Three Case Studies of Protofeminism in Early Modern Art: Levina Teerlinc, Sofonisba Anguissola, and Artemisia Gentileschi

Victoria Chandler Tait

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THREE CASE STUDIES OF PROTOFEMINISM IN EARLY MODERN ART:
LEVINA TEERLINC, SOFONISBA ANGUISSOLA, AND ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI

by

Chandler Tait

A Thesis
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Dedicated to Frank

and Michael
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Abstract

This thesis aims to understand protofeminism in early modern European art by examining the lives and works of three women artists: Levina Teerlinc (1520-1576), Sofonisba Anguissola (c.1532- c.1625), and Artemisia Gentileschi (1593- c.1652/53). This study proposes that protofeminism existed in early modernity and that it can be understood as a form of feminism before the term was defined in the twentieth century. Like contemporary feminist art, early modern protofeminism intended to highlight the inequities women faced in society based on their gender, specifically women employed as artists. Each thesis chapter dedicated to the three aforementioned artists includes biographical information, visual and contextual analyses of several paintings made at various moments in their careers, and a conclusion of evidence of protofeminist intent. This intent is supported by studies of their personal lives and works, as well as more modern definitions of feminist art. Based on the dates of creation, iconography within the paintings, and historical background of each woman, it is argued that they each intentionally created work meant to emphasize a version of protofeminism that highlighted the discrepancies between male and female artists during the early modern period.
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Chapter I

Introduction

Feminism first came to the forefront of critical art historical analysis in the twentieth century. Considered a consistently updating and incredibly diverse discourse, feminism as a whole is not just a theory of equality for women, but a movement of change and advocacy, and is best defined by its oppositions to the patriarchy’s stances and its oppression of women.¹ Feminist theory in itself is defined as the identification of misogyny, sexism, and patriarchy and the oppositions women present in order to deconstruct these practices.² A discussion of the incorporation of feminism in the field of art history is most readily begun with Linda Nochlin’s 1971 article, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”³ By addressing this question, Nochlin opened a door to and called for an entire feminist critique of art history. Nochlin, along with the first generation of writers to build on her essay, sought to answer questions of what qualified an artist as “great,” why women artists were excluded from museums and textbooks, and what these exclusions say about the structure and ideologies of art history.⁴

Importantly for this thesis, these discussions opened a door to new investigations of early modern women artists, giving them attention that they had long been lacking. Could their work contribute to feminist ideology and theory, or should they be held to different standards of interpretation? Furthermore, what qualifications determine an artwork to be considered feminist?

² Ibid, 4.
I believe the best definition comes from scholar of feminist aesthetics and philosophy, Peg Brand, who says:

Feminist works are often identifiable by their female-centered subject matter, informed by a strong familiarity with and empathy for women’s lived experiences. Women or men can create them, but typically, they are the result of a woman’s hand and are informed by a particular cognitive makeup, a positive, supportive, pro-female ideology that reinforces a woman’s integrity, strength, autonomy, freedom, and self-empowerment.⁵

I suggest that a form of the ideology expressed in this definition existed in early modernity, and can be seen in a number of the artworks created in this period, especially those created by women. This study asks whether what I will call a “protofeminist” intention, which will be discussed in more detail shortly, was recognizable in early modernity, and whether it can be recognized in these same works today. This term is not original to this thesis, but has not been previously applied to these three women together. Women, including women artists, existed within a completely different set of cultural norms during the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries. Yet, there is evidence to support an inclination towards the idea of equality as evidenced in public records of women’s labor, land-ownership, contributions to their communities, and how women artists found education, training, and employment in their practice. I would like to clarify that while we can look at the works discussed in each chapter now through a feminist lens, I do not intend to definitely interpret the meaning of each work, and the protofeminist inclinations of each artist and piece can only be speculated.

While Nochlin’s article created vast ripples in the art community, that is not to say other women were not striving to hold institutions accountable for their lack of female inclusion. The

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Women Artists in Revolution (WAR) of 1969 fell into the second wave of feminism, started in the 1960s, and worked to protest institutions that included almost no women artists in their exhibitions or catalogues, such as the Whitney Museum. In 1988, Griselda Pollock added to the conversation by asking if adding women to art history is the same thing as producing feminist art history. She notes that women’s studies are not just studies for women, but investigations into the social systems in place that lead to the dominion of men over women, specifically in class and race. Second wave feminism, like first wave feminism, had a focus on women’s rights, but began the process of delving deeper into feminist theory and assessing the institutions of sexism that were already in place in politics, art history, and in women’s everyday lives. The concept of protofeminism connects more with second wave feminism due to its critical assessment of art history from a feminist perspective.

While feminist art history may have begun with a question of where the female artists were, it is more accurately defined not as a search for historical gaps (though that is still an important part), but as a challenge to the established structure and biases of art history as a whole. Pollock’s 1988 article calls for scholars not to just add women to history or appreciate the quality of the art or artist, but to change the entire conception of art history as a study of the social aspects that lead to art development, meaning that the intricacies of social interactions amongst all genders and classes should play a role in understanding the cultural context of any given artwork. Based on this idea, “feminist art history” seems limiting and may not be the

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8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid, 304-305.
correct term for a discourse that has developed over so many different platforms, specifically referring to gender, sexuality, class, and race. The narrative of art history must be seen as a reimagining from a feminist perspective, allowing for a better understanding of historical gender representation and how this plays a role in understanding gender and sexuality today.

This thesis aims to add discourse to the question of whether early modern women artists can be viewed, in any way, as feminists. This question has plagued art historians since it was first proposed in the twentieth century. Were women artists during this time frame making art that called for equality or reflected their struggles? Did those struggles carry the same weight for them as they do for women of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries? Understanding the culture and social climate of Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, especially as pertaining to women, is crucial to understanding how our modern definition of feminism might fit into the context of early modern artworks created by women. Perhaps, for example, the act of simply producing art on a large scale at all could be viewed as a form of protofeminism. However, with an artistic platform at the disposal of certain women artists, it does not seem far-fetched to assume that the artworks of early modern women at least in part reflected their struggles.

**Women Artists during the Early Modern Period**

The roles of early modern women workers cannot be easily ascertained through just a cursory glance of the period. Scholars like Michael Roberts and Natalie Zemon Davis have used European documents to show that women in certain cases were proven to be landowners, laborers, apprentices, and often deeply involved with the community, but these studies can also

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12 Ibid.
help to determine how women were regarded as citizens with income and certain rights.\textsuperscript{13} Women joining the workforce was not uncommon in early modernity, but it was typically accompanied by strict regulations and patterns of discrimination in specific trades. It is also important to note that the women who most commonly joined the workforce were of a lower, working class, as they often married later, had fewer children, and died earlier than women of higher classes who had access to wetnurses and better medical care.\textsuperscript{14} In Constance Jordan’s book, \textit{Renaissance Feminism}, she makes the claim that women workers actually had two jobs: the job they earned wages for, and the compulsory job given to them at birth and designated by their gender.\textsuperscript{15} She then notes that women working in specific trades could be listed as apprentices, but were required to be identified as members of households under a patriarch, while men (even unemployed men) used their trade as a formal part of their public, recorded identity.\textsuperscript{16} For example, a man that worked as a tailor could be known as, “John the Tailor,” but a woman working as an apprentice for a tailor would only be known as her father’s daughter or her husband’s wife. Jordan found that sixteenth century manuals for house-hold governance corroborate that the role of women in the domestic setting was one of subservience, admonishing the women who spent their husbands’ income or left the home too often.\textsuperscript{17} These guides frequently did not take into account or mention that, in addition to the expectations put on


\textsuperscript{14} Zemon Davis, “‘Women's History’ in Transition,” 87.


\textsuperscript{16} Ibid. For more information, see Roberts, “‘Words They Are Women and Deeds They Are Men’.”

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 17-18.
women to maintain their domestic roles, it was also often necessary for them bring in their own wages to help support their households.

Women seeking apprenticeships as artists in order to build careers in guilds faced the same challenges. It was not necessarily looked down upon for women to pursue a career as an artist in the early modern period, but women were expected to still play a specific role as caregiver and reproducer.\textsuperscript{18} Despite these societal expectations, it was actually fairly common for women to be taken on as artistic apprentices, or even assistants, by male family members, who were already guild masters, for free.\textsuperscript{19} Through this training, it seems that women were often able to gain some merit of success within painting guilds—that success being defined by simply being allowed to work at all in a profession that was typically considered only for men. Unfortunately, by early modern standards, the work that women produced was not considered as “good” or valuable as their male counterparts, solely because these works were created by women, as will be evidenced in this case study of the career of Levina Teerline. It is also important to note that any woman that did manage to have formal training and join a guild did so primarily by joining under a male family member’s name, or by being the widow of the man who previously held that position within the guild.\textsuperscript{20}

The odds of a woman not only being successful as an artist, but also gaining a significant amount of recognition seems to have been rare, but, as proven by Levina Teerline, Sofonisba Anguissola, and Artemisia Gentileschi, among many others (a number of whom have only recently been brought to light), it was not impossible. Men certainly considered themselves


\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, 29.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
superior in terms of art production, though, and long-established social constructs supported this. In fact, Nicholas Hilliard, the artist appointed as Teerlinc’s successor in the 1570s, notoriously stated that, “none should meddle with limning [painting] but gentlemen alone.”21 Ironically, it is believed that many of the techniques Hilliard used were taught to him by Teerlinc.22 They both painted miniatures using watercolor on vellum, with Hilliard’s finished works closely resembling the works attributed to Teerlinc. These visual similarities may be used in support of the theory that many of Teerlinc’s works have been mistaken for works by her male colleagues and successors at the court.

In examining the lives of early modern women artists, it is also important to consider their training and education. Any artist wishing to become a master or professional had to attend life-drawing studies in order to copy the human form, but, as such classes involved a study of the nude human body, it was considered too obscene for women to join.23 This put women artists at a severe disadvantage, as early modern women seeking education in the arts could only be trained up to a certain point. By creating social guidelines that forced women artists to work around such a specific obstacle, male artists essentially ensured a certain lack of competition in the art world. Indeed, many women artists in the sixteenth century seem to have specialized in portraiture and other non-figurative genres, which can be read as a direct result of their lack of access to these life-drawing classes where they would have gained better understandings of anatomy by way of studying the nude body. In Joan Kelly-Gadol’s essay, “Did Women have a Renaissance?,” access to education, or a lack of, played a significant role as one of the four


23 Gaze, *Dictionary of Women Artists*, 76.
major criteria for establishing the power that women could really obtain during the time.\textsuperscript{24} The period known as the Renaissance in Europe is acknowledged as a time of advancements in art, science, and scholarship, but who truly experienced and reaped the benefits of this “advancement” depended almost entirely on the social opportunities afforded to individuals. As noted in Kelly-Gadol’s essay, women were typically not counted amongst the individuals that society determined needed more advanced learning, and the institutions that existed were not suitable (by period standards) to accommodate women.\textsuperscript{25}

It is evident that early modern women artists faced notable disadvantages while attempting to create careers for themselves in a socially and systemically male-dominated field. Through three separate case studies, which only begin to consider the much larger historical roles that women played in the early modern art world, this thesis proposes that a kind of protofeminism existed in early modernity, as expressions in artworks created by women and in some cases through their very defiance of adhering to traditional standards and expectations of marriage, childbirth, and subservience. The choice to continuously pursue the profession of artist, as well as the imagery these three women chose to depict in their works, offer a point of view that could be interpreted as a plea for professional equality. Exactly how this perceived defiance manifested and how such rejections of tradition may have been perceived in early modern culture must be considered, however.

**Protofeminism in Early Modern Art**

With an understanding of twentieth-century feminism, feminism’s role in art history, and the lives of women artists during the early modern period, protofeminism can be best explained


\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
as the existence of early modern “pro-female ideologies that foreshadowed actual ‘feminism’ of
the modern era.”\textsuperscript{26} The term has also been used to apply Renaissance writings by women and can
be applied to any advocation of women’s rights from any century.\textsuperscript{27} I am not the first to use this
term, but it is a popular concept used in studying the role of women advocating for women in
eras predating twentieth-century feminism. A crucial element to understanding protofeminism is
also understanding the concept of “period eye.” Michael Baxandall describes a useful approach
in his book, \textit{Painting & Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy}, known as the “period eye.” He
illustrates an example of the period eye by explaining that, while all cognitive humans are
capable of being visually aware of the shapes, colors, and lines that make up a picture, each
person’s interpretation of what those elements mean when brought together can vary based on
the individual’s life experience—an experience that is heavily dictated by one’s gender, class,
and historical period.\textsuperscript{28} This concept is crucial to understanding how protofeminism can play a
role in the artwork of the women discussed in the following chapters, and also how the narrative
of each woman’s life and career contributes to changing notions of art history today. None of
these women, nor their artworks, used a direct approach of calling attention to the subjugation
that they clearly faced. Rather, they typically used nuance and metaphor, thereby remaining in
the realm of social acceptability. Advocacy for equal rights in early modern art simply did not
exist in quite the same ways as expressed in twentieth- and twenty-first-century art.

\textsuperscript{26} Martha Moffitt Peacock, “Mirrors of Skill and Renown: Women and Self-Fashioning in Early-Modern Dutch

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid. For more information on the term “protofeminism” and how it applies to Renaissance writings by women,
see Margaret L. King and Albert Rabil, Jr., “The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: Introduction to the Series,”
in \textit{The Worth of Women Wherein is Clearly Revealed Their Nobility and Their Superiority to Men} (Chicago:
Chicago University Press, 1997).

\textsuperscript{28} Michael Baxandall, \textit{Painting & Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy}, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972),
29-31.
Like modern feminism, protofeminism, as seen in early modern art, can be defined as an acknowledgement by women of not only the inequality consistently encountered in society, but also the acts of misogyny carried out against them by men. Early modern women were not just facing unequal pay and pressures to conform to certain long-standing gender roles, but also systemic abuse and even violations of human rights. The most significant and noteworthy difference between feminism and protofeminism is the version of equality that women apparently sought before the twentieth century versus our definition of such today. This is where the concept of Baxandall’s period eye plays a role—it is crucial to take into account the social treatment of women and likely understandings of how women saw themselves in the early modern period, and more specifically in early modern Europe. These details can help to provide insight into how a protofeminist version of equality differed greatly from the modern woman’s.

