast to the cognate images, the expressive core of Gentileschi's painting is the heroine's plight, not the villains' anticipated pleasure.'¹⁶ The basis of the difference is gender: 'In art, a sexually distorted and spiritually meaningless interpretation of the theme has prevailed because most artists and patrons have been men, drawn by instinct to identify more with the villains than with the heroine.'¹⁷ 'Artemisia's Susanna presents us with an image rare in art, of a three-dimensional female character who is heroic in the classical sense, for in her struggle against forces ultimately beyond her control, she exhibits a

HEROINES

spectrum of human emotions that moves us, as with Oedipus or Achilles, to pity and awe.¹⁸ The artist's special affinity with this subject is both the fact that she was a woman,¹⁹ as opposed to a man, and that she was this particular woman, herself vulnerable to unwanted sexual aggression at the time of painting the *Susanna*, a woman who was later raped as a result of that vulnerability, before she painted her first version of the theme of *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (Fig. 5.4). Thus Mary Garrard concludes her chapter on Artemisia Gentileschi's *Susanna*:

What the painting gives us, then, is a reflection, not of the rape itself, but rather of how one young woman felt about her own sexual vulnerability in the year 1610. It is significant that the *Susanna* does not express the violence of rape, but the intimidating pressure of the threat of rape. Artemisia's response to rape itself is more probably reflected in her earliest interpretation of the Judith theme, the dark and bloody *Judith Slaying Holofernes* . . . In this image – as even the most conservative writers have realized – Judith's decapitation of Holofernes provides a shockingly exact pictorial equivalent for the punishment of Agostino Tassi. No painting, of course, and certainly no great painting, is mere *raw autobiography*. Yet once we acknowledge, as we must, that Artemisia Gentileschi's early pictures are vehicles of personal expression to an extraordinary degree, we can trace the progress of her experience, as the victim first of sexual intimidation, and then of rape – two phases of a continuous sequence that find their pictorial counterparts in the Pommersfelden *Susanna* and the Uffizi *Judith* respectively. [my emphasis]²⁰

Why should we argue with this? Perhaps the distinctions I want to bring out are too fine to merit much attention. But I think that a great deal of what feminist interventions in art history are about is at stake. Mary Garrard's argument is very compelling because it seems to bring the seventeenth-century artist to life to see her work as a kind of personal testimony, witnessing her own traumas. But how does this differ from what we find in the normalised accounts of art history – the equation of the artist's biographical life with the art through the mechanism of expression? Nanette Salomon has pointed out that, while biography has held a privileged place in the modes of art history ever since Vasari initiated the heroic model with his *Vite* (Lives) of famous artists,²¹ in regard to gender, biographical material works differentially:

Whereas Vasari used the device of biography to individualise and mythify the works of artistic men, the same device has a profoundly different effect when applied to women. The details of a man's biography are conveyed as the measure of the 'universal', applicable to all mankind; in the male genius, they are simply heightened and intensified. In contrast, the details of a woman's biography are used to underscore the idea that she is an exception; they apply only to make her an interesting case. Her art is reduced to a visual record of her personal and psychological make up.²²

THE FEMALE HERO

Salomon claims that in art history, feminist and otherwise, Artemisia Gentileschi's works are 'reduced to therapeutic expressions of her repressed fear, anger and/or desire for revenge. Her creative efforts are compromised, in traditional terms, as personal and relative.'²³

Biographical materials certainly provide significant and necessary resources for the belated production of women's *authority*. But there is surely a difference between careful interrogation of the archive which includes materials on a lived life and the binding back of paintings on to the Western bourgeois notion of the individual within discourses on biography. Biography, moreover, can never be a substitute for history. We might do well to recall Marx's famous dictum in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (1852), suitably edited: 'Women make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.'²⁴ When producing his historical biography of the nineteenth-century French novelist Gustave Flaubert, Jean-Paul Sartre tried to theorise how individuals within a class come to class-consciousness. Sartre argues that a bourgeois child, as Flaubert was, insulated from class awareness within the homogeneity of his (or her) family group, might, for instance, witness some major historical event, a riot, an uprising, a fight, a strike. In that momentary crystallisation of the antagonisms of classed society, the child is forced to see his or her bourgeois family 'from outside', as the object of proletarian hatred or aristocratic disdain.²⁵ By this conjunction of the personal perception of major public events that suddenly reveal the social forces shaping the individual, the latter is forced to know the necessary interface of the private and the public, the personal and the social, and to find himself or herself defined by it. Sartre concludes: 'In truth, to discover social reality inside and outside oneself, merely to endure it is not enough; one must see with the eyes of others.'²⁶

In just such a way might we read the public ordeal of the Gentileschi/Tassi trial of 1612 as a moment crystallising the relations between sexuality and gender power in seventeenth-century Rome. The process of the public re-presentation of her sexual and indeed social trauma might have revealed – articulated – to Artemisia Gentileschi how she was placed as a woman as object of exchange between men in which her sexual violation signified less her personal suffering than the abuse of the legal rights of men over women's bodies to decide their social status in this sex-gender economy. Nanette Salomon analyses the structure of meaning the trial enacts in order to place the 'experience' within historical representation of gender relations.

While the proceedings of the trial may or may not add anything to our understanding of Gentileschi's art, they can do so only when seen as part of the highly coded discourse on sexuality and the politics of rape in the seventeenth century. Perhaps more than anything, they emphasize the fact that Artemisia, body and soul, was treated as the site of exchange between men, primarily her father/mentor and her lover/rapist/mentor. . . . This process of exchange began when she was 'given' to Tassi as a pupil, and it continued

HEROINES

when he violently 'took' her, when her honour was 'redeemed,' and when she was given and taken again. The homosocial bonding ritual enacted and reenacted among these men make 'Artemisia' an historically elusive construct. If the testimony of the trial reveals anything, it is a person with an obstinate sense of her own social and sexual needs. Her paintings look less like 'heroic women' than like the nexus of a series of complicated negotiations between convention and disruption, between 'Artemisia' and Artemisia.²⁷

What would a *cooked* autobiography look like?²⁸ Playing on Mary Garrard's own choice of words, raw autobiography, I am referring to Lévi-Strauss's image of the difference between nature and culture as a difference between the raw and the cooked.²⁹ Mary Garrard is saying that no art delivers unmediated elements of an artist's life, but her text offers us the image of art as a mirror: reflection, expression, 'pictorial counterpart' and pictorial equivalent. What is the cooking agent, the process by which what happens to us is transformed from event into experience, memory and thus meaning? I suggest that it is representation as at once a semiotic process and a filter to the 'other scene'.

