

CARAVAGGIO AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES:
AN EXAMINATION INTO THE LEGACIES OF ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI AND
GIOVANNI BAGLIONE

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Caravaggio is known as a master painter not only in the modern age, but within his own time as well. Born in 1571 as Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, he made a name for himself not only as an incredible artist who synthesized different elements of composition to create a new style but was also understood as a type of rogue not only within his art, but also in the world around him. Known for his incredible naturalism and strong use of chiaroscuro in his works, he is also often spoken of as a rebel in contemporary biographies indicating that he would get into fights, frequently found himself in trouble with law enforcement, had poor relationships with artists around him, and is known to have murdered Ranuccio Thomasoni¹. Despite this perception and negative reputation of Caravaggio, he had devoted followers throughout Europe, including in the Netherlands, France, Spain, and, of course, in Italy. Two notable followers were Artemisia Gentileschi, daughter of the painter Orazio Gentileschi, and Giovanni Baglione, a prominent painter and historian of the time. Caravaggio's life and work, though cut short in 1610 at the age of thirty-eight potentially due to syphilis, had a major impact on artists of his time and later in history. What cropped up as a result from his style of works were followers known as the Caravaggisti, who would work in a Caravaggesque style. Meaning, they would follow certain general thematic conventions that were typically seen in Caravaggio's work such as a strong naturalism, intense light and shadow (known as tenebrism or chiaroscuro), excellent composition, and specific handling of subject-matter. Two of the artists that will be examined are Giovanni Baglione and Artemisia Gentileschi. By looking into some works such as *Judith and Holofernes*, *Amor Victorious*, and *Sacred and Profane Love*, a direct comparison of the two followers can be drawn to certain works by Caravaggio of similar or exact themes. This essay

¹ Graham-Dixon, Britannica

will continue to examine how their personal identities and ever-evolving relationships (however present) with Caravaggio affected their own work and overall personal success.

Giovanni Baglione was an artist and historian born to Florentine parents in Rome in 1566, just five years before Caravaggio. He was trained by Francesco Morelli, a Tuscan artist, in a general Mannerist style of work (a style named after *maniera* or manner/style with characteristics being a general elongation of the body and an emphasis on artifice). When Caravaggio's work began picking up traction with larger audiences around 1600, Baglione chose to incorporate some of Caravaggio's elements into his own style, greatly admiring the younger artist. Yet, his Caravaggesque era was short lived, ending around 1604 after undergoing a trial against Caravaggio, Orazio Gentileschi, Onorio Longhi, and Filippo Trisegni for slander. Caravaggio painted *Amor Victorious* and, in response, Baglione painted *Sacred and Profrane Love* as a work meant to be directly compared. Soon thereafter, Caravaggio and his friends released verses directly criticizing Baglione's work, saying that he knew "nothing about there being any painter who will praise Giovanni Baglione as a good painter"². These harsh words quickly soured Baglione's opinion on Caravaggio, causing him to sue him for libel in an infamous trial in 1603. While he quickly falls off of directly utilizing themes and subjects from Caravaggio's style, certain aspects of Caravaggism continue to appear in his works later on in life as well. Despite his tumultuous love-hate relationship with Caravaggio, Baglione could not help but respect the works of the younger painter, going so far as to say, "if Michelangelo Merisi had not died so soon, the art world would have profited greatly from his beautiful style"³. Baglione's inclusion of Caravaggism within his own work through naturalistic modelling and strong chiaroscuro showed great respect for the younger painter. He continued to find moderate

² Spear, 44

³ Hibbard, 356

success as a painter, but was more notably understood as a historian, writing artists' biographies in the 16th and 17th centuries. The concept that Caravaggio's work and style was so profound and beloved that even an older artist adapted his personal style to compare and compete with Caravaggio's work speaks volumes about the impressiveness of Caravaggio's portfolio. The reasoning behind and integration of Caravaggio's style into Baglione's work is reflected in the way Baglione chooses to assimilate aspects of Caravaggism into his pieces and ultimately withdraw them from his art.

