

### **3 Feminist Novels : History as a Science and Agenda In Need of Reconstruction**

- (1) The Passion of Artemisia  
*Susan Vreeland*  
ISBN: 0-670-89449-4  
Viking Penguin 2002**
- (2) The Seven Ages  
*Eva Figs*  
ISBN 0-394-55540-6  
Pantheon Books 1986**
- (3) Girl With A Pearl Earring  
*Tracy Chevalier*  
ISBN 0-525-94527-X  
Dutton 1999**

#### **(i) Introduction**

**Justification for this comparative review of 3 novels so very different in style, construction and formal content , lies in the larger considerations that motivate them. Principal among these are :**

- (i) The reconstruction of history as a science in the light of a feminist perspective;**
- (ii) Adopting the vehicle of the historical novel as the means for accomplishing this objective;**
- (iii) The high artistic quality of each of them.**

**In terms of its command of the art of fiction, Susan Vreeland's *The Passion of Artemisia* rises well above the others. It is an astounding work, a genuine *tour-de-force* . All the same it must be acknowledged that the narrative form known as "the novel" has, over the last century, grown to include so many**

**distinctive sub- genres, that it is as little possible to grade these 3 works along a scale of quality, as it would be to claim that apples are superior to grapes, grapes better than oranges, although all of them are classified under "fruit" .**

**If, however, *The Passion of Artemisia* is an apple, it's the most delicious apple I've bitten into in a very long time. It is richly coloristic, filled with telling description, dramatic tension, vivid action. One can identify 3 fundamental themes, along with several minor ones:**

**(i) Rape, in its reality, and as metaphor for all forms of violation. (ii) The bitter relationship between estranged father and daughter;**

**(iii) The unique magnificence of the life of a major painter at the height of the 17th century Italian Baroque.**

**What holds the novel together compositionally is the continually renewed relationship of these themes to the paintings produced by the historic Artemisia over her lifetime.**

**Less ambitious than *The Passion of Artemisia* , Tracy Chevalier's *Girl With A Pearl Earring* achieves more in the domain of psychological insight, if for no other reason than the fact that its focus is restricted to the same small group of people in the same place over a limited time span of exceptional intensity in their lives . Here the feminist message is more subdued, less militant though equally in evidence . By the end of the novel one is left with the sense that the author, ( seen indirectly through its principal character Griet ) , feels a certain degree of compassion for the "patriarchy" ( and the patriarchy is everywhere in evidence:**

**Jan Vermeer, Anton van Leeuwenhoek, the rich and lecherous patron van Ruiven, Griet's fiancé Pieter ) on account of the incurable blindness that is the inevitable consequence of its presumption. What compassion the fictional Artemisia feels towards the crude, boorish male bullies that populate the pages of Vreeland's novel comes out only at the very end, in the key moments of the reconciliation with her father, Orazio.**

**Eva Figes' *The Seven Ages* creates a category all to itself. It is the only one in this group of 3 which ought to be considered avant-garde or modern ( neo-post modern, whatever ) in that most conservative of artistic vessels, the long prose narrative. In point of fact it's a daring experiment in multiple lines of chronology unfolding, sequentially or in tandem, while carrying along its unmistakable feminist message: that the true history of mankind ( with the history of England from the 10th century to the 1960's as paradigm) , is not what one finds in the traditional chronicles of battles and dynasties, but should be sought in the despised accounts of midwives and the unacknowledged torment of mothers in labor : "*A high scream carried on the wind in an unending wail .* " ( pg. 23) At the foundation of the tragic oratorios of war and death one finds the tragic recitatives of conception, pregnancy and birth.**

## **(ii) The Agenda**

**A feminist agenda is common to all three of these historical romances. The atrocious history of the abusive use of wives as baby factories looms large in *Girl with a Pearl Earring* and many of the stories in *The Seven Ages* .**

Save in the psychology of artistic conception, ( the 'passion' associated with artistic creation) , birth figures little in *The Passion of Artemisia* . The only physical birth is that of her daughter, Palmira, accomplished without fanfare. Rather it is the transfer of the stigma of rape from perpetrator to victim that sets the tone of this novel; it also appears in a particularly brutal fashion in *The Seven Ages* , in the long account of the 6 rapes ( and 7 pregnancies ) of the 12th century mid-wife, Judith. For sheer energy, ugliness, vengefulness, squalor and violence, this narrative is scarcely to be matched.

The suppression of the natural talents and aptitudes of women by forcing them into motherhood and domestic servitude persists as an ostinato through *Girl with a Pearl Earring* . Griet, a domestic in the house of Jan Vermeer, has an innate gift for the visual arts. She herself does not recognize it; only Vermeer is aware of it. <sup>1</sup>

Although Susan Vreeland has Orazio Gentileschi perceive his daughter's talent as nothing more than a means for bringing in more money, this does not accord with the historical record <sup>2</sup> .

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<sup>1</sup>This detail gives its author Chevalier the opportunity to drag out the romantic chestnut that the ' artist is special and above the normal run of humanity' . The same idea is present in *The Passion of Artemisia* . The *Seven Ages* doesn't deal with artists, so one doesn't find this cliché there. I have little patience with it.

<sup>2</sup>The basic reference consulted for this review is : Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi ; Christiansen and Mann ; Yale University Press , 2001

**Vreeland's fiction is only weakly obedient to historical fact. It is rather through the transmission, by means of minute detail and rich description, of the spirit of the high Renaissance that she engages our interest and enthusiasm.**

**The humiliating denigration of feminine crafts throughout history is a principal theme of *The Seven Ages*. Every episode in this densely conceived compendium of anecdote, legend and myth illustrates the theme that, over the 1000 or more years chronicled in the narrative, the arts and medical knowledge of the female midwife had been, in all matters pertaining to the birthing of children and the regulation of the sexual life of married couples, far superior to the superstition and ignorance of doctors, priests and charlatans, virtually all of them men.**

**The combined effect of all 3 novels produces a single message: that what our civilization accepts as its history has been so contaminated by a masculinist perspective that, apart from the barren factual record of names and dates, its scientific value is virtually worthless. The subject is basically a pseudo-science in that it has misunderstood and ignored the contributions of more than 50% of the human race, ( bringing together women, children, the poor, the marginals and the illiterate ). Modern historians such as Fernand Braudel and the *Annales* group of French historians, by attempting to reconstruct the history of daily and domestic life, have acknowledged this critique.**

