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## Sex, Lies and Anecdotes: Gender Relations in the Life Stories of Italian Women Artists, 1550-1800

Julia K. Dabbs



Fig. 1. Jan Steen, *The Drawing Lesson*, c. 1665 (photo: Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum).

Jan Steen's c.1665 painting of *The Drawing Lesson* (Fig. 1) is one of the few visual representations of a female art student in the studio of a male artist in the early modern period, and thus sheds interesting light on this complicated gender dynamic. In the foreground, a well-dressed young woman sits sharpening a drawing instrument, a potential metaphor for a heightening of the senses. Her gaze is undeniably riveted on a nude male

statuette on the table in front of her.<sup>1</sup> The figure's exposed private parts may be a particular focus of her attention, for she leans closer for a better look, cheeks flushed with excitement. Her distraction is echoed by that of another student, a young boy who gazes not at the statuette, but rather longingly at the attractive young woman, clearly ignoring his studies. The instructor, meanwhile, hovers attentively over the female student, his form nearly encircling hers as he corrects a drawing, bringing our attention back to the provocative statuette. This sexually-suggestive scenario is reinforced by the presence of a cupid (even if only a plaster prop), which flies suspended from the ceiling, tellingly placed above the young woman and the male instructor.

Should this scene be interpreted as a reflection of reality or a 'comic fiction'?<sup>2</sup> As will be seen, Steen's characterization of the female art student as the subject and object of love and lust is one that is echoed in biographical portrayals of women artists written in the early modern period, indicating a broad cultural stereotype that differentiated these female phenomena from their male colleagues, whether in Northern or Southern Europe.<sup>3</sup> In particular, the focus will be on anecdotal passages and *topoi* (or literary commonplaces) as the sites for these gender interactions, given their narrative depth and their revelation of prevailing male attitudes towards the uncommonly gifted female.

*The Drawing Lesson*, in fact, is very much like the anecdotal passages to be interpreted here: it presents a condensed narrative involving aspects of everyday life and the foibles of human behavior, and thus on a superficial level may seem merely humorous and entertaining. Yet, while the exaggerated actions illustrated in the literary and visual anecdotes might proclaim them to be fictions, each simultaneously reveals a specificity of

<sup>1</sup> My interpretation of the woman's gaze, independently arrived at, coincides with that of Leo Steinberg in "Steen's Female Gaze and Other Ironies," *Artibus et Historiae*, XXII, 1990, 107-128. H. Perry Chapman, "The Drawing Lesson," Cat. entry, in *Jan Steen: Painter and Storyteller*, Guido M.C. Jansen, ed., Washington D.C. and Amsterdam, 1996, 188 describes the scene as a "mildly titillating narrative transpiring in the studio," but also says it is unclear whether the female is entranced by the statue or by the lesson being given. John Walsh, *Jan Steen: The Drawing Lesson*, Malibu, 1996, 83 has claimed that it is not possible to ascertain the direction of the woman's gaze, and thus rejects the notion of any sexual motivation in the painting. However, the confluence of visual evidence indicating a sexually-charged scene is, I believe, more compelling.

<sup>2</sup> Chapman, 186 begins her discussion of *The Drawing Lesson* by stating that it is "an accurate picture of artistic instruction." On the literary qualities of Steen's paintings in general, see Mariët Westermann, "Steen's Comic Fictions," in Jansen, ed., 53-67.

<sup>3</sup> On some of the other common distinctions between male and female artists evidenced in early modern artistic biography, see Elizabeth Alice Honig, "The Art of Being 'Artistic': Dutch Women's Creative Practices in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century," *Woman's Art Journal*, XXII, 2001-2002, 31-37; Mary D. Garrard, "Review of *The Women Artists of Bologna* by Laura Ragg," *Woman's Art Journal*, I, 1980-1981, 62.



local detail that implies a desire for historical veracity. This duality has in turn divided modern scholarly interpretation; on the one hand, art historians such as Carl Goldstein argue that anecdotes and *topoi* are merely empty rhetorical formulae which "are of no help in understanding historical figures."<sup>4</sup> While not denying their rhetorical significance, I would instead concur with Joel Fineman's more positivist interpretation of anecdotes as being essentially "pointed towards or rooted in the real," and thus deserving of critical attention.<sup>5</sup> To the early modern reader, the reality of the anecdotal passage, like a Dutch genre painting, was the moral lesson presented beneath its entertaining façade, thereby revealing something of a culture's attitudes and mores. Specifically in the case of artistic biography, one function of the anecdote was to provide artists (and other readers) with exemplary models of conduct, as the eighteenth-century biographer, P.J. B. Nougaret stated.<sup>6</sup>

In that same vein, as Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, and more recently Catherine Soussloff and Paul Barolsky have demonstrated, the repetition of certain anecdotal themes in the writings of various biographers elucidates how artists were perceived and often mythologized in a particular culture.<sup>7</sup> For example, in order to demonstrate that the artist's talent was divinely-inspired rather than man-made, the young artist's skill is shown to quickly surpass that of his master, as in the cases of Giotto and Leonardo. Or, to demonstrate the greater aesthetic intelligence of the artist, he is shown to outwit a pretentious art critic, evidenced in the life stories of Donatello and Michelangelo.

Yet was the female artist similarly mythologized in the early modern period? Reading the sources on artist anecdotes cited above, or Rudolf and Margot Wittkower's extensive typological study of artistic biography in *Born*

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<sup>4</sup> Carl Goldstein, "The Image of the Artist Reviewed," *Word & Image*, IX, 1993, 17.

<sup>5</sup> Joel Fineman, "The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction," in *The New Historicism*, H. Aram Veesser, ed., New York, 1989, 57.

<sup>6</sup> P.J. B. Nougaret, *Anecdotes des beaux-arts*, Paris, 1776-1780, I, x. His view certainly would have been shared by earlier artists' biographers, such as Vasari and Baldinucci.

<sup>7</sup> Ernst Kris, and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist*, New Haven & London, 1979; Catherine M. Soussloff, *The Absolute Artist: The Historiography of a Concept*, Minneapolis, 1997; idem, "Lives of Poets and Painters in the Renaissance," *Word & Image*, VI, 1990, 154-162; Paul Barolsky's voluminous writings on Vasari's *Lives*, for example, *Why Mona Lisa Smiles and other Tales by Vasari*, University Park, 1991; idem, *Giotto's Father and the Family of Vasari's Lives*, University Park, 1992. Also useful is Giovanna Perini's "Biographical Anecdotes and Historical Truth: an Example from Malvasia's 'Life of Guido Reni'," *Studi Secenteschi*, XXXI, 1990, 149-160.