TRAUMA, MEMORY AND THE RELIEF OF REPRESENTATION

Current research on trauma suggests that the more terrible has been the pain, the more difficult it is to speak of it or to deal with it. Cathy Caruth argues that the pathology of trauma is '*the structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences'. The enigmatic core of trauma is the fact that a *raw* history inhabits the subject: 'the traumatized person carries an impossible history within them, or they become the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess'.³⁰ This creates a further paradox. In trauma the greatest confrontation with reality may occur as an absolute numbing to it: 'that immediacy, paradoxically enough may take the form of belatedness'.³¹ This creates then, a crisis of truth.

In the testimony of a trauma survivor, occurring only when some transformation has been begun, the analyst hears not the event but the survivor's incipient departure from its raw and overwhelming presence. Caruth writes that studies of 'the inaccessibility of trauma, its resistance to full theoretical analysis and understanding . . . also open up a perspective on ways in which trauma can make possible survival, and on the means of engaging this possibility through the different modes of therapeutic, literary, pedagogical encounter'.³² And, I would add, artistic, and even historiographic, encounter.

Psychoanalysis, the practice dedicated to the study, and hopefully the relief, of trauma, began with the young women known as hysterics, who were said to 'suffer from reminiscences', but of what they could no longer recall – they were traumatised

THE FEMALE HERO

by events that were unspeakable. The young women diagnosed as 'hysterics' and treated by Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud in the 1880s and 1890s were a bundle of symptoms in which these traumatic experiences of sexual abuse, betrayal and bereavement had been diverted from memory because the overwhelming immediacy remained undigestible by the subject's psychic apparatus. These experiences had undergone conversion into a language of body signs: aphasia, anorexia, paralysis, localised pain and dysfunction, blindness, recurring gestures which retained, even as metaphoric transpositions, a kind of telling literalness.³³ Relief was produced by restoring events to memory and thus delivering them into representation.

The expressive model of art history, which imagines a vicarious therapeutic violence in Artemisia Gentileschi's paintings fails in this primary understanding of the psychic mechanisms that defend us against the pain of trauma by symptomising it, and also by not understanding what it takes to 'work through' to representation of it. Michèle Montrelay, writing about the censorship of femininity and its necessary release through 'repression' in discourse, argues that, in order for us to have pleasurable and creative access to sexuality, we must undergo the structuring of discourse, the repression that is also known as symbolic 'castration'. Representation relieves us from the immediate 'real' of the body (and traumatic events). It is thus a 'castrating' representation, while quite specifically not being a representation of castration. By aiding the analysand into discourse, the paradoxical liberation of repression occurs through the analyst's interpretation of the analysand and her symptoms.

Here, therefore, pleasure is the effect of the word of the other. More specifically, it occurs at the advent of a structuring discourse. For what is essential in the cure of a woman is not making sexuality more 'conscious'; or interpreting it, at least not in the sense normally given to this term. The analyst's word takes on a completely different function. It no longer explains, but from the sole fact of articulating, it *structures*.³⁴

What pleasure, Montrelay asks, can there be in the repression that is produced at the moment of interpretation? 'These words [produced in analytic interpretation] are *other*; the analyst's discourse is not reflexive but different. As such it is a metaphor, not a mirror, of the patient's discourse. And precisely, metaphor is capable of engendering pleasure.'³⁵

I want to suggest this argument itself as a metaphor for art practice. Art practice can be thought of as metaphor, in order to interrupt the sliding of the artist under his or her own work which art history consistently effects. The work an artist makes is literally *other* because it is a product of the artist's labour and an external object. It is also *other* in so far as making a painting, for instance, involves participating in the public languages of the culture whose formal protocols, rhetorical conventions and supplied narratives might be said to *structure* the material which presses upon the artist, functioning as the drive, need and desire to produce. In addition to any conscious manipulation of semiotic conventions of the culture in which the artist is

HEROINES

trained, disciplined and operative, there is an exchange between the artist's as yet unformulated materials for discourse and the articulation made possible by its enunciation through the discourse of the other: the culture's given sign systems and stories.

But if these given conventions and stories are *other* in a way that provides only an alienating field of representation incommensurate with the shape and needs of the subject because the creating subject is feminine and the discourse phallogentric, there will be a contradiction. In that space between a necessary and an alien *otherness* we might begin to look for traces of a shift in the circuits of meaning, which might have served as the site of discovery for the creator's experience and the reader's realisation of historically distanced femininities.

The Biblical stories of Susanna and Judith so favoured in the Baroque period are exemplary (Fig. 5.3). I propose that we do not consider them merely the means by



Fig. 5.3 Jacob Jordaens (1593–1678), *Susanna and the Elders*, c.1630, oil on canvas, 189 × 177 cm. Brussels, Museum of Fine Arts

THE FEMALE HERO

which Artemisia Gentileschi 'expressed' her violated female self, which she 'knew' before its representation. The stories and the changing forms of their representation and hence of their potential meaning and affect provided metaphors through which, whatever the psychological impact of the event, her trauma may have found the relief of representation. The bar of repression is both the structural mark of entry into Language, the Symbolic Order, and the local boundary of a historically specific symbolic order. We cannot, therefore, assume we know what meaning these events had. We have the texts of the trial and we have the paintings done by the chief witness at the trial. Each of these is a socially mediated and semiotically framed site of 'articulation'; in specific ideological ways, these texts structured the meanings given to these events. If we assume that Roman courts in seventeenth-century Italy offered, even in their historical specificity, some aspect of a patriarchal logic with regard to sexual crimes, as well as both a class and a political logic, it may be that some of the affective trauma of the events as Artemisia Gentileschi experienced them could not be articulated in the representation of a female body in a legal dispute as damaged, previously soiled or still pristine goods. The metaphors were inappropriate to 'relieve' the woman, to give her the *jouissance* of allowing the pressure of traumatic injury to pass into discourse – to be put at a distance. Then should we not examine the paintings in detail for the ways in which creative work under certain pressures might deliver into artistic discourse meanings other than those already caged in existing metaphors?

