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LIFE WITHOUT INSTRUCTION: ARTEMISIA, AND THE LESSONS OF PERSPECTIVE

Peu de choses ont été écrites sur Artemesia Gentileschi, une peintre italienne du XVIIe siècle, depuis que des féministes historiennes de l'art l'ont redécouverte au cours des années 1970. Life Without Instruction, une pièce écrite par Sally Clark en 1994, est une importante illustration de la façon que l'on s'est réapproprié Gentileschi aujourd'hui. Dans cet article, Grace examine les sources utilisées par Clark, analyse la pièce en tant que texte et représentation, puis inscrit le personnage de Gentileschi qu'a créé Clark dans le contexte plus vaste de la performance féministe et des figures allégoriques de pittura et poesia



“And I will show Your Most Illustrious Lordship what a woman can do, hoping to give you the greatest pleasure.”
(Artemisia Gentileschi to Don Antonio Ruffo, 7 August 1649, qtd in Garrard, 394)

JUDITH. “THE HEAD OF HOLOFERNES!!! SLAIN BY
MY HAND!! THE HAND OF A MERE WOMAN—”
(Clark, *Life Without Instruction* 161)

ORAZIO. “My God! Is that your new painting?”
ARTEMISIA. “Yes. I have taken my revenge . . .”
(Clark, *Life Without Instruction* 162)

The character of Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-c1653) is, in large part, a rediscovery of the latter third of the twentieth century. Although Gentileschi was a popular and highly successful painter of the Italian baroque, with several major canvasses to her credit, she was all but written out of art history until feminist scholars began revisiting her story in the 1970s. Since her rediscovery, however, her greatest works have been interpreted with reference to and in terms of her biography. As a result, the woman *artist* has been read through the woman's body and life, and the life had some violent, lurid episodes, which, together with her attributed and signed works, comprise most of what can be known about her today.

There are two chief reasons for Artemisia Gentileschi's current status: her magnificent paintings (most notably a self-portrait, a

famous depiction of Susanna and the Elders, and an even more famous rendition of Judith and Holofernes, to each of which I will return), and a rape trial that took place in Rome in 1612, for which court transcripts survive. Revival of interest in Gentileschi, no matter what form that it takes, turns on the rape trial and on these paintings, and in each fictional creation of the artist's life differing emphases and interpretations are given to these dramatic events and hence to her great works. To date, the works inspired by her story include four novels and four plays (one of which is Sally Clark's *Life Without Instruction*) in English, one feature film, and two television pieces.¹ In most of these works the young Gentileschi is presented as shaped by two men: her father, who trained her, and another painter, who raped her, and she is either constructed as falling in love with her rapist, the artist Agostino Tassi, or as loathing him and taking violent revenge upon him through her art. She is also imagined either as adoring her father, Orazio Gentileschi, until she feels betrayed by him, or as always remaining loyal to him and finally being reconciled with him before his death in 1639. Few *creative* recreations of her life go beyond ringing the changes upon this triad of father/daughter/lover-cum-rapist, and the art historical record has provided the lens through which this version of the life and work is seen.

Although my focus here is only on Sally Clark's play, a few key texts deserve further attention. The most important of these are Germaine Greer's *The Obstacle Race* (1979) and Mary Garrard's majestic *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Baroque Art* (1989), both of which influenced Clark's reading of her subject, and Griselda Pollock's *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (1999), which, together with other recent scholarship (Bissell, Cohen, and Spear), has influenced my approach to Artemisia Gentileschi and, thus, to Clark's play.

The dominant readings of Gentileschi have been *autobiographical*, by which I mean that a few of her most powerful paintings have been privileged as definitive and then interpreted as direct reflections of her personal experiences, with the inevitable implications that she could not have painted them if she had not actually experienced harassment, betrayal, torture, and rape, and that the power of her best work derives from some essential (hence essentialist) femaleness, where to be female is to be defined by one's body (including one's sexuality), by what is done to that body by men and by one's feminine passions. Overlooked by these readings, even when they are grounded in immense historical research

and theoretical nuance, as by Garrard, are the talent, training, and ambition of the artist, the cultural context of her life, and the long trajectory of her career. As Griselda Pollock notes, when the life is seen as “mirrored in art [then] art [...] confirm[s] the biographical subject—a woman wronged” (97). But Richard Spear goes an important step further than Pollock by reminding us that Gentileschi was much more than a wronged woman. “The most remarkable aspect of Artemisia’s life [...],” he insists, is that “after the rape and trial, and despite persistent serious family and financial problems, she had the talent and guts to find her way within a male discourse of image-making and marketing” (577).