*Under Saturn*, one would assume that she was not written about at all.<sup>8</sup> This, however, was not the case, since life stories of women artists similarly appear in the biographical compendia written by Vasari, Baldinucci, and others, albeit to a lesser extent. The marginalization of women artists by their contemporaries is unfortunate, especially as early artistic biography, such as Vasari's *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, are foundational sources both for the history of art and the history of the artist. The utter disregard for women artists' life stories in modern studies of artistic biography, though, is unfathomable. As Mary Garrard noted in 1980 regarding the historiography of early modern female artists, "These women were better served by their contemporary biographers than by modern historians."<sup>9</sup>

Fortunately, with the advent of a heightened feminist consciousness in art historical scholarship, historians have begun to redress this prior neglect by examining specific aspects of the representation of women in artistic biography.<sup>10</sup> Likely interest was prompted by Ann Sutherland Harris' references to the critical attitudes of biographers in her introduction to the ground-breaking catalogue, *Women Artists 1550-1950*.<sup>11</sup> Esther Tobé's recent overview of *topoi* in the life stories of Northern European women artists most closely follows the typological approach of Kris, Kurz, and Rudolf and Margot Wittkower, and offers a model for further research and interpretation. However, neither she nor the other historians cited have addressed the role of anecdotes, and have only minimally considered the issue of gender relations. My examination of approximately fifty biographical compendia on artists published in Europe between 1550 and 1800 revealed one of the most intriguing and manifest thematic patterns: the emphasis on

<sup>8</sup> Rudolf Wittkower and Margot Wittkower, *Born Under Saturn: The Character and Conduct of Artists, A Documented History from Antiquity to the French Revolution*, New York, 1963. The only woman artist mentioned in this extensive volume is Artemisia Gentileschi, who is in fact given less attention than her rapist, Agostino Tassi (see 162-164) – and when she is mentioned, her character is unfairly maligned, as will be discussed later.

<sup>9</sup> Garrard, 62.

<sup>10</sup> For specific studies on early modern women artists and artistic biography, see Margarita Russell, "The Women Painters in Houbraken's *Groote Schouburgh*," *Woman's Art Journal*, II, 1981, 7-11; Fredrika Jacobs, "The Construction of a Life: Madonna Properzia De' Rossi 'Schultrice' Bolognese," *Word & Image*, IX, 1993, 122-132; idem, *Defining the Renaissance Virtuosa: Women Artists and the Language of Art History and Criticism*, New York, 1997 [though this also deals with non-biographical writings]; Esther Tobé, "Perles et princesses du pinceau: Femmes artistes dans trois recueils biographiques (1550-1800)" in *A chacun sa grâce: femmes artistes en Belgique et aux Pays-Bas 1500-1950*, Katijne van der Stighelen and Mirjam Westen, eds., Amsterdam, 1999, 59-67.

<sup>11</sup> Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, *Women Artists 1550-1950*, Los Angeles and New York, 1984, 13-35. Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art and Society*, New York, 2002, 31-38 also provides a historiographic overview of early writings on women artists.



encounters between the sexes in the *vite* of women artists.<sup>12</sup> Although this *topos* is found in life stories published throughout Europe in this period, it is most prevalent in anecdotal passages concerning Italian artists, which will be the focus here. Gender interactions occasionally factor in male artistic biography, with women typically negatively portrayed: as lovers, they give the plague to Raphael and Giorgione, leading to their untimely deaths; as wives they hinder the careers of their husbands, evidenced for example in the life story of Andrea del Sarto.<sup>13</sup> Yet rarely do the descriptions of these situations overshadow the discussion of the artist's creations – which is exactly what occurs in Italian women artists' biography. In their case, historians had to confront a new and exceptional phenomenon that was further complicated by the societal norm that a woman's proper place was in the domestic interior or convent, where her essential virtue of chastity might be better protected and preserved.<sup>14</sup> Patrizia Cavazzini has noted in an essay on Artemisia Gentileschi's social milieu that even appearing at a window could be considered improper for a woman in Rome.<sup>15</sup> The professional woman artist, who necessarily had to violate this cloistered existence in order to interact with male artists or patrons, would thus have been seen as exposing herself to innuendo, slander, and even potential violence. As we shall see, early modern biographers seem to have been well-aware of these difficulties, and exploited their dramatic potential to engage the reader, in addition to providing models of virtuous, or unvirtuous, conduct. Yet, in the process, it is the woman artist's life, as defined by her sexual relationships with men, rather than her art, which takes center stage, establishing an unfortunate precedent which continues to flourish in contemporary film portrayals of twentieth-century artists.<sup>16</sup>

A prime example of a male biographer viewing his female subject in

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<sup>12</sup> The research I have conducted is in preparation for a forthcoming book *entitled Life Stories of Women Artists, 1550-1800: An Anthology*. My thanks are due to the Office of the Vice President for Research at the University of Minnesota for generous research grants which have greatly facilitated my study.

<sup>13</sup> According to Vasari, *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, Gaston du C. de Vere, trans., New York, 1996, I, 838 it is due to his wife's pleas that Andrea fails to return to the King of France's service, thereby diminishing his achievements. See Wittkower and Wittkower, 150-164 for additional discussion of generally negative relations between male artists and women.

<sup>14</sup> Margaret L. King, *Women of the Renaissance*, Chicago and London, 1991, 29-31.

<sup>15</sup> Patrizia Cavazzini, "Artemisia in Her Father's House," in Keith Christiansen and Judith W. Mann, eds., *Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi*, New York, 2001, 286.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Agnes Merlet's "Artemisia" released by Miramax in 1998; "Frida," directed by Julie Taymor and released in 2002; and "Carrington" of 1995 directed by Christopher Hampton.



Fig. 2. Propertzia De' Rossi, *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife*, c. 1525-1530, Bologna, Museo di San Petronio (photo: Alinari/Art Resource, NY).