The stories and the repertoire of the prior representations of Susanna and Judith are metaphors which might have to be turned and shifted in order to articulate the inarticulate material of the sexual violation and what it might have meant to this Roman woman in a semiotic universe shaped by existing legalities and cultural narratives. Thus the images need to be read at a distance from the artist – for the articulating distance that representation created for the subject who was the artist. I sever the two for a moment to insert the relation as problematic – and get away from the legendary form of biographically construed artistic subjectivity, which effectively collaborates with canonical devaluation of women artists.³⁶

The *topoi* of Susanna and Judith were highly popular at the time with artists and patrons alike, and it would be the purest example of dehistoricising and over-personalising the work of a woman artist to detach her from that cultural context in which images of sex and violence were so imaginatively central. Rather, therefore, than imagining that we can read these images for the personal response to a trauma, we have to wonder how an artist could deal with a subject, such as sexual assault, that in its public currency in the artistic repertoire, represents situations which she has herself experienced, but from the position that the topic and its traditional artistic representations effectively objectify. How do you paint *for* and *as* the victim, on the way to becoming a survivor using an iconography that presumes a viewer who could not be the victim? These topics that were so central to Baroque narrative painting did present opportunities for some women artists because they apparently figure heroic women so prominently. Yet, by the same token, the meanings they traditionally signify are not in the end about women. 'Woman' as Susanna, Judith, Lucretia, Cleopatra is a

HEROINES

sign, communicated between men in their use of women's chastity or sexuality as the token of their relations to, commerce between and competition with each other.³⁷

The conjuncture of Artemisia Gentileschi, the subject of that set of historical events and the author of a painting of the mythical subject Susanna which the events postdate, still poses the question of why this woman could and would depart from the dominant prototypes of the theme. If we read *Susanna and the Elders* (Fig. 5.2) as a painting by this woman, Artemisia Gentileschi – there is still debate about attribution, even though the work is signed and dated – we might then ask: What space was it possible to carve out of the iconographic repertoire by the reconfiguration of forms and bodies, colours and meanings on the canvas? Mary Garrard's reading of *Susanna and the Elders*, of the awkwardly twisting, and distressingly exposed body, surmounted by the anguished face in a painting that places us so close to the vulnerability of the naked woman with the men so menacingly near, is true to what we now see. But how do we understand what we are seeing, historically? If the work were so deviant, why would it have been painted, bought and hung? What are the conditions for its renovation or deviation other than in the positing of the artist as a woman whose experience we can safely assume we understand? Are there not other readings of the same material, in which such vulnerability and anguish might, for instance, heighten the sadistic pleasure offered by the painting? Is that body's exposure and titillation for a male viewer not as apparent as in the other paintings of this theme, when the naked body is there so directly in the foreground, exposed to us even while it turns to hide itself from the menace of the prying lechers whose view is obstructed all the better to facilitate ours?

Such paintings are a space in which possibly contrary meanings could vie with each other. While none is excluded, some may be preferred, according to the perspective of the reader or viewer, and whether or not they are reading within a dominant or subordinate cultural formation. At this level, the picture does not 'express'. It is a productive site for several possible meanings, where Artemisia Gentileschi worked over existing materials and conventions, reshaping them to permit certain inflections but without control of the range of meanings once her work entered the social contexts of consumption. It is, therefore, possible that a deviant reading co-exists with those that would sell the painting to a patron insensitive to these other possibilities of this artist's treatment of her subject. Which meaning will prevail ultimately depends upon the desire of the viewer. That desire is gendered, hence it is always political. Feminism creates the conditions of our wanting stories of ourselves, stories of women, of seeking clues to feminine traces in the dominant metaphors of sexuality in our varied cultures.

Yet we are still imagining the painting as Mary Garrard has represented it to us in terms of a scene of threatened male-inflicted sexual violence. The seventeenth-century viewer of the painting, knowing the story, might well have perceived this scene through the anticipated conclusion of the narrative. The elders are put to death for their transgression of the laws governing men's right of possession of women, regulating who is allowed to look at an already claimed woman: Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife. The narrative is fundamentally about the legal versus the illicit

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THE FEMALE HERO

use of a woman's body by men. The story instates the husband's rights over the elders' desires, giving it an Oedipal dimension since cross-generational masculine desire is punished through the legally established status of the woman as a man's chaste wife; that is, a woman possessed only by one, younger man.

The late Shirley Moreno worked upon the emergence of the erotic nude in Venice in the sixteenth century in relation to the negotiation of marriage rules and kinship systems. In addressing the sexuality in play in paintings of the nude, she argued against a non-historical analysis of the nude in terms of modern conceptions of generalised male eroticism. In many of the Ovidian stories used by Titian in his cycle of paintings of the erotic nude for Philip II of Spain, a high-ranking woman, her nudity signifying her purity in the case of the chaste Moon goddess Diana, is watched illegally by a mortal man whose subsequent fate is death. Paintings such as *Diana and Acteon* (Edinburgh, National Gallery of Scotland) must be read as monitory: displaying the field of visual temptation while protecting the viewer against the due punishment for the transgression of illicitly seeing a prohibited woman's nakedness by locating a surrogate man within the painting, or the story, who would bear the pain of death.³⁸

The painting *Susanna and the Elders* (Fig. 5.2) creates some singular effects. The most compelling is created by the radical compression of the space within the painting. Perspective is what Artemisia Gentileschi was to study with Agostino Tassi, her teacher turned rapist. Perspective, more than a useful skill, represented not merely a technology for the production of the illusion of space on two-dimensional surfaces; it was a discursive construction of a world and a way of establishing an ideological relation to that world, measured, mastered, displayed, legible, rational, mathematically calculable. Perspective rendered visually represented space symbolic.³⁹ There is very little space in the *Susanna*. This is probably a result of a lack of initiation on the part of the painter into the intricacies of establishing space according to this system. That lack, however, creates the painting's affective edge; it gives it its dramatic intensity and creates its profound ambivalence.

The viewer is offered a viewing position that is notionally in the bathing pool or mikveh.⁴⁰ That is to say, the viewer can have no rational relation to this space as an observer. We are too close to what is going on. This excessive proximity is repeated in the positioning of the over-large elders, who loom over the stone seating so close that they could reach out and touch the bathing Susanna, while they appear to behave as if they are lurking at a sufficient distance to conspire in whispers while merely watching her. In Rubens's near-contemporary version of the subject dated 1609-10, there is a similar compositional use of a formal garden setting with stone balustrade and ornamental bath. But one of the elders dramatically bestrides the balustrade and touches the naked skin of the woman from whom the other man is pulling away the drapery. As the Susanna figure leans away from their assault, the whole composition takes on a dynamic leftward thrust compensated by the woman's slightly astonished look back at the intruders.⁴¹ Rubens strives to bring all the figures into a narratively created conversation, centralising the focus and using this centrifugal composition to signify the intrusive intimacy of the illicit scene.

