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Three Views of Judith in Italian Renaissance and Baroque Art

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Chaste Sexual Warrior, Civic Heroine, and *Femme Fatale*: Three Views of Judith in Italian Renaissance and Baroque Art

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Abstract

The apocryphal story of Judith and Holofernes has fascinated artists for centuries and is thus one of the most commonly depicted religious scenes. This story was particularly popular during the Italian Renaissance and Baroque periods. Although depictions of Judith vary greatly, I believe the interpretations of Judith’s role can be divided into three broad categories: chaste sexual warrior, civic heroine, and \textit{femme fatale}. These classifications are not exclusive, and many images could be classified in multiple ways. In this thesis I thoroughly discuss each of these themes, using quintessential examples of each type of depiction to illustrate my ideas, and I situate these images within their political and socio-historical contexts. Studying the artists, their patrons, and their society allows a better understanding of why these images were produced.
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In loving memory of my grandfather, who took great interest in my thesis and enjoyed telling me about writing his own.
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Illustrations


Introduction

One of the most commonly depicted religious scenes, the apocryphal story of Judith and Holofernes has long captivated artists. This story was particularly popular in Italy between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. Although there have been many variations in the depiction of Judith, I believe the interpretations of Judith’s role can be divided into three broad categories: chaste sexual warrior, civic heroine, and *femme fatale*. These classifications are not exclusive, and many images could be classified in more than one way. I will thoroughly discuss each of these themes, using quintessential examples of each type of depiction to illustrate my ideas, and I will situate these images within their political and socio-historical contexts.

The first objective of this thesis is to explore each of the classifications of Judith depictions that I have outlined above, and I will examine key examples of each kind of image to support my assertions. Although in the course of my research I have examined as many images of Judith as possible, I must, for the sake of brevity and feasibility, focus my thesis on just a few images that best represent each of the three respective categories. From this classification of representations, one will come to a greater understanding of how this critically important Old Testament figure was understood by society during the Italian Renaissance and Baroque periods.

The second goal of my thesis is more general in nature: I will consider the relationship between depictions of Judith and the socio-historical context within which they were created. Through my general analysis of Judith imagery of the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries, and my more focused study of selected images, I will examine several broad patterns in the theme and content of these illustrations and
connect this pattern to the historical record. In studying the artists, their patrons, and their society, I will come to a better understanding of why these images were produced.

Although scholarly discourse has covered most depictions of Judith individually, there are relatively few publications that discuss Judith as a theme. Those works that do discuss the theme of Judith representations have not attempted to create a systematic categorization of the images. I believe that my particular classification of the different types of Judith depictions creates a new way of looking at the subject. Furthermore, within each category, I have made observations that will make a small contribution to this field of study. For example, one offshoot of my research will be a much-needed analysis of the Cincinnati Art Museum’s *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* (ca. 1469) by Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510), which up until now has generally been left out of scholarly discourse.

As mentioned, there are few sources that discuss Judith as a theme. The sources that do involve a thematic study of Judith generally examine the subject from a literary, religious, or historical standpoint. Thus far, the most comprehensive study is Margarita Stocker’s *Judith, Sexual Warrior: Women and Power in Western Culture* (1998). A lecturer in English at Oxford University, Stocker focuses on the theme of Judith in Western social and cultural history. Although she does discuss Judith imagery, art is not the primary focus of her study. Eumie Imm’s “Depictions of Judith and Holofernes” (Master’s thesis, U. C., 1985) also addresses the theme of Judith representation. In this thesis, Imm discusses depictions of Judith from the Middle Ages through the seventeenth century. Her study is not thorough or focused, and her conclusions are quite general. In her essay “Judith and Holofernes: Some Observations
on the Development of the Scene in Art” (1992), Nira Stone uses a diachronic approach to conduct a cursory survey of Judith imagery from the Middle Ages through the present day. Mira Friedman’s “The Metamorphosis of Judith” (1986-1987) is a more thorough survey of the development of representations of Judith in Jewish and Christian art from the Middle Ages through modernity. However, Friedman discusses only Donatello’s sculpture in detail, and she does not connect the evolution of Judith imagery to its cultural context. She is primarily concerned with how these depictions relate to Judith’s religious connotations within Judaism. Other sources such as Toni Craven’s Artistry and Faith in the Book of Judith (1983), Solomon Zeitlin’s The Book of Judith (1972), and Marie Nelson’s Judith, Juliana, and Elene (1991) focus primarily on the book of Judith itself and are not concerned with the development of Judith representations. I believe that by studying and classifying Judith depictions, thoroughly examining each of the categories, and connecting them to their socio-historical context, I will illuminate an unexplored area in Judith scholarship.

In the first chapter I will discuss the depictions that cast Judith in the role as “chaste sexual warrior.” In this allegorical role, Judith is an embodiment of chastity or temperance triumphing over lust. Although this view of Judith is essentially positive, it can nevertheless be morally ambiguous. These depictions of Judith often involve an inversion of sexual roles, which has at times left viewers feeling uneasy. In my discussion of this theme, I will examine, chiefly, depictions of Judith by Donatello (1386-1466), Giovanni della Robbia (1469-ca. 1529), and Giorgione (ca. 1478-1510). Through the discussion of this subject I will examine the tensions inherent in the story of Judith
and gain a better understanding of the contemporary response to these images of Judith.

The second chapter will focus on the depictions in which Judith is featured as a “civic heroine.” At great personal risk, Judith cut off the head of the Assyrian army’s leader and thereby saved her people from destruction. Thus Judith has often served as an inspirational figure of civic bravery, and different political groups have used Judith to represent themselves and the worthiness of their cause. To illustrate this theme, I will once again examine the depiction of Judith by Donatello. I will also consider representations of Judith by Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510) and Michelangelo (1475-1564). In this chapter I will closely study the political framework within which these works were created and will attempt to find the connections between image and context.

In the third chapter, I will examine those images that portray Judith as femme fatale. In some of these depictions Judith features as a temptress who uses her “womanly wiles” to seduce, deceive, and murder Holofernes. Although these negative portrayals of Judith could certainly be interpreted as misogynistic, many “Judith as seductress” images were actually commissioned by women. These depictions of Judith were often semi-portraits of the wealthy courtesans who commissioned them and were meant to associate the patronesses with the irresistible sexual appeal of Judith.¹ These highly sensual Judith images were particularly popular with the courtesans of Venice. Other images represent Judith’s role as femme fatale more literally. In these depictions Judith is a powerful woman who brutally butchers Holofernes. I will examine depictions by Palma Vecchio (ca. 1480-1528), Cristofano Allori (1577-1621), and Artemisia

Gentileschi (ca. 1597-ca. 1651) in an attempt to illustrate this aspect of Judith’s meaning.

There are several critical approaches that will be useful in my research. Obviously, a socio-historical perspective will inform my study of Judith imagery. I will consult Michael Baxandall's *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: a Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (1972) and Frederic Jameson's *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981). Furthermore, iconographic analysis will play a vital role in my attempt to interpret and categorize representations of Judith. This aspect of my thesis will to some extent rely on my own observations, though I will consult Erwin Panofsky’s *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (1965). Given the nature of my topic, feminist theory will also inform the thesis. Although I do not intend to present my argument from a predominantly feminist perspective, I will nonetheless consult the works of Norma Broude, Mary D. Garrard, and Susan Brownmiller.

The study of Judith in art reveals much about the history of attitudes toward women. At times, it also reflects the social and political setting within which the works were created. Therefore this study will contribute to our understanding of women’s roles in history, and how art captures these changing meanings.
Chapter 1

“Woman on Top:”

The Moral Ambiguity of Judith’s Role as Chaste Sexual Warrior

So she took the head out of the bag, and shewed it, and said unto them, behold the head of Holofernes, the chief captain of the army of Assur, and behold the canopy, wherein he did lie in his drunkenness; and the Lord hath smitten him by the hand of a woman.

