

# eScholarship

## California Italian Studies

### Title

Anna Banti Stages Artemisia Gentileschi: Feminist Intersections of Painting and Theater

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9w95s8jq>

### Journal

California Italian Studies, 7(1)

### Author

Streifer, Monica L

### Publication Date

2017

### DOI

10.5070/C371031200

### Copyright Information

Copyright 2017 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

# Banti Stages Artemisia Gentileschi: Intersections of Painting and Performance on the Modern Italian Stage

Monica Streifer

Anna Banti (Lucia Lopresti, 1895–1985) is best known for her critically-acclaimed novels, but she was also a playwright of considerable talent. In her three-act play entitled *Corte Savella* (1960), Banti adapts her most famous novel *Artemisia* (1947) to recast her earlier treatment of Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1653) for a contemporary audience.<sup>1</sup> In *Corte Savella*, Banti gives voice to one of the first women recognized in her own time as a master painter, a woman whose story was and often still is misconstrued and whose art is often judged in light of the rape she suffered at the hands of her tutor.<sup>2</sup> Through her dramatic treatment of Gentileschi's life, Banti analyzes the experiences of an historically marginalized and misunderstood artist from an innovative feminist perspective. But why use the theater to reproduce Artemisia's life story and what role, if any, do her paintings play in such a production? For Banti, there exists a special relationship between drama and painting, and she uses Gentileschi's paintings to drive her play thematically, aesthetically, and narratively. As she adapts her novel for the theater, I argue, Banti draws upon the power of Gentileschi's images in both her creation of characters on stage and her address to the audience beyond the proscenium arch. A principal goal of *Corte Savella* is to provide a new interpretation of Gentileschi's artistic oeuvre, which, until the early-twentieth century, had been largely dismissed.<sup>3</sup>

Telling women's stories is a fundamental component of Banti's poetics.<sup>4</sup> A preoccupation with women's subjectivity, autonomy, happiness, and memory are foundational themes of her corpus.<sup>5</sup> Despite this focus, Banti had a complex relationship with feminism. While she

---

<sup>1</sup> Anna Banti, *Corte Savella* (Milan: Mondadori, 1960); Anna Banti, *Romanzi e racconti*, ed. Fausta Garavini (Milan: Mondadori, 2013). In-text parenthetical citations are to the 1960 edition of *Corte Savella*.

<sup>2</sup> The rape continues to loom large, especially in popular cultural production on Artemisia. Despite this trend, numerous critical works and exhibits on Gentileschi's career have been produced in the decades following the publication of *Corte Savella*. Selected exhibits include "Artemisia" (Casa Buonarroti, Florence, 1991); "Orazio e Artemisia Gentileschi" (Rome, New York, and Saint Louis, 2001–02); and "Artemisia Gentileschi e il suo tempo" (Rome, 2016–17). See the essay by Patrizia Cavazzini, "Artemisia in Her Father's House," in *Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi*, ed. Keith Christiansen and Judith Walker Mann (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 282–312. See also Roberto Contini and Gianni Papi, eds., *Artemisia* (Rome: Leonardo-De Luca, 1991). For an historical interpretation of how rape has affected Gentileschi's critical reception, see Elizabeth S. Cohen, "The Trials of Artemisia Gentileschi: A Rape as History," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 31/1 (2000): 47–75.

<sup>3</sup> *Corte Savella* premiered on October 4, 1963 at the Teatro Stabile di Genova in a production directed by Luigi Squarzina. It remains neglected in the scholarship on Banti's work.

<sup>4</sup> Banti's literary subjects are often women in the public sphere—writers, artists, poets, and activists. She comments on the general absence of women's histories in an interview with former student Grazia Livi: "pensa solo ad Artemisia, o a Lavinia [the painter, Lavinia Fontana]; sono donne che vengono fuori da una storia che per loro non c'è, non è mai stata scritta, anzi le cancella. Tant'è vero che quasi ne muoiono, si ne muoiono di disperazione" ["Just think about Artemisia or someone like Lavinia; they are women who emerge from a history that does not exist, that has never been written, and even erases them. In fact, they almost die as a result of this—they die of desperation"] (Grazia Livi, *Le lettere del mio nome* [Milan: La Tartaruga, 1991], 139). All translations are my own.

<sup>5</sup> Examples include two collections of short stories *Il coraggio delle donne* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1940) and *Le donne muoiono* (Milano: Mondadori, 1951), and the novels *Il bastardo* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1953) and *La camicia bruciata* (Milano: Mondadori, 1973).

promoted many of its main concepts in her texts—including the dignity and courage of women, and their right to a fulfilling and economically productive career—and crafted her narratives around independent female protagonists who must overcome the barriers to success and happiness perpetuated by a patriarchal society, she eschewed the label, identifying instead as humanist: “il mio è più una forma di umanesimo che vero e proprio femminismo” [“I am more of a humanist than a bona fide feminist”].<sup>6</sup> This semantic evasion, however, did not prevent her from acknowledging and criticizing, in fiction, interviews, and essays, the unequal treatment of women in society.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, when asked by a former student if women face more problems than men in modern society, Banti replied emphatically: “sì, questo lo credo. E penso anche che questi uomini ne fanno veramente di tutti i colori e che, politicamente, ci stanno portando alla rovina. Forse se ci fossero le donne al potere, le cose andrebbero meglio” [“yes, I believe so. And I think that men are up to all kinds of things, and that politically they are leading us to disaster. If women were in power, maybe things would go better”].<sup>8</sup> One way in which Banti expresses her interest in women’s stories is by focusing on historical female characters and their fight for recognition, whether as artists, musicians, scholars, or simply as autonomous persons distinct from male family members.<sup>9</sup> The temporal distance between Banti and her protagonists ultimately shows what has and has not changed since the lifetimes of her literary heroines. In these works, Banti often chooses examples of the “exceptional woman,” the one who must suffer for her passion, to show how gender politics and women’s agency are at odds, and what the costs of this exclusionary pattern may have been.

Selecting Artemisia Gentileschi as her literary-dramatic protagonist presented challenges with regard to research and the historical record. In the 1940s, very little was known about the painter, who had yet to become the art historical icon she is today. Gentileschi was the only known female follower of Caravaggio, and “adapted the bold and dramatic style of Caravaggesque realism to expressive purposes that differed categorically from those of her male contemporaries.”<sup>10</sup> Despite her artistic innovation and talent equal to, if not greater than, many of her male peers, for over two centuries there was a paucity of scholarship on her impressive oeuvre. It was not until the early twentieth century that Gentileschi’s career was studied in earnest by Roberto Longhi, Anna Banti’s husband and a famous art historian.<sup>11</sup> Longhi’s 1916 essay, “Gentileschi padre e figlia,” was the first accurately to distinguish Artemisia’s works from those of her father, to provide a detailed analysis of her artistic corpus (including a contextual

---

<sup>6</sup> Sandra Petrignani, *Le signore della scrittura. Interviste* (Milan: Tartaruga, 1984), 106.

<sup>7</sup> Banti’s critical writings of the 1950s and ’60s further demonstrate her interest in women’s education and their ability to take part meaningfully in Italy’s economic, cultural, and political life. See “Umanità della Woolf” in *Opinioni* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1961), 66–74, and “Responsabilità della donna intellettuale,” in *Le donne e la cultura*, ed. Sibilla Aleramo (Rome: Edizioni “Noi donne,” 1953), 89–93.

<sup>8</sup> Petrignani, *Signore della scrittura*, 106.

<sup>9</sup> In *Lavinia fuggita*, for example, Banti tells the story of an aspiring composer who, prohibited from composing herself, works in secret and lives in constant fear of discovery. In an interview, Banti explicitly acknowledges Lavinia’s progressive character: “un racconto che amo moltissimo è *Lavinia Fuggita*, che apre il coraggio delle donne: è un po’ femminista anche” [“A story I really love is *Lavinia Fuggita*, which deals with the courage of women; it is even a bit feminist”] (Petrignani, *Signore della scrittura*, 106).