Mary Garrard highlights some of the misogynistic practices against early modern women, along with the male reasoning for such practices, in her book, *Artemisia Gentileschi and Feminism in Early Modern Europe*. Much of the oppression faced by early modern women came from the Church and the institution of Christianity, which touted that, while women possess some virtuous qualities, they were the daughters of Eve, and thus ultimately always second to man. As a result, women apparently did not possess the ability to be fully independent, relying on men for rational and critical thinking.²⁹ Garrard covers this form of oppression in her book, noting that many women in Italy were confined in their homes by their husbands, not unlike nuns in a convent, a practice meant to keep the women subjugated in a period of growing discontent.

and fractures within the Church.\textsuperscript{30} This distinct separation of men and women in the early modern period, especially during a time of religious upheaval from the Reformation, lead to many questions (mainly from early modern women) about whether the status-quo was not only unreasonable, but in need of change.\textsuperscript{31} With the long-established mindset of women as the inferior sex, it seems that many found it easy to dismiss their thoughts, concerns, and talents as oddities to be amused by rather than gifts to be explored. Because of this frame of thought in the early modern period, the protofeminist intent referenced in each chapter of this thesis seems to seek out the creation of a space of understanding that early modern women artists were not outliers, but true masters meant to be taken seriously by their male counterparts and to be placed on at least an equal footing.

In order to trace the ideology of protofeminism studied for the purpose of this paper, the artists discussed in each chapter will appear in chronological order according to their respective careers and lifespans. Each chapter of this thesis explores early modern protofeminism through the examination of three women artists’ lives and works, using these details to support the proposal that many women artists of the period were working with at least an underlying protofeminist intent. Each women comes from a different region of Europe and different time-frame of early modern art, but the connections made between these artists intend to propose the overarching theme of protofeminism that reached all three regions regardless of differences in culture and era. Chapter Two takes on the under-studied Northern artist Levina Teerline (1520-1576), who was an acclaimed miniaturist and the paid successor to Tudor court painter Hans


\textsuperscript{31} Ibid, 14-19. See also Lucrezia Marinella, \textit{The Nobility and Excellence of Women and the Defects and Vices of Men} (1600), and Christine de Pizan, \textit{The Book of the City of Ladies} (1405). Both of these texts specifically call into question male conceptions of women as weak and irrational.
Holbein the Younger, one of the earliest major accomplishments for a woman artist of the period. Chapter Three discusses the life of Sofonisba Anguissola (c.1532- c.1625), whose work has recently seen more devoted scholarship, with a focus on her self-portraiture as a form of protofeminism through its clear showcasing of her artistic talent rivaling her male colleagues. Finally, Chapter Four discusses arguably the most well-known woman artist from early modern Europe, Artemisia Gentileschi (1593- c.1652/53), renowned as an icon of feminist art history. Gentileschi’s case study considers how the tragedies that befell her in her life, along with her later independent choices that countered social norms, played a crucial role in showcasing her protofeminist intent through biblical and historical metaphor.
Chapter II

The Case of Levina Teerlinc

If asked to identify a work by artist Levina Teerlinc, the likely response would be one of loss or confusion. Teerlinc was employed as an official, royal court painter for a series of monarchs in Tudor Britain, including King Henry VIII, King Edward VI, Queen Mary I, and Queen Elizabeth I, yet she remains shrouded in mystery with very few works attributed to her name, and none that are definitively attributed to her. Assuming she diligently fulfilled her duties as court painter, which would be likely considering the length of her employment, how can less than ten paintings be definitively tied to her? For comparison, Hans Holbein the Younger, her predecessor, has well over two-hundred known works that have been attributed to him.\(^1\) It is worth mentioning she was also employed as a lady-in-waiting—those courtly duties would probably have demanded much of her time. Additionally, her main practice (painting miniatures and illuminated manuscripts) meant that her work could be scattered quite widely, making it harder to establish provenance than it is with works on a monumental scale, and the fact that most miniaturists painted in a similar style and format means that distinguishing different hands is all the more difficult, especially when the miniatures are unsigned. Holbein, by contrast, was working on mostly life-size canvasses and he signed many of his works.

In this case, it seems gender is the most glaring difference, and thus important to consider when pondering how the career of a court painter could be lost over time, especially when both Holbein and Hilliard were so well-documented. If Levina Teerlinc had been a man, would her works have been more thoroughly considered, researched, and remembered? Would past scholars of art history have paid more attention to her as a subject of study? While, of course,

this cannot be based on any direct evidence, the possible answer is yes. It is not a coincidence that the most well-known historical painters of this period were men, especially considering the discouragement painters faced in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. The primary source of inspiration for painting until this point came from creating biblical scenes, but the Reformation banned religious imagery in artwork. Regardless, there is a pattern of early modern women painters being pushed aside when a time for recognition comes their way, and Teerlinc’s story is an ideal example. In a perfect world, Levina Teerlinc would have her place in art history textbooks and courses following Hans Holbein the Younger, but it is difficult to study an artist with no definitive works to their name and a speculative chronology and career at best. Holbein being a British citizen, and Teerlinc being from Flanders, could contribute to the preservation of his work from a nationalist perspective.

To support my thesis of early modern women painters creating works with protofeminist intent during their lifetimes, a careful examination of their lives and works must be conducted. Throughout this chapter, my research aims to address a number of questions. Firstly, if the goal is to consider Levina Teerlinc as a kind of “protofeminist” artist, how can we really do so when she has such little representation? I aim to show that Levina Teerlinc’s attributed work can, in fact, be placed in conversation with the concept of a feminist painter, and it is her lack of recognition within art historical research that makes her a prime candidate for this particular study and interpretation. However, in order to address the proposed questions, we must return to the cultural climate for sixteenth-century women artists.

**Teerlinc Biographical Overview**

For a woman with so few recorded works, Levina Teerlinc interestingly has one of the best documented lives of all three artists discussed in this thesis. Historical records of her life
still exist today, and most of the biographical accounts of Teerlinc reiterate the same facts about her life and employment at the court. While the major events are fairly well documented, there is a severe gap in knowledge about her works and what exactly she created during her career.² It is known that Teerlinc was born in 1520 as Levina Bening, daughter of Simon Bening and Catherine Stroo.³ Her father, Simon Bening (1483-1561), was a trained artist specializing in miniature painting and illuminated manuscripts.⁴ He was well renowned as one of the last major figures in Flemish illuminations and miniatures, and had a lucrative career during the first half of the sixteenth-century.⁵ He became a leading illuminator of the Ghent-Bruges school and ultimately Dean of an illuminators’ guild in Bruges.⁶ As the oldest of five daughters, it is possible that Levina was trained by her father because he lacked a male heir, and taking a daughter or niece as an apprentice was not an uncommon practice in Flanders.⁷ Netherlandish guilds had no prohibitions regarding women members, and in fact by the 1480s the painters’ guild of Bruges recorded that twenty-five percent of members were women.⁸ There was no law for men who were members of artists’ guilds stating that they had to register their sons as apprentices in order to teach them the craft, so, it can be assumed that the same applied to daughters.⁹ Because of this, many women were technically able to be formally trained as artists


⁴ Ibid.


⁸ Gaze, 28.

⁹ Ibid, 33.
by their family, yet, they could only be traditionally accepted into a guild under their male family member’s name.10 Due to the strong evidence of female participation in the Bruges painters’ guild, it is more understandable that Levina was chosen to carry on her father’s craft.11 By the time Levina was of an appropriate age to train, and with the acclaim that Simon Bening had earned during his career up to that point, the quality of her knowledge in the practice of illumination and miniature painting was likely unparalleled by the end of her apprenticeship.

By 1545, Levina had married George Teerline and still resided in Bruges with him.12 Public records indicate that she and her husband were summoned by the Mayor of Bruges on February 4, 1545 to settle the estate of George Teerline the Elder.13 This, however, is the first and last account of Levina Teerline residing in Bruges before leaving for England to begin her career as a court painter for King Henry VIII.14 The exact details of how and when she was officially offered this prestigious position are not recorded. It is likely, though, that she was part of the painters’ guild in Bruges, working under her father’s name, who was also the Dean. Levina’s connection to the guild offered more opportunities for exposure, and therefore lead to her work being better-known, and to a successful career while in Bruges.15 By November of 1546, Levina’s first annual payment as court painter is documented, meaning that if her birth year is correct, she was only twenty-six years old by the time she began this position.16 Even more impressive is the likelihood that Teerline operated professionally within the Bruges guild

10 Ibid.
11 Harris and Nochlin, Women Artists, 19.
12 Ibid, 102.
14 Ibid.
15 Harris and Nochlin, Women Artists, 19.
16 Ibid, 102.
for at least some time before being offered such an illustrious position, suggesting that her formal training ended in her early twenties. To have a reputation with such weight at her young age speaks to her artistic talent, which caused her to stand out even among her male counterparts within the guild.

What is not covered in these historical documents, but which can be discerned, is the drive that Teerlinc clearly displayed concerning her career. Not only did she foster an environment in which her art could thrive, and she could truly gain recognition, she also took initiative to move herself and her husband for advancing her career when the opportunity was presented. Typically, early modern women that took court positions were able to through family ties made between male family members and members of the court. It has been recorded that Teerlinc’s husband, George, was a Gentlemen Pensioner (a bodyguard for royalty) at the burial of Henry VIII, which made him a member of the royal household. It is possible, then, that through her husband, a door was opened that afforded her the opportunity for her artistic talents to be noticed by the King. Considering the choices made by Teerlinc regarding her career, it is clear she did not feel inhibited by her gender when pursuing success as an acclaimed artist.

During her time as a court painter for the English monarchy, Teerlinc served under four different rulers: Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary I, and Elizabeth I. Original records indicate that a payment to Levina Teerlinc was recorded almost every year from 1546 until her death in 1576. One of the most notable facts about her career as a court painter, mentioned in almost every source about Teerlinc, is that she not only succeeded Hans Holbein the Younger as court

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18 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
painter but that she also started at a higher annual salary than him at forty pounds. The fact that she was specifically sought out, and paid more than her male predecessor, can be read as a testament to her reputation before she even arrived in England.

It is also noteworthy that during her time as court painter, she never took on a project larger than miniature art, likely the leading cause of why so many of her works are not clearly indicated to be hers. While most early modern court painters created miniature paintings or portraits, they were also usually commissioned for other duties such as stage scenery, large paintings, book illuminations, etc., but Teerlinc only completed miniatures while working as court painter. Perhaps this is due to her prominence as a miniature painter, or perhaps other works by her were simply not recorded, as it seems almost certain that much of her production has been lost over time. What is known, though, is that during her career in England, Levina Teerlinc was the only Flemish miniature painter to be employed by the court and also the only widely-renowned miniaturist in the kingdom until the hiring of her replacement, Nicholas Hilliard. Beyond her reputation and salary, one can say that Teerlinc was apparently an accomplished court painter based solely on the gifts she received for her work. There is documentation, for example, of Queen Elizabeth awarding her gilded spoons and a salt cellar, as well as making Levina, her husband, and their son official English subjects in 1566.

So, of Levina Teerlinc’s work, what do scholars claim was produced while she was employed as court painter? Unfortunately, the works of Levina Teerlinc are shrouded in mystery and surrounded by debate, even today. There are no documented paintings that can be attributed

21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
to her without doubt or speculation, and the ones that are likely by her cannot be definitively proven by scholars due to her never signing anything she completed. Many speculate that it is likely that a number of her paintings were incorrectly attributed to either Hans Holbein the Younger or Nicholas Hilliard. Hilliard has indeed been given attribution for hundreds of miniatures during his career. However, as previously stated, many art historians have claimed that it is possible, even likely, that he learned the tools of the trade from none other than Teerlinc herself while she was court painter.25

Some of the most extensive research on works by Teerlinc has been carried out by Simone Bergmans. An article by Bergmans that was published in 1934 credits at least nine miniature portraits to her.26 It has unfortunately been proven since, though, that many of these paintings were the products of other painters. However, Bergmans laid important groundwork for further research into Teerlinc’s artistic career. As such, it is important to now discuss exactly what has been determined to likely be by Levina Teerlinc. Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin very convincingly attributed at least four miniature paintings as works by Teerlinc in their 1977 exhibition Women Artists: 1550-1950, but again, without signatures and with few critical studies completed on her style and techniques, it is difficult to be entirely certain.27

The piece with the strongest case is Portrait of a Young Woman, 1549 (Figure 1). Because the date of this work is clearly labeled 1549, Hans Holbein the Younger and Nicholas Hilliard can be excluded as possible candidates, as the former was deceased and the latter was only two years old.28 From about 1545 to 1560, it seems that Teerlinc fit the mold of a credible,

26 See Bergmans, “The Miniatures of Levina Teerling.”
27 Harris and Nochlin, Women Artists, 103-104.
28 Ibid, 103.
and widely-recognized miniaturist in all of England, which is strong evidence for her role as the painter of this work, and likely any high-quality miniature produced in this window.\textsuperscript{29} This particular portrait shows very fine details and almost imperceptible brushstrokes, with the head of the woman appearing proportionally a bit too large for her body.\textsuperscript{30} The portrait of Katherine Grey, granddaughter of Mary I (sister of Henry VIII), is visually quite similar to the Windsor Portrait of a Young Woman, and is also attributed to Teerlinc (Figure 2).\textsuperscript{31} Furthermore, these stylistic characteristics can also be seen in the coronation portrait of Elizabeth I (Figure 3). Despite scholars originally attributing this coronation portrait to Hilliard, who would have been only twelve years old at the time of the date initially given to the portrait, it is much more likely a work by Teerlinc. Studies have found that the portrait’s date was, at some point, incorrectly labeled five to eight years later than its actual production.\textsuperscript{32} So, yet again, this portrait seems tied to Teerlinc. And it certainly seems more likely that a coronation portrait would be painted at the time of the coronation, rather than years later by an individual who was not even present at the event. Importantly, the conclusion of Harris and Nochlin’s investigation of Teerlinc’s works ends with a plea for other scholars to pick up where they left off and bring more of Teerlinc’s works to light.\textsuperscript{33}

\textbf{Protofeminism as Evidenced in Miniatures}

It can be argued that Teerline’s first truly impactful introduction to art history occurred during Nochlin and Harris’ \textit{Women Artists: 1550-1950} exhibition, installed at the Los Angeles

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid, 104.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
County Museum of Art.\footnote{Ibid, 102.} However, Teerlinc’s name still remains lesser known, especially when compared to Anguissola and Gentileschi. During the lengthy planning of this exhibition, the two scholars also wrote a nearly 400-page catalogue that discussed each artist’s life and work.\footnote{Peter Walch, “Reviews: Women Artists: 1550-1950,” \textit{Art Journal} 4, no. 36 (Summer 1977): 327.} Levina Teerlinc was the earliest artist included in this exhibition, and again, Harris and Nochlin determined at least four miniature paintings to have very strong evidence for being by Teerlinc.\footnote{Harris and Nochlin, \textit{Women Artists}, 103-104.} Before this, there were no recorded shows or exhibitions even acknowledging Teerlinc’s role as a Renaissance miniaturist with a very notable career. Even with her introduction in this widely-praised show, however, Teerlinc, along with a number of other artists, still faced speculation regarding their worth as painters. Art critic Peter Walch, for example, said in his 1977 review of the show:

> Indeed the chronologically arranged installation at times reminded one all too much of a university teaching collection- a sampling of each major historical style from Renaissance to Modern. Perhaps this was built into the exhibition’s premises. Perhaps this also contributed to the occasional lapses of quality. Teerlinc and Sophonisba Anguissola simply aren’t great painters, but one is obligated by history to begin the story with them.\footnote{Walch, “Reviews: Women Artists,” 328.}

Obligations of chronology and historical accuracy did not stop previous scholars from omitting significant artists, their works, and associated events from historical accounts. One can argue that obligation is not the reason Teerlinc was chosen for an exhibition with clear feminist goals, but it is impossible not to at least consider Walch’s point, however problematic it may be.
Do these early modern women great painters measure up to the likes of their male counterparts, or are they simply “necessary” to weave an important story that is being told for the first time? Did more women artists live after 1800, or was the purpose of the show to highlight the numerous women that have been consistently overlooked in studies of the centuries prior?

