Rape, Religion, and Female Sexuality in Works by Artemisia Gentileschi and Tori Amos

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Introduction

It seems difficult, even strange, to put in conversation with each other a seventeenth-century Italian painter and a twentieth-century U.S. American singer-songwriter—separated as these individuals are by geography, era, and medium. Artemisia Gentileschi and Tori Amos, though, are two women artists whose pairing is remarkably apt.

Artemisia Gentileschi was born in Rome in 1593, the eldest child and only daughter of Orazio Gentileschi, a painter. She demonstrated an early artistic talent, and was apprenticed to her father at a young age, eventually leaving his tutelage and producing independent works at seventeen. Gentileschi operated in Rome, Florence, Venice, Naples, and London, and was well-known as an artist by her contemporaries, up till her death in 1653.

Tori Amos was similarly a prodigy. Born Myra Ellen Amos in Newton, North Carolina, in 1963, to Methodist preacher Edison Amos, she was admitted to the Peabody Conservatory on a scholarship at the age of five. There, she studied classical piano, before dropping out six years later. Amos played in hotel lounges and piano bars throughout her teens, and came to commercial attention with her first solo album, Little Earthquakes, in 1992. Since then, her music has come to attract a cult following.

There has been significant feminist interest in Gentileschi’s and Amos’s careers, not least because of their engagement with gendered themes. Both women offer in their personal and professional lives substantial commentary on religion and women’s sexuality. Another reason feminist scholarship has embraced their personae, however, is their shared experience of sexual assault. When Gentileschi was seventeen, in 1611, her father’s colleague Agostino Tassi raped
her in her home. Amos was raped in 1984, after performing in a nightclub, by an audience member to whom she had offered a lift in her car. These experiences, many critics argue, inevitably colour our understanding of the works produced by Gentileschi and Amos.

Gentileschi, throughout her career, frequently returned to classical and biblical images of women known for their chastity or sensuality—Lucretia, Cleopatra, Susanna, Judith, Jael, and Mary Magdalene among them. Meanwhile, Amos has gained a reputation for deliberately erotic renditions of original compositions; her songs are often confessional, autobiographical accounts of her religious upbringing and sexual identity. In their creative output and their interpretations of their chosen material, Gentileschi and Amos challenge cultural and religious patriarchal values about rape, submission, resistance, and honour.

My interest in classical Christian approaches to rape and sexual assault survivors began when I discovered, in 2008, the story of Saint Maria Goretti. Despite her statue being included in the sanctuary at the Church of Saint Francis Xavier back home, I knew nothing of her at that point in time. I have since found out that she was held up as a popular model of chastity in Catholic schools before the Second Vatican Council.¹

In 1902, an Italian peasant, Alessandro Serenelli, accosted his neighbour, twelve-year-old Maria Goretti. When she refused to entertain his demand for sex, he murdered her by stabbing her repeatedly with a knife. For her decision to die rather than be raped, Maria was canonised in 1950 by Pope Pius XII as a “sweet little martyr of purity.”² On the occasion of the centenary of


her death, Pope John Paul II also eulogised her as “a shining example for young people” whose
death showcased “the beauty and value of chastity.”

My fifteen-year-old feminist self was, understandably, outraged at her canonisation. I
could not understand how a child could be lauded for making an impossible choice in an
impossible situation, nor—and this was worse—how the church could seize upon her as an
example of ideal sexuality. Within such a framework, engaging in consensual sexual activity and
experiencing sexual assault are parallel in their magnitude of immorality—and God forbid that
the same person should be capable of doing both. How, as a Chinese-Catholic feminist, was I
supposed to respond to this paradigm? I found the anger in Gentileschi’s 1620 Judith Slaying
Holofernes and the terror in Tori Amos’s 1992 “Me and a Gun” immensely easy to relate to,
when I first encountered those works.