<sup>10</sup> Mary D. Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 3. On Gentileschi’s oeuvre, see also Judith Walker Mann, ed., *Artemisia Gentileschi: Taking Stock* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), and R. Ward Bissell, *Artemisia Gentileschi and the Authority of Art: Critical Reading and Catalogue Raisonné* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> Longhi and Banti were married in 1924. Together they founded and co-edited the journal *Paragone*, which published alternating volumes on art and literature.

overview of each work's commission and location), and to situate her paintings within the context of Caravaggism.<sup>12</sup> As late as the 1960s—after Banti had already written both *Artemisia* and *Corte Savella*—the primary source on Gentileschi remained her husband's article. While scholarship on Gentileschi has greatly expanded since that article, Banti's understanding of her protagonist would have been determined by the sources available in the 1940s and '50s: the archival transcript of Artemisia's rape trial, Longhi's essay, and the few scholarly articles preceding it.<sup>13</sup>

To understand Banti's motivation for her theatrical adaptation, it is helpful to look at the major stylistic, formal, and thematic differences between the novel and play. The two are related through subject matter but little else, as the play is “un'opera del tutto nuova e dipendente dal romanzo solo per un comune impulso d'interesse e di partecipazione alle sorti del personaggio” [“an entirely new work, and one that derives from the novel only inasmuch as it shares a common interest and concern for the fate of the protagonist”].<sup>14</sup> *Artemisia* the novel, for example, foregrounds a complex relationship between the narrator and protagonist, and its temporal structure oscillates between Banti's Florence of 1944—which was largely destroyed by wartime bombs—and Artemisia's Italy of the early 1600s. It is more faithful than the play to the few firm biographical details we know of Artemisia's life, and charts her travels to Rome, Naples, Florence, and England. The narration alternates frequently between a dialogic first person, a subject who is ever-shifting between “Banti” and Artemisia, and the third person.

The play, on the other hand, is set only in Rome and Florence, is clearly dialogic, and is firmly rooted in time, its three acts set in 1610, 1611, and 1620. Most importantly, as its title suggests, *Corte Savella* focuses on Artemisia's experience of the rape trial, the play's longest act dedicated to the trial's proceedings. This act dramatizes the institutional battles women face while attempting to be heard or believed by those in power—an experience many of Banti's female protagonists confront, regardless of their temporal context.

One of the most significant differences between the novel and the play concerns Artemisia's relationships with Caravaggio and her husband, Antonio Stiattesi. In the novel, she is distraught when Antonio decides to abandon their happy marriage. In the play, however, Artemisia explicitly desires not to wed, and is furious with her father for arranging the marriage without her knowledge or consent. In fact, she exclaims “anche da mio padre son stimata peggio che una bestia” [“even my father considers me inferior to an animal!”] (108). She laments Antonio's lack of understanding of the role painting plays in her life, and chooses to carry on without him, in honor of both her career and her love for the late Caravaggio. She cannot simply “vivere per un po' di tempo come una donna qualunque, con una casa, un marito, dei figlioli” [“live for a while as an ordinary woman with a house, husband, and children”] (151), as her husband implores.

It is only in the play that Banti addresses Artemisia's ardent love for Caravaggio. The famed painter's disembodied “presence” in the play is more than just a tawdry attempt at romance. Caravaggio is to Artemisia as Beatrice is to Dante: a guide, a source of inspiration and fortitude, a model. Artemisia's adoration, however, stems from the glory of his art: she loves his work,

---

<sup>12</sup> Roberto Longhi, “Gentileschi, padre e figlia,” *L'arte* (1916): 245–314.

<sup>13</sup> The original trial transcript (1612) is available in English translation in the appendix to Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 407–87. In many ways, Banti's novel is responsible for the resurgence of interest in Artemisia Gentileschi as a literary subject in the second half of the twentieth century. On popular cultural literary and filmic adaptations of Gentileschi's life, see Tina Olsin Lent, “‘My Heart Belongs to Daddy’: The Fictionalization of Baroque Artist Artemisia Gentileschi in Contemporary Film and Novels,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 34/3 (2006): 212–18.

<sup>14</sup> Luigi Baldacci, “*Corte Savella*,” *Letteratura* 8/46–48 (1960): 243.

what he represents, more than the physical man as such, whom she has never actually met and has seen only once at a distance. In a review of *Corte Savella*'s 1963 premiere at the Teatro Stabile di Genova, theater critic Raul Radice recognizes the importance of this love, arguing that Artemisia “si riconosce in quel pittore rivoluzionario e da lui acquista coscienza di sé, del diritto al proprio lavoro, anzi all’arte dalla quale si sente chiamata, e alla propria indipendenza” [“identifies with that revolutionary painter, and it is from him that she achieves self-awareness and the right to her work—to the art that is her calling—and her own independence”].<sup>15</sup> Her two passions, then, Caravaggio and painting, are actually one and the same—eking out a living by her own brush and honoring his legacy are identical acts. Caravaggio’s invocation in the play as Artemisia’s eternal love interest is therefore a metonym of her commitment to her own artistic career—a calling which, as we see in Act III, prohibits her from accepting Antonio’s proposal to build a life together in Rome. In refusing his offer, Artemisia articulates a key theme of the play, an idea that Banti weaves through much of her literary corpus. Women who dedicate themselves to producing art of any kind render themselves incompatible with, or outside the bounds of, social and romantic relationships as structured in a patriarchal society. Banti thus outlines two choices for Artemisia: marriage and a life of relative comfort and companionship, or solitude and a life on the margins of society.

Banti omits from the play certain historical elements included in the novel to fashion a dramatic heroine whose sole focus is the promulgation of her art. There is, to a certain extent, a foregrounding of aesthetics in this operation: Banti chooses to shine a direct light on Artemisia’s artistic career, which in turn creates a new, more empathic and feminist way to remember her. Gentileschi was not only a victim of rape (as the historical narrative often mentions first) but also a master artist. Everything except for painting is ancillary, even if the result is a life incompatible with traditional romantic and social relationships. Artemisia’s last conversation with Antonio confirms this reading: “che donna son io? Non lo so, so che soltanto nella pittura trovo la mia pace, e anche la mia casa e la mia famiglia” [“What kind of woman am I? I do not know. All I know is that in painting I find peace of mind, as well as my home and family”] (151). Banti constructs a theatrical heroine whose dedication to her art is absolute, thus providing for the viewer what Baldacci terms “una chiave più essenziale del carattere della donna e insieme il segreto del suo destino” [“a fundamental interpretive key regarding the woman’s character and the secret of her destiny”].<sup>16</sup> Banti rewrites the story to produce a history of Artemisia’s achievement and virtuosity.

To transform Artemisia Gentileschi from a little-known historical figure into a dramatic protagonist who embodies female resistance to the patriarchal order, Banti creates a new life out of the remnants of historical documentation. In this process, she does not forsake accuracy or deny the historical record, but rather acknowledges the flaws, gaps, and inconsistencies inherent in historiographical discourse that prevent it from adequately representing the experiences of subaltern groups, and of women in particular. Banti is faithful to the idea of Artemisia that she has acquired through her own intensive archival research, but considering that the few documented details of Artemisia’s life are incomplete and inadequate, she fills in the remainder through educated and imaginative conjecture. Banti fictionalizes her character to create a dynamic vision of the young woman and to diffract her own political-cultural agenda through the lens of the seventeenth century.

---

<sup>15</sup> Raul Radice, “Con *Corte Savella* di Anna Banti aperta la stagione dello Stabile di Genova,” *Corriere della Sera*, October 5, 1963.

<sup>16</sup> Baldacci, “*Corte Savella*,” 243.

