Part III

Embodied time
Embodied temporality

Lucrezia Tornabuoni de’ Medici’s sacra storia, Donatello’s Judith, and the performance of gendered authority in Palazzo Medici, Florence

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Abstract

This essay approaches Donatello’s fifteenth-century bronze sculpture of Judith as a dramatic actor in Lucrezia Tornabuoni de’ Medici’s ‘The Story of Judith, Hebrew Widow’, written in the 1470s. The essay highlights the strategies by which Lucrezia’s narrative enfolds contemporary Florentine attitudes concerning justice, virtue, and political power into Judith’s sacred history and traces how the performative cues of Lucrezia’s words functioned to connect her audience somaesthetically with the statue in the temporal setting of the garden of the Palazzo Medici. Ultimately the essay analyzes Lucrezia’s self-fashioning in relation to both the textual and sculptural biblical heroine as a strategy to give voice to her critical role within the family and the state.

Keywords: Donatello; Lucrezia Tornabuoni; Palazzo Medici; sacred drama; Judith; Renaissance sculpture

Donatello’s bronze sculpture of Judith, once located in the garden of the Palazzo Medici in Florence, was one of the most visible works within the family’s collection of art and today is considered a critical monument within the art historical canon of Renaissance sculpture (Figure 8.1). While its earliest history is unknown, by the mid-1460s the sculpture was installed in

1 Although the scholarship on Donatello’s sculpture is too extensive to fully cite here, the following sources provide useful overviews of the literature and/or bibliographies: Janson, Sculpture, pp. 198–205; Greenhalgh, Donatello, pp. 181–92; Dolcini, ed., Donatello; Donatello-Studien; Wohl, review of Donatello Studien; Caglioti, Donatello e i Medici; Petrucci, La scultura.

DOI: 10.5117/9789462984585/CH08
Figure 8.1 Donatello (Donato di Niccolò di Betto Bardi), Judith, c. 1464, bronze, located between mid-1460s and 1495 in the garden of Palazzo Medici, today in the Sala dei Gigli, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence. Photo: author
Palazzo Medici, where it remained for nearly 30 years until its forced removal to Palazzo della Signoria in 1495. Considered to be the first monumental sculpture of the Jewish heroine, the bronze figure emphasizes the action of beheading in its compositional design. Judith stands with her right arm raised in the air, poised to strike the neck of Holofernes, whose hair she holds in her left hand. Holofernes is awkwardly positioned beneath her, and the contortion of his head in relation to his body indicates that he has already received one blow and is prepared to suffer the second and fatal strike of the sword. Judith’s steadfast expression and erect posture above the tyrant visualizes her sacred female authority.

During its installation within the garden of Palazzo Medici, the Judith was raised on a column, which had two (no longer extant) inscriptions attached to it. The first inscription proclaimed,

Kingdoms fall through luxury, cities rise through virtues; behold the neck of pride severed by the hand of humility
Regna cadunt luxu, surgunt virutibus urbes; Cesa vides humili colla superba manu.  

The second, presumably written by Piero de’ Medici and placed on the base of the statue as a means to reiterate his political stature and beneficence in Florence, read,

Public Health. Piero de’ Medici, son of Cosimo, dedicated this statue of a woman to the union of liberty and fortitude, so that the citizens might be led back through their constant and invincible spirit to the defense of the republic.
Salus publica. Petrus Medices Cos. fi. libertati simul et fortitudini hanc mulieris statuam, quo cives invicto constantique animo ad rem publicam tuendam reddentur, dedicavit.  

2 There is general scholarly agreement that the Judith and Holofernes dates to the late 1450s to early 1460s, with an installation date in the garden of the Medici palace in 1464, or shortly thereafter. On the differing views on date and commission, see Janson, Sculpture, pp. 202–5; Herzner, ‘Die “Judith” der Medici’; and Caglioti, ‘Donatello’, pt. 1. On the removal of the sculpture, see Landucci, Diario fiorentino, p. 119.
3 See, particularly, Janson, Sculpture, pp. 198–205; Caglioti, Donatello e i Medici, pp. 1–12; Crum, ‘Severing’.
4 My translation of ‘salus publica’ as ‘public health’ implies the meaning of the term as in Cicero’s maxim ‘salus publica suprema lex esto’.
The inscriptions’ rejection of tyranny in favor of liberty and humility clearly positioned the sculpture as a metaphor for the Medici as virtuous defenders of Florence.\(^5\) Indeed, the intended combined message was rather straightforward: Judith symbolizes the victory of humility (humilitas) over pride (superbia) and luxury (luxuria).\(^6\) The Medici erected the statue so that they and others would be inspired by her example to selflessly perform civic duty to the Republic. Given this overt political framing, art historians have situated their interpretations of the form and content of the *Judith* within the context of Cosimo’s or Piero’s efforts to self-fashion their political identity in the 1450s and 1460s. The bronze heroine, standing erect with sword held high above her head, is understood as the embodiment of male Medici political power.\(^7\)

