MISOGYNISTIC PRESENCE IN CELLINI'S *VITA* & THE WORKS OF MACHIAVELLI

Shailee Peck
HUMA 1125
Tom Cohen

Across the many works of the Renaissance explored this term, the presence of misogyny has been a constant. Appearing and existing equally across the variety of genres, Renaissance misogyny takes innumerable forms and is exploited by each author for the purpose of communicating their many personal goals. The trivialization, abuse, and vilification of women chronicled in these works are included to serve many functions, often respective to the author writing them. The works of two significant Renaissance figures illustrates this point particularly clearly. The misogynistic impulses of Benvenuto Cellini and Niccolo Machiavelli often take different forms, yet retain common threads of authorial intent.

A primary function of Machiavellian misogyny is to use it as a tool with which to parody and ridicule male Florentine anxieties. Though Machiavelli's own misogynistic impulses are present, there is another aspect of exaggeration deliberately being put to use. Florentine conceptions of matrimony are centre-stage in *Belfagor,* with its dowry system of bargaining, competition, honour, and purity. When Machiavelli writes of "[…] the extravagant expenses incurred to make [Onesta] happy." (Belfagor, 423) and Roderigo's ensuing loss of money, it is an intentional play on Florentine insecurities regarding women and financial ruin. Florence was a patriarchal state in which Machiavelli makes it clear that a deep-seated feeling of male insecurity was nevertheless constantly underlying all male-female interactions. Because women were not afforded legal freedoms in the political sphere, men found a new method of scapegoating women for their own misfortunes in the form of expenditure. Roderigo claims that he was obliged to spend his fortune in order to "be on good terms with [Onesta]" (Belfagor, 423) and in addition to that was forced to support her family. In this way, Onesta becomes the master of her husband by leveraging finances, a subversion of the "proper" social order in which men were rulers of the household. This fear is not only introduced as a vague social notion – the council of Hell as the

primary framework for the exploration assigns these insecurities a sense of legal validation. This legal inquest concludes with Belfagor's testimony to "the evils that a wife brought into a household", and the preference of residing in Hell to the "many problems, dangers, and discomforts that marriage imposed upon him." (Belfagor, 429). Machiavelli exploits these contemporary concerns to put on display the characteristic insecurities of sixteenth century Florence for the purpose of pointed entertainment.

That women are ultimately at fault for the failures of their male counterparts is once again explored by Machiavelli in *The Prince.* The misogyny of this political treatise is concerned with the Italian concept of virtù – the notion of a man's worthiness that encompasses his skill, valour, leadership, dominance, and manliness, specifically that of a prince in Machiavelli's usage of the term. Despite women being generally conspicuous by their absence in *The Prince,* Machiavelli first manages to find a feminine target in the form of Fortune personified. Chapter Twenty-five sees Machiavelli condemning man's reliance on Fortune, stating that "Fortune is a woman, and it is necessary, in order to keep her down, to beat her and to struggle with her." (*The Prince,* 162). The implication being that were a Prince (ie. man) ever to rely on Fortune (ie. woman) for success, he will inevitably come to ruin for the very act of this reliance betrays the Prince's virtù. Machiavelli explicitly connects virtù with the physical domination of women – "And so always, like a woman, [Fortune] is the friend of the young, because they are less cautious, more ferocious, and command her with more audacity." (*The Prince,* 162). This framework presents a mode of thinking where even when women are not themselves present, they conveniently remain at fault for the misfortunes of men. Chapter Nineteen similarly validates this worldview, laying blame for the failures of historical rulers at the feet of women. Rulers who by demeanour were historically considered "too feminine", as well as those who

allowed themselves to be governed by their mothers found themselves despised and rebelled against by their people. Machiavelli argues that though Alexander was by all accounts a just ruler, "[…] since he was considered effeminate and a man who let himself be ruled by his mother, because of this he was despised, and the army plotted against him and murdered him." (The Prince, 141). The perceived power of women is an internal threat to state governance – not only is taking the advice of women a dangerous action, it is enough to merely resemble women in one's thoughts or actions to place man in a precarious position. Female authority threatens male virtù by the perceived process of undermining their ability to showcase leadership and dominance. These misogynistic values result in a sort of societal syllogism to the effect of: 1. Man takes the advice of woman, 2. Man falls to ruin, 3. Therefore, women are the impetus for man's failures. *Belfagor* sees Machiavelli exaggerating and parodying Florentine misogyny for the purpose of entertainment, while the *Prince* differs. Machiavelli now uses historical precedent and contemporary domestic conditions to validate society's position on the role of women in general misfortune.

