

ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI WITH THE HEAD OF THE BEAST

By Newton Sweeney

Content Warnings:

Rape, Manipulation, Torture, Institutional Misogyny

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GALLERY



“Judith and Her Maidservant” (Artemisia Gentileschi, 1615)



“Susanna and the Elders” (Artemisia Gentileschi, 1610)



“Judith Slaying Holofernes” (Artemisia Gentileschi, 1620)

Cast of Characters:

- ARTEMISIA: A lonely painter, 19 years old. Seeks answers in her dreams.
- TUZIA: A former lodger of ORAZIO, 45 years old. Knows how to survive.
- ORAZIO: A painter, 49 years old. ARTEMISIA's father and teacher.
- THE BEAST: Agostino Tassi, a painter, 34 years old. Feeds on control.
- GIOVANNI STIATTESI: A family friend, 30 years old. Jovial and well-intentioned.
- PIERANTONIO STIATTESI: Giovanni's brother, 27 years old. Hint of a savior complex.
Played by the same actor as GIOVANNI.

Time:

Late 1612

Place:

The sleeping mind of Artemisia Gentileschi

PART ONE: JUDITH AND HER MAIDSERVANT

Scene 1

Setting: A cluttered painter's studio. Easels and canvases are spread throughout the space, though all are covered in sheets save for a portrait of two women, one holding a sword slung over her shoulder, both looking off the frame. The woman without the sword carries a man's severed head in a basket. This is Judith and her Maidservant, 1615. The canvas is larger than the others, roughly upstage center. Upstage is raised on a low platform, maybe six inches off of the ground. A moderately-sized table and stool are placed downstage left of the uncovered painting, with a jar or two of paintbrushes on the table. The space should be well-worn and clearly in frequent use.

At Rise: The lights come up only enough for us to see ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI, dressed in a simple nightgown, as she attempts to hold one of the paintbrushes. She's struggling with this; her hands are thoroughly bandaged, making it impossible to move her fingers. She drops a few brushes. Maybe she makes noises of frustration at this. Eventually, she surrenders, looking up at the painting with a heavy sigh.

ARTEMISIA

Oh, Judith. How did you have the strength?

(A beat. She tears her eyes from the painting, looking around her surroundings. She takes in the paintings, the easels. Is she home? Cautiously, she approaches one of the easels, places a bandaged hand on the canvas. Sneaks a glance offstage.)

ARTEMISIA *(continued)*

Father? Are you home?

(Beat. Did she miss a lesson? Then, more cautiously—)

ARTEMISIA *(continued)*

Tuzia? *(Beat.)* When did I get here? I shouldn't be in Rome, I am in Florence with—

(A realization. Her shoulders slump.)

ARTEMISIA *(continued)*

Not again. I cannot endure another night of this.

Projection: A DREAM: JUDITH ALONE

(Unseen by ARTEMISIA, TUZIA appears at the opposite side of the stage. There is a great distance between the women. Both address the painting by looking out over the audience, as if a replica hangs along the back wall of the space.)

TUZIA

(Re: the painting) You paint these women so often. Why is that?

(At her voice, ARTEMISIA starts, staring frozen at TUZIA.)

TUZIA *(continued)*

Look at them. So unseemly. They don't regret a thing.

ARTEMISIA

You. Why are you here?

TUZIA

What makes you think I'm here? *(Beat)* Your hands look like they hurt.

(ARTEMISIA pulls her injured hands in towards herself.)

TUZIA *(continued)*

Was it worth it?

ARTEMISIA

To see him punished? Of course it was.

TUZIA

Oh, Artemisia. Lying as always. *(Beat)* You know as well as I that his punishment is hardly a slap on the wrist. What is eight months behind bars compared to a lifetime of reckoning with what he did to you? Meanwhile, you get cords crushing your fingers until your mouth cannot even form the words, "It is true!" You cannot deceive me, not here.

ARTEMISIA

(Almost losing her composure) Don't talk to me about lies. You let him in the house. You ignored my cries. And then, to defend him...

(A deep breath, in and out. Careful. ARTEMISIA turns back to the painting.)