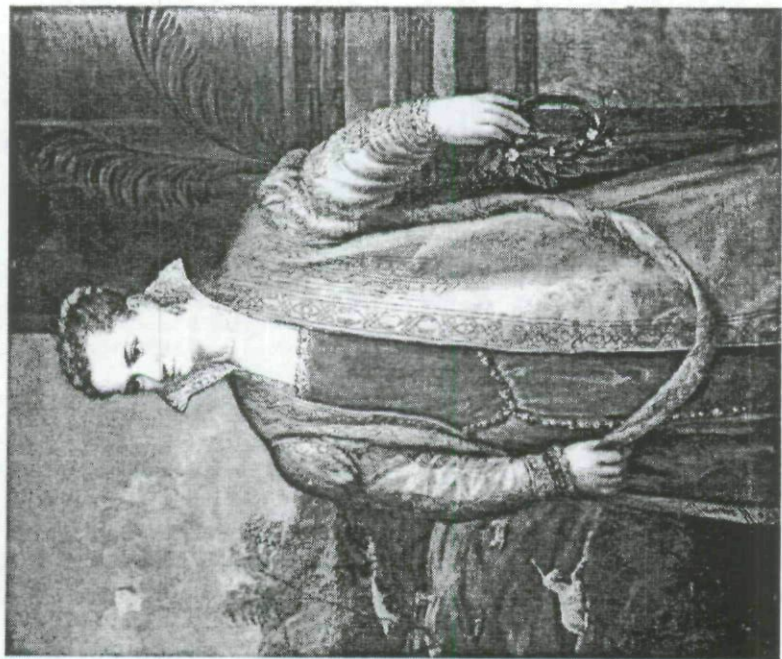


Fig. 3. Follower of Titian, *Irene di Spilimbergo*, c. 1560 (photo: Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, Widener Collection).



terms of her sexuality occurs in the first Renaissance *vita* of a woman artist, Vasari's 1550 account of the sculptor Properzia De' Rossi (c.1490-1530).<sup>17</sup> As the only woman to be given a distinct entry in the *Lives*, De' Rossi would have stood as an *exemplum* for women artists in general, and her life story a model for those of subsequent female artists given Vasari's vast influence on later biographers.<sup>18</sup> This is why, then, the most memorable part of the brief *vita* is so consequential.

Following an extended introduction which justifies De' Rossi's inclusion by linking her with worthy women from the past, Vasari relates how she goes from creating "miraculous" peach pit carvings to obtaining a commission (through her husband's intervention) to carve a large relief panel of *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife* for the Church of San Petronio, Bologna (Fig. 2). Seemingly the only explanation for a woman's ability to carve such a compelling scene is to relate its emotional content to the artist's own unreciprocated passions, as Vasari does in the following:

. . . she made an exquisite scene, wherein – because at that time the poor woman was madly enamored of a handsome young man, who seemed to care but little for her – she represented the wife of Pharaoh's Chamberlain, who, burning with love for Joseph, and almost in despair after so much persuasion, finally strips his garment from him with a womanly grace that defies description. This work was esteemed by all to be most beautiful, and it was a great satisfaction to herself, thinking that with this illustration from the Old Testament she had partly quenched the raging fire of her own passion.<sup>19</sup>

This is the fullest account in the narrative of a work by De' Rossi, and yet the relief's masterful execution is virtually ignored in favor of a soap-operatic spin. While Vasari's interpretation is consistent with the Neoplatonic notion of self-reflectivity in artistic creation, summed up in the Renaissance *topos* that "every artist paints himself,"<sup>20</sup> his words paint the woman artist as being driven solely by her irrational passions. In this regard, Vasari was a

<sup>17</sup> Vasari, I, 856-858. Fredrika Jacobs, 1993, 122-132 and 1997, 64-84 has provided additional insight into this life story. I would, however, take issue with Jacobs' perpetuation of the fictional notion that Properzia suffered from a form of erotomania or melancholia, which in my opinion is not indicated by Vasari's text.

<sup>18</sup> Jacobs, 1993, 124 also notes the exemplary nature of De' Rossi's life story.

<sup>19</sup> Vasari, I, 858.

<sup>20</sup> On this *topos*, see for example Martin Kemp, "Ogni dipintore dipinge sè," in *Cultural Aspects of the Italian Renaissance*, Cecil H. Clough, ed., Manchester and New York, 1976, 311-323.



product of his culture, for the sensual appetite of the female was a Renaissance commonplace, and thus his primarily male readership would have readily accepted the inclusion of a female artist if her character demonstrated this deficiency.<sup>21</sup> Vasari's emphasis on De' Rossi's sensuality and other standard feminine traits (such as her beauty, and small, tender hands) might have been deemed especially necessary given her adoption of the male-dominated profession of sculpture; "feminizing" De' Rossi would thus at least verbally contain the artist within the cultural constraints imposed upon her gender. The example of De Rossi stands in striking contrast to Vasari's account of the philandering Fra Filippo Lippi, whose sexual escapades are a recurring motif in his lengthier *vita*, but never subsume an appreciation for his artistic achievements.<sup>22</sup> Instead, De Rossi's career is defined and diminished by her perceived amorous nature, as the Renaissance historian concludes, "And so the poor love-stricken young woman came to succeed most perfectly in everything, save in her unhappy passion."<sup>23</sup>

A more positive role model is found in the first autonomously-issued biographical encomium to a woman artist, Dionisio Atanagi's *Rime di diversi nobilissimi et eccellentissimi autori in morte della signora Irene delle signore di Spilimbergo* (Venice, 1561).<sup>24</sup> Published in honor of Irene di Spilimbergo, a promising Venetian artist who had died two years previously at the tender age of twenty-one, the volume consists of 381 poems celebrating her life, preceded by an eleven-page *vita*. Although significantly longer than most life stories of early modern women artists, there is still minimal discussion of Irene's artistic talents, other than her exceptional ability in copying paintings by Titian, with whom she is said to have studied.<sup>25</sup> Instead, the biographer focuses on Irene's character as if she were a candidate for sainthood, and emphasizes how her intelligence and seriousness of purpose exceeded the

<sup>21</sup> On the perceived sensuality of the Renaissance woman, see for example King, 41-42; Ian Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman*, New York, 1980, 16-17.

<sup>22</sup> Vasari, I, 435-443.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 858.

<sup>24</sup> On this volume, see Anne Jacobson Schutte, "Irene di Spilimbergo: The Image of a Creative Woman in Late Renaissance Italy," *Renaissance Quarterly*, XLIV, 1991, 42-61; scattered references to it are also found in Jacobs, 1997. I would like to thank the staff of the University of Pennsylvania Rare Book & Manuscript Library for allowing me to see their copy of Atanagi's rare volume.