Artemisia Gentileschi, on the other hand, was the daughter of Orazio Gentileschi, Caravaggio's friend and accomplice in the libel trial against Baglione. She was born in 1593 in Rome, twenty-two years younger than Caravaggio, but raised in the time of Caravaggio's prominence as an artist⁴. Being brought up in the time that Caravaggio was at his peak in terms of artistic prowess, in addition to being her father's friend, had a profound influence on Artemisia as a young artist. She quickly adopted his naturalism and strong chiaroscuro within her works, creating paintings with excellent composition that appeared to be a snapshot in time of a particular event, becoming history's only female Caravaggisti. Something that potentially played a role in Artemisia's distinctive style, perspective as an artist, and preference toward female heroes was the fact that she was raped by her art teacher, Agostino Tassi, and underwent a trial against him in order to defend her family's honor. Following the trial, Gentileschi married Pietro Stiattesi the same year and moved to Florence in order to be able to continue her work as an artist and not be ruined by the trial⁵. In addition to this traumatic event, Artemisia is notable for being a successful artist at this time when being an artist was primarily considered a male-dominated occupation. While Artemisia may not have had a turbulent relationship with

⁴ Spear, 96

⁵ Franklin & Schultz, 302

Caravaggio like Baglione, her direct observations of his work was most definitely an influence on her style, especially in the beginning of her career. Artemisia's career took off and she rose to prominence with the support of her father adapting Caravaggio's style to meet her own perspective as a female artist of the 16th and 17th centuries.

One of Caravaggio's most striking images in terms of horror and gore is his *Judith and Holofernes*, 1598-99. The work which was most likely commissioned by a Genoese banker named Ottavio Costa, depicts a scene of tension⁶. The subject matter is representative of the Old Testament story of Judith and Holofernes where Judith sacrifices Holofernes by seducing him and cutting off his head, therefore preventing the Assyrians from attacking her home. Caravaggio's wonderful, intense style of painting adds to the drama of the situation as Judith is shrouded in a bright light against a dramatically dark background. Caravaggio excellently creates a foil between Judith's youth and beauty and her maidservant, showing Judith as the virtuous heroine of the story. He chose to illuminate Judith with light from the left side of the canvas in order to shed light on her distinct emotional expression and actions. Yet, Caravaggio paints Judith as undertaking this great feat in a state of turmoil, her brow is furrowed, and she holds Holofernes as far away from her body as possible in an attempt to distance herself from this task. He utilizes strong naturalism to create these incredible figures in the midst of a complicated composition, yet the subject itself may be far from realistic. It would be unlikely that Judith finds herself in a calm state of pensive thought while she kills Holofernes. In addition, the blood released from his neck spurts straight out at an awkward and unnatural angle. Yet, his rich use of detail and ability to render focus on the emotions of each figure in the composition is unparalleled.

⁶ Franklin & Schutze, 264

Artemisia's version of the same subject-matter is most definitely influenced by Caravaggio's previous work, yet hers takes a distinctly different route. Her *Judith and Holofernes*, 1612-13 depicts more of a scene of struggle as it takes the strength of both Judith and her maidservant, Abra, to restrain Holofernes as Judith beheads him. Artemisia takes certain elements seemingly directly from Caravaggio's version such as the deeply dark background and Judith's outstretched arms holding the sword and Holofernes' head in place. She also places Holofernes on a bed, hanging similarly off of the edge on the righthand side. Yet, where this composition differs is the way in which both Judith and Abra are killing Holofernes. Both women are unidealized as Artemisia presents the viewer with a more "realistic" approach to what may have happened. The women's sleeves are rolled up, and, in the midst of the struggle, Abra's has begun to slide down her arm. While Judith has Holofernes in a tight grasp, and held far away from her body as well, Artemisia's heroine appears to be more confident and presents a more turbulent and horrifying approach than Caravaggio⁷. The blood pouring from his neck stains the sheets and the sword as she struggles to bring the blade through his neck. While her approach is certainly more realistic, it lacks the psychological emotion that Caravaggio so expertly presents to the viewer.

Although there was initially dispute over whether or not Artemisia's father, Orazio Gentileschi, painted the *Judith and Holofernes*, in Artemisia's rape trial, testimony points to the fact that this was one of Artemisia's works. In fact, this is a subject that Artemisia returned to frequently, creating different variations of the story in different points in time such as after his head is fully severed and Judith and Abra are attempting to make their getaway. What is incredibly interesting about this work is how modern and her contemporary readers understood

⁷ Franklin & Schutze, 268

the painting as a reflection of her own inner feelings toward her rapist Agostino Tassi. Tassi was understood to have raped Artemisia many times, yet the trial was not as a result of these rapes, but more toward the idea that Tassi was refusing to marry Artemisia after the fact. One of the ways that art historians and others who study Artemisia's work is that they look at her life through a modern lens, a rape victim and survivor who utilized painting to live out her feminist, Freudian fantasies of revenge⁸. While this is theoretically possible, it may be unlikely due to the differences between the times and our tendency to look at history through a modern lens.