ARTEMISIA *(continued)*

Her servant, Abra. She stayed with Judith, even at risk of her own safety. If he had discovered Judith's plan, both women would have been killed. But Abra stayed. Abra watched, she helped Judith hold him down once he had grown drunk and confused, she hid the severed head in her bag and carried it all the way back home. *Abra* understood the strength of women's combined might.

TUZIA

Who is *he*? Holofernes, or –

(ARTEMISIA shoots TUZIA a sharp look and takes a few steps towards her. A warning.)

ARTEMISIA

He was a *beast*. You could have carried his head in a bag alongside me. But instead, you choose to slander my name and my father's name to defend him. Why?

(TUZIA takes a step towards ARTEMISIA, then another. The distance is almost bridged, the two women splitting an ever-closing center.)

TUZIA

(Quietly) You are not the only woman in this world, Artemisia. I take care of myself. I was compensated handsomely.

ARTEMISIA

Compensated. To allow him into my home. To allow him to– I heard you at the trial. You said he tormented you when you would not let him in.

TUZIA

You are not my responsibility. I am not your mother; I owe you nothing.

ARTEMISIA

You are the only woman I have ever called a friend. Does that mean nothing to you? For months, you knew what that man was doing to me, and you stayed silent. *Why?*

TUZIA

And what can a woman do in this world? You cannot honestly believe I could have done anything to stop him. I spoke the truth at the trial. The man was obsessed.

ARTEMISIA

A woman can defend herself. I am proof of that.

TUZIA

Are you? Would you be as known as you are if not for your father's lessons? If not for your *private lessons* with Signor Tassi? Be honest with yourself, even if you refuse to be so with me. *If you are remembered, it will be only as the painters' whore.*

(TUZIA takes another step. The two women are nearly within arms' reach of each other.)

ARTEMISIA

You forget that I have won. I endured the torture and was proven innocent.

TUZIA

Yet your father married you off almost before the verdict was declared. Signor Stiatessi seems far preferable to your beast. He is not cruel. You will be protected by him.

(Softer) You are lucky, Artemisia. I know what it is to be a woman in this world. A woman can be skilled, but a woman can never be without a man. You forget that I am a widow. I held no love for my husband, but the protection he offered from this world was a gift I miss every day. If he were still here, perhaps I would have—

(TUZIA stops herself; ARTEMISIA looks at her. A moment of understanding.)

TUZIA *(continued)*

Life isn't as it is in the tales you paint, Artemisia. Womanhood is not a binding contract.

ARTEMISIA

(With a sudden intensity) How is it not? If you had had the strength to protect me, I would still be home! I would not flinch at the sight of— Speak the truth, Tuzia: You are a coward who loves no one. An unwanted woman too pitiful to protect her own.

TUZIA

You have no right to speak to me in that way.

ARTEMISIA

And you had *no right* to hurt me. You may not have touched me, but you are to blame as much as he is. The closest thing I knew to a mother since she passed. But you were no mother to me, no friend. No, Tuzia, you were my bawd, my madam. You turned my father's house into your brothel. Under your care, I was sold for your own terribly fragile security. *You* destroyed me.

(ARTEMISIA crumbles and sinks onto a stool, exhausted by her outburst. TUZIA, whose cool exterior has been just barely eroded by her words, reaches out a hand to ARTEMISIA as if to pull her into an embrace. ARTEMISIA lightly slaps the hand away. Somewhat awkwardly, TUZIA sits next to ARTEMISIA.)

ARTEMISIA *(continued)*

(Turning back to the painting) Could Judith have done it alone? Abra is so often forgotten. *(Faces TUZIA again)* Judith, at least, brought home justice for her people. Freedom. I am not so lucky.

TUZIA

Aren't you? Your beast is in prison. Your beast had a guilty verdict delivered on his head. How many women can say that?

ARTEMISIA

Eight months is hardly justice. And my hands...

(TUZIA finally bridges the gap, taking ARTEMISIA's bandaged hands.)

TUZIA

Your hands will heal. See.