**Virginity or Death**

One form which patriarchy takes in society is an “honour culture,” where a woman’s
sexuality is considered the property of the men in her household—her father or her husband—
and where her sexual reputation reflects on their social status. In an honour culture, even non-
consensual intercourse—rape—deprives a woman of her sexual integrity, and thus her honour.

In addition to its social implications on honour and reputation, Christianity also imbues virginity
with a moral quality. Virginity is chastity, and the loss of virginity—even forcibly—has the
potential to be the loss of the prospect of heaven.

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Under such circumstances, submission to a rapist constitutes submission to sin. In her critical analysis of Maria Goretti’s sainthood, Kathleen Young writes:

The legends and myths of virgin martyrs reinforce passivity and the victimization of Catholic girls and women. … Serenelli’s trial placed blame on Maria for struggling and on the Church for inspiring her struggle. A 12-year-old facing a menacing weapon was expected to be reasonable, to submit. The assumption was that by struggling, she precipitated, even if unwittingly, her own victimization. But from the Church’s perspective, her struggle is what made her a martyr and a saint.\(^5\)

This Christian view on rape and sexuality, reflected in the canonisation of Maria Goretti, presents the experiencing of surviving rape as a moral defeat. The victim, not the rapist, is in control, asserts this point of view—she has the power to make the choice between the spiritual degradation of rape or the sanctifying martyrdom of death. Rachel Van Cleave summarises this attitude aptly: “honorable women … resist, fight back, and are willing to sacrifice their lives rather than dishonor themselves or their families.”\(^6\)

Steeped as she was in the honour culture of seventeenth-century Italy, Gentileschi’s physically vigorous struggle with Tassi during the rape—in which she “scratched his face and pulled his hair and … grasped his penis so tight that I even removed a piece of flesh”\(^7\)—is desperate behaviour in accordance with these social norms. Having failed to die in defence of her virginity, and having failed in her attempt to kill Tassi after the rape,\(^8\) Gentileschi’s only recourse was to continue submitting to Tassi’s sexual advances, in the hope that he would legitimise her lack of virginity by marrying her. She had lost her “honour” when she was raped; Mary Garrard

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\(^{5}\) Young, “Imperishable Virginity,” 478.

\(^{6}\) Van Cleave, “Sex, Lies, and Honor,” 446.


\(^{8}\) Ibid.
explains that “under the laws and customs of seventeenth-century Italy, … a raped woman was considered ‘spoiled goods’ for anyone other than her violator.” Although Gentileschi tells the court at Tassi’s 1612 rape trial that she “yield[ed] lovingly, many times, to his desires” when he promised her marriage,⁹ her supposed consent was clearly given under social pressure and duress. In such a situation, “Orazio’s accusation, that Tassi raped his daughter ‘many, many times,’ was not mere hyperbole or a contradiction in terms, but in fact devastatingly accurate.”¹⁰

Amos’s account of rape is as graphic and visceral as Gentileschi’s. In an interview with Hot Press, she describes the physical as well as psychic trauma of the experience as having “left me urinating all over myself and left me paralysed for years.”¹¹ Like Gentileschi, Amos was subjected not only to the physical violence of the assault itself, but to the psychological humiliation of complying with her attacker’s demands. She attributes her survival—a literal survival, as she makes clear when she asks “why have I survived that kind of night, when other women didn’t”—to her terrified appeasement of his wishes, “singing hymns [during the rape] … because he told me to.”¹² Amos dared not resist as Gentileschi did; she afterwards blamed herself for this failure to fight back. Because she could not live up to the ideal of an “honourable” woman, who would rather struggle unto death than submit to sexual violence, she “felt I let myself, and all women, down because of my total vulnerability the night I was raped.”¹³

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⁹. Ibid.

¹⁰. Garrard, Artemisia Gentileschi, 206.


¹². Ibid.

¹³. Ibid.
Nonetheless, confronted with sexual subjugation and shame, Gentileschi and Amos create a new form of resistance: their refusal to die. Through surviving, they resist not only rape itself, but also the religious paradigm that would have preferred their deaths, and the concept of a family “honour” intrinsically linked to their sexual integrity. They chronicle their survival through creative works which both depict instances of sexual assault and emphasise victims’ desire to live.