HEROINES

In Artemisia Gentileschi's painting, the men and the woman exist in radically different zones. The elders are painted as a unit, blocked off over the balustrade, talking to each other. The plain, blue sky roughly forms a backdrop. Where are the trees so crucial to the narrative (the elders' deceit is revealed because each tells Daniel that he spied Susanna's adultery taking place under a different type of tree)? Where are the signs of the garden so common in other settings – creating an Edenic situation to displace the stark conflict of male concupiscence and female nakedness? Instead of a developed setting, the painting does not provide that implied narrative through detail and excess. In a simplicity that bespeaks the artist's immaturity (that is her only half-cooked training and induction into how to manage the conventions of her chosen models), the drama of the situation is revised to pose a doubled masculinity – one old, one young – against an anguished femininity – a young, naked woman. Unlike other versions of this theme, the painting does not correlate the viewers with the view of the elders, leching under the cover of trees while the young woman blithely carries on with her toilette, exposed to a view which embraces both the men within and those without the painting's fictional space (for instance in Jacopo Tintoretto's version of 1555–6 in Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum). Artemisia Gentileschi's painting is thus not a metaphor for viewing, for visual pleasure which is sexually inciting. Nor does it dramatise the men's intrusion and unwanted proposals. The exposed and the conspiring are rudely juxtaposed within the awkwardly compressed space. The distance necessary to allow them to articulate into a narrative is denied. I suggest that Artemisia Gentileschi's paintings exhibit a tendency that undercuts the narratives of her selected *topoi* to reveal, in tableau form, the oppositions that underlie and structure the tale. In looking at her painting, we are made to ask: Why in this instance is Susanna so distressed given the stage of the story represented?⁴²

There is an excess in the nude body, in its sharp body-creasing twist, the flung-out hands, the taut neck and the downcast head. The face of Susanna is also disturbing. Its expressive tenor is pitched almost too high and its position draws it away from the body, creating distinct registers of representation. This tension suggests two different exemplars for facial expression and for bodily gesture being used in dissonant conjunction in one painting, troubling the ideological freight that any template from contemporary art might be bringing with it. These elements of pose, gesture and facial expression, the grammar of historical painting bequeathed by the High Renaissance Academy, endow the female body that is the luminous centre of the painting with an energy, a pathos and a subjectivity that does indeed run counter to the figuration of the female nude as a display, and thus it undoes some of the genre's canonical meanings. That shift in effect is not, I would suggest, the result of Artemisia Gentileschi's knowing intention or of her experience. The painting might suggest the tentative beginning of a possible grammar, arising out of inexperience as an artist, resulting from difficulties in resolving the integration of elements and of managing space as a narrative device. The unexpected power and intensity of the image is the outcome of a working process through which the artist might have recognised a way of putting figures together that could be used again, knowingly, purposively, to be the signs by

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THE FEMALE HERO

which a feminine difference might be inscribed across the texts of a culture that provided only stories that rehearsed the exchange of women between men. Equally these same elements could be read sadistically through an identification with the elders against the woman. Yet the imagined masculine viewer would want to be detached from their fate and find a way to delight his vision while enjoying the protected distance of a known narrative where there is also the Daniel figure, the rescuer and redeemer of the terrorised woman.

Mine is only a tentative counter-hypothesis, one semiotic reading of the painting that seeks to trace the level at which I might look for the inscription of difference. The difference is thus both simply that which is other, not the same as the dominant masculine meanings embodied in narrative representations of Susanna, and that which is what those dominant meanings decree to be the feminine. The woman artist works in the dark, seeking a gap between those two. It is that space of possibility that, as feminists, we desire to see. The aberrant details in a painting that does not achieve resolution of its elements give me the clues I desire to find about how a woman artist might have found her difference through the very act of making art, which is the process of working the canon in the presence of which she seeks to find herself as an artist.

DECAPITATION OR CASTRATION: *JUDITH SLAYING HOLOFERNES*

The art historian and Baroque expert R. Ward Bissell writes: 'It was also natural that she should represent – even identify with – the famous heroine. Indeed her grizzly rendition of *Judith Decapitating Holofernes*, now in the Uffizi, makes one wonder, whether, consciously or unconsciously, Artemisia did not cast Agostino Tassi in the unfortunate role of Holofernes.'⁴³

The subject of Judith and Holofernes is, however, not a revenge theme. Its biblical basis is the story of a political execution carried out by a widow⁴⁴ who puts herself at risk in the camp of the besieging enemy in order to kill the general, and thus to dishearten his troops and liberate her people from a deadly siege which her slain enemy has mounted. The story dates from a late period in Jewish history, around the second century BCE, and it would seem to be an allegorical reworking of older, historical texts in which women killed politically significant men in similarly critical politico-military situations. The biblical book of Judges provides us with the stories of Yael's murder of the General Sisera; Delilah's delivery of Samson to his enemies; and an anonymous woman's execution of Abimelech who was besieging the tower from which the woman dropped a millstone on his head.

Mieke Bal's feminist analysis of the man–woman murders and woman–man murders chronicled in *Judges* exposes what she names the structural dissymmetry between the motivations and meanings of cross-sex murders.⁴⁵ She examines the differences between the women as victims and the women as executioners and stresses

HEROINES

that, in these stories, women kill for political reasons, in the interests of their people. Although there may be sexual elements in each of the stories – Delilah, Yael and the anonymous woman in the tower they are subordinated to the larger cause and purpose of actions in a military context. Yet the later mythic meanings of Delilah and women created on that model overwhelmingly focus on sexuality, which is then endowed with a lethal danger to men. Sex, not politics, kills.

The biblical stories in *Judges* provided *topoi* for Christian art. In the secular art of the Middle Ages the seeming subversion of social order represented by women killing men became a popular theme for a monitory moral tale known generically as ‘the power of women’ or ‘women on top’.⁴⁶ Through tales of the inverted state of relations between the sexes, the threat and anxiety associated with it could be both representationally acknowledged and, in the same act, presented as perversion.⁴⁷ The representation of ‘women on top’ works metaphorically to delegitimize women from any role other than of subordination since their uppityness signifies only disorder, an unnatural reversal of the divinely ordained hierarchy of the sexes.

