

Judith Slaying Holofernes

Woman, Murderer, Icon

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The biblical figure of Judith has long been understood as an ideal of feminine piety and chastity, and as a vessel of divine intervention.¹ Throughout the Renaissance, however, depictions of Judith evolved from those of a devout, asexual woman to a sensual, classical heroine. This shift reflects the Renaissance tensions between the humanistic quest for knowledge and the Counter-Reformation's need to assert moral authority. The rise of humanism encouraged interest in the human form and mind, allowing for more emphasis on Judith's sexuality and capability. At the same time, her status as a paragon of biblical virtues and an instrument of God, combined with her eventual narrative return to domesticity, allowed her actions to be seen as unthreatening, even worthy of celebration. While her story continued to be understood as a metaphor for the victory of God and his people, she also became emblematic of major religious and civic virtues such as humility, justice, and triumph. These trends enabled the unusual popularity and potency of Renaissance iconography of Judith as a heroine representing both feminine moral virtue and masculine physical courage.²

The tale of Judith is thousands of years old, originating from the scriptural text *The Book of Judith*. Generally understood as an allegorical tale, it tells the story of the Assyrian invasion of Israel, under the leadership of Holofernes. Judith, trying to protect her town of Bethulia, sought entry into Holofernes' camp, which she was granted due to her beauty. Eventually, Judith cut off a drunk, powerless Holofernes' head with his sword, her faithful maidservant keeping watch outside his tent. They returned to Bethulia with Holofernes' head and their people defeated the Assyrian

1 Diana Apostolos-Cappadona, "Costuming Judith in Italian Art of the Sixteenth Century," in *The Sword of Judith: Judith Studies Across the Disciplines* (Open Book Publishers, 2010), 327-328;

2 Robert M. Knotts, "Judith in Florentine Renaissance Art, 1425-1512" (The Ohio State University, 1995), 3.

forces.³

As with many originally Jewish stories, hers was absorbed by and used to reinforce Christianity and its values. The earliest known image of Judith is an eighth century fresco in a Roman church, which depicts her serenely holding Holofernes' head.⁴ Medieval Judith imagery remained largely confined to religious spaces and manuscripts; often alongside other biblical scenes and figures, representing salvation, chastity, and virtue.⁵ Judith was consistently shown in simple clothing, regardless of the importance of elaborate dress and jewelry in her biblical text.⁶ It was not until the early Quattrocento that Judith depictions are known to have been produced for private, domestic display, and in many new mediums. Judith's popularity peaked in the Renaissance; numerous notable artists produced depictions of her that infused her religious imagery with political overtones. The earliest prominent example of her influence is Donatello's bronze *Judith*, commissioned by the Medici clan in 1457 for semi-private display. Donatello's *Judith* transformed the formal conventions of Judith imagery. While medieval Judith was a pious widow in humble clothing, Donatello's is dressed luxuriously. The references to classical antiquity and warrior status are pervasive, from clothing—visually quoting both Medicean and classical armor—to her victor's pose, gazing down at her enemy. Her armor transforms her into a classical female warrior, and her fine dress, true to the original tale, changes her into a wealthy Renaissance woman.⁷ She is also physically dominant, her foot on Holofernes' wrist, one hand gripping his hair and turning his head, the other raised high with a lethal sword. In Donatello's reinvention of her image, Judith appears both pious and warriorlike.

Donatello's *Judith* was highly political in both form and context. When the Medici were in power, their *Judith* could be understood as representing their piety, humility, and unity; an inscription on its base reads, translated, "Kingdoms fall through luxury, cities rise through virtues; behold the neck of pride severed by the hand of humility." This latter threat is represented quite literally by Judith's sword raised up to cut through Holofernes' neck.⁸ She was originally located near Donatello's earlier bronze *David* (c.1440s) in the Medici gardens, a figure with whom Judith was often associated in Florence. Both figures functioned as political symbols of Florentine strength and republicanism, the meek overtaking the strong.

Judith and David's situations were similar—both defeated tyrants in defense of their people, sanctioned by God—but their narratives ended very differently, reflecting gender norms. David went on to become a king, though he would later fall from grace, but Judith's story went nowhere. She retreated to her home and resumed her domestic widow's life. Accordingly, David imagery was largely public, and with

3 Knotts, 2.

4 Diana Apostolos-Cappadona, "Costuming Judith in Italian Art of the Sixteenth Century," 328.

5 Robert M. Knotts, "Judith in Florentine Renaissance Art, 1425-1512," 1-4; Richard J. Kubiak, "The iconography of Judith in Italian Renaissance art," (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin, 1965), 6-8.

6 Diana Apostolos-Cappadona, "Costuming Judith in Italian Art of the Sixteenth Century," 329.

7 Apostolos-Cappadona, 330-332.

8 Roger J. Crum, "Severing the Neck of Pride: Donatello's "'Judith and Holofernes'" and the Recollection of Albizzi Shame in Medicean Florence," *Artibus et Historiae* 22, no. 44 (2001): 303.

few exceptions, Judith imagery was intended for private display.⁹ For this reason, the transfer of Donatello's *Judith* to Florence's central plaza, after the exile of the Medici, was startling—and impermanent. The public display of *Judith* transformed her into an explicitly anti-authoritarian, anti-Medicean symbol.¹⁰ However, she was replaced just a decade later by Michelangelo's *David*. The Florentine council member who argued for her removal contended that the statue was inappropriate as a former Medici symbol and it was “not fitting that the woman should slay the man.”¹¹

Like Donatello's sculpture, early Renaissance paintings of Judith tended to depict the moments just before or after the murder, foregrounding Judith's ambivalence about performing this necessary but distasteful deed. Michelangelo Buonarroti's *Judith* fresco in the Sistine chapel from around 1510 shows her as a muscular woman, yet she modestly turns her head away from the head of Holofernes, which is covered with a cloth. Holofernes' contorted body lies out of her sight, in shadow. She is physically strong, but weak-stomached. Her physical robustness here contrasts sharply with Caravaggio's *Judith Beheading Holofernes* from 1600, in which the heroine is dainty, unconvincingly grabbing at the enormous Holofernes' hair, the sword like a slender dagger in comparison to his body. Even more so than in Michelangelo's depiction, Judith is visibly disturbed. This is shown in the way she holds him at arm's length, leaning away with an expression of unease. The blood spurting from his neck is directed away from her, leaving her clothing unstained, and her face is bathed in light, a sign of divine blessing. Caravaggio's Judith is undeniably feminine, and though disturbed by her action, morally pure.

Other Renaissance artists treated Judith's transgressively masculine aspects more explicitly and emphasized her active participation. Giorgio Vasari's oil painting *Judith and Holofernes* from 1554 echoes Michelangelo's, but depicts her as strong both physically and mentally. She holds the sword, pulling Holofernes' unresisting head down with ease, and gazes dispassionately down at him, undisturbed. Even more unapologetic is Artemisia Gentileschi's oil painting *Judith Beheading Holofernes* from 1620. Shown in the very act of decapitation, Judith is well-built, wrestling his writhing body into submission as her strong arm forces the sword through his neck, her gaze fixed resolutely on his face. There is blood on her hand, his blood spurting toward her. The ends of her sleeves, rolled up in a practical manner, are red, indicating the corruption of her innocence. Gentileschi's Judith is the very picture of strength in mind and body, bloody-handed. In Gentileschi's 1623 painting of the same story, *Judith and her Maidservant*, Judith's hands are clean, her hand and righteous sword are lit with divine light, while her maidservant's hands are bloodied. Still, Judith is tainted by the sin of the deed, her face cast in shadow.

Beyond Judith's physical strength and ruthlessness, other Renaissance paint-

9 Crum, 292-294.

10 Roger J. Crum, “Judith between the Private and Public Realms in Renaissance Florence,” in *The Sword of Judith: Judith Studies Across the Disciplines* (Open Book Publishers, 2010), 305-306.

11 Saul Levine, “The Location of Michelangelo's David: The Meeting of January 25, 1504,” *The Art Bulletin* 56, no. 1 (1974), 36.

ers underscore the encounter's sexual aspects. When his body is pictured, Holofernes is often shown naked and abed, and while many images show Judith fully clothed, just as many show her suggestively dressed or provocatively posed. Giorgione's 1504 Judith gazes down demurely like Venus or Virgin Mary. Yet the fully exposed length of her leg, foot resting lightly on Holofernes' head, and the blush pink of her dress, cast her as more of a Venus. Fede Galizia's 1596 Judith is even more sumptuously clothed in a revealing dress, while her maidservant lurks appraisingly behind Judith, reminiscent of a bordello's madam.¹² Giovanni Baglione's Judith from 1608 is fully nude from the waist up, stepping away from the monstrous, contorted nude body of Holofernes—who can say what had occurred just minutes prior? To preserve Judith's reputation, her maidservant is often intrusively present, unlike the biblical account: Gentileschi's Judith holds the struggling, naked Holofernes down and her maidservant helps her, saving her from the compromising position of being alone with a naked man.

In every depiction, Judith maintains her femininity as regards her moral purity, while her relationship to Holofernes' stolen, phallic sword allows her to claim masculinity to varying degrees. Throughout Renaissance imagery of Judith, the sword disappears out of frame as she wields it above her head, it dangles limply beside her, it is not anywhere to be seen; each iteration brings with it different emphasis on her accountability, her strength, her masculinity. Galizia's Judith holds a dagger suggestively at groin level. In Gentileschi's earlier *Judith with Her Maidservant* from 1613, she rests the sword comfortably on her shoulder. The act of decapitation is comparable to castration; biblical scholar Ela Nutu notes that Holofernes' bare arms resemble thighs as Gentileschi's Judith forces them apart, suggesting sexual assault.¹³ The power dynamics of gender are reversed here, as in the original text, which is what so strongly disturbed the Florentine council member who argued for the removal of Donatello's *Judith*. The woman is beautiful and seductive, yet calculated and powerful, while the man who holds cultural and political power quite literally loses his head.¹⁴ These depictions emphasize the will of God through the light on her face and the red drape often seen in the background—the gender role reversal is less disturbing if Judith can be seen as an instrument of God rather than a woman acting of her own will. Judith as a “phallic woman” is a challenge for male artists; to show her acting under God's (a man's) will deflects that challenge.¹⁵

Judith is thus shown to be both a murderer and a righteous woman, performing a violent physical act generally reserved for men while embodying the moral virtue expected of women, albeit occasionally accompanied by suggestive sexual imagery. Rather than being condemned, Judith is highly praised for her courageous, potentially self-sacrificing action, because she acted according to the will of God, and killed the “right” enemy.¹⁶ When depicted as an asexual, pious, divine vessel, she is a

12 Ela Nutu, “Framing Judith: Whose Text, Whose Gaze, Whose Language?” 135-136.

13 Nutu, 126.

14 Nutu, 117-118.

15 Nutu, 132, 141-142.

16 Nutu, 117-118.

prototype of the Virgin Mary, and though she becomes more challenging as a strong, sensual woman, the emphasis on her femininity and virtuousness allows her to retain acceptable devotional status. The example of Judith provides a useful insight into the line Renaissance artists had to walk in depicting female icons who inhabit the liminal space between secular and sacred, masculine and feminine, virtuous and sinful. Judith is the rare female figure who fits those criteria; murderer, woman, icon nonetheless. The tenuous nature of her perception in art can speak to the standards placed upon women in the real world, for they are not nearly so one-sided as even Judith's most nuanced depictions. If this fictional heroine's masculinity, power, and sin were (barely, at times) acceptable only due to her extraordinary virtue and God's own ordinance, then the reality of women who could not hope for divine intervention to excuse their own sins was confining, and, in some ways, remains so even today.