But before I say anything specific about Sally Clark’s artist hero, let me outline what I want to do with this play. I will begin by examining it primarily as a text, with close attention to one production.² Then I will suggest a reading of the play *through* Gentileschi’s paintings rather than through Gentileschi’s biography because, while I have no doubt that the play draws on her biography and suggests parallels between her trauma and some of her paintings, I also think that Clark’s play moves beyond what Pollock calls “a woman wronged” to suggest a more complex figure of the woman artist with, as Spear notes, “the talent and guts” to succeed in a male world. To stress a play-to-painting reading provides a fresh perspective on the play and allows me to explore how one woman artist might create another and, most important, what happens when one of those artists is a painter (a human embodiment of *pittura*) and the other is a playwright (a human embodiment of *poesia*).³ I am not especially interested in Gentileschi’s life beyond agreeing that her life far exceeded the events of May 1611 and early 1612. I see her as a remarkable artist, not merely as a *woman* artist, as better than Orazio Gentileschi and far superior to Agostino Tassi, and I agree with Spears in seeing her as successfully negotiating a complex position as an artist, who was also a woman, during a period when the status of painting was hotly debated by men for men, when the emerging academies excluded women, and when the art world was dominated (as it still largely is) by men.⁴ By reading Clark’s play through Gentileschi’s painting, I want to explore how the play signifies, what choices Clark has made in creating her artist, what a production can reveal, and thus what this play about a seventeenth century artist can say to us in the early twenty-first century. We can never recover Artemisia Gentileschi, but we can learn many lessons by reading or watching Clark’s play; we can engage in a struggle for perspective; we can experience different points of view; and we can gain insight into

life and art by studying the sister arts of *pittura* and *poesia*.

II

My approach to Clark's version of this artist is grounded in both historiographics (the theory of historiography as story) and, more particularly, autobiographics (the theory of life-writing as self-fabulation).⁵ Moreover, I must rely on what the art historians tell me, just as Clark had to in her own research for this play, and most of these facts, as we know them, are necessary to any understanding of the semiotics and themes of Clark's play. Here, then, are the facts, as presented by Garrard in the reprinted translation of trial transcripts and interpreted by Garrard and Cohen, the latter insisting that "[t]he rape must be read as history" (48).

Early in 1612 Orazio Gentileschi petitioned Pope Paul V in legal proceedings against his friend and associate Agostino Tassi. He accused Tassi of raping his daughter Artemisia in May 1611, and thereafter many times, and alleged that Tassi had stolen one of his, Orazio's, paintings and also interfered with attempts to arrange another marriage for Artemisia. Artemisia supported the charge of rape and explained that, when Tassi promised marriage, she agreed to continue sexual relations with him. The trial began on 18 March by calling Artemisia to testify, and it ended on 16 May 1612. When Tassi testified he made several claims: that he had never had any sexual relations with her, that she had a reputation as a whore, and that she may have had an incestuous relation with her father. Artemisia was interrogated a second time and examined by two midwives in her home, not in public court, to see if she was still a virgin (she was not). She was also subjected to the *sybille*, a legal form of torture intended to exact the truth from a witness. This process took place in front of Tassi, who, as far as the court records indicate, showed no sympathy for Artemisia. While undergoing this torture, she reconfirmed her testimony and he continued to deny all knowledge of her, accusing her of being a whore and of telling him that her father "wants to use me exactly as if I were his wife" (Garrard 453). At one point during this part of the trial, Artemisia said, "This is the ring that you give me, and these are your promises" (Garrard 462), by which she was referring to the *sybille* cords around her fingers that were intended to ring the truth from her.

Many witnesses were called and their testimony was rife with slander and contradiction, especially from those supposedly testifying for the accused, and Tassi's reputation as a violent, disreputable man, living with the sister of his wife—whom he *may* have had murdered or who may have still been alive—was

corroborated by many. At the time of the rape, Agostino Tassi may have been giving Artemisia Gentileschi lessons in drawing and perspective with her father's knowledge and consent, but Tassi is the only one to make this claim in the trial transcript.

