FORTIS FEMINA: ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI'S TREATMENT OF CLEOPATRA AND SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ITALIAN ART

by

Rachel N. Shermock

A Thesis Submitted in

Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in Art History

at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

May 2023

ABSTRACT

ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI'S TREATMENT OF CLEOPATRA AND SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ITALIAN ART

by

Rachel N. Shermock

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2023
Under the Supervision of Professor Tanya Tiffany

Cleopatra is a historical figure with mythical fame; she has captivated the attention of artists over centuries and millennia. Two common themes of the myriad portrayals of her infamously purported death by asp are her sexualized figure and the masculine identities of the majority of artists. But, what about female artists? How did they depict Cleopatra? Did they similarly sexualize her figure? This paper seeks to partially address these previously little-answered questions by using the representative example of Artemisia Gentileschi's ca. 1635 *Cleopatra* painting, which has not been as thoroughly examined as many of her other works featuring heroic or strong women. The primary focus of this work is to compare and contrast Artemisia's illustration of Cleopatra's demise with those created by her male contemporaries, such as Guido Reni, who was a celebrated artist in seventeenth-century Italy. The evidence described in this work suggests that Artemisia indeed infuses her Cleopatra painting with a feminine perspective that her male contemporaries are unable to adopt. Ultimately, the ca. 1635 work successfully showcases Artemisia's awareness of the sexualized Cleopatra as an archetype and rather than embracing it, creates a new narrative.

To my family, the two legged and the four legged

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract vv
List of Figures v
I. Introduction 1

II. Artemisia Gentileschi: State of the Question 1
Attribution and Artemisia's Paintings of Cleopatra 4
Describing Cleopatra Throughout the Ages 6
Looking at Cleopatra 9
Artemisia's *Cleopatra* and Other Women Painters: Exotic Over Erotic 12
Artemisia, Cleopatra, and the Body on Display 14
Artemisia on Cleopatra: Narrating Art 17
Looking at Death in Early Modern Depictions of Women 20
Suicide and Spectator: Horror and Delight 22
Cleopatra's "Gaze" 25
Cleopatra and the Saved Woman 26
Cleopatra and the Condemned Woman 28

III. Legacies of Artemisia and Cleopatra 30

Illustrations 33
Bibliography 52

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Giampetrino. *Cleopatra* 1

Figure 2. Guido Reni. *Cleopatra* 1

Figure 3. Artemisia Gentileschi. *Cleopatra* 1

Figure 4. Artemisia Gentileschi (?) *Cleopatra* 4

Figure 5. Artemisia Gentileschi. *Cleopatra* 5

Figure 6. *Muse of Philiskos* 10

Figure 7. *Sleeping Ariadne* 10

Figure 8. Piero di Cosimo. *Portrait of Simonetta Vespucci* 11

Figure 9. Michelangelo. *Cleopatra* 11

Figure 10. Jan Muller. *Cleopatra* 11

Figure 11. Lavinia Fontana. *Cleopatra* 12

Figure 12. Elisabetta Sirani. *Cleopatra* 13

Figure 13. Ginevra Cantofoli. *Cleopatra* 14

Figure 14. Guido Reni. *Cleopatra* 19

Figure 15. Guido Reni. *Lucretia* 21

Figure 16. Guido Reni. *Massacre of the Innocents* 23

Figure 17. Guercino. *Dying Cleopatra* 23

Figure 18. Ferrari Luca. *Nero Before the Body of Agrippina* 25

Figure 19. Massimo Stanzione. *Cleopatra* 26

Figure 20. Artemisia Gentileschi. *Penitent Magdalene* 26

Figure 21. Guido Reni. *Penitent Magdalene* 27

Figure 22. Alessandro Varotari (Il Padovanino). *Medea* 29

Figure 23. Artemisia Gentileschi. *Medea* 29

Introduction

Queen Cleopatra is one of the most iconic women in history. Her name conjures up centuries of images of a beautiful, often dangerous woman, concocting poisons, leading armies, and seducing men. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, distinguished male artists routinely depicted the queen and particularly her suicide. The Lombard painter Giovanni Pietro Rizzoli, commonly known as Giampetrino (1492-1521), created a voluptuous woman who invites a snake to slither up her bare arm (figure 1). In a series of works dated between ca. 1626 and 1640, Guido Reni (1575-1642) similarly showcased a fair-skinned woman whose bared breast is visited by a snake (figure 2). At this same time in Italy, women artists were also investigating Cleopatra's life and death. Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1656), most known for her heroic images of celebrated women from antiquity, produced several images of the Ptolemaic queen.

This thesis intends to examine Artemisia's ca. 1635 painting of Cleopatra (figure 3), with a specific analysis of how her version differs from those of other sixteenth- and seventeenth-century artists who portrayed the queen of Egypt. I aim to investigate how Artemisia's gender informed her presentation of female nudes. I hope to also uncover the ancient and early modern artistic, literary, or social influences that inspired her compositions.

Artemisia Gentileschi: State of the Question

In the past two decades, a significant amount of new research on women artists has been published, with a myriad of works devoted to Artemisia Gentileschi. Interest in Artemisia as a female artist increased in the 1970s. Karen Petersen's 1976 *Women Artists: Recognition and Reappraisal from the Early Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century* offers a rediscovery of works

by women. Petersen argues that Artemisia's heroic women paintings showcase the protagonist's present power, and she calls attention to how, in Artemisia's compositions, each woman's strength of character is molded in her arms and hands.[1] The same year, Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin applauded Artemisia, calling her the first woman in the history of western art to make a significant contribution to art of her time and also praising her strength and awareness of problems professional women of her time faced.[2] In 1989, Mary Garrard published a groundbreaking, though controversial, book that highlights Artemisia's artistic originality and application of personal experiences to the heroic protagonists in her paintings.[3] R. Ward Bissell's 1999 monograph on Artemisia likewise provides insight into her work, but he questions the arguments of scholars such as Garrard, who portray Artemisia as an emerging feminist. Instead, he deems Artemisia's subjects to be based exclusively on various influences of the times, such as the specifications of patrons.[4]

Scholars from the late twentieth century onward have continued to bring new perspectives to Artemisia's art. Judith Mann credits the feminist approach to brining more awareness to Artemisia as an artist, and with it, opportunities to study the artistic storylines Artemisia portrayed. At the same time, Mann praises Bissell's book for uncovering several

[1] Karen Petersen and J. J. Wilson, *Women Artists: Recognition and Reappraisal from the Early Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1976), 2, 28-29.

[2] Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin. *Women Artists: 1550-1950* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 118.

[3] Mary Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art* (New Jersey: (Princeton University Press, 1989), 3.

[4] R. Ward Bissell, *Artemisia Gentileschi and the Authority of Art* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), xx, 110. Chapter 6, "Myths, Misunderstandings, and Musings," delves more into the critique on feminist readings.

previously unknown works.[5] More recently, Jesse Locker has linked Artemisia's paintings to her personal intellectual pursuits, as illustrated by her relationship with playwrights, painters, poets, and writers active in the Italian cities where she worked. For example, Locker suggests that the Venetian writer, Gian Francesco Loredan, who authored works in the 1620s discussing historical female protagonists and who knew Artemisia during her sojourn in Venice, influenced many of her female subjects painted between the 1620s and 1630s.[6]

Artemisia's oeuvre has also been the focus of various international exhibitions. In 2002, the Metropolitan Museum of Art featured an exhibition on Artemisia and her father and teacher, Orazio Gentileschi, a celebrated artist among the Caravaggisti, who were followers of Caravaggio's naturalistic style of painting. The show highlighted the individual achievements by both artists, though Artemisia was still represented under the umbrella of Caravaggio's influence. More recently, a 2020 London exhibition with contributions by Letizia Treves, Sheila Barker, and Elizabeth Cropper emphasized Artemisia's individualism. The authors argue that Artemisia always went against the grain in both her paintings and life, as evident in her initial portrayal of a victimized biblical heroine, Susannah, painted when she was just seventeen years old. They also emphasize Artemisia's pursuit of fame in a culture that admonished women to eschew worldly glory.[7]

---

[5] Judith Mann, "Artemisia and Orazio Gentileschi," in *Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi*, ed. Keith Christiansen and Judith W. Mann (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 251.

[6] Jesse Locker, *Artemisia Gentileschi and the Language of Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 1-2, 68-69.

[7] Letizia Treves, *Artemisia* (London: National Gallery Company, 2020). Specifically, Treves, 112; Sheila Barker, 78; Larry Keith, 94.

Attribution and Artemisia's Paintings of Cleopatra

Despite a growing interest in Artemisia's career, scholars continue to debate questions of attribution. These conflicts center mainly on questions of authorship, namely whether she or her father, Orazio, should be credited with certain works. Because Orazio trained her, similarities in style and execution or corrections to her early works are expected. At least one painting of Cleopatra has been attributed to both Artemisia and Orazio. The so-called *Milan Cleopatra*, which is housed in the Etro Collection in Milan and dates to ca. 1611-1612 (figure 4), is often claimed to be Artemisia's first known work. Bissell, however, believes that Orazio was the painting's creator.[8] He cites certain chronological disparities, a level of technical finesse he finds beyond Artemisia's capabilities at this early stage in her career, and a lack of creative execution for a generic nude more typical of her father's style as his evidence.[9] Keith Christiansen, who has curated and authored works about both Gentileschi artists, also ascribes the work to Orazio based on the painting's color choices and technical handling of fabrics.[10] Bissell nevertheless attributes another Cleopatra painting, dated to ca. 1630-1635, to Artemisia, citing as evidence of her authorship the stylistic choices—such as color—that she commonly employed.[11] More recently, art historians have been investigating a newly-discovered Cleopatra painting dated to ca. 1640

[8] Debate over attribution is ongoing; Keith Christiansen attributes this painting to Orazio. Barker, Garrard, and Mann, however, site Artemisia as author.