Gentileschi’s *Lucretia* (1621) is a vivid example of how she perceives and represents the conflict posed to rape survivors. *Lucretia* depicts the classical Roman matron who committed suicide after being raped, to avoid the stigma of being an “adulteress.” In Gentileschi’s artistic imagination, writes Garrard,

Lucretia … weighs her decision and its consequences through contradictory gestures: the raised left hand that holds the dagger introduces the dismal prospect of suicide, while the right hand that clutches her breast and palpates the nipple recalls the ongoing biological cycle about to be interrupted by the drastic action that patriarchal morality requires.

By presenting Lucretia’s inner turmoil and confusion, Gentileschi recognises in the figure of Lucretia the same impossible choice with which she was faced. Suicide here is a “dismal prospect” and a “drastic action” which Lucretia must force herself to attempt, against her will, to preserve her father’s and her husband’s reputation. Gentileschi captures in her painting Lucretia’s internal torment, and thus highlights the unfair misogyny of the situation, where a woman’s individual response to being raped is erased in favour of securing her family’s “honour” or her religion’s claim to her sexual integrity.


Similarly, in “Me and a Gun,” where she narrates the night she was raped, Amos ends the first stanza with the sentiment that grounds her entire song: “I wanna live.” She sings this line flatly, giving the declaration the air of a simple and self-evident statement. The idea of wanting to live dominates her description of the rape she experienced. Amos repeats throughout “Me and a Gun” that “I haven’t seen Barbados, so I must get out of this.” The first time she uses this line, she prefaces it with a quiet, almost self-effacing confession—“You can laugh, it’s kind of funny, things you think, times like these.” This lends a shocked and faintly bitter self-consciousness to her admission of a wish to see Barbados—hinting at the discomfort Amos feels at the memory, as well as the self-censorship practised by rape survivors in recalling the moments of the assault. Nonetheless, when the Barbados line subsequently recurs, the word but sits squarely before it. “Me and a gun and a man on my back,” sings Amos; “but I haven’t seen Barbados, so I must get out of this.” The but transforms the anguish of being threatened and raped, with “a man on my back,” into a determination to “get out of this.” With each repetition, Amos’s resolve is symbolically strengthened. She endures the suffering by fixating on the goal of survival at all costs, rather than giving in to the patriarchal notion of maintaining sexual “honour” at all costs.

**Religion and Female Sexuality**

The traditional Christian perspective on virginity—wherein rape lends sin and shame to the victim, not the perpetrator—arises out of an honour culture obsessed with controlling women’s sexuality. “Medieval Christians,” writes Clarissa Atkinson, “inherited Jerome’s appreciation of virginity as a physiological state and his intense interest in ‘protecting’ virgins from a defiling world. They also inherited Augustine’s belief that the human will determines the
good or evil of any human activity or status, including sexual activity and sexual status.”\textsuperscript{16} The former belief implies that, whether consensual or not, the loss of virginity carries an equal loss of moral stature. The latter, drawing on the shaming of female sexuality, implies that a woman being subjected to sexual assault can be more morally defensible than her choosing to exercise her sexual agency. Taken in conjunction with each other, these two beliefs impose a conflicting and restrictive social behaviour on rape survivors.

On the one hand, the experience of rape forces upon a woman the role of a sexual object, and leaves her open to subsequent accusations of hypersexuality. On the other, she feels compelled to eschew any overt expressions of sexuality, lest she be accused of complicity in her own rape. The cultural contradiction ultimately, as Van Cleave puts it, “represent[s] an enduring skepticism about whether a woman can ever be raped.”\textsuperscript{17} Gentileschi and Amos would have been familiar with this notion that women are intrinsically “rapable.” Having had to defend themselves from accusations of sexual promiscuity when they spoke about being raped, they knew that—as per Andrea Smith’s description of the sexual colonisation of Native American women—“in patriarchal thinking, only a body that is ‘pure’ can be violated. The rape of bodies that are considered inherently impure or dirty simply does not count.”\textsuperscript{18}