Judith 13:15

In this initial chapter I will examine and discuss representations featuring Judith as chaste sexual warrior. As one might surmise, these images tend to be the most allegorical of Judith depictions. In these representations, Judith essentially becomes an embodiment of chastity triumphing over lust. It is unsurprising that Judith, renowned for her faithfulness to her husband's memory, would become an exemplar of chastity. In fact, it is possible that the name of Judith’s hometown was developed for the purpose of emphasizing her role as chaste warrior. According to Mira Friedman, “Bethulia [the name of Judith's city] . . . was associated as an allusion to the word betûlah, which in Hebrew means not only ‘virgin,’ but also an innocent and pure young woman.” Thus it seems that as the story of Judith evolved, the name of her home city derived its name from one of her most important attributes. It would seem that these allegorical depictions of Judith would be considered positive and edifying, and to some extent they were. However, they could also be viewed as morally ambiguous. Frequently, allegorical representations of Judith involve an inversion of the roles traditionally associated with men and women, the roles of dominator and dominated respectively. Unsurprisingly, this inversion has at times caused discomfort for the viewer. Towering over Holofernes, Judith becomes literally a “woman on top.” Often she is depicted with

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her foot resting on his head or even standing on his body. Sometimes the decapitation of Holofernes is interpreted as a metaphor for castration, and Judith’s power over Holofernes is often quite overt in these representations. In my examination of this theme, I will focus on Donatello’s *Judith and Holofernes* (Palazzo Vecchio, ca. 1456) (fig. 1), Giovanni della Robbia’s *Judith* (Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, n.d.) (fig. 2), and Giorgione’s *Judith* (The Hermitage, St. Petersburg, ca. 1504) (fig. 3). Through discussion of this subject I will examine the tension between Judith’s roles as chaste widow and “castrating” warrior.

Before beginning my discussion of the representations of Judith, it is useful to contextualize the images through a brief examination of the history of chastity in the church and the effect that this emphasis on chastity had on the lives of women. Many of the strict Judeo-Christian beliefs regarding adultery and fornication date back to the earliest written books of the Old Testament. Concerning the punishment for adultery, the writer of Leviticus 20:10 states quite plainly, “And the man that committeth adultery with another man's wife, even he that committeth adultery with his neighbour's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.” As the early Christian Church developed, these ideas became solidified: chastity was insisted upon and virginity preferred. Concerning the early Church’s trend towards celibacy, Karl A. Olsson observes, “Within the Christian tradition temperance seems inevitably to become abstinence. The early Christian *koinonia* with its Jewish-Christian belief in the unity of modesty and fruitfulness rather soon became an ascetic community dedicated to virginity. The best Christians were thought to be virgins.”\(^3\) This new emphasis on celibacy largely derives from the teachings of the apostle Paul. In 1 Corinthians 7:8-9 he

\(^3\) Karl A. Olsson, *Seven Sins and Seven Virtues* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1962), 95.
I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, It is good for them if they abide even as I [unmarried]. But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn.” It is significant that Paul directed his comments specifically towards women. This preference for virginity and celibacy in general particularly affected the lives of women in the early Church. Kathryn A. Smith explains, “From the early second century, widows and unmarried women could choose lives of abstinence, public prayer, fasting, and good works, The ‘orders’ of virgins and widows were exemplars of the perfect Christian life and were revered by the community.” While these ideas regarding women as moral leaders provided women with a kind of power, they also limited the power of women to the safely confined realm of morality and chastity.

Donatello’s *Judith and Holofernes* (fig. 1) is an excellent illustration of the tension inherent in Judith’s role as chaste sexual warrior triumphing over the lust of man. Commissioned by the Medici family for their palace garden in the 1450s, Donatello’s statue is the only monumental sculpture of this subject matter. The sculpture stands nearly eight feet tall, the figure of Judith towering over the vanquished Holofernes. She seems to have already struck Holofernes once, and she raises her right arm to finish the job. Donatello makes the emphasis on Judith’s role as sexual warrior abundantly clear, particularly by the contrast between Judith and Holofernes. Clothed in only a loincloth, Holofernes sits on a luxurious cushion, his bare legs dangling over the side of the pedestal. Judith, on the other hand, is modestly garbed in voluminous robes. Only

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5 The gash that has lead many to believe that Donatello’s Judith had already struck Holofernes is actually a flaw in the fit of the sculpture’s separate pieces. However, it is legitimate to argue that Donatello decided to leave the gaping seam since it worked well with his sculptural design. (Janson, 204).
her face and her raised right arm emerge from her billowing raiment. The sexual, yet ultimately chaste, nature of Judith’s mission is further emphasized by the physical relationship between the two figures. While Holofernes sits helplessly on the cushions of his bed, Judith stands over him, one foot on his wrist and the other on his genitals. Clutching him by the hair, she pulls Holofernes back against the inside of her left thigh, his nearly severed head coming to rest just in front of her pelvis. Thus, while there is a clear emphasis on Judith’s morally positive role as vanquisher of lust, there is also an emphasis on her morally questionable role as man-killer.

A significant factor that one must take into account when interpreting the allegoric and symbolic meaning of Donatello’s Judith is the inscription that was included on the base of the sculpture. This inscription reads: “Kingdoms fall through luxury, cities rise through virtues; behold the neck of pride severed by humility.” In this context, it seems that we are to read Judith as a symbol of humility triumphing over sensuality or pride. Frederick Hartt further explains:

St. Antonine may have provided the Medici with a written program for the statue; in his *Summa* he compares Judith's victory over Holofernes with that of Mary over sensuality (*luxuria*), which derives from pride (*superbia*), the first sin and source of all the others. Judith's purity under the blandishments of the pagan general awaiting her in his tent is compared to the virginity of Mary; she, like Mary (in a simile borrowed from the Song of Songs), is a camp of armed steel, an army terrible with banners.

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6 Donatello formed these robes by soaking cloth in a thin clay slip. He then draped the cloth around the clay figure before casting it into bronze. Prior to casting, some of the clay on the cloth over Judith’s forehead broke off, exposing the cloth underneath and thus revealing Donatello’s method (Frederick Hartt, 292).

7 There is a second inscription that was later added to the sculpture. I will discuss this inscription in the second chapter.

Judith’s triumph over Holofernes is, in a sense, a prefiguration of the Virgin Mary’s triumph over sensuality. Thus, the inscription emphasizes and clarifies the message enacted by the figures of Judith and Holofernes.

Iconographic analysis serves to further support this symbolic interpretation. In particular, scholars have made much of the medallion that Holofernes wears around his neck. Sarah Blake McHam observes, “The medallion Holofernes wears, which has swung around to his slumping bare back, depicts a galloping horse, symbolic of Pride or Superbia, the vice traditionally defeated by Humility, represented by Judith.”9 Roger J. Crum believes that this symbol is of biblical origin. He argues, “This reference [the medallion] may have its source in Psalm 73:6, where pride is associated with a necklace: ‘the wicked wear pride like a necklace and violence wraps them round.’”10 H. W. Janson points out that the cushion on which Holofernes sits and the “Bacchanalian revels” of the putti on the sculpture’s base also serve to emphasize Holofernes’ role as a symbol of luxuria.11 The inscription and iconographical elements are obviously an important part of this sculpture and give an unquestionably positive moral message.

Although there is relatively little written about Della Robbia’s Judith (fig. 2) to guide us in our interpretation, iconographical analysis of this sculpture reveals many of the same themes and tensions that are present in Donatello’s sculpture. Given the limited literary record, an iconographical study will form the basis of my interpretation of this work. At first, it seems that even an iconographical interpretation of Della Robbia’s

work will prove difficult. He provides us with very little context to guide us in our reading of his sculpture. His Judith is an iconic figure without a strong narrative. Swathed in her voluminous robes, Judith poses triumphantly, a sword in her raised right hand and Holofernes’ severed head in her lowered left hand. As a sculptor working in the round on a small scale, Della Robbia is limited in his ability to provide the details that might normally be included in the scenery of a painting such as Holofernes’ bed or tent. Furthermore, Della Robbia does not even provide the viewer with an inscription to guide interpretation as Donatello’s sculpture does. Thus, it begins to seem that we should be hesitant in asserting that the subject depicted in Della Robbia’s sculpture is indeed the story of Judith. After all, it seems that the lyrical pose of Della Robbia’s figure could just as easily suggest the story of Salome with the head of John the Baptist. However, Erwin Panofsky considers a very similar case in his explanation of the iconographical method, and we can apply Panofsky’s logical argument to Della Robbia’s Judith as well. As there are no unquestionable images of Salome with a sword, we are probably safe in concluding that Della Robbia’s sword-wielding figure is indeed Judith.