**An example in point: among Susan Vreeland's notable insights in *The Passion of Artemisia* one finds the shrewd observation that, despite the thousands, perhaps hundreds of**

thousands of portraits of nude or semi-nude women done in the Renaissance, the majority are lacking in the depiction of simple physical details that would not normally escape the eyes of women, had they been allowed careers as Renaissance painters. On page 86 Michelangelo Buonarroti the Younger, (Michelangelo's son), inspects Artemisia's *Susanna and the Elders*, and comments:

*"That's real flesh your Susanna is wearing, those lines in her neck, the crow's feet at her underarm, the fold of flesh below her stomach - male painters wouldn't think of those details."*

To which one can add that Susan Vreeland's own descriptions of the 8 or so paintings around which the novel is conceived show the same fine attention to detail. Throughout the millennia of our Wild West civilization, which has invested so much spiritual and intellectual energy in the fatuous idealization of feminine beauty, a disturbingly large percentage of its extant productions in the graphic arts, virtually all of it the work of men, has systematically falsified the record through the neglect of details that were perfectly obvious to any woman. Had women been allowed to compete freely in the arts, we would probably have a much better notion today of the actual appearance of women (*as well as men*), throughout the ages.

Such poverty of understanding is omnipresent in the pathologically dysfunctional<sup>3</sup> household of Jan Vermeer as portrayed in Tracy Chevalier's *Girl With A Pearl Earring*. No-one

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<sup>3</sup>"dysfunctional" is a dysfunctional spelling of "dysfunctional".

could be expected to have a reliable understanding of its human relations in such an environment.

Once again it is the artistically inclined domestic servant, Griet, who alone sees things clearly (while all the same time being painfully, (should we not say suspiciously?), ignorant of her role in setting the various crises in motion.)

No one bothers to listen to her, because she is a Protestant in a Catholic household, she is only a juvenile imported from the lower classes and, of course, she is a woman. Yet it is through her eyes that we see the members of the household as they are: sad, desperate, self-deluding, vain, petty, spiteful. Apart from Jan Vermeer's delight in painting there appears to be little joy within it.

Once more the reader is invited to speculate as to the astronomical number of narratives written (or at least conceived) by women in lowly positions that have never been chronicled in any history book, for the simple reason that male historians believed nothing they had to say was worth anything.

Since the structure of *The Seven Ages* is built upon the standard model of English history as foundation, the intrinsic and blatant distortion of historiography by the masculinist perspective may be considered its principal theme.

### (iii) Girl With A Pearl Earring

The year is 1664, the place Delft, The Netherlands. Griet is the daughter of a tile-painter who has lost his livelihood after an accident that rendered him blind. As a member of the painters guild he was entitled to

its help and protection. Accordingly Jan Vermeer and his wife, Catherina Thins, pay a visit to his house to see what can be done for him and his family. The Vermeers are Catholics, (the real Jan Vermeer converted in order to marry Catherina). All the same they agree to engage the Protestant Griet as their domestic servant.

The story throughout is narrated from Griet's perspective, in the first person, as is *The Passion of Artemisia*. (It is one of the signal achievements of *The Seven Ages*, that Eva Figs' invents and elaborates an authentically original narrative voice, a flow of multiple voices embracing wind, fire, rain, rivers and all levels of human society.)

Yet the plain, unsophisticated discourse of Griet is rich in revelatory details. A handful of words on the second page of novel already indicate to us that Catherina is unfriendly by character, and will be so towards Griet in particular. On the next page we realize that Griet has an artistic gift, but that only Vermeer is aware of it.

It requires some time to become thoroughly familiar with the world of the Vermeer household, but eventually one comes to feel compassion for Catherina. Jan Vermeer has his distinguished career, Griet her native intelligence and zest for life. Maria Thins, Catherina's mother, is the undisputed matriarch of the household. She never pretends that she doesn't enjoy it. Catherina alone has nothing, is nothing. Even Vermeer's love for her will be supplanted by his never fully acknowledged passion for Griet. Catherina was, is, and always will be the family baby machine, dutifully supplying her famous husband with 4 girls and 2 boys

before the dramatic miscarriage that brings the novel to its ultimate crisis, and another 5 babies in the years to follow.

Tracy Chevalier provides only brief descriptions of a few paintings. This is in marked contrast to *The Passion of Artemisia* which is constructed around such descriptions. Susan Vreeland is clearly taking aim at the Renaissance, even at the very concept of the Renaissance. Despite its title, *Girl With A Pearl Earring* is not situated in the context of the history of painting, but stays focussed on the human relationships, with an intense, yet not exclusion attention to that which abides between Vermeer and Griet.

There are two paintings which *do* play a central role in Griet's story. The first is the *Lady Writing*<sup>4</sup>. The way in which the diagonal slant of the arm holding the pen parallels a blue fold on the tablecloth of the writing desk, is a distinguishing feature of this painting ( Both Wheelock and Chevalier draw attention to it) . By putting this observation in Griet's mouth, Chevalier awakes Vermeer to the realization that he's dealing with a person of considerably more substance than a simple serving maid.

Indeed, while he was away from his studio Griet actually moved the blue cloth so that the fold lay parallel with the arm. ( A nice novelist's conceit: the famous detail noted by artists, historians and critics alike was first discovered by Griet! ) Upon his return, Vermeer notices what she's done. Quote:

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<sup>4</sup> It can be seen on page 256 of Vermeer, The Complete Works; edited by Arthur K. Wheelock, Editor ; H.N. Abrams, 1997

**" *Tell me, Griet, why did you change the tablecloth?*" His tone was the same as when he asked me about the vegetables at my parent's house.**

***I thought for a moment. 'There needs to be some disorder in the scene, to contrast with her tranquillity', I explained, 'Something to tease the eye. And yet it must be something pleasing to the eye as well, and it is, because the cloth and the arm are in a similar position.'***