Benvenuto Cellini's *Vita* frequently illustrates the direct connection between the belittlement of women and male honour culture. Cellini's autobiography is a famously ego-driven work in which the artist recounts past events of his life that he believes will reflect honourably on him. This concept is crucial to understanding Cellini's authorial perspective: in general, the man includes only that which he believes will elevate him according to the standards of sixteenth-century male honour culture, and excludes that which would dishonour him. Analysis of Cellini's *Vita* indicates that male honour depended largely on how dominant men were in all aspects of life, whether it be work, battlefield, or bedroom. Cellini's own accounts of his behaviour toward women demonstrates this, and a notable example is how his poor treatment

of the model Caterina ultimately brought him honour in the form of artistic recognition. The model Caterina was a favourite sexual partner of Cellini's, and when Paolo Micceri is caught in the act of having sexual relations with her, Cellini takes this as a personal attack on his honour as his position is now perceived as that of the cuckold. The concept of cuckolding in sixteenth-century honour culture cast women as pawns in a battle between male sexual rivals – Caterina becomes the instrument through which Paolo and Cellini will demonstrate their masculinity, each to the detriment of the other's reputation. The intricacies of sexual honour are demonstrated when Cellini writes: "[…] then the idea entered my head of making them get married, as the lesser evil and in order to have my revenge later on." (*Vita,* 288). After the event of this compelled marriage, Cellini resumes his sexual affair with Caterina so as to invert the previous roles: Paolo is now the cuckold, and the dishonour from Cellini's affair will reflect permanently on both Caterina and Paolo.

To supplement this offence, Cellini inflicts pain on Caterina in various way. First by forcing her into increasingly uncomfortable modelling positions – "Not satisfied with having made him take such a shameless little whore as his wife, as well as this – to round off my revenge – I used to send for her to make use of her as my model […] and I made her pose in the nude." (*Vita*, 289). When Caterina objects to this treatment, Cellini "[…] seized her by the hair and dragged her up and down the room, beating and kicking her till [he] was exhausted." (*Vita,* 290). The intersection of violence and sexual exploitation with male honour is constantly and explicitly at play in this episode: Cellini never expresses regret for Caterina's pain or humiliation; rather his remorse is for his own sake alone. "I realized what a mistake I had made, since I was losing a splendid opportunity of winning honour." (*Vita,* 290.), he writes, and again "Staying in this position gave her great discomfort, she was as annoyed as I was pleased, since

she was very beautiful and won me great honour." (*Vita*, 289). By intentionally forcing her to stand nude in painful positions for hours, Cellini was able to exploit both her body and her pain to produce great artistic works which won him fame and profit. Cellini also notably makes it a point to stress how Caterina willingly kept returning to his side after these violent episodes, emphasizing his ultimate worthiness over Paolo through these complex sets of interactions. In true Cellini tradition, the presence of misogyny in the *Vita* serves the function of cementing his own reputation as a man of great honour. As a direct result of his violent dominance over women, Cellini had been awarded great honour in both his own eyes and in the eyes of society at large.

Machiavelli's misogyny typically takes the form of women as literary representatives of behavioural models to avoid, while Cellini's misogynistic portrayal of himself was presented as one that men should emulate. In his plays, treatises, and novellas, Machiavelli was writing with an eye always to his audience. Drawing from Florentine anxieties, Machiavellian women are vilified for their promiscuity, expressions of opinion, narrow-minded egotism, and defiance of men's wishes. From this, it is clear that the subtextual "ideal" of woman as prescribed by Machiavelli's works was one who was chaste, silent, and obedient to the whims of male authority – and, from *The Mandrake Root*, charmed and grateful. By contrast, as a famous braggart and egotist, all behaviours modelled by Cellini in his *Vita* were meant to be understood by his audience as ones that should be imitated to bring male honour. The tone of pride and conviction with which Cellini describes his violent encounters with women signals behaviour which raises him to a higher standard of masculinity. It is appropriate, in Cellini's view, to use women as instruments against male rivals, as convenient targets of male anger and punishment, and to disregard their health and safety for the purpose of self-gratification. Machiavellian

misogyny takes the literary form of larger behavioural prescriptions, and for the purpose of parodying male anxieties on loss of control, while Cellini takes a more personal approach in prescribing how men ought to act honourably to the detriment of the women around them. While these forms differ in their execution, they remain parallel in intent.