A theatrical representation brings to life Artemisia's experiences in a way that the novel, trial transcript, or other historical documents do not. Banti justifies changing genre by invoking the *verosimile*, positing that theater, compared to other literary modes, is more capable of fulfilling the aesthetic and moral dimensions of the concept.<sup>17</sup> In an introductory note, Banti acknowledges theatrical discourse as a tool with which to bring immediacy, authenticity, and verisimilitude to the telling of Artemisia's story. She explains that what she imagines or thinks happened during Artemisia's lifetime comes closer to a real history of the artist's life than any compilation of scant factual evidence left to us by a history written predominantly by men:

Le mie ragioni sono quelle di chi, raccontando un fatto non inventato ma realmente accaduto [...] vien colto dallo scrupolo di aver sommerso sotto il flusso narrativo le punte più icastiche dell'azione e dei caratteri che ne formarono il nodo. Di qui [...] l'intervento di ipotesi dirette a raggiungere quel "verosimile" spesso più intimamente vero di una realtà amputata e soffocata dalle mani goffe del caso [...] Così può avvenire che i contorni di figure e azioni veduti dapprima a distanza e in un vasto panorama, precipitino a un tratto in una concitazione che esige la parola diretta, l'aria mossa da corpi vivi. Ed ecco la tentazione teatrale affacciarsi proponendo gesti tanto più attuali quanto più costanti, voci con cadenze e accenti precisi, la ripetizione, insomma, di quel che accadde ieri o trecento anni fa. (10)

[My motives are those of someone who, in telling a story about an actual fact, not an invented one, [...] is seized by the realization that I have submerged the most incisive elements of the plot and the characters central to it under the flow of the narrative. Hence [...] the use of scenarios aimed at achieving that *verosimile* that is often more intimately true than a reality lopped off and strangled by the clumsy hands of chance [...] In this way, the contours of figures and actions seen initially at a distance and from a wide angle may be reduced to its essence in a heated exchange that requires the direct word, the animated speech of live bodies. Thus, there is the theatrical temptation to put oneself forward, proposing gestures just as real as they are unwavering, voices with precise accents and cadences—the repetition, in other words, of what actually happens, whether today or three hundred years ago.]

The live voice of her protagonist on the stage, she argues, whose screams of pain seemed almost palpable from the court transcripts, were in reality too detached and distant when retold in the form of a novel, as if filtered through a sieve. Hence, she turned to theater to create a sense of proximity, a continuity between the events of 300 years ago and the present time. Moreover, the

---

<sup>17</sup> Banti adds her own definition of *il verosimile* to its long history in the Italian literary panorama of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Using Alessandro Manzoni as the springboard for her critical discussion, she examines whether or not the *fatto inventato* should take precedence over Manzoni's preferred *fatto avvenuto* in constructing a historical narrative: "la sua difesa ostinata del fatto avvenuto contro le insidie del fatto inventato, a tutto scapito dei diritti appena intravisti del fatto supposto, rattrista chi ricorda quel suo eccezionale rilievo: 'il verosimile è un vero... veduto dalla mente per sempre, o per parlar con più precisione, irrevocabilmente'" ["his stubborn defense of what has happened against the hidden dangers of invented facts, to the detriment of advantages offered by the conjectured fact, is painful to those who remember its exceptional significance: 'the *verosimile* is a reality... seen from the mind from eternity, or to put it more precisely, irrevocably'"] (Banti, *Opinioni*, 40). See also "Manzoni e noi," and "Romanzo e romanzo storico," in Banti, *Opinioni*, 53–65, 28–43.

randomness inherent in historical documentation necessitates a more creative approach to its narration, one that gives space to the *fatto supposto* or *inventato* in addition to the *fatto avvenuto*. Banti, therefore, posits that *il verosimile* is a more authentic aesthetic by which to guide literary production than *il vero*.

Banti's transposition from novel to play entails a new set of thematic, aesthetic, and moral potentialities. Through the immediacy of the theater Banti hopes to foster a less misogynist portrayal of the artist's life, one more attentive to the gender implications of Artemisia's experiences. In an interview tellingly entitled "Artemisia dalla narrativa al teatro" ("Artemisia from narrative to theater"), Banti argued that the passage from novel to theater was a natural progression, both artistically and with regard to the production of meaning. "Il sussurro dei personaggi, immaginari o storici che siano, è spesso assillante e dà batticuore" ["The rustle of characters, whether imagined or historic, is often compelling and exciting"]. To access the essence of these voices, "il romanziere possa pensare al teatro" ["the novelist can turn to the theater"]. In the case of Artemisia, Banti was virtually compelled to "ricostituire le pagine già scritte che la rievocano per obbedire al suo desiderio di vita e di ricordo" ["reconstruct the already-written pages that conjure her in order to bear witness to her longing for life and recognition"]. In this effort, she was aided by the "minuziosi verbali" ["meticulous testimony"] that recorded "atteggiamenti, timori, proteste, astuzie, menzogne, che paiono cose d'oggi" ["attitudes, fears, complaints, cunning, and falsehoods that seem so contemporary"]. Such documents led Banti to recast Artemisia's story theatrically to "recuperare tutto quel che il romanzo aveva trascurato e far risuonare al naturale quelle voci sepolte da tre secoli" ["recover everything that the novel had left out and to bring to life those voices that have been buried for three centuries"].<sup>18</sup> Here, Banti enumerates the features of theater that enable its efficacy: voices, bodies, and immediacy. Theater offers the means by which Banti can most viscerally connect Artemisia's inability to achieve justice at the Savella Court, with the "attitudes, fears, complaints, cunning, and falsehoods" to which Banti herself was subjected, given the status of women in postwar, 1950s Italy. This was a decade in which women's juridical equality had yet to yield meaningful economic, political, or socio-cultural changes, or to reform traditional gender roles and their division of labor.<sup>19</sup>

From the proscenium arch to the window of Artemisia's studio, framing devices are essential tools in Banti's theatrical interpretation of Gentileschi's story, connecting the world of the play to that of its viewers, and her *dramatis personae* to Gentileschi's paintings. The presence of Gentileschi's paintings on stage is central to the play's *modus operandi*. In many ways, Banti's own convictions are transmitted to the audience through the paintings, which elicit strong and diverse reactions from characters within the play, as they have from scholars, critics, and viewers. Banti also relies on scenic elements such as windows, doors, stairwells, mirrors, and the witness stand of Corte Savella to interrelate different dimensions of the dramatic action.

The importance of painting and its relationship to framing is evident even in the stage directions, which highlight Artemisia's art supplies amongst the nondescript, somewhat unkempt Gentileschi home in Rome: "*stanza a soffitto basso con travicelli, ammattonato dozzinale [...]*

---

<sup>18</sup> All quotes in this paragraph from Anna Banti, "Artemisia dalla narrativa al teatro," *La fiera letteraria* 12/46 (November 17, 1957): 1–2.

<sup>19</sup> On the position of women in Italian society from Unification to World War II, see Perry R. Willson, *Gender, Family, and Sexuality: The Private Sphere in Italy, 1860–1945* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). On women in the post-war era, see Penelope Morris, ed., *Women in Italy, 1945–1960: An Interdisciplinary Study* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

*Accanto alla finestra un cavalletto col dorso rivolto al pubblico, sopravi una tela piccolo, e uno sgabello con tavolazza, pennelli, colori ecc.*” [“a room with a low ceiling and narrow beams, paved with cheap tiles [...] Next to the window there is an easel facing away from the public with a small canvas, and a stool with an easel, brushes and colors, etc.”] (19). With the exception of the courtroom in Act II, Artemisia is always surrounded by her painting tools—her easel, canvas, colors. They are an essential part of the *mise-en-scène* and provide the reader or viewer with an idea of her personality and the extent to which painting lies at the foundation of her identity. Her easel, moreover, is positioned by a window that allows her to look out on the city, provides light by which to paint, and creates a larger frame for the canvas in progress.

The window in Artemisia’s studio is her portal to the outside world, the vantage point from which she is able to observe her own city. As was the case for many women of the era, it would have been untoward for her to have ventured out of doors without supervision. Thus, the window also affords her the opportunity to communicate with the world beyond the walls of the family home. This small freedom, however, is tenuous at best. When she looks out, she can be compromised by being seen and observed in the act of doing so—hence the long-standing trope of the woman at the window, admired and gossiped about by the men in the street below. Indeed, this is exactly what happens to Artemisia: she is framed. As the plot against her unfurls in Act I, Tuzia (her corrupt maid) and Agostino Tassi (the visiting painter, acquaintance of Orazio, and rapist) use Artemisia’s studio window as a place of exposure. He purposely strolls beneath it so that Tuzia can implore Artemisia to come to the window to take a look at the *galantuomo* below: “eccolo che ripassa e guarda in su. E affacciati un momentino!” [“there he is passing by again and looking up here. Come have a quick look!”] (23). Artemisia, immersed in her painting, ignores her pleas: “dagli un’occhiata, che male c’è? Tanto tutti se ne so’ accorti che te sta dietro” [“have a look at him, there’s no harm in that. Besides, everyone’s noticed that he’s pursuing you”] (25). There are two motives for this event. First, it is an opportunity for Tassi to show himself off and be perceived as an admirer of Artemisia by her neighbors, and second, it is a means by which to “expose” Artemisia as the type of woman who watches men in the street, and worse, who makes herself visible to them in turn. Consequently, various witnesses in the trial use Artemisia’s appearances at the window, both real and slanderously invented, as proof of her wanton character.

