
How Lucrezia Marinella Disproves Misogynists' Arguments

The feminist reader would enjoy Lucrezia Marinella's *The Nobility and Excellence of Women and the Defects and Vices of Men*, written in 1600. In her work, Marinella ridicules men's arguments for the defects and vices of women by making equally preposterous arguments for the fact that women are actually superior to men, and that it is men who are defective and vindictive—more so than women.[1] She effectively and continually turns men's words against them, using the same sources and authorities. More importantly, this work is a direct attempt to enlighten the misogynist reader and empower the female one; in short, Marinella wrote this piece in the hopes of realizing social change.

To highlight the intensity of Marinella's effort, one might compare this work to Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies*, written two centuries previously. De Pizan concerns herself less with men's behavior than she does with depicting female virtue as a universal phenomenon.[2] Although she does allude to several vices and hypocrisies of men, de Pizan focuses on listing as many virtuous women as possible. Marinella, at some portions, makes similar lists, often using the same examples as Boccaccio and de Pizan. But these are brief sections, as her objective is to thoroughly refute arguments against women's goodness rather than present what might seem to be exceptions to a general rule. Further, Marinella is writing in response to a particular work: *Dei deonnschi difetti* (1599) by Giuseppe Passi.[3] His work is one of many in the philosophical and literary tradition of misogyny. Although this work moves Marinella to compose her *The Nobility and Excellence of Women*, she also addresses many other authorities, including Aristotle. Marinella's treatise surpasses all others of its kind; no woman before Marinella had been able to create such layered arguments using so many sources, as well as manage to attack men for the same accusations they make against women.[4] Furthermore, Marinella determines how exactly men form their arguments, and uses exactly the same method to form hers, with delectable results.

It is in this way that Marinella attempts to effect change. By using the ludicrous argument form, men cannot claim that her arguments are fallacious without making hypocrites of themselves, for they use the same reasoning she does throughout the book. So they must either concede to Marinella's conclusions or they must find another means or foundation upon which to base their claims. Through her arguments and proofs, Marinella shows that the attack on women's vices is unfounded and hypocritical; thus, she "wins" the debate if no one can refute her treatise as wholly as she refutes Passi's. Furthermore, like the men against whom she argues, Marinella adjusts references to suit to her own ends, apparently deliberately misunderstanding some sources.[5] Essentially, Marinella cherry-picks her sources for only good women and their deeds, as well as "understands" metaphors and allegories using feminine figures to be real

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women (e.g., Plato's Hydra).

Marinella divides her work into two parts, the first to refute allegations against womanhood, and the second to attack men. It is a thoroughly long work. She writes that the first part will be divided into six principal chapters, of which the fifth alone will contain enough for eleven separate sections...The second part she divides into thirty-five chapters.[6] Although this book review covers a selected translation, the passages are salient and reveal much about Marinella's style of attack. Her primary method is to invert arguments. Typically, male writers in this time did not praise men, taking for granted that any vituperation of woman in effect highlighted male excellence without so saying.[7] Marinella disproves the binary, or rather flips it on its head, as she makes no distinction between good and wicked men—the same neglect men have shown. In fact, Marinella writes that “it is most reprehensible of [men] to jump from the particular to the universal,” and that an appropriate title would be “the defects of wicked women.”[8] And yet the title of the second part of her work is *The Defects and Vices of Men*, not of wicked men.

All this is at the crux of Marinella's methodical proofs. She goes on, throughout the book, to make three main arguments: the first is etymological; the second pertains to poetic beauty; and the third is an extensive list of wicked and defective men.

Marinella makes a case for the superiority of women by calling to attention several respectable and noble titles: Donna, Femina, Eva, Ischia, and Mulier.[9] For each, she discusses the etymology and meanings, and even brings up how some men appropriate and masculinize the terms (i.e., donna to don). One of her more salient etymological arguments has to do with femina, which Marinella claims “denotes reproduction or generation...[which] of all human acts, is one of the most worthy, and it can only be performed by perfect beings such as women.”[10] To summarize her argument, she equates each term, respectively, to “Life, Fertility, Fire, Mercy, and Dominion.”[11] Related to this appeal to title is that men pay honor to women who hold such titles as “lady,” “madam,” and so on. Marinella writes that “the object of such honor is always more nobler than the person who honors them.”[12] Although she conveniently leaves out the fact that there are women who honor men, I am hard-pressed to find an example which does not stem from expected and enforced obedience, except perhaps curtsying to a lord.