[9] Bissell, 306-310.

[10] Christiansen, *Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi*, 97.

[11] Bissell, 244-245.

(figure 5). Riccardo Lattuada, one of the first scholars to view its restoration, points to color choice and Caravaggesque shading as signs of Artemisia's authorship.[12]

Despite such debates, scholars are unanimous in attributing to Artemisia the Cleopatra painting that is the subject of this thesis. The picture is currently in a private collection and dated to ca. 1635 largely on account of its skillful application of color paired with an innovative narrative. Letizia Treves argues that the strong use of blue, a distinctive trait of Artemisia's Neapolitan-period canvases, along with an enriched narrative and the inclusion of handmaidens are characteristic of Artemisia's works. Jesse Locker also sees the work as epitomizing Artemisia's brilliant hand in a mastery of the vibrant blue she used at the time.[13] Much of the scholarly attention to works ascribed to Artemisia emphasize her practice of highlighting her female subject's hands, which are a defining hallmark of her art. In compositions these hands are conveyors of action, allowing protagonists to wield weapons and play instruments. Paintings in which characters do not use specific tools showcase hands that are usually fleshy and noticeably jointed rather than slim and elegant; the hands are nevertheless artfully displayed in such a way that captures movement with a unique bend, motion, or gesture. In the ca. 1635 painting, Cleopatra rests her left hand under her chin, yet it is displayed in a way that exposes a plump palm and heavy folds of flesh that favor a naturalistic sense of depth rather than an idealized symbol of refined femininity.

I have selected the ca. 1635 painting of Cleopatra (figure 3, hereafter referred to as the ca. 1635 *Cleopatra*) as my focus both because the attribution is secure and because the composition

[12] Riccardo Lattuada, "Unknown Paintings by Artemisia in Naples, and New Points Regarding her Daily Life and Bottega" in *Artemisia Gentileschi in a Changing Light*, ed. Sheila Barker (London: Harvey Mills Publisher, s2017), 199-2000.

[13] Treves, 202; Locker, 114.

vastly differs from others portrayed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Most artists of the time depicted Cleopatra dying in isolation, but Artemisia has opted to portray the moment the queen's body—already turning stiff and blue in death—is discovered by her handmaidens; the asp, having bitten her, slithers on the couch near the lifeless body. Unlike the versions painted by Reni, here there is no bodily contact between the queen and the serpent, no overt sexual innuendos.

Describing Cleopatra throughout the Ages

As we have seen, Artemisia was not the first artist to engage with the subject of Cleopatra VI (69-30 BCE), whose life, and especially death, had for centuries been the subject of artistic and literary portrayal. Ancient authors discussed Cleopatra in Roman histories and biographies as early as the first century BCE. Her liaisons with the Roman statesman Julius Caesar (until his death in 44 BCE), and the Roman general, Mark Antony, were particularly fertile ground for imaginative narratives. In 34 BCE Antony embarked upon a relationship with Cleopatra. This soured his relations with Rome, particularly after he formally divorced his Roman wife, Octavia—the sister of Caesar's heir, Octavian—to be with Cleopatra. In 31 BCE, Octavian defeated Cleopatra and Mark Antony at the Battle of Actium. Antony committed suicide in 30 BCE in Alexandria. That same year Cleopatra took her own life rather than be taken back to Rome as Octavian's captive.

In response, Octavian promoted anti-Cleopatra propaganda throughout the Roman Empire, where critics emphasized what they deemed her exotic, foreign practices and dangerous female charms, which had enchanted Roman men. Octavian's propaganda campaign likely ignited some of the sensational elements that Greco-Roman writers used to portray the queen in the years following her death, with particular interest on her mode of suicide. Although it is not

known precisely how she took her life, various writers suggested that she died from snakebite. Horace and Virgil, the Augustan poets who actively wrote during the reign of Octavian (who as Emperor adopted the honorific of Augustus in 27 BCE), popularized embellished accounts of Cleopatra's death. Horace and others embrace the snakebite theory and suggested that a number of snakes were involved, with Horace noting that she took in her hands the "irritated asps" (*Ode* 37.33).[14] In the *Aeneid,* Virgil highlights Cleopatra's 'foreignness,' and compares the snakes to the Egyptian gods:

> And there in the thick of it all
> the queen is mustering her armada, clacking her native rattles,
> still not glimpsing the twin vipers hovering at her back
> as Anubis barks and the queen's chaos of monster gods
> train their spears on Neptune, Venus, and great Minerva.
> (8.816-820)[15]

Descriptors such as "clacking her native rattles" and "chaos of monster gods" reinforce how Roman authors commonly viewed Cleopatra—and indeed many aspects of Egyptian culture—as alien from Roman society and its adopted pantheon of Olympic deities. In *Parallel Lives*, a series of biographies written by the Roman historian Plutarch (ca. 49-119 CE), the author paints the queen, who also succumbs to snakebite, as a jealous, manipulative, scheming woman and records the downfall of her amorous partnership with Caesar. He chronicles how she—a "bold coquette"—was wrapped in a bed-sack and brought before a captivated Caesar (*Caesar* 49). Plutarch also reduces Antony to a drunken, besotted sycophant who was "so infatuated with

[14] Horace, *The complete Odes and Satires of Horace*, trans. Sidney Alexander (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 52.

[15] Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Viking, 2006), 264.

Cleopatra, he abandoned a trial to cater to her" and eventually "surrendered his power to a woman" (*Antony* 58-60).[16]

Plutarch's denigrating sentiment regarding the Egyptian queen was echoed by historian Cassius Dio (ca. 155-235 CE), who drew attention to Cleopatra's machinations regarding Antony in *Roman History*: "She had, it was believed, enslaved him…" And "had laid him under some spell and derived him of his wits" in "the hope that she would rule the Romans…" (50.5). Much like Virgil, Dio uses descriptive language to exoticize Egypt and its queen. He writes of Antony, garbed in foreign, non-Roman clothing: "Somethings [he] carried an Oriental dagger in his belt, wore clothes which were completely alien to Roman custom" (50.5). The author concludes the narrative stating, "Cleopatra was a woman of insatiable sexuality and insatiable avarice" (51.15).[17]

Authors in the late medieval period continued to embrace the Greco-Roman narrative of a sexually charged Cleopatra. Dante adds Cleopatra to his underworld cast in the *Commedia* (ca. 1308-1321). She briefly appears as "wanton Cleopatra" in *Inferno's* second circle of hell, the sphere reserved for other legendary queens Dido, Helen, and Semiramis—those considered promiscuous and adulterous (*Inferno* 5.63).[18]

Similarly, Cleopatra's supposedly bad nature was noted by celebrated Renaissance humanist, Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375), who revered Dante and made a life-long study of

[16] Plutarch. *Plutarch's Lives*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (London: William Heinemann, 1922). For Caesar's entry see 7:559; for Antony see 9: 271, 273.

[17] Cassius Dio, *The Roman History: The Reign of Augustus*, trans. Ian Scott-Kilvert (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 38, 76.

[18] Dante Alighieri. *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Allan Mandelbaum (New York: Knopf, 1995), 79.

the *Commedia*.[19] Boccaccio includes Cleopatra in his Latin work, *De Mulieribus Claris* (*On Famous Women*: 1361-1362), a moralizing text that focuses on praiseworthy and iniquitous women. Boccaccio follows the same narrative as outlined by the noted Greco-Roman authors, although using even more harsh and critical language. The author begins the queen's biographical section stating, "Cleopatra had no true marks of glory except her ancestry and her attractive appearance; on the other hand, she acquired a universal reputation for her greed, cruelty, and lust" (88.2). Boccaccio omits many of Caesar's activities in Egypt to focus on Antony who, much like earlier classical authors, he paints as a weak fool. The author says, "her beauty and her wanton eyes ensured an easy conquest of this vile man, and she kept him miserably enthralled" (88.10). The account concludes with her notorious death. Boccaccio dramatized the event by stating that "she opened her veins and placed asps over the wounds" (88.26).[20]

Looking at Cleopatra

Despite the abundance of lurid descriptions of the queen in ancient literature, few ancient visual images of Cleopatra remain. Octavian ordered that all images of Cleopatra be destroyed after her death in 30 BCE, and scholars have argued that his efforts were largely successful, at least, outside of Egypt. Art historians have suggested that a handful of first-century BCE

[19] Robin Kirkpatrick, "The Wake of the *Commedia*: Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Boccaccio's *Decameron*," in *Chaucer and the Italian Trecento*, ed. Piero Boitani (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1983), 201.

[20] Giovanni Boccaccio, *On Famous Women*, ed and trans. Virginia Brown (London: I Tatti Renaissance Library: 2001), 361-373.

Egyptian-style and Egypto-Greek stone statues represent Cleopatra, although the images, in keeping with Egyptian art of the time, are highly stylized depictions rather than likenesses.[21]

Two ancient sculptures discovered in Italy during the early modern period informed subsequent representations of Cleopatra. In the fifteenth century, a marble statue of a muse with a restored head was reimagined into a "tragic" portrait of Cleopatra, possibly restored by Venetian sculptor, Tullio Lombardo (1455-1532) around 1492. This representation features a woman in classical garb wearing a crown with her head thrown back, an expression of anguish on her face. Moreover, her bicep is adorned with a snake armband, a piece of jewelry that became symbolic with the asp that injected its venom into Cleopatra (figure 6).[22] In 1512, a Hellenistic statue thought to represent Cleopatra (it was correctly identified as a sleeping Ariadne centuries later) was excavated to great fanfare in Rome (figure 7). The figure reclines awkwardly, her naked breast peeking out from under her garment below an arm adorned with a snake armband. Pope Julius II (l. 1443-1513) ultimately acquired the sculpture, and his successor, Julius III (l. 1487-1555), later installed it for public view in the Vatican. Cultural historian Mary Hamer argues that the pope set up the statue not as a confident spectacle of a living woman; instead, it offered viewers the sign of a woman who had taken her own life, isolated in death. As one of the first works to be placed in the Vatican gallery to provide a teaching place for artists, this statue defined Cleopatra, or provided the baseline for meditation on her subject, throughout Europe for many centuries.[23] Importantly, these two modified Greco-

[21] Sally-Ann Ashton, "Identifying the Egyptian-Style Ptolemaic Queens" in *Cleopatra of Egypt*, ed. Peter Higgs and Susan Walker (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 148-155.