***There was a long pause. He was gazing at the table. I waited, wiping my hands against my apron.***

***' I had not thought I would learn something from a maid' , he said at last. "***

**The other painting is of course the one called *Girl With A Pearl Earring* . We will be discussing it in a moment.**

**In any successful narrative there exists an internal motor, ( Stanislavski's through-line of action? ) that gives continuity to the story and propels it forward. In *The Seven Ages* continuity and movement are supplied by the chief events of English history itself. In *The Passion of Artemisia* the circumstances surrounding the conception, execution and ultimate content of Artemisia's paintings is offset contrapuntally against her vagabond migrations from city to city. The narrative energy in *Girl With A Pearl Earring* thrusts it forward through a slow, though eventually deafening crescendo of crisis piled upon crisis, Vermeer's paintings serving primarily as backdrop or catalyst to the action . In a novel of this genre it could hardly be otherwise. Virtually all the action is set in a single household, with occasional**

**excursions to the outside world ( primarily to the butcher's market and Griet's family home) that serve to provide an external reinforcement to the intensity of the domestic drama.**

**The very entrance of Vermeer and his wife into Griet's home precipitates a minor crisis. Vermeer notices that Griet arranges the vegetables she's cutting up for the dinner in piles according to their colors. The observation annoys Catherina, whose domestic habits have never elicited any commentary.**

**At Griet's introduction to the Vermeer household there is an unhappy confrontation with Vermeer's oldest daughter, Cornelia, a girl with a spiteful character who doesn't like her. This is quickly followed by her encounter with Tanneke, the senior domestic who( with some justification) sees Griet as a threat. When Griet meets Catherina again, she's treated somewhat dismissively.**

**Just before turning in for sleep on her first night in her new home Griet is in for a final shock : a painting of the crucifixion hangs on the opposite wall ( Vermeer's *Allegory of Faith* in the Wheelock book. It may also be seen in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum, New York ).**

**The crises continue to build: a range of spiteful practical jokes by Cornelia designed to get Griet expelled from the house ; extra burdens of work imposed by Tanneke; lecherous advances from van Ruiven, Vermeer's principal customer. ; the death of Griet's sister from the plague; her brother's flight to Rotterdam.**

**Van Leeuwenhoek alone tries to protect her. One is naturally led to compare the role of the inventor of the microscope**

**in this novel with a similar role afforded to Galileo in The Passion of Artemisia. The added presence of a world famous scientist puts the reader in touch with the greater events of the Century of Genius .**

**These events are used with great effectiveness as foils to concentrate attention upon the spiritual center of Chevalier's novel, the deeply disturbing yet inevitable attraction between Griet and Vermeer.**

**One day , to Griet's astonishment, Jan Vermeer asks her to pose for her portrait. She agrees; she has little leeway to refuse anyone anything in this household.<sup>5</sup> The work proceeds apace, with both of the artistically gifted protagonists supplying his and her contribution. Both Vermeer and Griet know that something is missing, something needed to unify the face, the turban and the eyes, to give the portrait a focus and bring it to life . Griet is the first to know what it is, but dare not suggest it to her employer, who is also a great artist. Soon enough he discovers it on his own. (Page 191): " *I did not know what to say. I could not help him if I had not seen the painting. 'May I look at the painting, sir?'***

***He gazed at me curiously.***

***'Perhaps I can help', I added, then wished I had not. I was afraid I had become too bold.***

***'All right', he said, after a moment [ .....] He was right [....] something was missing from it.***

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<sup>5</sup>She does put her foot down however when Vermeer asks her to remove her head-cloth: decent women don't show their hair!

*I knew before he did. When I saw what was needed - that point of brightness he had used to catch the eye in other paintings - I shivered. This will be the end, I thought.*

*I was right. "*

(Page 93): *" His eyes were fixed on his wife's pearl earring. As she turned her head to brush more powder on her face the earring swung back and forth, caught in the light from the front windows. It made us all look at her face, and reflected light as her eyes did. "*

The manifold uses made of the pearl earring as literal object and literary metaphor testify to Tracy Chevalier's skill as a novelist. Even as the glitter of the pearl earring integrates and illuminates face and garments in the portrait, even so does the romance of Griet and Vermeer blossom into life from the moment that this earring and its partner enter the narrative. The fact that they are Catherina's merely adds that subtle allure of adultery which sweetens the taste of forbidden fruit.

Griet is given the earrings and wears them for the portrait. The effect of the right earring is dazzling, so much so that Vermeer finds that their effect must be diluted by two eye-spots on the iris and pink spots on the lips. Even a glance at the reproduction on the cover of the novel reveals how these occasional details significantly heighten its aura of sensuality.

The rest follows swiftly. Vermeer insists that Griet wear both earrings for the portrait, even though only the one on the right will appear in the finished work. The self-inflicted torture of Griet's two ear piercings contain all the essentials of a violently consummated sexual intercourse, almost as if the consummation

of and punishment for illicit sexual desire were co-joined in a single deed. Vermeer's physical handling of Griet as a model is itself transparently, if not overtly sexual. Catherina has good grounds for her futile jealousy, her lame accusation of theft.

The coincidental arrival of Griet's jealous suitor, Pieter from the Butcher's Market jacks up the tensions that lead to the principal confrontation of the novel, the 4-fold meeting in the studio of Griet, Catherina, Jan Vermeer and mother-in-law Maria Thins in the studio, brought together through Cornelia's malicious intent in revealing to Catherina the existence of the portrait.

If not stated in so many words, Vermeer's repudiates his bond to Catherina in favor of his attachment to Griet.

(Page 214) "*Catherina was no fool. She knew the real matter was not the earrings. She wanted them to be, she tried to make them be so, but she could not help herself. She turned to her husband. 'Why', she asked, 'have you never painted me?'*

*As they gazed at each other it struck me that she was taller than he, and, in a way, more solid.*

*'You and the children are not part of this world', he said, 'You are not meant to be.'*

*'And she is?' Catherina cried shrilly ... "*

Then Catherina makes a sudden, futile attempt to slash the canvas with a palette knife. With crisis piling on crisis, Catherina has a miscarriage and Griet flees the house. It is almost as if the one way Catherina could punish Vermeer for his infidelity would be through sabotaging the baby factory. Over the next decade

however she goes on to have more children, until, when he dies, there are eleven all told, all very much alive and very hungry.

(Page 215:) ... *"Catherina struggled but he held her wrist firmly, waiting for her to drop the knife. Suddenly she groaned. Flinging the knife aside she clutched her belly. "*

We learn much later that it is indeed a miscarriage:  
( Page 221 ) : *"...Catherina had lost the baby she delivered that day of the painting and the palette knife. She gave birth in the studio itself - she could not get down the stairs to her own bed. The baby had come a month early and was small and sickly. It died not long after its birth feast. I knew that Tanneke blamed me for the death.*

*Sometimes I pictured the studio with Catherina's blood on the floor and wondered how he was still able to work there "*.

