

Feminism in Western Painting

—Taking Judith Beheading Holofernes as an Example

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Abstract: In western painting, the subject of beheading is very common, and the creations with the theme of Judith are not a minority. Among them, Artemisia's *Judith Beheading Holofernes* is one of the typical works of creation around this theme. In the combing of existing documents, a single research subject is one of the biggest issues, mostly embracing the impact of Artemisia's life story on the creation of Judith. Therefore, in this article, violent aesthetics will be used as a hitting point to study the image of Judith in Artemisia's work, then settled on the theme of feminism, and through image analysis with the history of art and society, explain the distinctions of Artemisia's Judith and feminism in her works. Based on the above analysis, the painting of Artemisia reflects the softening of violence and expresses the resistance to the patriarchal society, defending the dignity of herself and other women, which is a prototype of feminism.

Keywords: beheading subject, Artemisia Gentileschi-*Judith Beheading Holofernes*, feminism, violence aesthetics

1. Introduction

Judith is a character in the classical tradition of the Bible, which is loved by many artists, and is a very common image in the Renaissance. There are many works about the image of Judith, and the painters will usually capture some plots to perform it, but because Judith cut off the head of Holofernes, which is very intense and expressive, it is frequently adopted by painters. *Judith Beheading Holofernes* is one of the representative works on this subject, but the study of academia is very single. It is believed that feminism in this work is very valuable, so this article will find out the differences between Artemisia and other male painters through image analysis with the analysis of the history of art, society, and the generation of beheading subjects.

2. Judith Beheading Holofernes

2.1. Judith

The image of Judith is derived from the *Book of Judith*, which is a chapter from the *Old Testament*. The main story in the text is that the ancient Assyrian Empire invaded the State of Israel, the Jewish heroine Judith used her beauty to deceive the trust of Holofernes, and after Holofernes was drunk,

she with her servants cut off his head, leading to the rout of the Assyrian army without a commander. Judith's heroic behavior frightened the Assyrian invaders and saved the Israeli people [1]. This religious theme is loved by painters of all periods. Artemisia Gentileschi, Italian Baroque art painters, suffered from malice and disrespect in the patriarchal society due to the violation of her teacher as a child[2]. The paintings of Artemisia contain personal characteristics that differ from other male painters in their expression of this theme. Artemisia was created *Judith Beheading Holofernes* in 1620, and is now in the Uffizi Gallery. This work reflects the author's own disgust, anger, and dissatisfaction with the teacher's violation. Full of fiercely dramatic and tensional atmosphere, this work contains not only the personal anger and rebellion of Artemisia but also reflects, with the development of that society, the liberation of females' thought and the courage to resist had shown, which, in the opinion of the author, is the rudiment of feminism.

2.2. Male Painter's Perspective in Judith

Paintings of Judith's theme have a more fixed pattern—one or two women and a sword and a head. Medieval education in Western Europe and the monopoly of the Christian churches were strongly religious and hierarchical. The education that ordinary people can receive comes almost exclusively from the Bible [3]. Therefore, medieval and Renaissance paintings are mainly about religion. But in the Renaissance, scholars promoted the liberation of human thoughts and emphasized people themselves, yet the Christians believed that the desire for sex, killing, and bloody things are villainous and did not believe that the pursuit of their own normal desires was right, thus leading to conflict between the two notions. Male painters began to satisfy personal desires through the leak in religion, such as the Madonna, which is also very common in religious paintings. Male painters not only can show their devotion in faith but also can satisfy their desires via the Madonna to chase beauty. However, in the continuous liberation of human nature, male painters were not satisfied with this, thus continuously seeking more subjects to stimulate their senses, so Judith's theme became popular in the period of the Renaissance. Concerning the theme of Judith, the Renaissance male painters mostly portrayed Judith as a classical goddess. Elegant women should be beautiful, and effeminate. It is the will of God that supports her to accomplish the feat -- cutting off the head of Holofernes, but she herself is not contaminated by blood. The beautiful image of Judith makes viewers feel pathetic, while also sigh the invincible power of God" [4]. After the minds were completely emancipated and the artists were no longer restricted by religion, the male painters unabashedly put their desire into the paintings. The images of women we see in most religious paintings are a reflection of the typical female images in the minds of men in the patriarchal society.

2.3. Judith Beheading Holofernes

At the end of the Renaissance, humanism continuously deepened, the status of women was gradually improved and the number of paintresses and female sponsors increased [5]. In paintings, paintresses expression of Judith is very different from male painters. Paintresses emphasize Judith's heroism, intelligence, and power, and more show a series of feminist ideas such as rebellion and vengeance. The best representation of Judith from a female perspective is Artemisia's Judith, 1620, *Judith Beheading Holofernes*.