[22] Peter Higgs, "Searching for Cleopatra's Image: Classical portraits in stone" in Higgs and Walker, 201.

[23] Mary Hamer, "The Myth of Cleopatra Since the Renaissance" in Higgs and Walker, 303-304.

Roman statues represent a preference for highlighting Cleopatra's dramatic death, a theme likewise explored in the works of Plutarch, Boccaccio, and others.[24]

One fundamental source of the Ariadne-as-Cleopatra appeal is its double aura of classical antiquity and heightened eroticism.[25] This sexual treatment of mythological and historical female figures pervaded other media beyond sculpture while Renaissance artists increased their investigations of the human body. Between 1400 and 1530 the development of the nude form in Italian painting burgeoned, and depictions of female nudes became prevalent around 1500.[26]

In the visual arts, the snake, a symbol that often accompanies images of Cleopatra, soon played a decorative function as an accessory akin to jewelry. Piero di Cosimo (1462-1522) portrayed the noblewoman, Simonetta Vespucci, as Cleopatra in a lavish painting from ca. 1460 (figure 8) that displays a beautiful fair woman in profile with a sophisticated hairstyle fashioned with pearls. The lady is all but nude with a shawl draped casually about her shoulders where a wriggling snake and a gold necklace are intertwined. The live snake, tongue protruding, crawls towards her exposed breast. A 1533 drawing by Michelangelo (1475-1564) expounds on the theme of snake as decoration, revealing a serpent that winds about Cleopatra's neck and clamps down with a vise-like bite on her breast (figure 9). Northern European artists also showed interest in the Egyptian queen, particularly in German and Dutch sixteenth-century engravings. Around 1600, Jan Muller (1571-1628) depicted the queen's suicide in a dramatic expose. Muller created his engraving after the Florentine Mannerist, Giovanni da Bologna (figure 10). In Muller's composition a voluptuous woman handles serpents in both hands, as if she grapples

[24] Higgs, 201-202.

[25] Kenneth Gross, *The Dream of the Moving Statue* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 170.

[26] Jill Burke, *The Italian Renaissance Nude* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 19.

with them. Guido Reni's 1640 version reveals a porcelain-skinned lady gazing upward; her left hand loosely grasps fruit from a basket (figure 2). The right hand pinches the tail of a tiny asp that seeks out her breast. The sexual nature of each of these works is explicit. In Muller's engraving, Cleopatra's face reveals an almost ecstatic reaction to the bite while in Reni's composition, her hands seem to encourage or fondle the serpent. In addition, many pictures, such as those created by Reni and di Cosimo, emphasize the serpent's tongue in proximity to Cleopatra's nipple to further convey her exoticism and sexuality.

Artemisia's *Cleopatra* and Other Women Painters: Exotic over Erotic

Artemisia Gentileschi was not the only female artist active in early modern Italy to depict Cleopatra. Lavinia Fontana (1552-1614), Elisabetta Sirani (1638-1655), and Ginevra Cantofoli (1618-1672) all created portraits of the queen of Egypt which are characterized by distinctions routinely ignored by male artists who favored the relationship between snakes and suggestive, nude poses. And while Fontana and Sirani did not universally reject eroticism in all their works featuring female protagonists, the Cleopatras created by each of them did.[27] Fontana departs from the typical approach of an eroticized female holding a snake to her breast. Instead, her work, dated between 1605 and 1610, highlights a woman in profile view who wears a striking red garment conservatively buttoned up the front that conceals her feminine body, a conical helmet, and white veil in the act of releasing a pair of snakes from a vase (figure 11). Although her action appears to follow the general suicide narrative, the queen here directly eyes the snake, showcasing her bravery when faced with death rather than expressing the submission seen in

[27] Babette Bohn, "The Antique heroines of Elisabetta Sirani" in *Renaissance Studies 16*, no. 1 (2002): 56, accessed April 16, 2023, https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/10.1111/1477-4658.t01-1-00004. Bohn credits diverse patron as part of the reasons for this consistency.

most eroticized depictions. In addition, although Cleopatra's robes are reminiscent of Ottoman dress (deemed exotic in Italy at the time), the clothing lacks the erotic nature visualized by Reni and others.[28]

Elisabetta Sirani, hailed as a talent by early modern art biographers like Carlo Cesare Malvasia (1616-1693), also painted ancient protagonists. In her *Cleopatra*, dated to ca. 1662-1665, the queen wears bright, sumptuous clothing and gazes serenely off to the side as she dangles a pearl above a bowl (figure 12). Her action alludes to a passage found in Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, where Cleopatra supposedly dissolves a pearl in a cup of vinegar, an episode that became a signifier of the frivolous character assigned to her by ancient and early modern writers. This event was not as widely recreated within the arts during the seventeenth century in Italy as were depictions of the queen's death, but it was an episode that women artists like Sirani and Cantofoli portrayed. Sirani's—like Fontana's—inclusion of a headpiece and splendid clothing acts to draw attention to the exotic nature of Cleopatra lore at the same time that the garments cover her body. Here the queen is beautifully, if conservatively, dressed in a light pink mantle, white shirt, and braided bodice. This Cleopatra is no nude figure for the viewer's pleasure but rather a wealthy, clever, youthful woman. Her slightly bemused sideways glance gives the impression that she has caught someone's attention. Sirani's departures from the examples of Reni and others are especially compelling, because her own father, who trained her, had worked as Reni's assistant. While some of Reni's stylistic influences are identifiable in her work—such as the beautiful, idealized pale female with doll-like features against a flat, dark background, Sirani's work articulates a point between Artemisia's realism and Reni's idealism.

[28] Babette Bohn, *Women Artists, Their Patrons, and Their Publics* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State Press, 2021), 53.

Ginevra Cantofoli, who studied under Sirani, presents viewers with a comparable half-length portrait of Cleopatra, dated between the ca. 1650s and 1660s. Like her mentor, Cantofoli follows the Cleopatra-with-pearl narrative, capturing the queen holding a pearl over a cup (figure 13). Here Cleopatra also wears a diaphanous pink dress decorated with a gold embossed neckline and gilt patterned cape. Her golden hair is swept up and interwoven into a crown and elaborate headdress. Like the Cleopatra captured by Fontana and Sirani, this queen wears striking clothes that contrast with Reni's and other male artists' fascination with nude female bodies, instead promising viewers a glimpse of her wealth and royalty. Additionally, Cantofoli rejects and Reni-like anatomical traces, such as the doll-like facial features; conversely, Cantofoli gives the queen's face a more naturalistic and defined structure that shadowing on one side reinforced. The queen's direct gaze invites the viewer to look at her while at the same time seemingly challenges the masculinist approach.[29]

Artemisia, Cleopatra, and the Body on Display

These examples are only a small sample of a trend in early modern art that reveals male artists' fascination with Cleopatra's last living moments and female artists' exploration of infamous women. This sentiment, however, was not limited to the visual arts, for Cleopatra's allure permeated early modern Italian literature as it had through Roman and medieval works. In an attempt to square the circle of being simultaneously disgusted by and attracted to women, male Italian writers created art and poetry that established criteria they could use to judge the beauty of the female form.[30] Writers in Artemisia's time continued to point out the queen's

[29] Eve Straussman-Pflanzer and Oliver Tostmann, ed. *By Her Hand: Artemisia Gentileschi and Women Artists in Italy, 1500-1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 156.

[30] Burke, 157.

supposed lustful nature. Influential poet Giambattista Marino (1569-1625) was known within Italian art circles and was an intimate friend of celebrated artists like Caravaggio. Through associations with writers like Loredan, Marino and Artemisia moved in the same circles. Marino was working in Venice in the early 1600s, a city that housed a number of prolific gatherings of humanist literati. In 1620, the same year that Artemisia relocated to Venice, Marino published *La Galeria*, a book of poems based on painting and sculpture. In the section featuring bad women titled "Belle, Impudiche, e Scelerate" (Beautiful, Impudent, and Wicked), he briefly describes Cleopatra:

> Who could be more cruel? The harsh snakes
> that fill my breasts with terrible poison,
> or I, who irritated their fierce bites
> with my hands, affix them to my breasts?
>
> Chi sara più crudel? gli aspri serpenti
> ch'empion le poppe mie d'atro veleno,
> o io, che i morsi lor fier, e pugenti
> con mano irrito, e me gli affiggo al seno.[31]

Similarly, his full-length poem, *La Cleopatra*, portrays Cleopatra as more akin to an exotic courtesan than a queen.[32] An admirer of art, Marino clearly engages with visual sources in writing the poem; he imagines a beautiful but foreign naked woman with ivory skin who seduces Mark Antony. Indeed, Marino's contemporary, Paganino Gaudenzi (1595-1649), who wrote his

[31] Giambattista Marino, *La Galeria del Cavalier Marino*. Venice, 1620, accessed March 20, 2023, https://www.google.com/books/edition/La_Galeria/zERLAAAAcAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0. Verse translation my own.