Regardless of the reception or criticisms, though, the show undeniably made an important impact in the art world, finally distinguishing all eighty-four women shown, Teerlinc included. Nochlin and Harris intended to cast a light on systemic discrimination of female artists with the creation of this overtly feminist exhibition, and they arguably succeeded. The exhibition specifically highlighted the shortcomings of historical scholars in identifying the works of women artists. Through this exhibition, Nochlin and Harris cast Teerlinc, among others, into the role of a discriminated woman, inspiring other women to see her as something like an icon—Anguissola and Gentileschi, as well. While this in itself does not immediately paint Teerlinc as a “feminist” artist, especially noting that feminism as we understand it today simply did not exist in early modernity, it does make her notable in feminist history and scholarship, and colors how later scholars interpret her life and works with this particular lens. I will now show that it is not obligation that pushes Teerlinc into the spotlight, as Walch claimed, nor is it obligation that necessitates Teerlinc be included in discussions of feminism, but instead, it is the very merits of her painting that I feel reveal a demand for equality.

Three of Teerlinc’s miniatures have already been established as speculative, but prime, examples of her work, but these portraits do not overtly capture evidence of protofeminist intent. However, there are two illuminations in the National Archives of London, believed to be by Teerline, that do, I suggest, reveal a determination to provide equal representation of power to the Tudor Queens when compared to the Kings. The first illumination, *Mary with Figures in a...*
Landscape, ca. 1553 (Figure 4), comes from the top of a plea scroll, a legal document used in the highest court of common law. Inside the capital “P” at the top of the document, Queen Mary I is pictured on a throne, flanked by two angels at her elbows. In her right hand she holds a sword pointed upwards toward the heavens, and above her head is the royal coat of arms directly under a dove recognized as the Holy Spirit. To the right of the throne, soldiers mounted on horses raise arms as they ride into battle in the name of their queen. In Mary’s ascension to the throne, her most significant claim was not just birthright that allowed her to rule, but divine right. By successfully, though temporarily, reclaiming England in the name of Catholicism, Mary confirmed her stance as a “godly Queen.” The iconography of this illumination supports this claim, with Mary, the crest, and the dove forming a Trinity of sorts, and her sword pointing towards heaven. This portrayal as a divine ruler is not uncommon for a queen, however, a woman painter creating the scene involves a new distinction. The empowerment of Queen Mary in this illustration is not bestowed upon her by a male artist, but by another woman.

When determining Teerlinc as the speculative artist behind this illumination, several factors must be considered. Even though other illuminators were also employed by the court, the date of this work is recorded as circa 1553, which coincides with the height of Teerlinc’s career as a court painter, making her a likely candidate. The year of production holds great significance for Mary I. In 1553, Mary I overthrew Lady Jane Grey, the chosen successor of King Edward VI, and was officially declared Queen of England. Teerlinc’s miniature portrays Queen Mary as the

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41 Anna Whitelock, and Diarmaid MacCulloch, “Princess Mary’s Household and the Succession Crisis, July 1553,” The Historical Journal 50, no. 2 (2007): 266. Mary achieved this coup by eluding the duke of
rightful heir to the throne as the daughter and firstborn of King Henry VIII. However, any depiction of Mary as the divine ruler faced scrutiny unparalleled by previous male rulers. Teerlinec was well known for having been trained by her father, the leading illuminator in Flanders, making her the optimal choice for such a project. Art historian Louisa Woodville also notes an important visual similarity between the white horse pictured at Mary’s right and a white horse from a work by Teerlinec’s father. Simon Bening’s *St. John of Patmos* from the *Hennesy Hours*, ca. 1530 (Figure 5), includes a white horse in the background of the composition that is nearly identical to the horse in his daughter’s depiction of the coronation of Queen Mary I. This clear visual similarity suggests that Teerlinec was familiar with this work, perhaps having seen it and even studied it while serving as a pupil under her father, and that she drew upon this piece for inspiration when composing Queen Mary’s illumination.

The second illumination, *Indenture between the Queen and the Dean and Canons of St. George’s Chapel*, August 30, 1559, is also proposed to be by Teerlinec. This legal document made between Queen Elizabeth and the Dean and Canons of St. George’s chapel was formed to ensure that thirteen soldiers would be cared for after their service to the throne was completed. Similar to Mary I’s illumination, Elizabeth is here depicted in the capital “E,” enthroned, wearing the crown of her father, and holding a golden orb symbolizing her divine right to rule. The iconography of this illumination again harkens back to the imagery of Mary on the throne, as they both incorporate traditional symbols of their royal male predecessors while also

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Northumberland, John Dudley, who controlled the London tower and royal artillery. During the next five days she traveled through Norfolk and Suffolk while gaining the support of the gentry and Edwardian privy council, officially raising her standard and rallying those to her cause on July 9. On July 19, 1553, she was officially declared queen while the duke of Northumberland declared defeat.

42 Woodville, “Levina Teerlinec,” *ArtHerstory.net*.

43 Ibid.
emphasizing their female genders. In fact, it might be argued that Mary set a precedent that made the subjects she ruled more open to another female successor.  

Many of the same arguments made for Teerlinc’s production of Mary’s illumination also stand true for Elizabeth’s illumination. The completion date of 1559 falls within Teerlinc’s time as court painter and previous works already show that she was more than adequate at creating a composition that highlighted the importance of Elizabeth’s rule. It also follows suit that Teerlinc would be chosen due to her personal relationship with the Queen. Many of Teerlinc’s definitive and proposed works are of Queen Elizabeth I. *Portrait of Queen Elizabeth in Coronation Robes* (Figure 3), for example, is dated several years after her coronation. As such, perhaps this one was a later gift from Teerlinc rather than a work commissioned to commemorate the moment itself. There are also documentations of Queen Elizabeth gifting many lavish objects to the Teerlinc family, and it was during her reign that Teerlinc was given citizenship in England. 

If, indeed, Teerlinc did create both of these illuminations—an attribution that I believe is supported—then a protofeminist reading of both can be beneficial. Both queens are portrayed in a “kingly” fashion, openly declaring that they are more than just consorts or producers of heirs. They are presented as official monarchs, and similarly imbued with the divine right to rule. This shift in power to not one, but two influential women in direct succession of each other shows that a demand for equality in power was not just being proposed but being carried out. Previously, queenship within the Tudor court was largely symbolic, holding little significance in the shadow of the king. The boldness and social impact of these queens is well documented, though. For example, Elizabeth never married, despite assumptions that her beauty and youth would undoubtedly produce an heir during her reign. Teerlinc’s similar portrayals of Queen Mary I and

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44 Kewe, “Godly Queens,” 54-55.
Queen Elizabeth I can be seen as supporting evidence of her advocacy for their monarchies respectively. It might initially be assumed that her support of the Catholic Queen Mary stemmed from a respect for or desire for Catholicism to return to England, but Teerlinc’s equal support of Queen Elizabeth’s Protestant reign negates this, making it more likely that she valued them both as powerful women entirely outside of a religious context.

**Conclusion: The Aftermath of Teerlinc’s Career**

In the past forty years, since her modern debut in the 1977 exhibition, there has been an increase in mentions of Teerlinc and her career in scholarly articles and books. This is not necessarily surprising, as feminist-focused studies have also become more prominent in art historical scholarship in recent decades. Documented studies of art history textbooks also show a significant rise in the inclusion of the names of women artists. Unfortunately, these numbers are still severely lacking, as shown in *Janson’s History of Art*—there is no mention of female artists for the 1977 edition, but in the 1986 edition, the author includes fourteen female artists alongside the 220 male artists in the book.\(^45\) It is speculated that the reason women artists are not making major appearances in art history books is because these art history books have long had all male authors.\(^46\) Indeed, the field of art history itself was long dominated by men. The rise of “great” women artists seems to have coincidentally increased with the number of women working as art historians, which has grown significantly over the past several decades.\(^47\) It seems safe to say that historical studies of women artists becoming more prominent in our contemporary world can


\(^{46}\) Ibid.

\(^{47}\) Ibid, 7-8.
be directly tied to the societal changes that have been occurring during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

It is, of course, true that women artists have always existed, and it is true that the achievements of many women artists have been recorded over the years, so it is not correct to say figures like Levina Teerlinc have been “re-discovered.” However, it is fair to say that women artists were not sufficiently investigated by scholars until the later twentieth century, and there remains nearly infinite room for continued studies.

Like many early modern women artists, Levina Teerlinc faded into obscurity after her death, her reputation and works over-shadowed by her male predecessor and successor, with historians often attributing her paintings to her male colleagues. An obligation to historical accuracy is not what brought Levina Teerlinc back to light and to the forefront of feminist studies of early modern women artists. While her work does not overtly display a rejection of the traditional roles of sixteenth-century women, she arguably uses her artwork in a subtle way to make a stance on her views of equality in the art world and in the political sphere. She also worked to make a name for herself, demanding recognition as not only court painter to the Tudor monarchs, but unequalled in her abilities as a miniaturist. From our present point of view, looking back to works of early modernity, protofeminism within art is not always composed of loud declarations of freedom or attention being drawn to themes of oppression, but small acts of defiance and celebrations of women that become relevant by closely studying an artist’s creation process and the strategic works that result. By the standards set in Brand’s definition feminist art, Teerlinc also created works centered on female empowerment, and highlights the autonomy

presented by both queens. It is Teerlinc’s work, and Harris and Nochlin’s twentieth-century recognition of her subtle feminist nature, that make her worthy of examination in the group of early modern “protofeminists” studied within this thesis.
Chapter III

The Case of Sofonisba Anguissola

Building on the chronology introduced in Chapter Two, Sofonisba Anguissola follows in the discussion of intentional protofeminism in the work of early modern women artists.\(^1\) With her birth being speculated to be between 1531 and 1535, Anguissola’s life and career would have coincided with the life of Levina Teerlinc, although there is no evidence that they knew each other personally or interacted in a professional capacity.\(^2\) Like Teerlinc, Anguissola was extremely proficient in her craft, earning many accolades and highly respectable positions throughout her career. Aside from place of origin—Teerlinc a Flemish artist and Anguissola an Italian—the largest difference between these women is the recognition they received both during their lives and after their deaths. Unlike Teerlinc, Anguissola has many works definitively recorded as hers. This is not necessarily due to a larger production output, but more likely due to the esteem Anguissola received during her life from other well-known artists that she worked with or studied under. Additionally, it is important to note that Sofonisba Anguissola has been increasingly studied by art historians in recent decades, resulting in much more available scholarship on this artist.

With this posthumous fame, Anguissola is regarded as one of the greatest women artists that worked during the early modern period. Thus, one might assume that any reference to feminism and art history should at least include a mention of Anguissola, much like Artemisia Gentileschi, who will be addressed in the next chapter—the most well-known of early modern

\(^1\) Variations on the spelling of her name include Sophonisba Anguisscola, Sofonisba Anguisciola, and Sofonisba Anguissiola.

women artists and now widely discussed as a period exemplar of protofeminism. Unfortunately, however, Anguissola, like Levina Teerline, has still not been afforded the modern scholarship that her work deserves. As previously mentioned, and like Teerline, she owes much of her current historical interest to the Harris and Nochlin exhibition in 1977, along with a few more recent publications, including a very recent monograph published in 2020 by Michael Cole. Yet, one of the most significant contributions to our understanding of Anguissola’s career actually comes from Giorgio Vasari. He is best known for his famed *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, which is regarded as a “foundational text in the history of art history,” according to Paul Barolsky.\(^3\) A testament to Anguissola’s early modern fame is her inclusion in the 1568 edition of Vasari’s *Lives*, along with only five other women artists.\(^4\) It is largely Vasari’s recognition of Anguissola’s talents during her lifetime that ultimately helped her name to avoid slipping into obscurity following her death in 1624. Instead, her legacy continued to circulate among historical researchers for centuries, allowing a much better documented account of her career and resulting in more considerations for the care and maintenance of her artwork over time. One might even suggest that Vasari’s inclusion of Anguissola as a credible artist led to the preservation of records of many of her works, especially in comparison with contemporary women artists like Teerline, with few works that can be definitively attributed to her.

