

Crafting Fame

Praise and Exclusion in Fifteenth Century Florence



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Abstract

This thesis examines the way that celebrated craftsmen from renaissance Florence were remembered selectively by fifteenth and sixteenth century chroniclers and biographers. With an emphasis on Filippo Brunelleschi, this study briefly explores Florence's world of workshops, artisan contests, and patrons, before analysing comparative accounts of Brunelleschi's social life and architectural accomplishments. The enquiry engages with historiographical scholarship concerning selfhood and individualism, and is developed through the related genres of biography, comedy, and apocryphal tale. It closes by arguing that when some men were praised others were excluded, and that fame and eminence were reinforced through humour and ridicule.

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Introduction

In this thesis I will study a group of famous craftsmen from the fifteenth century in order to analyse the way that such figures were fashioned in popular tales and stories from the city of Florence. The impressions that we have of characters such as Brunelleschi, or Donatello, or Ghiberti, or Masaccio, were consciously crafted by their biographers, and because of this sources like Giorgio Vasari's *The Lives of the Artists* or Antonio Manetti's *The Life of Brunelleschi* are loaded with episodes that tell one much about the way that eminent men from renaissance Italy were celebrated by their contemporaries and immediate successors.¹ Looking at such praise also leads one to the study of opposing characters who were marginalized and excluded, as the celebration of distinguished figures often meant the related derision of those who were foolish, naïve, dim-witted, and outclassed by their distinguished adversaries. Fifteenth century authors selectively remembered their subjects, and looking at the values that were emphasised in their accounts allows one to get to the crux of fame, praise, and exclusion in Florence, as the ardent fashioning of some individuals, and the derisive marginalization of others, resulted in a carefully crafted and maintained discourse regarding the superb Florentine artist.

There was a time, in the mid-nineteenth century, when the Renaissance Man was imagined as a free self-determining individual who could objectively contemplate and improve the

¹ The translations of these texts that will be used are: G., Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, trans., Julia Bondanella & Peter Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). & A., Manetti, *The Life of Brunelleschi*, trans., Catherine Enggass (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1970)

world around him. When Jacob Burckhardt published his seminal essay, *The Civilization of Italy in the Renaissance* in 1860, he inspired a paradigm in which the Renaissance person was understood as liberated from the veil of medieval religiosity and social identity, free to lead Europe into the advancements and achievements of urbanism and modernity.² While this view has been challenged on a number of fronts over the last hundred and fifty years, it remains resonant in the sense that we often think of certain people – Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Brunelleschi, Donatello, Machiavelli, Lorenzo de Medici, Petrarch, or Boccaccio (to name but a few) – when we turn to Renaissance Florence. These men came from varied professions, and indeed centuries, and yet they figure prominently in an image of the city as an intellectual and artisan milieu of genius and innovation. The intention of this thesis – in the context of such a vision – is to suggest that the appearance, bearing, and remembrance of these men were fashioned in a conscious way by the writers of the age. Renaissance biographers had their own ideas about what constituted talent and brilliance, and the vision put together by Burckhardt may cause one to miss, assume, or overlook the categories that were important to the period itself. Nineteenth and twentieth century historiography redeveloped and reinterpreted the characters put forward from the renaissance, but historians should not forget that it was important for fifteenth and sixteenth century Florentines themselves to proclaim certain figures as individually brilliant. In terms of identity and selfhood, these figures were both linked to, and deliberately raised above, the social and gendered discourses that have been scrutinized closely in modern scholarship.³ I will illustrate that renaissance authors crafted an impression of archetypal

² For Burckhardt's statement on Renaissance Italy, see J., Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy: an Essay* (London: Phaidon Press, 1955). See in particular part two – "Development of the Individual: Glory".

³ Obviously such scholarship is vast, with a wide range of focuses, methods, theories, and contributions to the field of renaissance history. Giving even an impression of such significant scholarship is well beyond the scope of this thesis. Two edited collections that I have found particularly useful however, are J. Brown, & R. Davis, eds., *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy* (London: Longman, 1998). Also see, R. Crum, & J., Paoletti, eds., *Renaissance Florence: A Social History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

cleverness and skill, and that they gave this impression emphasis by correspondingly developing characters of ridicule and derision.

