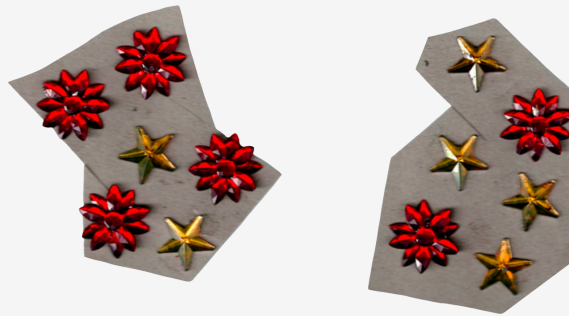


A BEAUTY COALITION? – DECONSTRUCTING MARINELLA’S ESSENTIALIST BEAUTY

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This essay argues that, despite her commendable attempt of subversion, Lucrezia Marinella’s thesis that “women possess superior spirituality owing to their higher physical perfection,” while “men who are moderate creatures can raise themselves to the knowledge and contemplation of the divine essence,” ultimately perpetuates a dependency on patriarchal definitions of identity and virtue that cannot be reclaimed as empowering. It becomes critical to make it clear early on that this paper does not assess her project in terms of historical intent or feminist success. Rather, it interrogates the aesthetic logic she mobilises and the structural limits of subversion grounded in visual and bodily hierarchies. To this end, the paper first outlines Marinella’s argumentative strategy, identifying its internal tensions and contradictions, and examines the aesthetic trap of beauty as empowerment and the theoretical implications of failed subversion.

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I

Lucrezia Marinella's project in her philosophical polemic, "The Nobility and Excellence of Women and the Defects and Vices of Men," is to provide a systematic response to the misogynistic indictment presented by Giuseppe Passi in his work, "Il donneschi diffetti - The Feminine Defects." Passi's initiative sought to educate young men on evading women's deceptions. His idea refers to the Aristotelian assertion that "women are mistakes of nature" due to flawed rational or deliberative faculties, as well as the classical patristic tradition's portrayal of women as a "necessary evil" (Campbell, 2011, p. 145). Within this framework, female inferiority is cast as natural and moral, rendering misogyny a matter of philosophical common sense.



In his text, Passi accused women of the vices of "pride, avarice, treachery,cowardice, laziness, and impertinence" and asserts that women have debased themselves as prostitutes, engaged in witchcraft, thievery, deception, and falsehoods. Furthermore, while he employs the Latin phrase "maxim mulla mulier bona," which translates to "no woman is good" (Campbell, 2011b, p.145), his scholarship concerns instances relating to specific women. It is essential to recognize that each vice attributed to women in Passi's list is contingent upon external perceptions. To assert that women have disgraced themselves suggests the presence of an individual before whom they have incurred disgrace; to claim that they are tricksters and liars implies that they have deceived or misled someone (a man). Passi's claims are relational and contingent on the male perception: Women are described as "disgraced" only insofar as they act in opposition to men's expectations and interests.¹ Crucially, many of

these alleged vices depend not on demonstrable actions but on external judgments about women's appearance, conduct, and moral legibility. To claim that women have "disgraced themselves," for instance, presupposes an observing subject who authorises shame, interprets visibility as moral evidence, and transforms perceived deviation into ethical failure. Irigaray theorises women's structural relationality - the state of existing only about men as the "phallogocentric symbolic order", or the marginalization of women and their subjectivity, reducing them to an "other" outside of the dominant male-centered system of meaning (Irigaray, 1977).

Lucrezia Marinella uses the strategy of reinterpretation of the same citations and anecdotes used by men to defame women (Campbell, 2011, p.150) to provide a philosophical and rhetorical argument, to effectively object to the misogynistic claims of Passi. Rather than rejecting the terms of the debate outright, Marinella intervenes within them, exposing the contingency of misogynistic interpretation itself. This strategy is made explicit in the chapter "Of the Nature and Essence of the Female Sex," which begins with an outline of Moderata Fonte's attempt "to demonstrate that women are as noble as men, owing to them belonging to the same species or having the same nature"². Marinella advances a much more provocative claim, theorising that "Women's souls were created much more noble than men, which can be seen from the effect they have and from the beauty of their bodies" (1600//1999, p. 55). By grounding spiritual nobility in visible effect and bodily beauty, Marinella elevates women not only morally but ontologically. This move reaffirms the epistemic role of appearance as evidence of inner virtue, a condition that both enables her defence of women and constrains the terms on which that defence can be made.