Anguissola’s flourishing career and historical prominence makes her an ideal choice for an investigation of protofeminist influences in the artworks of early modern women. Her self-

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portraiture, in particular, holds invaluable insight for her convictions regarding womanhood in general and how her role as an artist either fit into a mold preconceived by her male contemporaries or did not. It is almost certain that her gender would have actively affected her style and how she chose to portray herself, but can it be said that she truly longed for equality as an artist? Or does evidence support the assumption that she was comfortable with the level of recognition she achieved in her lifetime, despite her gender? A thorough visual and contextual analysis of certain works by Sofonisba Anguissola might help us begin to formulate answers to these questions. By examining her life, accomplishments, three specific portraits, and the patterns of behavior within her art production, this chapter will show an arguably direct correlation between her artwork and protofeminist mindsets of early modernity.

**Anguissola Biographical Overview**

Sofonisba Anguissola’s birth does not have an officially recorded date, but is most commonly believed to be in the year 1532.\(^5\) Born in Cremona to a family of noble standing, Anguissola’s father, Amilcare Anguissola (1494-1573), married his second wife, Bianca Pozone, in 1531.\(^6\) Together they had seven children, six daughters and one son, of which Sofonisba was the oldest.\(^7\) Several of his other daughters, including Elena, Lucia, and Europa, were also practicing artists and scholars during their lifetimes, although Sofonisba remains the most renowned.

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\(^5\) Harris and Nochlin, *Women Artists*, 106.

\(^6\) Ilya Sandra Perlingieri, *Sofonisba Anguissola: The First Great Woman of the Renaissance*, (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 21. While many sources include information about Anguissola’s early life and education, Perlingieri’s book offers the most extensive information and will therefore be used for a majority of this chapter’s biographical section.

\(^7\) Dates have ranged between 1527 to 1540 based on previous records and dates on her self-portraits, but Sofonisba’s birth has been narrowed down more specifically to 1531-1535. In July of 1624, Anthony van Dyck visited Anguissola in Palermo, at which time he recorded her claim to be ninety-six years old. However, this would put her year of birth at 1528, which is not in agreement with various other sources. Her second husband, Orazio Lomellino, had a centenary celebration for his late wife in 1632, though, supporting her birth year as ca. 1532.
Like most aristocratic families during the Renaissance, Amilcare ensured his children received a proper education. The fact that his children were largely comprised of daughters mattered little to him, as educated noble women were not entirely unheard of in early modern Europe. It also stands to reason that having six daughters before producing a male heir encouraged him to lend more attention than most to the education and talents of his female offspring. Though still considered a rarity in the period, there are many other notable aristocratic women that received education to the same or even higher levels than men at their fathers’ behest. The Anguissola children were learned in history, literature, and the arts, but Sofonisba, in particular, began her artistic training early when Amilcare noted her exceptional talent with painting and drawing. Unfortunately, the Anguissola family did not contain any professional painters. Most young female art students, especially those of noble descent, were trained within the family, but because of this lack of a familial connection, Amilcare had to search for instructors that would be willing to properly train his daughters.

In 1546, Amilcare was introduced to the Cremonese painter, Bernardino Campi (1522-1591). Amilcare worked as a superintendent in charge of art commissions at the San Sigismondo Church in Cremona, and in 1546, the church hired Campi to complete a series of frescos. It seems likely this commission helped to build the foundational connection between Amilcare Anguissola and Bernardino Campi that led to two of Amilcare’s daughters, Sofonisba and Elena.

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9 Perlingieri, Sofonisba Anguissola, 30.
10 Ibid. Other aristocratic men that were known for the exemplary education provided for their daughters or granddaughters included Sir Thomas Moore (1477/78-1535), who had his daughter Margaret (1504-1544) trained under Roger Ascham, and Federico da Montefeltro, whose granddaughter Vittoria Colonna (1490-1547) devoted her life to poetry after the death of her husband in 1525.
studying under Campi’s tutelage.\(^{11}\) Thus at the age of fourteen, Sofonisba, and her younger sister, Elena, were sent to study under and live with Campi and his wife, who also lived in Cremona.\(^{12}\)

At this point in his career, Campi was an accomplished painter, having worked with Raphael’s protégé, Guilo Romano (1499-1546), on the decoration of Mantua’s Ducal Palace. It is speculated that during Campi’s time in Mantua, he also studied under Titian, who was visiting to advise on the addition of rooms to the palace.\(^{13}\) For three years, the Anguissola sisters cohabitated with Campi and his wife, Anna, who would sit in as a chaperone for many of their lessons.\(^{14}\) During this period of learning, Sofonisba made significant advances in her drawing skills and use of Venetian *colorito* for her portraits, something Campi was also known for and certainly would have picked up during this possible time spent with Titian.\(^{15}\) Her experimentations with pigments under Campi’s instruction heavily influenced the techniques used in the works she produced as she built her own career. Vasari’s praises of the life-like quality of many of Sofonisba’s portraits—which he is said to have examined while visiting her father in the Anguissola family home—are heavily centered around her skillful use of color in portraiture.\(^{16}\)

Following her training under Campi, Sofonisba also studied under Bernardino Gatti (c. 1495-1576), primarily because Campi was called to work for the court of Milan in 1549.\(^{17}\)

\(^{11}\) Ibid, 42.
\(^{12}\) Ibid, 35.
\(^{13}\) Ibid, 39-40.
\(^{14}\) Ibid, 42.
\(^{15}\) Ibid, 42-43.
\(^{16}\) Jacobs, “Woman's Capacity to Create,” 76-78.
\(^{17}\) Perlingieri, *Sofonisba Anguissola*, 48-49.
During this time, Elena stepped away from her artistic studies and eventually joined a convent in 1551. In a document discovered in 1983, Amilcare Anguissola, still in his position as superintendent for San Sigismondo, hired Gatti to complete a vault painting in the late 1540s, likely leading to his hiring of Gatti as a teacher for Sofonisba. While the dates are not known with certainty, it is believed Anguissola studied under Gatti for at least three to four years (c. 1549-1552/3), further advancing her foundational education in drawing, and methods of late Renaissance and Mannerist painting. Amilcare’s continued devotion to keeping Sofonisba and her sisters educated in the arts during their adolescence and early adulthood shows not only his faith in all his daughters’ skills, but his devotion as a parent. Catherine King, a scholar in Renaissance art, even notes that it is Amilcare’s consistent dispersion of Sofonisba’s self-portraits that potentially lead to her eventual position at the Spanish court, something potentially inspired by Levina Teerlinc’s own success in her English court post.

Entering the mid-1550s, with little left to learn from the artists in Cremona, Anguissola sought inspiration from new teachers in larger cities. Accompanied by a chaperone and her sister Lucia, she is believed to have journeyed to Rome to further pursue her passion for painting, possibly in 1554. In Rome, she met the famed painter and sculptor, Michelangelo (1475-1564). Little is known with certainty about her stay in Rome or her professional relationship with Michelangelo, but two letters written to Michelangelo by Amilcare in 1557 and 1558 highlight

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18 Ibid, 52, 57.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid, 55.
21 Ibid.
23 Perlingieri, Sofonisba Anguissola, 65.
some of the lessons the older artist apparently imparted on the young Sofonisba.\textsuperscript{24} In the correspondences, Amilcare writes to Michelangelo thanking him for the encouragement he showed Sofonisba, saying, “… And what makes me and my whole family obliged to you is having understood the honorable and thoughtful affection that you have shown to Sofonisba, my daughter, to whom you introduced to practice the most honorable art of painting.” He continues on in the letter by stating, “Therefore, I am asking you, as in the past you were kind enough by your gracious courtesy, to talk to her and encourage my daughter, once again in the future to share your divine thoughts with her … This would be all the more if you would be kind enough to send her a sketch so that she may paint it in oil, obliging her to send it back duly finished by her own hand.”\textsuperscript{25} It is clear that some sort of tutelage or mentorship occurred based on these statements, and that Michelangelo possibly continued to serve as a mentor by sending Anguissola sketches so that she may paint them in oil and learn from his compositions and studies of the body.\textsuperscript{26} His interest and praise in the young, Cremonese painter proved her talents worthy of critical attention. By 1555, Anguissola returned to Cremona to continue her education in the humanities and art and to begin her first direct and independent portrait commissions.\textsuperscript{27}

1559 proved a significant year for Anguissola’s career. She was invited to Madrid to become the painting tutor and court lady for King Philip II’s young bride, Elisabeth (Isabel) de Valois.\textsuperscript{28} With the Queen’s young age of fourteen and new role in the Spanish court, perhaps she

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid, 67-68.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid, 69-70. This is taken from a translated letter written by Amilcare to Michelangelo, 7 May 1557. The original Italian transcript resides in the Buonarotti Archives of the Medecco Laurenziana Library in Florence, Italy.


\textsuperscript{27} Perlingieri, \textit{Sofonisba Anguissola}, 77.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid, 112. Note that Elisabeth’s name was changed to “Isabel” upon her marriage to Philip II.
needed a friend as much as a tutor, and it appears that Sofonisba served as both.\textsuperscript{29} She and Isabel spent much time together, and Sofonisba capitalized on the opportunity to paint individuals at the Spanish court. However, she did experience tribulations, according to a letter Sofonisba wrote to her former teacher, Bernardino Campi. Here, she notes how taxing the lessons with Isabel could be and that she was saddened to have less time to herself to focus on her own paintings.\textsuperscript{30} Additionally, though she was technically employed by the court to serve in part as an artistic tutor, and she was paid wages of money, silk, and jewels by the Queen’s household, Anguissola only held the title of lady-in-waiting or \textit{dama}.\textsuperscript{31}

After Queen Isabel’s death in 1566, many of her ladies-in-waiting dispersed back to their homes, but Anguissola stayed at the behest of King Philip II.\textsuperscript{32} It is possible she stayed as well for Princess Isabella, to whom she was made governess at her baptism. Being unmarried and having no children of her own, some historians have speculated that Anguissola may have favored the two-year-old girl and wished to remain with her.\textsuperscript{33} As a ward of the King, and now thirty-eight years old, Philip II looked to arrange a marriage for Anguissola, whose only condition was that her spouse preferably be Italian.\textsuperscript{34} He found a husband for her in Don Fabrizio, who she married in 1570 or 1571, and remained married to him until his death, believed to be in 1579.\textsuperscript{35} During their marriage, they spent time traveling to her husband’s many estates in southern Italy, and may have even resided in a royal residence that the king offered as

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\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{31} Perlingieri, \textit{Sofonisba Anguissola}, 120-21.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid, 141.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid, 141, 148.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid, 151.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid, 152, 167.
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a wedding gift to the couple. Following Don Fabrizio’s passing, King Philip II requested her return to the Spanish court, but Anguissola decided she would return home to Cremona instead. There are no records explaining the exact sequence of events that followed, but speculation leads to the theory that she took a ship from Palmero to Naples with the intention of traveling home. It is during her travel on this ship that she met Captain Orazio Lomellino, with whom she fell in love and married in January of 1580. Choosing her own paths outside of societal influence and expected tradition served her well, as what little is known about this period of her life suggest that she had a content marriage with Lomellino.

Sofonisba lived into her nineties, and a bit more is known of the last couple decades of her life. Due to her weakening eyesight in old age, she was unable to paint as much as she liked. It seems that the last recorded contact she had of artistic value was with Anthony van Dyck who painted a well-known portrait of Anguissola that he documented in his journal on July 12, 1624. In his account of the elderly painter, he notes that her mind remained sharp and her spirit quick and kind. Anguissola likely died in 1625 at the approximate age of ninety-three, having established herself as a great painter of her time, and historically, as part of an important trajectory of protofeminist early modern artists.

**Self-Portraiture as a Method of Protofeminism**

37 Ibid, 169.
40 Ibid, 204.
41 Ibid, 207.
Sofonisba Anguissola’s early feminist values are most prominently discussed in relation to her self-portraiture and portraits of her sisters. However, two of the three paintings to be discussed in this chapter are portraits of her mentors and/or acquaintances. Bernardino Campi has already been established as a valued source of inspiration for much of her development as an artist, but I propose that it is Anguissola’s *Bernardo Campi Painting Sofonisba Anguissola* (Figure 7) that marks her establishment as a professional painter in her own right. The popularized assumption that this painting is a tribute to her mentor begins to fade when the witty details that Anguissola incorporated are studied, giving the work a completely different contextual meaning.

Officially dated 1558-59, the painting shows Campi painting his own rendition of a portrait of Anguissola with his back to the viewer.\(^{42}\) Campi is painting using his right hand to paint with the aid of a mahlstick, a device used to steady an artist’s hand.\(^{43}\) He looks out at the viewer over his right shoulder, rather than at the piece he is actively painting, a common tactic used in period portraiture to capture the viewer’s attention. Campi’s brush is still touching the canvas, giving the appearance that he has just turned to look at a viewer who has entered the space. Despite the 1558-59 date common attributed to this portrait’s creation, it should be noted that current evidence more accurately dates the painting to the early 1550s, as the depiction of Anguissola seems to better align with her appearance in many of the self-portraits she completed in her early twenties.\(^{44}\) The portrait that Campi is working on seems to be imaginary, as no

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\(^{42}\) Ibid, 49.


\(^{44}\) Perlingieri, *Sofonisba Anguissola*, 49.
portrait of Anguissola by Campi has ever been discovered.\textsuperscript{45} In Mary Garrard’s discussion of this unique double-portrait, she notes that Anguissola’s likeness highly resembles the numerous self-portraits she produced during her career, so it is likely the image of her serves as a metaphor, rather than an actual depiction of an existing work by her mentor.\textsuperscript{46}

There is sufficient evidence for the theory of the painting serving as a tribute piece to Campi. The relationship between the student and teacher is typically regarded as a positive one, with Anguissola owing much of her technical skill to her time spent working with Campi, and records of him often praising her works. The painting is actually the only surviving portrait of Campi to date and has what seem to be very flattering details.\textsuperscript{47} To be memorialized in a portrait depicting wealth and/or skill was a common goal for much of the early modern aristocracy, but Anguissola’s picture reveals a bit more. Whereas most would have been painted plaining sitting or standing, perhaps with a dog or surrounded by objects denoting wealth or education, Campi shows an active narrative, making this work unique.\textsuperscript{48} By showing Campi actively painting a portrait of Anguissola, possibly even creating her in front of the viewer’s gaze, it is easy to see how she could be correlating her creation as an artist with his tutelage. However, an examination of the finer details of the work support a different conclusion—that of advancement beyond her mentor.

