

Daughter, painter feminist: Artemisia Gentileschi honored in first Convocation of the year

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Meet Artemisia Gen- tileschi--a feminist of the 17th century and a woman painter of her own making.

If she lived in the 21st century, she would have been called a feminist. However, Artemisia Gentileschi, an obscure female Italian painter, was a feminist in the shadows of the 17th century--whether she knew it or not.

Her life and paintings were the subject of this year's first Convocation, held in Jones Auditorium, Monday, Sept. 17, 2001 at 10 a.m.

Born in Rome in 1593, Artemisia was the eldest child and only daughter of Orazio Gentileschi and Prudentia Mantrone.

As a young woman, her father noticed her gifts for painting; however, a career in painting for Artemisia seemed unlikely considering she was a woman living under the Renaissance thought that women lacked intelligence and were therefore incapable of the career aspirations of a man.

However, her father, seeing her talent, allowed her to work with a rising painter of the time, a man with whom he had worked painting frescos on the walls and ceilings of beautiful churches.

His name was Agostino Tassi, and it was not long before Artemisia and Tassi became too close.

He attacked her, raping her and leaving her alone with no promise of marriage and no remorse of his unwarranted actions.

Artemisia may have never told anyone.

However, her father forced Tassi to trial.

Artemisia's trial, dated March 1612 by the court records, lasted seven months, a time in which her father demanded his daughter be reinstated as a pure woman.

Tassi, having falsely promised to marry Artemisia, sat at the trial and watched her sit on the stand to be questioned. A sibil--rings slipped over her fingers and tightened by strings--was placed on her hands to determine whether she was telling the truth.

She asked the court attendants to pull the rings tighter because she still believed that Tassi would uphold his promise to marry her. She knew that she was telling the truth.

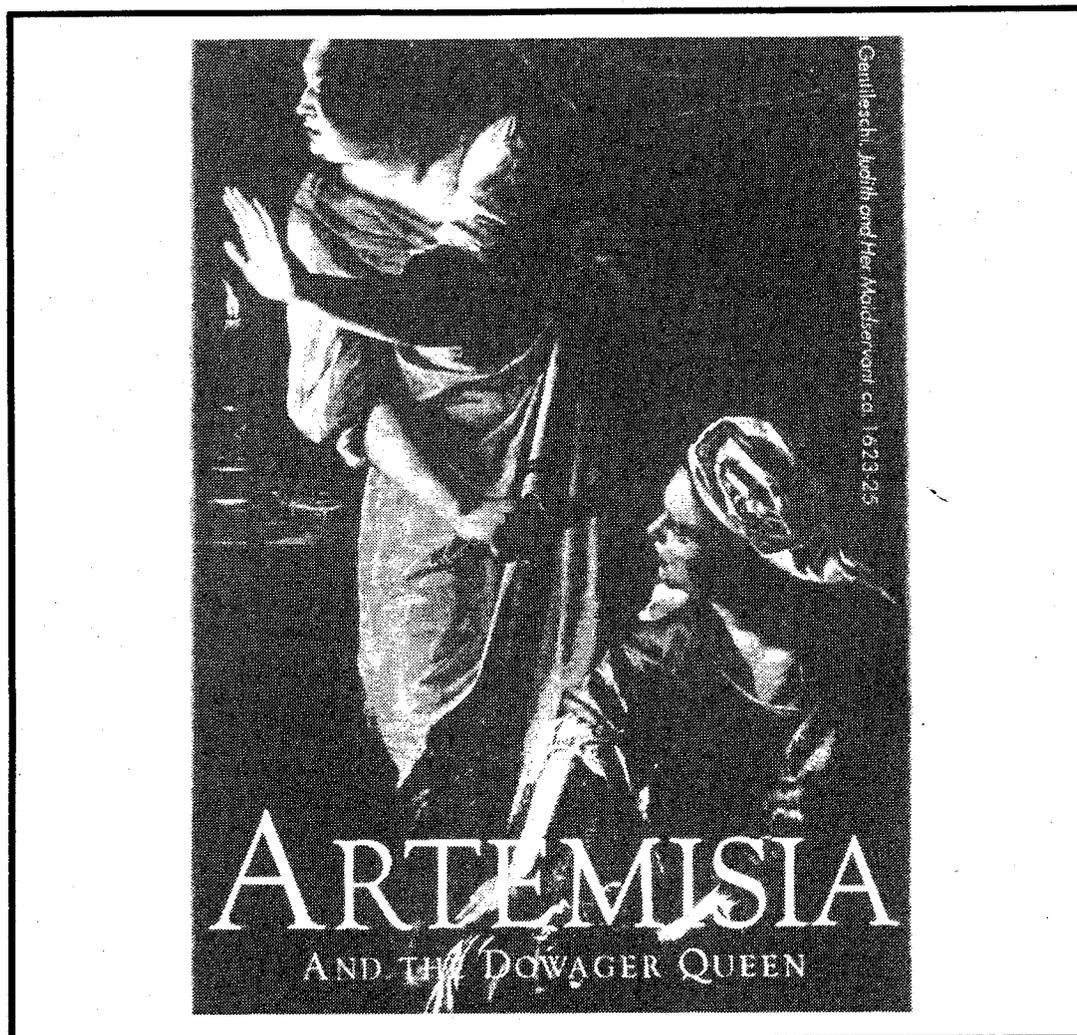
And that is how the rest of the court knew she was as well.

After the trial, Tassi served some time in jail but soon was let out, leaving Artemisia forever.

Artemisia turned backed to her first love--painting. It is in these works that many historians believe her emotions associated with her rape bleed onto the canvas.

Many of her works, such as one painting called, "Judith and Her Maidservant," shows the Biblical Judith peeking around a corner illuminated with candlelight with a sword gripped in her hand. Judith is looking for Holofernes, the man whom she is trying to kill. In other paintings, such as "Judith Slaying Holofernes," Judith succeeds, severing his head in a bloody bedroom scene.

Artemisia's life and works were honored in the Convocation on Monday in which actress Lesley Hunt performed a monologue written by play-



Artemisia Gentileschi's painting "Judith and her Maidservant."

wright Bill Hartley.

Hunt played the role of Marie de Medici, the exiled Dowager Queen of France, who was known in her country for being the leader of revolutions.

She also adored Orazio Gentileschi's art--which gave Hartley the idea that while there is no proof that the queen ever knew Artemisia, it is possible that they had met or at least that they had feelings in common considering they both faced great adversity as women.

Also, records show that both women were living in England in the late 1630s.

"If she had been a man, it

might have been easier," said Medici, pointing to one of Artemisia's paintings projected onto a screen on the stage in Jones Auditorium. "But she would not have been able to paint these paintings."

Through the character of Medici, Hunt told Artemisia's life story, adding what Hartley believed she must have been feeling at the time.

Hartley researched letters, journals, websites and read the biography of Artemisia written by Mary D.Garrard to delve into the personality and character of Artemisia.

"As soon as I started reading," Hartley said, "I got hooked."

After reading, Hartley said the connection between the two women hit him.

"All of a sudden it seemed the plight of Marie de Medici was so much like the life of Artemisia Gentileschi," he said.

Thus he began weaving the lives of the two women to write the monologue for the Convocation.

Artemisia Gentileschi's life was honored through Hartley's writing, Hunt's acting and the Meredith community who met her for the first time on Monday.