So unbearable are the tensions aroused in this insolated household, that Griet's flight and expulsion come as a decided relief. Still, expulsion is not defeat. Vermeer dies in 1675, about ten years later. Griet is happily married to Pieter and works with him at the Butcher's Market, ( a venue memorably described by Tracy Chevalier) .

At the reading of the will it is learned that Vermeer has given the earrings to Griet as a bequest . As her final humiliation, Catherina is obliged to hand them over to her in person. Thus, through an astonishing twist of fate it is Griet, with her successful marriage to Pieter, who ends up with greater security , while it is Catherina, thrown upon her own resources through her inheritance of 11 children and the time-honored

improvidence of an artist husband, who is dependent upon the mercy of society.

#### **(iv) The Passion of Artemisia**

Susan Vreeland's *The Passion of Artemisia* is more than just a well-written novel, it is one of those books that linger indefinitely in the imagination. Wealthy rather than profound, it abounds with riches: vivid descriptions are bestowed with a painter's eye to color and detail, extravagant color combines with rhetorical restraint, the analyses of the works actually painted done by the historical Artemisia are subtle and informed. Though conservative in form, it is innovative in its dramatic handling of situations and personalities, effectively building to climaxes through the accumulation of tiny details that may pass unnoticed with a first reading, yet supply indispensable vibrancy, immediacy, excitement and suspense.

Some of these details merit special attention because of their particular effectiveness: as one among many one may cite the brief appearance of a mosquito in Chapter 4. It manifests its presence at a unique moment of heightened tension, just when Artemisia is about to hear the verdict of the tribunal charged with appraising the veracity of the accusation of rape brought by her and her father Orazio against his partner and her teacher in perspective, Agostino Tassi.

(Page 31): " *Only Porzia and Giovanni Stiattesi in the first row were silent. Porzia lifted her chin to give me courage. Giovanni picked at a sore on his lip ... I 'd had to deny each testimony, pierce the charade of one falsehood after another that tried to make my*

*character the issue and not Agostino's deed. And Rome enjoyed it all.*

*A mosquito kept buzzing in my ear and I couldn't get rid of it ... "*

The moment climaxes 30 pages of suspense, pages filled with torture, humiliation, violation, betrayal, deceit, endless lies. At the moment just before the verdict, ( to be decided in Artemisia's favor although Agostino will get off with a slap on the wrist), the irritation of a buzzing mosquito drives all other thoughts out of her mind. Suddenly, by virtue of this tiny detail the scene comes into sharp focus. For a brief instant we have been taken out this horrible 17th century Roman court to share the distress of a petty physical itch.

This technique of the focussing minor distraction is used throughout the novel, always to telling effect. The detail which accumulates the strongest metaphorical resonance through the novel only appears a few times in half a dozen pages. It surfaces first on page 14, returning by implication a few times after, until it re-appears on page 20. By that time it has become imbued with a sinister significance that hovers in the imagination as far as page 47, where a new chapter is opened up in Artemisia's life through her departure to Florence.

This is the "rancid-smelling animal fat" used in the vaginal examination in the second part of her trial. ( One always thinks of it as "her" trial, though it is technically Agostino who is on trial). The substance is disgusting: slimy, foul-smelling, sticking like napalm to, and contaminating every surface it touches. The way

it is used brilliantly conveys the manner in which the stigma of a rape sticks to its victim for life. On page 14 it is introduced thusly:

*" The younger one smeared rancid -smelling animal fat over her fingers and then she lifted my skirt. She looked down at me the way a new serving-girl looks down to gut a chicken for the first time. Her greasy fingers wormed into me. I squeezed all my muscles against her. The feel of squeezing against Agostino shot through me and I shuddered. "*

On page 19:

*"Today they had two midwives examine me, you know, with the notary watching. I know people could see me through the curtain. "*

On page 20:

*" I turned my head to one side and saw that my dress was smeared with the midwives' grease ... "*

On page 27, the symbolism of the midwife's grease is conflated with menstrual blood; later its orbit will be extended to encompass the shedding of blood in various situations: the blood that drips from the cracks opened up by the torture instrument applied to Artemisia's mutilated fingers; the ghastly blood dripping across and down the mattress of Holofernes in Artemisia's *Judith* paintings, which she compares to " the blood soaking my sleeve in court" . Henceforth whenever there is any mention of blood in the narrative, one senses echoes of the Roman court and the brutal Agostino.

**Intertwining chronologies also underlie the temporal dynamics of *The Passion of Artemisia* , though less forcefully than what one finds in the *tour-de-force* of *The Seven Ages* . These are :**

**(i) Insightful, if abbreviated analyses of key paintings done at different stages in the career of the historic Artemisia Gentileschi. The chronology is not always strictly in step with the historic record, and one needs to check Vreeland's imaginative reconstruction with the dates as set out in the Christiansen and Mann catalogue.**

**(ii) Artemisia's travels. Once again the reconstruction is imaginative, even to the extent of placing Artemisia in Genoa when she was actually in Venice, or eclipsing the 6 years of her return to Rome into a few months. As she passes through the locales where the real Artemisia is known to have lived or visited, the fictional Artemisia provides the reader with magnificent descriptions of street scenes and landscapes, in and around Rome, its outlying villages, Florence, Genoa, Naples and Greenwich, England**

**(iii) Artemisia's strangely tenuous yet intense skein of human relationships. Most of them are failures ( Orazio, Agostino, Pietro, Palmira), a few may be counted successes ( Michelangelo the Younger, Galileo, Cesare Gentile, Don Francesco Maringhi ). The one reconciliation, with her father Orazio, frames then closes the novel.**

**Apart from Agostino Tassi, ( whom it would seem, is depicted only to bring out his ugliness) , none of the principals**

are given physical descriptions , This appears somewhat odd for two reasons. The first is that this novel is replete with so many minute, even savory, descriptions of all kinds ( one must not neglect to mention the delicious recipes which one finds in every chapter, sometimes on every other page ) . The other is that Susan Vreeland does provide us with many physical descriptions, yet they are all within the canvases of Artemisia's masterpieces: the 3 *Judiths* , *Susanna and the Elders* , *Cleopatra* , the 2 *Mary Magdalenes* , *Bathsheba* .