While such an interpretation is undoubtedly accurate, the sculpture is filled with layers of signification that resist being ‘read’ in one particular way all the time.\(^8\) The ground floor spaces of the Medici residence were designed to accommodate a wide public who came to the palace as visitors, business associates, and supplicants. The statue’s positioning within the garden ensured its visibility to these guests, and, since the primary entrance to the palace from Via Larga offered a view of the garden beyond the space of the courtyard, even passersby may have had the opportunity to glimpse the sculpture.\(^9\) The ability of the *Judith* to communicate to multiple audiences in a variety of ways enhanced its intrinsic value for the Medici family. Indeed, its adaptability perhaps is one reason why the sculpture was considered acceptable in a fifteenth-century domestic context, despite its overt symbolic connections with the Florentine government and its potential characterization as a conspicuous display of Medici wealth and power.\(^10\)

Although the scholarship on Donatello’s bronze sculpture in Palazzo Medici is quite extensive, very little has been written of the primary viewing audience for the *Judith* during the 30 years in which it was installed in the garden; that is, those individuals who lived in the palace and who served to benefit from its pro-Republican subject.\(^11\) Cosimo, the *pater patriae*, already was dead by 1464, the earliest proposed date for the *Judith*’s installation within the family’s

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5 Cagliotti, *Donatello e i Medici*, pp. 1–21.
7 For a recent example, see Crum, ‘Judith’.
11 For an interpretation of the *David* from a female perspective, see Baskins, ‘Donatello’s Bronze *David*’, pp. 113–34.
home. Likewise Piero, despite his direct intervention in crafting the sculpture’s meaning by adding his inscription to it, died within a few years of its arrival in the palace. Thus, despite the great number of art historical studies dedicated to illustrating the Judith’s ability to shape a portrait of Piero’s political power, the visual resonance of it to do so with effect necessarily ebbed in the wake of his death and the decades that followed. Between 1469 and 1492, Lorenzo ‘il Magnifico’—Piero’s son and the effective leader of the family after his father’s death—inhabited the spaces that had been decorated by his grandfather and father. The memory of his ancestors was visualized in the architecture and art of the palace, and the way in which the palace was used and how its decoration communicated the family’s status and power persisted fluidly during Lorenzo’s lifetime. As Dale Kent has emphasized, Renaissance ‘sons “became” their fathers at a certain point’ and continued to embody and express their attitudes over the generations. In this line of thinking, the sculpture of Judith continued to uphold male Medici claims to authority and power in the city after Piero de’ Medici’s death, albeit transferred to his eldest son.

Yet, Lorenzo was only 20 years old at the time he assumed the head position of the family, and he relied on his mother, Lucrezia Tornabuoni de’ Medici, to help manage his and the family’s affairs. Before her husband’s death, Lucrezia held many roles simultaneously within the Medici household, including wife, mother, hostess, intellectual liaison to the leading male members of the family, political sounding board, and diplomat for Medici affairs. As Francis Kent has discussed, Lucrezia possessed active political power, and often received letters from individuals who wished her to use this power in particular ways. She openly demonstrated her understanding of the economic transactions of the family business through strategic investment in properties and was a savvy entrepreneur who, among other enterprises, designed and managed a resort at the hot springs of Morba. Piero’s death in 1469 did not diminish Lucrezia’s authority and visibility; rather it rose as she retained the role of first matron of the household and served as a relatively overt intermediary for and adviser to Lorenzo until her death in 1482.
Lucrezia built a reputation as a cultured intellectual from the first year of her marriage to Piero in 1444 and was an active participant in humanist discussions at the family’s residences both in the city and in the country. She authored several texts that were shared with, praised, and performed by some of the leading poets and writers of Florence.\textsuperscript{18} Her extant body of work includes several \textit{laudi spirituali} (spiritual poems that were sung) and five \textit{sacre storie} (sacred narratives in verse).\textsuperscript{19} In the 1470s, Lucrezia wrote her sacred narrative entitled ‘The Story of Judith, Hebrew Widow’, one of several that she composed after Piero’s death.\textsuperscript{20} The text is cited often as an expression of Lucrezia’s piety, and is seen in alignment with her impressive public charitable works in Florence and elsewhere. Art historians and literary critics have noted a loose connection between Lucrezia’s selection of subject and Donatello’s sculpture in the garden of her palace. In his exploration of the gendered implications of the \textit{Judith}’s woman-on-top iconography, Adrian Randolph suggested that the sculpture may have inspired a ‘proto-feminist’ gaze for the female members of the Medici family, including Lucrezia, who decided to rewrite the story of the empowered biblical female.\textsuperscript{21} Yet, this is as far as scholars have ventured to address the sculpture within the context of Lucrezia’s writings and her specific agency within the palace.\textsuperscript{22}

This essay instead situates Donatello’s sculpture in direct communication with Lucrezia’s sacred story so as to highlight another layer of signification for the \textit{Judith} as an embodiment of female Medici political power. Jane Tylus has suggested convincingly that Lucrezia’s texts were created specifically for an intimate group of family and friends, and the language that Lucrezia used may be understood as a self-conscious attempt to insert her works into the popular literary culture already realized in Florence by the late 1460s, which was erudite and laced with political content.\textsuperscript{23} Evidence of a broad spectrum of locations and contexts for the recitation of poems and prose exist for fifteenth-century Florence, from ‘public’ to ‘private’, including Palazzo Medici and other Medici villas in the region. Texts, poems, and songs were commonly performed by members of the Medici family, including Lucrezia, for small gatherings of familiars or on the occasion of diplomatic