<sup>25</sup> Schutte, 53, n. 44 lists some paintings previously attributed to Irene; others have been suggested by Fritz Heinemann in "La Bottega di Tiziano," *Tiziano e Venezia*, Vicenza, 1980, 438. There has not yet been a thorough study of her oeuvre, perhaps because she has been viewed as more of a literary creation rather than as a practicing artist.

norm associated with the typical female, thereby seeking to explain her unusual artistic gifts. These qualities are strikingly witnessed when Irene's chastity is put to the test in this anecdote concerning a childhood encounter with a male admirer:

I do not wish here to be silent [about] a thing that really is exceptional for a child of that age, [and] which perhaps will seem impossible, but is very true. This is that one day a gentleman of the household made a sign of wanting to give her a kiss, [but] she being still of a very young age resented it greatly, regarding herself at fault that such an action had been made to her; and being told that it was not important since she was yet a little girl, she replied in this manner, that kissing didn't have respect to age, that one should only kiss those who don't yet know what an important matter a kiss is for a young woman [or maiden].<sup>26</sup>

Irene's rejection of the male suitor's advances, echoed in the *vite* of other women artists such as Onorata Rodiani (to be further discussed) and Rosalba Carriera, is a significant *topos* which closely parallels the tradition of female hagiography.<sup>27</sup> Chastity was the most highly celebrated virtue for a woman in the early modern period, significantly freeing her, as Margaret King states, "from the negative image of seductress."<sup>28</sup> In fact, the ability of some women to overcome their presumably lusty nature was regarded as heroic.<sup>29</sup> A posthumous portrait of Irene visually attests to her extraordinary

<sup>26</sup> "Non voglio qui tacere una cosa, che per ecceder molto l'ordinario delle fanciulle di quella età, potrà forse parere impossibile, ma è verissima: cioè, che havendole un giorno un gentilhuomo di casa sua fatto segno di voler darle un bacio, essendo ella ancor in età molto puerile, fece di cio risentimento grande, tenendosi a biasimo, che le fosse fatto un atto tale; & essendole detto, che cio non importava niente, per esser cosi fanciulla; rispose in questo senso, che nel baciare non si dovrebbe haver rispetto all'età, ma basciar quelle, che non sanno ancora quanto importi un bacio in una donzella." Atanagi, n.p. This and all subsequent translations are by the author, with the assistance of Pieranna Garavaso and Anthony Colantuono.

<sup>27</sup> For Carriera's rejection of a male suitor, see A.J. Dezallier d'Argenville, *Abrégé de la vie des plus fameux peintres*, 1762; Genève, 1972, I, 314. On the influence of hagiography on the life stories of early modern women artists, I am in disagreement with Jacobs, 1997, 133 who believes that the Renaissance woman artist was characterized as ladylike rather than saintlike, to distinguish her from male artists.

<sup>28</sup> King, 93.

<sup>29</sup> King and Albert Rabil, Jr., "Introduction" to Cecilia Ferrazzi, *Autobiography of an Aspiring Saint*, Chicago and London, 1996, xxiii-xxiv. As King, 94 states, "Self-denial became the path by which many women hoped to gain an eminence that the secular world would not permit them."



purity, as a small unicorn, a symbol of virginity, can be seen in the lower left background (Fig. 3).<sup>30</sup>

In addition to revealing the woman artist's supremely feminine virtue, the anecdote may also link Irene with other single-minded (male) artists, who being unencumbered by spousal or familial obligations, could thus focus on their art.<sup>31</sup> But perhaps more apparently, the passage effectively illustrates the sexual tensions experienced by women (or young girls) when alone with a man to whom they were unrelated.<sup>32</sup> Even though she responded virtuously, Irene is said to have blamed herself for the man's inappropriate advance, and such feelings, endorsed by the male biographer, demonstrate how grave the question of impropriety was for a woman.

The vulnerability of the female artist is in fact a recurring *topos* in early modern artistic biography, and its dramatic potential is further evidenced in the life stories of Onorata Rodiani, Artemisia Gentileschi, and Annella de' Rosa. Rodiani's career (c.1400-1452) was resurrected by two eighteenth-century biographers from her homeland of Cremona, Giambattista Biffi and Giovanni Battista Zaist.<sup>33</sup> Both relied on a key early source, Flamenio's *Storia di Castelleone*, which provided the basis for the following anecdote in which the young female artist is assaulted by a jilted lover:

In the bloom of adolescence she [Rodiani] was painting in the palace residence of Cabrino Fondulo, Signore of Cremona and Marchese of Castelleone, when a courtier of the above-mentioned tyrant fell deeply in love with the young painter, but seeing himself rejected in this conceived desire, and scorned, he attempted one day to have by means of violence that which he despaired of obtaining by means of his prayers; Rodiana defended herself within reason until seeing that the attack was extreme, [she] killed the assailant by stabbing [him], and fled in disguise, greatly fearing

<sup>30</sup> A brief discussion of this painting's symbolism is found in Catherine King, "Portrait of the Artist as a Woman," in *Gender and Art*, G. Perry, ed., New Haven & London, 1999, 42-43. Vasari, II, 796 mentions a painting of Irene by Titian. However, the painting in the National Gallery of Art is now thought to be the work of a follower of Titian, possibly Gian Paolo Pace. See Harold E. Wethey, *The Paintings of Titian*, London, 1971, II, 178.

<sup>31</sup> On celibacy and early modern male artists, see Wittkower and Wittkower, 150-153.

<sup>32</sup> As M. King, 29 notes, "unattached women were especially vulnerable to improper sexual advances, a matter of extraordinary gravity because of the value accorded to chastity in the economic and social system of the Renaissance."

<sup>33</sup> Giambattista Biffi, *Memorie per servire alla storia degli artisti cremonesi*, Luisa Bandera Gregori, ed., Cremona, 1989, 33-34; Giovanni Battista Zaist's more succinct account of the artist's life is found in his *Notizie istoriche de' pittori, scultori ed architetti cremonesi*, 1774; Rome, 1965, I, 29-30. Vasari neglects to mention Rodiani in his *Lives*, perhaps because of the remoteness of her works in the northern Italian town of Castelleone.

the disdain of the Marchese who appreciated and held dear the ill-advised lover.<sup>34</sup>

The biographers then relate how Rodiani, disguised as a man, eventually enlisted as a soldier, and was later made a non-commissioned officer due to her courageous action on the battlefield. Tragically, she was mortally wounded while defending her hometown of Castelleone, and when being tended to, Rodiani's true identity was uncovered. On her deathbed, the heroine is remembered as saying that just as her name was Onorata, so was she dying "onorata" [or honored] for the wise conduct of her life – in particular, the preservation of her chastity, no matter the cost.<sup>35</sup>

The *leitmotifs* of chastity, desirability, and vulnerability evidenced in Irene di Spilimbergo's biography are clearly of even greater consequence in Rodiani's life story, leading to the derailment of her artistic career. And it is a career that might have had significant potential, given that she is one of the first Italian women known to have worked in the challenging medium of fresco. Her biographer, Biffi, has high praise for an altarpiece attributed to Rodiani in a church in Castelleone which he specifically sought out. Depicting the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child with St. Catherine, he lauds its beauty, the result of soft Lombard coloring and skillful *chiaroscuro*. Sadly, this altarpiece is apparently no longer extant and other attributions to the artist remain speculative.<sup>36</sup> Yet does this present lack of securely attributable works mean Rodiani should be written out of art history, including feminist art histories such as Harris and Nochlin's *Women Artists 1550-1950*, or Chadwick's *Women, Art and Society*?<sup>37</sup> Certainly the legendary quality of her life story is also a factor in Rodiani's apparent dismissal from serious scholarship; however, it seems equally unbelievable that someone could

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<sup>34</sup> "Sulla fiorente sua adolescenza dipingeva il Palazzo di residenza di Cabrino Fondulo Signore di Cremona, e Marchese di Castelleone, quando un cortigiano del suddetto Tiranno fortemente invaghì della giovane pittrice, ma venendosi deluso delle concepite speranze, e disprezzato, tentò un giorno di avere colla violenza ciò che coi prieghi disperava di attere; si difese la Rodiana, moderatamente sinche estremo vedendo l'attacco, uccise d'una pugnata l'assalitore, e fuggi travestita temendo gravemente lo sdegno del Marchese che apprezzava, e tenevasi caro il malconsigliato amante." Biffi, 33.