II

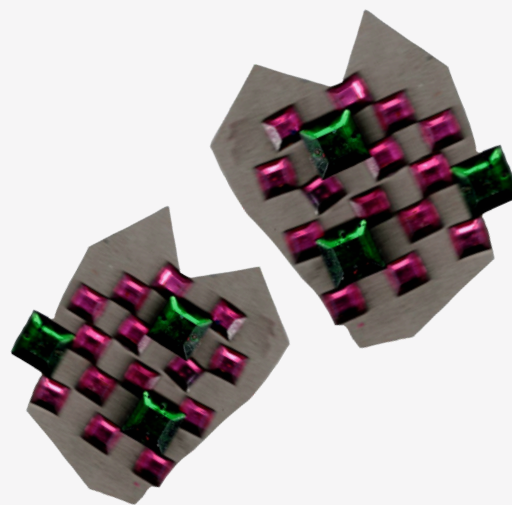
For the purpose of analyzing her project, Marinella's core arguments can be divided into two categories: arguments for beauty as the manifestation of virtue and arguments regarding the admiration of beauty as leading to spiritual elevation.

Arguments for beauty as the manifestation of virtue

According to Marinella, women's physical beauty is both an effect and evidence of their superior souls, reflecting

their higher spiritual virtue. Her polemic and defence of women shifts the argument from an aesthetic and social account to a teleological and metaphysical claim regarding the physicality and beauty of women. Resting on the claim that "The nobility of the soul can be judged from the excellence of the body" (1600/1999, p. 57). She theorizes that beauty is a "ray of light" emanating from the soul that links the material body to spiritual excellence (1600/1999, p. 57). In order to support this, Marinella references poets such as Remigio Fiorentino and Guarini to suggest that the "eternal mover" may sometimes make beings of remarkable grandeur (1600/1999, p.57). She also references sonnets by Padre Angelo Grillo and Tasso to support the notion that "the soul is the cause and origin of physical beauty" (1600/1999, p.57-58). Before pushing her logic even further, to seek the origin and source of the beauty in the divine, referencing Platonist assertion "that external beauty is the image of divine beauty"(1600/1999 p.58) and asserts that poets must look to the divine elements (stars, gods) to capture the essence of women's beauty (1600/1999 p.64). She also recalls Dionysius's claim that God, as the cause and measure of all beauty, functions as the ultimate source of created form (1600/1999, p. 60). The male-authored literary sources she relies upon play a dual role: they mirror the kind of textual citation used by Passi, thus subverting misogynistic logic from within, but they are also deeply steeped in idealised and symbolic portrayals of women. Marinella adopts these idealisations, largely informed by Neoplatonic thought, and in her intellectual context, this linkage between soul and beauty is not unusual, situated within the epistemic and moral frameworks of early modern thought. Beauty functioned as a legitimate epistemic sign: moral worth was not only expected to be visible, but to become intelligible through visibility. In this schema, seeing was a mode of knowing, and external form served as evidence of inner virtue. Furthermore, Marinella does not naïvely reproduce misogynistic aesthetic norms; she strategically reworks them to defend women's moral and spiritual authority within the constraints of early modern discourse. Yet recognising the radical nature of this move in its historical moment does not exhaust its critical evaluation. If outward beauty functions as an epistemic gateway to virtue, then aesthetic norms not merely reveal virtue; they organise the field of intelligibility within which virtue can be recognised at

all. The critical question, therefore, is not whether Marinella's framework was empowering or intelligible in its own moment, but what structural exclusions are produced when virtue is anchored to beauty itself.