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{18}{Tomas, \textit{Medici Women}, p. 28.}
\footnotetext{19}{Medici, \textit{Sacred Narratives}, p. 162.}
\footnotetext{20}{The \textit{sacre storie} are found Biblioteca Nazionale di Firenze, Magliabechiano VII, 338. Throughout this essay, I rely on Jane Tylus’s transcription of ‘The Story of Judith, Hebrew Widow’, in Medici, \textit{Sacred Narratives}.}
\footnotetext{21}{Randolph, \textit{Engaging Symbols}, p. 268.}
\footnotetext{22}{For example, see Medici, \textit{Sacred Narratives}, p. 120.}
\footnotetext{23}{Medici, \textit{Sacred Narrative}, p. 153.}
\end{footnotes}
visits. In her own stories, Lucrezia included performative clues that signal their use as both texts to be read and words to hear. Expanding on Tylus's suggestion, the essay reconstructs the garden of Palazzo Medici as it once appeared in the 1470s to consider it as a performance space for Lucrezia's sacred narrative of Judith. The performative culture fostered within the fifteenth-century Medici household itself provides a strong foundation for considering the garden as a space activated by Lucrezia's words. As this essay explores, however, compelling formal and performative intersections between Lucrezia's text and Donatello's sculpture also signal the garden as a setting for a recitation.

The essay traces how the performative cues of Lucrezia's words functioned to somaesthetically connect Lucrezia's audience with Donatello's statue, thus prompting the opportunity for an active co-production of the narrative that bound performers and audience together. ‘Somaesthetics’— a term derived from the combination of soma, or the active, sentient body, and aesthetics, or sensory appreciation— refers to the purposeful cultivation of the body and mind to enhance sensory appreciation and creative self-fashioning. Somaesthetic experiences, such as the active cultivation of the audience in the garden of Palazzo Medici, fostered the production of meaning in the Renaissance spectator through the self-conscious performance of body–mind engagement strategies that personalized viewers' perception and understanding of artistic programs. Through the sensuous, time-based scenarios of somaesthetic experiences, the process of viewing became enfolded into performative assertions of individual and collective identity. Throughout the text, Lucrezia actively cultivates her audience members to appreciate their immediate sensory environment through clear instructions on how and when to look, listen, or imagine. When she speaks of Judith, Lucrezia often strays from the standard narrative of the female heroine and, within these self-conscious expansions and gaps in the text, invites the audience to read into the subject and personalize its protagonist. In the context of a recitation in the garden of Palazzo Medici, or, as a text imagined in tandem with the decoration of the garden, Lucrezia's words enliven Donatello's sculpture.

24 Ibid., pp. 28, 71.
25 For Butler, the body is not a static fact that is given, but rather is ‘a manner of doing, dramatizing, and reproducing a historical situation’; Butler, ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution’.
27 This is the central focus of my book-length project, Somaesthetic Experience and the Renaissance Viewer: Politics and Political Persuasion in Medicean Florence, 1459–1580, which is currently in progress.
Judith as the sacred heroine of her story. They also construct a dynamic relation between herself and her audience by enfolding the sacred time of the story with contemporary time, which was experienced sensuously through her commands to see and hear. Highlighting the strategies by which Lucrezia’s fifteenth-century story conflates contemporary Florentine attitudes concerning justice, virtue, and political power with Judith’s sacred history, the essay provides a gendered reading of Donatello’s Judith based on Lucrezia’s heroine. Ultimately the essay reveals how Lucrezia’s self-fashioning in relation to both the textual and sculptural biblical heroine may be considered a strategy to give voice to her critical role within the family and the state.

During the fifteenth century, Palazzo Medici featured a square plan with its primary facade facing Via Larga and its garden located behind it along Borgo San Lorenzo (now Via Ginori). Although the garden and its surrounding architecture were completely transformed under the Riccardi family after 1680, it is possible to reconstruct its original form—an irregular quadrilateral plan—in the mid- to late-fifteenth century. The garden was enclosed on four sides and free-standing sculptures were placed along the walls and in niches. The northern wall of the garden was lined with fruit trees and most likely featured an ancient statue of Priapus, which was inscribed with a verse. A one story high wall ran along the southern (Via de’ Gori) and western (Borgo San Lorenzo, now Via dei Ginori) sides of the garden; these walls were crenelated at the top and plastered and decorated in sgraffito to emulate stone blocks. The wall lining the Borgo San Lorenzo was pierced by a portal that aligned with the center of the courtyard and front entrance. Two antique marble statues of Marsyas flanked the door on either side. The back of the palace, including the arcade that lined the western side of the courtyard, formed the eastern wall of the garden.

The portal that connects the garden to the courtyard on this side gave onto a direct view of Donatello’s bronze sculpture of David, which was placed in the center of the courtyard. Raised above eye level on a pedestal, the slender, sensuous body of the young boy is positioned in triumph above the decapitated head of Goliath. While the rock held in David’s left hand

30 Thiem and Thiem, Toskanische, p. 62.
33 Shearman, Only Connect, pp. 22–27.
identifies him, the long sword held in his right hand firmly locates him in the narrative moment after the slingshot battle and beheading of the giant. An inscription placed on the base iterated the significance of the act: ‘The victor is whoever defends the fatherland. God crushes the wrath of an enormous foe. Conquer, o citizens!’ Raised in the air as it was, the bronze statue was displayed like imperial statues of ancient Rome but proclaimed the Republican values of the city-state instead of the rule of one. As fifteenth-century visitors were well aware, an earlier sculpture of David by Donatello was installed in the sala grande of the Palazzo della Signoria and its pedestal also was inscribed with a political text, ‘To those who fight bravely for the fatherland God lends aid even against the most terrible foes.’ This inscription’s close relationship with the later inscription on the bronze David in the Medici courtyard indicates that it was self-consciously appropriated to forge a political connotation between the two and ensure its primary subject was understood to express the values of the Florentine popolo, firmly against tyranny and a defender of liberty.