Given the interpretational difficulty inherent in Della Robbia’s Judith, it might seem that it would difficult to tie this work to a specific allegorical or symbolic meaning. However, Della Robbia’s Judith actually reads quite well as an allegorical figure. The

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12 Panofsky argues that a painting by Francesco Maffei that had previously been said to be an image of Salome was actually a representation of Judith. He asserts that the element of Maffei’s painting that proves confusing for interpretation is the charger on which the head of Holofernes rests. According to tradition, Judith put Holofernes’ head into a sack. The inclusion of the charger would seem to suggest that it is actually a depiction of Salome, since she is traditionally depicted as presenting the head of John the Baptist on a charger to her mother Herodias. However, whereas Judith is traditionally depicted with a sword, Salome is not. Thus, the inclusion of both a charger and a sword within one scene could cause difficulty in iconographical interpretation. To deal with this difficulty, Panofsky turns to the “history of types.” In examining the pictorial tradition of Judith and Salome imagery, he discovers that while there are unquestionable depictions of Judith that include a charger, there are no unquestionable portrayals of Salome that include a sword. Panofsky explains that “there was a type of ‘Judith with a charger,’ but there was no type of ‘Salome with a sword’” (Panofsky 12-13).
lack of narrative in Della Robbia’s work, which makes it so troublesome in some respects, gives his *Judith* an almost iconic quality. Judith stands alone with her sword and the head of her enemy. The simplicity of Della Robbia’s composition allows the viewer to focus on the figure of Judith alone. There is nothing to distract us. The simplicity of her figure is reminiscent of allegorical representations of the seven virtues, such as those depicted by Giotto in the Arena Chapel. Thus, a comparison with Giotto’s figures might help us in our reading of allegorical meaning in Della Robbia’s *Judith*. Of the seven figures, *Temperance* (1306) (fig. 4) bears the closest resemblance to the *Judith*. Temperance, like Judith, is a lone figure, swathed in flowing robes and holding a sword. One of the Four Cardinal Virtues extolled by the Catholic Church, Temperance is essentially the practice of moderation. In his examination of these virtues, Thomas Aquinas explains:

> The virtue of temperance concerns moderation. Temperance is virtue in general insofar as reason moderates all human actions and emotions, but temperance is a special virtue, temperance chiefly concerns the emotions tending toward sensibly pleasurable goods and the sorrows resulting from the absence of such pleasures. It concerns the chief sense pleasures; those of food and drink, which nature requires for the preservation of the life of the individual human being; and that of sex, which nature requires for the preservation of the human species.\(^{13}\)

Thus, the resemblance between Judith and the figure of Temperance is not just one of physical likeness. The comparison between the two figures works thematically as well. According to the apocryphal story, Judith in a sense becomes an embodiment of Temperance. Holofernes represents indulgence in all the things that Temperance moderates. He lusts after Judith, and, in his attempt to seduce her, he overindulges in food and wine, which allows Judith to overpower and decapitate him with his own

sword. In vanquishing Holofernes and all of his excesses, Judith acts in the role of Temperance.

Giorgione’s Judith (fig. 3), like that of Della Robbia, is an iconic image that reads well as an allegorical figure, though in this case the message presented is more morally ambiguous and troubling. Although Giorgione was not limited as was Della Robbia in the scope of his scenery, it seems that he did not take full advantage of his medium to create a less ambiguous image. On the Hermitage website, the description notes, “the serenity of both the heroine and the landscape behind [Judith] do not seem to be in keeping with the dramatic events set out in the Bible, and only her traditional attributes confirm Judith as the subject of the painting.” The literary record does little to help us in our interpretation of Giorgione’s painting. As in the case of Della Robbia’s sculpture, there is relatively little written about Giorgione’s Judith. Thus, we must once again turn to iconographical analysis to help form our interpretation.

Giorgione’s scene is exceptionally calm. Judith stands in front of a low stone wall in what appears to be a quiet courtyard. A solid tree stands just beyond the wall, to the right of Judith, its thick trunk obscuring part of the view. A cool, misty vista fills the remainder of the background. Judith wears a simple, softly colored shift that parts, revealing her left leg up to her mid thigh. Her foot rests lightly on the head of Holofernes. The simplicity of the scenery and focus on the figure of Judith suggests a more symbolic interpretation. Once again, the lone figure of Judith is reminiscent of the allegorical figure of Temperance. For example, Judith, like Giotto’s Temperance, holds

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a lowered sword, pointing towards the ground. It is interesting that in other images of Temperance, such as that by an anonymous master of the Raimondi School (n.d.) (fig. 5), Temperance is depicted as a modestly clothed woman sitting on top of and subduing a bearded struggling man who looks very much like depictions of Holofernes. While the demeanor of Giorgione’s Judith is modest, the revealing slit of her dress and the aggressive positioning of her foot on the head of Holofernes suggest a potentially troubling message. Stocker discerns this tension in Giorgione’s work as well. She observes:

Exceptionally amongst the biblical sirens, Judith was a polyvalent image that the observer could perceive either way [as heroine or as shrew]. Giorgione’s Judith is a good example of this, for one can read her treading upon Holofernes’ head either as an example of women’s unnatural aggressiveness or as an exemplary instance of woman triumphant over the venality of men. Alternatively, one could choose to see only the moral Christian message, that Holofernes is an instance of worldly pride put in its place – on the floor – by godly humility.15

While we could, as Stocker suggests, choose to focus on the moral Christian message in Giorgione’s Judith, it seems difficult to ignore the disturbing aspects of this image.

Clearly the overt symbolism often present in depictions of Judith was meant to be morally edifying and uplifting, but sometimes the message represented was ambiguous, and the responses to these teachings, as presented in this particular form, were mixed.

Concerning the didactic nature of Judith and Holofernes’ symbolism, Durandus, a thirteenth-century canonist and liturgical writer, observes that “the Church also directs us towards sanctimony, or to continence, by the example of Judith. For just as she slew Holofernes, which means he who weakens the fatted calf, so the Church directs that we should slay Holofernes, i.e. the devil, who weakens and slays the lascivious in the

15 Margarita Stocker, 52.
According to Edgar Wind, this book was printed in forty-four different editions in the fifteenth century. Thus, we might conclude the ideas that Durandus presents in his work would not have been unknown in Italy during the Renaissance. As Durandus’s ideas were so prevalent, it would seem that the response to images of Judith triumphing over Holofernes would be positive. However, historical records show that this was not the case. According to the records from a meeting concerning the locations of Michelangelo’s *David* and Donatello’s *Judith* that took place on January 25, 1504, there was some contention over the prominent location of the *Judith*:

Francesco di Lorenzo Filarete, the herald of the Signoria, [proposed] to substitute the David for the Judith [on the *ringhiera*] because “the Judith is a deadly symbol (*segno mortifero*) and does not befit us whose insignia are the cross and the lily, *nor is it good to have a woman kill a man* [emphasis mine]; moreover, the stars did not favor the erection of the Judith, for ever since then things have been going from bad to worse.”

Francesco di Lorenzo Filarete saw Donatello’s *Judith* as representing something that was morally wrong, and he felt that it was unpropitious to continue exhibiting it in such a prominent location. Since the *Judith*’s creation in the 1450s, Florence had been in continual political upheaval. Although there is no record of similar responses to Della Robbia and Giorgione’s work, it does not seem to be much of a stretch to imagine that some viewers would have looked on these images less than positively. Della Robbia’s Judith stands triumphant as she grips the decapitated head of a man by his hair.

Giorgione’s Judith may seem demure in demeanor, but the revealing slit in her shift and foot that rests softly on the head of Holofernes send a very different message. As the

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historical record suggests, feminine power was permissible as long as it remained safely in the realm of moral leadership, but it became much less acceptable when it involved the exertion of physical power over a man.
Chapter 2

Political Propaganda or Figure of Justice:

Judith as “Civic Heroine”

*Hear me, and I will do a thing, which shall go throughout all generations to the children of our nation. Ye shall stand this night in the gate, and I will go forth with my waitingwoman: and within the days that ye have promised to deliver the city to our enemies the Lord will visit Israel by mine hand.*

Judith 8:32b-33

In this chapter I will focus on the representations that feature Judith as a “civic heroine.” Risking her much valued chastity as well as her personal safety, Judith deceived Holofernes, decapitated him, and thereby rescued her people from certain defeat at the hands of the Assyrian army. As the savior of Bethulia, Judith has frequently been viewed as an embodiment of this city. Furthermore, according to Friedman, “Bethulia was understood as *bêt ‘elôah*, which means the house of the Lord, that is, the Temple or perhaps even the city of Jerusalem”\(^\text{19}\). Therefore, Judith might even be understood to represent Jerusalem itself. Moreover, as an inspirational figure of civic bravery, Judith has been used by different political groups to represent themselves and the worthiness of their cause. To illustrate and explore this theme, I intend to focus my study on Donatello’s *Judith and Holofernes* (Palazzo Vecchio, ca. 1456) (fig. 1), Sandro Botticelli’s *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* (Cincinnati Art Museum, ca. 1469-70) (fig. 6), and Michelangelo’s depiction of Judith on the Sistine Ceiling (1508-12) (fig. 7). In this chapter I will carefully examine each of these works as well as the political framework in which they were created, and I will explore the relationship between each image and its political context.