Arguments for the admiration of beauty leading to spiritual evaluation

Marinella further states, "Men are obliged and forced to love women, and women are not obliged to love them back, except merely from courtesies"(1600/1999, p. 63); using Platonist traditions, she argues that Women's beauty inspires men's spiritual progress toward divine contemplation. Moreover, she further asserts that "compared to all women, all men are ugly and that which is less beautiful or ugly, is not by nature worthy of being loved"(1600/1999, p.63). This claim is an incredibly heteronormative assertion that operates within a binary male-female paradigm, accentuating a Gender/Sex-Body Dependency. Not only are gendered binaries of beauty conceived as the outward, aestheticized manifestation of virtue, rigid and unforgiving, but there is no room for female contemplation of feminine beauty, nor male contemplation of masculine beauty. In Marinella's paradigm, men are transcended closer to the divine through their appreciation of female beauty. What of men who don't find female beauty, who rather find attraction, love, and the divine in other men? What of women who find beauty in those not deemed beautiful? If beauty is the measure of metaphysical worthiness, where does this leave women deemed "ugly"? Men are often accused of dehumanizing women they do not find attractive. While she attempts to argue that women are closer to the divine, the citations present in her argument do not necessarily affirm that there is an

implicit claim or recognition of ‘women’s beauty’ but rather make the case that regarding a singular ‘woman’ that a poet she cited found beautiful. For Petrarch, Laura might have been the divine ray, but what of her handmaidens or of women who were burnt as witches in the background? Marinella can also be accused, similar to Passi, of chronicling the cases of a woman and ascribing these to the entire gender—a rhetorical strategy. It is important to notice that the poets and thinkers cited by Marinella only talk about the singular “*Woman*” and not “*Women*”. While appropriate for her time, Marinella’s evidentiary mode relies on poetic authority. This Poetic authority universalises the particular. While she attempts to argue that women are closer to the divine, the citations present in her argument do not necessarily affirm that there is an implicit claim or recognition of ‘women’s beauty’ but rather make the case that, regarding a singular ‘woman’ that a poet she cited found beautiful.

There are further issues arising with Marinella’s account. She says, “Beauty of a lovely face, accompanied by a graceful appearance, guides every man to the knowledge of his maker” (1600/1999, p.53). Two important statements are made here. *Firstly, women are beautiful because they are pleasing* (1600/1999, p.53). *The question is, pleasing to whom?* Significantly, she also draws heavily on male poets who have commented on the nature of a woman’s soul - the “pure soul” which “lights the sparks of love in beloved eyes” is observed by men (1600/1999, p.56). Therefore, *who decides who is pure?* And who decides who is beautiful? Moreover, Leone Ebero - “the corporeal beauty which shines in bodies is a shadow and image of incorporeal beauty. If it came solely from the body, each body would be beautiful, which it is not” (1600/1999, p.58) Again, *who decides which body is beautiful, and which isn’t?* Marinella distinguishes beautiful female bodies and un-beautiful male ones. But what about the bodies that don’t conform to normative ideas of femininity, be they queer bodies, PoC bodies, or disabled bodies? Even if these are ‘female’ bodies, if they adhere more to ‘masculine’ tropes and are therefore delineated as less beautiful, does this imply that the soul within these bodies is also less pure? According to Susan Sontag, “Beauty is theatrical, it is for being looked at and admired” (2005, P.211). As Marinella relies exclusively on male descriptions of divine feminine beauty, the

understanding is that women are beautiful because they are pleasing *to men*. Further, their pleasurability lies in their loveliness and ‘delicate’ appearances. This idea of the delicate face is inherently exclusionary to a large portion of women, whose facial features, let alone wider body types, do not conform to ideas of ‘delicate’ femininity.

The most obvious example of this is non-European women, whose facial features have been historically delineated as less feminine in comparison with European femininity. Marinella cannot be taken as referring to all women; rather, she assumes a Eurocentric monolith that arguably does not exist among European women, let alone women globally. Here, Marinella can also be accused, similar to Passi, of chronicling the cases of a woman and ascribing these to the entire gender—a rhetorical strategy. Marinella’s strategy ultimately complicates the subversiveness of her project. While she elevates feminine virtue, she does so by appealing to already mythologised ideals of femininity. In attempting to dismantle one form of patriarchal constraint, she reproduces another: a symbolic economy in which women’s moral authority remains contingent upon aesthetic legibility. Since if outward beauty functions as an epistemic gateway to virtue—if moral worth must appear in visible form—then the conditions under which bodies become recognisable as virtuous remain governed by aesthetic norms. The question, therefore, is not whether Marinella’s framework was intelligible or even empowering within its historical moment, but what structural exclusions are produced when virtue is anchored to visibility itself and whether these can be reclaimed as empowering.