The window takes on new meaning in Act III, however, where it becomes a conduit of female friendship. The Roman street has been replaced by the river Arno, and Artemisia, now in Florence, is making a name for herself as a professional painter. The first and last acts of the play open on similar sets—an art studio—but with very different details: “*grande stanza chiara arredata con una certa nobiltà, tavolo di noce, sedie a braccioli di cuoio, cortine di broccato. Nel fondo una grande finestra che dà sull’Arno, e di fianco ad essa, ma voltato col retro al pubblico, il gran cavalletto su cui è l’enorme tela della Giuditta*” [“large, bright room decorated with a certain nobility, walnut table, chairs with leather armrests, brocade curtains. In the back, there is a large window overlooking the Arno, and next to it a large easel bearing a huge canvas of Judith”] (115). Artemisia’s living quarters have improved since her time in Rome, the shoddy table replaced with a leather armchair, her unfinished canvas depicting the biblical heroine Judith decapitating Holofernes prominently on display. Moreover, instead of inviting trouble, here the window is the channel through which she becomes friends with Arcangela, her neighbor and fellow artist.

The window, therefore, in addition to being a framing device that recalls the form of a painting, is also a metaphor for representation: it is a portal through which to view and be viewed



in turn. What we see through the window, however, is not a neutral capture of the world below, nor does it present a neutral image of the self. Moving from the seventeenth to the twentieth century, Banti shows us that while realism may provide a window on the real, and may purport to be objective in its representation, it does not always live up to its aesthetic and moral covenants. The many discrepancies between what the audience knows of Artemisia's rape in Act I and what the devious, lying characters declare during the trial in Act II, for example, attest to the fact that representation is subject to the values, goals, and judgments of its practitioners—including Banti herself.

Gentileschi's actual paintings function as another layer of representation in *Corte Savella*, and are likewise subject to interpretation. Gentileschi paints what she thinks is real—*il naturale*—but that does not save her canvases from manifold interpretations, many of which betray the anxieties and concerns of the viewer. This is particularly true for *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (Fig. 1)—a painting often maligned as a wronged woman's revenge fantasy.<sup>20</sup> Even Longhi capitulates somewhat to the reductive notion that the Judith painting is much too violent for a female artist to have created. In his analysis of the Uffizi *Judith*, Longhi comments: “ma—vieni voglia di dire—ma questa è la donna terribile! Una donna ha dipinto tutto questo? Imploriamo grazia” [“but one is tempted to exclaim, this is a terrible woman! A woman painted all of this? Beg for mercy”].<sup>21</sup> This reductive interpretation perpetuates the notion—even in the twentieth century—that art created by women should exhibit certain gendered aesthetic characteristics. As Garrard observes, such an oversimplification is predicated on the “sensationalist fascination of the melodrama of Artemisia's rape” and the “facile association of stormy biography with violent pictorial imagery.”<sup>22</sup> Ultimately, this reading obscures “the aesthetic complexity of the artist's identification with her depicted character” and the fact that “such artistic self-projection was by no means unusual” given that it “followed a tradition already venerable in her day.”<sup>23</sup> One of Banti's goals, then, is to position these paintings for new interpretation—the historical revisionist operation at the core of Act III. On top of these lenses (the proscenium arch, the window, and the painting) yet another is layered: Banti's own authorial point of view. Each of these filters is a metaphor for what representation can and cannot do, a means by which to demonstrate the flaws inherent in historiography. Approaches to recording the past—whether through art, literature, or history—are as imperfect as those engaging in them. Through her careful construction of framing devices that betray the lens buried within, Banti comments on the mimetic nature of schools such as neorealism: the predominant aesthetic and moral ideology that guided artistic production in post-war Italy, the time during which both the novel and play were written.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> For a comprehensive analysis and history of Gentileschi's Judith series, see Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 278 – 337.

<sup>21</sup> Longhi, “Gentileschi, padre e figlia,” 294.

<sup>22</sup> Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 278.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> In addition to the Judith series, Gentileschi is remembered for her exceptional later work, *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* (1630). Gentileschi depicts herself in the act of painting and as the allegory of it, thus repurposing a long-standing artistic practice—personifying arts such as painting, sculpture, and architecture as female figures—and imbuing it with significance for the professional woman artist and subject. In *Corte Savella*, Artemisia the character is often seen looking in the mirror. Artemisia the historical woman is famous for her self-portrait, and Banti as the author provides a non-literal self-portrait by projecting herself onto the character of Artemisia, assimilating their shared struggles as professional women artists across three centuries. See Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 337–61.



Figure 1: Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1620). Florence, The Uffizi.

Banti uses the metaphor of theater itself to highlight the problematics of gender and realism. In Act I, Agostino Tassi is presented as a skilled actor and dissimulator, capable of manipulating even the most strong-willed person. The trial in Act II is a theatrical production in its own right, complete with meta-audience, cast, and script. Here, Banti doubles both performers and spectators: the judge, various witnesses, and court employees become actors on the courtroom's

“stage” and audience members as they observe the trial. The most significant elements of this act are (1) the judge’s interrogation of Artemisia, which reveals his innate distrust of her experience and culminates in his use of torture against her person; and (2) Artemisia’s self-defense on the witness stand, where she rejects the hypocrisy of being tortured while her assailant goes unharmed: “perché a me i tormenti e non al mio assassino che dica il vero? Io che ho fatto che mi trattate da malfattore? Fateli almeno provare prima a lui e li supporterò volentieri!” [“why torture me and not my assailant, so that he tells the truth? What have I done to deserve being treated as a wrongdoer? First subject him to these measures, then I will endure them willingly!”] (102). Representing the trial on stage forces the audience to bear witness to Artemisia’s experience of torture, as opposed to reading a disembodied account in history books. Moreover, it allows the audience to hear for the first time Artemisia’s voice in the first person, enhancing the character’s subjectivity. While the first two acts elucidate *Corte Savella*’s engagement with self-conscious theater, I focus here on the metatheatrical core of Act III. In this last act, form and theme merge when the four Florentine noblewomen who observe Artemisia at work attempt a live reenactment of the Judith painting in her studio.

The trial, in addition to its metatheatrical function, is also a means for Banti to mount a critique of gender politics in midcentury Italy. By staging a sham trial, in which Artemisia is, for all practical purposes, blamed for being raped and forced to marry as reparation for lost honor, the play holds up a mirror to Banti’s contemporary society. Until the 1970s, rape in Italy was considered only a “crime against public morality,” not a criminal offense. The legal classification of rape as a moral crime thus formalized the notion that marriage could be used as reparation for a woman’s “loss of honor,” as is the case in *Corte Savella*. This practice was commonplace in Italy through most of the twentieth century and did not stop until the widely-publicized case in 1965 of Franca Viola, a Sicilian teenager who refused to marry her kidnapper and rapist, pushing instead for formal legal sentencing despite the damage to her reputation and the intimidation tactics employed by the perpetrator against her family.<sup>25</sup> In staging Artemisia’s rape and her refusal to continue to participate in the marriage of reparation planned by her father, Banti comments on the politics of justice, gender, and parity in both epochs, with specific attention to how women’s bodies are and were commodified by the family and the state.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, the trial showcases how women’s voices and opinions are not of equal importance to men’s. When Tuzia takes the stand, she is reprimanded by the judge for what he sees as her incoherent and rambling testimony. He publicly vents his frustration, exclaiming “mannaggia alle donne” [“damned women”] (90). It is not only Tuzia. The judge also views Artemisia as a suspect and liar. Her veil is false modesty; her unwillingness to acknowledge that her sexual encounter with Tassi was consensual is manipulative obfuscation. In his eyes, Artemisia allowed herself to be put in the position of being raped, ergo she is not a *zitella dabbene* but rather a loose woman who cannot claim to have been wronged: “le vostre scuse non servono perché una zitella dabbene, se non vuole, non si lascia consigliare male e sa come rispondere ai cattivi consigli” [“your excuses are useless because a respectable spinster, provided she does not want to be, does not allow herself to be adversely influenced, and she knows how to

---

<sup>25</sup> See Marta Boneschi, *Di testa loro. Dieci Italiane che hanno fatto il Novecento* (Milan: Mondadori, 2002), 275–96, and Bruno P.F. Wanrooij, *Storia del pudore. La questione sessuale in Italia, 1860–1940* (Venice: Marsilio, 1990).

