

Jan Steen's *Young Woman with a Letter (Bathsheba with King David's Letter)*: Dutch
Painting in the Age of #MeToo

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December 13, 2017

Abstract

Perhaps the greatest scandal in history is the subject of Jan Steen's *Young Woman with a Letter (Bathsheba with King David's Letter)*; the famed Dutch genre painter has brought to life the moment when Bathsheba receives the ill-fated letter from David summoning her to his chambers. While Bathsheba was a common subject of Steen's contemporaries, Steen's portrayal of Bathsheba is unique in her elegant dress and demure disposition. This paper seeks to examine how Steen's depiction of Bathsheba as a woman resigned to fulfilling the immoral wishes of her king induces the viewer to consider the rape not from the perspective of her male keepers, but from the perspective of the victim. Through visual analysis of paintings by fellow Dutch Masters such as Rembrandt and Frans van Mieris, Steen's divergence from typical illustrations of Bathsheba can be appreciated. Additionally, in the Bible's description of Bathsheba and King David's relations, the nature of the situation can be understood as rape. Analysis of proverbs of both ancient Israel and the sixteenth-century Dutch Republic informs the way both societies considered rape—as a violation against the woman's husband or father—lending Steen's focus on solely Bathsheba more significance. Another layer of Steen's painting is explored, as rape in art was commonly representative of Spanish violations of Dutch rights in the 1570s. Jan Steen's *Young Woman with a Letter (Bathsheba with King David's Letter)* clearly holds many possibilities for wonder and revelation, some of which are thoroughly examined in this paper.

Introduction

Despite the renown some artists of the Dutch Golden Age have garnered for their fine brushstrokes, many Dutch masters have shown themselves to be incapable of painting women with anything other than broad smears. Women in Dutch genre scenes were inevitably characterized as either beacons of morality or cautionary tales against temptation. Revered masters frequently showcased women as the focal subjects of their works, however almost always under the harsh light of seventeenth century gender constructs. This theme is not only inescapable, it is on full display when touring the National Gallery of Art's exhibit, "Vermeer and the Masters of Genre Painting," as paintings of ladies flirting, working, and preening beckon from the walls.

One work, however, immediately distinguishes itself from the flat female caricatures dominating the exhibit: Jan Steen's *Young Woman with a Letter (Bathsheba with King David's Letter)* (fig. 1). The painting is compositionally simple; two women converse in a bedchamber, one of them elderly, garbed in black robes, and the other young and elegant, holding a slip of paper in her hand. However, upon closer analysis, there is a prickling sense of tension and severity that seems to

emanate from the young woman. She stares out at the viewer almost confrontationally, her expression unrelenting yet defeated all at once. Her opulent dress and lavish surroundings contradict the unknown burden she bears; what could weigh this noblewoman down with such heaviness? An answer may be found in the painting's title: she is Bathsheba, wife of Uriah and taken by David, one of the most deeply controversial figures in the Bible. The National Gallery's short description of the painting on nearby wall-space reads as such:

Steen adapted Ter Borch's motif of a young woman with her maid for his depiction of the Old Testament story of Bathsheba receiving an invitation from King David to come to his chamber. The directness of Bathsheba's gaze as she reveals the contents of the letter to the viewer, and the open bed curtains behind her, foretell of her acceptance of his offer—a decision that will lead to the death of her husband. By depicting this biblical story in a contemporary setting, Steen made its moralizing lesson about choosing virtue over vice relevant to his audience.

In a few short sentences, the National Gallery has successfully forced the perceived place of women in Dutch seventeenth century society onto the previously clear picture. The characterization of the young woman shifts from a poised but troubled lady to a wayward, quasi-executioner. The National Gallery's entry implies that the subject of the painting serves as a reminder of the consequences resulting from immoral actions. Despite this coarse framing by the exhibit's curators, the impression on the viewer that the woman faces her troubles with dignity and composure remains clear.