III

This section turns to the consequences and theoretical implications of linking visible beauty and virtue. If Marinella’s framework renders virtue legible through beauty, the case of Sara Baartman exposes what occurs when bodies are rendered hyper-visible yet denied moral intelligibility altogether. Baartman is not introduced as a historical counterexample to Marinella but as a critical case through which the violent afterlife of aesthetic epistemologies becomes visible once they are absorbed into colonial and racialised regimes of looking.

The example of Sara Baartman, a Khoikhoi woman from South Africa who was exhibited across Europe in the early 19th century under the exploitative pseudonym “Hottentot Venus,” epitomizes the problem present in associating physical appearance with virtue. 19th-century Europe was emblematic of scientific racism, sexualised colonial fantasy, and a racialized economy of perception. Baartman’s body was pathologized in producing nationalistic and civilisational narratives, where European identity was defined in opposition to the grotesquely imagined ‘other.’

Especially prominent in travelogue narratives and, later, photographic anthropological ‘studies’ which documented Africans during the waves of colonial expansion and development of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, African women - with body fat distribution and facial structures much different from those of the European female comparison, were deemed paradoxically more promiscuous, and closer to masculinity and barbarity. The delineation of female delicacy as equivalent to divinity has never applied to people from the global south, particularly not to Africans or those indigenous to any land desired for colonization, because attributing divinity to their appearance would inherently contradict the brutal forms of domination that were inflicted upon them. Rather, the masculine and barbaric traits assigned to them were used to alienate them from the understood norms of femininity and justify brutalization. Such is especially apparent in how postcolonial literature, the concept of the “colonised body” is more analytically prevalent than gendered binaries like “colonised male” or “colonised female.” This framing emphasises that owing to colonialism’s primary logic of extraction and labour maximisation, which subjected enslaved and colonised women to equally physically demanding labour as men. The economic value of bodily productivity overrode gendered sanctity, illustrating how colonial subjugation created a vacuum wherein ideological protection typically afforded to ‘women’ and rationality typically afforded to ‘men’ in Eurocentric discourse was denied. Both were exploited and brutalised with impunity, though gendered perceptions shaped the methods of domination.

Seen in this light, Marinella’s sanctification of beauty relies on an implicit distinction between forms that can

signify virtue and forms that cannot. While this distinction remained largely unspoken within early modern European discourse, colonial modernity renders it brutally explicit. The rigid aesthetic conventions continuously attribute divinity to certain women and barbarity to others.



Echoing Marinella’s methodology, the politics of visual perception is cyclical, where even acts of subversion can end up reinforcing the structures they seek to dismantle. This raises a critical philosophical question: When both structure and subversion are complicit in subjugation, what space remains for women to resist? In post-apartheid South Africa, Baartman’s image is reappropriated into state-sanctioned narratives of national identity, often reduced to a symbol of victimhood. Though this idealisation differs from that of the Madonna or Laura, it remains another essentialised construct. As Levin notes (2011, pp. 97–99), such reconstructions frequently depict Baartman as a passive object of colonial trauma, erasing her agency, complexity, and voice. This not only exposes the critical flaw in using visual perception as a means of empowerment, but also underscores the danger of uncritical subversion—a subversion that merely inverts, rather than escapes, the oppressive logics it challenges - which has no space for the racialized, colonized, or enslaved female body and their post colonial counterparts.



