

Susanna's Strength

BY HEIDI J. HORNIK AND
F. MATTHEW SCHOBERT, JR.

Artemisia Gentileschi empathized with the figure of Susanna, for she, too, was the target of voyeurism and unwanted sexual advances by the men in her life. A victim of rape by her father's assistant, Artemisia understood and depicted the psychological aspects of the story of Susanna.

The story of Susanna is not in the Hebrew scroll of Daniel, but is in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of scripture prepared in the third century B.C. for Jewish readers dispersed throughout the Greek empire. Just as the Jewish tradition was of two minds about this story's placement, so has been the Christian movement. In the *New Jerusalem Bible*, a modern translation within the Roman Catholic Church, the story of Susanna appears as chapter 13 of the book of Daniel. In other translations, which follow the Protestant tradition of returning to the Hebrew text, it is placed in the Apocrypha.

Susanna, according to the story, is "a very beautiful woman and one who feared the Lord" in Babylon during the Jewish exile (Susanna 2). She is falsely accused of adultery by two elderly Jewish judges, or elders, after she deflected their sexual advances. The young Daniel, inspired by God, must rescue Susanna by cleverly exposing the elders' false testimony.

Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1652/3), a female Baroque painter in a man's profession, empathized with the figure of Susanna. She painted *Susanna and the Elders* when she was seventeen years old and working in the painting studio of her father, Orazio Gentileschi (1563-1639). Artemisia, like Susanna, became the target of voyeurism and sexual advances by the

men in her life. One year after Artemisia painted this work, she was raped by her father's assistant, Agostino Tassi, and her father brought the incident to trial. Artemisia stated that Tassi had made repeated sexual overtures towards her prior to the physical assault. These advances and the emotions brought forth from them, may have led Artemisia to this depiction of Susanna. She understood the psychological aspects of her story. Artemisia paints the elders much like the text describes:

Every day the two elders used to see her [for they held court in her husband Joakim's home], going in and walking about, and they began to lust for her. They suppressed their consciences and turned away their eyes from looking to Heaven or remembering their duty to administer justice. Both were overwhelmed with passion for her, but they did not tell each other of their distress, for they were ashamed to disclose their lustful desire to seduce her. Day after day they watched eagerly to see her.

One day they said to each other, "Let us go home, for it is time for lunch." So they both left and parted from each other. But turning back, they met again; and when each pressed the other for the reason, they confessed their lust. Then together they arranged for a time when they could find her alone (8-14).

Susanna has the custom of visiting her garden after the court adjourns, for afternoon walks and, on occasion, to bathe. One day the elders hide in the garden and watch her:

When the maids had gone out [to get Susanna's bathing oils], the two elders got up and ran to her. They said, "Look, the garden doors are shut, and no one can see us. We are burning with desire for you; so give your consent, and lie with us. If you refuse, we will testify against you that a young man was with you, and this was why you sent your maids away."

Susanna groaned and said, "I am completely trapped. For if I do this, it will mean death for me; if I do not, I cannot escape your hands. I choose not to do it; I will fall into your hands, rather than sin in the sight of the Lord" (19-23).

The elders in the baroque painting are leaning over a marble wall and motioning to Susanna to be silent. The younger of the two men whispers into the ear of his companion from a shadow. In contrast, Susanna's nude body is seen in a white light that accentuates the blush in her face. Though typically in the history of art Susanna is depicted as a seductress or at least a willing victim, in this composition as well as the story she exemplifies the

virtue of chastity. Too shocked initially to further cover her body, she fends off the two voyeurs with her hand gestures and by turning her head away from them.

The story of Susanna continues as the elders accuse Susanna of adultery with a young man and call her to appear before their court the next morning. Everyone is stunned, "for nothing like this had ever been said about Susanna" (27). She comes to court accompanied by her parents, children, and all her relatives, but not by her husband, Joakim. Still filled with lust for her, the two elders order her to remove her veil "so that they might feast their eyes on her beauty" (32); then they deliver their trumped up charges. Because of the elders' status, the assembled people accept their testimony and condemn Susanna to death.