In *Young Woman with a Letter (Bathsheba with King David's Letter)*, Jan Steen is able to blur the line between virtue and immorality to create a work that resonates with viewers through the ages. His choice to paint a biblical pariah in demure dress provides a multidimensional perspective of the subject, foreign territory for his peers when it came to painting women. The depth of the painting's focal character pushes the viewer to fresh conclusions and new questions. Jan Steen's depiction of Bathsheba as a modest woman resigned to fulfilling an immoral duty induces the viewer to consider the rape of a married woman not from an invested male spectator's position, but from the perspective of the victim herself.

Bathsheba's many voyeurs

To understand Bathsheba's image in art, one must understand her place in history. The story of Bathsheba appears in book two of Samuel in the Old Testament of the Bible. During ancient times in the burgeoning Hebrew nation of Israel, King David sees a young woman bathing from his perch on a rooftop. He is immediately enamored and inquires into her identity. The woman is Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, a general in King David's army away at war. Despite Bathsheba's marital status, King David summons her to his bedchambers. When Bathsheba becomes pregnant, King David concocts the clever plan of sending for Uriah and his men to return home. To King David's dismay, Uriah keeps with standard military discipline for the time and refuses to spend the night at home if his men cannot do the same. When Uriah returns to war without having slept with his wife, thus leaving the pregnancy unexplained, King David sends another general with him to ensure that Uriah is killed on the battlefield.¹ Complete with scandal, betrayal, and murder, this story is certainly among the Bible's more salacious. It is important to note, however, that although the story revolves around Bathsheba, she is hardly mentioned in detail. Instead, the Bible focuses on King David, and readers are left to ponder what kind of woman Bathsheba might have been. As the central character in the perfect storm of sexual scandal and biblical significance, Bathsheba was an exceedingly popular subject among Dutch Golden Age painters.

The nude form was a contentious choice to focus on in Dutch Golden Age painting. However, due to the biblical anchor of Bathsheba's story, as well as the role of sexual desire in its conclusion, Bathsheba was an obvious choice to portray in the nude form. Rembrandt certainly took advantage of her unique history, as two well-known works of his, *The Toilet of Bathsheba* (fig. 2) and *Bathsheba at Her Bath* (fig. 3) feature her as the focal figure. In both works, she is unclothed, the

¹ "Book of Samuel," in *The Holy Bible: containing the Old and New Testaments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

viewer presumably catching her when she is bathing, not unlike King David seeing her for the first time. In *The Toilet of Bathsheba*, she looks out at the viewer, a sly smile on her face and her body positioned as if on display. One servant combs Bathsheba's hair while another washes her feet. These acts of beautification imply that she is getting ready to impress with her appearance. Similarly, in *Bathsheba at Her Bath*, Rembrandt has decided to show Bathsheba in a manner so that it is impossible to ignore her nudity. Although her head is tilted down towards the servant washing her feet rather than up and out such as in *The Toilet of Bathsheba*, she is ultimately angled towards the viewer. Again, the moment we have found ourselves observing is that when King David might have seen Bathsheba for the first time.

Jan van Scorel, another Dutch painter and earlier contemporary of Jan Steen, includes a nude Bathsheba in his work, however perhaps a touch more discreetly than Rembrandt. In his *Landscape with Bathsheba* (fig. 4), van Scorel has relegated Bathsheba to the far left of the landscape painting. Although she is not centrally located, she is still nude and once more angled towards the viewer in an inviting manner. She sits on a marble ledge, her feet dangling into the water below with a languid sensuality. As expected, van Scorel has chosen to picture a bathing Bathsheba tempting the viewer, emphasizing the interpretation of Bathsheba as a seductress.

Even when Bathsheba appears clothed in other artists' depictions of her, she is done crudely so, with simple fabrics and suggestive draping. In *Woman with a Lapdog, Accompanied by a Maidservant (probably Bathsheba with King David's Letter)* (fig. 5), Frans van Mieris imagines Bathsheba dressed in a loose white top with a gaping neckline as well as a mottled green shawl drooping off her shoulders. The rosy glow of her cheeks frames a small smile playing on her lips while her hands toy with a luxurious mane of hair. While van Mieris's graceful hand is evident in the rendering of distinct textures, his portrayal of Bathsheba is as an eager recipient of King David's letter.