The main details that Mary Garrard uses to highlight her argument for feminist intention in this painting are: the portrait of Anguissola inside the work, Campi’s use of a mahlstick, and the differences in size and scale between Anguissola’s self-portrait and her portrayal of Campi.

\textsuperscript{45} Garrard, “Here’s Looking at Me,” 565.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{47} Perlingieri, \textit{Sofonisba Anguissola}, 49.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.
As noted, the portrait Campi paints of Anguissola looks remarkably like her own paintings of herself. Certainly, Anguissola was very familiar with Campi’s style, having studied under him for so many years, yet she apparently chooses to show him deliberately copying her style of portraiture.

The conclusions drawn from this creative decision could vary, but Garrard proposes that Anguissola’s intent was not to pay tribute, but to show her instructor favoring her style over his own.49 The argument makes a valid point for understanding Anguissola’s motives in creating this work. Furthermore, Campi’s gaze towards the viewer raises another question—who is he looking at? One must bear in mind that the first eye contact made with this portrayal of Campi was Anguissola herself as she painted him. His expression remains stoic as he boldly looks out at Anguissola while paying homage to his student in his rendition of her style of self-portrait. In this interpretation she has made a visual stand-off between master and former pupil, building a somewhat confrontational scene that might be read as him taking credit for her work. His gaze also raises the question of the intended audience for the piece. Who was this for, and why was it made?

Garrard’s theory that this double-portrait was intended to display Anguissola’s artistic abilities as greater than those of her mentor stems from a letter written to Campi by the artist Francesco Salviati in 1554.50 In this letter, Salviati congratulates Campi on Anguissola’s successful paintings in Rome by saying, “Given the works I am looking at, here with wonder, by the hand of the beautiful Cremonese paintress, your creation, I can guess at the beautiful intellect you possess, since you were her master and at the fame you are acquiring in Milan through your

49 Garrard, “Here’s Looking at Me,” 565.
50 Ibid, 560.
paintings.” The practice of assuming that a woman’s talents are merely a reflection, or “creation,” of her teacher’s instruction seems to have been common in the early modern art world. In fact, it appears that the only man in Anguissola’s life who appreciated her art simply for its merit and not the merit of her instructors was Amilcare, her father. Based on the letters he wrote to Michelangelo about Sofonisba in 1557-58, he valued not only Michelangelo’s praise of her work, but also the instruction and advice that he continued to send to the young artist. What seems to have been an unwavering belief in his daughter’s ability to succeed as a painter is not just noteworthy, but could qualify as a contributing factor to her internal self-worth, which she reflects in her art and is arguably part of her works’ protofeminist nature.

Garrard further supports her theory for the painting’s intent by focusing on the use of the mahlstick by Campi, as its inclusion could be read as pointing to a lack of professional level skill, although this is likely unfounded as Anguissola also shows herself using a malstick. Traditionally, a painter or artist used this tool to steady one’s hand while painting, thus creating straighter lines and more concise brushstrokes. In Garrard’s article, she sums up the professional opinion of many early modern artists regarding the mahlstick, stating, “In Renaissance art the mahlstick sometimes connoted artistic timidity or preoccupation with detail.” Anguissola herself used a mahlstick in one of her early self-portraits, but Garrard also makes the point that

51 King, “Looking a Sight,” 391. The excerpt from the letter, dated 28 April 1554, reads, “Se dall’opere, che vegghiamo qui, con maraviglia, de mano della bella pittrice Cremonese vostra fattura, si pùo fare congettura del bel’inteletto vostro, che la sete stato maestro, tanto più poi dal nome che v’acquistate con let pitture vostre de Milano.”

52 Perlingieri, Sofonisba Anguissola, 67-68.

53 Garrard, “Here’s Looking at Me,” 564.
once she matured as an artist it was not seen again. Anguissola’s specific inclusion of the tool is certainly an interesting choice.

The final point Garrard makes about this work heavily revolves around the depiction of Campi versus the self-portrait of Anguissola. The size of the portrait that Campi works on is larger than many standard portraits in this period, even larger than himself. In fact, Anguissola’s portrait towers over Campi, forcing him to physically look up at her to complete the work. The image calls to mind the idea of hierarchical scale, in which the person with the most power in the painting is shown as larger than the other individuals displayed. The chosen size of Anguissola’s self-portrait seems to make her intent quite obvious—proving that the artistic power she wields is solely her own, and not a gift Campi that bestowed upon her.

The painting was restored in 1996 by the staff at the Pinacoteca Nazionale di Siena, and since this restoration, Anguissola’s choice of apparel for herself and for Campi further stands out (Figure 8). The cleaning revealed with more certainty that Campi wears a typical black painter’s smock, while Anguissola is shown wearing an ornate and certainly expensive red gown, complete with jewels sewn into the fabric. The restoration also revealed a very curious discovery—perhaps a pentimento—a third arm emerges from Anguissola’s left arm and seems to be reaching up to take the paint brush from her mentor’s hand. It is not known if this was meant to be part of the finished piece, or if this was an earlier aspect that was later covered up by Anguissola, but its mere existence shows that, at some point, Anguissola at least considered conveying a demonstration of power over Campi, and therefore a celebration of her own artistic abilities moving far beyond those of her mentor.

54 Ibid.
55 Ibid, 562.
A second portrait that can be used to convey Anguissola’s protofeminist intent in her artwork is *Self-Portrait at the Easel, painting a Devotional Panel*, c. late 1550s (Figure 9). In this self-portrait, Anguissola depicts herself sitting at an easel while painting a small devotional of the Madonna and Child. In her right hand she holds a brush, still touching the canvas, and in her left hand she holds a mahlstick that is supporting her painting hand. This work is a relatively early work and the only known self-portrait in which she uses a mahlstick. She wears a black dress or painter’s smock with her hair pulled back into a bun, a traditional style for her time and common choice for many of her self-portraits. Below the painting on the easel sits a variety of paint splotches in multiple colors, likely test swatches for the painting while she determines what colors she wishes to use. Anguissola herself looks out at the viewer rather than her painting, showing her face fully to the audience so they make no mistake that she is in fact the artist responsible for this work.

While the protofeminist intent within this piece might be interpreted solely through the imagery, an evaluation of self-portraiture in early modern art sheds light on the significance of female self-portraiture during this time period. Portraiture alone in early modern art holds a valuable significance for a person’s self-fashioned portrayal of wealth, fame, and knowledge. It was important for artist and sitter to make a good connection, as the sitter/commissioner is often paying not just for their likeness to be immortalized, but their accomplishments, as well. A display of education and accumulated riches typically aligned with the will of the sitter, as the portrait paints a perception of an individual that would likely be seen by family and peers for years to come. Babette Bohn refers to “the executive power of will” in her essay on female

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self-portraiture, meaning that the sitter—the artist—foregrounds their own personal wishes.\(^{57}\) The clothing, objects, setting, and even hairstyles needed to be not just meticulously chosen, but accurately depicted to the finest detail, as sitters were curating their own images—just as in portraiture today. For this reason, the choice of artist would be particularly important for an individual wanting to commission a portrait of themselves. And artists are making the same choices in fashioning their own self-portraits.

Self-portraiture among painters is more than a means of practicing their craft. These works show specific insight into an artist’s internal relationship with themselves, as well as how they hope others will see and remember them, and the same can be said for Anguissola’s self-portrait at the easel. She is not only choosing to show herself as an educated noble-woman, but also, and primarily, as an artist.\(^{58}\) The act of painting within a painting creates a phenomenon of self-introspection as the artist must now take on the role of both commissioner/sitter and creator. The problem that arises in this introspection for female artists is the conflicting portrayals of women by men in early modernity versus the way women, like Anguissola, choose to portray themselves. How does Anguissola see herself as both a woman dominated by the male gaze and as a successful artist in a culture that typically only sees the value of male professionals in the field—both challenges that she certainly had to confront daily? Furthermore, what “power of will” does she exert in her own self-portraits, if any at all?

The male gaze being referenced is commonly found in the sexualization of women in artworks from this era. Many early modern artists looked to the Petrarchan model of the “perfect woman” as a template for their own idealizations for the female form. In Petrarch’s sonnets


\(^{58}\) Sofonisba Anguissola does have a series of self-portraits that highlight her status as an educated woman.
dedicated to Laura, his object of affection for twenty years, he describes a golden haired woman with beauty so overwhelming that all other earthly beauty paled in comparison and would halt to watch her weep or laugh. Through this model, early modern women were seen as objects of beauty that artists could stitch together from various sources to create an image of perfection in art that nature could only dare to rival. The key word to observe is “objects,” as women were, as noted above, considered to be intellectually inferior to men. The (pro)creative potential for women in the early modern era was limited to their ability to contribute to the creation of life, and almost nothing more. Vasari even made a comment on Anguissola’s skill by stating, “If women know so well to make living men, what marvel is it that those who wish are also so well able to make them in painting?” While this seems a compliment at face value, it still sheds light on the common misogynist mindset regarding women artists. Artists like Anguissola were seen as “miraculous” because they existed outside a realm of normalcy and were seen as an exception to a pre-ordained talent reserved for men. This makes her self-portrait at the easel not just a portrayal of her artistic talent or worth, but a challenge to all who lock eyes with her painted visage. She is directly challenging the norms of acceptable artistic license by creating images that call attention to herself as the creative agent.

Even more interesting is the lack of physical adornment, displays of wealth, and common educational motifs in this painting. She does not choose to wear anything more than a black

60 Garrard, “Here’s Looking at Me,” 570.
61 Jacobs, “Woman’s Capacity to Create,” 92.
63 Ibid, 78.
64 Garrard, “Here’s Looking at Me,” 573.
smock, with her hair pulled into a traditional updo. Her body and the painting to her right take up the majority of the canvas, with very little indication of location or space. Usually interpreted as a call to modesty or virtue, the common belief of the early modern period was that unmarried (and assumed to be virginal) women should not be portrayed in elaborate décor or dress lest they be seen as anything other than passive or submissive. This would apply to Anguissola as well because she was unmarried during the production of this piece. If Sofonisba wanted to show herself as a modest, virginal young woman, she could have easily stuck to simple self-portraits that only supported this fact. Yet, she places careful emphasis on where the attention of the viewer is directed in the portrait—towards more than her physical likeness. Anguissola’s face takes the focal point of the painting, mainly due to the darker background causing her skin tone to stand out. Her hands, another instance of brightness against this darker background, then lead the eye to her painting on the easel. Her brush and the malhstick both work as a directional devices, stemming from her hands and pointing straight to the canvas she works on. The stylistic decisions Anguissola makes point the viewer towards her craft, not her virtue or modesty.

Her choice of subject matter within the portrait also alludes to her intention of artistic equality. She paints the Madonna and Child. Saint Luke, one of the writers of the Gospels, was said to be the first to paint the Virgin and Child, and thus becomes the patron saint for artists. For this reason, early modern portraits depicting only an unidentified male painting the Virgin with the Christ child are interpreted to be showing Luke as the artist. Here, Anguissola inserted herself into the role of St. Luke—historically taken on by male artists—but she has made clear indications that she is to be recognized in this task. Her gaze is clear and steady, denoting a calm

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66 Ibid, 204.
and almost impenetrable energy. If she is indeed putting herself in the role of St. Luke, it can be assumed she is looking out towards the Virgin and Child who have appeared to her. Catherine King notes this comparison as well, but uses it as a call to Anguissola’s address of her own piety, however I stand that she intends to create a composition that offers a correlation between herself and the patron saint of artists, indicating that she saw herself in a comparable light to Saint Luke, as well as her contemporary male colleagues.  

The portrait also draws a comparison between Anguissola and the Virgin on her easel. Anguissola’s identification with Mary in the portrait is highlighted by the tip of her brush pointing to the Christ child, thereby reminding viewers of the solely female ability to create life. Mary’s demeanor and posture shows her leaning in and touching faces with Christ in an emotional display of devotion and love. In particular, her hands draw attention to how she delicately, but attentively displays her maternal instincts. Though Anguissola is not hunched over, her posture is similar to that of Mary as they both take up the right side of the canvas they are respectively depicted on, and both are seen in a sitting position. Mary gently, but purposefully cradles the back of the Christ Child’s head with her right hand, showing a special relationship between herself and her child. Like the Virgin, Anguissola gently holds her brush with her right hand and pays devoted attention to every detail in her work, showing a purposeful connection to her creation, as well—two women of virtue are depicted with the fruits of their labor in their own respective rights. By showing the painting to her right in the same location that Christ takes in the smaller Madonna and Child painting within, Anguissola intends to claim her art as something like her child, what she has dedicated her life to—putting her vocation above her perceived duties as a woman to conceive offspring.

The final portrait by Anguissola that subtly reveals protofeminist intent is not a self-portrait, but a portrait of yet another friend and mentor. *Portrait of Giulio Clovio*, c.1578, shows the artist Giulio Clovio sitting in a chair with a green table before him (Figure 10). Taking the date into account, it is likely that Anguissola painted this portrait while she and her first husband, Fabrizio, traveled through Rome after leaving Spain. Clovio is dressed in black clothing (likely influenced by sumptuary laws), a hat, and in his left hand he holds a miniature portrait thought to be by and of Levina Teerlinc. The significance of this painting remarkably ties Teerlinc, from Chapter Two, to Anguissola. As mentioned previously, there is no evidence that Teerlinc and Anguissola interacted, but that does not mean they did not know of each other, and this very portrait suggests that Anguissola at least knew of Teerlinc. It is not directly stated how Anguissola and Giulio Clovio (1498-1578) were introduced, but it is known that Clovio worked with and studied under Giulio Romano, the same man that worked with Bernardino Campi in Mantua’s Ducal Palace. It is also speculated that Clovio met and/or worked with Teerlinc in either Flanders or England sometime between 1540-1546, right before she became court painter to King Henry VIII. The miniature portrait in his hand was identified by Federico Zeri, the current owner of the painting. In Zeri’s collection is also the inventory of Clovio’s possessions. Among the items listed was the miniature portrait by Lavina Terlinks, which he kept until his death. Unfortunately the miniature portrait in question has since been lost.