<sup>35</sup> Biffi, 33.

<sup>36</sup> Gregori, ed., 34, n. 4. To my knowledge, Gregori's notes to Biffi's text are the extent of published research on the artist. More work is clearly waiting to be done on Rodiani.

<sup>37</sup> In Harris and Nochlin's highly esteemed *Women Artists 1550-1950*, Rodiani is reduced to a footnote which states that she "so far is only an extraordinary legend" (21 n. 43). Rodiani is omitted altogether from Chadwick's *Women, Art and Society*. This omission would seem deliberate given that she is given paragraph-length treatment in Karen Petersen & J.J. Wilson, *Women Artists*, New York, 1976, 22.



have entirely concocted this story, given that so few women worked as professional artists in the 1400s, let alone in fresco painting. Who possibly could have served as the basis for such a character? Only by searching for the truth behind an anecdotal life can we become more fully cognizant of the contributions of early modern women artists.

In something of a reversal of art historical fortune as compared to Rodiani, Artemisia Gentileschi's compelling life story was surprisingly neglected by early modern biographers, yet has been the focus of much attention in the modern era.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps the best-known fact concerning her life is her rape at the hands of fellow artist Agostino Tassi, but somewhat surprisingly no contemporary account of the artist refers to this violent encounter, even though a public trial was held. It seems additionally unlikely that even historians outside of Rome had no knowledge of the incident since slanderous comments concerning Artemisia's supposed promiscuity were published in Italy in 1653, and were no doubt only the tip of the iceberg of rumor.<sup>39</sup> This puzzling and seemingly deliberate biographical silence might be explained by a couple of factors: first, the genre of biography in the early modern period was fundamentally epideictic in nature, and any taint of rape would have (and did) tarnish Artemisia's reputation; thus, silence was golden.<sup>40</sup> But it was not just golden for the female subject, since in this case the attacker was a male artist, and his actions are in fact defended by Giovanni Battista Passeri in his life story of Tassi.<sup>41</sup> Not only did Passeri, a fellow artist, claim that it was questionable whether Agostino had raped her, but he also squarely placed blame on Artemisia's good looks and mannered behavior for causing Tassi to fall in love with her. The effect of the incident on Artemisia's reputation is also clearly evident in Passeri's remarks that while she "made herself famous" for her painting ability, she "would have been worthy of every esteem if she had been of a more respectable and honorable character."<sup>42</sup> Unfortunately, Passeri's comment has stood the test

<sup>38</sup> Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, Princeton, 1989, 3 presents an overview of the early biographers' sparse accounts. For the modern fascination with Gentileschi's life story and its impact on her art, see for example idem, *Artemisia Gentileschi Around 1622: The Shaping and Reshaping of an Artistic Identity*, Berkeley, 2001, esp. 1-23; Richard E. Spear, "Artemisia Gentileschi: Ten Years of Fact and Fiction," *Art Bulletin*, LXXXII, 2000, 568-579.

<sup>39</sup> The satirical epitaphs are translated in Garrard, 1989, 137. See 519 n. 243 for the unfortunate legacy of the slanderous comments.

<sup>40</sup> On the epideictic nature of artistic biography, see Goldstein, 12.

<sup>41</sup> G. B. Passeri, *Die künstlerbiographien [Vite de' pittori, scultori ed architetti che hanno lavorato in Roma, e che son morti dal 1641 al 1673]*, J. Hess, ed., 1672, Leipzig and Vienna, 1934, 122.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.: "Haveva Orazio una figlia chiamata Artemisia, che nella pittura si rese gloriosa, e sarebbe stata degna d'ogni stima se fusse stata di qualità piu onesta et onorata."

of time, as in *Born Under Saturn* Rudolf and Margot Wittkower undermine a brief reference to Artemisia's successful career by characterizing her as a "lascivious" girl.<sup>43</sup>

What is related about Artemisia in the longest primary account of her life is rather surprising. The four-page *vita* in Filippo Baldinucci's *Notizie de' professori del disegno*, tagged on to the life of her father, Orazio Gentileschi, narrowly focuses on Artemisia's Florentine period (1613-1620) given the author's geographic bias.<sup>44</sup> While Baldinucci provided glowing descriptions of her paintings of *Aurora* and *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, nearly half of the life story is comprised of an extended anecdotal narrative which illustrates the artist's beauty and her ability at painting still-lives, neither of which she is noted for today.<sup>45</sup> Baldinucci wrote that Giovanni Francesco Romanelli (ca.1610-1662) wanted to paint a portrait of Artemisia, with whom he is said to have enjoyed a *virtuous* friendship [*virtuosa amicizia*] – a significant qualifier indicating that male-female relationships outside of marriage needed explanation to dispel any notions of impropriety. He then asked Artemisia to embellish the portrait with an example of her still-life painting skill. When their collaborative work was completed, he took the painting home to show to his wife. Romanelli "gave the picture a well-arranged place among the other beautiful paintings with which he had adorned his own home, and sometimes in jest he called his wife, and made her consider the portrait of Artemisia," whose beauty and talent he extolled.<sup>46</sup> This of course provoked the wife, so that

... frequently fuming on account of excessive jealousy, [she] finally became so angry one day that, seizing the time in which her husband was not at home, she equipped herself with a large hairpin, or bodkin, or awl, or whatever it was, and began to go around frequently piercing [the portrait], especially the face of that so much disliked Artemisia, and particularly those places whose qualities received the most praise from her husband.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Wittkower and Wittkower, 164.

<sup>44</sup> Filippo Baldinucci, *Notizie de' professori del disegno*, 1681-1728; Firenze, 1845, III, 713-716.

<sup>45</sup> On Artemisia's apparent lack of beauty, based on existing self-portraits, see Garrard, 2001, 8.