In returning to the painting of primary analysis, Jan Steen's *Young Woman with a Letter* (*Bathsheba with King David's Letter*), it is difficult to ignore how stark the contrast between Steen's portrayal of Bathsheba against his contemporary artists is. Steen's Bathsheba is not only elegant, she is the picture of demure dress as well. The elegant gown she wears gleams as the sunlight hits the folds of the fabric; the shine of the satin coupled with the bright colors of the dress make for a magnetic effect on the viewer's eye. Additionally, the neckline of the dress is high while the hem is low. Her forearm, hand, neck, and face are the only parts of her body that are truly exposed. Although the dress's volume swallows up the young woman's slender frame, Steen's skill ensures the viewer can still make out the stance of her body. She is actually positioned facing away from the viewer, which we can see due to the squaring of her shoulders. This is a far cry from the inviting, open poses of other artists' depictions.

In thinking of the other portrayals of Bathsheba by fellow Dutch painters, the modesty Steen paints Bathsheba with is a remarkable change in how her image can be approached. From the nude lounging of Rembrandt to the deliberate stiffness of Steen, the sexual undertones are almost all but sapped away. Even though Steen's Bathsheba may at first seem to alienate the viewer, her closed off turn only emphasizes the gravity of her head tilt. The angle at which her head is turned would not happen naturally without reason. Her body faces the open window in the background, while her head is turned over her right shoulder to look out at the viewer. She does not beckon the viewer towards her in a sexual manner. All of these minute cues and suggestions culminate into one overall effect: Bathsheba is the passive recipient of David's actions, not a seductive strategist.

Ancient consequences and Steen's Bathsheba

The acceptance of David as the driving force behind the whole affair leads to an examination of the legal context for adultery in search of consequence. Bathsheba was a married

woman living in ancient Israel. In the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy in the Bible, Hebrew law states that “If a man commits adultery with a married woman, both the partners in the crime are put to death.”² Should anyone have discovered that Bathsheba had extramarital relations, she would have been killed. Even though there were laws stating that both adulterers should be put to death, analysis by modern scholars has uncovered that “death” when referring to the man, is “generally synonymous with moral perdition” and is sometimes unofficially carried out as the “revenge of the injured husband.”³ Even if Bathsheba had tried to seduce King David into an affair, it would have been at the stake of her own life. She had far more to lose than King David.

With an understanding of the lethal penalty for adultery, the question that arises upon which the National Gallery has based their short entry on Steen’s painting is *why did Bathsheba choose to accept King David’s invitation?* Let us look into the reach and might of King David’s power for answers. In a compilation of ancient Hebrew proverbs, pictures of how the people viewed their king slowly emerge. One proverb warns, “The king’s wrath is as the roaring of a lion.”⁴ The king, once angered, seems to have been able to wreak havoc upon a subject’s life. Another adage cautions, “He that provokeketh [the king] to anger sinneth against his own life. In the light of the king’s countenance is life; and his favor is as a cloud of the latter rain. The wrath of a king is as messengers of death.”⁵ Falling out of the king’s favor is clearly met with the greatest of prices.

Coming together in an impression of terror on a whim, these proverbs are useful tools in analyzing Bathsheba’s choice of going to King David’s bedchambers. To be frank, there was never a choice to be made at all. The inherent power dynamic between king and female subject makes the invitation to his bedroom not an open dialogue, but in truth, a firm command. In whatever action

² Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Instruction* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997) 36

³ de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Instruction*, 36

⁴ Charles Foster Kent, *The Wise Men of Ancient Israel and their Proverbs* (2011) 112

⁵ Foster Kent, *The Wise Men of Ancient Israel and their Proverbs*, 111

she took, Bathsheba was doomed. Had she refused his order, King David would have put her to death; following through with his advances meant death under Ancient Israel's laws. Once her truly impossible situation is realized, the National Gallery's claim that Bathsheba's decision led to the death of her husband is understood as unfounded and falsely accusatory. Steen's painting acknowledges that Bathsheba is a silent victim with its depiction of Bathsheba as a proper woman who is coming to terms with the trapped fate King David's letter implies.