The Petrarchan tradition inspires Marinella's second argument. She points out that God created everything, all of which have differing degrees of perfection.[13] Interestingly, Marinella takes this idea further and argues that souls are not equal—that is, some souls are superior to others.[14] In another inversion of the binary, Marinella places women's souls above men's, stating that outward beauty directly reflects inner beauty (i.e., the soul).[15] As proof of this, Marinella uses great poets as authoritative sources, writing that “the greatest poets teach us...the more beautiful the woman, the more they affirm that it is her soul that renders grace and

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loveliness to her body.”[16] She asks: “if women are more beautiful than men, who...are generally coarse and ill-formed, who can deny that they are remarkable?” Marinella answers her own question thusly: “compared to women all men are ugly;”[17] ergo, women are nobler than men. But Marinella does not stop here. In order to be sure that her argument is solid and irrefutable, she reminds her audience that beauty, which comes from the soul, is divine, and divine attributes cannot lend themselves to evil.[18] Although logically Marinella’s argument is unsound, it follows the same pattern men use, and is no more ludicrous than theirs.

Marinella dedicates the second half of her work to criticizing men for the same faults they find in women. But before she begins her litany, Marinella makes sure the reader understands why men slander women as they do: the reasons include “anger, self-love, envy, and insufficient intelligence.”[19] Any given slanderer, then, could be afflicted with any one or a combination of these vices which drive them to condemn the fairer sex. Marinella goes so far as to compare men to a weathercock that changes each time the wind blows.[20] Essentially, she makes many arguments from all kinds of disciplines, including history, medicine, and philosophy. As Christine de Pizan lists good women throughout her *The Book of the City of Ladies*, Marinella lists bad men throughout *The Defects and Vices of Men*. She has many examples of men who represent a variety of sins. These men are wrathful, brutal, obstinate, ungrateful, discourteous, fickle, inconstant, evil, hateful, ornate, polished, painted, bleached, envious, and murderous;[21] better, Marinella universalizes these traits in men. Proving that men are just as likely to be wicked and vain as women upsets the binary once again. If all men are not virtuous, then it must be that all women are not wicked. Marinella makes a compelling case, historical inaccuracies and unsoundness aside.

Marinella skillfully refutes many arguments from many different misogynists throughout her book. She not only defends her own sex, but also attacks the other, calling to attention men’s hypocrisy. Marinella uses men’s argument forms against them; she wields the same sources and authorities, leaving no stone unturned—and creating stones to overturn as needed; and she leaves traces of biting sarcasm and deep contempt that greatly appeals to a modern reader. Misogynists who seriously try to refute her claims would have a very difficult time of it—which is perhaps why no one has attempted it.

Endnotes

[1] Marinella, Lucrezia. *The Nobility and Excellence of Women and the Defects and Vices of Men*. Translated by Anne Dunhill. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999, p. 38.

[2] *ibid.*, p. xvii

[3] *ibid.*, p. 2

[4] *ibid.*

[5] *ibid.*, p. 89, footnote 65: “Marinella appears to be adjusting a reference to suit her own

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ends;” p. 90, footnote 74: “...as so often, Marinella appears deliberately to misunderstand [a reference].”

[6] *ibid.*, p. 41.

[7] *ibid.*, p. 19 – 20.

[8] *ibid.*, p. 127.

[9] *ibid.*, p. 46.

[10] *ibid.*, p. 49.

[11] *ibid.*, p. 51.

[12] *ibid.*, p. 69.

[13] *ibid.*, p. 52 – 53.

[14] *ibid.*, p. 55.

[15] *ibid.*, p. 57, “...the nobility of the soul can be judged from the excellence of the body—which is ornamented with the same character and beauty as the soul...”

[16] *ibid.*

[17] *ibid.*, p. 62 – 63.

[18] *ibid.*, p. 66.

[19] *ibid.*, p. 119.

[20] *ibid.*, p. 162.

[21] *ibid.*, Taken from the titles of the chapters in Part II, which sums up her arguments nicely.

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