<sup>46</sup> Baldinucci, III, 71: "Fecelo vedere alla consorte sua, e poi un bene aggiustato luogo gli diede fra l'altre belle pitture, con che egli aveva adornata la propria casa, e talora per ischero chiamava a sè la consorte, le faceva considerare il ritratto dell' Artemisia ... "

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 715-716: "... la quale sbuffando sovente per soverchio di gelosia, venne finalmente un dì in sì fatta collera, che preso il tempo nel quale il marito non era in casa, provvistasi di un grande spillo, o punteruolo, o lesina ch'ella si fusse, incominciò a dintornare traforando spessamente il volto della da sè tanto malveduta Artemisia, e in quei luoghi particolarmente, ove risedevano le qualità più lodate dal proprio marito."



Upon returning home and finding the mutilated portrait, Romanelli comprehended his wife's strong feelings, and wisely desisted from further praise of Artemisia.<sup>48</sup>

Certainly to the modern reader this narrative sounds like a tall tale, and understandably both Garrard and Bissell give little credence to the Romanelli anecdote in their authoritative volumes on Artemisia.<sup>49</sup> Yet what if a painting existed that seemingly matched the one described in the anecdote, as Baldinucci claimed was still in the possession of Romanelli's heirs at the time of his writing? Mina Gregori and Gianni Papi have independently asserted that a painting now in the Galleria Voena, Turin (Fig. 4) fits the bill, claiming that it is a collaborative work between Romanelli, credited with the portrait of the dark-haired woman, and Artemisia, believed responsible for the abundant still-life elements.<sup>50</sup> Their attribution is far from secure, however, since the idealized female figure hardly resembles any known portrait of the artist; nor is the canvas pock-marked with pinholes made by the enraged wife.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, Gregori and Papi's attribution momentarily, at least, cause us to suspend disbelief. Is there more that might be gleaned from a careful reading of this anecdotal passage, besides a hearty laugh?

First, and perhaps most significantly to its early modern audience, moral instruction is offered to both male and female readers: men obviously should not tease their wives, and women, undoubtedly jealous by nature, like Romanelli's wife, should learn to control their emotions. What the modern reader might recognize in this passage is the standard *topos* of the woman artist as a beautiful object of desire, praised here by both Baldinucci and Romanelli.<sup>52</sup> However, it is not only her lovely image that Romanelli desires,

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 716.

<sup>49</sup> Garrard, 1989, 83-84. Ward Bissell, *Artemisia Gentileschi and the Authority of Art*, University Park, 1999, 105-108 suggests that Baldinucci confused Artemisia with Giovanna Garzoni, another Roman painter of the *seicento* who is known for her still-life painting.

<sup>50</sup> Gregori, "Una nota per Artemisia Gentileschi," *Paragone*, CDLXXXVII, 1990, 104-106; Gianni Papi, "Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1626): gli anni romani, il soggiorno fiorentino," in *Artemisia*, Roberto Contini and Gianni Papi, eds., Rome, 1991, 57-58.

<sup>51</sup> Bissell, 105-106 additionally notes that there is no firm evidence that Romanelli and Artemisia were ever in Rome at the same time.

<sup>52</sup> On this *topos* see Garrard, "Here's Looking at Me: Sofonisba Anguissola and the Problem of the Woman Artist," *Renaissance Quarterly*, XLVII, 1994, 556-622; C. King, "Looking a Sight: Sixteenth-Century Portraits of Woman Artists," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, LVIII, 1995, 381-406; Jacobs, 1997, 134-146.



Fig. 4. G. F. Romanelli and Artemisia Gentileschi (attr.), *Still-life with Allegory of Painting*, c. 1640 (photo: Turin, Galleria Voena).



Fig. 5. Andrea Vaccaro, *Portrait of Annella de' Rosa*, c. 1660, Naples, Private Collection (photo: Soprintendenza Speciale per il Polo Museale di Napoli).



but joined with it an example of the fruits of the artist's creative abilities, in the form of a still-life accompaniment. In this way, the male artist/collector could uniquely obtain two marvels in a single work of art, illustrating another *topos* in the literature on women artists that undoubtedly was based on reality, given the documented requests for such works by Sofonisba Anguissola, Lavinia Fontana, and Levina Teerlinc.<sup>53</sup> For the early modern collector, this might have been a savvy means of obtaining a "two-fer;" but from a more cynical historical distance, the conflation of the artist's beauty with that of her handiwork (as in the commonplace, "every artist paints himself") would also have provided yet another explanation for what seemed almost inconceivable to its early modern audience: female artistic talent.

One plausible aspect of the anecdote worth noting is that male and female artists indeed collaborated during the seventeenth century. This might seem surprising given the obstacles to gender interaction outside of familial encounters, which have already been noted; yet given Baldinucci's matter-of-fact tone regarding the Romanelli-Gentileschi collaboration, it apparently was not unusual. Artemisia in fact is known to have worked with a number of male artists, including Stanzone, Cavallino, Codazzi, and Guercino.<sup>54</sup> To my knowledge, there has not been an extensive study of this topic in relation to the issue of gender. Beyond identifying particular hands, such a study might explore why and how collaboration between the sexes took place, and examine the controversial question of male versus female styles. The social and psychological implications of artistic "cross-training," as we might call it, would be other factors to consider, for the life stories of women artists demonstrate how volatile an heterogeneous the work environment could be. While Artemisia was only virtually stabbed by the envious wife of her collaborator, the Neapolitan artist Annella (or Diana) de' Rosa (1602-1643) faced a much more real and tragic outcome due to her close association with her teacher.<sup>55</sup>

The stage is set for the de' Rosa drama by her principal biographer, Bernardo de Dominici, who engages the reader's attention with an introduction that rivals any modern-day movie trailer in its dramatic, rhetorical appeal: "Here, oh reader, is the fateful spectacle of a painter as extraordinarily beautiful, honest, and virtuous, so unfortunate, maligned, and by slanderous language brought to an unhappy and tragic end, as will be

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<sup>53</sup> See Jacobs, 1997, 127-129. Garrard, 2001, 7-9 has also noted how the conflation of the female artist's beauty with that of her creations has continued in modern media marketing of art.

<sup>54</sup> Riccardo Lattuada, "Artemisia and Naples, Naples and Artemisia," in Christiansen and Mann, eds., 384-386 briefly discusses Artemisia and some of her collaborators. See also Garrard, 2001, 101-105.