Bathsheba in her own light

As we have seen in previous analysis of contemporary works concerning Bathsheba, Steen's painting of her deviates drastically from typical renderings of a nude, bathing temptress. However, not only is the painting unique in visible elements, it also takes a second look at this ancient figure in a new light. Bathsheba's tale is almost always viewed through the eyes of David. Placing her in a bath or near a fountain like Rembrandt and van Scorel plants the viewer in the shoes of David seeing Bathsheba for the first time. Because of the story's nature, David's lust and desire inevitably cloud a scene from his point of view. When the viewer looks at a painting like *The Toilet of Bathsheba* (fig. 2), she is transported out of the self and into King David's mind. However, Steen's painting does no such thing.

The genius of Steen's imagination is on full display in his clever choice of scene. The moment Steen has captured is not written of in the Bible or historical accounts. When Bathsheba is presented with King David's letter, a plethora of intense emotions are surely darting through her mind, however all of them are *hers*. King David has no presence here, save for the pain he has induced. We cannot look at Steen's painting and pinpoint the perspective from which we see everything unfold, only an omniscient, unnamed narrator. The fact that Bathsheba's gaze is turned deliberately towards the viewer now takes on a deeper meaning. This subtle challenge to meet her

gaze draws the viewer into the scene not just as an interrupter of a private moment, but a witness. Departing from the popular perspective of erotic voyeurism in countless other Dutch Golden Age paintings is a meaningful step for Steen to have taken.

The lack of distinctly male presence tinting the work is far from normal depictions of married victims of rape during the time; the intended reaction from viewers of a painting concerning rape was usually fury stoked in sympathy with the woman's husband, father, or brothers. In seventeenth century Dutch society, rape was seen not as a violation of the woman's rights, but as a crime against property of men. Because women were considered under the ownership of their husbands or fathers, discussions of rape were not commonly centered around the victim, but rather the men to whom the perpetrator should make amends.⁶ Other artists and prominent writers of the time didn't even try to make the women in cases of rape appear as the victim; the Dutch writer, Jacob Cats was a proponent of portraying rapists as "sad victims of powerful feelings of lust and female attractiveness, and raped women as powerful seductresses."⁷ In these characterizations of rape that contrast so sharply with Steen's portrait of a strong but cornered Bathsheba, we see that Steen has given Bathsheba a voice, uncrowded by suggested male presence.

Possible political implications

Jan Steen's *Young Woman with a Letter (Bathsheba with King David's Letter)* has already proven itself a work with layers of revolutionary concepts and hidden meaning to discover. Another interpretation of the painting that presents itself when examining historical context is the possibility of a subtle political statement. Rape in art was a popular sixteenth century symbol of Spanish violation of Dutch rights and rallying point for Dutch men to continue to fight in the war with

⁶ Amanda Pipkin, "Every Woman's Fear: Stories of Rape and Dutch Identity in the Golden Age" *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 122 no. 3: 297-8

⁷ Pipkin, "Every Woman's Fear: Stories of Rape and Dutch Identity in the Golden Age" 299

passion and righteousness.⁸ When featured in art, the beautiful woman defiled stood as a representation of the Dutch nation. As the villain brutally attacked the women in theater productions or presented himself as a scoundrel in paintings, the audience could parallel his actions with those of the Spain's army. In the same way depictions of rape victims were supposed to incite anger from sympathizing with her male keepers, they could also incite anger against Spain's ravaging of the Dutch nation in male citizens.

Jan Steen's painting of the beautiful Bathsheba asks the viewer to consider not the call to arms that might be aggravated by an anger towards the assailant, but the genuine sorrow and pain of the victim. The Eighty Years War for a Dutch nation independent from Spain ended in 1648; Steen's painting is dated from around 1659-1660, a mere eleven years after the war's end.⁹ Even though the Dutch people had won their independence, the toll of the war had not dissipated. By highlighting Bathsheba's suffering, Steen could be calling his audience to consider the far less illustrious side to the Eighty Years War victory.