Recent research by Alexandra Lapierre has proved that Tassi was convicted “for presumed defloration [of Artemisia Gentileschi] and suborning of witnesses” and sentenced, on 27 November 1612, at the Corte Savella prison to five years banishment from Rome (186-87). In April 1613 at the end of yet another trial, however, Tassi's 1612 sentence was revoked and he was granted a general pardon (Lapierre 393). For her part, Artemisia Gentileschi married Pierantonio Stiattesi, a minor painter, left Rome for Florence, had four children with Stiattesi, and established her career as a successful painter with important patrons (including the Medicis) and commissions, became a friend of Galileo's, was elected to the Accademia del Disegno, separated from her husband circa 1622, supported her family by her own efforts, established her reputation and an important studio in Naples in the 1620s and 30s, and travelled to London in 1638 to assist her dying father with his work on the Queen's Chapel at Somerset House. She returned to Naples and was living and working there at the time of her death in 1652-53. In short, the painter Artemisia Gentileschi cannot be defined by events in 1611-12, and, as Elizabeth Cohen notes, “Artemisia's reputation in her own lifetime shows little sign of grave sexual blemish” (50). More importantly, Cohen argues that our twentieth century “universalizing ideology of rape” (55) has shaped our readings of Artemisia, thereby blinding us to the meanings assigned to the body, to concepts of identity and gender, and, thus, to rape in the early seventeenth century. According to Cohen, a woman of Artemisia's day was unlikely to understand her body as integral to her sense of a private, internal, or psychological self, but she most certainly would understand an assault on her body, especially a virgin body, as a grave social offense against her reputation and her family (notably her father and male relatives). According to Cohen, her early modern honour was at stake, not her psyche, and “we can profitably read Artemisia's testimony as a ‘self-fashioning,’ where she focuses on her public identity embedded in reputation and relationships with others” (67).

With these points—and reservations—in mind, it is now possible to turn to Gentileschi's most famous paintings, the ones that Sally Clark invokes in her play (see Figures 1 and 2): *Susanna and the Elders* (1610) and *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1612-13).

Both are depictions of biblical stories that were common art themes and popular narratives of the day. To choose these subjects was in no way exceptional; it is what Gentileschi did with her material that makes them outstanding and uniquely hers. Both works, as well as her later Judith paintings (such as the 1620 *Judith Slaying Holofernes* and the 1625 *Judith and her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes*), are notable for their action, their pictorial drama, which is a function of Caravaggist chiaroscuro and composition, and for her talent with colour, moulding, and realism. Artemisia's *Susanna and Judith* are not the passive, delicate, or overtly seductive heroines familiar from Orazio's work or from the works of other male contemporaries; they are flesh and blood, complete with creases and wrinkles, muscles, and determination. They are depicted as active—indeed, in the case of Judith, as full of conviction and business. Whether or not Artemisia Gentileschi was fashioning her self in these works is an open question, but she was definitely *refashioning* the received story and iconography of these biblical genre paintings, working within a familiar tradition but pushing its envelope.



Figure 1:
Artemisia
Gentileschi,
Susanna and
the Elders
(1610).

Oil on canvas,
170 x 119 cm.
Pommersfelden,
Kunstsammlungen
Graf von Schönborn

Figure 2:
Artemisia
Gentileschi,
Judith Slaying
Holofernes
(1612-13).

Oil on canvas,
168 x 128 cm.
Naples, Museo di
Capodimonte.



When Sally Clark, who trained as a painter before she turned to writing (Rudakoff 76), wanted to write about Artemisia Gentileschi she studied the available sources, notably Greer's chapter in *The Obstacle Race* and Mary Garrard's major study. In both works she found a twentieth century feminist recreation of the seventeenth century painter as rape victim and a reading of her paintings as versions of self-portraiture in which the painter used biblical heroines, Susanna and Judith, to tell her own story and to take revenge upon a father, who had betrayed her, and a lover, who had begun by raping and ended by publicly rejecting her. As Greer puts it, Artemisia "developed an ideal of heroic womanhood. She lived it, and she portrayed it" (193). More important, both scholars, but especially Garrard, resort to metaphors of theatre, drama, and staging to explain both the power of these paintings and Artemisia Gentileschi's unique qualities.⁶ For example, Greer claims that "Artemisia had developed her own dramatic language" (194) and, in a representative passage, Garrard writes (of *Judith and her Maidservant* [1613-14]) that in

her radical deviation from Orazio's model, Artemisia reveals a talent for character development and dramatic tension that may fairly be said to exceed her father's. Her painting, in its precise definition of the frightful moment

when the sound is heard, simply makes for better theatre. Indeed, the picture may literally draw inspiration from the theatre, since the figures' response to a sound from the side, in the lateral plane, recalls the conventions of the stage, and especially those of the seventeenth century, when noises and music were usually produced in the wings [. . . S]he may have responded more generally to theatricality itself, and to the dramatic conventions that permitted events to occur both on and off stage. (315-16)