It is clear that famous men were considered exceptional cases in Florentine society, and while they were informed by codes of behaviour that were expected in Italy, they were also moulded in the realm of the different and the remarkable. John Jefferies Martin has suggested that there were multiple modes of identity in renaissance Europe, each of which overlaid, contested, and influenced the way that an individual both understood himself or herself personally, and was understood by his or her companions and contemporaries. The biographies of Filippo Brunelleschi, for instance, are filled with assumptions about his masculinity, about his professional world and about his social status, that seem to frame and contain his character into a surprisingly specific set of categories. This was a man who was dedicated to his city, who was entrenched in a workshop culture, and who had a certain social eminence because of his cleverness and dexterity. Brunelleschi was defined by these assumptions both during his life and after his death, and this tells us that social and cultural categories should be viewed as present – if assumed – influences on the way that a famous man is remembered. Filippo, in this sense, seems “remarkably unfree”, defined as he is by the discourses of his culture.⁴

Artisan celebrities however, were exceptional, and they were celebrated as such by the sources that preserved them. Manetti for instance emphasises Brunelleschi’s unique capacity for greatness, developed and refined within an intellect that was private and

⁴ The image of a “remarkably unfree” individual, defined and fashioned by the discourses of their culture rather than their own internal disposition, comes from Stephen Greenblatt - a man who is often synonymous with the approach of new historicism. His perspective of the individual is that of a “cultural artifact”, in the sense that an identity is framed by how a person understood the world around himself/herself, which is in turn determined by a cultural, discursive, and social context – making a person (unavoidably) an artifact of their period. For Greenblatt’s classic statement, see S., Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From Moore to Shakespeare* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 257.

distinctive. For Manetti, his protagonist's honour was an unavoidable outcome of a significant and influential talent –

“You will learn that he was a man of great intellect, great resoluteness, and extraordinary talent. In certain parts you will see how far and to what extent credit may be given to him and what was deserving of honour ... Although he was preeminent over many others in many things and consequently refined his own and the following century, he was never known to boast or praise himself or vaunt or laud himself by a single word.”⁵

In terms of fashioning such an ideal, one may think of Martin's suggestion that historically a person is best viewed in a relationship between the *internal* self (“emotions, beliefs, thoughts, and so on”) and the *external* self (“society, culture, politics, and so on”).⁶ Manetti's subject was gifted with an internal genius that elevated him above the world of common Florentine craftsmen, yet the external landscapes of the source remain concerned with assumptions of gender, profession, citizenship, and sociability. The self that we find emerging from the document then, is complex and multilayered, with overlapping and coinciding influences that work together to form a particular type of celebrated personage. Neither internal nor external selves can be separated from the way that such a man was praised. As such, the chapters that follow will be guided by a methodological assumption that Florentine individuals were defined on a number of different and intersecting levels, and that the image of a famous and reputable artisan was the product of conjoining both exceptional and common frameworks of identity and selfhood.

In terms of sources, I will naturally work with documents that propose their protagonists as eminent figures from fifteenth century Florence. Such documentation is vast, and traces of

⁵ Manetti, *Life of Brunelleschi*, 38 – 42.

⁶ J. J. Martin, *Myths of Renaissance Individualism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 7.

praise can be found in letters, engravings, poems, commentaries, and even speech transcripts.⁷ Perhaps the most well known work regarding Brunelleschi however has already been mentioned, his biography written by Antonio di Tuccio Manetti – *Life of Brunelleschi*. While Manetti’s accuracy is often questioned, he captures the bones of how biographers crafted Brunelleschi’s magnificence, and he was the platform from which later studies of the man were developed and expanded. Discovered in the same manuscript as the *Life*, and written in the same hand, was another source entitled “*Novella del grasso legnajuolo*”, which was a folkloric story about Grasso the woodworker and a trick that was played upon him by Filippo and his companions.⁸ This was Manetti’s account of a tale that may or may not have taken place in Florence in 1409, in which - the witty Brunelleschi and his clever acquaintances (including Donatello) fool a bumbling craftsman into losing his sense of reality. The story was written in the tradition of the Italian *beffa*, which were tales about practical (and often unkind) jokes, and its action takes place on the stage of Florence’s streets and workshops, making it a snapshot – albeit a fictive one – of fifteenth century renaissance culture.⁹ The *Woodworker* and the *Vita* will be used together to argue that Brunelleschi was fashioned as intelligent, witty, and reputable in reference to both the city and a close social world of companions and acquaintances.

Giorgio Vasari’s *The Lives of the Artists* will also be used to make some comparisons with Manetti’s work, as his classic compendium of Florentine artists – while published over half a century after Manetti’s documents – had a resonating impact on the way that craftsmen

⁷ For an excellent collection of early sources regarding Brunelleschi, see Isabelle Hyman, eds., *Brunelleschi in Perspective* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1974).

⁸ H., Saalman, ‘Introduction’, in Saalman, H., eds., Enggass, C., trans., *The Life of Brunelleschi: By Antonio di Tuccio Manetti* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1970), p. 1.