\(^{19}\) Mira Friedman, 225. It is interesting that the etymology of “Bethulia” works on a number of levels. As discussed in chapter one, it also relates to the Hebrew word *betûlah*, meaning virgin.
Commissioned by the Medici family for their palace garden just a few years before Cosimo de’ Medici’s death in 1464, Donatello’s *Judith and Holofernes* (fig. 1) is the only monumental sculpture of this subject matter, and it is the representation of Judith that is perhaps most frequently connected to its political context. Specifically, much has been made of the two inscriptions on the base of the sculpture. As we have seen, the first inscription reads, “Kingdoms fall through luxury, cities rise through virtues; behold the neck of pride severed by humility.” Inscribed on the sculpture at the time of its creation, these words must have been approved of by the Medici, and it would seem that they would reflect favorably on their unofficial rule, but scholars disagree on the precise interpretation of the inscription’s meaning. One of the most common and general interpretations of the sculpture and this inscription is that the humility of Judith triumphing over the pride of Holofernes was intended to represent the protection and liberty the Medici offered Florence from the tyranny of foreign rulers. As such, Judith becomes an embodiment of Florence perhaps even of the Medici family, and Holofernes represents all foreign tyrants.

Crum offers a slightly different and much more specific interpretation of the inscription. He argues that the inscription refers to the destructive pride of the Albizzi, another powerful Florentine family. More specifically, it is a pointed reference to a dispute between Rinaldo Albizzi and Cosimo de’ Medici that had taken place in the 1430s. Crum observes, “By the fifteenth century, it was held that humility fostered civic concord, while pride engendered discord and factionalism.” The Florentines would have understood that pride in leaders is divisive, but humility leads to peace and

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20 Roger J. Crum, 24.
21 Ibid, 23.
prosperity. As Crum argues, "Donatello’s work could have been intended to commemorate the fallacies of Rinaldo, the fall of the Albizzi regime, and the rise of a virtuous Medicean alternative." Thus, the inscription in conjunction with Donatello’s depiction of Judith triumphing over the pride of Holofernes took on a new and relevant meaning for the Medici family and their contemporaries.

The second inscription below the base of Donatello’s sculpture is less ambiguous and thus invites fewer variations in its interpretation. Added to the sculpture’s base while it still stood in the Medici gardens, this inscription reads: "The salvation of the state. Piero de’ Medici son of Cosimo dedicated this statue of a woman both to liberty and to fortitude, whereby the citizens with unvanquished and constant heart might return to the republic." Less allegorical than the first inscription, this dedication makes more explicit connections to contemporary Florence. In conjunction with the first inscription, these words celebrate the liberty that the people of the Florentine republic enjoyed under the protection of the benevolent Medici family.

Unlike Donatello’s sculpture, Botticelli’s Judith with the Head of Holofernes (fig. 6) has not been studied in connection to the political context in which it was created, and scholars have not written about Botticelli’s Judith specifically as a civic heroine. However, I would argue that the iconography of this painting points to just such an interpretation. Botticelli’s depiction of Judith differs from other representations of Judith in which she is depicted as an allegorical figure of chastity triumphing over lust or other images in which she features, conversely, as a seductress. In a number of ways, Botticelli’s Judith can be viewed as a figure of justice and the savior of her people.

22 Ibid, 28.
Unlike the “chaste warrior” images in which Judith exercises moral and physical dominion over Holofernes, Botticelli’s image does not emphasize Judith’s subjugation of Holofernes. As mentioned previously, many depictions of Judith involve an inversion of sexual roles. In these representations Judith typically towers over Holofernes. Frequently, she is even depicted standing on his body. In other representations, Judith holds Holofernes’ head, generally in a lowered hand. In fact, in most images his head is below Judith’s waist or even closer to the ground. All of these elements serve to emphasize Judith’s moral triumph over and subjugation of Holofernes. It is therefore significant that Botticelli’s painting may be the only depiction of Judith in which Holofernes’ head is higher than her own. The only other image that is at all similar is Michelangelo’s depiction of Judith in the Sistine Chapel. The images are similar enough that it seems possible to me that Michelangelo might have seen Botticelli’s painting. However, even Michelangelo does not place the head of Holofernes above that of Judith. Botticelli’s unique positioning of Holofernes’ head above that of Judith de-emphasizes Judith’s subjugation of him and allows for a different interpretation of Judith’s role.

Furthermore, Botticelli’s painting almost completely separates Judith from the gruesome act of decapitation, and in doing so accentuates Judith’s connection to Bethulia and her role as the savior of her people. Unlike many other representations of this theme, Botticelli’s depiction of Judith takes place far away from the scene of her ghastly deed. Although Judith’s handmaiden is carrying Holofernes’ head on top of her own, its inclusion is relatively discreet. It is neatly wrapped up and not nearly as grotesque as it often appears in other Judith scenes. Furthermore, Judith is completely
removed from the head: she does not hold it or even look directly at it. The exclusion of Holofernes’ decapitated corpse is also significant. Holofernes’ body is loaded with carnal and sensual meaning, and Botticelli substantially reduces the sensuality of his scene by choosing to exclude this element. Instead, the focus of the scene is on Judith’s return to Bethulia. One might almost believe that she is simply out for a pleasurable stroll with her handmaiden in the countryside surrounding her home city. She seems unaware of the horsemen in the valley below, perhaps the now leaderless Assyrian soldiers, who dart frantically in all directions. Botticelli is one of the few artists to include a view of Bethulia, and this focus on the city rather than on the act of decapitation serves to accentuate Judith’s connection to Bethulia and her role as a heroine and the rescuer of her city.

The physical appearance of Botticelli’s Judith also separates her from other Judith representations that focus more on her role as the chaste sexual warrior or as seductress. As Adrian W. B. Randolph observes, many Judiths are dressed almost as if they were preparing more for battle than for seduction. Sometimes they are even depicted in armor. It seems that by depicting Judith in such a way, artists remove any hints of Judith’s sensuality so that the emphasis is on her chasteness and her battle against lust. Botticelli’s Judith is very beautiful and graceful in her long billowing gown. However, although Botticelli’s Judith is pretty and feminine, she is not overtly sexual. Her appearance is not that of a seductress or femme fatale. Unlike many other scantily

23 Stocker even attributes sado-masochistic interpretations to some representations of Judith with Holofernes’ body (page 38).
25 In all of Lucas Cranach’s depictions of this theme, Judith wears thick chains around her neck and wields a heavy sword. Other artists depict Judith in a modest tunic-like shift, which also serves to emphasize her role as chaste warrior.
clad and curvaceous Judiths, Botticelli’s Judith is covered from neck to ankle, and there is little emphasis on the feminine curves of her body. Her beauty is sweet, innocent, and almost childlike. By avoiding both overly chaste and overly sensual qualities in his depiction of Judith, Botticelli achieves a more balanced representation that allows the stress to rest on other more significant iconographical elements in the scene such as the olive branch in her hand (a symbol of peace) and of course the view of Bethulia itself.

It seems possible that Botticelli decided to “de-emphasize” Judith’s role as a sexual warrior because of the moral ambiguity associated with this role. As discussed in chapter one, the chaste widow who uses her beauty to appeal to a man and then kills him would certainly seem problematic to the patriarchal society of Renaissance Italy. Botticelli might have sought to provide a less controversial image in his focus on Judith’s role as civic heroine. She has saved her people and is now returning to them. With the sword in her right hand, an olive branch in her left hand, and a view of Bethulia in the distance, Judith is a vision of justice and peace.