It will be worth our while to examine the way Susan Vreeland uses the descriptions of some of these paintings to unify the action and place its themes in high relief: Artemisia's first *Judith* painting makes its appearance on pages 11 and 12 . In the *Christiansen and Mann* catalogue ( henceforth referred to as simply , "the catalogue" ) it figures on page 309. Caravaggio's *Judith*, which is supposed to have inspired her, is mentioned on page 12 ( page 109 in the catalogue ) . The biblical tale of Judith and Holofernes is the *ne plus ultra* of a feminist vengeance myth against the dominant male hierarchy. As ever, the Jews are at war with the Philistines. Accompanied by her maidservant Abra, the heroine Judith visits the tent of the Philistine commander, Holofernes, with the pretence of offering herself to him. She delays giving into his demands until he is seduced into a drunken stupor. Then she picks up his sword and slices off his head. Exiting the tent and displaying the head routs the Philistine army.

As Vreeland correctly observes , Caravaggio's *Judith* is disturbingly passive despite her diligence in carving through the

neck of Holofernes; one could well imagine her the presiding chef at a turkey dinner. All of the expressiveness in his painting is concentrated in Holofernes' face, none in hers. Orazio also painted a *Judith* : in the catalogue it appears as plate 13 on page 83 . Vreeland notes that his *Judith* is much too holy.

By contrast, Artemisia's *Judith* is charged with primitive energy, gory with blood and guts. Judith does not conceal her ghoulish pleasure at the deed, nor is Holofernes spared the full measure of his merited agony. Given Artemisia's recent ordeals of rape, torture and humiliation at the hands of a reactionary hierarchy of depraved men this should come as no surprise, neither in the fiction nor in real life. The ridges on Holofernes' forehead are rigid, strained to the utmost. His eyes are fixated, open wide in shock, whites bulging beneath the pupils. There is blood eloquently smeared across Judith's left knuckles.

Susan Vreeland uses Artemisia's *Susanna and the Elders* ( page 262 of the catalogue , a powerful painting) to illustrate her shrewd insight that few of the classical paintings done by men show the bodies of women as they really are . Michelangelo the Younger's praise for Artemisia's perceptive eye, actually demonstrates the perceptive eye of Vreeland: real flesh; crow's feet at the underarm; lines in the neck; fold of flesh below the stomach.

Artemisia's second *Judith* is described on page 112 ( page 349 in the catalogue.) It was a remake of the earlier painting with the addition of important new details: a Florentine gold dress; more jewelry; a bracelet of carved green stone and filigree ; fuller

sleeves. Holofernes' red velvet bedclothes are edged with gold stitching. There is a speck of blood on Judith's breast. Blood is also splattered up the right arm that holds the sword. Also on the left wrist and knuckles. Blood also appears on Abra's arms, and even on the golden dress.

The 3rd *Judith* , a commission from the most celebrated of Florentine art patrons, Cosimo di Medici, depicts a scene shortly after the murder. At that point in the novel Artemisia has arrived, her standing in Florence among other artists secure. She has put aside her feelings of anger and the desire for revenge. The painting shows Judith and Abra being surprised by a noise coming from the army camp ( page 117 in the novel; page 331 in the catalogue.) Holofernes' severed head sits on the lower left in a basket. Artemisia is in effect painting a sound: the heads of the two women are turned towards its' direction. The sword is up, slung over her shoulder. Vreeland notes how the sword rests *on* the lace, cutting it! She relates the "screaming head" on the hilt of the sword to the (hidden) grimace of Holofernes' head in the basket. Susan Vreeland sees the influence of Michelangelo in the curve of Judith's neck .

*The Conversion of Mary Magdalene* receives considerable attention in the novel. So that Artemisia may examine Donatello's rendition of the same subject, Galileo offers his influence to arrange a visit to a church normally closed to the public. There however it would seem that she is even more influenced by the sight of a deranged beggar woman who has made the steps of the

church her home, than by Donatello's famous wooden sculpture. Donatello's sculpture is described as follows:

( Page 138) : "*In one shocking moment I saw it all. An emaciated figure with wide, hollow eyes in deep eye sockets, ravaged by time in the wilderness, her hands close together, praying. She was barefoot, standing with thin legs widely placed, naked, not artfully nude, clothed only in tangled hair that reached to her knees. Only two teeth stood like tiny headstones in her gaping mouth. Her shriveled legs so far apart and her clenching teeth rooted her to earth while she longed for heaven. I shuddered. "*

Palmira, Artemisia's daughter shrieks that she looks like the woman outside. The fullest description of this woman is given on page 153:

" *Bare shins to the ground, rocking back and forth, the woman moaned her remorse, feeling a shame so sharp as to make her lose all propriety. What could she possibly have done that was so heinous as to earn her a lifetime of self-mortification? No one short of a tyrant deserved such unremitting agony. I cried there with her, for her, for Eve, for sorrows past. I put my pencil away. It was wrong to draw live pain . "*

Vreeland outlines the process of Artemisia's thinking as she puts together the impressions she's received from these two inspirations; as readers we feel that we have somehow joined her in the very act of creation. The stages in the conception of and execution of the *Conversion* fill pages 135 to 161, by far the longest concentrated stretch of attention given to any of Artemisia's

paintings. It is instructive to compare what Vreeland says about this painting with the reproduction on page 327 of the catalogue.

## Plot Synopsis

*The Passion of Artemisia* opens *in media res* - in the thick of the action. It is the first decade of the 17th century, the inception of the Baroque. Orazio Gentileschi and his daughter Artemisia, both painters, have deposed a suit with the magistrates of Rome against Agostino Tassi, for having taken advantage of his position as Artemisia's teacher to rape her on numerous occasions. From the beginning it is evident that it is Artemisia herself who is on trial for having the presumption to depose such an accusation. With the trial in progress, the stage is also set for the alienation of daughter and father which provides the supporting frame

(beginning, middle and end) of the novel. Artemisia is convinced that her father only joined her in the suit to recover damages to his income because Agostino's violent indiscretions obliged him to charge a lower price for his daughter's talents as a painter. Although fundamental to the structure of the narrative, this interpretation is not borne out by the historical record. There is no indication that the real Orazio and Artemisia ever had a falling out, or that Artemisia ever rebuked her father for treating her like merchandise.