The clear sight line of the sculpture from the street and from the garden signaled to visitors its primary importance to the Medici within the overall collection of works on display.

While Richard Goldthwaite asserts that the walling off of the garden was an exclusionary gesture, one must consider how this same act functioned to cultivate an intimate sensory environment for those many individuals who gained access to the interior of the palace. The walls of the enclosed garden diminished the noise of the busy Renaissance city and created a self-contained architectural setting that was curated to elicit sensory delight. The garden was filled with diverse fruit trees, flowers, myrtle, and laurel, as well as topiary in the form of coats of arms, animals, and ships. According to a description from 1459, when Galeazzo Maria Sforza, the son of the Duke of Milan, was a houseguest for two weeks within the palace, the ‘garden [was] done in the finest of polished marbles with diverse plants, which seems a thing not natural but painted’. Such an extensive and well-cultivated green space was a site to be coveted in the urban setting of Florence, where residents utilized every available nook for the cultivation of

34 The inscription was recovered by Sperling, ‘Donatello’s Bronze “David”’.
36 Crum, ‘Donatello’s Bronze David’.
38 Goldthwaite, Building.
39 D. Kent, Cosimo, p. 300.
40 Hatfield, ‘Some Unknown Descriptions’, p. 233.
plants and flowers. Vespasiano da Bisticci recorded that Cosimo enjoyed getting his hands dirty in the garden and that his active work there brought him great enjoyment. In the casa vecchia, Cosimo had enjoyed an orange garden in the rear of the palace; in the new palace, this garden expanded to measure approximately 35 meters from the north to south walls and 18 meters between east and west.

A marble fountain was once located in the garden, most likely on the central axis with the David and the entrance doors to the palace. An account of the service for the 1469 wedding festivities of Lorenzo de’ Medici and Clarice Orsini held in Palazzo Medici provides a description of its relation to the David in the courtyard: ‘No sideboards had been placed for the silver. Only tall tables in the middle of the courtyard, round that handsome column on which stands the David, covered with tablecloths, and at the four corners were four great copper basins for the glasses, and behind the tables stood men to hand wine or water to those who served the guests. The same arrangement was made in the garden round the fountain you know.’ The spatial implication of the account is that the centers of both the courtyard and the garden were transformed into buffet stations for the drinks and food of the party. Thus, the David was the central feature of this festive display on one side, while the fountain anchored the station on the other.

Traditionally, the description was interpreted to suggest that Donatello’s bronze Judith was itself part of this fountain, for it was also believed that the bronze cushion upon which Holofernes’ body is splayed was once part of a watering mechanism. The Judith narrative is contingent on water, for the heroic defeat of Holofernes ultimately allowed for the restoration of water to the city of Bethulia, thus the coupling of the figure with a fountain was not iconographically illogical. Furthermore, by placing the Judith with the fountain in the center of the garden, the bronze figure repeated in both form and content the bronze figure in the courtyard. This produced a symmetrical layout of decapitation scenes in two large free-standing

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41 Looper, ‘Political’, p. 255.
43 Goldthwaite, Building, p. 135.
44 Ross, Lives, p. 130; Caglioti, Donatello e i Medici, p. 86
45 For proposals that the sculpture once was integrated into a fountain, see Hyman, Florentine Studies, p. 186, n. 37; Janson, Sculpture, pp. 198ff.; Pope-Hennesey, Donatello, p. 286; Looper, ‘Political’, pp. 257, 261–65. For documents relating to a granite basin that was left in the garden when the sculpture was confiscated by the Signoria, see Wiles, Fountains, p. 110. For a full dispute of the statue as fountain, however, see Cagliotti, Donatello e i Medici, pp. 81–100.
46 Looper, ‘Political’, p. 263.
sculptures made by the hand of the same artist and displayed along the east–west axis of the palace. Yet, as the material evidence found during the restoration of 1988 suggests, the holes in corners of the bronze pillows were not in fact spouts (but rather once featured tassels) and no other signs of technology for water were attached to any of the internal surfaces of the sculpture.\(^\text{47}\) Thus the *Judith* most likely was not used as a fountain, and, as such, it was not located in the center of the garden. While there is little to no documentary evidence to suggest an alternate location for it, Francesco Caglioni’s proposal for the disposition of the *Judith* in the center of the northern half of the garden is logical.\(^\text{48}\) While it would no longer be on direct axis with the *David*, the sculpture’s repetition of material, subject, and political content would have been unmistakable to a fifteenth-century visitor and would have bound it to the larger themes that underscored the Medici collection of art in the last quarter of the century.