<sup>55</sup> De'Rosa's baptismal name was Diana, but her principal biographer, Bernardo de Dominici, consistently refers to the artist by her nickname of Annella, as I will here.

manifested in the following narration."<sup>56</sup> He continues in a somewhat more objective vein to relate how Annella first learned to paint from her uncle and then studied with and assisted one of the foremost Neapolitan painters of the period, Massimo Stanzione (c.1585 - c.1656). In fact, their close working relationship led to the young woman being referred to as "Annella di Massimo," thereby identifying and justifying the female artist as the product of her male teacher.<sup>57</sup> She married another Stanzione student, Agostino Beltrano (1607-1656/1665?), and they eventually had six children.<sup>58</sup> Rather unusually, Annella continued to paint, and de Dominicis significantly relates her incipient feminist attitude, indicating that she was "not content to paint in her own home, desiring also to exhibit to the public some works from her hand, in order to make it known that women also could acquire excellence in Art..."<sup>59</sup> Two of her public altarpieces are still found today in the Church of the Pietà dei Turchini, Naples.<sup>60</sup>

Annella's flourishing career was sadly cut short at the age of forty-one, as de Dominicis dramatically relates in the following passage from her *vita*:

Now it happened that one day, having finished a painting of half-figures that represented the Holy Family, Massimo [Stanzione]

<sup>56</sup> "Eccoli il funesto spettacolo ò Lettore di una quanto bellissima, onestissima, e Virtuosa dipintrice, tanto disavventurata, calunniata, e dalle malediche lingue ad infelice, e tragico fine condotta, come dalla sequente narrazione si sia manifesto." Bernardo de Dominicis, *Vite de' pittori, scultori, ed architetti napoletani*, 1742-1743, Bologna, 1971, III, 96. Annella is one of only four women given a separate *vita* among the 200 artists included in de Dominicis's volumes, and is thus significantly distinguished from her husband and other followers of Stanzione, who are lumped together in a subsequent chapter. De' Rosa's *vita* is in III, 96-100.

<sup>57</sup> This nickname is prominently featured in the heading of the life story: "Vita di Anna di Rosa, detta Annella di Massimo, Pittrice." De Dominicis, III, 96. The sobriquet is also found in a 1715 inventory of paintings in Thomas Willette and Sebastian Schütze, *Massimo Stanzione: L'opera completa*, Napoli, 1992, 124.

<sup>58</sup> Ulisse Prota-Giurleo, "Un complesso familiare di artisti napoletani del secolo XVII," *Napoli rivista municipale*, LXXVII, 1951, 25.

<sup>59</sup> "Non contenta Annella di dipingere per case particolari, desiderava anche di esporre al pubblico alcuna opera di sua mano, per far conoscere, che anche le Donne fanno acquisitare l'eccellenza dell' Arte..." De Dominicis, III, 97.

<sup>60</sup> De' Rosa's two altarpieces, the *Birth of the Virgin* and the *Death of the Virgin*, are illustrated in Giuseppe de Vito, "Due postille alle 'Notizie' di Eduardo Nappi," *Ricerche sul '600 napoletano*, 1993, Figs. 48, 51. For other works attributed to the artist, see Ciro Fiorillo, "Sei tu Annella?," *Napoli nobilissima*, XXIII, 1984, 208-211. Although her oeuvre has not yet been the subject of a thorough study, a useful summary of de' Rosa's career by A. Catello can be found in the *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, XXXIX, Roma, 1991, 163-165, s.v. "De Rosa, Diana."



arrived at that time, and having seen with how much mastery of drawing and felicity of color Annella had executed that painting, and because it was made for him, surprised by the excellence of that work, gave her a very sincere embrace, praising her above every other of his students... These affectionate demonstrations were observed by the maidservant, and having seen the embrace, she also made a houseboy aware of it. As the Cavaliere [Massimo] was leaving, the jealous Agostino intervened and, believing that he had observed the Maestro [Massimo] in certain acts of extraordinary affection, he began to harshly reprimand his wife, but as soon as the wicked servant had told him how the Maestro had also embraced her, [he became] agitated with a great fury, and blinded by the devil, without considering either Massimo's integrity, or his wife's ingenuousness, he drew his sword, and mercilessly pierced her breast.<sup>61</sup>

The promising artist thus died, with her husband realizing too late the error of his ways and asking forgiveness, before fleeing the region. According to the biographer, de' Rosa's relatives then "gave a highly honored burial to that innocent and virtuous woman's body."<sup>62</sup>

This may read like an eighteenth-century equivalent of a soap opera, resulting in its dismissal as "plainly nonsense" by Germaine Greer in *The Obstacle Race*.<sup>63</sup> In fact, de Dominicci, an artist by profession, was branded the "Neapolitan Art Gossip" as early as the nineteenth century for his purported biographical creativity. And like most historians, he made some mistakes, such as his indication that Annella died around 1649 rather than in 1643. In addition, Ulisse Prota-Giurleo asserted that the artist died of natural causes, which would make de Dominicci's anecdote entirely bogus.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>61</sup> "Or accadde, che un giorno avendo questa terminato un quadro di mezze figure, che la Sacra Famiglia rappresentava, capitò in quel punto Massimo, ed avendo veduto con quanta maestria di disegno, e felicità di colore aveva Annella condotto quel quadro, e perchè era fatta per lui, sorpreso dall bontà di quell'opera gli diede un sincerissimo abbraccio, lodandola sopra ogn' altro del suoi Discepoli, ...Queste affettuose dimostrazioni furono osservate dalla Fantessa, e veduto l'abbracciamento, ne fece accorto altresì un Garzone di casa. In partendosi il Cavaliere, sopravvenne il geloso Agostino, il quale parendogli di avere osservato nel Maestro certi atti di straordinaria affezione, cominciò a rampognarne la moglie, ma poichè la scellerata Fante gli ebbe detto come il Maestro aveala anche abbracciata, agitato da gran furore, ed occeato dal Diavolo, senza riflettere all'integrità di Massimo, nè all' ingenuità della Moglie, sguainata la spada, spietatamente le trasse il seno." De Dominicci, III, 98-99.

<sup>62</sup> "I parenti... diedero al Cadavere dell'innocente, e virtuosa Donna onoratissima sepoltura." De Dominicci, III, 99.

<sup>63</sup> Germaine Greer, *The Obstacle Race: The Fortunes of Women Painters and Their Work*, New York, 1979, 40.

<sup>64</sup> Prota-Giurleo, 25.

However, the church document to which Prota-Giurleo referred does not actually indicate a cause of death.<sup>65</sup> Two seventeenth-century sources, on the other hand, indeed confirm that Annella de' Rosa was "killed by a dagger from the hand of Beltrano her husband" ["mori di pugnale per man di Beltrano suo marito"] due to his unfounded jealousy.<sup>66</sup> One of those sources is a manuscript written by Massimo Stanzione himself, and thus one of de Dominici's key texts given that he did not personally know de' Rosa or Beltrano.<sup>67</sup> Of course de Dominici, like most historians of the early modern period, would have turned to literary commonplaces to embellish the narrative, such as that of the vindictive servant woman, who serves as a convenient, lower-class scapegoat in order to exonerate the male artist. The author's amplified rhetoric is also appropriate to this genre of writing, which was intended to forcefully impress the reader's sensibilities with the examples of virtue and vice exhibited in the *vita*.<sup>68</sup> While these literary devices may cloud the modern reader's perceptions, though, they should not deflect us from the truth that a woman artist's career was cut short by her husband's suspicion and rage due to her interactions with a male colleague.