(ARTEMISIA's hands are unwrapped and free; she holds them up to her face and moves them carefully. There is no pain.)

ARTEMISIA

But what am I to do—

(TUZIA is gone. ARTEMISIA examines her hands again. She goes to the paintbrushes, reaches for one before she remembers the few she'd dropped on the floor. She bends and picks them up, placing them back in the jar. She grips the largest one for a moment, then quickly returns it to the jar as well.)

Scene 2

Projection: A MEMORY: THE FIRST MEETING

(Time shifts as ARTEMISIA is pulled into a memory. She is in the process of pulling her loose hair into a bun, and ORAZIO, her father, approaches her. The lights are focused DS, causing the studio background to fall out of focus.)

ORAZIO

Signior Tassi will be arriving soon.

ARTEMISIA

I still don't understand why you insist upon my having another tutor. Have I really surpassed your abilities so soon? I would have thought it would be at least one year more before you admitted defeat.

ORAZIO

Daughter, please. Tassi is a very busy and *respected* artist. It will do you good to learn from him; Even my own skills have sharpened from our work together on the Palazzo. His command over landscapes is unmatched, and yours leaves much to be desired.

ARTEMISIA

But my figures –

ORAZIO

Are hardly perfect either. Do you not wish to improve?

ARTEMISIA

(Sulking somewhat) I do.

ORAZIO

Then behave yourself. Learn from him. Your work will be better for it.

ARTEMISIA

I suppose.

(ORAZIO starts to answer, but he is cut off by a knock at the door. He exits SL and returns with THE BEAST, Agostino Tassi, in tow.)

BEAST

Signorina Gentileschi. Lovely as I had imagined.

(ARTEMISIA, for a moment, is pulled out of the memory and looks at her BEAST with terror. Then it passes. She nods politely.)

ARTEMISIA

Thank you for coming, Signior.

BEAST

It's my pleasure. Rarely do I have the opportunity to instruct the daughter of a man so renowned as your father.

(ORAZIO starts to gather supplies: a folded-up easel, a canvas, a case of paints.)

ORAZIO

The studio is just upstairs, Artemisia will show you the way.

BEAST

You're not staying?

ORAZIO

Unfortunately not. I have a meeting in town, but our lodger, Tuzia, will be home should you need anything.

BEAST

I see.

(ARTEMISIA helps her father into his coat, kisses his cheek, and he exits SL. She turns to THE BEAST.)

ARTEMISIA

If you'll follow me, Signior.

(ARTEMISIA and THE BEAST enter the studio, indicated by the US lights. THE BEAST takes a moment to look around as ARTEMISIA settles herself at an easel.)

BEAST

You share this studio with your father, yes?

ARTEMISIA

Yes. Though that wasn't always the case. He hadn't particularly desired a daughter to follow in his stead. But none of my brothers showed interest in his work, and I did.

BEAST

I see. But you've not been painting long.

ARTEMISIA

My father has taught me for almost three years now. But before that, I found ways to use these resources when his focus was elsewhere.

(THE BEAST turns away from the studio and trains his eyes on ARTEMISIA, interest sparked. He approaches.)

BEAST

A rebellious child, then?

ARTEMISIA

A bit, yes. I've always felt that painting was something I had to do, no matter what consequences I may face for wasting my father's good paints. Aside from that, I have always been perfectly well-behaved.

BEAST

I'm sure you were. *(Beat)* Well then, show me some of your work. Your father has told me much, but I would like to see it for myself.

(ARTEMISIA goes to a covered easel, angled away from our line of sight. She pulls back the sheet then steps aside for THE BEAST to view the piece.)

ARTEMISIA

This is my most recent. Madonna and Child.

BEAST

Satisfactory. For an amateur, you show skill.

ARTEMISIA

Thank you, Signior.

BEAST

But I see no background here. Only darkness. Your father said that you needed to improve your perspective skills.

ARTEMISIA

Yes.

BEAST

Have you any paintings that demonstrate such a skill?

ARTEMISIA

I'm afraid not, Signior. A few practice canvases here and there, but my lessons until now have primarily focused on figures.