[32] Giambattista Marino, *La Cleopatra*. 1770, accessed March 2, 2023, https://www.google.com/books/edition/La_Cleopatra_del_Cav_Marini/azlLAAAAcAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0.

own biographical account of the Egyptian queen, contended that Marino based his poem solely on artistic depictions of the queen.[33] In writing the *La Galeria* entry and his full-length poem *La Cleopatra*, Marino could have drawn on any of myriad Cleopatra paintings circulating in the early seventeenth century. We can surmise that a painting of some beautiful, voluptuous woman was likely his inspiration; he may have had a work by Reni in mind, as he is known to have admired Reni and mentioned several of his works in *La Galeria*. Gaudenzi's own work, *Di Cleopatra, reina d'Egitto la vita* (*Life of Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt*), published in 1642, seven years after Artemisia's ca. 1635 *Cleopatra* painting was likely completed, similarly falls into the pattern of perpetuating tropes including the queen's supposed lustful nature, indicating that denigrating views of the Egyptian queen were still a widespread and popular phenomenon in the arts into the mid-1600s.

While Marino was re-exploring ancient biographies through the visual arts, Artemisia corresponded with various humanist thinkers in Venice. During her three-year sojourn in the city, she enjoyed relationships with these literati—including various women writers—who wrote on Cleopatra and other so-called lascivious queens. Locker has shown that these relationships informed the imagery of Artemisia's paintings; he emphasizes that her pictures from the 1620s and 1630s shows a subtle shift in the treatment of subjects, and in particular, female protagonists. At this time, she began to portray women who were less than saintly, such as the Greek character Medea and biblical figures of Lot and his daughters as well as women who were notorious and widely condemned.[34]

---

[33] Paganino Gaudenzi, "*Di Cleopatra, Reina d'Egitto la Vita"* as quoted in Elisa di Bona, "Cleopatra in 16th and 17th century literature and painting in *Mosaic* 6 (2019) 48-49, accessed February 5, 2023, https://www.liceofedericoquercia.edu.it/index.php/mosaico6.

[34] Locker, 44, 69, 72.

Artemisia on Cleopatra: Narrating Art

One such woman of purported ill-repute was Cleopatra. Artemisia's ca. 1635 composition portrays a lifeless Cleopatra; her eyes are rolled back, her lips blue (figure 3). Cleopatra, whose body is illuminated from an overhead source of light, appears to recline almost casually on her left side, her relaxed left hand propped under her chin and the right elbow at rest on a plump, embellished pillow. Her lower torso is draped with a rich, royal blue garment. A diminutive asp—here little larger than a worm—slithers away on the bedcover. In the background, two clearly distraught and grieving handmaidens open the curtains to discover their queen's dead body.

Several facets of Artemisia's painting differ from the typical narrative paintings that depict the standard Cleopatra iconography of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Artemisia worked with live models, a method adopted from Caravaggio. In his practice, Caravaggio used live models throughout the painting process; this departed from the standard practice in which artists drew from life and then used their preparatory drawings—rather than their models—in completing their compositions.[35] His exploration of the human body therefore greatly differed from the classical-influenced idealized body regularly utilized by painters like Reni.

Some of Caravaggio's contemporaries applauded the naturalism that resulted from his innovation, although others criticized his commitment to painting figures with physical flaws and a rejection of classicizing ideals. Caravaggio's novel approach, however, allowed the artist to achieve a sense of lifelikeness and immediacy.[36] Following Caravaggio's method, Artemisia

[35] Keith Christiansen, "Caravaggio and "L'esempio davanti del naturale," *The Art Bulletin* 68, no. 3 (1986), 430, accessed March 2, 2023, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3050975.

[36] Sheila Barker, *Artemisia Gentileschi* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2022), 28.

assigns Cleopatra ordinary features and a generic body type: one neither too delicate nor plump. Artemisia's choices allow for a more lifelike presentation, while simultaneously replicating a sense of realism of a woman reclining on her side rather than performing any suggestive or awkward contortion act seen in works of painters like Reni. The bright light that bathes the corpse also mimics the loss of color as the body naturally cools and stiffens in death. Similarly, the queen's right leg, rather than bending, appears to extend in a stiff line suggestive of early rigor mortis, and lends credence to the actual paralysis caused by snake venom. These visual techniques allude to the fact that Artemisia's artistic inventions were also the product of a gifted imagination; while working from live models she nevertheless adjusts certain features to suit her own needs. For example, she makes the body look dead, even though the model would, of course, have been alive. Indeed, Artemisia herself said that while she sought diverse types of beauty to use in her works, she often struggled to find one suitable model in a choice of fifty.[37]

Comparing Artemisia's Cleopatra paintings to those of Reni and others reinforces the distinctiveness of Artemisia's approach. We have already seen that one popular conception depicts a porcelain-skinned woman who turns her breasts suggestively toward the viewer (see figs. 1, 10). Truly, the most widespread conception of Cleopatra in the seventeenth century was a sexual one.[38] Paintings of Cleopatra, particularly death scenes in which the viewer sees an intimate setting, play to the popularity of scopophilia, the act of deriving pleasure from looking at someone. Reni's works do seemingly operate on a level of recognition of woman-as-object

[37] Artemisia Gentileschi to Don Antonio Ruffo in *Lives of Artemisia Gentileschi*, ed. Sheila Barker (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2021), 138.

[38] Garrard, 249.

and of woman-as-erotic spectacles.[39] All of his works featuring Cleopatra, which consist of dates spanning over a decade—from ca. 1625 to ca. 1640, reveal the same female archetype—a porcelain skin woman who exposes her breast to a snake. The backgrounds are usually darkened or draped in somber colors; the female figure is painted at close range. The more they were replicated, the more they came to represent a typical "Renis" for collectors; they became the benchmarks of his style. Indeed, Reni was applauded for visual perfection through graceful forms, limpid colors, and lucid compositions.[40] Despite this praise, Reni's skill in rendering the female was not as developed as his attention to male musculature. In a Cleopatra painting dated to ca. 1625, the queen awkwardly cranes her neck upward, her barrel-shaped upper body twists in a contrapposto pose as she loosely grasps the snake, supported by a wooden arm (Figure 14). Richard E. Spear has called Reni's forms "putty without skeletal underpinnings."[41]

Artemisia's ca. 1635 *Cleopatra* also contrasts with the earlier Cleopatra (figure 4) attributed to her, which most scholars believe she painted as a young artist of eighteen in 1611. For the earlier painting, Artemisia adopted the sleeping Ariadne pose widely employed by many artists of the time, including her father, Orazio. Reproductions of an Ariadne-as-Cleopatra figure permeated artistic communities in Europe at the time, with dozens of works attributed to German, Italian, and Dutch artists. Through the tutelage of her father and his exposure to common tropes surrounding nude pagan subjects, Artemisia's earlier depiction of the queen conforms more clearly to the masculinist paradigm. It follows the common narrative of

[39] Richard E. Spear, *The "Divine" Guido: Religion, Sex, Money and Art in the World of Guido Reni* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 84-85, 90, 94.

[40] Stephen Pepper, "Guido Reni's Practice of Repeating Compositions," in *Artibus et Historiae* 20 no. 39 (1999): 45, accessed March 13, 2023, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1483573.

[41] Spear, 77.

presenting a courtesan-like Cleopatra in which the overt sexual relationship between Cleopatra's nude body, the snake, and the pose, are evident. Mary Garrard argues that the painting does not conform to the typical male perspective, citing innovations such as the queen's heavy-lidded eyes, dreamy near-death expression, thick torso, and the snake's placement on the arm as features ignored by most modern artists, although she concedes that it at least superficially conforms to the stereotype of the recumbent female nude and an overtly erotic pose.[42]

Looking at Death in Early Modern Depictions of Women

Artistic fascination with female suicide, for painters of the early modern period, played on notions about women's self-sacrifice. These works commonly show them dying by their own hands, typically as sensual nudes, thus offering a simultaneous gratification of misogynous and erotic impulses.[43] During this period, writers built upon histories from the early Roman Empire, when suicide was commonly believed to be an acceptable form of death. Roman historians deemed political suicides heroic and admiringly reported on individuals who took their own lives. Early Renaissance writers who revisited classical sources pushed back against the medieval belief that suicide was immoral. Humanists instead fostered dialogue on the once taboo subject. However, as Mary Garrard points out, whereas early modern written history and myth were full of male suicides, the visual depiction of men committing suicide was relatively rare, whereas artists routinely depicted suicidal women.[44] For example, when artists portrayed Mark

[42] Garrard, 244-246.

[43] Garrard, 214.

[44] Garrard, 211.

Antony, they generally represented not his suicide, but rather his convivial gatherings with Cleopatra.

"Virtuous" women whose suicides were the subject of discussion during the early modern period, however, were regularly painted, with sixth-century BCE Roman martyr, Lucretia, receiving much attention. Guido Reni features her in a series of eroticized paintings nearly identical to his Cleopatras (figure 15). Like his works showing the Egyptian queen, Reni's Lucretias are subject to a sensualizing treatment favored by early modern artists who routinely portrayed Lucretia in various stages of undress. In many of Reni's works, Lucretia pulls back her clothing, baring her left breast and holding a dagger to her porcelain skin. In one painting Lucretia is semi-nude and loosely holds a dagger on the bedcover. Reni's works deviate from the Greco-Roman accounts surrounding Lucretia's death, particularly concerning her nudity. Livy (ca. 59 BCE – 17 CE) mentions that the woman plunges into her heart a knife that was "concealed beneath her garment" (*Hist*.1.58)[45] while Dionysus of Halicarnassus (ca. 60 BCE – ca. 7 BCE) similarly references Lucretia keeping the knife "concealed under her robes" (*Rom. Ant*.4.67).[46] Neither account alludes to any state of nakedness. Ancient accounts also stress the public location of her death, as she committed suicide in front of onlookers including her father and husband. That artists routinely depict her as naked or semi-naked and situate the suicide in a private context suggests that such alterations are meant to arouse the viewer.

[45] Titus Livius, *History of Rome*, bk 1, trans. D. Spillan (London: Henry G. Bohn: 1853), 76, accessed April 12, 2023, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/19725/19725-h/19725-h.htm.