In their works, Gentileschi and Amos deliberately bring themselves into opposition with such a mindset. Gentileschi, with her focus on painting victims of sexual assault as vulnerable women rather than sultry temptresses, uses her art to protest raped women being invariably


\footnote{17. Van Cleave, “Sex, Lies, and Honor,” 445.}

Amos, in contrast, crafts and embraces an eroticised public image, in order to reclaim female sexual agency and bodily autonomy from a culture that devalues both. Despite their different approaches, the two women together present a nuanced and affirmative perspective on rape survivors’ sexual identities.

Garrard observes that, “unlike the beautiful Susannas, Lucretias, and Cleopatras of men’s art, who wriggle seductively even in extremis, Artemisia’s nude heroines convincingly experience pain and emotional anguish.” Rather than lush, titillating bodies which a male gaze can gawk at, the women whom Gentileschi paints are caught at intensely vulnerable moments. In her 1636 Bathsheba (fig. 1), for example, Bathsheba’s breasts are obscured by her left arm, which she wraps protectively about herself; her hands clutch tightly the frame of her chair, as though seeking reassurance from its sturdiness; and the expression which she directs at her servants is one of reluctance and distress. Gentileschi thus presents Bathsheba as a sympathetic character genuinely fearful of King David’s advances. This marks a departure from classical Christian interpretations of Bathsheba’s story, which suggest she is an adulteress who seduced the otherwise righteous David by daring to bathe on her own rooftop.

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Similarly, Gentileschi overturns the traditional power dynamics in her 1638 retelling of *Lot and His Daughters* (fig. 2). As the Bible tells it in the book of Genesis, the patriarch Lot’s two daughters conspired to inebriate him, and to impregnate themselves by their father. Under Gentileschi’s brush, however, the daughter towards whom he is advancing has her body turned away, and she shies away from the tentative touch of his right hand. Her expression is guarded and her gaze defiant. She hesitates; she is not an entirely willing participant in this sexual act.

![Fig. 2. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Lot and His Daughters*, 1638. Oil on canvas, 90 ¾" × 72 ½". Toledo Museum of Art. Reproduced from the Toledo Museum of Art website, http://classes.toledomuseum.org:8080/emuseum/view/objects/asitem/People$0040313.](image)

In this way, Gentileschi paints women in conventionally sexual settings, but she imbues the atmosphere with the implication of threat towards her subjects’ sexual integrity. Her women are not, as male artists portrayed, perpetually sexually available objects; yet they are vulnerable to the risk of being thought so. However, Gentileschi refuses to depict victims solely as victims. Lucretia, Bathsheba, and Lot’s daughter all demonstrate a sense of turmoil in their body gestures and facial expressions—they recognise the conflict between the situations in which they have been trapped, and are determined to find a way out. Rather than being wholly passive and sexual victims, they are individuals with strong personalities.

If Gentileschi argues against the sexualisation of raped women, Amos performs the complementary act: she reclaims their bodily autonomy from the experience of rape. Critics have
noted the blatant sexuality which Amos brings to her live performances. “Tori has sex appeal. Lots of it,” Bill DeMain states in a preface to an interview with her. He goes on to elaborate:

Her erotic persona is carried even further in her mesmerizing concerts. By her own admission, she “makes love with the audience.” Whipping her bright red mane in a frenzy, undulating against the piano keys and singing in a voice that can rise from a velvet whisper to a tempest’s raging howl, she often appears to be approaching orgasm on stage.20

Through her management of her stage persona, Amos challenges the victim-blaming culture that positions sexually independent women as “unrapable.” She sits with open legs at the piano and swivels her torso and hips,21 but as she protests in “Me and a Gun,” neither such behaviour nor the “slinky red thing” she wore on the night she was raped justify the act of sexual violence. Amos asks, in a voice laced with anger and defiance, if her red dress alone invited the rape or meant “I should spread for you, your friends, your father.” Recounting how she was forced at knifepoint to “sing ‘holy holy’ as he buttoned down his pants,” she warbles the “cryptic and polysemous phrase” holy holy22 in a high tone that contrasts with the flat carnality of spread. The hosanna and “the unholiest of situations”23 are mingled together, hinting at Amos’s ambivalence about the relationship between religion and female sexuality.

Amos has stated that she differentiates between Christian orthodoxy, whose narrow-minded patriarchy is criticised in her work, and the figure of Jesus Christ, whom she identifies in “Me and a Gun” as positively affirming her sexual autonomy with his line “It’s your choice

20. Bill DeMain, In Their Own Words: Songwriters Talk About the Creative Process (Westport, CT: 2004), 154.
23. Ibid.
babe.” She refers to a teenage rape victim who was denied an abortion by the Church in Ireland as having had a “horrific cross … between [her] legs.” Amos then clarifies: “Jesus Christ has nothing to do with that and it has nothing to do with Jesus Christ and don’t let anyone tell me that it has. The cross has been used as a weapon, as it has been used against all women throughout the ages. And that’s the greatest evil of all.”

“ICicle,” from her 1994 album *Under the Pink*, discusses Amos’s adolescent sexuality in a religious household. In “ICicle,” Amos’s teenage persona explores her body through masturbation, while her preacher father and his congregation are “all downstairs singing prayers.” Amos brashly juxtaposes religion and sexuality with lines such as “And when they say take of his body, I think I’ll take from mine instead,” which elevate the female body to the same spiritual level as the Eucharist. A similar technique is employed in “Me and a Gun,” when Amos sings that “me and Jesus a few years back used to hang, and he said …” Bonnie Gordon suggests that “by taking on the voice of Jesus she infuses her own voice with a kind of sacred power.”

Whereas traditional Christian morality exalts the intact hymen and female virginity, Amos uses religious allusions to celebrate women’s sexual exploration and agency.

**Autobiography: Creating Victim and Survivor Identities**

Throughout this paper, I have used the terms *victim* and *survivor* to connote two different aspects of rape and post-rape experiences. Anne McLeer provides a succinct overview of why

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25. Ibid.

survivor has been considered by some feminists to be the better word:

“Victim” was seen as dis-empowering and negative. The word “survivor” became commonly used as it held connotations of recovery and resistance. The use of the word “victim” also implied that the presumed helplessness and failure continued beyond the time of the crime, implying an inability to recover and an immutability of the victim status; whereas the use of words such as “survivor” and “recovery” indicated a process of empowerment and subjectivity after, as well as during, the crime.27

Nonetheless, the problem with the primacy of the word survivor in discourse on rape is its erasure of the potent vulnerability—and, indeed, helplessness and failure—which sexual violence inflicts on women’s bodies and psyches. The experience of sexual assault is too complicated to be sorted into victimisation and survival; Linda Wood and Heather Rennie aptly note that the distinctions between “victim vs non-victim; and victim vs survivor” constitute “artificial dichotomies.”28 Furthermore, victim implies a submissive position while survivor implies a resistive overcoming of that forced submission. As has been shown, the dichotomy of submission and resistance—especially in a religious context—is fraught with ambiguity.

The Guerrilla Girls, commenting on Gentileschi’s 1620 Judith Slaying Holofernes, contrast the conventional view that “a woman could not bear to look while doing such a deed” with Gentileschi’s presentation of a Judith “intent of accomplishing her mission, and unafraid to face carnage and death.”29 Far from the desperate widow using her body to gain access to the villainous Holofernes, Gentileschi’s Judith is presented as heroic and powerful in her manifestation of righteous anger. The Judith theme recurs multiple times in the Gentileschi


canon; as Garrard notes of a 1625 *Judith* (fig. 3), the heroine “claims authority, gripping Holofernes’s sword with unusual determination … as if to mock his loss of power and flaunt her gain of it.” However, the main theme of *Judith and Maidservant* is still the imminent risk of discovery by the enemy troops, as seen in Judith and Abra’s frozen, wary poses. Vulnerability is once more at the forefront of the scene.