In the study of depictions that represent Judith as a civic heroine and the political context in which these images were created, it is interesting and perhaps helpful to examine a distinctly unheroic or even antiheroic Judith depiction and its political context. To fulfill this aspect of my study, I will examine Michelangelo’s depiction of Judith in the Sistine Chapel (fig. 7). First, it seems necessary to justify the inclusion of this image under the classification of civic heroine. In many ways, Michelangelo’s Judith almost

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26 Nude or scantily dressed Judiths were particularly common in northern Europe: Quentin Massys depicted Judith stripped to the waist, while Conrad Meit, Hans Baldung, Jan Sanders Hemessen all depicted a completely nude Judith. Bare shouldered and cleavage-showing Judiths also became very common in Italy, particularly in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century (see images by Carlo Saraceni, Giuseppe Cesari, Giovanni Baglione, and Francesco Furini).
defies classification. She is clearly not a temptress: the masculinity of her muscular
body, her tightly pinned up hair and head covering, and her voluminous robes are a far
cry from a seductress’s overt sexuality. However, she is also clearly not supposed to be
in the role of chaste sexual warrior. Michelangelo’s Judith does not dominate over
Holofernes, and she lacks the upright pose and bearing that indicate righteousness in
other chaste representations of Judith. In fact, the furtiveness of her backward glance
and posture seems to suggest timidity or a sense of anxiety. As Wind observes
regarding Michelangelo’s Judith:

There is a minor but rather startling anomaly in the characterization of
Judith. Instead of appearing as a heroine, proudly facing the spectator and
carrying Holofernes’ sword, as she commonly does in Renaissance
paintings, she is represented with her face averted, looking back towards
the dead body in the tent. The absence of sword, the hidden face,
transform her into a kind of anonymous figure, joining her attendant in an
uncannily inoffensive looking group, almost lyrical, if not feline in its
slyness.27

The classification of Michelangelo’s Judith as a civic heroine may, on the surface, seem
erroneous. However, the image’s thematic context in the Sistine Chapel and the political
context in which this image was created support the inclusion of Michelangelo’s Judith
in this category, even if she is included as an unheroic deliverer rather than a typical
heroine.

The scenes depicted in the Sistine Chapel’s four corner spandrels all represent
the miraculous salvation of the Jewish people by God. Besides the story of Judith, the
other biblical narratives depicted in these scenes include that of David and Goliath, the
punishment of Haman,28 and the Brazen Serpent.29 According to Charles de Tolnay,

27 Edgar Wind, 35.
28 In the Old Testament book of Esther, Haman is a wicked official who, in revenge for Esther’s
cousin Mordecai’s refusal to bow before him, plotted to kill all of the Jews. Esther, the wife of King
these scenes were included as antetypes of the future salvation of humanity by Christ. In each of these biblical narratives, God works through a surprising protagonist to save his people: David is just a boy, Judith and Esther are powerless women, and Moses is a murderer with a faltering tongue. In all of these stories, God strengthens and empowers unlikely individuals so that they are able to rescue their people. In this context, it is clear that Michelangelo intended that Judith be interpreted as the savior of her people, even if it was only through God’s power that she was able to accomplish her heroic feat.

Before examining the political context in which Michelangelo created his depiction of Judith, it is first necessary to briefly examine Michelangelo’s ties to the republic of Florence and the Medici family. A Florentine, Michelangelo lived for a time in the Medici palace and benefited greatly from their patronage, particularly in the early days of his career. In 1496, two years after the Medici were ousted by the Florentine aristocracy, Michelangelo visited Rome for the first time, but he soon returned to Florence. After his initial trip, he continued to travel back and forth between Florence and Rome for many years. Despite the support that he had received from the Medici family, Michelangelo opposed their tyrannical rule over Florence. A strong supporter of the republic, Michelangelo was in charge of its fortifications in 1529, just before the Medici were restored to power. After the Medici’s restoration, Michelangelo again

Ahasuerus, risked her own safety by revealing her Jewish identity to her husband and saved her people from destruction. After Haman’s plans were revealed, he was sentenced to hang on the tree that he had prepared for Mordecai’s execution.

29 The Old Testament story about the brazen serpent is related in Numbers 21:5-9. According to this account, while Moses and the Jews were wondering in the wilderness, the people began to complain, saying that God had led them into the wilderness only to let them die of starvation and thirst. In his righteous anger, God sent “fiery serpents” to bite the children of Israel and kill them. The Jews cried out for forgiveness, and God mercifully told Moses to make a brass serpent, place it on a pole, and all who had been bitten and looked upon the serpent would live.

worked under their patronage, but for political and professional reasons he left for Rome in 1534 and did not return to Florence until his entombment there in 1564.\textsuperscript{31}

The political context in which Michelangelo created his depiction of Judith not only supports this image’s classification as civic heroine, it also provides a possible explanation for Michelangelo’s decision to depict Judith as an unheroic deliverer rather than as a typical heroine figure. Despite its often tumultuous history, Florence’s reputation as a free republic was renowned. According to Gene Brucker, by the early fifteenth century,

Florence became the main defender of republicanism in a peninsula increasingly dominated by despotic regimes. Often struggling alone against great odds, sometimes assisted by her sister republic Venice, Florence fought to preserve her own liberty, and also that of other city-states seeking to maintain their independence against such tyrants as Giangaleazzo Visconti and King Ladislaus.\textsuperscript{32}

By 1434, Cosimo de’ Medici and his family gained considerable control over Florence. Although the city formally remained a republic, the power of its new unofficial leader was undeniable. While Medici rule may legitimately be viewed as a loss of freedom for the republic, it also certainly provided greater political stability and protection. After sixty years of Medici rule, the aristocracy of Florence led a revolt and ousted the Medici. The republic then went through a turbulent period first under the puritanical influence of the Dominican Savonarola (1452-96) and then under that of the ruthless Machiavelli (1469-1527). Savonarola’s influence was cut short by his execution at the hands of Florentine aristocracy in 1496. Machiavelli, however, remained influential in Florence for a much longer period while he served as the secretary of the second cancelleria of the republic.


According to Brucker, “During those years when Machiavelli was an official of the republic (1498-1512), the city was torn by internal conflict, which weakened its efforts to recover Pisa, and to defend itself against its enemies.”33 Florence may have been free of Medici tyranny, but its political situation certainly became considerably less stable. In light of Michelangelo’s ties to the republic of Florence, the fact that it was in such turmoil while he was painting the Sistine ceiling could prove significant in his representation of Judith.

On some level, it almost seems possible to trace the evolution of Florentine political history through its artists’ depictions of Judith. Designed during the height of Medici rule, Donatello’s sculpture and its rather pointed inscriptions could certainly be said to reveal the powerful banking family’s position of influence and their intimate connection to Florence. Created just a few years later, the continuation of the Medici regime seems to be evident in Botticelli’s depiction of Judith as well. Judith’s heroic status and her explicit connection to the city of Bethulia could easily be extended as metaphors of Florentine civic pride and Medicean protection against tyranny. In any case, Botticelli’s Judith clearly seems to be of civic import. Differing greatly from the proud heroines of Donatello and Botticelli, Michelangelo’s Judith furtively slinks away from Holofernes’ body. A sneaking antiheroine, the Sistine Judith almost seems to reflect the turmoil of the Florentine republic after the Medici were ousted from power. Obviously it is impossible to make definite connections between each artist’s interpretive decisions and the political situation in Florence. However, it is also impossible to deny that each artist would have been aware of this political situation, and this awareness would affect the artist even if only subconsciously. Marxist theorist

Frederic Jameson argues that “at each moment [in history] it is possible to write the immediately adequate equation: such and such an element (economic, political, legal, literary, religious, etc. . .) = the inner essence of the whole.”\textsuperscript{34} Thus it follows that each depiction of Judith is equal to the “inner essence” of the historical moment in which it was created. While it may be impossible to prove a causal relationship between the Florentine political situation and each artist’s interpretive decisions, it is undeniable that the historical context would have an impact on their work.

Chapter 3

Seductress or Strong Woman:

Judith as *Femme Fatale*

_Holofernes his heart was ravished with her, and his mind was moved, and he desired greatly her company._

Judith 12:16

The representations of Judith that I have examined up until this point have been essentially positive depictions. In these images Judith is a virtuous figure of chastity who triumphs over lust or a civic heroine who saves her city from destruction. However, many of these images convey a tension integral to the story of Judith: while Judith is clearly a godly and heroic woman, she also triumphed over a man, which “sat uneasily” in the patriarchal society of the Italian Renaissance. The morally ambiguous nature of the story of Judith taints these essentially positive depictions. In this final chapter I will examine images of Judith that deal more explicitly with these tensions, images in which she is depicted as *femme fatale*. Some of these representations focus on Judith the temptress who uses her “womanly wiles” to seduce, deceive, and kill Holofernes. Obviously, these depictions of Judith could be interpreted as misogynistic. However, many of these “Judith as seductress” images were commissioned by women. Particularly in Venice, many wealthy courtesans commissioned depictions of Judith that were semi-portraits, meant to associate the irresistible sexual appeal of Judith with the patroness.  