However their alienation is of considerable importance within the novel's universe of discourse. Alienation and Violation

are the two wellsprings through which the narrative emerges. Although the *violations* are numerous at the beginning of the novel, ( and, in the first few chapters quite brutal ) *alienation* is in many ways the stronger theme.

Alienation prevails at every level: as an artist Artemisia shares with Orazio ( and even with Agostino as one is led to understand in the final chapter ) the ageless incomprehension of mankind about her work and intentions. As a woman she encounters patriarchal indifference and ignorance everywhere. As rape victim she is subject to the depraved and vicious judgments of every fool and scoundrel. She finds no comfort or understanding in her father, nor in her husband, Pietro. Even her daughter Palmira fails to understand her; in fact she has little interest in doing so. Like most women everywhere she wants a secure and comfortable life as housewife and mother. Artemisia expresses contempt for such mundane ambition. It is not clear whether or not the novelist asks us to share that contempt. As a general rule the 'Artemisia' depicted in the novel has a tendency to establish too high a standard in judging her fellow creatures in suffering. Only Galileo himself appears to embody enough superiority to live up to her expectations.

Yet it is this very condition of extreme alienation which lays the foundation for freedom, adventure and fulfillment. As Vreeland has her remark at one point, she is one of the most fortunate women in Europe. She can paint as she wishes, set, and obtain, her own prices . When her husband deserts her for the cheap embraces of a doltish model, she interprets this not as her

failure, but as an opportunity for travel. She goes to Genoa where a kind and generous patron awaits her in the person of Cesare Gentile. ( An invention of Vreeland. In fact Gentile was Orazio's patron while she was in Venice. )

The motif of violation dominates the discourse for the first 5 chapters, up to about page 45. It then continues to linger in the imaginations of the reader and principal character throughout the narrative, despite the absence of any further violence. Yet this ordeal is terrifying enough: in an attempt to force her to retract her accusation, the Papal magistrate (*Locumtenente* ) orders her right hand to be bound in a *Sibille* : a contraption made from ropes that can be tightened until cracks open up in the skin and the blood flows. At the limit it can slice off the fingers . Her sufferings are incredible but she sticks by her story. No such ordeal is applied to Agostino Tassi.

In the interlude before her second ordeal, the vaginal examination, the author takes us into Artemisia's studio so that we may watch her as she paints her first *Judith* .

The painful and humiliating vaginal examination is performed by coarse midwives in the presence of a notary. The animal fat smeared on their hands before the invasion of the uterus spatters over Artemisia's body and dress. The verdict is in favor of Artemisia. The behavior of Agostino had been so unspeakable that even in a social order that treats women with contempt he had outraged public sentiment. Historically Agostino Tassi was given the choice of 5 years hard labor, or banishment from Rome. The novelist interprets this to mean that

**Agostino was pardoned because the banishment was unenforceable.**

**Artemisia can no longer endure her living situation in Rome . She prevails upon her father, who arranges a marriage with Pietro Antonio di Vincenzo Stiattesi. Before the couple moves to Florence, Artemisia visits Sister Graziela, an old friend, now a nun at the convent of Santa Trinità. Page 16 provides us with a gripping description of Artemisia's climb up to the convent as she tries to avoid the callous louts who would ridicule her. Sister Graziela's personality is somewhat too 'nunny' for my tastes: stereotyped "goodness" is always embarrassing. However the idea is conveyed that Sister Graziela's companionship is a rare place of refuge. Further on in the novel Sister Graziela's isolation in the dull routine of the convent serves as a counterpoise to the freedom eventually experienced by Artemisia in the vagabond life of the free-lance artist.**

**In Florence Artemisia finds her one true friend : Galileo Galilei. His notion that the earth is moving although we cannot feel it exhilarates her; the Inquisition will not be so pleased with it. When Galileo is confined to house arrest, he and Artemisia find more common ground in their common persecution by a superstitious and hidebound society.**

**Pietro is not exactly a good husband. Rather he is pictured as " no better than he ought to be" - not irresponsible nor uncaring, yet with loose morals and vague notions of infidelity, plus the petty jealousies of a second-rate soul in the body of a second-rate painter. Their marriage rapidly deteriorates from his feeling that**

**his manhood is humiliated by his wife's superior ability as an artist.**

**Artemisia's stay in Genoa is a fabrication of the author's . For her novel the episode is important as it sets the stage for another betrayal. Orazio has also found work there, and eventually Artemisia encounters him there. Their reunion is friendly until she discovers that he's resumed his partnership with Agostino. Bitter with despair she returns to Rome. The real Artemisia spent six years there. The time is far briefer in Vreeland's account. Finding herself spurned by a reputation as a whore ( for having deposed an accusation of rape, even though she was vindicated) she goes off to Naples. This will be her permanent home, and she comes to know prosperity, security and fame. Her daughter "marries well" to a nobleman's son. Her painting also becomes more conventional:**

**(Page 260 ) "*... no one wanted realism now. Buyers saw no courage in age or unpleasantness. They didn't understand that ugliness caught in real emotion would speak through the centuries. They wanted only ideal beauty ..... I had no more courage for invenzione. I had learned to bow to what paid for ball gowns and bread ... "***

**Then she receives a letter from her father. Orazio is sick, poor, and dying in far-off semi-civilized England. She is all he has left in the world: he begs her to come immediately. In spite of misgivings she joins him there. After his death she will return to Naples.**

The marked contrast between the rude society of England, as contrasted to the sophisticated, indeed over-refined world of Italy is a tribute to Vreeland's abilities. She finds him almost literally in rags, living in and working on a commission in a morose stone palace in Greenwich, virtually deserted save himself and a few caretakers. Upon their encounter, the first after many years, they immediately begin fighting. They are finally having the bitter, grandiose quarrel they should have had years before. The fighting done they become reconciled. She joins him as a partner in his work for the brief period of time he has left on earth.

In a short but tender and moving deathbed scene, he dies in her arms:

*" His hand clutched mine and his lips burnt with a question he was too embarrassed, even now, to put into words.*

*'Si', I said. I left a twenty-year knot release in my chest, and I fully understood that what he had wanted was not just forgiveness for him, but healing for me. "*

### (v)The Seven Ages

It is somewhat unusual that a novel with an outspoken political agenda should also be an absorbing experiment in narrative form. Only the style is conventional, ( in the sense that it is not an interior monologue, nor a synthetic or analytic dissection of an anecdote, nor an exhibition of poetic virtuosity, nor some eccentric venture into the universe of self-reference ) . The prose is simple, yet the discourse is not prosaic . Its poetry, (

and it is filled with poetry) arises primarily - and for me this is the most attractive feature of this novel - from Eva Figes' invention of an authentically original narrative voice, indirectly derived from the interweaving of 4 chronologies, autonomous yet interdependent, much in the way that independent lines of counterpoint appear to generate the harmonies of a musical composition .

