



SLAYING HOLOFERNES

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Author's introduction

Slaying Holofernes was inspired by the National Gallery's exhibition of work by Artemisia Gentileschi, which I saw on BBC 4 during lockdown. The title is taken from my favourite work of hers, 'Judith Slaying Holofernes', completed following her rape by Agostino Tassi. The rage she felt is evident in this painting, so I wanted to capture this in my fictionalised piece on her court-case. Her frustration is clear in the final section, in which she repeatedly exclaims 'It's true', words I took from the court-transcript of 1612. Artemisia is not the only woman to have been abused in such a way, nor will she be the last, and recent news supports this. Her perseverance and eventual success despite torture and injustice shows a strength we can learn from. This is perhaps why, deservedly, her paintings are now displayed alongside her father Orazio's, as some of the best that the Italian Baroque Era has to offer.

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1612, The Curia, Rome

I was sure he was watching, relishing, as they wound the cords over my fingertips.

The silence in the courtroom was punctured by a low whisper, one guard to another, ‘Be gentle. She is just a child.’ I felt the cord loosen, revealing a strip of flesh, puckered and purple like the skin of a damson.

I dared a glance up from the instrument, from the bruised fingers encased in metal and twine. I looked at my father, Orazio, wringing his hands, palms flecked with cadmium red.

My dear father. I know he didn’t want this trial; pacing between dawn and twilight and whispering pleas against a locked door. ‘Please marry her, Agostino. Marry her and salvage the Gentileschi name which you so wilfully sullied.’

Soon those pleas turned into demands, a battering of fists against a locked door, ‘I shall take this to court, Agostino. Do you have no guilt? Artemisia lies, ever since and even now, in her room, broken and tarnished – a ruined woman, a child. Have you no guilt Agostino? Marry her, I demand it!’

He didn’t marry me, so here I sat, in a silent courtroom. The cords were taut, my fingers now properly attached to the Thumbscrews – the procedure commenced. This method of torture was devised to procure the truth. I risked my fingers, my ability to paint, all to prove that Agostino Tassi raped me.

He had already battered the audience with lies, ‘Never have I had carnal relations nor tried to have it with the said Artemisia... I’ve never even been alone in Artemisia’s house with her.’ I seethed quietly while he stalked round the room, delivering his testimony. His voice, stance and glare repulsed me.

The judge asked me directly, ‘Artemisia Gentileschi, you claim that Agostino Tassi raped you, deflowering you, is this true?’

I said, ‘It is true.’ I felt a fierce tug on my fingertips, the cords pulled tighter. I was surprised to feel that the pain buoyed me, my determination spiked and drove me to speak further. ‘He was working with my father to paint the vaults of the Casino delle Muse. He had been following me for some time, asking after me, observing me. I could see it, but felt no need to fear it, until we were left alone, and he forced himself upon me.’

‘Was there a struggle?’

‘Yes.’ The cords tugged. ‘I fought him fiercely, clawed and pushed and scratched. It was futile.’

I paused, ‘I’ve never felt worse pain.’ My lips trembled. I was speaking as confidently as I could, desperate to share my pain and ruin with the audience, desperate to see Tassi condemned and punished. I felt his strong grip against my neck still, pressing me down in a mockery of submission. I avoided his gaze and awaited the next question.

‘Was anyone else complicit in the act?’

This question struck me; I remembered Tuzia, peering in the doorway to see me struggling, and slipping away, down the darkening corridor, as if scared. As if she was the one who should be scared.

Following a barrage of questions, my voice never faltered. I persisted; the pain grew increasingly intense. I spoke for Tassi’s sister-in-law, his previous wife and all who had felt his crushing grip and lustful tongue. I spoke for the months I lay in bed, a cold husk. Unable to paint or draw the heavy curtain to glimpse at the dawn or dusk or day or night: a wraith.

Throughout the trial, I had not dared glimpse at Tassi, for fear of destabilizing my fragile confidence. Though I knew he watched me intently, his eyes groped my body even now, from the hem of my dress to the weeping red of my fingertips. I imagined him as I answered every question, his façade faltering at every utterance of truth, his mannish shock that his action should have this consequence.

‘Did Agostino Tassi fail to marry you following your alleged sexual relations?’

‘Clearly,’ I said somewhat confidently.

Tighter still. The joints of my fingers white as the bed linen I was forced against. I tried to face him, but some force, perhaps my abhorrence of him, stopped me. My eyes bored into the cords, as if willing them to loosen and let me wilt into the courtroom floor.

Dare I look at my father? Dare I weep? Perhaps weeping might help my case. Poor 17-year-old Artemisia, a young and frightened girl. Evil Agostino Tassi, a rapist and a liar. My tears polarizing the crime for the ignorant audience.

Several questions later and there can't have been much more to ask. The pain had me involuntarily weeping, great tears swept the globes of my cheeks, I couldn't even brush them away.

How would this conclude? How could the audience fail to see my truthfulness? I came to a cold realisation, who would care about the honour of a 17-year-old painter, a girl, nonetheless? My trial was inconsequential, unimposing on all involved – even Tassi – except me. I was going to lose everything, my honour, my career, my fingers – my poor fingers! And even though my story would soon become irrelevant, a court transcript tucked away in a decrepit building, it was not a new story. My struggle thrummed with biblical precedence. I was Susannah, as she bathed in the view of the leering elders. A woman observed, a woman abused, a woman discarded. A perpetual cycle perpetuated by men and the patriarchal society. Sickening. I refuse to submit to the sexual whims of men - of Tassi, he cannot walk away from his wrongdoing, from his sin.

The cord spanned my whole body, wrapped and roiling in injustice and agony. A feral anger overflowed.

'It's true! It's true! It's true!'

My heart felt fire in those words, I lifted my face as my tears sprung victoriously.

'It's true!'

Exhilaration tore through me, I stared at the judge and willed him to understand.

'It's true!'

I turned my head at looked at Tassi, his eyes wide and lips agape. In those stony eyes I recognised terror, I delighted in his humanity. I shouted at him, 'It's true!' He flinched and I felt giddy; as if omnipotent, as if divine. I was the Goddess Artemis and he Actaeon. Judith Slaying Holofernes. I was punishing him, my observer, my abuser, in a bout of glorious fury.

Is this what it is like to be a man? To exert control over another living being, feel their fear as you cradle them in a glance or a gesture?

My rush of power ended abruptly as the cords sprung back, leaving my fingers a startling maroon. I cradled them and wept, steadily and methodically – filtering out my hysteria. I was still murmuring, 'It's true, it's true, it's true,' as my father knelt beside me on the courtroom floor, his hands resting on my trembling shoulders.

'They know it's true, my darling, they know.'