Such comments, along with Garrard's references to many Judith plays of the day, must have struck Clark, the painter-turned-playwright, as grist for her dramatic mill, as authorizations to *dramatize* her version of Gentileschi's life. Most important for my reading of *Life Without Instruction*, these comments encourage me to look for an intimate connection between *pittura* and *poesia* in the play and to read the play on one level as an allegory in which Clark portrays painting (Artemisia as *pittura*) through her own art of poetry (Sally as *poesia*) while, as the author, she is figuratively absent and yet everywhere present in the text.

III

Life Without Instruction has two acts, each consisting of interwoven, uninterrupted scenes that conflate the story of Judith and Holofernes with that of Artemisia and Tassi. The four chief characters in each story are played by the same actors to underscore the doubling and conflation: Artemisia/Judith, Tassi/Holofernes, Orazio/Ratzo (Holofernes's eunuch), and Tutia, who plays both Artemisia's feckless chaperon and Judith's maidservant (Abra in the biblical tale). Thus, the governing trope of the play—of doubling or mirroring—is established in the opening scene, and it will be picked up, expanded upon, and then consolidated in the echoes of the final scene of the play. The play opens on a drunken Holofernes in bed with a beautiful Judith, who is there to slay him and save the city of Bethulia from invasion by his army. After a few lines about love, entrapment, rape, and an exchange of kisses, the lights go down only to come up again on the naked forms of the sleeping couple. But Judith is not asleep. She gets up, dresses, calls Tutia, and together they perform the slaying of Holofernes *just as it appears in* Gentileschi's painting (see Figure 2). And so what I call the play's mirror trope is firmly established: life, which is nothing more nor less than story—apocryphal at that⁷—foreshadows art which, in turn, reflects life.

Scene Two continues the Judith and Holofernes theme, but shifts from a tent in the Middle East to a studio in Rome, where young Artemisia is posing as Judith with Holofernes's head so that her father can paint his version of the story, which will be, as he puts it, "A frozen moment in time" that captures his daughter as "perfection itself" (15). Orazio believes that painting should be timeless, static, and frozen, and through him Clark fires her first salvo in the *ut pictura poesis* "querelle des femmes" debate that will play out through the text.⁸ Artemisia, inevitably it seems, opposes her father's conventional, lifeless aesthetic: "You made me look like a little girl. Why did you even bother telling me I was Judith. [. . .] You should paint the story" (15-16). And so the die is cast. Even before raw life enters the studio in the form of Agostino Tassi, Artemisia knows enough to reject her father's lifeless forms and to demand that he get her another teacher. She yells for Caravaggio, whom her father loathes, until he finally settles upon Tassi because Tassi is a master of perspective. Art *without* perspective, it is already clear, is inferior, frozen, false. Art *with* perspective is another matter, so the lessons are crucial.

The nature of those lessons, however, is anything but clear. Tassi understands Orazio's request for lessons as a request to initiate his daughter in the facts of life and in a fully sexualized perspective on reality; Orazio, however, believes he is asking Tassi to train her in drawing, which is not his own strong suit, and he seems unaware of the sexual innuendo in his request. This misunderstanding between the two men arises, not simply because they are drunk when the arrangement for lessons is made, but because they have been examining Artemisia's unfinished "Susanna and the Elders" (see Figure 1). Tassi immediately recognizes "a living body" in this painting — "It's not your usual shit" he tells Razzo (22) — and he is aroused by Susanna's "delightful body" and "good tits" (23), even though "the perspective is all off" (22). When Orazio admits that the painting is not his but his daughter's, and that "She is my revenge on [Caravaggio] that sonofabitch" (26), Tassi is merely amused by Orazio's jealousy. However, with Orazio's words Clark has introduced the idea of revenge into the play, where it will take on an inexorable life of its own and multiply into many, many acts of revenge. Most importantly, however, in this scene revenge is closely linked with artists, as if to suggest that it is common, if not natural, for one artist to seek revenge on another.⁹