Other images present Judith more literally in the role of fatal woman: Judith is a determined and powerful woman who brutally slaughters Holofernes. In an attempt to illustrate the first aspect of Judith’s meaning as *femme fatale*, I will first focus on Palma Vecchio’s Judith (Uffizi, ca. 1525-8) (fig. 8) and Cristofano Allori’s _Judith with the
Head of Holofernes (Palazzo Pitti, Florence, 1613) (fig. 9). To illustrate the second, more literal interpretation of Judith as “killing woman” femme fatale, I will examine Artemisia Gentileschi’s numerous depictions of this theme. By juxtaposing and studying these particular images, I hope to explore certain aspects of the social consciousness of this period and to highlight the different ways in which male and female artists treat the same subject. Specifically, in my survey of the images of Judith by these three artists, I will examine the role of the courtesan in Italian Renaissance and Baroque society, and I will demonstrate how that function changes when presented from the female perspective.

In order to better understand “Judith as femme fatale” imagery within its historical context, we must first briefly examine the situation of courtesans, a “fatal” class of women who thrived during the Italian Renaissance and Baroque periods. Although courtesans of Italy, particularly those in Venice, are much celebrated, the nature of the position that these women held in their society is less frequently understood. The tradition of women who were charming and witty as well as beautiful providing intelligent and powerful men with companionship and sexual pleasure dates back to ancient Greece. There, women such as Aspasia, Diotima, Thais, and Phyrne enticed Pericles, Socrates, Praxiteles, and Alexander with their intelligence and great beauty. Concerning the origin of the term “courtesan,” Georgina Masson explains:

When the Italian Renaissance produced similar types of women [to those of ancient Greece], who were the companions and mistresses of the cortigiani – the courtiers who thronged the courts of Italy – they were called cortigiane, or courtesans, the feminine equivalent of courtier. Partly, no doubt, the word was coined because of this association, but it surely owed its rapid adoption into current usage as a matter of convenience,

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because it would have been awkward to refer to these beautiful, much
courted, and often gifted women as whores.37

During the end of the fifteenth century and the first half of the sixteenth century,
courtesans flourished in Rome as well as in Venice. Even prominent leaders of the
Catholic Church patronized these women. Popes Innocent VIII (1432-1492), Alexander
VI (1431-1503), Leo X (1475-1521), and Julius II (1443-1513) all fathered children by
their beautiful mistresses. Pope Paul IV (1476-1559), the first in a succession of
reforming popes, was elected to the papal position in 1555. From this point on, it
became more difficult for Roman courtesans to keep up the glamorous lifestyle that they
had previously enjoyed.38 Masson asserts that “only in the free city of Venice was it
possible, until the end of the sixteenth century, for a gifted woman to practice the one
independent profession open to her,39 and, as in ancient Greece, be accepted by the
great – rulers, artists and writers alike- as something other than a common whore.”40
These talented women were certainly not limited to providing sexual favors to the rich
and powerful; many were also highly accomplished in music and poetry. Courtesans
were also celebrated for their charm, taste in dress, and witty conversation.

Although the lifestyle of these courtesans may seem glamorous and did, to some
extent, allow these women a degree of power in a patriarchal society, the lives of these
women were not always glamorous and could even be quite dangerous. Some
courtesans essentially became concubines, remaining relatively faithful to one member
of the nobility or wealthy upper class. Although this arrangement might seem relatively
mundane and safe compared to working for numerous customers, it was often the case

37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., 10.
39 Masson’s point is well taken, but this statement may be an exaggeration.
40 Masson, 10.
that the wealthy lover would eventually grow tired of his mistress or yield to family pressure and obligations and would arrange to have her quietly put away. Typically, he would arrange for the woman to marry a man of lesser social status, thus giving her the chance to become an “honest woman.” However, as Joanne M. Ferraro points out, “Concubines . . . did not always willingly go away. Moreover, they so resented being conveniently discarded and shuffled around by their noble lovers that they sought the aid of the Patriarchal Court.”

These women were not typically very successful in pleading their cases before the court, but some women did manage to have their unwanted marriages annulled, and a few even managed to marry the man of their choice. Other women met with even more desperate situations. Lorenzo Venier’s infamous poem *Il Trentuno di Zaffetta* offers a semi-fictional account of one such woman. According to the poem, a courtesan’s jilted lover arranged for seventy-nine men to rape her as punishment for her behavior. Although this story is largely fictitious, it reveals the vulnerability of the courtesan’s position. While these beautiful women may have been celebrated for their charm and intellect, the fact still remains that they were women selling sex in a patriarchal society, and this could be a very dangerous occupation.

I will begin my examination of “Judith as *femme fatale*” images by examining the representation by Palma Vecchio, an artist renowned for his portraits of beautiful blond women, both courtesans and noblewomen. As with most of Palma’s works, the patron and the precise date of the Uffizi *Judith* (fig. 8) are unknown. Thus we also do not know the identity of the voluptuous blond woman whom Palma depicts in the guise of Judith.

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with her sword and Holofernes’ severed head. Given the diversity of Palma’s clientele, the woman depicted could just as easily be a courtesan as a noblewoman, and it is often difficult to distinguish between these two groups of women as depicted in Palma’s portraits. In order to understand how we are to interpret this depiction of Judith, it is first necessary to look for clues about the sitter’s identity.

In Palma’s *oeuvre*, the title of a portrait does not automatically indicate who the patroness might have been or what the nature of the subject matter might be. For example, Palma frequently represented his sitters in classical costuming and gave them idealized titles such as “Lucrezia” and “Judith.” These titles do not necessarily help the viewer to distinguish whether Palma was portraying a noblewoman or a courtesan, since both of these names could be applied appropriately to women of either station. Traditionally, Judith and Lucretia both represent chastity and female virtue. Thus, both of these figures would provide an appropriate guise for a proper Venetian noblewoman. However, as previously mentioned, many courtesans wished to associate themselves with Judith’s irresistible beauty. Furthermore, Masson points out that, however inappropriately, Lucrezia became a favorite *nom de guerre* among courtesans. It is unsurprising that the irony of such a name would appeal to these women who were celebrated for their wit and intelligence. However, this fact makes it all the more difficult to discover how we are to interpret Palma’s Uffizi *Judith*.

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43 Lucretia was a mythological Roman noblewoman who was raped by Sextus Tarquinius. Rather than live with her shame and allow women to use her name as an excuse for adultery, Lucretia killed herself (despite her husband’s pleas) and thus challenged the men of her family to avenge her defilement.
44 Masson, 26.
Since we are unable to rely on the title or an established identity of the patron to guide our interpretation of this depiction of Judith, we must turn to another source of information: analysis of the painting itself. By modern standards of female beauty, it may be difficult to appreciate the sexual appeal of the buxom woman of Palma’s portrait. One might even be tempted to claim that she is not necessarily a seductress at all. After all, she is in relatively modest attire and does not assume a particularly suggestive pose or expression. However, by comparing this work with two other portraits by Palma, we can deduce that the Judith is indeed a portrait of a courtesan. The resemblance between Palma’s Judith and the woman depicted in Portrait of a Blonde Woman: Flora (London National Gallery, ca. 1522-4) (fig. 10) and Portrait of a Blonde Woman with Bared Breast (location unknown, ca. 1524-6) (fig. 11) is remarkable. Each painting features a plump woman with wavy blond hair, dark brown eyes, aquiline nose, and a small, slightly pursed mouth. The differences in appearance between the three depictions seem to be a matter of age: the woman depicted as Judith appears older than the woman in Portrait of a Blonde Woman with Bared Breast, and both of these women appear older than the woman portrayed as Flora. Given the approximate dates for each work, the apparent aging of the woman depicted in them supports the hypothesis that these portraits are of the same woman. Both of the earlier works are much more overtly erotic than the Judith. In each of these works the woman depicted reveals her breast. She gazes boldly at the viewer as her hair slips seductively over her bared shoulders. Furthermore, Flora was another name that was popular among courtesans. Thus, the hypothesis that Palma’s Judith is a well-established courtesan seems perfectly reasonable.

http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/cgi-
Even if the assumption that Palma’s Judith is a courtesan is correct, the representation itself does not seem particularly negative. The woman depicted in the portrait appears to be comfortable and self-satisfied, and she clearly is able to afford to have her portrait painted by a renowned artist. She is richly dressed, and it would appear that she is also well fed. While this image of Judith as a voluptuous beauty is clearly not a representation of chastity, it probably will not strike terror into the heart of a male viewer. Compared to some of the militant Judiths that we have already examined, Palma’s portrait is rather staid. For Palma, the depiction of Judith as *femme fatale* is not of personal significance; it is merely part of a business agreement meant to please a well-paying patron. However, as the portrait of a courtesan, there are certain more negative implications that we must consider. As we dig deeper, Palma’s representation loses some of its seeming harmlessness. First, as mentioned previously, being a courtesan could be a dangerous occupation. Furthermore, in a patriarchal society, it is understood that courtesans do not just provide men with harmless pleasure: they are women who ruthlessly set out to attract men and sometimes lead to their downfall.