In the Baroque period the stories from *Judges* provided rich resources for artistic representation. The biblical and canonised Yael and Delilah, so popular in medieval secular art, however, lost place to Judith. In the complex ideological projections for this figure, operating like Susanna in the spaces contradictorily emerging for sexuality in visual representation at the crossroads of Counter-Reformation Catholicism and modern formations of the secular nation-state, the *mythos* of Judith was reworked to elaborate a specifically sexual dimension to the events clearly stated in the Apocryphal text as having political not sexual meanings.⁴⁸ In an essay on Artemisia Gentileschi’s painting of Judith, Roland Barthes reports the tale simply. Judith, a Jewish heroine, leaves the city under siege, goes to the enemy general, seduces him, decapitates him and returns to the camp of the Hebrews.⁴⁹ Barthes rehearses a number of modern versions of Judith which attribute complex psycho-sexual motives to her killing: Judith is willing to kill for patriotic reasons, but succumbs to Holofernes out of desire and recovers herself to kill him for personal revenge for this sexual awakening; Judith, still a virgin despite being a widow, wants to be famous. In his genuine love for her, Holofernes recognises this. He offers himself to her. She is overwhelmed and allows herself to be seduced, but recovers self-control to cut off his head. Barthes concludes his survey on what the transformations of the story tell us: the ambivalence of the bond, at once erotic and funereal, which unites Judith and Holofernes.

Even were we to allow this sexualisation of the drama, it would be important to stress that Judith’s killing of Holofernes then results from a disturbance created by pleasure, sexual arousal, *jouissance* and not from rape. It is a narrative of imagined seduction and death in which the man is used sexually, and suffers punishment at the hands of a woman, made to signify only disordering sexuality. Not only does the theme bond Judith and Holofernes through the linking of the erotic and the lethal but it links female sexuality and death in direct opposition to the story’s original elaboration of a *topos* of woman and political, altruistic and nation-saving execution.

THE FEMALE HERO

In her study of Artemisia Gentileschi's contemporary Rembrandt, Mieke Bal argues that these stories can be treated as myths. Bal redefines myth as an empty screen on to which the user, viewer or reader projects. This projection takes place in the context of what she names a transference relation. In so far as painting or literature are themselves responses to other responses to mythic stories, there comes to be a sequence of transferences in which painter/writer and reader/viewer are part of the relay along with the texts they make or read.

The difference between myth and literary text or artistic image, like that between primal and other fantasies, is to be situated on the level of the transferring subject and its relation to myth – to an empty screen. The *illusion* of the stable signified allows the user of the myth to project more freely onto the screen. But what s/he takes to be a signified, actually functions as a signifier . . . It has no meaning, but supports meaning, providing the subject's projection with a means of getting rid of its subjectivity and thereby granting subjective projections universal status.⁵⁰

Transference as a hypothesis for analysing cultural texts and images liberates us from either the mastery attributed to the original text from which the subject matter derives or the mastery of interpretation as the finding of the true meaning projected onto the author to disguise the subjective investment of the interpreter. As Mieke Bal concludes, there is no story, just the tellings. Each time the telling opens up meanings and possibilities, unfixing, for instance, the meaning of the woman in the story. 'The importance of the telling reassigns responsibility, taking it from the teller, who disposes of the means to propose his or her own view, and assigning it to the viewer, reader or listener, who takes over by processing the works.'⁵¹ In this light, I want to draw three conclusions.

Firstly, by focusing on the story of Judith and the varied projections the armature of this tale has sustained, I can get away from the tendency of psycho-biographical 'reading in'. Instead I shall be concerned to do detailed work on the 'tellings' of the Judith myth by Artemisia Gentileschi in order to trace through that actual re-signification of the mythic components the difference that might mark this subject's projections and create a screen for my own, different, feminist desires.

Secondly, this allows me still to have access to the particularity of a subject, Artemisia Gentileschi, but not as author and self-authoring artist. Rather she, like the analysand in the metaphor of analysis, is learning what she is through the analysis of her own transferences. The myth is the empty screen on which text or image incises a particular set of meanings shaped by the exchange between the projections made by the artist and the possibilities of misrecognition and projection offered by the myth. Artemisia is not Judith and is not identifying with Judith; she may, however, have found something of herself in the whole composition – its lighting, colour, scale, space, figures – that she carved on to this culturally provided screen.

HEROINES



Fig. 5.4 Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, 1612–13, oil on canvas, 168 × 128 cm. Naples, Museo di Capodimonte

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THE FEMALE HERO



Fig. 5.5 Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, c. 1620, oil on canvas, 199 × 162.5 cm. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi

Thirdly, if, having distanced myself from both biographism and authorship, I am, as a viewer, made responsible for both reading for the artist's transference and recognising my own, I discover yet another layer to the process which prevents this way of thinking from inviting a notion of 'anything goes'. This is not the royal road to relativism. Mieke Bal's term is *responsibility*, and it comes close to what I am offering in the notion that what motivates reading and interpretation is desire, and that we are responsible for recognising such desire. Thus the transference taking place when we look at paintings needs to be analysed. If not, we may misrecognise whose meanings we are playing before ourselves in an act of mastery that pretends to be mere discovery of a truth that inheres in what we see.

In 1620 Artemisia Gentileschi painted another version (Fig. 5.5) of *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1612–13, Fig. 5.4). The slight difference between these two works is a measure of the claim, 'it's all in the telling'. The major difference lies in the effects created by the expanded space of the later painting. There are minor differences in the details: Judith wears a gold bracelet on her holding arm in the 1620 version. The coverlet is of a different colour. Blood spurts out of the wound. In the later version the colours are brought into an overall harmony of gold and deep red. But the whole composition is set back from the viewer by enlargement of the bed and the addition of darkness above the figures. The body of Judith leans further towards the right-hand edge of the canvas, loosening the dynamic thrust of her action. The whole scene becomes a static tableau that, for all the apparent recreation of the original elements, creates a far less intimate and dramatic effect

HEROINES

The 1612 *Judith* (Fig. 5.4) derives its specific character from an intensity of pose and the spatial proximity of the characters to each other and the scene to the viewer. The dark enclosure of the background stands both for the narratively required tent and the growing interest in and competence at using a Carravagist lighting style. The viewer is made to feel close to the event. We are placed at the end of the bed or couch. Perhaps we feel placed as the object of appeal for the upturned desperate eyes of the suffering man. He looks out from that claustrophobic space in a gaze that is on the edge of living terror and encroaching death. The eyes of the two female figures are hooded by their lids as they direct their attention down converging lines of vision that form two sides of a triangle whose apex is that distorted, grimacing, ghastly masculine face.