From these subtle but crucial opening ideas, the rest of the play will flow. One perspective will give way to another; one act of revenge will lead to another. Under the stimulus of Artemisia's

beautiful body—as represented in her Susanna—or on the pretext of visual seduction by her art, Tassi will rape Artemisia, and Clark leaves absolutely no doubt about what kind of sexual encounter she intends: it is a violent, unprovoked (from the girl’s perspective) attack that leaves her shattered. But as Clark’s version of the story develops, the perspective keeps changing. Artemisia will agree with Tutia’s plan to trap Tassi into marriage, a *nozze di riparazione* (82), but then she will come to love him, and Tassi will also come to love Artemisia, after his rough, self-centred fashion. Artemisia will continue to refine her perspective on life, even as she advances the perspective of her art: she will continue to improve her *Susanna and the Elders*, depicting one elder as her father, the other as Tassi, and she will start planning the first of her famous Judiths by staging her lover as Holofernes—to get the image right she needs a male model. Prior to the trial her desires seem purely aesthetic (85–86), but after the trial her perspective on life and art, father and lover, truth and lies, love and vengeance, submission and power, will change.

The second act of this play keeps tightening the screws on revenge until the drama becomes a parody of a revenge tragedy and the latter part of the trial lapses into a combination of melodrama and farce—a kind of Punch and Judy show—even as Clark draws on some of the most moving testimony and events of the actual trial.¹⁰ But the more serious undercurrent is never far from the surface. Art, Clark shows us, has an ultimate power. If it is good, then it will exact its own revenge, possibly on life, but most certainly on art history and other artists. In the final scenes of the play, which take place some time after the trial, Artemisia tells Tassi that he is finished: “I’m on the edge now, Agostino,” she taunts him at sword point, “THE CUTTING EDGE!!” (156). Of course, the double entendre on cutting edge refers less to revenge as a matter of swords and beheading than to revenge as the pupil’s surpassing of the teacher in the lessons of perspective.

In the scene that follows this dismissal of Tassi, we shift to the closing moments in the story of Judith and Holofernes. The General has been decapitated and the two women are escaping to Bethulia with the head in a basket. At the town gate Judith (who hears, but resists, Holofernes’s head telling her he loves her) holds up the severed head and shouts hysterically: “THE HEAD OF HOLOFERNES!!! SLAIN BY MY HAND!! THE HAND OF A MERE WOMAN—” (161). But that is not all that has been done by the hand of a woman. Mirroring this Judith and Holofernes scene is one in which Artemisia has completed her painting and exacts

what is, in Clark's rendition, her finest revenge on both father and lover. She shows Orazio her painting, challenges him to paint one as good, and says: "I have taken my revenge on Agostino Tassi. He is dying as we speak. An ignominious and gruesome death. Dying for all eternity and all the world shall be witness" (163). Of course, she has done much more than take revenge on Tassi. She has learned her lessons well and become "Something truly unspeakable. An artist!" (163) She has become an artist as good as, perhaps better than her father, an artist whose painting surpasses his and, in the penultimate scene, will be displayed to the astonishment and admiration of others. Art, Clark seems to be saying, is an act of revenge on the mentors and on the tradition in which the artist must train and work.

Life Without Instruction does not end on this note of triumph, however. In the final scene of the play, almost a coda, time has passed, we are in Florence, and we see Artemisia in bed with her husband Tony (Pierantonio Stiattesi in history). The great painting of *Judith Slaying Holofernes* hangs above the bed. Tony is angered by this talismanic presence of his wife's artistic prowess and biographical past; he wants her to love *him*. The play ends with Tony shouting that he will make her love him as he forces himself on her and she "lies back, her head upside down, facing the audience in the 'Holofernes's position'" (168). The problem, for me, is what to do with this ending, which Clark explains as the culmination of revenge in her version of the story.¹¹ This scene seems to say that Artemisia Gentileschi, at least in Clark's reading, was obsessed by Tassi and unable to escape or grow beyond his influence and that she is fated to relive and repeat that rape/betrayal/torture scenario until life, in the shape of another man, takes its own revenge on her. Such a reading would seem to align this portrayal of Artemisia with the female victims in other Clark plays.¹²

IV

However, when I take a closer look at the final tableau of Clark's play, especially through the lens of an actual production, other interpretations of Artemisia become possible. Clark's stage instructions are brief but precise: Artemisia and Tony are in bed and "they are lit only by the slide projection of the painting, 'Judith Beheading Holofernes,' above the headboard of the bed" (167). In the 1999 Frederic Wood production, however, the set involved actual (or what appeared to be actual) easel paintings (see Figure 3); slides were *not* used. The final scene (see Figure 4) captured a dramatic chiaroscuro lighting effect

but in a more literal, natural-seeming, and painterly (Caravaggist) manner than might have been achieved with the mechanics of slide projection.¹³ In this production the audience was presented with a powerful tableau that recapitulated, while it mirrored and distorted, the triadic structure of the biblical Judith story, of Gentileschi's painting, and of Clark's retelling of the stories (both Judith's and Artemisia's). In other words, the staging of this scene exploited the mirror trope running through the play by repeating it in visually interesting ways.