For Cristofano Allori, the fatal qualities of a seductive woman may have held a great deal of personal significance. Dating back to the writings of Italian historian Filippo Baldinucci (1625-96), the Judith of Allori’s *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* (fig. 9) is traditionally considered to be a portrait of the artist’s mistress Maria di Giovanni Mazzaferri, and the depiction of Holofernes is supposedly a self-portrait of the artist. According to this tradition, Allori was a rakish character who lived a carefree existence until he fell in love with Maria di Giovanni Mazzaferri, a woman famed for her great
beauty. Allori supposedly spent all of his money on *La Mazzafirri*, as she was called, and received nothing but heartache and suffering for his trouble. Their relationship was fraught with jealousy and arguments. The beautiful woman of Allori’s painting is dressed in gorgeously colored robes of rich fabric. She stands aloof and gazes coolly down at the work of her hand. Compared to the horrified, angered, and physically tormented expressions that are typical of most depictions of Holofernes, the expression on the face of Allori’s Holofernes seems particularly sorrowful and shows an anguish that seems more psychological than physical. His lowered eyes and downcast expression are reminiscent of a crucified Christ. Friedman observes that “the contrast between the coldness on the face of Allori’s Judith and the pain on the face of Holofernes gives a special significance to the painting and apart from the personal aspect, it also conveys the idea of the triumph of love [women who triumph over men through the power of love].”

Thus, Allori has brought the fear that is latent in Palma’s Judith to the surface: Allori’s Judith is a woman who wants to seduce, entrap, and cause agony.

In a sense, the paintings by Palma and Allori each represent a step in the surfacing of the anxiety that is embedded in the essentially positive images of Judith (Judith as civic heroine or allegorical figure of chastity). Palma depicts Judith as a courtesan, a professional seductress. Granted, Palma’s image of Judith is unlikely to strike fear into the heart of man, but it brings up the uncomfortable fact that she is a woman who makes her living by causing men to fall “in love” with her without concern for the emotional anguish it might cause. Allori brings this anxiety one step closer to the surface. The personal significance that the subject matter held for Allori shows through

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46 Mira Friedman, 240.
clearly in his depiction of this theme. Allori’s Judith is a cold-hearted vamp who feels absolutely no remorse for the man whose head she has just severed.

Oddly enough, it is an image by a woman who completes the slow progression of bringing this latent anxiety over Judith’s deadly act to the surface. In the hands of a female artist, the idea of “Judith as femme fatale” can take on a more literal and, in some respects, a more terrifying meaning. Although none of Artemisia’s many Judths would typically be classified as “seductresses,” one could view these images as a realization of the fears that are only semi-revealed in the femme fatale images that focus more on Judith’s role as seductress. While the seductress is a cause for anxiety in men, it is perhaps not as terrifying as a woman who usurps powers typically associated with men. Traditionally, it was accepted that women gain power over men through seduction and their “womanly wiles.” Friedman explains that, according to custom, fatal women are culpable simply because “they are women and the object of men’s desire, and their weapon is the love they inspire.”47 Women need not necessarily even have devious intent: the fact that men desire them and become weakened through their desire and love for them is cause enough for condemnation. Given its misogynistic undertones, it may seem odd that a woman would choose to work within this genre. However, Artemisia was not condemning her own sex. She took up this genre, subverted it, and used it for her own purposes.48 One of the most significant aspects of

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47 Mira Friedman, 240.
48 Artemisia was not the only woman to subvert a misogynistic genre. We can see this phenomenon in Judith Leyster’s The Proposition (1631). “Proposition” scenes are relatively common in seventeenth-century Dutch art. In a typical proposition scene, a man and woman, sometimes in the company of a procuress, gesture to each other flirtatiously, and the man offers the woman a few coins. It is understood that the proffered coins are payment for sexual services to be rendered. Unlike her male counterparts who depicted women as more than willing participants in these scenes, Leyster depicts a woman who seems half-ashamed and quite unwilling to accept the coins offered to her. In contrast to the low-cut dresses and bawdy behavior of women in similar scenes, the woman in Leyster’s scene is
Artemisia’s depictions of Judith is that each one is an illustration of female power from a female point of view. As Garrard asserts, “In her paintings of Judith Slaying Holofernes, Artemisia appears to have drawn personal courage from her subject, to go farther than any woman artist had ever gone – or would go, before the twentieth century – in depicting a confrontation of the sexes from a female point of view.” Artemisia’s Judith is not a seductress: she is decisive, authoritative, assertive, and physically powerful, all powers characteristically associated with men.

Although it is difficult to refrain from committing the biographical fallacy in regard to Artemisia’s many depictions of Judith, it would be negligent and misleading to ignore the artist’s biography in the study of her work. According to Geraldine A. Johnson and Sara F. Matthews Grieco, Artemisia painted her first image of Judith when she was just eighteen years old and sent it to Agostino Tassi, the man who had raped her and then broke his promise to marry her. In another early painting of the subject attributed to Artemisia (location unknown, n.d.) (fig. 12) Judith looks remarkably like a younger version of Artemisia herself as depicted in Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting (Royal Collection, Windsor, 1630s) (fig. 13). Furthermore, Artemisia devoted more of her time to depictions of Judith than any other theme. She produced at least five paintings of Judith in her lifetime. Garrard argues that “given the artist’s unusual biography, and given the validation by modern psychology of the Aristotelian principle of modestly dressed and is quietly sewing, an activity that is indicative of her virtuous nature. It is interesting that, although they most certainly did not come into contact with each other, Artemisia and Leyster were contemporaneous female artists who chose to reinterpret a genre that reflected badly upon their sex. Frima Fox Hofrichter, “Judith Leyster’s Proposition – Between Virtue and Vice,” in Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany, eds. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1982), 173-82.

50 Geraldine A. Johnson and Sara F. Matthews Grieco, eds., Picturing Women in Renaissance and Baroque Italy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 5.
catharsis, it is surely justifiable to interpret the painting, at least on one level, as a cathartic expression of the artist's private, and perhaps repressed, rage."\(^{51}\)

Considering the brutal quality Artemisia's depictions of Judith and their sheer number, it is certainly tempting and perhaps not wrong to tie these images to the personal events of her life.

The Uffizi version of Artemisia's *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (ca. 1620) (fig. 14) is arguably one of the most gruesome depictions of this subject to date. Even in comparison with Caravaggio's violent depiction of this theme (Galleria Nazionale d' Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, Rome, 1598-99) (fig. 15), Artemisia's depiction is bloodier, more physical, and conveys more tension. Whereas Caravaggio's girlish Judith leans back with a look of concern and perhaps disdain as she performs the decapitation, Artemisia's Judith, a sturdy woman, almost straddles Holofernes as she saws off his head. Her knee presses into his neck as she and her handmaiden hold down the strong struggling figure who tries desperately to push them away. It is a woman who creates the most terrifying image of female power. While woman's power over man remains in a more abstract realm in the depictions of artists such as Palma and Allori, Artemisia brings this anxiety to the surface in a completely concrete carnal way. Anne Jones argues that "society is afraid of both the feminist and the murderer, for each of them, in her own way, tests society's established boundaries."\(^{52}\)

For patriarchal Italy, Artemisia's Judith is a nightmarish perversion of the *femme fatale*: She is not just a woman who uses her sex appeal to gain some sense of power over a man; she is an active woman with physical power, which she exerts as capably as any man. She challenges and breaks down their most established boundaries.