De Dominici's literary portrayal of Annella as an object and victim of male desire finds an intriguing visual parallel in a possible posthumous portrait of the artist by Andrea Vaccaro (Fig. 5).<sup>69</sup> Depicted in front of an easel, Annella looks out towards the viewer, and the directness of her gaze as well as the absence of any symbolic objects (such as a mask pendant on a chain) suggest that this was indeed meant to be a portrait, rather than an allegory of painting. Curiously, the half-length female figure, which she is in the process of painting, mirrors the artist's own dark-haired beauty, perhaps yet another allusion to the now-familiar refrain, "every artist paints himself." However, the figure's chest is bared, and she looks up towards the heavens, possibly suggesting her imminent death. Although a more precise

<sup>65</sup> Willette, "La scuola stanzionesca," in Willette and Schütze, eds., 124 has also noted that Prota-Giurleo's claim regarding de' Rosa's death is unsubstantiated.

<sup>66</sup> Carlo Celano, *Notizie del bello dell'antico e del curioso della città di Napoli*, 1692, Naples, 1970, III, 1467.

<sup>67</sup> Willette, "La scuola," in Willette and Schütze, 124, 145-146 n. 38. On de Dominici's reliability as a source see further Willette, "Bernardo De Dominici e le *Vite de' pittori, scultori ed architetti napoletani*: contributo alla riabilitazione di una fonte," *Ricerche sul '600 napoletano*, Milan, 1986, 255-273.

<sup>68</sup> Willette, "Bernardo De Dominici e la sua <vita> di Stanzione," in Willette and Schütze, 154 further comments on de Dominici's desire to provide morally edifying *exempla* to artists and others throughout his *Vite*.

<sup>69</sup> See further on this portrait Maria Commodo Izzo, *Andrea Vaccaro, pittore, 1604-1670*, Napoli, 1951, 32-34, 161-163.



identification of the subject is elusive given its incomplete state, it certainly recalls images of Lucretia, or possibly St. Agatha, in both cases women who died innocently after being assaulted by men, and who were exemplars of chastity. Through these possible associations, Vaccaro, a friend of both Stanzione and Annella, may be visually proclaiming de' Rosa's innocence and virtue.<sup>70</sup> Yet consistent with the ambiguity which pervades early modern attitudes toward gifted women, the bared chest of the fictive female not only suggests her vulnerability, poignantly recalling where Annella was stabbed, but simultaneously exploits her sexuality.

Thus whether visually or verbally characterized, the woman artist simply could not be seen apart from her femininity, and consistently was portrayed as an object of desire which is acted upon by the male subject. Numerous other examples from early modern artistic biography might be cited as well, such as Arnold Houbraken's relation of how the chaste Maria van Oosterwijck wittily rejected the amorous demands of fellow painter Willem van Aelst, or Giulio Mancini's bizarre relation of the Persian Ambassador's attempts to lure Lavinia Fontana to return with him to Persia (he was unsuccessful).<sup>71</sup> Not to be outdone, the Bolognese biographer Carlo Cesare Malvasia stated that one of the reasons attributed to the sudden death of the talented Elisabetta Sirani was a form of love-sickness resulting from her father's rejection of a suitor's proposal.<sup>72</sup> Although perhaps unintentionally, Malvasia's interpretation recalls Vasari's account of the desperate Properzia de' Rossi, yet with more dire results, thus emphasizing the emotional fragility of the female subject. In fact, not even in death could Elisabetta be viewed independently of a male relationship, for upon burial her body was eternally conjoined with that of the deceased and similarly unmarried Bolognese painter, Guido Reni. An epitaph confirms their dual interment in the church of San Domenico:

This tomb which encloses the ashes of Elisabetta [Sirani]/ also covers the sepulcher of Guido Reni./ Thus, [while] Life never joined these two Miracles of Painting,/ Death could join them in this

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<sup>70</sup> Izzo, 162 suggests that Annella served as a model for various paintings by Vaccaro. She does not, however, identify the image being painted on the canvas in this work, other than to suggest that it has physical affinities with de' Rosa. For Vaccaro's friendship with Stanzione, see *idem*, 32; de Dominici, III, 137.

<sup>71</sup> The van Oosterwijck anecdote has been translated in Hendrik J. Horn, *The Golden Age Revisited: Arnold Houbraken's Great Theatre of Netherlandish Painters and Paintresses*, Doornspijk, 2000, I, 302. For the anecdote concerning Fontana, see Giulio Mancini, *Considerazione sulla pittura*, A. Marucchi, ed., Roma, 1956-1957, I, 234.

<sup>72</sup> Carlo Cesare Malvasia, *Felsina Pittrice*, 1678, Bologna, 1967, II, 402.

tomb.<sup>73</sup>

The recurring emphasis on gender relations in early modern life stories, which typically deflects or overshadows discussion of artistic achievement, clearly marks the woman artist as a breed apart from her male colleagues.<sup>74</sup> Given that their biographers were often artists themselves, or at least were connected with artistic circles, the commonalities of these anecdotal narratives illuminate how the male artistic community, and by association the broader society of which they were a part, viewed these "miracles of nature," to use Vasari's term. By looking through the veil of literary embellishment, such passages can provide significant insight regarding the social dynamics involved in the creation of art in the early modern period. As in Steen's *Drawing Lesson*, the novel presence of the woman artist in the male art world was indeed perceived as a sexually-charged and complicated situation for all involved. It is no wonder that this gender dynamic became the inspiration for biographical anecdotes, which still can not only entertain, but also edify the reader.

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<sup>73</sup> "Siranae Tumulus Cineres hic claudit Elisae/ Guidonis Rheni qui quoque busta tegit./ Sic duo Picturae, quae non Miracula iunxit/ Vita, hoc in tumulo iungere Mors potuit." The epitaph was written by Giovanni Luigi Picinardi, and is recorded in Malvasia, II, 403. Translation from the Latin by Lin Widmann.

<sup>74</sup> On the exceptionality of women artists' life stories, see for example Nanette Salomon, "The Art Historical Canon: Sins of Omission," 1991; reprinted in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, Donald Preziosi, ed., Oxford, 1998, 347, 351.



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