Dressed in her wine-red garment, Abra, Judith's maid, peers with remarkable *sangfroid* over the outsized fist that should make violent contact with her blouse or dress, but doesn't. Abra's position towering over the supine general's torso creates the painting's sense of depth – promising a space from which she comes and creating further dimension by moving towards him and thus the spectator. Against this axis, Judith stands off-centre, on the right, dressed in a gold trimmed, low-cut, short-sleeved blue robe, calmly balancing herself to accomplish the tricky business of cutting through a man's neck. She is strongly modelled because of the powerful use of dramatic chiaroscuro which rounds her shoulders and arms and leaves half her face in shadow. The painting's style is the obverse of the 1610 *Susanna* (Fig. 5.2). Darkness and night replace overall illumination of a daytime scene. Interior replaces exterior. Rich robes replace female nakedness. Two women impose on one man, whereas, in the earlier painting, one woman suffered the intimidation of two men. Death replaces concupiscence. Yet, in that use of the triangle of three figures, in the combination of two agents and one victim, one a woman in anguish, the other a man in mortal agony, we might discern a compelling structure that the artist found useful and able to rework.

The story and the means of representing it came to Artemisia Gentileschi through a sequence of masculine transferences and projections which constantly remodelled the mytheme of woman–man murder. Caravaggio had painted a *Judith Decapitating Holofernes* (Fig. 5.6). It lays the story out on a single plane, filling in the background with heavy drapery. A very young Judith, frowning in concentration, has already got a good way through Holofernes's neck. His mouth gapes, his eyes strain up towards his killer. His face is bearded. Judith holds his hair, which fringes through her fingers. Judith stands to the right of the painting, her arms forming strong lines of force framing his head. Abra is, however, an elderly woman peering with intense interest at the beheading from the extreme right. In suggesting, as we must, that Artemisia took much from this painting, I hope to bypass art history's favoured route of transmission: influence (which, in the case of women, is always detrimental). We could think of reference and citation as means to ensure the genealogy of the later painting, its belonging to the grouping founded by the man from Caravaggio. This would invoke on the painting's behalf connotations associated with that school. We could also think of more subtle transpositions. What if the artist takes over most visibly the awful

THE FEMALE HERO



Fig. 5.6 Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1573–1610), *Judith Decapitating Holofernes*, c.1599, oil on canvas, 144 × 195 cm. Rome, National Gallery of Antique Art (Palazzo Barberini)

excessive grimacing face of the dying general, turning it round, making it appeal directly to the viewer? Does not the quotation from the Caravaggio painting function as a bit of 'Caravaggio', included in her painting, making clear her loyalties, her interests and where she shall make her difference?

Her father Orazio was one of Caravaggio's earliest Roman followers. He painted *Judith* (Fig. 5.7) in a very clear combination of Caravaggist simplicity and his own, purer colours. Orazio creates a classical composition with Judith and her young maid forming the two sides of a central triangle. Each looks away creating a centripetal force that frames but refuses to direct the look at the peaceful, unblemished head they cradle between them in a basket on Judith's knees, while she still holds the weapon. Caravaggio's version is about dying, killing, action. A woman versus a man and a spectator form his company of actors. Orazio's version takes places in the aftermath, two women together with the trophy, the token of absent manhood. Judith is made phallic with her sword but maternal with her bounty, the male baby-head. The drama of the scene is the attention the women are paying to what is beyond the scene depicted – a scenario Orazio's daughter would also take up and rework with Caravaggist intensity in 1625 (now in Detroit, Institut of Art, Art Collection, Oil, 127 x 117

HEROINES



Fig. 5.7 Orazio Gentileschi (1563–1639), *Judith and Her Maidservant Abra with the Head of Holofernes*, 1610–12, oil on canvas, 143.9 × 154.3 cm. Hartford, Wadsworth Atheneum (The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Caitlin Sumner Collection Fund)

Slaying Holofernes incorporates, invokes, defers to and differs from Caravaggio through the obvious use of key elements of his version – Judith’s arms, her furrowed brow, the expressionism of Holofernes’s head. It also takes over the triangular composition of Orazio’s work, but inverts it to create this focused, intense drama of action – Caravaggist – in opposition to the passivity of Orazio’s frieze. Yet the action of Judith, doing the unpleasant work, which Roland Barthes suggests would have come more easily to the maid, used to gutting animals and dealing with dead meat, is enacted upon the most Caravaggist moment of the painting.

In a sense, therefore, the screen was not empty. For women artists it is already filled with masculine projections. Making a claim for oneself as the only daughter of an established painter and one of a still small number of women painters in Italy at this period would involve not only the murder of certain internalised prescriptions on femininity but also a symbolic killing of the fathers, who were both figures of necessary identification and professional rivalry. It required a specifically feminine, filial

THE FEMALE HERO

engagement with the 'anxiety of influence', which Harold Bloom has insisted is what gives a work its edge and claim to accede to the canon in the face of which the artist is always a latecomer.⁵²

My representation of Artemisia Gentileschi has to include her profound connection with her father, an identification with him as his favoured successor, the only bearer of his talent and profession in a family of sons. Like Shakespeare's Cleopatra, Artemisia Gentileschi claimed to have the soul of a man in the body of a woman – clearly a widely used defence at this time against spreading notions of women's feebleness.⁵³ Yet, as in the case of all other sons, the father is both idealised and to be removed so as to allow the rivalrous son some place in the light. Would we gain another perspective on these paintings were we to go beyond reversing the mainstream biographical trend represented by Ward Bissell, and the inversion of it by Mary Garrard? These paintings were a working through the place of being a daughter-painter – a woman in a genealogy of father figures, who have much to offer and yet must be vanquished for fear they deny the daughter her creative space. That space would have to be hollowed out from a visual world already occupied and figured by their artistic inventions and freighted images.