Despite the different forms that misogyny takes in the works of Cellini and Machiavelli, there remains further common threads of intent present in each. Like Machiavelli, who cites historical and contemporary precedent for female scapegoating, Cellini lays blame at the feet of women for his own failures. Madame d'Etampes is to blame for Cellini's loss of commission with no accountability taken for himself: "[…] she began using her sharp tongue to slander me as much as if I were a mortal enemy of the throne." (*Vita*, 303), the Duchess is to blame for his loss of favour with the Duke of Florence: "I completely lost the favour of the Duchess, and as a result nearly lost the favour of the Duke's." (*Vita*, 361), while Caterina and her mother are to blame for Cellini's ensuing legal troubles in such a way that attacks his sexual honour. "They planned to have their revenge on me and they consulted a Norman lawyer, who advised them that she should say I had used her in the Italian fashion, that is to say, unnaturally, like a sodomite." (*Vita*, 281). To Cellini, this attack on his sexual practices is an unacceptable dimension to the accusations levelled against him.

Another concept common to both writers is the role of women as man's natural inferior. In Machiavelli's *Belfagor*, things begin to go wrong when women forget their place and attempt to subvert the proper order by dominating men, such as in the case of Onesta's control over Roderigo through his finances. In *The Mandrake Root*, Lucrezia is vilified for attempting to assert her own judgement over her husband Messer Nicia, despite his role as consummate fool. Callimaco and Siro both agree that Messer Nicia is "[…] the dumbest, most foolish man in

Florence", but still condemn Lucrezia, for "she has a rich husband who lets her dominate him." (*The Mandrake Root,* 438). There is an interesting and complex mode of reasoning at play, in which the belief that Nicia is an incapable fool coexists equally with the conviction that Lucrezia as a woman has no business trying to assert her judgement over him in her own affairs. When Father Timotea tells Lucrezia, "I'm leading you toward something for which you will always thank me in your prayers […]" (*The Mandrake Root,* 460) it is a statement that requires a necessary element of suspension of disbelief on his part: he both believes it and knows it is false all in the same moment. Cellini himself represents women as naturally inferior through his violent physicality with them, which is always cast as just punishment for any perceived slight. The belief that some women's bodies necessarily serve a different and more subservient role in the world than men's is made clear in the *Vita*. Cellini often threatens and acts on women with violence when displeased with their conduct, or the conduct of others. This, of course, mirrors how Cellini treats men, but with the caveat that women cannot fight back the way that men are expected to. Using Caterina's body as a means to punish Paolo for his harmful conduct to Cellini's honour exhibits this, as does the violence enacted on Caterina and her mother for theirs.

Another example is Cellini's recklessly getting the young Gianna, or "Costanza" pregnant at fifteen, before quickly wiping his hands of the responsibility. "For her endowment I assigned the girl as much money as an aunt of hers – into whose care I gave her – would agree to: and that was the last I had to do with her." (*Vita,* 293). Very telling is the fact that Cellini may conduct multiple affairs simultaneously, but that for Caterina to do so is a catastrophic act. Similarly, Machiavelli's principle of the ends justifying the means finds an example in the pregnancy of Lucrezia, where it matters not who gets her pregnant necessarily, but that she fulfills her womanly obligations to men's satisfaction, as these women are the means for men to

obtain a male heir and continue on the patriarchal line of inheritance. The belief in the natural inferiority of women is consistent between all works. This is demonstrated through women being kept entirely absent from decision-making processes, violent and reckless liberties taken with their bodies, and the presentation of injustice as the result of the "those wiles with which women know so well to work on men." (*Vita*, 374).

The works of Niccolo Machiavelli and Benvenuto Cellini carry consistent undertones of misogynistic thought and instinct. Misogyny is presented in innumerable forms and with endless commentary on how best to curb and restrict the thoughts, feelings, and behaviour of women. Machiavelli, despite writing across genres, manages to communicate his misogynistic analysis of the role women are meant to hold in society, as well as providing us with a window into the distinctive forms of fifteenth-century Florentine misogyny in all of them. Machiavelli's works find a common thread of authorial intent with Cellini in his *Vita*: while implementation of analysis differs, their basic principles remain the same. Women are best when they are silent, obedient, and chaste. As Machiavelli and Cellini tell it, when women are allowed to exert any measure of influence over the men around them, chaos ensues. Unchecked by their male "superiors", female influence will lead to injustice, failure, and poverty. Though masters in their own right in the realm of Renaissance literature, Niccolo Machiavelli and Benvenuto Cellini stand also as significant players in the long legacy of female subjugation.