

"Historical Inaccuracies in Artemisia"

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[Ed. Note: We have rec'd a number of requests for this statement, hence the posting on the H-Women website under "Discussion threads" although technically not a discussion.]

From Helen Langa hlanga@american.edu 04 May 1998

NEW FILM DISTORTS HISTORY TO CREATE A FICTIONALIZED AND SENSATIONALIZED "TRUTH"!

A controversial film about Artemisia Gentileschi, the 17th century artist, will open on May 8, 1998 in theaters across the U.S. "Artemisia," by French filmmaker Agnes Merlet, which focusses on the incident of Artemisia's rape and its immediate aftermath, was initially advertised as "a true story" by Miramax Zoe, its American distributor. Those who have seen the film attest that it is nothing of the kind. Every detail of the historical story has been inverted to produce a romanticized narrative of "true love" between Artemisia and Agostino Tassi, her rapist. (See attached fact sheet below for details.)

Those who study women's history, who know how fragile the truth about women in history always is, and how vulnerable it is to conflation with female stereotypes, have been and will be outraged by the latest injustice to Artemisia Gentileschi, who has repeatedly been subjected to sexualized explanations of her life and career success.

At the New York premiere screening of the film on April 28, Gloria Steinem and other women in the audience circulated a fact sheet prepared by Steinem and art historian Mary Garrard. This intervention led Miramax to retract its claim that that film presents a "true" story. Steinem and Garrard's intention was not to interfere with the film maker's creative freedom, nor with Miramax's distribution of the film, but rather to counter its historical distortions with concrete factual information about the subject.

You can support this project. If the film is opening in your city, and you would like to help, please use the information attached below (retype and reformat it if necessary), make multiple copies, and organize a group to pass out the leaflet at screenings of the film. We also encourage you to forward this message to others who might be interested. Thanks! Mary Garrard and Gloria Steinem

(FLYER TEXT:)

NOW THAT YOU'VE SEEN THE FILM, MEET THE REAL ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI...

THE RAPE

In the film, Artemisia Gentileschi and Agostino Tassi are presented as voluntary and passionate lovers. When her father (Orazio Gentileschi) brings Tassi to trial on the charge of rape (to protect his own reputation), Artemisia testifies even when tortured that Tassi did not rape her. Tassi is presented first as a reluctant lover, then as a flawed but noble character who protects Artemisia by accepting the false charge of rape.

HISTORY: In the fully documented trial of 1612, Agostino Tassi was charged with and convicted of the rape of Artemisia Gentileschi. He never confessed to the crime, and on the contrary, tried to accuse Artemisia's father of having deflowered her, and to insist she had also written love letters to other men -- though she could barely write at the time. Artemisia testified repeatedly under oath and torture that she had been raped by Tassi. She described the event in explicit and graphic detail, and her own resistance to the point of wounding him with a knife. After the rape, Agostino promised to marry Artemisia, which would have been the only socially acceptable remedy in 17th century Italy for a woman who had become "damaged property." She evidently believed him at first (though she came to doubt his intentions) and had reluctant sexual relations with her assailant: "What I was doing with him, I did only so that, as he had dishonored me, he would marry me" (from her rape trial testimony).

In reality, Tassi was known as what might now be called a multiple sex offender. He had been sued for raping and impregnating his sister-in-law, equated with incest, and there was testimony at the trial that he had arranged and paid for the murder of his own wife, whom he had also acquired by rape.

THE ARTIST

The theme of the film is that Artemisia's sexual awakening, initiated by Tassi, launched her artistic creativity. Tassi is cast as a guiding creative spirit, whose ability to visualize landscape inspired Artemisia's art. His work is also portrayed as rivaling that of Artemisia's father, Orazio Gentileschi.

HISTORY: Tassi is known for technical skill in perspective and for conventional marine landscapes. Artemisia's art had nothing to do with landscape (she hired other artists to paint the landscape backgrounds in her pictures). Contrary to the film, she never drew or painted independent images of the nude male body. There was no known effect of Tassi's "teaching" on her art, and Tassi's own art is judged to be second rank, no rival for that of Artemisia or her father.

Artemisia Gentileschi is today considered the most important woman artist of the pre-modern era, and a major artist of the Italian Baroque. She was the first female artist to paint large scale history and religious pictures, subjects considered off-limits to women at that time, and she specialized in themes with female protagonists. Her depiction of traditional stories of rape and vengeance -- but from the viewpoint of a woman -- marked a breakthrough in the history of art. In fact, a year before the rape, Artemisia produced an important early painting, *Susanna and the Elders* of 1610, whose unusual treatment of this biblical theme has been recognized as a subtextual protest against the

sexual exploitation of women. The Judith and Holofernes painted shortly after the rape -- which is used in the film as an erotic tableau vivant -- has been interpreted by art historian Mary Garrard as a metaphoric expression of female resistance to masculine sexual dominance.

THE MYTHS

The idea that a woman artist is the creation of a male mentor has been a persistent myth in the history of art, frequently asserted by artists and critics of the 16th and 17th centuries. So has the romanticization of violent rape, as in the rape scenes in this film, and the idea that women wish to be raped or fall in love with their rapists. Perhaps it seemed to the filmmaker that presenting Artemisia as a sexually independent woman was a positive gesture, a step beyond casting her as a sexual victim. However, the focus remains upon her sexuality and not her art. Perhaps unwittingly, the film Artemisia taps into pervasive stereotypes about women artists in general, and it perpetuates the stigma of a primarily sexualized identity that has followed Artemisia Gentileschi from her own lifetime down to the present.

THE ENDURING EVIDENCE OF ART

Thanks to "Paint and Passion," the current exhibit at the Richard Feigen Gallery in New York, the art of Artemisia and her father can be contrasted with that of Tassi. Her work shows not only her artistic skills, but her unique creation of images of strong and struggling women. They speak to both her own life and to ours in the present.

RECOMMENDED READING:

Mary D. Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art* (Princeton University Press, 1989). Includes documents (English translation of the artist's 28 letters and testimony of the rape trial of 1612). Available in paperback.

Roberto Contini and Gianni Papi, *Artemisia* (Rome, Italy, 1991). Catalogue (in Italian) of exhibition held at Casa Buonarroti, Florence, 1991.

Alexandra Lapierre, *Artemisia: un duel pour l'immortalité* (Editions Robert Laffont, Paris, spring 1998).

R. Ward Bissell, *Artemisia Gentileschi and the Authority of Art: Critical Reading and Catalogue Raisonné* (Pennsylvania State University Press, forthcoming fall 1998).

Anna Banti, *Artemisia*, a 1953 novel, translated into English by Shirley D'Ardia Caracciolo (University of Nebraska Press, 1988).

(information above prepared by Mary Garrard and Gloria Steinem) Helen Langa
Assistant Professor, Art History
American University
Washington, DC
<hlanga@american.edu>