[46] Dionysus of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*, vol. 2, trans. Earnest Cary (London: William Heinemann, 1939), 431.

In discussing works on Lucretia and Cleopatra, Garrard argues that the correlation between women and suicide reveals not only men's psychic needs to define women as passive victims in their art, but "artistic rightness" of female self-destruction.[47] Art historian Griselda Pollock suggests that such images can establish fetishistic scopophilia, where an artist draws attention to the aestheticism of spectacle in displaying a woman's anxiety. She affirms that artists employ phallic imagery in these pictures to stimulate a threat, as exemplified by the qualities of Cleopatra's snakes and Lucretia's knife.[48] In the case of Cleopatra, the common snake-on-skin depictions acting as phallic symbols can also be strengthened by folkloric and literary traditions that reinforce the image of the queen's supposed lascivious nature and her insatiable sexual proclivities.

Suicide and the Spectator: Horror and Delight

The plethora of painted works surrounding Cleopatra's death is suggestive of the viewer's delight in looking at suffering. Elizabeth Cropper and others have analyzed the common artistic invention of juxtaposing horror and beauty in early modern paintings, which Reni and others utilized.[49] This technique was commonly referred to as a performance of *orrore* and *diletto* (horror and delight). Reni captures what Cropper calls the *exemplum doloris* (example of pain), which is evident through visually seeing someone's suffering.[50] Cropper and others have focused their discussions of disgust and enjoyment on seventeenth-century depictions of the

[47] Garrard, 213.

[48] Griselda Pollock, "The Male Gaze" in Mary Evans and Carolyn Williams, *Gender: The Key Concepts* (Boca Raton: Routledge 2012), 146.

[49] Elizabeth Cropper, "Marino's '*Strage Degli Innocent*!' Poussin, Rubens, and Guido Reni" in *Studi Secenteschi* 33 (1992): 137-164, accessed February 10, 2023.

[50] Cropper, "Marino's '*Strage*,'" 153.

Massacre of the Innocents, a brutal campaign of infanticide briefly mentioned in the New Testament. Yet, study of psychological reaction to viewing violence in the visual arts can be extended to depictions of pagan female subjects within the history painting genre. To execute a composition that displays horror and delight, seventeenth-century artists often contrasted beauty with revulsion by manipulating space and color. An artist's talent in painting could push displays of vulgarity or barbarism to a level that both awed and repulsed viewers. In Reni's *Massacre of the Innocents* (1611), for example, the women's classical beauty contrasts with the bloody bodies of fallen children and blood-stained knives wielded by the killers (figure 16). Reni similarly employs this technique in his ca. 1640 *Cleopatra* painting. In this *Cleopatra*, the overall theme is tempered with a calm dignity.[51] Here, we see Cleopatra in her last living moments calmly looking away from the snake. Reni contrasts the visual delight elicited by the queen's beauty and wealth—the lustrous pearl earring, the glittering diadem, and the bright, sumptuous clothing—with the horrible death bite the serpent is about to deliver.

Artemisia, by contrast, denies the viewer the "pleasure" (à la Guido Reni) of watching the suffering of a beautiful woman. In her ca. 1635 *Cleopatra*, the queen has already died, whereas Reni and others showed the moments preceding her demise. The scene further deviates from common tropes surrounding the queen's death. For one, she seemingly provided no visual evidence that the snake has bitten the queen; no puncture marks mar the skin (although this may be a product due to the condition of the painting), whereas Guercino's *Dying Cleopatra* (1648), with painted curtains pulled back to exhibit the body on display, shows blood dripping from the snakebite on the queen's breast (figure 17). Guercino, inspired by Reni's style of painting,

[51] Carlo Caruso, "Orrore and Diletto: G. B. Marino's La Strage de' Fanciulli Innocentti di Guido Reni" in *Letteratura & Arte* 7 (2009): 106.

juxtaposes a beautiful dying body with a slithering snake drawing blood. In Artemisia's version, Cleopatra's pallid skin, stiffening body, and slack facial features indicate recent death. The viewer must ponder the question—where did the snake bite the queen? The answer is ambiguous. Clearly, Artemisia decided to represent the aftermath of Cleopatra's death. Departing from the textual accounts of Plutarch, Cassius Dio, and others, she did not reveal the spot of the snake wounds on the body.[52] By depicting Cleopatra dead, Artemisia also presented a successful rejoinder to the criticism that early modern audiences, both fascinated and appalled with such works, leveled against artists who were adept at bringing their painted subjects to life: that the painter's hand knew not only how to give life to figures and animate canvases, but that these artists brought subjects to life only to kill them again and again before the viewer's eyes.[53]

Artemisia's presentation of the *modus mortis*—the snake—also deviates from most other paintings of Cleopatra at the time. In the ca. 1635 work, the diminutive asp slithers on the bedcover, almost as a harmless object rather than a vehicle of death, and there is no direct contact with Cleopatra. This contrasts starkly with the examples by Reni, who showed the queen fondling the snake as it appears to suckle a breast. Viewers would have understood the phallic connotations present in his works because the snake—often symbolic of human vice such as carnal desire and vanity—consistently appeared in Western art. When viewing Cleopatra, the snake's perceived negative imagery performed a phallic role while showcasing the queen's vanity—a trait that many Greco-Roman authors had called into question.[54] Similarly, Garrard

[52] Judith Mann suggests that it is possible that bite marks were originally visible on the canvas.

[53] Locker, 47. Cropper, "Marino's '*Strage*,'" 162.

[54] James H. Charlesworth, *The Good and Evil Serpent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 2, 277.

points out that a phallic object was a typical instrument for female suicide in the visual arts, as illustrated by Cleopatra's serpent or Lucretia's dagger.[55]

In painting Cleopatra, Artemisia also contended with the early modern artistic conventions of portraying dead female bodies and offering them up for what feminist scholars have deemed the masculinist gaze.[56] Here, *Nero Before the Body of Agrippina* (ca. 1644-1679) by Artemisia's contemporary, Luca Ferrari, provides a useful contrast. This work depicts a scene based on the story of Agrippina, Nero's mother, whom he murdered. Ferarri retells events showing two men gazing at the semi-nude body of a noble lady. In the picture, one man holds Agrippina's arm and gestures to the fatal wound, which has occurred just below the right breast (figure 18). Events unfold at close quarters against a dark background, which greatly contrasts with Agrippina's corpse. Ferrari positions Agrippina's body near the picture plane, so the viewer can appreciate a closer inspection of a marble-like naked body and a face with hints of blush on the cheeks. By contrast, Artemisia's composition—which deemphasizes Ferrari's attention to a statue-like death—reveals that the queen has died in private. Additionally, Artemisia has manipulated the body, so it has a bluish-white tint rather than a beautiful porcelain hue. This is no painted Agrippina, but a body set soon to decay.

Cleopatra's "Gaze"

One significant aspect of early modern artworks depicting Cleopatra's death concerns the queen's gaze which, in the paintings, is commonly directed away from the viewer. An indirect

[55] Garrard, 210.

[56] James Clifton, "Looking at Saint Agatha in Seventeenth-Century Italian Art" in *From Rome to Eternity: Catholicism and the Arts in Italy, ca. 1550-1650*, ed. Pamela M. Jones and Thomas Worcester (Boston: Brill, 2002): 147. See also Pollock for a thorough investigation of the masculinist gaze.

gaze indicates a break in intimacy between subject and viewer. Reni employs the technique of a flat, compressed background, which creates the perfect snapshot on which to trap one's gaze where there are few distractions from the primary focus of the frame. In those less common depictions in which Cleopatra does look directly back at the viewer, her features are suggestive of a coy nature. One work, most recently attributed to Massimo Stanzione (1585-1656), showcases the queen holding a snake to her breast as her transparent bodice falls away from her chest, revealing a visible nipple (figure 19). The queen gives the viewer a flirtatious look with heavy-lidded eyes, as if inviting the viewer to watch events unfold. The sexualized nature of the painting reaffirms the queen-as-courtesan trope supported by many artists and writers at the time. Artemisia removes the erotics of 'the gaze' from her ca. 1635 work because Cleopatra is already dead, her eyes rolled up in death, and the vehicle of death has been removed from the body. The element of sexuality is somewhat muted when compared to the Cleopatras of Reni and Stanzione.

Cleopatra and the Saved Woman

The resistance that Artemisia's ca. 1635 *Cleopatra* shows to the male conventions of painting beautiful "fallen" women also applies to her depictions of Mary Magdalene. An analysis of her *Penitent Magdalene*, painted around ca. 1635-1640 (figure 20), thus enriches our reading on her Cleopatra.[57] While one represents a pagan queen and the other a biblical figure, both depict legendary women dubbed 'lascivious' or 'promiscuous' by ancient and early modern audiences. Like Cleopatra, Mary Magdalene was often the embodiment of vice. Widespread

[57] Bissell, 230. Bissell also attributes the *Penitent Magdalene* to Artemisia, although he dates it, along with the *Cleopatra*, to ca. 1627-1629. Lattuada cites a more mature hand to the works, a trait I agree with, and sets the date to ca. 1635-1640.

belief and canonical church traditions held that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute, though no direct biblical textual evidence supports this claim. Indeed, she was part of a long tradition of infamous women such as Jezebel, who symbolize temptation and bodily pleasure, those inherent evils of the female sex.[58] As with Cleopatra, early modern depictions of a contemplative Magdalene were popular, particularly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[59]

Artemisia's *Penitent Magdalene* strongly resembles the ca. 1635 *Cleopatra* in both color and composition. As in the *Cleopatra*, a semi-nude woman wearing a deep blue garment stretches out in an s-shaped pose, her head supported by her left arm. A heavy chiaroscuro effect obscures much of the surrounding outdoor landscape. Attributes commonly associated with the Magdalene—a book and skull—lie near her left elbow, similar to Cleopatra's arm in proximity to her fruit basket. Bissell suggest that the two paintings may have been developed from the same model, citing the pose, color, and lighting as evidence.[60]

Artists like Guido Reni, in contrast, provided the basic formulae for many of the 'saintly' portraits in the seventeenth century.[61] Reni's paintings of Mary Magdalene involve the same treatment as his Cleopatras and Lucreatias: a pale female figure clad in a sumptuous garment seated against a flattened background, her ivory body accentuated by a shroud of loose golden hair (figure 21). The Magdalene's hand, which lies near the breast, seemingly invites viewers to gaze upon her luminescent skin. Female beauty conventions placed emphasis on blonde or red

---

[58] Spear, 167.