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68 Perlingieri, *Sofonisba Anguissola*, 166.
69 Ibid, 40.
70 Ibid.
71 Garrard, “Here’s Looking at Me,” 575. Note the spelling of Teerlinc’s name differs in this account but has been shown to be the same individual.
A portrait of a male artist like this is not unusual in any capacity, but the events leading to its production by Anguissola are worth examining for the protofeminist intent considered in this study. Clovio not only sat for Anguissola to paint his portrait, but held in hand a miniature portrait painted by a different woman artist. His choice to include the miniature in his portrait alludes to personal attachment to the work, proving its value to the artist. By showing his appreciation for the artwork through its inclusion in the portrait, Clovio also shows his appreciation for the artist behind the work: Teerlinc. The timeframe of this painting sets its creation at 1556-1558, right after Teerlinc began a career as the Tudor court painter. Certainly, such an accomplishment would not have escaped Anguissola’s notice, and she would have been reminded of it while Clovio sat for this portrait. One can only imagine the discussions between them about the miniature that he holds so dearly in his hand, painted by a woman not so unlike Anguissola.

Garrard offers a counter argument for this portrait, stating that the intention of a male artist grasping the work of a female artist in his hand could be viewed the same way men metaphorically hold women in their grip as well. I offer that the way Anguissola shows his hand holding the small painting is far too delicate to infer any kind of malice. There is no other object pictured with Clovio in the portrait, as his right hand remains empty, laying on the table in front of him. Of course, without explicit documentation from the period, the intention of this piece can be read in a multitude of ways, but the mutual respect that appears to exist between professional artists seems undeniable, and thus comes forward as the most important aspect of the painting. Clovio did not need to sit for a portrait, but he clearly valued Anguissola’s skill enough to not only allow it, but possibly even actively commission it. The miniature also was not

72 Ibid., 575-576.
a necessary addition to his portrayal in the painting, but he certainly made the distinct choice to include it, nonetheless.

**Conclusion: The Aftermath of Anguissola’s Career**

Mary Garrard’s own arguments for placing Anguissola and her artworks in a protofeminist framework incorporates a very important point, a point that can be applied to each of the women artists discussed in this thesis.\(^73\) Regardless of exposure to any sort of literature that might be considered protofeminist, like-minded female artists, or even supportive male artists, Anguissola was an educated and exceptionally bright woman with her own agendas. And again, so too was every woman artist discussed herein. The attitudes of the men around her in response to her artwork would not have escaped her notice, and she surely recognized that she was not considered an equal in her field by a majority of the critics she encountered.\(^74\) The existence of period literature, too, that has also been considered as protofeminist suggests that women were capable of investigating their own position in the world and finding dissatisfaction with the roles in which they were cast. Anguissola’s accolades and glowing reviews by male counterparts show that she received collegial support in her successes despite her gender and the systemic biases that came with it. She was viewed by most of her contemporaries as more than just an artist—as a woman incredibly capable of artistic talents. Being conscious of her gender in relation to her vocation, Anguissola’s artwork offers a critical view of women artists through the lens of a woman artist.

\(^{73}\) Ibid., 578-579.

\(^{74}\) Ibid.
Chapter IV
The Case of Artemisia Gentileschi

Finally, any discussion of intentional protofeminism in the works of early modern women artists is not complete without a consideration of the seventeenth-century painter Artemisia Gentileschi. Gentileschi had a fair amount of renown, as well as controversy, during her lifetime, with her works typically being compared to the Baroque master, Caravaggio. Like Caravaggio, she used a dramatic style of story-telling, enhanced by tenebrism, in her paintings, which often centered around themes of life and death, sexual misconduct, or facing adversity. She is perhaps most notable for her depictions of strong biblical and historical heroines. Outside of her work as an artist, Artemisia Gentileschi also gained a level of notoriety in her personal life during her late teenage years. At age seventeen, she was raped at the hands of her art tutor, which lead to a highly publicized and well-documented trial that follows her reputation even today. Largely because of this event, Gentileschi became a popular historical figure in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries with books and screenplays depicting fictionalized versions her life and trial. Over time, her image has become one of inspiration to women and survivors of abuse, pushing her to the forefront of feminist movements in art history.

Today, Gentileschi is considered a feminist icon in early modern history. Because of the abuse she suffered not only at the hands of her rapist, but also from the society that put her on trial in ways more so than him, her artworks are seen as reflecting a unique female gaze that allowed her protofeminist mindset to flourish. Scholars have long debated, though, whether her status as a feminist art history icon is due to her work as an artist or her reputation as a survivor of sexual assault. I offer the position that she deserves credit for her protofeminist approach to art largely due to the trials she endured as a young woman, but her artwork can still hold
protofeminist value when explored through a lens that excludes the impact of her rape. While Gentileschi can be compared in many ways to the female artists previously discussed, she also stands distinctly apart from Teerlinc and Anguissola. The discrimination she faced as a woman was centered on her personal life in ways that are publicly recorded. The resulting effects this produced in her art created something that cannot be found in the works of Teerlinc and Anguissola. As with Teerlinc and Anguissola, this chapter will examine distinct works of art produced during Gentileschi’s lifetime in order to investigate her protofeminist intent within each.

**Gentileschi Biographical Overview**

Artemisia Gentileschi was born to Orazio Gentileschi and Prudentia Montoni on July 8, 1593 in Rome.¹ Her age was debated for a short period of time based on testimonials from the Gentileschi vs. Tassi rape case. Originally, Orazio Gentileschi claimed his daughter was only fifteen years old when raped, making her birth year 1597. Information found in censuses and birth records afterwards however suggests that her father altered her age to be younger in order to hopefully bring stronger chargers against the accused. The birth certificate found in the baptismal books of San Lorenzo in Lucia confirmed that Artemisia Gentileschi was born on July 8, 1593. The book also contained the birth records of five of her brothers, definitively proving the records to belong to the Gentileschi family.²

Like many other women artists born during the early modern period, Gentileschi’s father was also a successful artist. Orazio Lomi Gentileschi (1563-1639) created a name for himself

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during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries through Mannerist and Baroque styles of painting. Orazio’s original surname, “Lomi,” comes from his paternal Florentine ancestry, and in fact, many of Artemisia’s early works are signed with this surname, as well, which lead many scholars to assume she was also born in Florence. The truth, however, seems to be that she used her Florentine surname for professional reasons, to strengthen her community ties while producing artwork in Florence.

Coming from a family with ties to the art community, it is no wonder that Artemisia began her arts education at fifteen years old, with her earliest dated painting being completed in 1610. It is likely that Orazio taught her many of the basics for painting; and as the oldest living child, Artemisia would have been given the most educational attention until her brothers had reached a proper age. According to witness testimony during Gentileschi’s rape trial, it is evident that Orazio was an exceptionally protective and strict father. Many witnesses stated that Artemisia rarely left the house, and, like many early modern women, her father urged her to become a nun. Unfortunately, this seclusion in her home lead to one of the defining events in Artemisia’s life—her rape at the hands of her tutor, Agostino Tassi. Orazio originally worked with Tassi in a professional capacity and the two ran in the same social circles, likely leading to his arrangement to have Tassi occasionally tutor Artemisia in painting linear perspective.

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3 Bissel, “Artemisia Gentileschi,” 156.
4 Ibid.
5 Christiansen and Mann, Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi, xiii.
8 Ibid, 49.
Conforming with societal expectations, Orazio also arranged for a married, woman neighbor, Tuzia, to sit in as a chaperone for Artemisia’s lessons.\footnote{Ibid.} In May of 1611, Tassi called on the Gentileschi household and found Artemisia, accompanied by Tuzia, painting an image of the Madonna and Child.\footnote{Cohen, “The Trials of Artemisia Gentileschi,” 49. According to accounts listed in the chronology by Christiansen and Mann, this occurred on May 6, 1611. See Christiansen and Mann, Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi.} During this visit, Tassi reportedly harassed Artemisia and ultimately forced her to have intercourse with him despite her protests and pleas to stop.\footnote{Ibid, 49-50.} There are also records of Gentileschi stating that she resisted Tassi so desperately she wounded him during the encounter.\footnote{Joseph William Slap, “Artemisia Gentileschi: Further Notes,” American Imago 42, no. 3 (1985): 337.}

Despite her reservations, Tassi manipulated the young Artemisia into keeping this assault a secret by promising to marry her. Left with what must have felt like little choice, in order to avoid a public scandal, Artemisia agreed to this and considered herself the future wife of Tassi. As such, she was deceived into further manipulation, as he continued to force her engagement in more sexual encounters for a series of months following the initial rape.\footnote{Cohen, “The Trials of Artemisia Gentileschi,” 49.} The trial records include statements from Artemisia claiming that Tassi provided her a ring to signify his promise to eventually wed her.\footnote{Slap, “Artemisia Gentileschi,” 337.} Some accounts claim that Orazio also implicated another artist, Cosimo Quorli, as an accomplice in the rape, which was corroborated by Tuzia in her statements during the trial, but this is not widely circulated in most accounts of the assault.\footnote{Ibid.} Quorli was one of Orazio’s closest friends in 1610, but apparently frequently impersonated Orazio, claiming to be
Artemisia’s father. Witnesses also testified that Quorli attempted to molest Artemisia on multiple
occasions.\textsuperscript{16} It is possible that Quorli is actually responsible for introducing Orazio to Tassi in the
first place, and together Quorli and Tassi plotted Artemisia’s harassment and assault.\textsuperscript{17}

Orazio was not aware of his daughter’s rape, nor Tassi’s on-going abuse, until nine
months after the first attack. When Artemisia finally told her father what had happened, he
immediately took Tassi to court in March of 1612. Over the course of seven months, Tassi and
Gentileschi were both put on trial, and their respective personal lives each put under a
microscope in order to determine if an assault had occurred or if Artemisia had “sullied her own
honor.” Several times, both Tassi and Gentileschi were subjected to torture with a “thumb-
screw,” a device that slowly crushes fingers, used in early modernity as a means to feel certain
that the plaintiff is telling the truth during their questioning.\textsuperscript{18} The trial ended in November 1612
with Tassi being found guilty.\textsuperscript{19} The judge offered Tassi a choice between five years of hard
labor or banishment from Rome, with Tassi choosing the latter.\textsuperscript{20} Overall, Tassi got away
without any real punishment for his misdeeds against Artemisia, and he was eventually acquitted
and allowed to return to Rome.

Perhaps eager to move on, Artemisia was married to Pierantonio di Vincenzo Stiattesi on
November 29, 1612, less than a month after the conclusion of her rape trial.\textsuperscript{21} As the public
humiliation she endured during the trial was still fresh in the early months of her marriage, this

\textsuperscript{16} Cavazzini, “Artemisia in Her Father’s House,” 100.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 100-101.
\textsuperscript{18} Harris and Nochlin, Women Artists, 118.
\textsuperscript{19} Cohen, “The Trials of Artemisia Gentileschi,” 49. In Joseph Slap’s account of the trial, Tassi was imprisoned for 8
months during the proceedings and then acquitted. See Slap, “Artemisia Gentileschi.”
\textsuperscript{20} Christiansen and Mann, Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi, xv.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
may explain why the newly-weds decided to move to Florence shortly after they married.\textsuperscript{22} Evidence of their departure from Rome to Florence exists in Stiattesi officially giving over responsibility of his Roman affairs to his brother and notary, Giovanni Battista, in December of 1612.\textsuperscript{23} There is little definitive information on the intricacies of Artemisia’s marriage to Stiattesi or how many children they had, and historians have offered varying accounts. In Joseph Slap’s account of Artemisia’s life, the couple had one daughter in 1618 and their marriage ended shortly after.\textsuperscript{24} However, in Elizabeth Cohen’s slightly more detailed account of her life, she notes that the couple had multiple children, but only a daughter survived infancy, and her “ne’er-do-well husband” vanished after 1622.\textsuperscript{25} The most detailed chronology of Artemisia’s life by Christiansen and Mann corroborate both of these accounts by dating the births of four children, with two boys in 1613 and 1615, and two girls in 1617 and 1618.\textsuperscript{26} Christiansen and Mann also verified that, in 1623, she lived alone with her daughter and had lost track of her husband’s whereabouts. Her daughter, Prudenza, born August 1, 1617,\textsuperscript{27} is likely the surviving daughter referenced in the latter parts of Artemisia’s life, and it is notable that she raised her alone after her husband’s departure.\textsuperscript{28} Unusual for the period, Gentileschi provided for herself and her daughter independently, likely using the funds she acquired from the sale of her paintings.

\textsuperscript{22} Cohen, “The Trials of Artemisia Gentileschi,” 50.

\textsuperscript{23} Christiansen and Mann, \textit{Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi}, xv.

\textsuperscript{24} Slap, “Artemisia Gentileschi,” 337.

\textsuperscript{25} Cohen, “The Trials of Artemisia Gentileschi,” 50.

\textsuperscript{26} Christiansen and Mann, \textit{Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi}, xv-xvi.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid, xvi. Prudenza has also been spelled Prudentia, and she was also apparently known to respond to the name “Palmira.”

\textsuperscript{28} Slap, “Artemisia Gentileschi,” 337. Cohen also notes the possibility that Artemisia had two surviving daughters, and perhaps one was born illegitimately. See also, Cohen, “The Trials of Artemisia Gentileschi,” 50.
Records reveal that from 1612 until her death in ca. 1652/3, Gentileschi had a lucrative painting career, creating works for both private collectors and for cathedrals.\(^{29}\) Some of her most renowned works, such as *Susanna and the Elders* ca. 1610, and *Judith Slaying Holofernes* ca. 1612-1613, were created in her youth, but many of the works she profited on came later in her career. The themes of many of her known works centered on Judith or similarly other historical, biblical, and mythological heroines. Some of her most notable achievements during her lifetime include being the first woman to join the Accademia del Disegno in 1616, and her contributions to the Casa Buonarroti in 1617.\(^{30}\) Most importantly, Gentileschi is credited for the introduction and spread of Caravaggism to Florence and Naples during the 1620-30s, an achievement only recently recognized in the twentieth century.\(^{31}\)

**Development as a Feminist Icon**

The 1970s welcomed a decade of progressive feminist movements in the art world. For the first time, historical women artists were beginning to be viewed through a wider lens and questions were finally being asked about women working in centuries prior. The main question, of course, was, where were they? This launched investigations by many art historians, Linda Nochlin and Mary Garrard becoming two of the most notable. Nochlin’s famous essay, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” attempted to dissect this question and formulate a possible answer. As discussed in the two previous chapters, Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin’s 1976 exhibition of *Women Artists: 1550-1950* spotlighted these questions, placing them at the forefront of the art community. This exhibition included six paintings by Artemisia


\(^{30}\) Harris and Nochlin, *Women Artists*, 118.