<sup>26</sup> In 1958, the Italian parliament ratified the *Legge Merlin*, becoming one of the last European countries to abolish the national regulation of prostitution. See Molly Tambor, “Prostitutes and Politicians: The Women’s Rights Movement in the Legge Merlin Debates,” in *Women in Italy, 1945–1960*, ed. Morris, 131–146. See also Sandro Bellasai, *La legge del desiderio. Il progetto Merlin e l’Italia degli anni Cinquanta* (Rome: Carocci, 2006).

respond to wicked suggestions”] (82). This dismissal of women’s experiences recalls the institutional sexism prevalent in 1950s Italy. The traditional notion that women are naturally unreliable and inherent liars was compounded by Positivism and the advent of the “criminal woman,” the latter an ideology upheld throughout the process of Italian Unification and well into the first few decades of the twentieth century.<sup>27</sup>

Artemisia is not the only woman in the play whose experiences highlight questionable gender politics and its intersections with other social cleavages. Artemisia’s relationships with other women characters—Armida and Clarice Torrigiani, the *marchesa* Violante Mazzinghi, and Laudomia Vettori, all Florentine aristocrats; Caterina, the novice artist; and Arcangela, the singer—show how female camaraderie is often constrained by the social, economic, and political conditions of patriarchy. It is only with other artists, women like herself, who have followed a non-traditional path, that Artemisia is able to find companionship and encouragement. The episode of the Florentine noblewomen who in Act III attack Artemisia for her “violent” art and non-traditional lifestyle demonstrates how women are prevented from forming bonds with one another by social conditioning that expects and rewards deference to male authority. These women share frustrations common across social classes—controlling or violent husbands; lack of congenial or important work; exclusion from the world outside of the home—and yet they are unable to bring themselves to support Artemisia, as she represents what they, in marrying, have been deprived of. In needing to justify their own decisions, these women succumb to the patriarchal trope of female rivalry. In holding a mirror up to their own oppression, Artemisia’s position as a woman who eschews tradition and lives independently makes them uncomfortable.

Arcangela is the most important woman with whom Artemisia interacts, for it is through their conversation that Banti provides a new interpretation of *Judith Slaying Holofernes*. Although she appears only in Act III, her presence serves multiple functions. She is a means by which to articulate the social isolation and economic perilousness that professional women artists face in dedicating themselves fully to their craft; the interlocutor and participant in a woman-to-woman discussion of *Judith*, and as such the catalyst for a new, non-canonical reading of its violent scene; and lastly, a demonstration of genuine empathy and camaraderie between two women. In fact, when Artemisia is demoralized by her castigation at the hands of the noblewomen, Arcangela affirms for her that, even though women across social classes encounter common struggles, class conventions prevent them from forming meaningful solidarity: “di coraggio voi ne avete quanto occorre e lo sapete anche voi che fra ricchi e poveri non c’è che la carità. Appena un povero si leva dagli stracci e mostra di valere qualcosa il ricco gli diventa nemico” [“you have all the courage you need, and you also know that the only thing standing between the rich and the poor is charity. As soon as a poor person lifts himself up from his tattered rags and shows himself to be worth something, the rich person turns into his enemy”] (154).

At the foundation of Act III is the dramatic reenactment, and subsequent reinterpretation of Gentileschi’s most infamous work, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*. Banti creates this opportunity to revise the public’s perception of both painter and painting. At the beginning of Act III, nine years have transpired since the trial, and Artemisia has moved to Florence to pursue her painting. Arcangela, a singer worried that she has lost her voice and thus her livelihood as well, comes to Artemisia for support and conversation.<sup>28</sup> Their friendship is quickly contrasted with the

---

<sup>27</sup> See Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferro, *Criminal Woman, the Prostitute, and the Normal Woman*, trans. and intro. Nicole Hahn Rafter and Mary Gibson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>28</sup> Here, Banti underscores the difficulties of being a woman whose livelihood depends on her art: “non ho più fiato,

competition and rivalry of the four Florentine noblewomen to whom Artemisia is beholden and who visit her studio to watch her paint. Unlike Arcangela, a fellow artist, for Artemisia, “queste dame sono tutte ignoranti e non hanno passione che per i loro quattro cenci. Solo una ne conosco che avrebbe talento e sempre mi prega d’insegnarle la pittura, quella palliduccia Caterina Vanni” [“these ladies are all ignorant and lack passion for anything other than their miserable belongings. I only know one of them who might have any talent, and she always begs me to teach her how to paint—that pasty white Caterina Vanni”] (123). This description sets up the rest of Act III in that it differentiates Caterina from the other four—idle women of the upper class who seem to Artemisia envious, resentful, and litigious gossips, but with a degree of evil that renders them almost like witches or furies. Caterina, on the other hand, is still young and less hardened by the reality of a woman’s life. She hopes to marry and have children someday, but is also an aspiring artist—a mirror of the younger Artemisia. Her optimism troubles the others.

The seven loquacious women of Act III are contrasted with the only male character in their midst: Anastasio, Artemisia’s deaf-mute model, who poses almost completely nude. It is noteworthy that the only man in this act (with the exception of Antonio, who briefly appears in the penultimate scene) is unable to speak: he serves as the object of Artemisia’s painting, and for the voyeuristic pleasure of her female audience. Scene 3 brings these characters together for the first time: Anastasio and Caterina arrive first, followed quickly by the four noblewomen, who rapidly make evident their jealousy of Artemisia’s lifestyle, which to them appears easygoing, free, and fun. They consider her lucky: an autonomous woman, unencumbered by a husband or children, who is able to indulge in her passion. They come to the studio to breathe the atmosphere of freedom that—as women dependent on men—they feel they lack: “mi fa piacere vedervi pitturare, mi ci diverto. Noi si viene qui per conversazione e per stare in libertà [...] In casa nostra, sapete, ci si annoia a morte, a me neppure il beneficio d’esser vedova m’ha servita, ci ho il suocero, la cognata da maritare, e quel serpente del maggiordomo che fa la spia” [“I enjoy watching you paint; it is fun. We come here for conversation and to be free [...] You know, in our house one can die of boredom. And for me, even being a widow has not done me any good: I have a father-in-law, a sister-in-law to be married, and that snake of a butler who spies on us”] (127), Violante says laughing. They are unable, however, to see the struggle, dedication, hard work, or barriers to success that Artemisia has faced.