[59] Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (London: Harper Collins, 1993), 229.

[60] Bissell, 230.

[61] Haskins, 297.

hair, and the Magdalene's uncovered hair was an essential sign of her sex, sin, submissiveness, and attractiveness.[62] From the fourteenth century forward, depictions of Mary Magdalene in art and literature showed her with red or golden hair.[63] Conversely, Artemisia's painting showcases a woman whose hair tucked behind her head rather than flowing outward, suggesting that Artemisia challenges the notion of an iniquitous woman's implicit sexuality as construed through hairstyle.

Cleopatra and the Condemned Woman

Our understanding of the place of Cleopatra in Artemisia's oeuvre is also enriched by a painting of Medea recently attributed to her by Jesse Locker, Judith Mann, and Sheila Barker. In Greek mythology, Medea was a princess who ended up killing her own children in an act of revenge. Greco-Roman authors Euripides and Seneca recorded Medea's actions in their works, although Renaissance authors, despite their enthusiasm for ancient texts, drew from her story less often than other notorious women. Despite the paucity of Medea narratives, Boccaccio and Marino penned accounts about her cruel deed. Boccaccio dedicates a chapter to her in *Famous Women,* while Marino makes her the second entry in his *Beautiful, Impudent, and Wicked* section of *La Galeria*. Artistic representations typically centered on diverse depictions of Medea rather than focusing on her murderous deed. Indeed, Medea's act of committing infanticide was almost never shown in art.[64] In the 1620s, Alessandro Varotari (1588-1649), commonly called Il

[62] Spear, 176.

[63] Haskins, 247-248.

[64] Maria Berbara, "Visual Representations of Medea's Anger in the Early Modern Period: Rembrandt and Rubens" in *Discourses on Anger in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Karl A. E. Enenkel and Anita Traninger (Boston: Brill, 2015): 361, 376. Accessed March 15, 2023, ProQuest Ebrary.

Padovanino, nevertheless showed the episode—a work that Locker suggests may have been a source for Artemisia's *Medea*. Padovanino's painting shows a woman plunging a dagger into the neck of a resisting infant, her right arm fully extended as the child struggles (figure 22). Both Artemisia and Padovanino capture the child's desperation, the woman's determined expression as she wields the weapon in an iron-clad grip, and the overall cruelty of the moment.

By contrast, Artemisia's ca. 1626 artwork reveals a woman clutching a dagger with one hand and gripping an infant by the hair in the other (figure 23). Artemisia manipulates the narrative in a way the Mann suggests differentiates her *Medea* from Padovanino's work—she heightens the emotional quality of the scene and deemphasizes the erotic female. Artemisia succeeds at capturing emotional turmoil, particularly in the queen's disheveled appearance and furrowed eyebrows.[65] Medea is positioned in a three-quarters length tilt toward the viewer, so her sullen resignation to conduct the bloody job is unmistakable. Intricate details like a broken string hanging from her shirt add to the event's desperate gravity. As with the ca. 1635 *Cleopatra*, Artemisia gives Medea lifelike facial features, and her knitted brows cause frown lines on the forehead and a strained mouth. A shadow lies across her bottom eyelid, mimicking an undereye circle due to exhaustion and contemplation. In contrast, Padovanino's queen appears stiff and apathetic while committing the deed. Additionally, the eroticized nature of Padovanino's series of paintings reveal women engaged in various acts that expose or partially-expose a shoulder or breast. His compositions recall Reni's Cleopatras and Lucretias, for the women are not only idealized beauties with impassive faces, but their bodies are awkwardly posed for the viewer's pleasure.

[65] Judith Mann, "Deciphering Artemisia: Three New Narratives and How They Expand our Understanding" in *Artemisia Gentileschi in a Changing Light*, ed. Sheila Barker (London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 2017), 170.

Artemisia's *Medea* ultimately reveals a willingness to challenge the traditional narrative as shown in literature and art, even when dealing with a notorious female killer Boccaccio dubbed as "the cruelest example of ancient treachery" (*Famous Women* 17.1).[66] Locker cites the *Medea* for impacting the way Artemisia's paintings in the 1630s opted to feature women more clever than virtuous.[67] Artemisia's knowledge of Il Padavanino's queen series, and an exploration with Loredan's scholarly group, affirms her ability to push current visual narratives in history paintings.

Legacies of Artemisia and Cleopatra

Artemisia ca. 1635 *Cleopatra* is one example of a successful approach to narrative painting in a way that challenged the typical histories portrayed by male artists in early modern Italy at the time. While Artemisia conforms to some of the archetypical themes reused throughout centuries of literature and painting, such as displaying a female in a semi-nude state, many of her innovations, like the snake's placement away from the body, suggests that she understood that Cleopatra's celebrity did not need to ride on an erotic device commonly fashioned in other paintings of the Egyptian queen. Artemisia invented a new narrative, one where Cleopatra could take charge of her own death while denying an opportunistic gaze upon her last moments of suffering on earth.

There is speculation by Garrard that Artemisia painted at least a subset of her subjects, possibly also including Cleopatra, through a feminist perspective. Although this idea has not been conclusively confirmed—Cropper, Bissell, Barker and others point out the hazards in

[66] Boccaccio, 37.

[67] Locker, 87.

applying the feminist theory to explain Artemisia's works—there is reason to lend credence to it; in Cleopatra's case, Artemisia may well have felt kinship with a queen who faced hardship in a world controlled by men. Perhaps patrons romanticized such connections, as Bohn points to the large percentage of paintings featuring heroic women that female artists painted whose own achievements may have been seen as analogues to accomplishments by ancient women who were also viewed as atypical for their sex.[68]

Barker points out that the genre of history painting had believed to be beyond the reach of women because of its demanding cerebral components.[69] Yet, creators like Artemisia, Sirani, Fontana, and Cantofoli are compelling examples of women who challenged this false narrative; they were women artists investigating how women were—and might be—portrayed in art. Their attention to Cleopatra generated works different from celebrated male artists such as Reni, Guercino, and Muller, suggesting that they had the intellectual creativity to consider a novel approach to painting female figures from antiquity. Moreover, Sirani and Cantofoli showed interest in the legend of Cleopatra's pearl despite her suicide being a more popular artistic subject.

Artemisia's continual experimentation with the figure of Cleopatra suggests that she often thought of innovative ways to portray the queen. Her interest in Cleopatra possibly facilitated a sequence of history paintings that strayed from a Cleopatra iconography trend that continued into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a heritage built much on Reni's legacy of breast-bearing maidens and phallic undertones. Indeed, Artemisia, in a letter to patron Don

[68] Bohn, "The Antique Heroines," 56.

[69] Barker, *Lives of Artemisia Gentileschi*, 19.

Antonio Ruffo (1610/11-1678) wrote that, "no one will ever have found in my paintings a repeated invention, even in the case of a simple hand."[70]

With these thoughts in mind, art historians can now ponder over who might have owned the ca. 1635 *Cleopatra*. Reni had illustrious patrons, such as Cardinal Giulio Sachetti (1587-1663), who owned a series of his works that feature Lucretia, Cleopatra, and Mary Magdalene. This *Lucretia* was later sold to Pope Benedict XIV (l. 1675-1758) for his Capitoline Gallery where her 'virtuous' suicide was prominently on view for all to see. With cardinals and popes proudly displaying female death scenes in homes and galleries, one can imagine that the ca. 1635 *Cleopatra* was housed in an esteemed villa or gallery and belonged to an enthusiastic art connoisseur. Nevertheless, the rediscovery of Artemisia's work in modern times and its place in her oeuvre have been a twofold success: it has coalesced the rising celebrity of both the painted protagonist and the artist as icons of strong, iconic women in history, the *fortes feminae*, and provoked dialogue on the presentation of gender roles in historical paintings from one of Italy's most memorable time periods.

[70] Artemisia Gentileschi to Don Antonio Ruffo, November13, 1649, in Barker, *Lives of Artemisia Gentileschi*, 143.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1. Giampietrino. *Cleopatra*, 1524-26. Samek Art Museum.

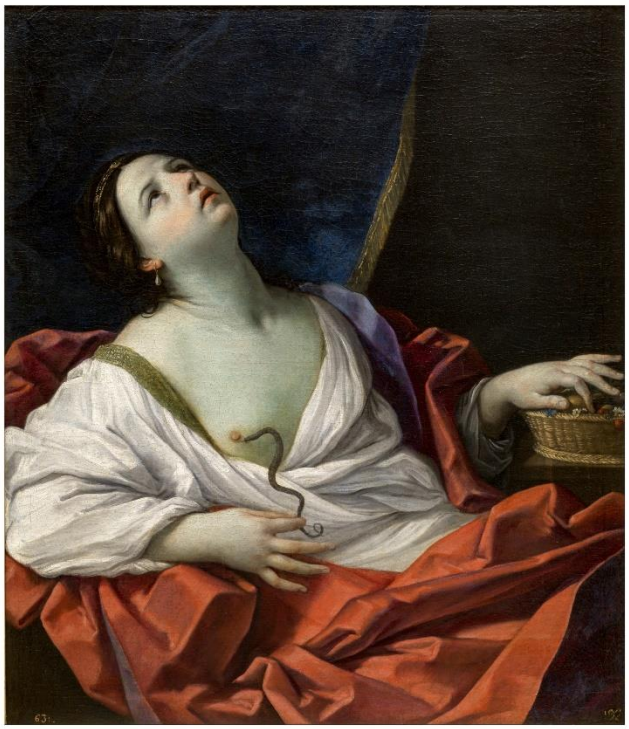

Figure 2. Guido Reni. *Cleopatra*, 1640. Museo del Prado.