Residents and guests could enjoy a view of the *Judith* in the garden from a number of different vantages. Benches were installed along the walls between the doors and stone paths lined the perimeter.\(^\text{49}\) As evidenced by extant columns and capitals incorporated into the current Riccardi gallery along the south side, an internal loggia with three bays once occupied this part of the garden.\(^\text{50}\) This loggia, unlike its exterior counterpart on Via Larga, was for the use of the family and their guests and was decorated with several antique relief panels as well as a monumental bronze sculpture of a head of a horse.\(^\text{51}\) The covered and arcaded space served as a place for relaxation, conversation, and entertainment and provided relief from the elements. It also was used as a frame for individuals, such as Clarice Orsini on her wedding to Lorenzo in 1469, when she was seated under the loggia as she ate and enjoyed the entertainment of 50 dancers.\(^\text{52}\) The loggia faced directly on to the garden and thus was freely accessible from it; a second entrance to the loggia was provided through a door in its southeastern wall, which led to the corner room of the courtyard on the *piano terreno*. Individuals could climb on top of the loggia to enjoy an elevated view of the garden. Additional raised vantages were offered along the entire west wall of the garden by means of a hanging walkway, which could be accessed via doors leading from the *piano nobile* at the back of the house as well as a

\(^{47}\) Dolcini, ed., *Donatello*.
\(^{48}\) Caglioni, *Donatello e i Medici*, app., illus. 18.
\(^{49}\) Looper, ‘Political’.
\(^{50}\) Tarchiani, *Il Palazzo*, pp. 85–86.
\(^{52}\) Baskins, ‘Donatello’s Bronze *David*’, pp. 113–34.
small, most likely enclosed, spiral staircase in the northwest corner of the
garden. An intimate gathering of *famiglia e amici* in the garden would have
afforded everyone a direct view of the *Judith*, regardless of their seating. The
seating arrangement was analogous to the theater-in-the-round developed
in medieval theatrical productions and experienced in Florentine popular
festival. That is, the audience encircled the actors. In the context of
Lucrezia’s *sacra storia*, Donatello’s sculpture played the role of Judith in the
center of the garden and the audience either sat on the benches or stood on
one of the raised platforms that surrounded it.

The line of sight for viewers of the Judith was critical for Lucrezia’s sacred
story of Judith, which is filled with concepts of vision and visual strategies.
The first half of her text (86 of the 151 stanzas) make no mention Judith at all.
Instead, this prolonged preamble introduces vision as an important indicator
of virtue and a vehicle for justice. Those characters who were unable to
see due to vices, including Nebuchadnezzar and Holofernes, suffered the
consequences of their shortsightedness, while those who possessed clarity
of vision due to virtue, that is, the Hebrews, were rewarded with God’s
grace. For example, Lucrezia elaborates on the ways in which Holofernes
wrongly attempted to control the vision of conquered peoples through the
forced worship of an image, presumably a statue of Nebuchadnezzar. It
is notable that Holofernes is here described as ‘Duke’, as though invoking
the courtly structure of tyranny. Yet the ‘children of Israel’ refused to
recognize Nebuchadnezzar’s idol. As a demonstration of their humility
before God, they shielded their eyes and hearts and instead channeled their
prayers more forcefully to him.

At the 85th stanza, Lucrezia breaks from the narrative to speak directly
to her audience and to instruct them:

> Now *take good note of my words*:
> see how the just Lord saw fit to exalt his people,
> *note* in what manner he sent a remedy,
> and *see* how they were liberated from that cruel siege.

55 Frank, ‘Pilgrim’s Gaze’.
57 Ibid., p. 132.
58 Ibid., p. 135.
59 Ibid., p. 145 (emphasis mine).
As narrator, Lucrezia urges her audience to open their eyes for the first time and to visually engage with the agent of God’s grace. Within the context of the garden, Lucrezia’s audience was invited to engage with Donatello’s *Judith*, who stood upon her raised column and provided a visual stimulus to the entrance of the heroine into the narrative. The aural aspect of Lucrezia’s words functioned like ekphrastic text, which, as Jas Elsner has argued, encourages viewers to ‘read in’ and personalize the image. Seated facing Donatello’s sculpture and listening to Lucrezia’s words, the audience—just as audiences of popular performances—co-produced the experience through their active gaze.

Vision also functions as an indicator of moral virtue in Lucrezia’s text. She emphasizes Judith’s clarity of vision, particularly in the narrative moments in which she must manipulate her own image to persuade Holofernes to act. For example, on the fourth and fateful night of her stay within Holofernes’ camp, Judith agreed to attend Holofernes’ banquet beside him and thus prepared her exterior self in her finest clothes and her interior self with great devotion to the Lord. Holofernes’ inability to see beyond Judith’s physical surface inevitably initiated his downfall. His incomprehension exposed his blindness to the strength of their faith, and thus he continued to besiege the Hebrew people. Without proper vision, Holofernes was in effect blind to what was to come.

The audience was cued to look at what he did not: his death by the hand of the virtuous woman. Lucrezia complements this cue to look with a reminder to listen. She explains,

> as you will now hear,
> their prayers were heard by God,
> and he rescued them from harm.
> You will witness his infinite grace;
> He reveals his power to unbelievers,
> *And he gives victory to them who have faith.*

The last phrase connects Lucrezia’s narrative directly with the inscription on the base of the *David* that was placed in the center of the courtyard. The wielding of such political statements within Lucrezia’s Judith

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60 Elsner, ‘Art History as Ekphrasis’, p. 49.
63 Ibid., p. 136.
64 Ibid., p. 145 (emphasis mine).
65 Sperling, ‘Donatello’s Bronze “David”’. 
narrative served to enfold her audience within the immediate context of the Palazzo Medici and shape the sculpture’s symbolic content in time-based performance.