Figure 3: The 1999 Frederic Wood Theatre production of Sally Clark's *Life Without Instruction*. Tassi (Fabrice Glover) and Artemisia (Heather Redmond) stand in front of *Susanna and the Elders*. The set was designed by Ron Fedoruk. Photograph: Bob Eberle.

To appreciate the impact of this scene as staged, we need to remember the composition of Gentileschi's painting in which the three figures (Holofernes, Judith, and her servant Abra) form a triangle that contains several other triangular areas (see Figure 2). Holofernes's head lies at the low point of the triangle with the heads of the women placed at the two higher points. All the weight of the women's arms and bodies bears down on that lower point, which is the focus of their and the viewer's gaze. In the final scene of the play, as staged in this production, the figures of Tony and Artemisia *seem* to mirror the triangular composition of the painting that hangs immediately above the bed (see Figure 4). At first glance, Artemisia appears to mirror Holofernes and Tony appears to mirror Tutia (Abra in the biblical account). But where is Judith? The famous

triangular construction of Gentileschi's painting has not, in fact, been fully duplicated. Instead, the mirror effect is something of a trick, and this trick, or ambiguity, adds another layer of possibility and complexity to the drama. In this scene, as staged and *from an audience's perspective*, it is Gentileschi's painting (or its simulacrum) hanging immediately above the two figures on the bed that completes the triangle and conveys the full downward force of Judith's sword and Abra's arm. It is the painting that represents the figure of Judith, the third and vital element in the composition and the emblem of *pittura* in this scene from Clark's play.



Figure 4: The final scene from the Frederic Wood Theatre production. Hanging above the bed is Artemisia Gentileschi's famous Judith Slaying Holofernes; hanging above Artemisia is her husband Tony (Bryan Johnston). Photograph: Bob Eberle.

But what about revenge? Clark's Artemisia has already told her father that her painting is her revenge on Tassi (163), and I have suggested that it is also her revenge on her father, insofar as she has been forced to and succeeded in outstripping him as an artist. However, the story of Judith slaying Holofernes is not a revenge story, either in its biblical version or in its art historical representations. Whatever associations male painters, buyers, and consumers may have seen in the story and the paintings, revenge is not a likely or prominent, let alone overt, reading. Judith's story is one of politics in which a courageous woman, who remains pure (in the original story she has not slept with her enemy), saves her people from siege and defeat by an infidel army; she undertakes her desperate, dangerous act at Jehovah's command and under his protection.

Killing Holofernes is a religiously sanctioned act of resistance against imperialist violence, and Judith—her very name signifying Judea, the Jewish people—is less an individual woman than a symbol of the group. The revenge reading of the story only enters the picture with our contemporary readings of Gentileschi's work as a mirror of certain events in her life.

To be sure, Sally Clark has reproduced the contemporary reading of *Judith Slaying Holofernes* as a storying of personal revenge. She has also, quite brilliantly I think, reproduced in the play's alternating scenes, overlapping characters, and final tableau, the mirror trope by which art historians like Garrard have read Artemisia Gentileschi's art as a mirror of her life and her life as a continual replication of key scenes of trauma in her life. However, I think Clark has done something more and that a careful, inspired production of this play can bring this *something more* into the light.

If I take the play as a whole, granting full recognition to its mirror trope and tight composition of doubled stories (Artemisia/Judith, Tassi/Holofernes) that are scripted and physically staged as mirror scenes, then another story emerges, one that returns me to the autobiographics (not the autobiography) of Sally Clark. As an allegory of the sister arts, the play presents two forces struggling for supremacy: the art of *pittura* and the art of *poesia*. These arts are represented by Artemisia Gentileschi, the successful Italian baroque painter, and by Sally Clark, the might-have-been-painter-turned-successful-contemporary Canadian playwright. Do these two arts work together here, as some Renaissance depictions of the female arts suggest, or are they still battling it out in an on-going *querelle des femmes*? If they are shown as still battling it out in this play, does one win? Is it a draw? Or does one seek revenge on the presumed victory of the other?