Figure 3. Artemisia Gentileschi. *Cleopatra*, ca. 1635. Private Collection.

Figure 4. Artemisia Gentileschi (?) *Cleopatra*, ca. 1611-12. Etro Collection.

Figure 5. Artemisia Gentileschi. *Cleopatra*, ca. 1640s. Galerie Giovanni Sarti.

Figure 6. *Muse of Philiskos*. 2nd century BCE, with possible restoration by Tullio Lombardo.

Museo Archaeologico Nazionale.

Figure 7. *Sleeping Ariadne*. Roman, ca. 2nd century CE. Marble. Uffizi Gallery.

Figure 8. Piero di Cosimo. *Portrait of Simonetta Vespucci*, ca. 1490. Museé Condé.

Figure 9. Michelangelo. *Cleopatra*, ca. 1533-1534. Uffizi Gallery.

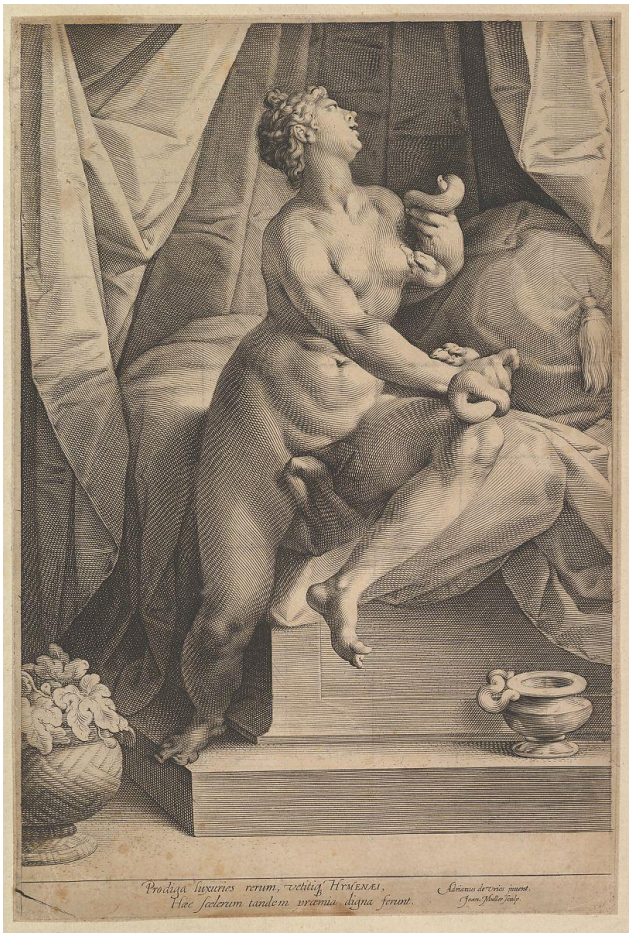

Figure 10. Jan Muller. *Cleopatra*, ca. 1598. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Figure 11. Lavinia Fontana. *Cleopatra*, ca.1605-1610. Galleria Spada.

Figure 12. Elisabetta Sirani. *Cleopatra*, ca. 1662-1665. Flint Art Museum.

Figure 13. Ginevra Cantofoli. *Cleopatra*, ca. 1650s-1660s. Private Collection.

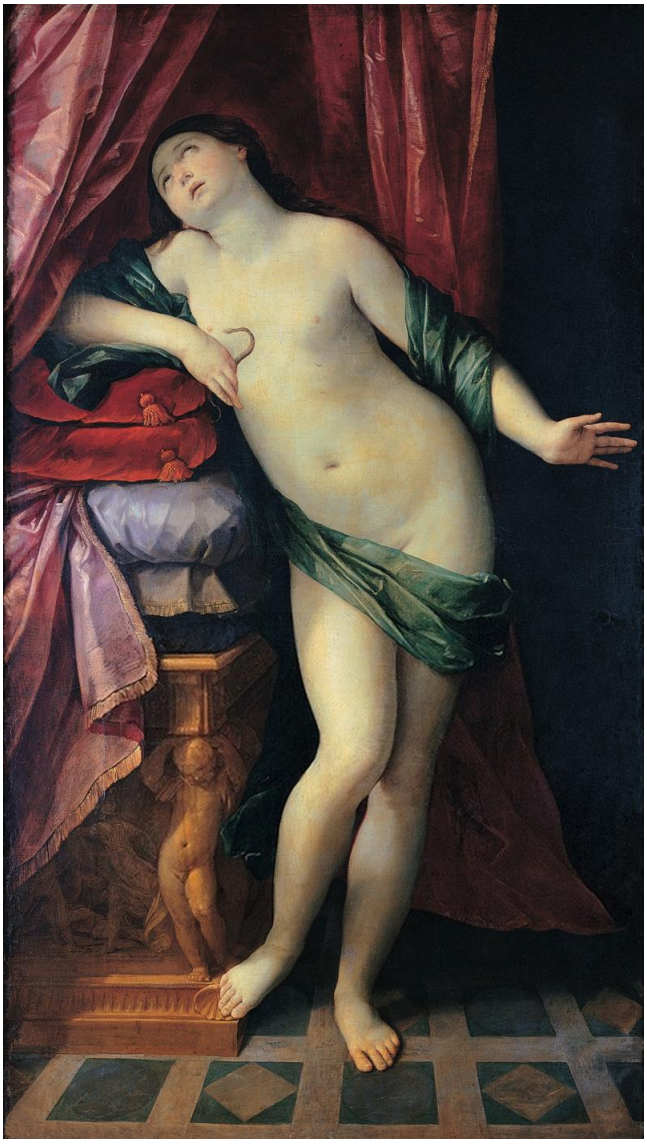

Figure 14. Guido Reni. *Cleopatra*, ca. 1625. Private Collection.

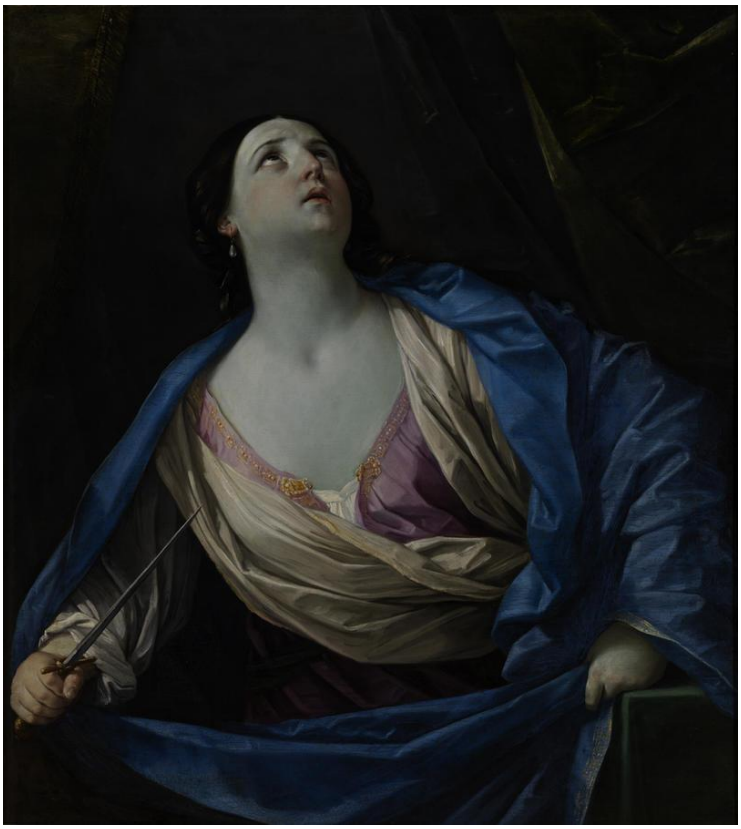

Figure 15. Guido Reni. *Lucretia,* ca. 1625. Rhode Island Institute of Design.

Figure 16. Guido Reni. *Massacre of the Innocents*, 1611. Pinacoteca Nazionale di Bologna.

Figure 17. Guercino. *Dying Cleopatra*, 1648. Musei di Strada Nuova.

Figure 18. Ferrari Luca. *Nero Before the Body of Agrippina*. ca. 1644-1649. Gallerie Estensi.

Figure 19. Massimo Stanzione. *Cleopatra*, date unknown. Galleria Durazzo Pallavicini.

Figure 20. Artemisia Gentileschi. *Penitent Magdalene*, ca. 1635-1640. Location unknown.