Welding together the foundations of this ambitious saga is an unbroken chain of grand-daughter narratives by a long lineage of midwives stretching across a thousand years of England's history. This fictional device is profoundly metaphorical in the way it imitates a homologous "birthing" of each period of English history as mediated through the stories of its associated midwife.

The lives and tales of Moriuw, Emma, Judith and Margery cover the period from the 9th to 14th centuries. Alice's account stands witness to the reigns of Henry VIII, Bloody Mary and Queen Elizabeth. Susan evokes the Civil War of the 17th century. Nancy's world straddles the late 18th and early 19th century. Her persona is the least convincing among them , yet what she has to relate is important: the epidemic of puerperal fever in the lying-in wards of the hospitals of the age . By the time we've come to her account, we as readers have been prepared to connect the gruesome events she speaks of to the traditional ignorance of male doctors and priests in all previous ages. In Figes' opinion , even as late as the middle of the 19th century the ancient folk and herbal therapeutics of the midwives were generally more reliable than standard medical practice.

**Granny Martin's stories communicate her memories of the late Victorian period and World War I. Neither this, nor any of the other chronologies are precise or historical in any scientific sense.**

***The second chronology* , framing the chronicle as a series of flash-backs to other eras, is recounted by the Narrator ( the word is capitalized because, although she is its principal character, she's never given a name) , a modern hospital-trained midwife at the time of the English Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament demonstrations of the 60's.**

***The third chronology* interconnects the biographies of the aristocratic women in the castles, and later in mansions as wives of wealthy capitalist entrepreneurs. It was they who hired the midwives to assist in difficult births, or to stimulate their fertility, or conversely to incapacitate a husband who had been abusive too long of his wife's body.**

**Among the portrayals in these stories one finds : Aethelfrida, for the 10th century; Lady Blanche for the 14th; Lady Elizabeth for the age of the Tudors; Ladies Susan and Lucy for the Civil War , ( their husbands respectively Roundhead and Cavalier), Sophie for the Victorian age, her daughter Dora for World War I.**

**Then the aristocratic line dies out, and the story continues with the 5 modern generations of midwives: Granny Martin, the narrator's mother, ( who never appears, though there is some mention of her sister and the narrator's aunt, Dora ) , the Narrator ( whose name we never learn), her daughters, and their children.**

***The fourth chronology* is that of English history itself, perceived indirectly through the careers and misfortunes of the**

husbands who went out to fight the wars and battles, or for overseas adventures, or to found commercial fortunes: all the things traditional scholars consider the real content of history.

Much like the floral background of a medieval tapestry, the author gives us a staggering catalogue of herbal remedies, specifics, emetics, purgatives, aphrodisiacs, soporifics, poisons - indeed an over-abundance. Eva Figs draws from an extensive lore of folk medicine and nostrums to load down page after page with long lists of herbs and plants, most of which most of her readers know nothing about.

There is, of course, as all the great poets have demonstrated, a linguistic delight to be derived from the sheer beauty in the names of flowers, herbs, trees, plants; yet it must be said that Figs doesn't do this very well. Compare, for example, her method of proceeding with the opening lines of John Keats' "Ode to Melancholy" :

*No, no, go not to Lethe, neither twist  
Wolf's-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine;  
Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kissed  
By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine;  
Make not your rosary of yew-berries,*

.....

It is no doubt unfair to compare the work of one of the most, ( if not the most) lyrical English poet with the prosaic catalogues of a good novelist. Observe however that it matters little if the reader is not familiar with the appearance and properties of "wolf's-bane" , "nightshade" or "yew-berries": the

poetry in the names is perhaps more potent even the literary effect of knowing about their psychedelic attributes as herbs. By contrast these examples from *The Seven Ages* are typical of what one finds throughout, particularly in portions that deal with the Middle Ages:

" .. *stitchwort and mugwort , archangel and milfoil , cinquefoil, calamint and bugle ... Vervain. Fumitory. Mullein and mouse-ear hawkweed. Eyebright and perewinkle..* " (Page 2)

" *mugwort and betony , fewerfew and cinquefoil, bugloss and periwinkle ...* " ( Page 5)

"... *marche and periwinkle, brownwort and vervein, pennyroyal and lupin ... vervain and southernwort ... adderwort and elder ... bishopwort ...* " ( Page 10) , etc.

The mechanical transcription of catalogues is one of the occupational hazards of all novelists; I have not been spared it. Even James Joyce was a notable offender in this regard , as one can see in the long and tedious catalogues that appear in *Ulysses* .

What she's trying to say, of course, is that the ancient midwives knew the medicinal properties of all of these herbs and more, a knowledge which has been largely lost in this excessively scientific age. The gorgeous tapestry of flowering plants is a delightful feature of the narrative style, yet Figes' manner of displaying it leaves something to be desired.

Rather than providing summaries or synopses of the numerous legends and stories in *The Seven Ages* , it will be more instructive if I present chapter outlines that will make it easier to comprehend the way the various chronologies interweave in their

creation of a a unique narrative voice. I was obliged to re-read *The Seven Ages* 3 times before I felt that everything was falling into place.<sup>6</sup> These tables may save a little bit of time in the lives of prospective readers. Many of them may not wish to abridge so rewarding an adventure .