Their conversing turns from innocuous to biting when, in scene 4, the women begin to vent, using colorful, uninhibited language, adding information and stories about how their husbands are violent, frustrating, brutish, and gross. These “gran bestie” [“great beasts”] (129), as Armida refers to them, are controlling and opinionated. As Laudomia sees it, she would prefer “un paio di schiaffi che la noia d’averlo sempre alla sottane a inquisire su tutti i fatti miei” [“a couple of slaps to the boredom of having him chasing my skirt and poking into my affairs”] (129). As they trade barbs, their discussion is increasingly judgmental of Artemisia, Arcangela, and Caterina, whose purported liberty they envy: “del resto beate voi che vivete in libertà: se sapeste come vi si invidia noialtre donne di condizione!” [“in any case, good for you who live in freedom; if you only knew how we married women envy you!”] (130). Artemisia rebuts Clarice’s understanding of what her freedom entails, clarifying that “la libertà che noi abbiamo non è per viver male, signora [...] una giovane che vive sola non ama i sussurri” [“the freedom we have is not to live poorly [...] for a woman that lives alone does not appreciate gossip”] (130). The noblewomen’s complaints are accompanied by taunts and false advice to Caterina, whose decision not to marry

---

non ho più speranze, non potrò più cantare” [“I no longer have any stamina, I do not have any more hope, I can no longer sing”] (*Corte Savella*, 124).

unnerves them. As Clarice goads, “che male ci sarebbe, infine? I gobbi, dicono, sono mariti gagliardi, e per certe cose non occorre accendere il lume” [“in the end, what’s the harm? Hunchbacks, they say, make for strapping husbands, and for some things, there’s no need to turn on the lights”] (132). While this scene has a comic and grotesque air, it is also tragic—a typically Baroque hybrid. Through the women’s piercing comments, Banti highlights how challenging and even dehumanizing institutions such as marriage and family were for women of the time. Even though they belong to the upper class, these women cannot fulfill their desires or needs, and their actions and movements are highly-controlled. They come to Artemisia’s studio, therefore, to express their pent-up rage and anger, and to imagine a life in which they had Artemisia’s supposed freedom. In many ways, the lives of these women are not a distant historical relic: their struggles, in fact, have much in common with the women of 1950s Italy, who experienced limited opportunities for independence during the postwar period with respect to women in Western Europe and North America.<sup>29</sup> In staging their frustration and rage, Banti is able to comment on the lived experiences of women in a traditional, honor-based society, both past and present.

This bitter conversation escalates into a dual argument about Artemisia’s reputation and the significance of her painting *Judith Slaying Holofernes*—the unfinished canvas of which sits in plain view. When Violante attempts to slander Artemisia—“non siete mica una verginella, esperienza ne avete più di noi, avete cominciato presto le vostre battaglie” [“you certainly are not a little virgin, you have more experience than we do, you started your battles early on”]—Artemisia proudly defends her life and career: “le mie battaglie, signora marchesa, una dama come voi difficilmente può immaginarle. Sono battaglie per il pane e per l’onore dell’arte” [“my battles, lady marchioness, are barely imaginable to a dame like you. They are battles to put food on the table and for the integrity of art”] (134). Violante perceives an inherent relation between Artemisia’s sullied character and the painting’s uncanny imagery. Her description of the painting, which oscillates between fascination and repulsion, thus represents the canonical or stereotypical reading of the work: that Artemisia painted it for revenge, and that the bloody painting with a beheaded male figure is aimed not just at the single man who offended her, but rather, toward all men:

VIOLANTE: L’avete scelto bene il vostro nemico questo corpaccio mezzo ignudo par l’immagine di tutti gli uomini messi insieme. Vedete che non sono sciocca. Voi li avete messi alla gogna, gli uomini, col vostro Oloferne. Così grosso e muscoloso che gli basterebbe alzare un dito perché quella vostra Giuditta—che fra l’altro vi somiglia—finisse schiacciata come una mosca. E invece eccolo lì che si ritrova, grullo grullo, senza testa. Tutto il sangue che aveva in corpo avete voluto spargere e lo avete dipinto goccia a goccia come una gatta lecca il latte. Se un uomo vi ha offeso, come si dice, avete saputo vendicarvi.

LAUDOMIA: Questa non lo sapevo. Davvero avete dipinto per vendetta, Artemisia? Fate un po’ vedere... (*gira davanti al quadro*): Uh. Che orrore! Ci avete ricamato tutto il materasso! (134)

[VIOLANTE: You selected your enemy well—this half-nude body—as a symbol of all men taken together. See, I am no simpleton. You are pillorying them along

<sup>29</sup> See “Women, ‘Wounded Emancipation’ and the Crisis of Patriarchy (1945–68)” in Maud Bracke, *Women and the Reinvention of the Political: Feminism in Italy, 1968–1983* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 33–63.

with your Holofernes. So big and muscular, with his fingers alone he could squash Judith like a fly—she looks like you, by the way. And yet, here he is, a dumb fool without a head. You wished to spill all the blood in his body, and you painted it drop by drop, just like a cat laps up milk. If a man has offended you, as the saying goes, you knew how to avenge yourself.

LAUDOMIA: I did not know this. Did you really paint for revenge, Artemisia? Here, let me see... (*she turns toward the painting*): Oh, how horrible! You even embroidered the whole mattress!]

This conversation effectively describes some of the painting's most famous attributes, including the mattress "embroidered" with blood, the severed head, and Holofernes' musculature. Violante even infers that Artemisia perhaps saw something of Judith in herself—reaffirming the canonical understanding of the painting as a portrait of personal revenge. Artemisia, however, quickly mounts a concise and thoughtful defense of her own work. Through this defense, Banti offers a new interpretation of the painting, one that focuses on Artemisia as a professional painter, as opposed to a woman marked only by the experience of rape: "no illustrissime, loro s'ingannano. Io non dipingo per vendetta, ma per amore dell'arte e dipingo il naturale. Cosa si vanno immaginando?" ["no, gentlewomen, you are mistaken. I do not paint for revenge, but rather for the love of art, and I paint what is natural. The things one imagines!"] (135). Artemisia simply paints what is real, Banti affirms: *il naturale*. This image, however, is as deeply troubling to the four furies as it is to actual viewers of the painting both past and present—especially the universally-male audience of art history academe.

The sight of the violent, corporeal painting, and all that it signifies, is the catalyst for the metatheatrical climax of *Corte Savella*: Violante, consumed with rage, implores the other women to enact with her their own version of the painting—and the effect it has on them—as a kind of *tableau vivant*. Similar to the trial in Act II, this second internal theatrical production has its own cast and stage, only this time the protagonist is not Artemisia herself, but rather, her painting and its biblical heroine. Harnessing Judith's strength, they turn their attention to Anastasio—realizing that for the first time they have power over a man—and enjoy the fact that they inspire fear in him. "Figliole," Violante exclaims, "vogliamo divertirci? Facciamogli paura davvero al gigante, fingiamo di andargli addosso tutte insieme e di volerlo graffiare così," she instructs with hook-like fingers ["Girls, do we want to have fun? Let's really frighten the giant! Let's pretend to attack him all at once, like we're trying to scratch him"] (138). Against Violante's threats, Artemisia begs the women to "considerare che questo povero infelice fa il suo mestiere" ["realize that this poor man is just doing his job"] (138), yet they persist in their game. Caterina, uncomfortable with the proceedings, is desperate to leave: "io me ne voglio andare, vi dico. Io queste cose non le voglio vedere né sentire. Siete matte o cosa siete?" ["I want to go. I do not want to see these things or hear them. Have you all gone mad or something?"] (139). Artemisia agrees with Caterina—"in carità, Signore, madonna Caterina ha ragione" ["for pity's sake, ladies, Madame Caterina is right"] (139)—and in doing so, sets off Violante, who accuses the painter of hypocrisy and forces Caterina further into the violent charade: "bada che tenerume, la nostra virtuosa, a momenti piange. Lei taglia la testa agli uomini, allaga un letto di sangue e poi non sopporta quattro sgraffiotti al suo Oloferne! Vien qua Caterina, smettila di scappare, è giusto che anche a te tocchi una parte della commedia. Anzi, se è vero che sei vergine, devi recitare la parte di eroina. Un coltello... ah eccolo qui" ["look how tender our virtuous one is, she cries every so often. She beheads men, floods a bed with blood, but cannot put up with a few scratches



on her Holofernes! Come here, Caterina, do not flee, its only right that you take part in the play. Better yet, if it is really true that you are a virgin, you have to play the role of the heroine. A knife... ah, here it is"] (139).