\(^{31}\) Ibid.
Gentileschi, as well as a published biography of her life and protofeminist contributions.\textsuperscript{32} Gentileschi was also singled out as a feminist icon by the 1973 Women Artist’s Cooperative, “Artemisia.”\textsuperscript{33} Founded by Joy Poe, the goal of this cooperative was to create a haven for women artist’s to thrive and form a platform in which they could “make their names known to the art world of Chicago and beyond.”\textsuperscript{34} Artemisia was chosen as their namesake because her seventeenth-century depictions of heroines enacting violence in her artwork reflected the ideals of the feminists fighting for equality in their own twentieth-century art world.\textsuperscript{35}

While Nochlin and Harris state that Gentileschi was not a “feminist” by 1970s standards, the letters she wrote during her lifetime alluded to her awareness of the inequality she faced as a woman artist and how she expected fairness from her peers and clients.\textsuperscript{36} These letters, coupled with the fame of her rape trial and interpretations of many of her works, set Gentileschi up to become one of the most critically acclaimed feminist icons of the 1970s art movements, and through the present day. Susanna Scarparo sums up Gentileschi’s role in feminist art history in the opening paragraph of her article, “‘Artemisia’: The invention of the ‘Real’ Woman.” She states, “For Feminist scholars, Artemisia has become an icon on account of having experienced the violence of patriarchal oppression—both intellectually and physically.”\textsuperscript{37} The controversial inquiry surrounding this development of her reputation, however, is whether protofeminist intent that seems to have been projected upon her historical image should be understood as sincerely

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid, 118-124.
hers, or if it was created through both the dramatized and fictionalized accounts of her life, and especially the accounts of her rape and trial. However, does every woman survivor of sexual violence automatically identify as a feminist? Or does identifying as a feminist involve openly and consciously contributing to the cause? By understanding how she came to be the feminist icon known today, perhaps we can gain more clarity of her protofeminist ideals.

The first published and popular account of Gentileschi’s life was not a true biography, but a historically fictionalized account of her life, told from Gentileschi’s perspective and published in 1947 by Anna Banti. Despite including many historical inaccuracies and a fair amount of liberties taken with interpretation of Gentileschi’s thoughts and feelings, this book is still considered the highlight of Banti’s career. In Banti’s novel the author serves as a type of narrator that interacts with Artemisia’s sullen ghost, distraught over the loss of the last manuscripts detailing her life story. As the ghost of Artemisia tells the author her version of events, she paints a verbal picture of an emotionally distant father, a graphic rape, and a life of single-motherhood forced upon her when her husband leaves her. In every aspect of the story, the male presences in Artemisia’s life worked to destroy her confidence and undermine her talents as a proficient painter, but many of these details do not reflect Gentileschi’s real life. Her father never failed to acknowledge her artistic talents even from a young age, and many speculate that it was Gentileschi who left her husband to pursue her own desires. While the gist of the story had some historical accuracy, this version created an overly dramatic account that painted Artemisia in a clear, feminist light, while also using literary devices to allude to Banti’s own identification with Artemisia. Scarparo even notes that Banti created Artemisia’s voice for

38 Ibid.
her; and through the author, this fictional version of Gentileschi’s “ghost” became the “real” version that audiences began to identify with.39

Following this trend, more “Artemisia Fictions” (as Scarparo calls them) came into existence during the 1990s and early 2000s in the form of novels and films, further adding to the fame her story saw during the turn of the century.40 Alexandra Lapierre published her novel, \textit{Artemisia}, in 1998, which was translated into English in 2000 due to its popularity.41 In 2002, Susan Vreeland published \textit{The Passion of Artemisia}, which became a best-selling novel the same year.42 Miramax also released the feature film, \textit{Artemisia}, in 1998, retelling the dramatic account of the abused painter, continuously struck down by the patriarchy.43 The main issues with these fictionalized portrayals of her life are the focuses on the dramatic structures, rather than the full picture of the woman. Almost all of the novels and films that reconstruct the story behind Artemisia focus on her rape, trial, and triumph as a woman in a male dominated society. Rather than sticking to the primary source materials documenting her life, the authors of these fictions instead found ways to turn this historic painter into a mythologized modern-day celebrity.44 While this is not the first time a historic figure’s life has been reinterpreted by the mainstream media for profit, it’s important to note that Gentileschi’s true image has be overshadowed by the consumption of these fictionalized media accounts of her life. As such, I ask whether her placement in history as a feminist could be a result of these fictional constructions.

40 Tina Olsin Lent, “‘My Heart Belongs to Daddy’: The Fictionalization of Baroque Artist Artemisia Gentileschi in Contemporary Film and Novels,” \textit{Literature/Film Quarterly} 34, no. 3 (2006): 212.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
Since the 1970s, there have also been numerous accurate articles and books published that are dedicated to piecing together the true story of Gentileschi’s life and art, including investigations to stylistically separate her art from that of her father. In addition, actual evidence of Gentileschi’s protofeminist ideals can be found in twenty letters she wrote to her patrons, published together to make this information more accessible.\textsuperscript{45} Specific excerpts from letters she wrote to Don Antonio Ruffo were translated and published in the exhibition catalogue written by Nochlin and Harris for \textit{Women Artists: 1550-1950}. In the context of the catalogue, these were used as primary evidence for Gentileschi’s awareness of how her gender impacted her career, as well as her refusal to let it affect her artistic worth.\textsuperscript{46} In these letters, written over several months in 1649, Gentileschi firmly tells Ruffo that she expects him to pay the amount of one hundred scudi that she is accustomed to receiving for her work. She goes on to state that she also sympathizes with his doubts about the quality of the painting as, “the name of a woman makes one doubtful until one has seen the work.”\textsuperscript{47} Gentileschi attributes her need to defend her prices to her patron’s doubts that she can create competent work as a woman, highlighting her absolute awareness in the differences in treatment between herself and her male peers. This phrasing also shows that she believes that her work is equal to that of a male artist, writing that, “The works will speak for themselves.”\textsuperscript{48} Beyond these letters serving as a primary source of information for


\footnotesize{46} Ibid.

\footnotesize{47} Ibid.

investigating Gentileschi as a protofeminist, I will now show that her views are further supported by evidence found in her artworks.

**Protofeminism Through Metaphor**

Of all the artwork Gentileschi produced, perhaps one of the most famous for its perceived feminist ideals is actually an early work in her oeuvre—her 1610 rendition of *Susanna and the Elders* (Figure 11). This work is widely considered one of her first major works to be completed as a trained artist, yet there have been many attempts to refute its 1610 dating. One of the earliest and most common arguments for the date being incorrect is Artemisia’s young age in 1610, being that she would have only been seventeen years old and thus had only been training as an artist for one to two years.\(^{49}\) Many scholars, such as Roberto Longhi, have used this argument to instead attribute the painting to Orazio, or at least conclude that he helped Artemisia paint a majority of the work.\(^{50}\) Contrarily, Mary Garrard devoted a substantial amount of effort to proving the authenticity of the painting’s original date, and Artemisia as the artist responsible for the work. In 1977, she and Susanne P. Sack, the chief conservator of the Brooklyn Museum during that time, collaborated with the painting’s owner, Dr. Karl Schonborn, and used ultraviolet rays to ultimately reveal that the inscription of “ARTEMITIA/GENTILESCHI F./1610” was in fact original to the painting and at no point had been altered or painted over.\(^{51}\) Garrard does conclude that Orazio may have had a heavy role in the planning and preparations of the work as its composition mimics his style, but notes that even this early work exhibits noticeable differences between what would come to be known as Artemisia’s style and that of

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\(^{50}\) Ibid, 147-148.

\(^{51}\) Ibid, 148.
her father.  
Specifically, Orazio commonly portrayed women in his paintings in a much more passive light, showing little expression on their face and seemingly less active in each respective narrative depicted.  
Garrard’s strongest argument to support the stylistic differences between father and daughter is her consideration of Gentileschi’s treatment of Susanna in comparison with several other artists of the early seventeenth century.  
Garrard’s studies help to differentiate Artemisia’s work from those of her male peers, thereby also contributing to the development of Gentileschi’s protofeminist intent within *Susanna and the Elders*, along with many of her works to come.

In Gentileschi’s *Susanna and the Elders*, she closely follows the biblical story, appeasing the guidelines set through the Catholic Church and the Council of Trent, of course.  
Susanna sits on the edge of a bath in her garden, and is shown being accosted by the two elders who lust after and harass her. Her face and body are purposefully twisted away from the men in a display of fear and discomfort as they lean into her personal space. Her body almost seems to curl into itself and her hands are thrown up in a defensive manner as a form of protection. The background shows the elders leaning over a wall behind her with no visible entrance or exit. The lack of foliage surrounding the bath is mentioned by both Garrard and Joseph Slap in their analysis of this painting as a major difference between this work and the lush gardens depicted in similar

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52 Ibid.
53 Ibid, 158.
54 Ibid, 148-149.
55 The story of Susanna and the Elders is documented in the book of Susanna, located in the Apocrypha, NRSV. Susanna, the wife of Joakim, is bathing in the gardens one day when two Babylonian judges saw her and lusted after her. Waiting until she sent her maids away, they approached her and demanded she lay with them or else they would accuse her of adultery. After refusing their advances, Susanna was sent to trial and ultimately sentenced to death based on the judges’ lies. When she cried to God for help, the prophet Daniel came to her aid and interrogated the judges separately and away from each other. They gave conflicting testimonies about which tree they claimed to see Susanna commit adultery under and their false testimony was discovered. The judges were then put to death and Susanna was exonerated.
paintings of Susanna. In Artemisia’s version, therefore, we are made to focus solely on the psychological aspects of this biblical narrative. The elders are depicted as two older men in expensive robes. One whispers into the other’s ear, while the other elder holds a finger to his lips in a bid to keep Susanna quiet. In this representation, they appear above Susanna, casting an ominous shadow over her. This display of dominance indicates their position of power and their intention to abuse that power at Susanna’s expense, which is true to the Old Testament account.

What is most impressive, especially in comparison with depictions of this story by her male contemporaries, is Gentileschi’s sacrifice of sensuality in Susanna’s body language in order to display clear fear and anxiety. Through Susanna’s body language, that of her harassers, and the closely-cropped composition, the viewer’s interpretation is that this young woman is trapped, not only physically, but morally as well. She can do as the elders wish and let them rape her, or be slandered and killed for the infidelity of which they will accuse her.

As mentioned, in other early seventeenth-century paintings of Susanna and the Elders, particularly those painted by male artists, there is a noticeable difference in the way that Susanna is depicted. As Garrard points out, it appears that although the story of Susanna focuses on her virtue at its core, men took it as an advantage to paint a scene of eroticism centered on the female body. Traditionally, the female nude in early modern painting was used to evoke mythological beauties like Venus, to illustrate the provocative nature of women (particularly courtesans), or, as in this case, the rare moments that female nudity is relevant to a biblical tale. To highlight the distinct differences in Artemisia’s depiction of Susanna, I have chosen to compare her work to

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57 Garrard, “Artemisia and Susanna,” 150.
the late Mannerist painter Alessandro Allori’s 1607 *Susanna and the Elders* (Figure 12), completed just three years before the date attributed to Gentileschi’s version.

In Allori’s version, Susanna sits on the edge of the bath, looking over one shoulder at the man behind her, her hand touching his face, while the other Elder has his arm wrapped around her torso and his face pressed into her stomach and underside of her breast. This blonde, Petrarchan Susanna has her hair pulled into an updo adorned with jewels and flowers. She touches both elders in what may initially be read as a caress, but upon knowing the story being depicted, it can be recognized as a push or struggle. The gentle quality of her touch, though, adds an eroticism to the work that is incongruent with the facts of the Old Testament story. The background is serene, dappled with sunlight, and filled with light colors, bowls of fruit, and beautiful Italianate landscapes, hardly setting the scene for anything violent. The foliage entering from the left side of the painting follows the lines of their bodies, hiding them from a passerby’s gaze, and thereby suggesting secrecy or even intimacy. The viewer’s clear view of Susanna’s body in the center of the composition, as well as the elder’s hand creeping in through the opening between her thighs, indicate a deliberate sensuality, giving the impression that this was created for a man’s viewing pleasure and the male erotic gaze. Even in the midst of sexual assault, Allori’s Susanna maintains a graceful composure and displays little fear on her face (lest the expression take away from her inviting beauty).

According to the Book of Daniel, Susanna is meant to be a heroine, a champion and exemplar of virtue and chastity, but Garrard points out that all too often rape in Western art is glorified as “a daring and noble adventure.” She attributes this glamorization of rape to the fact that male artists and patrons (especially in early modernity) possibly more often identify with the

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58 Ibid, 152.
elders than with Susanna.\textsuperscript{59} Perhaps, as scholars have suggested, this is why Gentileschi was capable of producing a distinctly different interpretation of the story. For the first time, an artist actually identified with Susanna’s harassment on a personal level. Joseph Slap has this to say about Gentileschi’s \textit{Susanna and the Elders}:

\begin{quote}
The difference then between Artemisia’s rendition and those of Rembrandt, Rubens, and Tintoretto and others less famous may not have been sexism but the circumstance that Artemisia treated it as a vividly realistic assault, a reflection of what she was experiencing at the time, while the others treated it as a classic myth.\textsuperscript{60}
\end{quote}

Additionally, Gentileschi’s rendering of the female nude does not contribute to Susanna’s apparent sexuality, but instead calls attention to her vulnerability and violation. Gentileschi regularly used the nude female form in her artwork, which was an uncommon practice for previous early modern women artists, as they were not allowed to study nude models. Gentileschi likely used her own body as a subject of study, showing her dedication to becoming a true master of painting. A question is posed, though, when connecting Gentileschi’s experience with sexual violation to her completion of \textit{Susanna}—how might she have shared in Susanna’s feelings if this painting was created around a year before her rape?