The death toll of the Eighty Years War reached the tens of thousands, not to mention the economic fallout for the infant Dutch Republic. The war was a marathon of killing and plunder; on July 12, 1573, after Haarlem was surrendered, twenty-three hundred citizens were "slaughtered in cold blood."¹⁰ An account of the damage naval battles wrought on Dutch citizens on land reads as:

Meanwhile the Dutch were suffering so severely from the blockade of their ports, injury to their fisheries and loss of trade that thousands were reduced to beggary, the food supply grew dangerously small and money was very difficult to obtain. In Amsterdam thousands of houses stood vacant, grass grew in once crowded streets, and the want of work was such that 'the whole country was quite full of beggars.'¹¹

⁸ Pipkin, "Every Woman's Fear: Stories of Rape and Dutch Identity in the Golden Age" 292

⁹ Charles Morris, *Famous Days and Deeds in Holland and Belgium* (Philadelphia and London, 1915)

¹⁰ Morris, *Famous Days and Deeds in Holland and Belgium*, 143

¹¹ Morris, *Famous Days and Deeds in Holland and Belgium*, 259

Perhaps Steen was motivated by his Catholic faith to shine a light on the overall suffering the nation bore due to the war, as the Dutch Protestant cause officially outlawed Catholicism.¹² Regardless of impetus, Steen's painting *Young Woman with a Letter (Bathsheba with King David's Letter)* holds parallels to and commentary on the Dutch nation's political climate.

Steen's Bathsheba and the #MeToo movement

The moment captured by Steen is timeless; even today, in the year 2017, women can relate to the dread and resignation Bathsheba is shown to have felt when a man of authority summons her to his chambers for an understood motivation. Although the depiction of an ancient scandal was created in the seventeenth century, it is more relevant today than ever. After Ashley Judd publicized sexual advances made towards her by Hollywood titan Harvey Weinstein, a wave of high-profile public figures have come forward with stories of abuse from men in positions of power.¹³ An article detailing the abuse Weinstein subjected Gwyneth Paltrow to recounts the event as, "Before shooting began, he summoned her to his suite at the Peninsula Beverly Hills hotel for a work meeting that began uneventfully. It ended with Mr. Weinstein placing his hands on her and suggesting they head to the bedroom for massages."¹⁴ This description sounds painfully familiar to Bathsheba's story from ancient times.

The prospect that power dynamics between men and female subordinates have remained the same in thousands of years is a depressing one. Furthermore, just as Bathsheba has been defamed throughout history as an immoral harlot, women cornered into impossible situations by men in current times have also been shamed. However, just as Steen's elegant, calculated depiction of

¹² Sutton, Peter C., and Marigene H. Butler, "The Life and Art of Jan Steen." *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* 78 no. 337 (1982): 7

¹³ Jodi Kantor and Meghan Twohey, "Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades" (The New York Times, 2017)

¹⁴ Jodi Kantor and Rachel Abrams, "Angelina Jolie and Others Say Weinstein Harassed Them" (The New York Times, 2017)

Bathsheba gives her depth and a voice, there is always hope to change the narrative. Perhaps the National Gallery could change the narrative written of *Young Woman with a Letter (Bathsheba with King David's Letter)* from a reminder of Bathsheba's surrender to vice, to an example of the impossible dilemmas men thrust upon women. In a wave of frustration and empowerment, women have already begun the revolution of speaking out and supporting one another. The future brims with the hope that, after thousands of years, we may finally put an end to modern reenactments of King David and Bathsheba.