In the scene's climax, Violante thrusts a knife into Caterina's hand, and the four noblewomen surround her, shoving her toward the silent victim and chanting "ti devi sentire come Giuditta, capace di tagliare una testa. Forte il braccio, chiuso quel pugno" ["you have to feel like Judith, capable of cutting a head, with a steady arm and clenched fist"] (140). Here, Violante turns into the director, ordering Caterina to take part in their play, and denouncing what she sees as Artemisia's duplicity: creating violent imagery through painting, she argues, is no better than feigning its live reproduction. Moreover, the heightened tension of the moment practically hypnotizes Caterina, who is subsequently horrified at what she has almost done. As if breaking a spell, Artemisia abruptly stops the incipient event, yelling "in casa mia questi divertimenti non usano. La commedia è finita, signore" ["in my home we do not play these games. The play is over, ladies"] (140). The scene devolves shortly thereafter—the noblewomen leave without a goodbye, and Caterina collapses on a chair, crying with her head between her knees. In this scene, the modality of metatheater allows the four women to externalize the frustrations, anger, and jealousy they feel towards their husbands onto the naked body of Anastasio. Unlike the other men in their lives, this one has no voice to order them around and can be insulted with impunity. In many ways, this operation could be seen as an ironic play on the tradition of the male artist's silent, nameless female model who is only a beautiful, naked body, and has no voice, personality, or subjectivity.

Violante, Clarice, Laudomia, and Armida are the object of violence at home, but in Artemisia's studio they are inspired to turn the tables, so to speak, and instead become the perpetrators of violence. In Artemisia's rendition of a brave Judith beheading the tyrant Holofernes—a piece of art that turns upside down a gendered power dynamic and foregrounds the potential for women's bravery, strength, and subjectivity—they are forced to come face to face with the painful repression they have suffered their whole lives, both in childhood and marriage. The Judith painting, then, functions as a mirror—albeit a very dark one. This mirror goes far beyond the surface of the face and penetrates deep inside their being, touching on something that moves them to expel their pent-up rage and frustration. In the painting, they see a facet of their lived reality reflected back at them, and it stimulates resentment. Through their dramatic reenactment of the painting, in which the goal is to commit violence and inspire fear in a male victim, they seek to vindicate themselves against the oppression they have experienced. Ironically, however, this is the same operation that Violante accuses Artemisia of completing in her own painting. In this metatheatrical tableau, Banti shows that regardless of social or economic status, women suffer disenfranchisement in a society ruled by men.

Perhaps the most important aspect of this second play-within-a-play is what transpires in its wake: Caterina's fitful departure from painting and subsequent breakdown, Artemisia's decision not to return to Antonio, and Artemisia and Arcangela's discussion and new interpretation of the painting that started it all. After Artemisia forcefully breaks up Violante's "play," a sobbing Caterina reveals how traumatic the experience was for her. She blames Artemisia, whose violent and bloody painting has driven the women, herself included, mad, to the point that she almost capitulated to using the knife on poor Anastasio. She thus decides that she will no longer draw: "è finita. Non disegnerò più, non ci verrò più da voi. È vostra la colpa, le avete fatte impazzire voi con tutto quel sangue del vostro Oloferne, e anch'io son come impazzita, non so quel che non avrei fatto con questo coltello!" ["it is over. I will not draw any longer, I am not coming back



here. It is your fault, you have let yourself go mad with all that blood from your Holofernes, and I, too, have almost gone crazy. I do not know what I would have done with this knife!”] (142). Artemisia defends herself gently, and tries to convince Caterina that she is not the fallen woman the Florentines make her out to be: “lo sapete bene che io non ci ho colpa [...] non sono quella che hanno detto quelle dame” [“you know very well that I am not to blame [...] I am not what the other ladies have said of me”] (142). Caterina will not listen, convinced that Artemisia—whom she thought she loved and could follow as a pupil—has “in cuore, un veleno” [“poison in her heart”] (142), that she wants to kill all men and teach women to hate them. Now she will never be able to see men in the same light, or be able to marry or have children as an honorable woman, as she knows the truth demonstrated by the painting and the ladies’ reaction to it: that “il mondo è fatto di uomini prepotenti e di donne che gli son nemiche” [“the world is made by powerful men and by women who are their enemies”] (143). The scene closes with Artemisia alone in her studio, head in her hands.

Caterina’s break-down is not without cause. Through the painting, and what it inspired in the four furies, she has witnessed the upsetting truth of gender politics, and it leads her to unravel. This, in many respects, is the moral crux of the play. Banti wants the audience of 1960 to see through *Corte Savella* what Caterina in 1620 sees through the painting: namely, that patriarchal society denies women the right to realize themselves independently of their marriages and families, and inhibits their ability to pursue “un lavoro congeniale e una parità di spirito fra i due sessi” [“congenial work and an equality of spirit between the two sexes”].<sup>30</sup> Women who wish to operate outside that paradigm must make themselves into exceptions by acquiring the strength of the mythical Judith, the dedication of Artemisia, and the willingness to live a life of solitude—something Artemisia the character demonstrates at the play’s end by renouncing her marriage and building a life on her own.

*Corte Savella* concludes by offering a new interpretation of the Judith painting, one that rejects the canonical reading put forth by Violante, Caterina, and traditional art historical narratives. The last scene of the play finds Artemisia again at her window, discussing with Arcangela the events that have just transpired. Their conversation in this scene recalls the female solidarity with which the act began, and that was challenged by the intervening scenes. Unlike Caterina, who has been frightened from her esteem, Arcangela professes admiration for her fellow artist when Artemisia questions the value of her own painting, and worries about its misinterpretation:

ARTEMISIA: E non vi ha fatto meraviglia che io abbia scelto, fra tanti che ce ne sono, un soggetto così crudele e l’abbia dipinto, proprio nel momento che tutto il sangue di Oloferne gli esce dalle vene?

ARCANGELA: No davvero [...] Se avete scelto quel soggetto è perché siete animosa e il sangue non vi fa paura, massime che degli uomini siete piuttosto nemica che amica.

ARTEMISIA: Così si pensano quelle dame, Arcangela. Anzi, m’hanno saputo dire che questo Oloferne io l’ho dipinto per vendetta. Chissà da quanto gira questa storia, forse tutta Firenze ne discorre della Gentileschi che dipinge sangue per vendicarsi dell’uomo che l’ha svergognata da fanciulla [...] Allora, ecco, m’è venuta addosso una gran paura che avessero ragione.

ARCANGELA: O triste che sono! E sciocca io che m’ha tradito la lingua. Ho detto

---

<sup>30</sup> Banti, *Romanzi e racconti*, 245.

che siete nemica degli uomini a somiglianza di Giuditta o di Clorinda, donne valorose e guerriere. Ma voi non odiate gli uomini se ne avete amato uno e ancora siete fedele alla sua memoria. (154–56)

[ARTEMISIA: Does it not surprise you that, of all subjects, I chose one so cruel, and that I painted it precisely at the moment in which all of Holofernes' blood is dripping from his veins?

ARCANGELA: No, honestly [...] If you chose this subject it is because you are brave, and that blood does not scare you, especially because you are more an enemy of men than their friend.

ARTEMISIA: That is what the ladies think, Arcangela. In fact, they suggested that I painted Holofernes out of revenge. Who knows how far this story has spread? Maybe all of Florence is talking about a certain Gentileschi who paints blood to avenge the man who dishonored her as a young girl [...] Now, even I am gripped with fear that they are right.

ARCANGELA: How sad I am! And foolish that I let my tongue betray me. I said that you are an enemy to men like Judith or Clorinda, women both courageous and fierce. But you do not hate men if you have loved one, and if you are still faithful to his memory.]

It seems that Violante's criticism and the madness elicited by the painting have provoked doubt in Artemisia. She is struck by how her reputation as a man-hater made the ladies feel entitled to come to her to vent their rancor against men. But Arcangela recognizes that this is not the case. Artemisia does not hate men, but rather does not fear them. Perhaps this is Banti's way of showing how the dominant interpretation of Artemisia's corpus—and of the Judith series in particular—as revenge for her rape, and thus as hatred for all men, is reductive and does not paint a comprehensive picture of Gentileschi's aesthetic vision and artistic courage.