The political intentions of Lucrezia’s narrative are implied further through her use of *ottava rima*, the structure of sacred and secular *cantari* that were publicly recited in Florentine *piazze*. As Nerrida Newbigin, Dale Kent, and others have demonstrated, these popular performances played an important role within Florentine daily life and often conveyed political sentiments couched in popular rhetoric. Lucrezia’s narrative was undoubtedly connected to popular performative culture in Florence and this, too, held political significance. The dramatic structure of her narrative anticipates her audience’s familiarity with the theatrical traditions of *sacre rappresentazioni* and uses their staging techniques to draw her listener-viewers into the sensory environment of the garden.

Not yet mentioned in the literature on either Lucrezia’s narrative or Donatello’s sculpture are the clear correspondences between the two Judiths during the scene of decapitation and their formal connections to public rituals of execution as well as their staged performance in Florence. While Holofernes’ decapitation generally is considered to be the dramatic highlight of the Judith narrative, Lucrezia’s version of the scene is rather unremarkable and quick:

Once she had said her prayer
Judith rose, her heart resolved,
and in one hand she grasped a sword she had found
leaning against a column or the wall,
and so well did the young woman brandish it
it would have been fitting for a strong and sturdy man,
she struck him twice, with force,
and his head rolled away from his shoulders.

The sparse attention given to the beheading is in alignment with extant fifteenth-century scripts for sacred dramas featuring decapitations, which do not verbalize the scene in any detail since this narrative was performed

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66 Lucrezia distinguished the stories of Judith and St. John the Baptist from her other sacred narratives through her use of the *ottava rima* (eight-line stanza); Medici, *Sacred Narratives*, pp. 26–27.
live by the actors on stage. By following convention, Lucrezia creates a gap in the text that allows for the witnessing of a performance of the scene by the bronze sculpture of Judith, which emerges as a dramatic actor.

Early modern dramas of beheading drew upon the visual language of juridical punishment in an effort to engage with the lived experiences of spectators and facilitate a ‘reality effect’ that personalized the distant past and enabled deeper understanding of the drama's significance.69 On the feast of St. John the Baptist’s martyrdom (29 August) in 1451, for example, Florentines staged a sacred drama of the Decollazione di San Giovanni Battista (Beheading of Saint John the Baptist).70 Unlike the elaborate traditions developed to celebrate the feast of the saint’s birth each year, sacred dramas commemorating the Baptist’s martyrdom were unprecedented in Florentine ritual practice. In fact, this performance provides the only extant record of a beheading drama in the city, which strongly suggests that the staging of the production must be understood in its temporal proximity to the signing of a political treaty with Milan. At that time, Cosimo de’ Medici, acting as a member of a wartime commission, the Dieci della Balià, negotiated an official alliance between the Florentines and Francesco Sforza, the Milanese duke, and thereby effected peace between the two city-states after an extremely long period of political strife and military battles.71 The immediate celebrations for the peace treaty included a great festa in Florence with fireworks and bells ringing from the towers of the churches. However, the drama presented one month later, on 29 August, was the culmination of the celebration. The location of the stage was outside the walls of the city in the Pratello della Giustizia (or the ‘little meadow of justice’), the site for state-sponsored criminal executions in the city. The enacted death of Florence’s patron saint on a site used for the execution of real criminals heightened and fostered devotion toward him, since both the saint and his death were embodied so vividly through actor and stage.72

The performance on the feast of the martyrdom of the Baptist was most likely connected to the new attention that the date received after the Medici family’s return from exile in 1434. Like all Florentines, the Medici held a special devotion to St. John the Baptist as the patron saint and defender of their city.73 According to Florentine legend, it was on John the Baptist’s

69 Owens, Stages of Dismemberment, esp. pp. 115–43.
70 Trexler, Public, p. 119, n. 130; Newbigin, Nuovo corpus, pp. 109–33; Terry, ‘Donatello’s Decapitations’.
72 Edgerton, Pictures, pp. 234–38.
73 Chrétien, Festival.
birthday in 401 that the city was liberated from the Goths, thus John was explicitly connected to libertas, the most important virtue of the Florentine Republic. Elaborate festivities, including processions, theatrical spectacles, mostre, and fireworks, marked the feast of John’s birth each year, and the Medici actively participated in the organization and staging of the celebrations. They also were involved in joint artistic commissions for the most important cult site dedicated to their city patron, the Baptistery of San Giovanni, as was their father. When the Albizzi faction staged its famous coup against the Medici in September 1433, Cosimo, his brother Lorenzo and the other male members of the family were stripped of their right to political office and forced into a fixed period of exile from the city. However, in the days and months that followed the Medici departure, a series of political, economic, and social disturbances disrupted the equilibrium of the city to such an extent that the Medici were invited back to Florence within a year, and their political enemies were exiled in retribution. The Florentines ultimately attributed the political disturbances of these years to inappropriate actions performed by elected officials of the city. These officials were elected to office in 1433 and 1434 on no less of an auspicious date than 29 August, the feast of San Giovanni Decollato. Thus, the sixteenth-century historian Francesco Guicciardini explained in his History of the Tuscan city that the popular opinion of the Florentines was that the economic and social disturbances of these years were a result of their patron saint’s anger with them for not respecting his feast day and not protecting the Medici family. When Cosimo returned to the city, the Florentines formally changed the date for all future elections of offices away from the feast of the Baptist’s martyrdom (29 August) to the day prior (28 August). With the newly expressed political connection between the Baptist’s feast of decapitation and Cosimo and Lorenzo’s return to the city from exile, the Medici assumed a particular devotion to the cult focus of their patron saint’s martyrdom, that is, the head of the Baptist.