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Appendix



Figure 1

Jan Steen

Dutch, 1625/1626-
1679

*Young Woman with a
Letter (Bathsheba with
King David's Letter)*

c. 1659-1660

oil on panel

Private Collection



Figure 2

Rembrandt

Dutch, 1606-1669

The Toilet of Bathsheba

1643

22 1/2 x 30 in. (57.2 x 76.2 cm)

oil on wood

Metropolitan Museum of Art

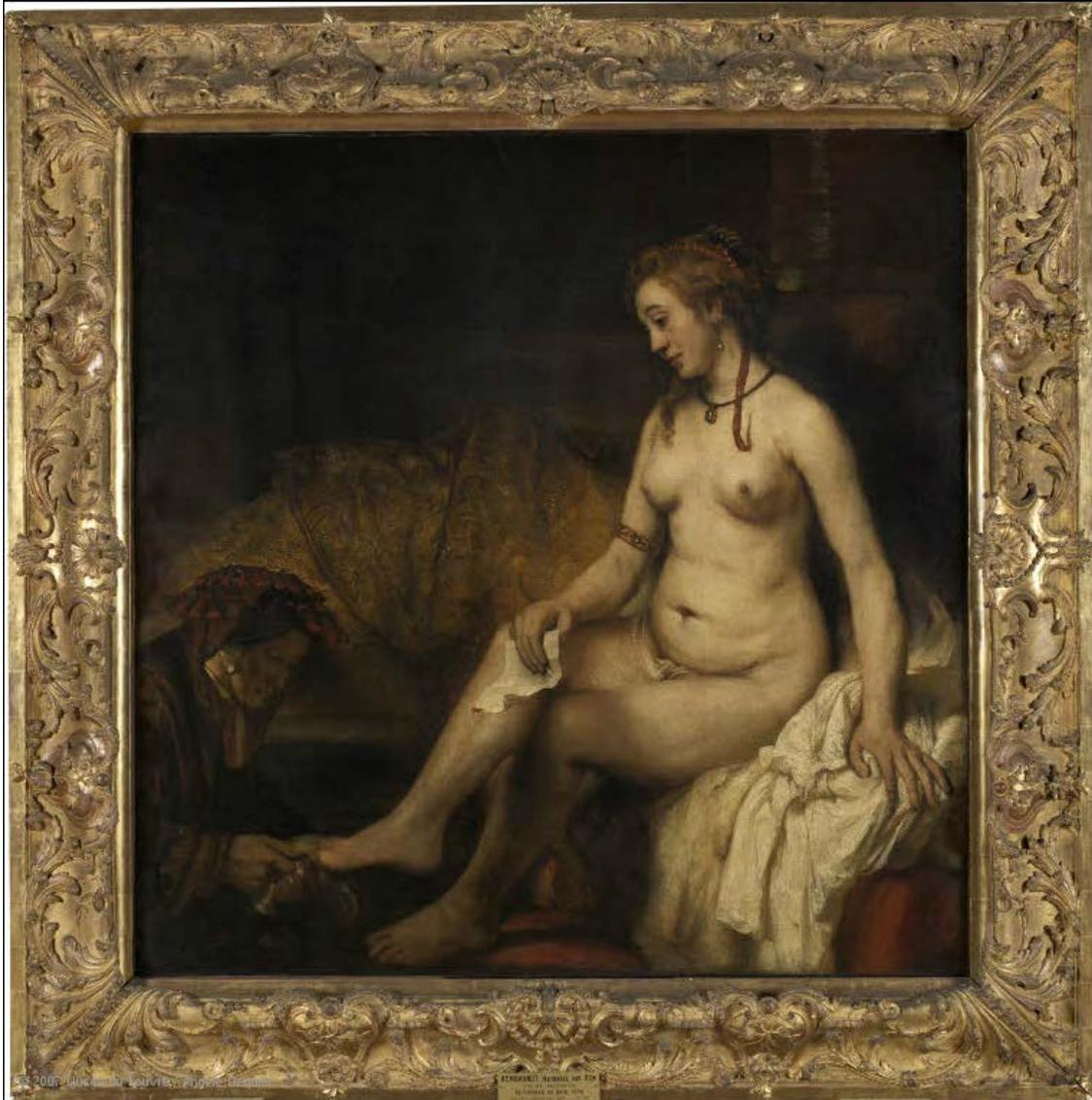


Figure 3
Rembrandt
Dutch, 1606-1669
Bathsheba at her Bath
1.42 m x 1.42 m
The Louvre