Artemisia confirms that her love for Caravaggio and painting sustain her, and provided her with the strength to decline Antonio's offer to join him once again. In this moment then, Banti ties together two of the play's major themes: the practice of art and its incompatibility with traditional gender roles and relationships. The play closes with Arcangela imploring Artemisia to give life with Antonio a try—"perché resistere, Artemisia? Siete giovane e non è peccato farsi amare dal proprio marito" ["why resist, Artemisia? You are young and it is not a sin to let yourself be loved by your own husband"] (157)—but Artemisia demurs. She insists that in order to respect him and herself (and her immutable feelings for Caravaggio and what he represents) she must remain alone: "è peccato non ricambiarlo e per me sarebbe peccato doppio perché mi conosco e so che mai muterò sentimenti. E poi che so io dell'amore? La violenza, il disgusto, la rassegnazione, la vergogna. Fatemi ascoltare le parole di un innamorato fedele" ["it is a shame not to return the love, but for me it would be even more of a shame, because I know myself, and I know that my sentiments will never change. Besides, what do I know of love? Violence, disgust, resignation, shame. Let me listen to the words of a faithful lover"] (157). Instead she asks Arcangela to read her the love letter from Alvisè—listening to them will recall her buried beloved and give her the strength to endure in her solitude—and the play ends with Arcangela reciting the opening address "dilettissima mia" ["my dearest"] (158), which Artemisia repeats quietly to herself.

The experiences and choices of Banti's Artemisia demonstrate a feminist typology very

much in the same vein as those of Virginia Woolf, Silbila Aleramo, and other early twentieth-century writers. The woman creator, writer, or artist is the exceptional case, a paradox. To achieve success, she must forsake comfort and stability for passion, which is incompatible with women's traditional responsibilities. Importantly, the idea of the woman artist as an exceptional figure is not predicated on her rejection or exclusion of other women, but rather, on the conditions of a society that requires women to sacrifice their needs and ambitions in marriage, family, and social relations. This is an isolating experience, one that Banti experienced first-hand during her lifetime. As the relationship between Artemisia and Arcangela and their conflict with the four noblewomen shows, women artists are best understood by fellow artists. The cycle, furthermore, is difficult to interrupt: women like Violante, who are constrained by their traditional role, do not necessarily want to have a mirror held up to their oppression. Others, like Caterina, frightened by the reality she has understood for the first time, find it easier to blame fellow women for the injustices perpetuated by male-dominated institutions. The social and economic conditions of patriarchy, therefore, work to prevent meaningful solidarity among women across social classes and situations.

It is to this end that Banti positions the Judith painting so prominently in her play: it provokes in its spectator a specific effect, one of inquiry, anxiety, and awe. The operation at the foundation of *Corte Savella*, therefore, is one of parallelism: the effect of the play itself on its modern audience parallels the effect of the painting on the characters behind the fourth wall. Furthermore, the painting forces its viewers to confront their discomfort with the representation of woman as heroine, as an acting subject endowed with power and courage. The Uffizi *Judith* has offended many, Garrard notes:

not because of its violence, for violence is a staple of art. It offends and shocks us because it presents an antisocial and illegitimate violence, the murder of a man by a woman. Beneath the rational veneer of the moralized biblical story lies a lawless reality too horrible for men to contemplate. Holofernes is not merely an evil Oriental despot who deserves his death, he is Everyman; and Judith and her servant are, together, the most dangerous and frightening force on earth for a man: women in control of his fate.<sup>31</sup>

Gentileschi is canonically referred to as a Caravaggesque painter, and while Caravaggio's influence is undoubtedly pronounced in her corpus, her paintings are in fact aesthetically distinctive.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, at their core, they are about more than just form and style. They are also about content, and in that capacity, they foreground the historical and mythic female heroine—including Judith, Susanna, Lucretia, and Cleopatra, among others. In using theater to explicate the meaning of Gentileschi's Judith—her *capolavoro* and principal artistic legacy—Banti, too, engages in an act of historical revisionism. By staging the lived experiences of Artemisia,

---

<sup>31</sup> Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 279.

<sup>32</sup> Caravaggio's *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1598–99), for example, differs markedly with regard to Judith's physicality and engagement in her task. As Garrard notes: "Holofernes, shown at the very moment his neck is being severed, is not yet dead, and he screams in outraged protest, a forcefully vital counterpart to the functionally effective but facially inexpressive Judith. His physically explicit, unidealized features contrast extremely with the emotionless, late *maniera* beauty of mannequin-like heroine, whose wrinkles are grafted inorganically upon her marmoreal face. Caravaggio's rendering of such aesthetically imbalanced types—the female conventional, the male real—is less likely to be explained by Renaissance art theory or Jesuit theology than by the influence of gender on the practice of an artist who happened to be male" (ibid., 291).

providing her with a voice to speak for herself, and highlighting the symbolic and thematic resonance of key works of her artistic corpus, Banti adds to and questions the extant works on Gentileschi, adding new, feminist interpretive possibilities.

## Bibliography

- Baldacci, Luigi. "Corte Savella." *Letteratura* 8/46–48 (1960): 243–45.
- Banti, Anna. "Artemisia dalla narrativa al teatro." *La fiera letteraria* 12/46 (November 17, 1957): 1–2.
- . *Corte Savella*. Milan: Mondadori, 1961.
- . *Il bastardo*. Firenze: Sansoni, 1953.
- . *Il coraggio delle donne*. Firenze: Le Monnier, 1940.
- . *La camicia bruciata*. Milano: Mondadori, 1973.
- . *Le donne muoiono*. Milano: Mondadori, 1951.
- . *Opinioni*. Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1961.
- . "Responsabilità della donna intellettuale." In *Le donne et la cultura*, edited by Sibilla Aleramo, 89–93. Rome: Edizioni "Noi donne," 1953.
- . *Romanzi e racconti*. Edited by Fausta Garavini. Milan: Mondadori, 2013.
- Bellassai, Sandro. *La legge del desiderio. Il progetto Merlin e l'Italia degli anni Cinquanta*. Rome: Carocci, 2006.
- Bissell, R. Ward. *Artemisia Gentileschi and the Authority of Art. Critical Reading and Catalogue Raisonné*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999.
- Boneschi, Marta. *Di testa loro. Dieci italiane che hanno fatto il Novecento*. Milan: Mondadori, 2002.
- Bracke, Maud. *Women and the Reinvention of the Political: Feminism in Italy, 1968–1983*. New York: Routledge, 2014.
- Cavazzini, Patrizia. "Artemisia in Her Father's House." In *Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi*, edited by Keith Christiansen and Judith Walker Mann, 282–311. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.
- Cohen, Elizabeth S. "The Trials of Artemisia Gentileschi: A Rape as History." *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 31/1 (2000): 47–75.
- Contini, Rovertò, and Gianni Papi, eds. *Artemisia*. Rome: Leonardo-De Luca, 1991.
- Garrard, Mary D. *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989.
- Lent, Tina Olsin. "'My Heart Belongs to Daddy': The Fictionalization of Baroque Artist Artemisia Gentileschi in Contemporary Film and Novels." *Literature/Film Quarterly* 34/3 (2006): 212–18.
- Livi, Grazia. *Le lettere del mio nome*. Milan: La Tartaruga, 1991.
- Lombroso, Cesare, and Guglielmo Ferrero. *Criminal Woman, the Prostitute, and the Normal Woman*. Translated with introduction by Nicole Hahn Rafter and Mary Gibson. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.
- Longhi, Roberto. "Gentileschi, padre e figlia." *L'arte* (1916): 245–314.
- Mann, Judith Walker, ed. *Artemisia Gentileschi: Taking Stock*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2005.
- Morris, Penelope, ed. *Women in Italy, 1945–1960: An Interdisciplinary Study*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- Petrignani, Sandra. *Le signore della scrittura. Interviste*. Milan: Tartaruga, 1984.

- Radice, Raul. "Con *Corte Savella* di Anna Banti aperta la stagione dello Stabile di Genova." *Corriere della Sera*, October 5, 1963.
- Tambor, Molly. "Prostitutes and Politicians: The Women's Rights Movement in the Legge Merlin Debates." In *Women in Italy, 1945 – 1960: An Interdisciplinary Study*, edited by Penelope Morris, 131–146. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- Wanrooij, Bruno P.F. *Storia del pudore. La questione sessuale in Italia, 1860–1940*. Venice: Marsilio, 1990.
- Willson, Perry. *Gender, Family, and Sexuality: The Private Sphere in Italy, 1860 –1945*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.