First of all, from the composition, Judith, her maid, and Holofernes presented a reversed triangle, so that the core of the visual shifted upwards, emphasizing the image of Judith and her maid. Artemisia depicted Judith and her maid with a very strong feeling. They're looking filled with force and disgust for Holofernes. Secondly, the light used in the background, which is the background and sidelight of Caravaggio's style [6], completely shows Judith's behavior. But by putting half of her face in the dark, such strong contrast can more accurately reflect Judith and the maid's sense of

strength and decisiveness and also add a bit of mystery to the painting. And what differs greatly from the other male painters, Judith of Artemisia, is that she does not like a goddess but rather like a real middle-aged woman with hatred, decisiveness, and power. Most of the images of Judith depicted by male painters are in the status of peace and indifferent, and tender goddesses without expression. Although the expression of Artemisia contains a feeling of oppression, the image is more with a feeling of dynamism and strength, this power comes from Judith and her maid. Their arms Judith are rough and full of strength with the sleeves held up, and one hand holds a knife, the other tightly grabbing Holofernes's hair. The blood splatters and empurples the white sheet which gives viewers a kind of visual impact. Artemisia removes the meaning of any eroticism and completely shows extreme violence and bloodiness. This painting focuses on the power and decisiveness of women, and Artemisia uses her life experience to express her anger with the patriarchal society.

3. Feminism in the Judea of Artemisia

Violent aesthetics refers to the representation of violence in a sensory, esthetic way, such as the use of poetic images or even fantasy scene to denote the violent aspect of humanity. The viewers themselves are immersed in the artistic form of expression, unable to produce a concrete discomfort with the content, which, in other words, is a means of softening and rationalizing violence. In western paintings, women often do not appear in the images of main, real, and vivid characters, but are presented as goddesses or accomplices, often on the edge of the story and even in the misery of being ignored [7]. "In Quentin's violent films, the type of 'vengeance' women play an important role. Women in the films have been brutally injured or witnessed the murder of their loved ones, they are not inclined to serve as foils for men, and then they are gradually from the edge to the center and become the protagonists of the films. Such women have considerable autonomy in behavior, and their path of revenge is also relatively rational so the audiences will often unconsciously have compassion for these women. In other words, Quentin's works through the film present female violence in a rationalized and moral way" [8]. Through the theme of Judith, Artemisia expresses her anger at the violation of her teacher and rationalizes her emotions. But her innovation in the expression of Judith's image, in fact, is her awakening of self-awareness and the presentation of courage that she dares to resist. Although feminism did not exist at that time, the development of society and the prosperity of the ideological culture allowed a small percentage of women to have the awareness of who they really are. Like the woman in Quentin's movies, Judith in this painting shifts from the oppressed victim to the perpetrator, from the plaything to the person who dominates her own destiny. "The gender status of women is redefined here: women are no longer the weak obedient, the shameful sexual seducer, or the victims of violence; on the contrary, in this painting of Artemisia, women are the manipulators of political conduct, the perpetrators of violence, and the dominators of sex" [9]. Judith fight with the sword is the awakening of self-awareness, and this behavior suggests that it is the 'castration' to the patriarchal society. "The repeated appearance of Judith's subjects reflects Artemisia's wish to build up her own status as an artistry—a positive woman can create art, and her exorcism metaphors the psychological behavior of 'castration', as women who have long been castrated in culture, in turn, to castrate the men who oppressed them" [10].

The essence of feminism is not that women obtain equal rights and status with men, nor that they become hostile to men or replace male hegemony with female hegemony, but that they seek social identity and respect in this way. In this Artemisia's painting, it is more resistance that can also be called female self-construction, women challenge the patriarchal society via violence to resist destiny and defend their dignity. This is precisely the feminism expressed by this painting, which not only shows the rebellion of Artemisia herself, but also the exploration and self-construction of the female themselves.

4. Conclusion

The performance of Artemisia's work---*Judith Beheading Holofernes* differs from other male painters, putting personal experiences into the painting, she shows Judith's heroism and decisiveness. This distinction encompasses the dissatisfaction and rebellion of the patriarchal society as a woman, demonstrating women's power with violence and shouting at the patriarchal society with violence. Due to insufficient documents, this paper's angle is very single. So, it is very essential to collect more studies of Artemisia's Judith in the future and involves more primary sources, not only limited to the history of art, but also involving philosophy, psychology, and other aspects comprehensively to interpret the spiritual contents in the works of Artemisia, which can have a deeper understanding of this work. And also a deeper analysis should be conducted to explore the motions that Artemisia wants to express. Now, in the study of feminism in this work, the subjectivity is stronger because there is no intuitive, direct evidence to prove it, thus it can only be interpreted by analyzing and comparing the image. In the future, with the abundance of sources, the results of this field of study may change, but the answers of this work will be more and more clear and objective.

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