A later work that Artemisia did on the same subject matter was *Judith and Her Maidservant With the Head of Holofernes*, 1625 in which she depicts the moment immediately after Judith and Abra sever Holofernes' head and move to hide it and escape. In this version, Judith stands at attention, hand blocking the internal light source of the candle in order to see if someone is coming. Abra also looks toward the same direction as if they have both heard a noise and are watching for intruders. Both figures are once again close to the picture plane, and the viewer feels drawn into the tense scene along with them. The internal light source of the candle may have come from another Caravaggisti, Gerrit Von Honthorst, who was well known for his internal lighting which emphasized the deep shadows present in his works. Judith displays these women as monumental heroic figures in the midst of a dramatic narrative, where these women show an intelligence, strength, and grit that is unparalleled in other artists' versions of these women⁹. Artemisia's handling of this work in particular speaks volumes not only to her ability as a painter, but her success with imitation and adaptation of Caravaggio's style as an artist.

As Cropper examines in her writing, Artemisia's rape trial was not about procuring justice for sexual violence, it was about restoring her and her family's honor, ultimately saving

⁸ Mann, 162

⁹ Gerrard, 67

her career as a painter. Artemisia's ability as a painter cannot solely be attributed to the fact that she underwent a traumatic experience and chose to depict her emotional response toward it. She must be remembered as an incredible artist who was well-known and respected of the time who created these beautiful works in spite of what happened to her. While it is possible her approach to *Judith and Holofernes* was a reaction to and a type of revenge toward Tassi, her approach to these works does take into account a woman's perspective of a situation. The confidence displayed in Judith's face in addition to the strength taken to hold Holofernes down shows a more realistic approach than Caravaggio's Judith who, in comparison, appears to be barely holding him in place. Artemisia was able to find success in these earlier works through her use of a Caravaggesque style utilizing elements like deep tenebrism with raking light, naturalistic figures and composition, and excellent attention to detail in regard to specific subject matter. Yet, she did not simply copy Caravaggio's work, she adapted it to create her own works which added a layer of depth, sensitivity, and perspective that was not seen from her male counterparts. Ultimately, Artemisia has become a well-known figure in the art world and the only Caravaggista to find success as a painter despite the limitations there were on women at the time.

Another work to examine by Caravaggio is his *Amor Victorious*, 1601-1602 which depicts a cupid seated rudely displaying his triumph over humans. The collection of trinkets strewn around his feet represent various different aspects of human endeavor such as music, the arts, military glory, immortal fame, and astronomy and are also thought to have been recognized as tributes to Giustiniani's successes and virtues in life¹⁰. This work was painted for Marchese Vincenzo Giustiniani, an Italian banker and collector who was a regular patron of Caravaggio's work. The work is meant to evoke the idea that physical love triumphs over art as a tribute to

¹⁰ Spear, 47

Giustiniani's love of the arts. As is typical in Caravaggio's work, the figure is naturalistic and unidealized, holding two arrows in his right hand, with his wings delicately unfurled behind his back, one feather lightly grazing his exposed thigh. Caravaggio once again makes use of the darkened background to extensively highlight his large figure in the foreground, bringing particular attention to the anatomy of the cupid. The cupid displays a mischievous grin, fully aware of the salacious pose he is in, and inviting the viewer to look at him. This piece truly exemplifies Caravaggio's artistic abilities as it shows a multitude of randomly assorted excellently rendered and detailed items alongside a rude, yet well-presented, cupid.

Giovanni Baglione attempted to create works in reference to and in competition with Caravaggio's *Amor Victorious* called *Sacred and Profane Love*, 1602-03. Baglione painted this work for Vincenzo Giustiniani's brother, the cardinal Benedetto Giustiniani. Baglione's work depicts an armor-clad angel representing Sacred Love preparing to strike cupid, Profane Love, who rests defenseless on the ground (Figure 1). Baglione takes elements from Caravaggio such as the use of an extremely dark background as well as treatment of the work as a genre painting despite subject-matter that could be considered history painting. The figures are once again close to the picture plane, similarly to Caravaggio's *Amor Victorious* with raking light covering the two figures in the foreground. Yet, Baglione does not let go of his traditional style of utilizing idealized figures. Previously creating works in a Mannerist style, and being an older artist, Baglione carries the idealization forward into this work, creating these beautifully sculpted figures. The naturalism that is generally taken from Caravaggio is still present, yet not as aggressive as Caravaggio's tend to be. In addition, the figures in the composition tend to lack the emotional depth that Caravaggio depicts in his works. Ultimately, it appears more likely that

Baglione was integrating Caravaggistic elements into his own work rather than adapting his style to fit Caravaggism.