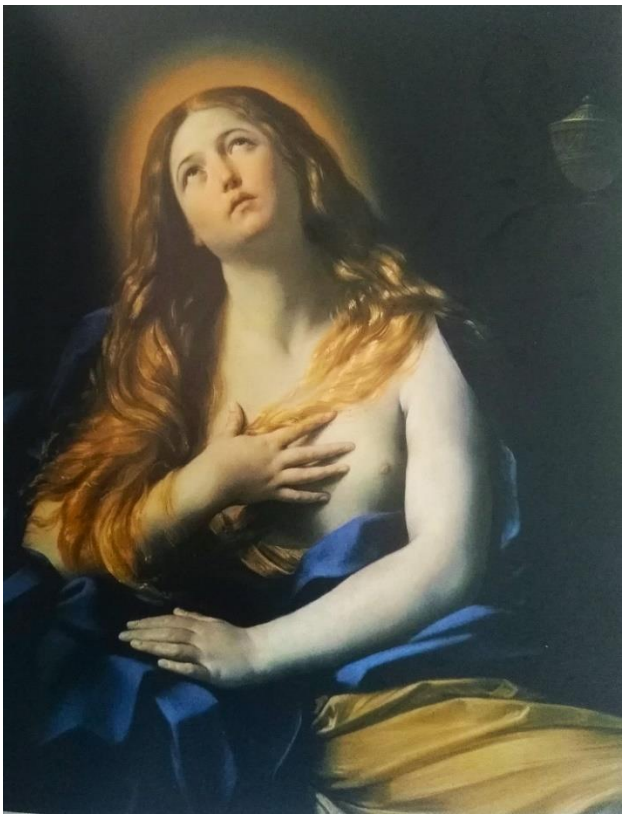

Figure 21. Guido Reni. *Penitent Magdalene*, ca. 1630. Julian Byng, Wrotham Park.

Figure 22. Alessandro Varotari (Il Padovanino). *Medea*, ca. 1620s. Galleria dell'Accademia.

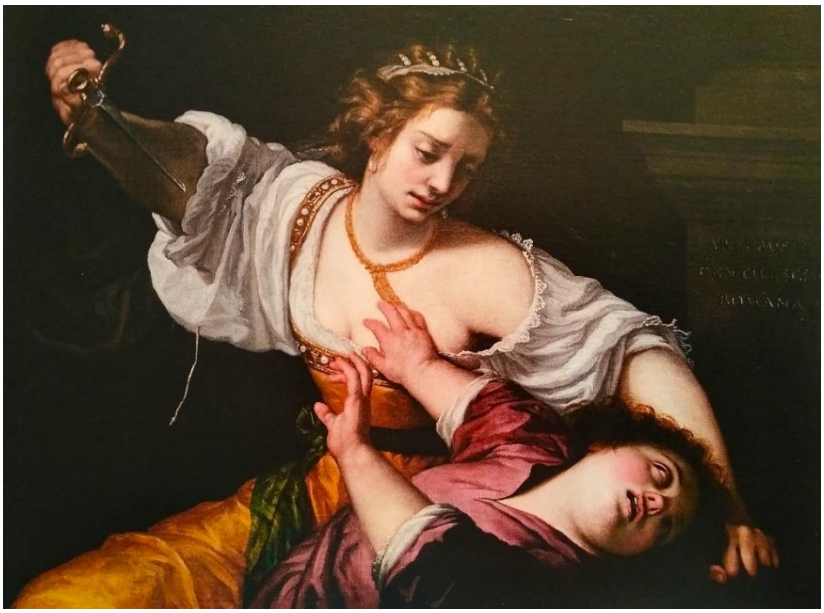

Figure 23. Artemisia Gentileschi. *Medea*, ca. 1626-1627. Private Collection.

Bibliography

Alighieri, Dante *The Divine Comedy*. Translated by Allan Mandelbaum. New York: Knopf, 1995.

Barker, Sheila. *Artemisia Gentileschi*. Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2022.

_____. ed. *Artemisia Gentileschi in a Changing Light*. London: Harvey Miller Publishers: 2017.

_____. ed. *Lives of Artemisia Gentileschi*. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2021.

Berbara, Maria. "Visual Representations of Medea's Anger in the Early Modern Period: Rembrandt and Rubens." In *Discourses of Anger in the Early Modern Period*, edited by Karl A. E. Enenkel and Anita Traninger, 357-377. Boston: Brill: 2015. ProQuest Ebrary.

Bissell, R. Ward. *Artemisia Gentileschi and the Authority of Art*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999.

Boccaccio, Giovanni. *On Famous Women*. Edited and translated by Virginia Brown. London: I Tatti Renaissance Library, 2001.

Bohn, Babette. "The Antique Heroines of Elisabetta Sirani." *Renaissance Studies* 16, no. 1 (2002):52-79. Accessed April 16, 2023. https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/10.1111/1477-4658.t01-1-00004

_____. *Women Artists, Their Patrons, and Their Publics*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State Press, 2021.

Burke, Jill. *The Italian Renaissance Nude*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018.

Caruso, Carlo. "Orrore and Diletto: G. B. Marino's La Strage de' Fanciulli Innocentti di Guido Reni." *Letteratura & Arte* 7 (2009):101-115.

Charlesworth, James H. *The Good and Evil Serpent*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010

Christiansen, Keith and Judith W. Mann. *Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.

_____. "Caravaggio and "L'esempio davanti del naturale." *The Art Bulletin* 68, no. 3 (1986): 421-445. Accessed March 2, 2023. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3050975.

Clifton, James. "Looking at Saint Agatha in Seventeenth-Century Italian Art." In *From Rome to*

Eternity: Catholicism and the Arts in Italy, ca. 1550-1650, edited by Pamela M. Jones and Thomas Worcester, 143-177. Boston: Brill, 2002.

Cropper, Elizabeth. "*Marino's 'S*trage Degli Innocent!*' Poussin, Rubens, and Guido Reni*. *Studi Secenteschi* 33 (1992): 137-166. Accessed February 10, 2023.

Di Bona, Elisa. "Cleopatra in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Literature and Art." *Mosaic* 6 (2019): 40-58. Accessed February 5, 2023. https://www.liceofedericoquercia.edu.it/index.php/mosaico6

Dio, Cassius. *Roman History*. Vol. 1. Translated by Earnest Cary. London: William Heinemann, 1914.

_____. *The Roman History: the Reign of Augustus*. Translated by Ian Scott-Kilvert. London: Penguin Books, 1983.

Dionysus of Halicarnassus. *Roman Antiquities*. Vol. 2. Translated by Earnest Cary. London: William Heinemann, 1939.

Fortunati Pietrantonio, Vera., et al. *Italian Women Artists: from Renaissance to Baroque*. exhibition Curators, Vera Fortunati, Jordana Pomeroy, Claudio Strinati. Editors, Elizabeth S.G. Nicholson. Milan: Skira, 2007.

Franklin, Margaret. *Boccaccio's Heroines: Power and Virtue in Renaissance Society*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Llimited, 2006.

Garrard, Mary D. *Artemisia Gentileschi Around 1622: The Shaping and Reshaping of an Artistic Identity*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001.

_____. *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.

_____. *Artemisia Gentileschi and Feminism in Early modern Europe*. London: Reaktion Books, 2020.

Gross, Kenneth. *The Dream of the Moving Statue*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992.

Harris, Ann Sutherland and Linda Nochlin. *Women Artists: 1550-1950*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976.

Harris, Ann Sutherland. "Artemisia Gentileschi and Elisabetta Sirani: Rivals or Strangers?" Woman's Art Journal 31, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2010): 3-12. Accessed March 15, 2023. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40605234

Haskins, Susan. *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor*. London: Harper Collins, 1993.

Horace. *The Complete Odes and Satires of Horace*. Translated by Sidney Alexander. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

Higgs, Peter and Susan Walker, ed. *Cleopatra of Egypt*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Johnson, Geraldine A. and Sara F. Matthews Grieco, eds. *Picturing Women in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Jones, Prudence J. *Cleopatra: A Sourcebook*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006.

Kirkpatrick, Robin. "The Wake of the Commedia: Chaucer's Canterbury Tales and Boccaccio's Decameron." In *Chaucer and the Italian Trecento*, edited by Piero Boitani, 201-229. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Livius, Titus. *History of Rome*. Book 1. Translated by D. Spillan. London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853. Accessed April 12, 2023. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/19725/19725-h/19725-h.htm

Locker, Jesse M. *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Language of Painting*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015.

Marino, Giambattista. *La Galeria del Cavalier Marino*. Venice, 1620. Accessed March 20, 2023. https://www.google.com/books/edition/La_Galeria/zERLAAAAcAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0

_____. *La Cleopatra*. 1770. Accessed March 2, 2023. https://www.google.com/books/edition/La_Cleopatra_del_Cav_Marini/azlLAAAAcAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0

Minois, Georges. *History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture*. Translated by Lydia G. Cochrane. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

Mirollo, James V. *The Poet of the Marvelous Giambattista Marino*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1963.

Pepper, Stephen. "Guido Reni's Practice of Repeating Compositions. *Artibus et Historiae* 20 No. 39 (1999):27-54. Accessed March 13, 2023. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1483573.

Petersen, Karen & J. J. Wilson, *Women Artists: Recognition and Reappraisal from the Early Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century*. New York: New York University Press, 1976.

Plutarch. *Plutarch's Lives*. Vols. 7 and 9. Translated by Bernadotte Perrin. London: William Heinemann, 1920.

Pollock, Griselda. "The Male Gaze." In *Gender: The Key Concepts* by Mary Evans and Carolyn Williams, 141-148. Boca Raton: Routledge, 2012.

Spear, Richard E. *The "Divine" Guido: Religion, Sex, Money and Art in the World of Guido Reni*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997.

Straussma-Pflanzer, Eve and Oliver Tostman, eds. *By Her Hand: Artemisia Gentileschi and Women Artists in Italy, 1500-1800*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021.

Treves, Letizia. ed. *Artemisia.* London: National Gallery Company, 2020.

Turner, James. *Eros Visible: Art, Sexuality and Antiquity in Renaissance Italy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017.

Tribby, Jay. "Cooking (with) Clio and Cleo: Eloquence and Experiment in Seventeenth-Century Florence." Journal of the History of Ideas 52, no. 3 (1991): 417-439. Accessed February 20, 2023. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2710045.

Virgil. *The Aeneid*. Translated by Robert Fagles. New York: Viking, 2006.

Walker, Susan and Peter Higgs. *Cleopatra of Egypt: From History to Myth.* Princeton, N.J. Princeton University Press; 2001.