\(^{51}\) Mary D. Garrard, 311.
Although it may seem odd that it was a woman who created one of the most
graphic and disturbing of images of Judith,\textsuperscript{53} maybe it should not be so surprising that a
woman’s interpretation of a theme would be radically different from the way men have
interpreted that same theme. Johnson and Grieco observe that “the different uses of art
by and for women . . . provoke new reflections on the specificity of women as creators,
consumers, and subjects of visual culture.”\textsuperscript{54} Johnson and Grieco’s words apply to both
the seductress images of Judith by artists such as Palma and Allori as well as to
Artemisia’s brutal representations of Judith. The courtesans, as female consumers,
dictated the terms of the seductress images of Judith. A woman, through her
relationship with Allori, influenced the way in which he interpreted this theme. Artemisia,
as female creator, depicted Judith in a way that differed dramatically from the images
made by her male counterparts.

\textsuperscript{53} While it is probably not particularly strange that a woman would feel rage and want to lash out
against her aggressor, it could seem strange that she would produce an image that could be viewed as
perpetuating myths about “evil” murdering women.

\textsuperscript{54} Geraldine A. Johnson and Sara F. Matthews Grieco, eds., \textit{Picturing Women in Renaissance
and Baroque Italy} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 6.
Conclusion

In this study of Judith imagery, we have seen but a few of the numerous representations of Judith that were created during the Italian Renaissance and Baroque periods. The images of Judith dating from this relatively short time span are almost innumerable. Almost every major artist from that period of time produced at least one representation of Judith, and, as we have already seen, some produced multiple images of this theme over the course of their career. Besides the artists that I have discussed in this thesis, other Italian artists who have depicted Judith include: Andrea Mantegna, Titian, Carlo Saraceni, Giuseppe Cesari, Giovanni Baglione, and Francesco Furini, just to name a few. Considering the controversial nature of Judith’s story, it seems odd that it became such a popular theme in art. Thus it is natural to question, to wonder, why this proliferation of Judith imagery? One might be tempted to claim that tradition is a sufficient explanation: Judith imagery dates back to the early church, and artists have continued to produce representations of this theme up through the twentieth century. Although tradition may partially explain the continuation of this theme, it does not explain the popularity and proliferation that occurred in Italy during the fifteenth, sixteenth, and early seventeenth centuries. In a time when women were subjugated and their powers both sexual and otherwise were so greatly feared, why was this image of a powerful, sexual woman celebrated?

One of the simplest explanations for the proliferation of Judith images is economical in nature: there was a market for representations of Judith. As noted above, there are many possible motives for the clients who demanded images of Judith. For many of the more pious patrons, Judith imagery served a didactic purpose. In more
allegorical depictions, Judith often featured as a representation of virtues such as temperance or chastity triumphing over lust. In the political realm, both rulers and republics adopted Judith, the civic heroine, as an advocate or representative of their cause. In some cases, the patrons’ motive for commissioning a work was more overtly carnal. As we have seen in chapter three, some wealthy courtesans wanted to associate themselves with Judith’s cleverness and beauty, and so they commissioned artists to paint their portrait in the guise of Judith. It seems equally likely that some male and perhaps female patrons simply wanted a depiction of a beautiful woman, and Judith, renowned for her supposedly irresistible beauty, made a fitting subject for such an image. Clearly the motives behind the commissions for representations of Judith varied greatly. Whatever the motivation of the patron, it seems that most Renaissance and Baroque artists were more than willing to satisfy demands for images of Judith.

As we have seen, particularly in chapter three, the artists’ motives for depicting Judith were sometimes more personal or perhaps even psychological. According to tradition, Cristofano Allori’s Judith is a portrait of his mistress Maria di Giovanni Mazzafirri. The icy gaze of Judith and the anguished expression of Holofernes have, unsurprisingly, led to many psychoanalytical interpretations of Allori’s painting. Although equally personal in nature, Artemisia Gentileschi’s paintings of Judith seem to have been motivated by very different circumstances. As discussed in chapter three, Artemisia painted the first of her numerous depictions of Judith at age eighteen and sent the painting to her rapist. The notoriously brutal quality of Artemisia’s depictions certainly seems to suggest a personal motive for creating these images. Thus it seems that at least for some artists, the story of Judith held a very personal significance, and it
seems that it was this significance that motivated them to produce these representations.

Although, as discussed above, there are many perfectly good reasons for artists to produce images of Judith, it still seems that these reasons are not sufficient to explain the plethora of images of such a potentially problematic figure. The theories concerning the unconscious of Sigmund Freud, Carl Gustav Jung, and Joseph Campbell offer potential insight to this seemingly inexplicable desire to create images of such a troublesome theme. Freud suggested that there are strong needs or desires in our subconscious that are socially taboo, and although we learn to suppress these unacceptable desires, they sometimes surface in some of our actions. Closely connected to Freud’s ideas, Jung’s concept of the collective unconscious is particularly relevant to our study of the Judith phenomenon. It does seem as though Judith is an almost universal figure that seems to show up in the tales and legends of many cultures. Some based on historical women and others purely fictional, tales involving strong chaste women abound in cultures throughout the world. Produced by the same society that put forth the story of Judith, the stories of Jael and Deborah are remarkably similar. Both of these biblical heroines were chaste strong women, very much like Judith. Greek mythology also produced numerous Judith-like figures. Artemis, the virgin goddess, was also the goddess of the hunt. She, like Judith, was renowned for her

55 According to Jung, “Personal unconscious rests upon a deeper layer, which does not derive from personal experience and is not a personal acquisition but is inborn. This deeper layer I call the collective unconscious. I have chosen the term ‘collective’ because this part of the unconscious is not individual but universal; in contrast to the personal psyche, it has contents and modes of behavior that are more or less the same everywhere and in all individuals” (3-4). We can recognize psychic existence such as the collective unconscious only through “the presence of contents that are capable of consciousness (Jung 4). In the case of the collective unconscious, the contents that allow us to recognize its presence are called archetypes. Jung explores four archetypes that he believes are universal: Mother, Rebirth, Spirit, and Trickster. Joseph Campbell further developed these ideas in his monomyth theory.
beauty. According to mythological tradition, many male admirers and would-be seducers met painful deaths or bizarre transformations at the hands of this steadfast goddess. The goddess of wisdom and war, Athena was also known as a virgin goddess. Joan of Arc, the “Virgin Warrior,” is the national heroine of France. She is renowned for her chastity and religious visions as well as for her successful military campaigns against the English. In England, Elizabeth I, one of the most successful leaders in the history of England, has become renowned as the “Virgin Queen” since she never married. Whether based on historical or fictitious women, stories involving strong, chaste female leaders seem to form a prominent part of history and legend in many cultures. If this figure is indeed a part of the collective unconscious, it seems possible that artists have created such pictures to express basic human psychological needs.

After examining the images, the artists, and the social and political context, I must conclude that it is probably a combination of all the motivating factors discussed above that prompted artists to create images of Judith. It seems that tradition, economics, personal experience, and perhaps even the collective unconscious share responsibility for the plethora of Judith representations. Indeed, it is perhaps the very complexity of Judith and her story that explains her widespread appeal.
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Figure 1. Donatello. *Judith and Holofernes*. ca. 1456. 236 cm. Palazzo Vecchio, Florence.
Figure 2. Giovanni della Robbia. *Judith*. n.d. 60 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest.
Figure 3. Giorgione. *Judith*. ca. 1504. The Hermitage, St. Petersburg.
Figure 4. Giotto. *Temperance*. 1306. Arena Chapel, Padua.
Figure 5. Anonymous Master of the Raimondi School. *Temperance*. n.d.
Figure 6. Sandro Botticelli. *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*. ca. 1469-70. Cincinnati Art Museum.
Figure 7. Michelangelo. *Judith and Holofernes* (detail). ca. 1508-12. Sistine Chapel, Vatican City.
Figure 8. Palma Vecchio. *Judith*. ca. 1525-8. Uffizi, Florence.
Figure 9. Cristofano Allori. *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*. 1613. Palazzo Pitti, Florence.
Figure 12. Artemisia Gentileschi (attributed to). *Judith with her Maidservant and the Head of Holofernes*. n.d.
Figure 13. Artemisia Gentileschi. *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* (detail). 1630s. Royal Collection, Windsor.