Figure 4
Jan van Scorel
Landscape with Bathsheba
c. 1540 - c. 1545
100.4 cm × 203.9 cm
oil on panel
Rijksmuseum



Figure 5
Frans van Mieris
Leiden 1635-1681
*Woman with a Lapdog, Accompanied by a
Maidservant (probably Bathsheba with King David's
Letter)*
1680
oil on panel
19.3 x 15.5 cm

Research Reflection Essay

When I first set out to choose my research topic, I was certainly not expecting to find a link between the Bible, Dutch painting, and the #MeToo movement. Students in Professor Pollack's University Writing course on Dutch Painting at the National Gallery were lucky enough to be studying the great genre painters of the Dutch Golden Age while a monumental Vermeer exhibit was on view at the National Gallery. To take full advantage of this rare opportunity, the final research paper for the class was to be inspired by a painting in the exhibit, "Vermeer and the Masters of Genre Painting." Strolling through the gallery, I was immediately drawn to a beautiful work by Jan Steen. However, after reading the National Gallery's short analysis of the work on the nearby wall space, I was surprised to find that I strongly disagreed with the curators' interpretations. Despite my impassioned initial reaction, I understood that I had not done sufficient research on the topic of the painting—Bathsheba receiving King David's letter—to fully support a counterargument to the National Gallery. With this in mind, I set out to explore GW's vast expanse of resources for student research.

My first step was to scour Gelman Library's database to guide my search. The art history librarian for my UW class had taught me and my fellow students how to access various research guides relating to the topic at hand as well as how to use the bibliographies of sources to expand one's research. Additionally, earlier in the year my class had the incredible opportunity to browse through selections from GW's Special Collections; by looking through centuries-old historic legal documents, the wide scope of GW's libraries became clear, assuring me that I would be able to find valuable primary sources even from the Dutch Golden Age. The GW library resource that I found particularly useful in this project was the broad access GW students enjoy to many different types of online journal articles. I was able to find prominent articles informing me of the historical context

for the painting I was researching, as well as analysis of the biblical story the subject was drawn from.

Once I read through the Bible story of Bathsheba and King David, I was bursting with a research question: did Jan Steen's painting of Bathsheba receiving King David's letter portray a more feminist version of the story than had previously been thought? From this unexpected avenue, I continued to sort through various articles and books providing historic background for Jan Steen's time. A unique aspect of my research process is that while the basis for the project might have been Dutch painting, I was branching off into various fields in order to view the painting in a new light. For example, I found myself traveling through various parts of the Gelman stacks in search of books on gender studies, Dutch history, ancient biblical times, as well as filing through contemporary sources such as investigations into Harvey Weinstein by various news outlets. I believe this multi-dimensional approach I took to my topic truly shows in the final paper; the ushering in of sources that were out of the ordinary both strengthened and sharpened my paper, bringing a unique interdisciplinary quality to the analysis while also developing my argument to address various points of rebuttal. I greatly appreciated the impressive scope of GW's library resources, which allowed me to explore different areas of study and apply information learned in other fields to my own.

Overall, writing this research paper was a true adventure. What started as a simple lack of seeing eye to eye on a painting at the National Gallery ended up being an analysis of a Dutch Golden Age painting of a biblical subject through the lens of the #MeToo movement. I am confident that I would not have been able to reach such a surprising and intriguing intersection without the vast resources offered by the GW Library system. With an argument that stretches through millennia, I was slightly worried at first that it would be difficult for me to find sources that related to all three time periods incorporated into my research project. However, I was quickly

relieved when I found GW's libraries to be up to the task of ensuring I could travel easily from one century to the next, as well as from one discipline to another. Allowing students to straddle different subjects creates more open-minded research projects that can offer surprising and creative insights about the world, both past, present, and future. Moving forward, I am positive that I will continue to utilize and enjoy GW's library services. Now armed with the knowledge of how to navigate online databases and the Gelman stacks with ease, I am excited to see what new research projects I will embark on with the help of GW's libraries.