The painting *Judith* is not about revenge. Yet it is about killing. But it is a metaphor, a representation in which the literalness of killing a man is displaced on to a mytheme wherein the action is necessary, politically justified, not personally motivated. There would be my difference. Not in her tragic biography, 'expressed' in the violent scene of revenge on seducers and rapists. 'Judith' could become a means to structure a desire for a certain kind of artistic identity, that of an active woman who can make art, make herself in that action of entering representation, a kind of killing that is not just in the representation of a kill – a castrating representation that is not a representation of castration. 'Judith' as she is produced from this negotiation of the existing transferences called Artemisia Gentileschi's sources can become both a support for Artemisia Gentileschi's projection of her desire for agency in the world and a figuration of what that desire might be: the image gives it a structure, allows it into articulation, into artistic discourse.

Hélène Cixous wants to encourage women to make themselves women by producing women-texts. Her sense of what these might be involves a specific theoretical construction of femininity and its unacknowledged relations to female corporeality. Thus she writes: 'Let's not look at syntax but at fantasy, at the unconscious: all the feminine texts I've read are very close to the voice, very close to the flesh of language.'⁵⁴ This produces a feminine textual body as a trace of a *female libidinal economy*.

The possibility of this difference emerging into texts is created when access to another unconscious is pursued. There is a cultural unconscious which tells us old stories, composed of the repressed of the culture: myths. But when women go beyond the bounds of what that masculine cultural unconscious censors 'in that cheeky risk-taking women can get themselves into when they set out into the unknown to look for themselves', something 'not yet' will become possible. Cixous's call is a call to feminists writing in art history as much as in fiction and poetry. But it also allows us

HEROINES

to retheorise the whole venture of feminist interventions in art history which appears prematurely to know what woman is. To read the oeuvre of Artemisia Gentileschi 'for the woman' is to affirm notions of humanity that may in fact be of masculine origin, and at any rate fall within existing cultural fantasies of 'psychic liberation' (Garrard) and heroism. In my insistence on both a historicisation of the study of women artists, and an acknowledgement of the split and conflicted subject, on psychic structures, fantasies and desire, some readers may well mourn the loss of the celebratory and positive force of the feminism from which stems Mary Garrard's affectionate admiration for Artemisia Gentileschi. Where else lie the pleasures of feminist revisions to the histories of art?

In her essay 'Castration or Decapitation?' Hélène Cixous recounts the Chinese story of how General Sun Tse made his king's 180 wives into soldiers. When first the General drilled the women in rows with drums, the wives laughed and paid no heed. Deeming this mutinous, the general forced the king to agree to their being subjected to the punishment for mutiny: decapitation. The chief wife was executed. The rest of the wives then marched up and down as if they had been soldiers all their lives. Cixous concludes: 'Women have no other choice than to be decapitated, and in any case the moral is that if they don't actually lose their heads by the swords, *they only keep them on condition that they lose them* – lose them, that is, to complete silence, turned into automatons.'⁵⁵

The significance of Gentileschi's paintings of decapitation lies only partially in their function as images offering a specific inflection of an iconography of heroic women. The point is their existence in the field of representation so powerfully dominated by the beat of men's drums, the economy of their desire, the projections of their fears and fantasies through figures such as Susanna and Judith who are turned into castrating women. The presence of an other enunciation from the place of a particular, historical femininity offers a shift in the pattern of meanings in a given culture. This presence of a difference had to be produced; these meanings are not alternative meanings but the effect of differentiations created at the level of textual telling and our reading. *Presence* is not expression but a production against the semiotic and psychic grain of those structures that would 'cut off *her* head', silence her difference as a woman and let 'woman' function only as a 'headless body' – the nude perhaps. Gentileschi's work in its specificity – topic, subject, treatment, syntax – can be read as a transposition of that imposed silence. In her *Judith* subjects as much as in *Susanna*, man is threatened with the violence that is typically, if metaphorically, enacted upon women in a culture that refuses and refutes their creative intellectual participation in it. Some of these images graphically show what that violence looks like, making it *visible* by inverting the gender of its executioners and victims. In that shock, that radical disorder, that world upside down which is the fascination and threat of the *topos* itself, but which her dramatic, bold Caravaggist treatment makes psychologically vivid, a woman's voice is made, speaking another *topos* for the mytheme she has borrowed.

THE FEMALE HERO

NOTES

- 1 Hélène Cixous, 'Castration or Decapitation?', trans. Annette Kuhn, *Signs*, 7, 1 (1981), pp. 41-55.
- 2 All quoted from published art historical sources by Amanda Sebestyan, 'Artemesia Gentileschi', *Shrew*, 5, 2 (1973).
- 3 Mieke Bal, *Double Exposures* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996) offers some important readings of the Judith subject, especially Artemisia Gentileschi's treatments.
- 4 I am indebted to the work of Mieke Bal throughout this chapter and especially to her 'Reading Art?', in *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*, ed. Griselda Pollock (London: Routledge, 1996).
- 5 This is the burden of Elizabeth Cowie's crucial article 'Woman as Sign', *M/F*, 1 (1978), pp. 49-64: 'I want to argue that film [or any other regime of visual representation] as a system of representation is a point of production of definitions. But it is neither unique and independent of, nor simply reducible to other practices defining the position of women in society' (p. 50).
- 6 Julia Kristeva, 'La Femme, ce n'est jamais ça' ('Women can never be defined') *Tel Quel*, Autumn 1974, reprinted in *New French Feminisms*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabel de Courtivron (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1981), p. 137.
- 7 For instance, Luce Irigaray contrasts the metaphors of fixity and unity associated with fantasies of masculine bodies with images of plurality - two lips, self-touching - and fluidity associated with female sexuality, and considers the different philosophical implications of such differences. This is quite different from saying that, because the labia touch, women are therefore by nature more open-minded.
- 8 I wrote these sections before Elizabeth Grosz's important new text was published. To a great extent her arguments provide a profound philosophical support for this tendency in feminist thinking. I am greatly indebted to her work, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).
- 9 I explain this at length in my 'Images/Women/Degas', in *Dealing with Degas: Representations of Women and the Politics of Vision*, ed. Richard Kendall and Griselda Pollock (London: Pandora, 1992; now London: Rivers Oram).
- 10 Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin 1989), p. 116.
- 11 Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1975).
- 12 Mary D. Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: the Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989). See also R. Ward Bissell, *Artemisia Gentileschi and the Authority of Art: Critical Essays and a Catalogue Raisonné* (Pittsburgh: State University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).
- 13 Garrard, *op.cit.*
- 14 The story is told in the Book of Susanna, which is part of the Apocrypha but not a canonically accepted text within the Hebrew or Protestant Christian Bibles.
- 15 Garrard, pp. 188 and 192.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 189
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 194
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 200
- 19 'This is not to insist that all art by women bears some inevitable stamp of femininity; women have been as talented as men in learning the common denominators of style and expression in specific cultures. It is, however, to argue that the definitive assignment of sex roles in history has created fundamental differences between the sexes in their perception, experience and expectations of the world, differences that cannot help but be carried over into the creative process where they sometimes leave their tracks.' (*Ibid.*, p. 202).
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 208.
- 21 Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' piu eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori nella redazione 1550 e 1558* ed. R. Bettarini and P. Barocchi (Florence: Sansoni, 1966-74), 1: 107-108.

