THE ELDERS AND SUSANNA

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In the apocryphal addition to the book of Daniel, written in the second or first century, the beautiful and chaste Susanna is threatened with rape. The threat originates in voyeurism: two lecherous elders, taking advantage of their prestigious social position, spy on Susanna while she takes a bath in the garden. It also leads to voyeurism in the later tradition of Western painting. When Susanna sends her maids in to get oil and ointments, the two men suddenly spring forward. If she refuses to comply with their desire, they will bring her to court, claiming to have caught her with a young man. Susanna takes that risk rather than giving in; and when she is tried young Daniel comes to her rescue. He separates the two men, interrogates them, and makes them give contradictory evidence. Susanna is saved.

Rembrandt's Susanna paintings represent a young, vulnerable woman who looks toward the viewer as if seeking help. And neither female figure shares the voluptuous and assertive traits of the traditional Susannas' bodies. Both have more or less the same pose; the Berlin Susanna, while slightly younger looking and more elegant than the Mauritshuis version, is at first sight closer to the Medici Venus Pudica. The early Susanna is still sitting on the bench, just beginning to stand up, while the later one is already stepping into the water. Among the slight differences in the represented body which this chronology entails are the position of the left leg and arm. The left arm is closer to the body and the left leg, closer to the ground in the early work than in the later one.

The major, conspicuous difference between the two works is in the position of the elders. In the earlier work, the men are almost invisible. They seem integrated into the bushes. In fact, only one man is visible, on the outer right side, and this figure is assumed to be a later addition. If we take the work as it is now, we must read the work as if at most one peeper were actually represented. In the later painting, the men are as clearly represented as the woman; one elder is watching at some distance, the other is already touching Susanna. The face of the more distant elder is sharply illuminated,
for there is a gradual shading of the light from background to foreground. Although the tension in the early work is related to the hidden presence of the elders, it is their absence from the scene, of which Susanna is the center, which makes the earlier work so different from the later.

Like many biblical stories, this one has theological, moral, and juridical themes. But using the uplifting moral of the story as an excuse, painters have more often than not used the story to depict an attractive female, suggesting her complicity with, if not provocation of, the sexual assault. Daniel does not appear in such paintings. In the story he is, however, very important, for he is not only a prophet, hence a spokesman of wisdom, but also a young man. It is young Daniel, the future prophet, who saves Susanna from the death penalty to which the vengeful elders had condemned her. The absence of Daniel in the tradition of Susanna paintings raises the

Plate 1. Rembrandt, Susanna Surprised by the Elders, 1645, canvas, 102 x 84 cm (Staatsliche Museen zu Berlin—Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldegalerie).