

The Symbolism of blood in two masterpieces of the early Italian Baroque art

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Throughout history, blood has been associated with countless meanings, encompassing life and death, power and pride, love and hate, fear and sacrifice. In the early Baroque, thanks to the realistic art of Caravaggio and Artemisia Gentileschi, blood was transformed into a new *medium*, whose powerful symbolism demolished the conformed traditions of Mannerism, leading art into a new expressive era. Bearer of macabre premonitions, blood is the exclamation mark in two of the most outstanding masterpieces of the early Italian *Seicento*: Caravaggio's *Beheading of the Baptist* (1608)¹ (fig. 1) and Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith beheading Holofernes* (1611-12)² (fig. 2), in which two emblematic events of the Christian tradition are interpreted as a representation of personal memories and fears, generating a powerful spiral of emotions which constantly swirls between fiction and reality.

Through this paper I propose that both Caravaggio and Artemisia adopted blood as a symbolic representation of their own life-stories, understanding it as a vehicle to express intense emotions of fear and revenge. Seen under this perspective, the red fluid results as a powerful and dramatic weapon used to shock the viewer and, at the same time, express an intimate and anguished condition of pain. This so-called

1 Caravaggio, *The Beheading of the Baptist*, 1608, Co-Cathedral of Saint John, Oratory of Saint John, Valletta, Malta.

2 Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith beheading Holofernes*, 1612-13, Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples.

‘terrible naturalism’³ symbolically demarks the transition from late Mannerism to early Baroque, introducing art to a new era in which emotions and illusion prevail on rigid and controlled representation.

Caravaggio’s *Beheading of the Baptist* is arguably the masterpiece of his career and one of the most overpowering images in all Baroque art. Painted for the Oratory of the St. John’s Co-Cathedral in Malta, it is Caravaggio’s largest painting and the only work that bears his signature (*f. MichelAn*), formed out of the blood spewing from the freshly cut neck of the Baptist (fig. 3). The outstanding work was commissioned to Caravaggio in 1608, when the painter was experiencing a moment of intense personal turmoil since he was seeking refuge in Malta, escaping the *bando capitale* issued against him in Rome for the murder of Ranuccio Tomassoni on 28 May 1606.⁴

The *bando capitale* was the most serious penalty in seventeenth century Rome, equivalent to a capital sentence; anyone in the Papal States had the right to kill Caravaggio and claim the reward by simply showing his severed head.⁵Hunted by the Roman authorities, the Lombard painter was frightened and aware that his head was on the block. This macabre perspective, together with his innate sense of realism, convinced him to sign his masterpiece drawing his own name with the blood spewing from the neck of the Baptist, imitating a well known Lombard tradition linked with the cult of St. Peter the Martyr, a local saint killed near Milan in 1252.

Understanding why Caravaggio signed his name in blood

3 ‘Terribile naturalismo’ is an idiomatic expression used by the Italian art historian Roberto Longhi to describe the innate realism of Caravaggio’s style. R. Longhi, *Me pinxit e quesiti caravaggaschi, 1928-34*. (Florence: Sansoni, 1968), 138.

4 On 28 May 1606, on the eve of the first anniversary of the coronation of Pope Paul V, Caravaggio was involved in a harsh fight with Ranuccio Tomassoni and two other men. After killing Tomassoni, the Lombard painter was forced to escape from Rome, seeking refuge in Naples and subsequently in Malta and Sicily. S. Ebert-Schiffener, *Caravaggio, the artist and his work*. (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2012), 194-95.

The original account about Tomassoni’s murder is in Biblioteca Vaticana, ms. Chigi, n°II., 36 fol., 102v. (cfr. M. Marini, *L’Alfa e l’Omega di Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, pittore: qualche precisazione documentaria sulla nascita e sulla morte*, in “*Artibus et Historiae*”, vol. 20, no. 40 (1999), 131-149, note no. 12.

5 A.G. Dixon, *Caravaggio. A life sacred and profane*, (New York: W.W.Norton, 2011), 325.

is one of the most fascinating riddles for early Baroque art historians and, as predictable, theories abound. Some scholars have interpreted Caravaggio's choice as a proud affirmation of his newly obtained knighthood;⁶ others ascribed it to his violent personality or to a self identification with either the aggressor or the victim.⁷

In my opinion, as suggested by Philip Farrugia Randon,⁸ Caravaggio's signature witnesses the enormous anxiety of his tormented soul. By signing his name in blood, Caravaggio, a man of deep religious conviction, symbolically foreshadowed his death, adopting the red fluid as a symbol of fate and destiny.

It is important to draw attention on the painter's psychological situation and, more importantly, on the desperation of his status as an exiled man. Having escaped from Rome, Caravaggio briefly stopped in Naples and then moved to Malta, where he arrived on 13 July 1607. As Mina Gregori explains, in the last years of his life Caravaggio's pictorial activity reflected a psychological situation obsessed by ideas of death and violence;⁹ he was alone in an unknown land and most likely not

6 Helen Langdon considers Caravaggio's signature in blood as an affirmation of his newly obtained knighthood with the Order of the Knights of Malta: 'the signature suggests his pride at having won the so passionately desired knighthood, and his sense of unity with the knights for whom he painted this meditation on the ignoble reality of martyrdom'. H. Langdon, *Caravaggio: biography in paint*. In C. De Giorgio & K. Sciberras eds., *Caravaggio and painting of realism in Malta*. (Valletta: Midsea Books, 2007), 53.

7 Caravaggio self identification with the aggressor is proposed in H. Hibbard, *Caravaggio*. (New York, 1983), 264-267, while the painter's identification with the victim is outlined by H. Röttgen, *Il Caravaggio: ricerche e interpretazioni*. (Rome: Bulzoni, 1974) and M. Gregori, *Caravaggio, oggi*. In *Caravaggio e il suo tempo*, Catalogue of the exhibition held at the Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples, May 14-June 30, 1985. (Naples: Electa, 1985), 44.

8 'My suggestion is quite straightforward: Caravaggio was terrified; he knew that the *bando capitale* empowered anyone to behead him and return his head to the authorities. He remained deeply perturbed and fearful, perhaps even more acutely after his escape from Malta.' P.F. Randon, *Four hundred years ago*. In C. De Giorgio & K. Sciberras eds., *Caravaggio and painting of realism in Malta*. (Valletta: Midsea Books, 2007), 21.

9 'Il seguito della vita del Caravaggio, dopo aver lasciato Napoli, è segnato da repentini spostamenti e da un'attività che riflette una situazione psicologica profondamente turbata dal pensiero della morte e ossessionata dalla violenza'. Gregori, *Caravaggio, oggi*, 44. Caravaggio's obsession with death and violence is recognizable in several

in total control of his mind. In view of these elements, while painting the *Beheading*, Caravaggio empathized with the story of the Baptist, foreshadowing in the martyr's death a vision of his own destiny. Moreover, in an ultimate attempt for redemption, he exorcised his condition as a prosecuted man by employing an old iconographic tradition learned during the years of his apprenticeship in Milan: he used a martyr's blood to sign his name, consecrating his soul to God and asking for forgiveness.

The concept of writing in blood was very well known in the Lombard tradition thanks to the story of St. Peter of Verona, a thirteenth-century Italian martyr who served as Inquisitor for Pope Innocent IV and was killed in 1252 near Milan by a local bandit named Pietro Carino da Balsamo.¹⁰ According to his hagiography, after being struck in his head with an axe, the saint rose to his knees and recited the *Credo* (*Symbolum Apostolorum*), offering his blood as a sacrifice to God. Afterwards, he dipped his fingers in it and wrote on the ground "*Credo in unum deum.*"

During the second half of the sixteenth century, when Caravaggio was a young and unknown painter,¹¹ the Lombard cult of St. Peter underwent a major development since pope Sixtus V in 1586 proclaimed him 'Prince of the Holy Inquisition'.¹² At that time, the State of Milan was the most important Spanish domain in Northern Italy and therefore the cult of St. Peter became so important to be only exceeded by the devotion for St. Ambrose, the traditional patron of the city of Milan.¹³

The importance of the cult of the Lombard martyr is evident in

late paintings: *The Raising of Lazarus* (1609, Museo Regionale di Messina), the *Supper at Emmaus* (Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan) in which the painter foreshadows the death of Christ by depicting the holy bread already cut and *The David with the head of Goliath* (Galleria Borghese, Rome) in which the beheaded Goliath is a Caravaggio's self portrait.

- 10 For a recent publication about St. Peter of Verona see: D. Prudlo, *The Martyred Inquisitor: the life and cult of Peter of Verona*. (Aldershot: Ashgate Pub., 2008).
- 11 Michelangelo Merisi was in Lombardy until May 1592 when he is documented in the little village of Caravaggio to share his mother's inheritance. At the time he was more than twenty years old and his education as a painter was already completed. Gregori, *Caravaggio oggi*, 22.
- 12 Sixtus V, *Invictorum Christi militum*, [13 April 1586], cf. *Bullarium ordinis Fratrum Praedicatorum*, 7 vols., ed. T. Ripoll, 1759, c. 448.
- 13 'Milan was Peter's home city. Though it remained unquestionably the Ambrosian city, Peter became a significant secondary patron there'. D. Prudlo, *The Martyred Inquisitor*, 138

the writings of the local historian Paolo Morigia, who, in his *Santuario della città e diocesi di Milano*, testifies to Carlo Borromeo's profound devotion to the saint.¹⁴ As Morigia states, the archbishop was so much devoted to St. Peter that when he visited the martyr's church in Barlasina, he entered in his bare feet, showing thus his deference for the memory of one of the most important saints in Lombard tradition.

Caravaggio, who from 6 April 1584 was an apprentice in the workshop of the Milanese painter Simone Peterzano,¹⁵ would have certainly known St. Peter's story as well as its iconographic representation in the famous works by the Lombard masters Vincenzo Foppa (1427-1515) and Moretto da Brescia (1498-1554). Vincenzo Foppa painted a *Martyrdom of St. Peter of Verona* for the Portinari Chapel, in the Milanese church of St. Eustorgio (fig. 4). The Chapel, sponsored by the Tuscan banker Pigello Portinari, was built between 1462 and 1468 by the Ticinese architect Guiniforte Solari and boasted the head of St. Peter, the most important relic of the saint¹⁶. In St. Eustorgio, Foppa inaugurated the iconographic tradition of St. Peter's martyrdom by setting the scene in a verdant Lombard forest and depicting the saint just before being killed, in the precise moment in which he is offering his blood as a sacrifice to God.

Among the painters who were inspired by Vincenzo Foppa, Alessandro Bonvicino (known as Moretto da Brescia) was among Caravaggio's most admired painters and together with Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo developed an idiosyncratic form of expressionism recognized by Roberto Longhi as 'the important harbinger of Caravaggio's terrible naturalism'.¹⁷ Moretto, probably the most important Lombard painter of

14 'E la Santa memoria del B[enedetto] Carlo Borromeo, quando fu alla porta di detta chiesa si fece cavar le scarpe e calze e volle andar a piedi ignudi fino al luogo dove fu ammazzato il santo di Dio'. P. Morigia, *Santuario della città, e diocesi di Milano*. (Milan: 1603), 144.

15 Simone Peterzano was an eclectic artist who was originally from Bergamo but preferred to stress his link with Venice, where he may have been training. In the second half of the sixteenth century he developed a severe Mannerist style in direct response to Carlo Borromeo's pronouncements on art which influenced Caravaggio's early style. Dixon 2011, *Caravaggio. A life sacred and profane*, 31.

16 Luisa Giordano, *Prima degli affreschi: la struttura architettonica*. In Laura Mattioli Rossi ed., *Vincenzo Foppa, la Cappella Portinari*. (Milan: F. Motta, 1999), 18.

17 'Savoldo and Moretto devono essere separati dalla tradizione veneziana ed essere

the sixteenth century,¹⁸ painted a large *Martyrdom of St. Peter* (now at the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana) for the Grumelli Chapel in the Chiesa dei Santi Stefano and Domenico in Bergamo (fig. 5). The painting, following Foppa's traditional iconography, was very well known by Caravaggio since, as noted by Roberto Longhi, it was used as a compositional model for the famous *Martyrdom of St. Matthew* (1600-1601), painted for the Contarelli Chapel in San Luigi dei Francesi in Rome.¹⁹

In view of these elements, Caravaggio's choice assumes a specific, macabre connotation. At the time of the commission for the Oratory of St. John's Co-Cathedral, the painter was aware of his imminent fate; he was a fugitive and, most important of all, a tormented soul. Michelangelo Merisi perpetrated his name in a martyr's blood to foreshadow his fate and, perhaps, ask forgiveness for his sins. In doing so he followed an old Lombard tradition, learnt during those Milanese years so geographically and chronologically distant from the Maltese environment.

Caravaggio's symbolic use of blood is also recognizable in a further masterpiece, *David with the head of Goliath* (1609-10),²⁰ a late work in which he dramatically depicts himself as the beheaded Goliath whose head is dripping blood rather than resting on a ledge (fig. 6). In 1650, Giacomo Manilli, the 'guardaroba' of Villa Borghese, wrote:

visti come autentici pittori lombardi, precursori del terribile naturalismo del Caravaggio'. Longhi, *Me pinxit e quesiti caravaggaschi*, 1928-34, 138.

- 18 Christiansen, *Alessandro Bonvivino detto Moretto da Brescia*, in *Caravaggio e il suo tempo*. In *Caravaggio e il suo tempo*, Catalogue of the exhibition held at the Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples, May 14-June 30, 1985, (Naples: Electa, 1985), 66.
- 19 'La tragica serietà di questo Pietro Martire dagli occhi ingolfati d'ombra (fatto anticlassico per eccellenza), la subitanea violenza fisica dei manigoldi, espressi in una plastica vicinissima e, dunque, diventata tutto orrore imminente di epidermide e di sangue pulsante, presentano molto dappresso il caravaggesco *Martirio di san Matteo*. È il novizio che fugge e si volge nell'aria sottile e dimostra già, non dico la plastica, ma bevidenza secca, nitida e fulminante del primo Caravaggio'. R. Longhi, *Quesiti caravaggeschi - II, I precedenti*, in "Pinacotheca", anno 1, numeri 5-6, mar-giu 1929, 275.
- 20 Caravaggio, *David with the head of Goliath*, 1609-10, Galleria Borghese, Rome. In a recent publication Andrew Graham-Dixon backdates the painting to 1607, highlighting a stylistic proximity with the "Seven acts of Mercy" painted for the Pio Monte della Misericordia in Naples. Graham, *Caravaggio, a life sacred and profane*, p. 467, note no. 3.

‘(Caravaggio) in quella testa volle ritrarre se stesso, e nel David ritrasse il suo Caravaggino’,²¹ providing the interpretation later adopted by Bellori.²² According to Maurizio Calvesi, Caravaggio’s self-portrait as a man beheaded is a desperate allusion to his death sentence, while his identification with the sinner Goliath is intended both to show his repentance and as a plea for forgiveness.²³ In the Borghese painting, Caravaggio transposes the original meaning of the Biblical theme by depicting the young David as an improbable executioner and the autobiographical Goliath as a desperate and pitiful victim.

Since only one year divides this painting from the *Beheading*, it is highly plausible that the two works share the same symbolic meaning and can be both understood as a vivid manifestation of Caravaggio’s mental turmoil.

In essence, *The Beheading of the Baptist* and *David with the head of Goliath*, both witness the way in which at the end of his life Caravaggio adopted the powerful symbolism of blood as a premonition of death and as a desperate request for forgiveness. He was a man of deep religious conviction, educated in Milan under the influence of Carlo Borromeo; he strongly believed that religion must be related with life, otherwise it is meaningless. It is for these reasons that he autobiographically represented his own expectations and fears in his paintings, hoping for redemption and (perhaps) forgiveness. Unfortunately, his hopes remained unheard. On 18 July 1610, Caravaggio died in dubious circumstance in the small village of Porto Ercole, on his way back from Naples to the Eternal City.

‘There were many Caravaggisti, but only one Caravaggista’, in this manner begins the introduction of Mary Garrard’s monographic study about Artemisia Gentileschi, one the most renowned female painters in the history of art.²⁴ Artemisia was the eldest child and sole daughter of Orazio Gentileschi, a Tuscan painter who began

21 Caravaggio depicted himself in that head, while the figure of David was inspired to his Caravaggino’. J. Manilli, *Villa Borghese fuori di Porta Pinciana descritta da Iacopo Manilli romano guardaroba di detta villa*. (Rome: 1650), 67.

22 ‘La mezza figura di Davide, il quale tiene per i capelli la testa di Golia, che è [di Caravaggio] il suo proprio ritratto’. G.P. Bellori, *Le vite de’ pittori, scultori e architetti moderni*. (Torino: Borea, 1976), 208.

23 M. Calvesi, *Le realtà del Caravaggio. Prima parte (vicende)*, in *Storia dell’Arte*, 53 (1985), 51-85.

24 M. Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: the image of the female hero in Italian Baroque art*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 3.

his career in Rome, where he met Caravaggio during the last years of the sixteenth century.²⁵ Given the friendship between the Lombard painter and her father, Artemisia, who is likely to have personally met Caravaggio, was vividly inspired by the 'terrible naturalism' of his art which was already on public display in the Roman churches of San Luigi dei Francesi and Santa Maria del Popolo.²⁶

As Caravaggio, Artemisia had a tormented life, cluttered by unfortunate events which forced her to work in different cities and integrate autobiographical references in her art. Following Caravaggio's footsteps, she used crude realism and vivid blood to describe her intimate emotions, exacerbating the rage for the rape suffered at the age of seventeen by her father's colleague Agostino Tassi, an illusionistic landscape painter, who collaborated with Orazio on the fresco decoration of the Casino delle Muse in Rome (now Palazzo Pallavicini-Rospigliosi).

The rape, occurred on 6 May 1611, resulted in a long trial which exposed the young Artemisia to the public knowledge and deeply influenced her art, characterized in the early years by the depiction of overpowering female figures set in backdrops of Caravaggesque memory. Through her art, Artemisia exorcized rage and frustrations, conceiving the story of Judith and Holofernes as a masterpiece of frightening power immediately recognized by Filippo Baldinucci, her Florentine biographer, who shyly commented '(the Judith painting) inspires a no little amount of terror'.²⁷

Artemisia's revenge in blood against Agostino Tassi serves her to interpret the Biblical theme of 'Judith beheading Holofernes', based on the Old Testament story in which Judith, a beautiful widow, seduces the Assyrian general Holofernes, whose army is besieging her hometown. Overcome with drink, Holofernes passes out and is

25 For a precise account about Orazio Gentileschi's friendship with Caravaggio see: R.W. Bissel, *Orazio Gentileschi and the Poetic Tradition in Caravaggesque painting*. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1981), 13.

26 *The conversion of St. Paul and the Crucifixion of St. Peter* in the Cerasi Chapel in Santa Maria del Popolo are among the few paintings by Caravaggio that the young Artemisia knew finished, as Santa Maria del Popolo was her Parish Church. K. Christiansen, *Becoming Artemisia: Afterthoughts on the Gentileschi exhibition*, in *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, 39, 2004, 106-107.

27 '[Il dipinto] mette non poco terrore'. F. Baldinucci, *Notizie de' professori del disegno da Cimabue in qua*, (Florence: Giuseppe Manni, 1728), 293.

decapitated by Judith through a bloody escalation of violence depicted by Artemisia without any censorship. Between 1601 and 1620, Artemisia painted two versions of the subject, respectively in Naples (Capodimonte)²⁸ and Florence (Uffizi)²⁹ (fig. 7) and both represent the action in an unprecedented way, as a bloody murder perpetrated by two women whose cold determination is almost vengeful.³⁰ On the canvases, the power of blood is so intense that Roberto Longhi wrote: ‘it is impossible to conceive such a brutal and bloody massacre’³¹ while Mary Garrard understood the bloody symbolic representation as a ‘cathartic expression of the artist’s private and repressed rage’.³²

It is curious, and certainly not a coincidence, that the only existing realistic representation of the story of Judith was depicted a few years earlier by Caravaggio in the large canvas now at Palazzo Barberini³³ (fig. 8). Before Caravaggio, the majority of the painters who had approached the Judith topic had chosen to focus on the moment following the beheading, when the beautiful widow and her servant Abra were escaping the Assyrian camp with Holoferne’s severed head.

Even if the above mentioned iconographic choice highlights a moment full of dramatic potential, it was also the easier to paint, since representing the instant of the actual murder was in a way more complicated.³⁴ In the Barberini painting, Caravaggio was the first painter

28 Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith beheading Holofernes*, 1611-12, Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples.

29 Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith beheading Holofernes*, 1620, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

30 It is important to note that Artemisia’s two versions of *Judith beheading Holofernes* are slightly different. The Capodimonte painting was conceived few months after the rape; it is straightforward and pitiless and expresses Artemisia’s rage and desire for vendetta. On the other hand, the Uffizi representation is less spontaneous and characterized by accurate attention to details and harmonious study of the composition.

31 R. Longhi, *Gentileschi padre e figlia*, in “*L’Arte*”, N°19, 1916, 235-314.

32 Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: the image of the female hero in Italian Baroque art*, 312.

33 Caravaggio, *Judith beheading Holofernes*, 1598-99, Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, Rome.

34 J.W. Mann, *Artemisia Gentileschi nella Roma di Orazio e dei caravaggeschi: 1608-1612*. In *Artemisia Gentileschi: storia di una passione*, Catalogue of the exhibition held at Palazzo Reale, Italy, Sept. 22, 2011-Jan. 29, 2012, (Milan: 24 ore cultura,

to depict the real moment of the beheading, highlighting its brutality and provoking the ashamed reaction of his contemporaries as occurred with Annibale Carracci who, pressed to express his opinion about Caravaggio's painting, replied: 'I don't know what to say except that it is too natural.'³⁵

Caravaggio's innovative representation of Judith's story was certainly a source of inspiration for Artemisia as well as an important milestone for the evolution of the subject's iconography. For one, the French painter Valentine de Boulogne was vividly inspired by Caravaggio's painting and his version of the *Beheading*, now at the National Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta, clearly shows a profound knowledge of both Caravaggio and Artemisia's versions³⁶ (fig.9).

Even if Caravaggio's masterpiece may be considered the forerunner of Artemisia's work, I would rather hypothesize that the conceptual idea behind the two paintings is totally different. In Caravaggio's painting the main focus is clearly drawn on Holofernes, who is not dead yet and screams in outraged protest, while Judith, almost repelled by the violence of her act, cuts his head provoking the spill of an improbable stripe of blood. Caravaggio creates a scene which is theatrical, artificial and harbinger of the Shakespearean drama,³⁷ but, at a closer look, his depiction seems impersonal and lacks the sufficient power to express the entire potential of Judith's story. Artemisia, on the other hand, unequivocally portrays the coarse reality of Holoferne's murder, which is organized with clinical precision, resembling an execution or, more appropriately, a blood sacrifice. While for Caravaggio Holofernes is still alive and present, in Artemisia's view he is nothing more than a sacrificial victim, and the blood that so realistically drops by his neck is the ultimate symbol of her rage and revenge (*vendetta*) used to expresses both the drama of her life-story and her desire to overcome it.

2011), 58.

35 "[Annibale] forzato pure a dire il suo parere su una Giuditta del Caravaggio, non so dire altro, rispose, se non che ella è troppo naturale". C.C. Malvasia, *Felsina Pittrice*, (Bologna: 1678), 344.

36 Valentin de Boulogne, *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, circa 1626, National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta.

37 Caravaggio's ability to investigate the meaning of life as well as the conflict between executioners and victims draws to an interesting parallel with the Shakespearean theatre. E. Sâfâric, *Acquisti 1970-72*, in *XV settimana dei musei italiani*. (Rome: Palazzo Barberini, 1972), 32.

This autobiographic interpretation of Artemisia's painting is both challenged and completed by a further metaphoric explanation proposed by Griselda Pollock in *Differencing the canon*, an acute and articulate analysis of Gentileschi's identity as a female artist.³⁸ In Pollock's view, the symbolic meaning of the bloody violence represented in Artemisia's *Judith beheading Holofernes* is not related with feelings of revenge against Tassi but, instead, aims to challenge the masculine authority of seventeenth century art.³⁹ More specifically, the American scholar draws the attention on the ambiguous role played by Artemisia as a seventeenth century female painter, who is forced to compete in an artistic environment dominated by male characters. Pollock hypothesizes that by borrowing the story of Judith Artemisia represented her ambiguous position as a female artist, asserting the ambition for a specific identity: that of an active woman who can make art. In this context, the painting can be read as a transposition of roles, in which the man (Holofernes) is metaphorically threatened with the same violence which was intellectually enacted upon women in an historic era which refused their creative participation in it.

Even accepting the validity of Pollock's interpretation, I am strongly inclined to believe in a more autobiographic reading of Artemisia's work, especially in relation to the Capodimonte painting, which was completed just few months after the unfortunate event of the rape. In the Neapolitan canvas, the dramatic power and the impulsive determination of the two vengeful women are too strong to underestimate Artemisia's emotional participation in the representation. Pollock's analysis, instead, could be perhaps more pertinent in relation with the Uffizi painting, which is more carefully organized and painted in the period in which Artemisia was struggling to assert her identity as a female painter.

To conclude, besides different interpretations, it is evident that both Artemisia and Caravaggio adopted blood as a symbolic representation of their own life-stories, understanding

38 G. Pollock, *Differencing the canon: feminist desire and the writings of art's histories*, (London; New York: Routledge, 1999).

39 'The painting Judith is not about revenge. Yet it is about killing. But is a metaphor [...] Judith could become a means to structure a desire for a certain kind of artistic identity, that of an active woman who can make art'. Pollock, *Differencing the canon*, 121-123.

it as a vehicle to express intense emotions of fear and revenge.

By combining blood's symbolism and dramatic representations, they created two of the most impressive and iconic images of the early Baroque period, influencing the naturalistic developments of European painting as well as opening a cutting edge window on the metaphoric representation of the self in art.

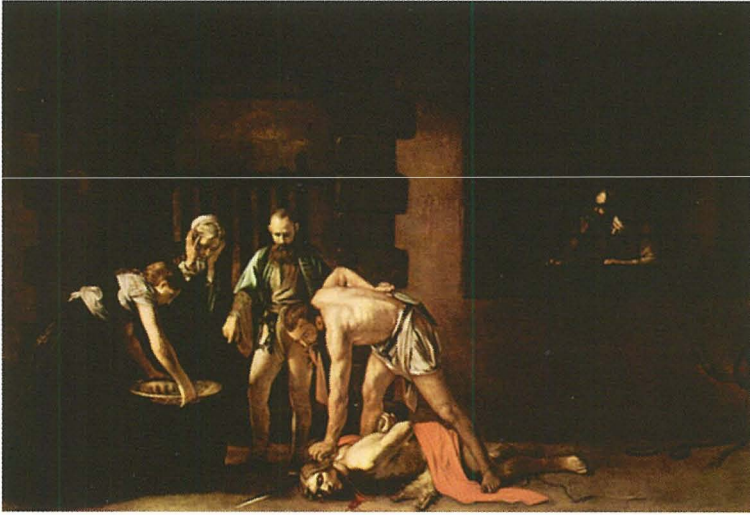


Figure 1: Caravaggio, 'The Beheading of the Baptist', Valletta, St. John's Co-Cathedral.



Figure 2: Artemisia Gentileschi, 'Judith beheading Holofernes', Naples, Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte.