BEAST

Figures. I must admit, I have never thought it right, a woman painting such a thing as a portrait. I find landscapes far preferable. With figures, it is inevitable that she will study the nude form, and for one young as yourself...

(THE BEAST reaches out a hand to ARTEMISIA's face, and she flinches away from him.)

ARTEMISIA

(Startled) I only paint women, Signior. I understand that some may find issue with a woman studying the figure of a man as she might someone of her own sex. I assure you, everything I paint is perfectly appropriate.

BEAST

Of course.

(A long beat.)

ARTEMISIA

Teach me the fundamentals, then. I have my easel ready.

(THE BEAST takes her easel from the ground and turns it to face SR, where a window is located offstage. ARTEMISIA, still off-balance, moves her other supplies to compensate. THE BEAST stands behind her, pointing a finger past her shoulder.)

BEAST

I want you to observe the skyline. See Rome stretch out before you, the houses, the cathedrals.

ARTEMISIA

Yes.

BEAST

Study how it all comes together. Perspective is not merely size; it is line, color, shadow, distance. To favor any of these over another is to doom your painting. *(Beat)* Begin.

(ARTEMISIA takes a pencil and begins sketching out the horizon. THE BEAST moves closer into her space, and she glances over her shoulder at him.)

ARTEMISIA

(After a few moments) I'm sorry, Signior; would you take a step back? I admit, it's difficult to do this with someone as skilled as yourself watching me so closely.

BEAST

I must see your work in order to teach you, do I not?

ARTEMISIA

(Stiffly) Of course.

(A few more beats. ARTEMISIA continues sketching.)

BEAST

Do you know, Signorina, I am wholly underwhelmed by this view. I wonder if there is another room in this house that would provide something more... appealing to the eye.

(THE BEAST takes a hand to ARTEMISIA's hair, and gently pulls out the cord holding it up. ARTEMISIA is frozen.)

ARTEMISIA

What are you doing, Signor?

BEAST

I seem to recall another window on this floor. Your bedroom, perhaps?

(ARTEMISIA breaks from her stupor and turns on THE BEAST. He does not retreat.)

ARTEMISIA

How dare you? You are a guest in my father's home!

BEAST

Your father is not here, Signorina.

ARTEMISIA

He will be back. And when he hears how you have disrespected him, you will never step foot in this house again.

BEAST

(Soothingly) Come, calm yourself. I mean you no harm.

(ARTEMISIA starts towards the door SL, but THE BEAST holds her still.)

ARTEMISIA

Let me go.

BEAST

Not until you behave. I see you've yet to lose that rebellious nature.

ARTEMISIA

I will scream. Tuzia is home, she will hear. You can choose to let me go, or I—

(THE BEAST cuts her off by holding a wadded-up cloth over her mouth, pulling her back flush against his front and speaking dangerously into her ear. He easily restrains her in his arms as she struggles.)

BEAST

You have the choice here, not I. You may be calm, and show me to your bedroom. Or you may scream and make this much more difficult for the both of us.

(ARTEMISIA continues struggling, but after a few long beats seems to realize that she will not be able to escape his grasp. She goes limp in his arms, and slowly, THE BEAST lowers the cloth. As soon as his grip loosens, ARTEMISIA runs for the door.)

ARTEMISIA

(At the top of her lungs) TUZIA! TUZIA!

(THE BEAST restrains her easily once again, but he does not cover her mouth. She continues screaming until it is clear that there will be no rescue.)

BEAST

Have you decided?

(Beat. The last of the fight in ARTEMISIA goes out. THE BEAST spins her around to face him.)

BEAST *(continued)*

Good. *(He tilts up her face towards him with a finger under her chin.)* Oh, you are so beautiful, Artemisia. It is a true pity to see hatred in those eyes. *(Beat)* Now, the bedroom?

(Mechanically, ARTEMISIA pulls a sheet from a canvas and spreads it on the ground DS. The US lights fade as we move to the bedroom. As ARTEMISIA lowers to the ground and THE BEAST climbs on top of her, blackout.)