Lucrezia would have been familiar with the performance of the drama and the connections it expressed to her husband’s family. She herself wrote a narrative of Saint John the Baptist’s martyrdom in one of her sacred stories. Although there are no specific staging instructions for the Florentine Decollazione drama, other theatrical productions from the period suggest that the gestural language used to express the scene of

74 Trexler, Public, p. 333, n. 3.
75 Guicciardini, History, p. 4.
76 Terry, ‘Donatello’s Decapitations’.
beheading was a prolonged exaggerated pose with sword held high. Like those actors on the stage, Donatello's Judith is remarkable for its static concentration on the moment of the decapitation (Figure 8.2). The rigid expression and stance of Judith—so different from the fleshlike treatment of David's prepubescent body in the courtyard—communicated strength and determination. Judith's sword is held high, frozen in the moment before the second, and fatal strike to his neck. Due to its position in the air away from Judith's body, the sword is easily seen regardless of the angle at which the sculpture is viewed. Traces of the original gilding on the blade of the sword suggest that it was further highlighted in the natural light of the day. Judith's costuming emphasized her active distribution of justice as a warrior hero since, as Diane Apostolos-Cappadona has analyzed, it was based on ancient armor, including the cuirass (neck piece) and vambrace (bracelet). Judith, in her raised position and with her sword held high, embodied the action of the beheading scene. By commanding her audience to look at the agent of God's grace, Lucrezia pointed to the visual form as the eternal image of Justice.

While Lucrezia's narrative abbreviates the scene of beheading so as to enliven the Judith statue in its performative action, at least thirteen subsequent stanzas are dedicated to the ways in which the decapitated head was displayed to Judith's fellow Israelites once back inside the walls of her hometown. As Lucrezia emphasizes, the sight of the head was so powerful that it spurred emotional and bodily reactions. Judith was urged to mount the 'cursed head' on the wall of the city 'so that by everyone it could easily be seen', and this emboldened the Israelites to seek further justice from members of Holofernes' army. Lucrezia's emphasis on the communal need for viewing Holofernes' decapitated head conforms to fifteenth-century Florentine attitudes about the importance of communal witnessing of criminal bodies. Sight was a means for civic cleansing after criminal transgressions. The body of the criminal was offered to the community as

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77 Scholars have noted the awkward position of Holofernes under the figure of Judith and have considered the group formation as a kind of visual psychomachia that condenses the narrative into its culminating moment; Randolph, Engaging Symbols, pp. 251–52. Yet, one can also read the sculpture as a performative image that enacts Judith's sacred history in the dramatic language of the late fifteenth century.
78 Apostolos-Cappadona, 'Costuming', p. 331.
79 Randolph, Engaging Symbols, pp. 257–59; Terry, 'Donatello's Decapitations'.
81 Ibid.
82 Terry, 'Craft of Torture'.

Figure 8.2  Detail of Figure 8.1. Photo: author
a means of visualizing the process of justice and the effective containment of crime through its retribution. The collective gaze of the crowd upon the criminal body was a means by which the community of Florentines imposed their moral and civic judgment. In this way, viewers could read the head of Holofernes in Donatello’s sculpture, twisted in Judith’s hands so as to be in alignment with the audience’s vision, as a sign of good government.

Whereas art historians generally have pointed to the _Judith_ as a stand-in for the male members of the Medici household, Lucrezia’s narrative positions her as the political protagonist. Throughout the sacred narrative, Lucrezia emphasizes Judith’s masculine and feminine characteristics as a means to explain her active power. According to Lucrezia, Judith possessed a ‘manly heart’, presumably one that would not falter under the stress of the impending siege, as well as an independent spirit, for she had been widowed for three years and ‘did not seek another husband’. However, she would use her feminine beauty to position herself as Holofernes’ assassin. Judith’s plan was to create a false vision for Holofernes and to use his susceptibility to material beauty to her advantage,

> When Holofernes saw her, he was set aflame; that ferocious heart of his became human, and once he began to _gaze_ at her lovely face he could not take his _eyes_ away from hers.  

Holofernes could not see beyond her exterior: he ordered his treasurer to ‘place her who is like the rose of an orchard here tonight among my treasures’.

During the scene of the decapitation of the tyrannous general, Lucrezia claimed that Judith brandished her sword like a ‘sturdy and strong man’. Although such references to masculine strength may be read as literary tropes intended to explain Judith’s augmented power through the grace of God, they also reflect on the ways in which Lucrezia self-consciously pointed to Judith’s crossing of normative gender boundaries. When Judith took it upon herself to take action to alleviate the suffering of her people, she brought herself before the priests of Bethulia and proclaimed,

84 Medici, _Sacred Narratives_, p. 145.  
85 Ibid., p. 150.  
86 Ibid., p. 148.  
87 Ibid., p. 155.
May each of you note my words!
Through his grace, God has put it into my heart
to meddle [frammettersi] in things so your vows will be heard
and thus my Lord has promised me
that I might serve as the means
whereby our suffering might be alleviated and ended.88

Lucrezia’s selection of the verb ‘frammettersi’ (‘to mix oneself up in’ or ‘to meddle’) was a deliberate intervention in the Judith narrative, as it does not appear in the source material.89 It served as an auditory cue to her audience to indicate that Judith recognized that she was transgressing normative performative strategies in order to achieve her purpose.