I think there are several possible answers to these questions and all of them are more interesting than a biographical/psychoanalytical reading of Clark's play in which Artemisia Gentileschi is a victim of rape and torture (Pollock's "wronged woman") who learned enough perspective to transform her life-story into art and to take revenge on her rapist/lover and betrayer/father, but who was forever shaped (because women artists are like that) by her love for her rapist and her adoration of a cruel father, by traumatic identifications/sublimations and an oedipal complex.¹⁴ Likewise, there are many readings of Clark's play—as of Gentileschi's art—besides the allegorical reading of both women artists *as* their respective ARTS that I am privileging here. To be sure, there is a revenge element in the works of both, but like Gentileschi, Clark is

taking revenge less on a rapist or a patriarch than on her male precursors in both arts and, quite possibly, *politically* (to recall the Judith myth) on male attempts to dominate women and the story. On the level of autobiographics, she is taking revenge—artistic revenge—on *pittura*, by seizing the last word, by putting painting in her play, by focusing our attention on the sheer drama of the baroque, especially in Artemisia Gentileschi's work, and harnessing the power of that drama *for her play*. But this is not all. For no matter how aggressively Clark seizes the word and the voice of an art that can speak—remember poetry is allegorized as speaking while painting is allegorized as mute—she cannot force this work of art to love her. Nor can she escape the irony and paradox of the theatre's need for visual enactment: a play can never be simply *poesia*; it must rely on *pittura*. Finally, like Tony in that closing tableau, she cannot control the creative force of *pittura* (Artemisia). The warning about trying to make great art by freezing it was there in Act I, when the innocent Bella challenged her father's painting of Judith (15-16), and that warning haunts the entire play, hovers over the bed in its closing moments, and lingers in my mind as an afterglow, a reading in excess of the literal staging of the play. The moral of the story is that painting should not be static, frozen, controlled by an artist, and neither should theatre.

If art must tell a story to be great, if it must not try to freeze, control, or contain the creative imagination, if it must embrace process and change, if this is finally one of the significant lessons in perspective of *Life Without Instruction*, then surely live theatre, which by its very nature differs with every performance, wins over painting, and Clark has exacted a delicious revenge on her rival art/artist. Surely she has, as Harold Bloom might put it (speaking of male writers), slain her precursor and rival art form. However, Bloom's masculinist reading of artistic tradition does not entirely satisfy me because I still wonder if a female artist, who just like male artists must work within a tradition and a marketplace, both of which are defined and controlled by men, can resist the pressure to kill off her *female* rivals. Is it possible that Sally Clark is paying homage to Gentileschi's art, her drama, her mastery, her success, and her lasting power by invoking that art of *pittura* in her play? Is Gentileschi's famous *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* (1630), which was created by using mirrors, the unacknowledged, because unscripted and unreproduced, mirror in Clark's play?¹⁵

For possible answers, let me return once more to that final scene and Tony's final words. Tony, after all, was (in life) a painter as well as a husband, and he failed at both tasks (see Lapiere). One

need not know the actual biographical facts to sense that in Clark's play he will fail to make Artemisia love him or to remove that painting from above his bed. The painting, which I read as symbolizing Judith *and* Artemisia Gentileschi, remains in its place of supremacy, where it can be mirrored ironically and very ambiguously by the drama enacted beneath it, but can never be dislodged. In this visually emphatic way, Sally Clark has commemorated her great artistic predecessor, rather than upstaged her or merely reproduced the art historical-autobiographical reading of a female artist as defined by her men and her body. If my analysis of *Life Without Instruction* as allegory is kept in mind when reading or producing the play, then it becomes possible to argue not only that this play is a complex work of art but also that it shows us a woman who is much more than a victim abused by men.

From my perspective as a late twentieth century woman and feminist reading/watching/learning the lessons of art, the key, if not only, lesson in Clark's play is that, try as he might, no man (no patriarchal or masculinist tradition) can keep a strong woman down because another woman will come along and revivify her. Quite apart from slaying her competition (male or female precursors, and the other art competing within her for attention), Sally Clark has thought back through her mothers, as Virginia Woolf recommended (96), and broken the taboo against reuniting with the mother, as Adrienne Rich said she should (255), to create a very fine, complex, multilayered, richly evocative story, in which one female artist can celebrate another without necessarily killing her off. Clark has drawn on the accepted historical record, made a strong work of art by re-presenting the dominant story, and yet left enough space in her recreation for ambiguity, imagination, and freedom—especially freedom in production. In part, this freedom is inherent to live theatre, but it is also one of the chief lessons in perspective that we take away from *Life Without Instruction*. ❁