The Hottentot Venus 1811 Engraving. (Sara Baartman) London: S. Bateman, Publisher, Lewis Delin et Sculp, March 11, 1811

Moreover, by grounding women's worth in physical beauty, Marinella perpetuates these same essentialist views that tie women's identities and values to their biological traits, leaving little room for diversity or individual autonomy. This logic collapses when considering women like Baartman; her steatopygia was framed as grotesque and "unnatural," violating the Euro-Christian gaze of feminine delicacy. Her perceived physical strength, bodily excess, and lack of refinement positioned her outside the bounds of normative femininity, much like Imane Khelif centuries later. If beauty becomes a metaphysical marker of virtue and elevated soul, which by implication suggests that women whose bodies did not conform to idealized femininity, lacked these spiritual or moral qualities. The legacies of women who continue to be excluded from traditional ideals of femininity— androgenity seen as a compliment for certain women who are told they are pretty for x (*insert a non-European ethnicity of choice*) — all underscore the dangers of relying on aesthetics as

moral indicators, how racialized genealogy of visual logic always upholds the very hierarchies it may seek to invert.

In her seminal essay 'Race, Beauty, and the Tangled Knot of a Guilty Pleasure', Maxine Leeds Craig articulates this tension succinctly: "Beauty is a resource used by collectivities and individuals to claim worth, yet it is an unstable good, whose association with women and with sex, and its dependence upon ever-changing systems of representation, put its bearer at constant risk of seeing the value of her inherent beauty or beauty work evaporate" (2006, p. 171). Any framework that intimately binds beauty to empowerment is inherently unstable, vulnerable to the shifting tides of cultural valuation and historical exclusion. As culture itself is not static but a continuous process—"a work of art never meant to be completed," as Guss (1989, p. 67) writes—so too are our ideals of beauty endlessly recreated and recontested. Yet, when beauty becomes the metric of worth, its volatility renders any empowerment derived from it precarious. Thus, the paradigm Marinella suggests is perpetuated to this day.

To conclude, Marinella's framework, despite its rhetorical inversion of misogyny, cannot be reclaimed. Women who do not conform to normative standards of beauty or femininity are excluded from Marinella's framework, reinforcing a narrow and restrictive definition of worth. Her argument hosts no space for the majority of women in the world, towards whom these rigid delineations of gendered beauty have been and continue to be weaponized to ensure their subjugation, not only within the hierarchy of patriarchy but also within race and queerness. I would like to acknowledge the limitations of my argument. Marinella's argument is a response to the misogynistic treatise, and she incorporates similar sources to those that she was refuting. There is a conscientious debate over whether Marinella can be theorized as a feminist (Deslauriers, 2024, np). Surely, the response to a misogynistic attack does not linearly translate to a feminist work. Regardless, a theory about women's virtue as being associated with their physical beauty seems problematic to be reclaimed as empowering.

Her erasure from the category of the beautiful, thus virtuous, and thus human is not incidental but instrumental to her subjugation. Similarly, there exists a profound frailty in the subversion of this beauty—not the divine fragility so often romanticised in feminine archetypes, but a frailty that signals the structural collapse of agency itself.

Footnotes

1. I think it is interesting that Passi's text, intended to warn men of the perceived threats women pose to their spiritual, economic, and moral well-being (Campbell, 2011b151), can be understood as a Renaissance precursor to contemporary misogynistic discourse found in certain online spaces, such as those propagated by 'Podcast and YouTube bro' figures like Andrew Tate and Jordan Peterson. Passi's misogyny depends on him chronicling the accounts of a few women and ascribing these to the entire gender—a rhetorical strategy mirrored by modern proponents of hyper-masculine ideologies. In both of these cases, the assertion of masculinity is intimately tied with the wholesale vilification of femininity. Both Passi and the modern-day "podcast and YouTube bros" anchor their perspectives in a reductive and essentialist framework.

2. Lucrezia Marinella and Moderata Fonte, in their respective works are not simply attempting to refute attacks of figures like Giuseppe Passi or the Italian society of their time. Their ultimate adversary is Aristotelian teleology which postulates a metaphysical paradigm naturalizing female subordination by interpreting anatomical difference as evidence of *formal* and *final* inferiority. Aristotle's association, utilising temperature difference, associates women with lower divinity and marked by incompleteness laid the groundwork for a hierarchy of binary oppositions—mind/body, reason/emotion, male/female—that justified the gendered exclusion of women from rational and political life. Marinella and Fonte implicitly contest not just the social consequences of these oppositions, but the metaphysical architecture that sustains them or the "god trick" of objectivity that masks itself as neutral but codes male embodiment as universal form and female embodiment as deficient matter (Haraway, 1988, p 575–599).

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