Again, this timeline has been explored at length by Garrard, who points out the likelihood of sexual harassment by Tassi predating the rape.\textsuperscript{61} Furthermore, drawing from documents recording the testimonies of witnesses during the trial, it was stated multiple times that Quorli also repeatedly attempted to sexually assault Artemisia before he too raped her after Tassi.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid, 153.
\textsuperscript{60} Slap, “Artemisia Gentileschi,” 3.
\textsuperscript{61} Garrard, “Artemisia and Susanna,” 165.
Artemisia’s testimony even revealed that Tassi and Quorli often requested sexual favors from her on the pretense that she already engaged in sexual activity with a servant\textsuperscript{62} which is remarkably similar to the biblical account of Susanna’s experience. The story of Susanna is not one of rape, but rather sexual harassment and coercion. It is not difficult to imagine, then, the connection that Gentileschi must have felt with the story of Susanna, considering the aggressive sexual pressure they both experienced from two older men. While Gentileschi’s status as a survivor of sexual assault does not immediately translate to feminist intent in her artworks, her empathy with other victims of sexual assault certainly cannot go unnoticed. This empathy for the female struggle is further expanded upon in another widely-discussed work by Artemisia, her 1612 *Judith Slaying Holofernes*.

*Judith Slaying Holofernes* ca. 1612-13 is also considered one of Gentileschi’s most overtly feminist works (Figure 13). This particular piece depicting Judith in the act of slaying the Assyrian general Holofernes is widely suggested to be inspired by Artemisia’s feelings about her sexual assault, as it was completed the same year as her rape trial. Gentileschi did recreate this painting in 1620, which became the more popularized version of the two works, but for the sake of examining her state of mind and protofeminist intent during the creation of this piece, this examination will focus on her first version of *Judith*. The main question I intend to investigate regarding this work involves proposing readings of Gentileschi’s intention in its creation, especially in her rendering of the Old Testament subject matter. Was her main motive only, as many have offered, to therapeutically work through her emotions in connection with the rape and the trial, or could there be another interpretation?

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
*Judith Slaying Holofernes* depicts the biblical heroine Judith, with the help of her handmaiden, in the process of decapitating the Assyrian general, Holofernes. A majority of early modern depictions of the story of Judith focus on her and her handmaiden post-murder, with Holofernes’ head in a basket being carried by the handmaiden.\(^{63}\) Gentileschi’s rendition is unique not only for showing the gruesome scene in its entirety, but also for its brutal nature, especially on the part of the female participants. Like her version of *Susanna*, Gentileschi does not portray Judith with the expected grace of a biblical beauty, and instead gives the audience a naturalistic, and quite strong, female body in the messy act of extreme violence and physical exertion. The severity of her depiction is most commonly compared with Caravaggio’s painting, *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, ca. 1598-1602 (Figure 14), a comparison which nicely contrasts the male perspective with an arguably global and timeless female perspective.\(^{64}\)

Gentileschi’s *Judith Slaying Holofernes* borrows stylistically from Caravaggio, though, which is not surprising as her father was a follower of his work. However, the major distinction between the two artists is in their respective representations of the figure of Judith. In Gentileschi’s painting, Judith appears as a husky woman, who is in the act of sawing through Holofernes’ neck as her handmaiden helps to restrain him. Her sleeves are pushed up her arms, apparently in an effort to avoid the blood spurting wildly from his neck (which famously travels on a parabolic curve in the 1620 version). Both women in Artemisia’s version have a look of absolute conviction on their faces, and the young handmaiden appears to climb on top of the writhing Holofernes to assist Judith in her task. The dark colors of the background contrast with


\(^{64}\) Comparisons of these artworks can also be found in the Marcia Pointon, “Artemisia Gentileschi’s ‘The Murder of Holofernes’”; Nanette Salomon, “Judging Artemisia: A Baroque Woman in Modern Art History” in *The Artemisia Files*, ed. Mieke Bal, 33-61 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); and Christiansen and Mann, *Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi*. 

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the pale skin of the three intertwined figures and crisp white sheets under Holofernes, highlighting the carnage atop them. Caravaggio also paints a gruesome scene, but his rendition of Judith is far daintier than Gentileschi’s version, with a slender body, blonde hair, and delicate features, again echoing the Petrarchan model of beauty. She seems timid as she actively cuts through the neck of a man twice her size, which is impressive considering she stands so far away from him, arches her body backwards, and holds the sword with a light, awkward grip. Her beauty is further emphasized by the elderly handmaiden who stands behind her, not participating until the act is done. Unlike Artemisia’s version, there lacks a sense of connection or solidarity between the two women. This does not paint quite as believable of a scenario as Judith and her maid holding down a struggling man, who actively resists death.

In nearly every article discussing this painting by Gentileschi, a reference to her rape and trial is made. The pervasive understanding of this work is that Gentileschi intended to use this depiction of Judith as a way to visualize her own anger towards Tassi following her rape and the humiliation she endured during her trial. It is even widely agreed that Gentileschi used herself as a model for Judith.  

Nanette Salomon, though, makes a remarkably important point in comparing the Caravaggio and Artemisia Judiths, when she notes that, while Gentileschi’s rape is frequently spoken of in connection to her version, Caravaggio’s history is rarely discussed in relation to his Judith painting, despite the knowledge that he actually killed a man with a sword. Perhaps the lack of a sexual element in Caravaggio’s crime makes it less dramatic and appealing for scholarly discussion. While Gentileschi’s role as a victim in her own art might more definitively be established by other works, such as Self-Portrait as a Female Martyr of

66 Ibid.
1615, her version of Judith here may suggest something more decidedly protofeminist, namely, an acknowledgement of the misrepresentation of nature in favor of idealized beauty, as found in other early modern interpretations of this event. Rather than assume, as decades of scholars have, that her personal history had the most impact on how she chose to approach this painting, perhaps Gentileschi’s view of early modern women artists was more impactful than has yet been fully examined. Mary Garrard, for example, has made the argument that Gentileschi’s version was a direct response to Caravaggio’s Judith, drawing a comparison between the stiff arms in both Judiths and the spatial separation between the women and Holofernnes.\footnote{Christiansen and Mann, Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi, 310.}

It is true that both women share similarities in stance and pose, but the paintings share even more similarities when the pose of Holofernnes and his placement on the bed in both works is taken into consideration. Gentileschi was very familiar with Caravaggio’s works through her father, who developed a friendship with the painter around 1600, the same time frame that Caravaggio completed his Judith Beheading Holofernnes.\footnote{Ibid, xiv.} It is not unlikely that Orazio would take his young daughter to view works by the master while she was in the early stages of her artistic training, making it highly probable that she saw Caravaggio’s Judith before his death in 1610. I offer that the main intention behind her version of Judith is to call attention to the male gaze perpetuated in examples like Caravaggio’s painting, and not just a depiction of rage following Gentileschi’s rape. In this interpretation of Judith Beheading Holofernnes, the significance of her comparison to Caravaggio’s Judith further supports an argument for Gentileschi’s intention to create a protofeminist standard in how women were depicted in early
modern art, or to at least make a visual comment on depictions of women and long-held, idealized standards of beauty and femininity.

One final example to illustrate Gentileschi’s stance on gender equality for artists lies in her famed *Self-Portrait as the Allegory for Painting*, ca. 1638-39 (Figure 15). Here, it is beneficial to return to Sofonisba Anguissola’s self-portrait at the easel, discussed in the previous chapter. Both Gentileschi and Anguissola display themselves as artists in the middle of practicing their craft. Both artists also have their right hands raised and holding a paint brush hovering above a canvas, so as to not allow any confusion about what they are in the process of accomplishing. Unlike Anguissola, however, Gentileschi has taken her self-portrait one step further. Here, as noted by Garrard, she is displaying herself literally as *Pittura*, or the female personification of the art of painting. This depiction is supported by the gold chain and pendant of a mask that she wears around her neck—the mask a common symbol for the imitation of life in art. 69 This self-portrayal as the embodiment of painting and art has led many to assume that this was a decision based on ego for Gentileschi, but Garrard points out that only a woman artist would have even been capable of creating this type of self-portrait, as *Pittura* had always been personified as female. 70

Another key difference between this self-portrait and similar artist self-portraits of the seventeenth century is Gentileschi’s focus on her task. Rather than looking at the viewer, she shows herself completely absorbed in her painting. Garrard even goes as far to say that the elevation of Gentileschi’s arm shows intention for her to elevate her practice to an intellectual

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70 Ibid.
level, an argument for painting’s place within the Liberal Arts. It is also important to note that of the canvas on which Artemisia is working is not visible to the viewer. The focus is purely on her portrait, making her perception of herself, and how she wants others to see her, the sole intention of this piece. As previously noted, Gentileschi made her feelings about the value of her skills clear in letters to her patrons, but this painting is a further testament to her talent—and arguably, her superiority—as a painter. She is proclaiming in no simple terms that she is not just a woman, nor just a painter, but truly a master in her field. Her gender does not hold her back, but rather emboldened her to make this comparison in the first place.

**Conclusion: The Aftermath of Gentileschi’s Career**

Despite the relevance of Gentileschi’s history as a survivor of sexual assault and the importance of the recorded rape trial that followed, she is also known for her impact on seventeenth-century art and the spread of Caravaggism in Italy and beyond. If an account of her life and her artworks as championing early modern protofeminist ideals was to be constructed with no mention of her sexual assault, building off of what has been presented here, there would still be plenty of evidence to support an interpretation that sees Gentileschi as an early modern protofeminist. Gentileschi is not merely an exemplar of how victims overcome the sexual violence inflicted on them. She is a symbol for recognizing the inequality surrounding her and vocalizing it every chance she was given. Her life is a testament to her dedication to living independently as a woman, mother, and successful artist, showing that she was a true force to be reckoned with in every respect.

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Chapter V

Conclusion

Through careful case studies, this thesis reveals a pattern of protofeminism in early modernity and builds upon existing art historical scholarship to strengthen the foundation for studies of women artists in this period. Although only three painters are directly discussed here, these examples demonstrate that women artists were finding subtle ways to express a certain type of early feminist intent, one that is unique to the period and can be considered a forerunner to later feminist approaches. A primary goal has been to appreciate that the protofeminism discussed in relation to each woman can only be understood through different approaches to art historical scholarship on the period. The narrative of each artist’s life plays a crucial role in recognizing how their gender affected the social circumstances that lead to their artistic productions. Rather than labeling the works discussed in each chapter solely as feminist works, this thesis aims to acknowledge and draw attention to the subtleties found by looking through a “period eye,” and thereby seeing a protofeminist intention or perception that is connected to, but distinctly different from, modern understandings of feminist art.

This brief survey of early modern protofeminist intent in the works of certain artists specifically investigated three individual women born in the sixteenth century in varying parts of Europe. Levina Teerline’s work in the Tudor court as a miniaturist and portraitist incorporated subtle celebrations of female power. Sofonisba Anguissola’s self-portraiture worked to reveal an intention of self-empowerment and showcasing mastery in her craft. Lastly, the biblical and classical metaphors presented in Artemisia Gentileschi’s artworks were shown as exemplary of protofeminist ideals by centering on female subjects and offering an empathetic approach to the shared struggles that early modern women faced. Each case study centered around detailed
analyses of the life experiences and artworks of these artists in order to better understand their artistic productions, showing that a number of these artworks need to be further examined, and in some cases re-examined, through a protofeminist lens. While each artists’ works appeared to fit “traditional” period standards of socially acceptable, and even “great,” artwork in terms of style, imagery, and subject matter, it is the visual and contextual nuances of the art, along with the personal circumstances of these women, that can help to provide an understanding of how each piece reflects a constant struggle for recognition as a woman in the early modern art world.

Teerlinc’s work does not vary drastically from that of Holbein or Hilliard in her portrayal of Queen Mary I’s and Elizabeth I’s miniature portraits, but the personal relationship she fostered with each woman and her continued favor in the court (supported by way of gifts and higher wages) tells a different narrative of intent for Teerlinc. When looking carefully at her life and career, therefore, certain protofeminist subtleties become more apparent in her works. The precedent that Teerlinc set as a woman known not as a wife or mother, but rather as the court painter for King Henry VIII and others to follow, shows an acknowledgement of her worth as an artist in the eyes of the English royalty. The same can be said for Anguissola, who worked in the court of the Spanish aristocracy and also fostered relationships with the King and Queen, who favored her for her artistic talent. The circumstances surrounding her self-portraiture are understood through letters and documents that reveal without doubt that male artists and other contemporaries praised her talent, but many were ready to write it off as an exception to the rule, or even as a byproduct of the instruction of her male tutors. However, Anguissola created much of her self-portraiture with a clear intention to claim her own autonomy and mastery, nuances that might not be recognized without first reading related documents or studying the societal reactions to her work.
Chapter Four’s study of the acts of misogyny and violence on a woman artist, Artemisia Gentileschi, solidifies the importance of understanding the cultural mindset of an era when determining the value or intention of an artwork. The use of biblical stories or classical mythology as subject matter would not be recognized as anything other than the usual artistic subjects produced in the Baroque period. However, when coupled with the life events and criminal acts experienced by Gentileschi, the metaphors behind much of her chosen subject matter bring light to the inequality experienced by early modern women. A protofeminist intent manifests in all three chapters when the exchanges between and comparisons of these women artists and their male counterparts are examined thoroughly.

What this thesis aims to accomplish is a first overview of all three women in one joint study. While each woman comes from a different region and time-period, they are shown to be connected by small periodic threads. Each woman artist also embodies a professional inclination towards possible protofeminist intent. By beginning with an artist with little recognition, moving to an artist with moderate recognition, and then discussing an artist with high recognition in modern discussion, this thesis covers the potential of protofeminism from three very different perspectives. There is nearly infinite room for further art historical study from a feminist point of view, but the first steps are to continue filling in these gaps in knowledge that have been overlooked. Women artists have always been here, and while they need recognition, another important concern is not only a true understanding of the quality of their work, but also the historical, social, systemic, and personal circumstances that led them to create, and often factored into what they created.

Finally, I hope to have laid unique groundwork for future scholarship on each woman artist. Levina Teerline requires more research, investigation, and above all, stylistic, technical,
and biographical evidence supporting her attributed works being her own. Sofonisba Anguissola’s self-portraits could be further discussed in varying contexts, especially in the genre of her painting herself in the act of painting. Lastly, Gentileschi has numerous works documenting her early life, specifically centering on her rape and trial, but studies of her later life as a successful artist and single mother are still lacking. As more scholarship is devoted to her life following her rape, perhaps more evidence of a true protofeminist intent will be uncovered.
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