HEROINES

- Vasari and biography see also Patricia Rubin, 'What Men Saw: Vasari's Life of Leonardo da Vinci and the Image of the Renaissance Artist', *Art History*, 13, 1 (1990), pp. 34–46.
- 22 Nanette Salomon, 'The Art Historical Canon: Sins of Omission', in *(En)gendering Knowledge: Feminists in Academe*, ed. Joan Hartmann and Ellen Messer-Davidow (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), p. 229.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 230.
- 24 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* [1852], reprinted in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Selected Works in One Volume* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970), p. 96.
- 25 Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Class Consciousness in Flaubert', *Modern Occasions*, 1, 2 (1971), pp. 379–89. A feminist version of this model, also transformed by dealing with a working-class girl's childhood, can be found in Carolyn Steedman's double autobiography, *Landscape for a Good Woman* (London: Virago Press, 1986). She also reworks Freud's legend of the little boy's traumatic glimpse of female genitals – read as lack and thus castration – to explore the discovery by a working-class child that her parents lack power in relation to bourgeois authorities.
- 26 Sartre, p. 381.
- 27 Salomon, p. 230.
- 28 In the following chapters I intend to question even more the issue of autobiography as even possible for women. Here we must keep the question open for it to be in play.
- 29 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and The Cooked* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964).
- 30 Cathy Caruth, 'Introduction', *American Imago*, 48, 1 (1991), special issue, *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Trauma*, pp. 3–5; reprinted as *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- 33 Inability to walk, because a patient feared to go forward in life; pain in the face because a remark had felt like a slap on the cheek, and so forth.
- 34 Michèle Montrelay, 'Inquiry into Femininity', trans. P. Adams, *M/F*, 1 (1978), pp. 95–6.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 96.
- 36 See G. Pollock, 'Artists, Mythologies and Media . . .', *Screen*, 21, 3 (1980), pp. 57–96.
- 37 Luce Irigaray, 'Commodities among Themselves', in *This Sex which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 192–7.
- 38 Shirley Moreno, *The Absolute Mistress: The Historical Construction of the Erotic in Titian's 'Poesie'*, unpublished M. A. thesis, University of Leeds, 1980. Shirley Moreno was working on a doctorate on this theme at the time of her death.
- 39 Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972); Hubert Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, trans. John Goodman (Boston: MIT Press, 1994).
- 40 Under Jewish rules of purity (*niddah*) women are required to bathe to mark the end of their menstruation. Thus the position of a woman at her bath might have acquired specific sexual connotations for it proved that she was both 'pure' and sexually approachable, i.e. that her husband could again have sex with her. The text, however, specifically mentions that Susanna bathed because it was hot.
- 41 An earlier painting of the subject by Rubens, probably painted during his sojourn in Italy, of 1607–8 (Madrid, Real Accademia de San Fernando) also used the device of placing the naked Susanna in the foreground against a balustrade. But in this painting she must twist round and look up at the figures looming over her into her space.
- 42 Tintoretto shows Susanna unaware and self-absorbed. Later versions that postdate Gentileschi's show Susanna cowering as the elders come forward to make their proposals.
- 43 R. Ward Bissell, 'Artemisia Gentileschi – A New Documented Chronology', *Art Bulletin*, 50, 1 (1968), pp. 155–6.
- 44 Judith – Yehudit – the feminine form of the generic term Yehuda, a descendent of Judah, from which is derived the term *Jewish*. She is thus a representative daughter of Israel rather than a singular character in a story. Her widowhood is also representative: of a nation lacking the necessary male warrior-redeemer.

THE FEMALE HERO

- 45 Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1988).
- 46 Susan L. Smith, *The Power of Women Topos and the Development of Secular Medieval Art*, Ph.D., unpublished thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1978.
- 47 Nathalie Zemon Davis, 'Woman on Top', in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965).
- 48 Judith goes to Holofernes's camp and offers to serve his King. For this she is rewarded with respect and protection. She is invited to dine with the general. She cannot eat his meat so must always bring her own in a bag. She also gets permission to leave the camp each night to pray. After a week, establishing these routines, Holofernes invites her to dine and hopes to seduce her. He gets himself hopelessly drunk and falls on to the bed. His servants have tactfully left Judith and the general alone. She singlehandedly strikes off his head and hides it in the bag her waiting servant carries her meat in. They then walk out of the camp – to pray as usual – but in fact return to Bethulia, the besieged town where Judith shows off the severed head. Judith lives to the age of 102, in honour, unmarried for the rest of her long life.
- 49 Roland Barthes, 'Deux Femmes/Two Women', in *Artemisia*, an issue of *Mot pour Mot/Word for Word*, 2 (Paris: Yvon Lambert, 1979), p. 9. I am grateful to Nanette Salomon for the reference to this text and the lengths she went to to enable me to read it.
- 50 Mieke Bal, *Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 99.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p. 127.
- 52 Bloom stresses the relation of his arguments on the anxiety of influence to his notion of the canon in his *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), p. 8.
- 53 Artemisia Gentileschi wrote to Don Antonio Ruffo on 13 November 1649: 'You will find the spirit of Caesar in the soul of this woman.' Cited in Garrard, p. 397. She also quotes as an epigraph Boccaccio's statement: 'I should think that Nature sometimes errs when she gives souls to mortals. That is, she gives to a woman one that she thought she had given to a man' (p. 141).
- 54 Cixous, p. 54.
- 55 Cixous, p. 43.