NOTES

1. The novels are by Banti, Lapierre, Smith, and Vreeland; the plays are by Cage, Clark, Hale, and Humphrey, and the films are Agnès Merlet's feature film, Adrienne Clarkson's CBC television documentary, and a Granada Television drama. Merlet's film has been sharply criticized for its factual errors and stereotyped construction of Artemisia; see Garrard and Steinam. There are creative works about Gentileschi in other languages, and there is a monodrama by Carolyn Gage called "Artemisia and Hildegard" in a trilogy called *Deviant Women*, but I have not been able to locate this play or find any reviews or discussions

of it. Hale's "Artemisia Gentileschi—Of Truth and Lies" is a performance piece by Hale and her One-Woman Theatre. Gentileschi has also inspired visual re-representations, most notably in Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*.

2. I will examine the 29 September to 9 October 1999 production at the Frederic Wood Theatre of the University of British Columbia, directed by Robert Metcalfe, with sets by Ron Fedoruk, lighting by Sharon Huizinga, and costumes by Sheila White, because I have seen this production. The play premiered at Theatre Plus Toronto on 2 August 1991 under the direction of Glynis Leyshon, with set and costumes by Phillip Clarkson.
3. See Garrard for background to early modern debates about the elevation of painting to the same rank as poetry and the allegorization of both as female figures (337-70). In Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (1644), "Peinture" is depicted as a female with her mouth bound to signify the mute art that speaks in visual images, unlike Poetry, and in the 1626 painting *Pittura et Poesia* by Francesco Farini that hangs in the Uffizi, where Gentileschi may well have seen it, the two females are shown in close embrace with *pittura* whispering to *poesia* as if to inspire the writer; see the engraving of Farini's painting reproduced in Garrard 346.
4. For detailed discussions of Artemisia Gentileschi in the context of early 17th century art, culture, and more, see Bissell, Cohen, Garrard, and Spear.
5. See Gilmore, Marcus, and Wagner-Martin. To date, little *theoretical* work has been done on biography and autobiography in drama (as distinct from literary narrative). For this discussion, I am drawing on Gilmore's theory of autobiographics as self-representation, invention, and performance that is not limited to the literary (see 42-45), on Wagner-Martin, who stresses the distinctive features of women's biography and the special importance, for the female subject, of what she calls "the enactment of cultural performance" (8) that involves the recurring theme of escape from the father, and on Marcus, who argues for the dynamic of autobiography within biography and a "double rhetoric" of autobiography that encompasses the verbal and the visual, the text and its mirror, and the interpretive and specular.
6. For a discussion of the broad use of theatre metaphors in the period see Daniels and Cosgrove, who note that "theatre as a glass or mirror to the greater world was a common metaphor for revealing order in the macrocosm" (58).
7. For the text of the Judith and Holofernes story, see Kee, and for discussion of its shifting meanings, see Barthes and Garrard.
8. The so-called "quarrel of women" refers to the debate between the arts, which were represented as female; see Garrard 142.
9. I am thinking of Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*, but the notion that an artist will try to kill off *his* precursor is a common one. Pollock also draws this connection in her reading of Artemisia

Gentileschi's first *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (see 123), and she stresses that the revenge being taken in this painting is not a woman's on her rapist so much as it is an artist's on her male influences, teachers, and mentors.

10. For example, Clark has Tassi accusing Artemisia and Orazio of incest and she keeps the scene with the *sybbile* and paraphrases Artemisia's actual words from the trial transcript: "THIS IS MY ENGAGEMENT RING AND THESE ARE YOUR PROMISES!!!" (140)
11. Clark stressed the revenge aspect of her play during a meeting with a class at the University of British Columbia in October 1999, and she confirmed her intention in a telephone interview with me in April 2002.
12. In his introduction to *Moo*, Jerry Wasserman sees the victimization of women by men as typical of Clark's plays, but he also notes that Clark's women are "strong and outspoken [...] victims and feminist rebels" (91).
13. Slides were used in the 1991 première, which I did not see, and a fully developed argument for staging possibilities requires a close comparison of different productions.
14. Current studies of trauma and its articulations contest any direct connection between trauma and art; see Pollock and Gilmore.
15. The program for the Frederic Wood production reproduced only one painting: *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting*. It is a pleasure to thank my colleague Ron Fedoruk for permission to reproduce stills of his set design and Bob Eberle for the photographic images. I also want to thank Kim Snowden, my research assistant and a doctoral student in Women's Studies at the University of British Columbia, for her help with sources on Artemisia Gentileschi and for making me read Garrard.

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