<b>The 7 Ages</b>	<b>TABLE I</b>	
<b>Chronologies:</b>	<b>Historic Period</b>	<b>Season in the life of the modern Narrator</b>
<b>Chapter 1</b>	<b>Saxon England</b>	<b>Spring</b>
<b>Chapter 2</b>	<b>12th-14th centuries</b>	<b>Summer</b>
<b>Chapter 3</b>	<b>Tudor monarchs</b>	<b>Fall</b>
<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>Civil War, 17th century</b>	<b>Winter</b>
<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>Late 18th century</b>	<b>Spring</b>
<b>Chapter 6</b>	<b>Victorian age and World War I (two series of grand-daughter tales</b>	<b>Summer</b>
<b>Chapter 7</b>	<b>The present. CND demonstrations. Narrator's grand-daughters</b>	<b>Fall</b>

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<sup>6</sup>about the same level of difficulty as a good text on Category Theory

<b>The 7 Ages</b>	<b>TABLE II</b>	
<b>Chronologies:</b>	<b>Midwives Narratives</b>	<b>Ladies Narratives</b>
<b>Chapter 1</b>	<b>Emma, mother Medhuil ,grandmother Moriuw</b>	<b>The Lady Aethelfrida: children Wilfred,Hilda</b>
<b>Chapter 2</b>	<b>Margery, midwife to daughter Joan mother of Alice ; Margery's mother Judith daughter of Bedda daughter of Emma</b>	<b>Lady Blanche, Lord Robert, Lady Isabella</b>
<b>Chapter 3</b>	<b>Joan, daughter of Alice and mother of Peggy</b>	<b>Lady Elizabeth and daughter Ann</b>
<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>Alice's granddaughters Susan and Jane</b>	<b>Lady Lucy (Roundhead) Lady Sarah (Cavalier)</b>
<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>Nancy, daughter of Susan. Rose, daughter of Jane</b>	<b>Charlotte Maria, daughter of Sarah; wife to Tom, Lucy's son</b>

<b>Chapter 6</b>	<b>Granny Martin, granddaughter of Nancy, mother to Ada (killed in WWII), and the Narrator)</b>	<b>Sophie, daughter of Tom and Charlotte Maria. Dora, granddaughter of Sophie.</b>
<b>Chapter 7</b>	<b>Modern Narrator; daughters Kate and Sally, grandchildren Emily, Adam, Amabel</b>	

**The novel is loosely structured as a succession of flash-backs of the Narrator, a retired midwife who has taken up residence in the country house that once belonged to her aunt, Doris. The region of England in which the village she lives in is never specified, though English readers can probably easily identify it through external clues.<sup>7</sup> All the events occurring in the 1000-year period of the chronicle take place in this village and its surroundings.**

**The manipulation of the flash-back technique is a bit clumsy. Eva Figs is more confident in the portrayal of the forward motion of events, whereas the Narrator's visions/meditations on the past are precipitated by gimmicks of various degrees of effectiveness: voices in the wind, or from the fireplace, old letters, photo albums, "loose sheets of paper from the loft", a chessboard that spontaneously 'materializes' into a game being played upon it in the home of a Roundhead family under siege by Cavaliers during the Civil War, etc. Still one discovers, encapsulated in the simple description of the chess game being played between the Narrator and a stodgy old colonel from the village, the political message of the whole of *The Seven Ages*. The passage starts in the middle of page 97 and continues on the first paragraph of page 98:**

***" The chessboard stands on the coffee table between the two armchairs under the window, almost empty except for the few pieces***

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<sup>7</sup>Indications in Chapter 3 suggest that it isn't far from Oxford, residence of the distinguished medical ignoramus Dr. Henry Dinsdale. He's hired to cure the wasting affliction of Lady Elizabeth, wife to " an up-and-coming wool merchant, become gentleman"

*needed to corner me. The old retired colonel from down the lane was in earlier and had little difficulty in finishing me off, though I gave him a run for his money first, and took several of his pawns and both bishops before I had to go on the defensive. He clearly enjoyed having someone, anyone, to play against, though I could tell he didn't expect much of a game from a woman. So when I managed to avoid a fool's mate and even had him on the defensive for a few moves he was pleased, told me how I had gone wrong, and suggested a return match next week.*

*He is interested in historic battles, strategy. that sort of thing, and when he is not reading about them likes to reconstruct what is supposed to have happened on his living room floor, using model soldiers and miniature cannons. He told me a little bit about his hobby over coffee. As a military man he is interested in the logic of armed combat, on which the course of human history depends . He laughed somewhat ruefully, and didn't expect me to understand: nor did his wife. who grew roses. She regarded his reconstructions as a nuisance that cluttered her carpet, and said it was time he grew out of boys' games .....* "

The somewhat 'blindered' view of this reactionary colonel, ( that history is nothing but a chronicle of wars and battles), is frankly treated as childishness by both his wife and the Narrator. Standing in opposition to it is the weight of the entire complex content of the chronicles of *The Seven Ages* , which place the core dynamics of the historical process in the causal chains of conceptions and pregnancies, births, midwives and birthing, anomalies, miscarriages, abortions, inheritances - the lowly,

frequently dreadful, yet inescapable burden that falls almost entirely on women but has rarely been recorded.

## (vi) Afterword

Inevitably, the rapid evolution of word processors over the last half century has led to more demanding standards in the novel. At least 3 forms of competition have promoted this evolution: commercial competition, the natural competition between writers, and a form of competition endemic to the arts: the ceaseless competition with oneself. The day is not long in coming when the literate public will, as a matter of course, expect novelists to be almost as scrupulous in their handling of language and choice of words as it does with writers of poetry.

Even today the well-crafted novel is able to provide a stronger stimulus to the intellect and the imagination than all but the most outstanding film. In the final analysis, despite its overpowering access to resources, the cinema is obliged to anchor itself in the banality of the tactile image. Save for a handful of masterpieces, film cannot rise above its dependence on verisimilitude. The novel, on the other hand, obliges its reader to both *visualize* and *reflect* at the same time, thus enabling him or her to journey through unexplored regions of space, time and imagination. Much of the delight of a well-wrought work of fiction comes from the play of imagination that is encouraged to fill in what has been deliberately left out. Most films, one is sorry to say, are expressly designed to inhibit this possibility.

In my review of Kenneth Branagh's "Hamlet" ( It can be found at <<http://www.fermentmagazine.org/essays/branagh.html>>

**) , while praising many aspects of the production I also deplore Branagh's obsessive concern to leave nothing to the imagination of the viewer.**

**Furthermore the necessity of recuperating the enormous costs of production oblige even the most capable film director to connect with as large an audience as possible, including ones whose standards of literacy or education are considerably lower than what a good novelist has to put up with. In fact, given the restrictions placed on the medium, one must admire the large number of masterpieces one finds in the archives of the first century of the cinema.**

**The 3 novels reviewed in this essay show that the contemporary novel has not lost its capacity to enliven thought, open the imagination, convey a moral or political message, or inspire wonder.**