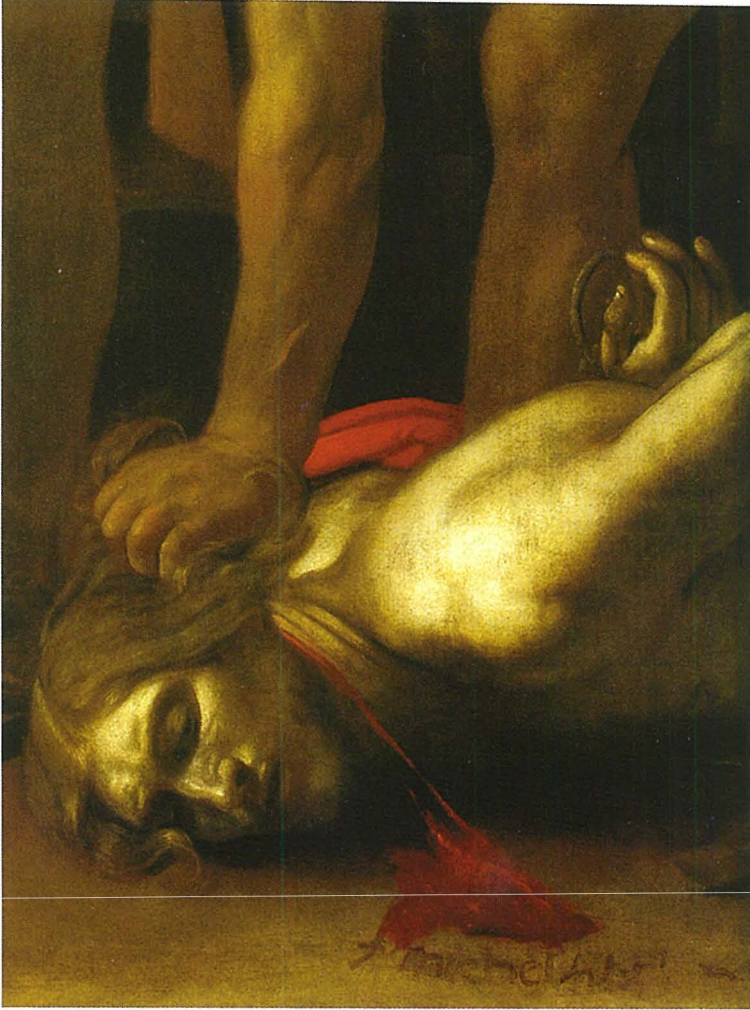


Figure 3: Caravaggio, 'The Beheading of the Baptist', (particular) signature in blood, Valletta, St. John's Co-Cathedral.



Figure 4: Vincenzo Foppa, The Martyrdom of St. Peter of Verona, Milan, Portinari Chapel.



Figure 5: Alessandro Bonvicino (known as Moretto da Brescia), 'Martyrdom of St. Peter of Verona', Milan, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana.



Figure 6: Caravaggio, 'David with the head of Goliath', Rome, Galleria Borghese.



Figure 7: Caravaggio, 'Judith Beheading Holofernes', Rome, Galleria Nazionale di Arte Antica.

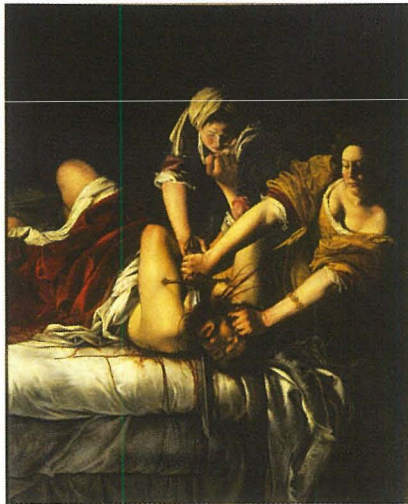


Figure 8: Artemisia Gentileschi, 'Judith Beheading Holofernes', Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi.



Figure 9: Valentin de Boulogne, 'Judith Beheading Holofernes', Valletta, National Museum of Fine Arts.