Then Susanna cried out with a loud voice, and said, "O eternal God, you know what is secret and are aware of all things before they come to be; you know that these men have given false evidence against me. And now I am to die, though I have done none of the wicked things that they have charged against me!"

The Lord heard her cry. Just as she was being led off to execution, God stirred up the holy spirit of a young lad named Daniel, and he shouted with a loud voice, "I want no part in shedding this woman's blood!" (42-46).

Daniel's outburst brings the people to an abrupt stop, and he convinces them to return to court in order to cross-examine the witnesses. But how will they uncover the truth about the matter? The plot has been called "the first detective story" because of what happens next in Susanna 50-59. Daniel separates the two elders and summons them individually before the assembly. "You old relic of wicked days," Daniel addresses the first elder, if you really saw Susanna commit adultery, under which tree was she intimate with the young man? He answers, "Under a mastic tree." Then Daniel orders the second elder to appear before the assembly. "You offspring of Canaan and not of Judah, beauty has beguiled you and lust has perverted your heart," Daniel charges; "under what tree did you catch them being intimate with each other?" The second elder responds, "Under an evergreen oak."

Typically in the history of art Susanna is depicted as a seductress or at least a willing victim; in this composition as well as the story, however, she exemplifies the virtue of chastity.

Then the whole assembly raised a great shout and blessed God, who saves those who hope in him. And they took action against the two elders, because out of their own mouths Daniel had convicted them of bearing false witness; they did to them as they had wickedly planned to do to their neighbor. Acting in accordance with the law of Moses, they put them to death (60-62).

The story of Susanna has much to teach us about God: that God vindicates virtue over villainy, protects the innocent, and delivers those who

The early Christians, in the sexually distorted Roman culture in which fertility cults, temple prostitutes, and religious orgies abounded, drew inspiration for chastity and fidelity from Susanna.

trust in him. But it also communicates a lesson about human sexuality and moral living. In revealing the source of Susanna's and the elders' character, the story suggests that preserving Godly virtues or yielding to evil begins in the heart.

The elders first "suppressed their consciences and turned away their eyes from looking to Heaven or remembering their duty to administer justice" (9), and their wicked actions flow from their deformed hearts. When the elders threaten Susanna, she by contrast "looked up toward Heaven, for her heart trusted in the Lord" (35). In these instances, looking to Heaven is a metonym for one's heart being rightly tuned to God. The two elders, who avert their eyes from Heaven, set themselves on a path to moral bankruptcy. Susanna, who ever fixes her eyes on Heaven, lives a morally virtuous life; she resists sexual harassment, endures a humiliating public trial, and sees the triumph of justice.

Perhaps this insight is what attracted the young Artemisia to paint this story. The young artist, though living under the presumed care of her father, was betrayed by the father's trusted assistant. As she struggled with Tassi's inappropriate advances, she was trying not only to maintain her reputation and career as a painter, but also to maintain her love of God and dignity as a woman.

Artemisia, like Susanna and many victims of rape today, was forced to prove her innocence rather than her assailant's guilt. Scholars still debate just how well things turned out personally for her. After a public trial, Tassi was banished from Rome. The next day, Artemisia was married; she had four children with her Florentine husband, though one of their daughters died as a child. Her artistic career flourished and she became one of the first women to join the Accademia del Disegno, an academic and professional organization of artists in Florence. However, her husband left her

in 1623 after eleven years of marriage. Artemisia continued to work and live with her daughter, in Florence, Venice, Rome, Naples, and London. Her empathizing with Susanna never ended. She painted at least three other versions of the Susanna and the Elders theme, and one of these is thought to have been her last painting before her death in 1652 or 1653.

In seventeenth century Italy, Artemisia Gentileschi drew upon Susanna's strength to live a full and prosperous life. In this she followed the lead of early Christians; in the sexually-distorted Roman culture in which fertility cults, temple prostitutes, and religious orgies abounded, they too drew inspiration for chastity and fidelity from Susanna. Adrift as we are in another highly sexualized culture, perhaps Susanna's example will stir us to personal faithfulness in the face of sexual temptation.



HEIDI J. HORNIK

is Associate Professor of Art History at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.



F. MATTHEW SCHOBERT, JR.

is Associate Director of The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University.