Baglione also created a second version of this painting (Figure 2), more fully rendering the third figure in the background which appears to be some type of devil figure that Sacred Love will also conquer. In this particular version, Sacred Love is far more adorned with his armor and the composition makes use of strong chiaroscuro in an attempt to further dramatize the piece. The third figure in the background nearly detracts from the image, though, and appears not to belong due to the intensely different color scheme used between the two main figures in the foreground and the figure in the background. Once again, the figure of Sacred Love is extremely idealized, his musculature emphasized by the light illuminating his body. The figures continue to lack strong, understandable emotion as Cupid appears to look up more in indifference than fear, and Sacred Love does not appear to be wearing the emotions of someone about to kill another. The only figure with demonstrable emotion is the devilish figure in the back whose mouth rests agape as he observes what will presumably be his same fate once Sacred Love finishes with Profane Love.

These works are obviously attempting to follow in Caravaggio's footsteps by pulling aspects like Cupid and the similarities seen in the make-up of the composition, yet Baglione is attempting to surpass Caravaggio's work by creating this second figure triumphing over Profane Love, as well as the third figure looking on. While the intent is there, the execution is not as beautifully rendered and executed as Caravaggio's. The faces lack any real emotional depth and there is an awkward third figure resting in the background with no apparent purpose toward the subject of the painting other than filling the composition in Figure 1 and reacting to the action in Figure 2. This attempt at a competition with Caravaggio backfired on Baglione in a major way as

Caravaggio wrote slanderous poetry along with other contemporaries decrying the poor imitation of his style. Baglione, spurned by Caravaggio, an artist he had greatly admired and sought to emulate, chose to sue Caravaggio for libel in an infamous trial in 1603.

After Baglione received a commission for an altarpiece for the church of the Gesù, Caravaggio and his friends released their slanderous verses into Rome¹¹. Caravaggio was known at the time for his antagonistic relationships with other painters from his time, yet this particular instance has lasted throughout time. The trial that ensued has nearly completely eclipsed Baglione's work as a painter and as a historian, as he is often mainly associated with the trial as a painter who sued Caravaggio, rather than a successful painter in his own right.¹² As a painter, after the trial, Baglione tended away from Caravaggio's style of painting, and actually contributed to incredible fresco campaigns up until his death. He is still known for his biographies of other artists at the time, providing modern viewers a look into not only the artists and their works at the time from the view of a contemporary, but also a window into the politics of artists in Italy as well.

Both Artemisia and Baglione are viewed, perhaps unfairly, predominately through the lenses of their respective trials. On one hand, Artemisia is painted in the light of a feminist painter, rising out of her trial as an artist who seeks revenge through her works. She is displayed as a powerful woman whose works tend toward Freudian interpretation with her themes of childbirth and castration. On the other side is Baglione whose work is generally funneled through the idea that he sued Caravaggio for libel and chose to not generally integrate any Caravaggistic elements into his work any longer, instead turning mostly into a historian. While there can be some truth to these interpretations of these two artists, they are much more than what is generally

¹¹ Ostrow, 608

¹² Zirpolo, 1166

credited to them. Artemisia was an excellent painter, and a successful female artist, one of the few finding success in her own time. Her ability to recognize minute emotions and strength in the female heroine is unlike any other artist of the time due to her unique perspective as a woman who was given the opportunity to have an artistic career. Being brought up around Caravaggio's work greatly influenced her art and gave her a launching point for her career in which she took his elements and adapted them to fit her own artistic needs. Baglione was also a successful painter and historian in his time. While his works may not have measured up to Caravaggio's in the Caravaggesque style, his paintings and frescoes were still sought after, and he continued to find success following the libel trial. Ultimately, these painters were greatly influenced by Caravaggio and their relationships to him had a major impact not only on their works, but on their legacies as well.

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Appendix

Figure 1: Giovanni Baglione, *Sacred and Profane Love*, 1602-03Figure 2: Giovanni Baglione, *Sacred and Profane Love*, 1602-03