Fig. 3. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith and Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes*, 1625. Oil on canvas, 72 ¾” × 55 ¾”. Detroit Institute of Arts. Reproduced from the Detroit Institute of Arts website, http://www.dia.org/object-info/0573dd3e-1079-4ce3-8262-78b0e1e68331.aspx.

Garrard argues that, when Gentileschi’s *Judiths* are viewed together with her *Susannas*, they document not only the 1611 rape by Tassi, but also the sexual harassment and intimidation he carried out. Like Susanna, Gentileschi was threatened with accusations of sexual promiscuity which would damage her “honour,” her reputation, and her livelihood. Her paintings are “not one woman’s fantasy revenge, but a sober metaphoric expression of the broader situation that gives rise to that extreme solution: the reality of women’s confined and vulnerable position.” If the protagonists of *Susanna* and *Judith* demonstrate resistive agency, it is only because they are surrounded by something to resist—“the intimidating pressure of the threat of rape.”

The same internally conflicting victim/survivor narrative occurs in “Me and a Gun.”


33. Ibid., 208.
Gordon observes that, in lines like “Does that mean I should spread” and “Is it my right to be on my stomach,” Amos’s protests “can be read as an adamant rejection of culpability so that the sound defines a submissive relationship to the rapist.”³⁴ Again, her resistance to the act of rape can only take the form of submission and vulnerability. In fact, Greitzer finds that the raw anguish of being raped is embedded into the very musical structure of the song, in the bridge where Amos asks, “Do you know Carolina where the biscuits soft and sweet?”

… I suggest we consider the possibility of the rapist’s ejaculating in her as causing the heightened intensity eliciting this improvisatory outpouring. … This is the song’s most continuous and unrehearsed-sounding passage, and not coincidentally the hardest part to imitate convincingly … It is a chilling moment, and yet it smacks of defiance when we realize that on some level she has shaped this phrase by naming him—you—at that highest note …³⁵

Amos finds a measure of empowerment where she can take it, and struggles against the sexual violence of the rape through her defiant lyrics and the keening outcry during the rapist’s orgasm. But in that moment, she is still a victim, not a survivor; and the climax of “Me and a Gun” relives and repeats the moment where the victimisation reaches its peak.

Conclusion

I grew up with a religion whose regular rites named only seven women saints—“Felicity, Perpetua, Agatha, Lucy, Agnes, Cecilia, Anastasia”—out of whom half were canonised for choosing virginity and martyrdom over rape and survival. In “The Imperishable Virginity of Saint Maria Goretti,” Young writes:

The legends of the saints which Roman Catholic women are raised with associate female

sexuality with virginity and motherhood. … *Inviolate* is a synonym for virgin. … Sexuality is not the gateway to autonomy for women but instead implies social and spiritual vulnerability and lack of autonomy. The cultic idealization of virginity both reflects and participates in the degradation of women, defining them as actual or potential rape victims.36

Gentileschi and Amos, through their autobiographical works, overturn both the Christian ideal of the virgin martyr and honour culture’s myth of the unrapable harlot. They dismantle and replace these stereotypes with their real accounts of their own experiences, defending both rape survivors’ sexual integrity and sexual autonomy.

Telling these sorts of stories cannot be easy. There is a deep need to speak up and relate what has been done to a person, in order to recentre the experience on victims and survivors rather than perpetrators, and to transform its destructive legacy into creative empowerment. At the same time, the act of storytelling manufactures a very personal product, and products are meant to be consumed. Often, it can feel that, in the act of narration, it is the narrator and not the narrative being consumed by an audience that can be hostile or victim-blaming. This only makes works like *Susanna*, *Judith*, and “Me and a Gun” all the more meaningful, all the more powerful, and all the more necessary.

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