Judith’s transgressions of normative gender roles were familiar to Lucrezia and she created parallels in their respective lines to foster a connection between them. For example, in stanza 85, Lucrezia (as narrator) commands, ‘Now take good note of my words’ (‘Or fa che mie parole a punto noti’); in stanza 90, Judith commands, ‘May each of you note my words!’ (‘Ciascun di voi le mie parole noti’).90 Like Judith, Lucrezia crossed normative gender boundaries in her highly visible position as wife of Piero and mother to Lorenzo.91 Indeed, Cosimo allegedly called her ‘the only man in the family’.92 Lucrezia’s alignment with the ‘meddling’ of Judith’s pious but nonconventional actions speaks to the ways in which the matron demonstrated her agency within the masculine-dominated familial structure.93

Lucrezia took liberty with Judith’s character description as a strategy to further connect her to the protagonist. For example, Holofernes described Judith as that ‘woman, with eloquent words’ and greeted her directly as ‘flower of all beauty’.94 The narrative emphasis on both Judith’s power of eloquence and her beauty as a ‘flower’ were Lucrezia’s additions to the Judith narrative, as these passages deviate from the sources and embellish the female heroine in particular ways. The treatment of Judith as an ‘eloquent flower’ may well have held allegorical significance for Florence (Fiorenza), the city of the Madonna del Fiore and home to a well-established humanist literary scene. Visual similarities between Donatello’s Judith and the female

88 Ibid., pp. 146.
90 Medici, Sacred Narratives, p. 146, n. 40.
91 Randolph, Engaging Symbols.
personification of Florentia found on the reverse of the bronze portrait medal of Cosimo de’ Medici make this point at least by the end of the century. Framing the heroine in such a way, Lucrezia built on familiar allegorical connections of Donatello’s statue of Judith with Florence—firmly against tyranny, faithful in God, and willing to fight for the collective good. The prominent connection of Donatello’s Judith with the seat of the Florentine government at the end of century—when the statue was removed from the Medici Palace and placed on the ringheria outside the Palazzo della Signoria—attests to the ways in which Florentines already made allegorical connections between their city’s history and the Judith story.

On a second level, however, Lucrezia’s words shaped this reference into a more distinct commentary on her own place within Florence. The ‘eloquent flower’ equally referenced Lucrezia herself, the author of Judith’s words and known throughout the city as ‘rarely eloquent’. In the years in which the text was most likely written—the early 1470s—Lucrezia, like Judith, was widowed, independent, and in a position to help shape the political scene of Florence. Her husband had previously connected himself to Judith by placing the second inscription on its base. When he died, she assumed the role of Judith and used her narrative to firmly connect herself with the symbolic content of the sculpture.

The last lines of Lucrezia’s narrative are spoken in the first person and contribute to an even further layer of symbolic content within the text:

May you, omnipotent Lord, be thanked,
who drew me out of the sea to the shore,
and I am now in harbor, where my heart
offers up to you my weak and unpolished rhymes.

The phrase ‘who drew me out of the sea to the shore’ is a clear reference to Venus, who was born of the sea. The putti adorning the neckline of Judith’s clothing in Donatello’s sculpture allude to this aspect of the female goddess. By positioning herself ultimately as a devout Venus, Lucrezia conflates the well-known typological associations of Judith-with-Mary with Mary’s-neoplatonic-association-with-Venus and, in so doing, perhaps makes a reference to herself as ‘cleansed’ through the just works of the government.

96 Valori, Vita, p. 95; F. Kent, ‘Sainted Mother’, p. 10, n. 31.
When considered as a text to be performed, Lucrezia’s sacred narrative of Judith fostered a particular way of viewing Donatello’s sculpture in the temporal setting of the garden of the Palazzo Medici. The matron’s commands to her audience to look up and see at key points in the narrative served to cultivate an active viewing experience that incorporated them, along with the sculpture and Lucrezia herself, into the dramatic action of the biblical tale. Just as in Florentine sacre rappresentazioni, Donatello’s sculptural group acted out the demonstration of justice through its gestural performance. By assuming the role of Judith’s compatriots, the audience served as embodied witnesses to her heroic efforts and were aligned with the notion of good government for which she stood.

Furthermore, Lucrezia’s manipulation of her audience’s somaesthetic experience may be connected to the subtle way that the matron shaped her own identity within the intimate circles of the Medici family. The text’s self-conscious doubling of Lucrezia’s narration with Judith’s speech conflated the voices of the two female protagonists and drew attention to the similarities of their social positions and moral virtues. As the audience in the garden witnessed the positive result of Judith’s transgression of normative gender roles, they also participated in Lucrezia’s own successful transgression of traditional patriarchal structures within the Florentine Renaissance household. Such performative interplay between listening inside the palace and witnessing Florentine identity politics in dramatic sculptural form is critical for understanding the full visual and symbolic potential of Donatello’s statue in the garden as well as the leading lady of the Medici family in the 1470s.

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