⁹ See Robert and Valarie Martone’s introduction to their translation of the tale. Their translation is also the version that will be used for the remainder of this thesis. A., Manetti, *The Fat Woodworker*, trans., R. Martone, & V. Martone, (New York: Italica Press, 1991).

were preserved and admired by future audiences.¹⁰ The *Lives of the Artists* established a Renaissance canon of praiseworthy men that culminated in a man whom Vasari viewed as an artist *par excellence* – Michelangelo. Before arriving at Michelangelo, Vasari describes the lives of Italy’s most famous craftsmen in a linear narrative of development, progressing art through three ages of increasing perfection - of which Brunelleschi, Donatello, Ghiberti, and Masaccio were all viewed within the second epoch.¹¹ The location of these protagonists within the rhetoric of such a narrative will be used to explore the way that a biographer may manipulate his subjects while also paying tribute to their life and achievements. Paul Barolsky has advised against being too wary of the bias and fabrication in renaissance biographies, suggesting that a “fear of fiction” inhibits the ability to garner meaning or value from a text.¹² Seeing Vasari’s *Lives*, or the apocryphal *Woodworker*, or the *Life of Brunelleschi* as flawed recordings of “fact” misses the point of the sources, and this leads to “unwitting fiction” because the historian presupposes a preference for factual rather than sentimental senses of the past.¹³ This thesis will instead view Vasari and Manetti as troves for understanding the way that Florentine artists were praised, fashioned as part of a narrative (that was both historical and literary), and imagined within a wider context of Florentine cultural development – “such fictions are borne of the historical imagination, that faculty essential to one’s larger vision of history”.¹⁴

The day-to-day experience of a man like Brunelleschi is only partly available to modern historians, and instead what remains are sentimental remembrances of the man as clever,

¹⁰ See Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*.

¹¹ The circle of historians, and especially antiquarians, that Vasari was associated with were important influences on the way that the artists of the *Lives* were crafted, as classical models were a guiding influence upon Vasari’s images of Renaissance artists. For a study of this world, see P. Rubin, *Giorgio Vasari: Art and History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

¹² P. Barolsky, ‘Fear of Fiction: The Fun of Reading Vasari’, in A. B. Barriault, et. al., eds., *Reading Vasari* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers & Georgia Museum of Art, 2005), p. 31 – 38.

¹³ P. Barolsky, ‘Fear of Fiction’, p. 34.

¹⁴ P. Barolsky, ‘Fear of Fiction’, p. 34.

witty, unassailably intelligent, and diversely skilled as a craftsman and engineer. One important thing to note is that women are strikingly absent in much of the material used for this thesis, as, for writers of the fifteenth century, eminence was a male attribute. While there were certainly instances of famous women in Florence, they were generally exceptions rather than part of Florence's standard cast of illustrious characters. As such, the following chapters will be focused upon a male-centric sphere of companions and rivals. While the experience of women is not my focus, the method of analysis – in looking at multiple and overlapping senses of self that were preserved consciously by authors and biographers – is one that could be applied to other sources for a more gendered type of analysis. In such a study, fame, gender, and exclusion may be the themes that revolve a cast of figures that either exemplify, or challenge, assumptions of behaviour from men and women in the fifteenth century. Such an assessment however, would require a whole new set sources and perspectives, and thus it is beyond the scope of this thesis.

My first chapter will address themes that provide something of a setting within which eminence, fame, and marginalization may be studied. The artisans mentioned above were citizens, craftsmen, and social companions, and the assumptions that accompany each of these labels had an important impact upon the way that Brunelleschi and his contemporaries were documented. I will address certain themes – civic participation, a complex workshop culture, and competition between acquaintances and rivals – as a way to suggest how selectively and conscientiously Manetti and Vasari's protagonists were remembered. My second chapter will study in specific detail the celebrated image of Filippo Brunelleschi himself. The theme of fashioning an individual will naturally infuse this chapter, as the plot of the *Woodworker*, and the biographical image crafted by both Vasari and

Manetti, will be used to illustrate the importance of manual and intellectual dexterity in praising Brunelleschi as a truly Florentine celebrity. My final chapter will look at the opposite of such a reputable man, turning towards characters who were bumbling and disorientated fools. Florentine writers supported ideals of community and acclaim by accentuating the foolishness of particularly dim or victimized figures. The Italian tradition of wit and mischief will be the background of this assessment, and I will use Manetti's *Woodworker*, and also Machiavelli's five-act comedy the *Mandragola*, to look at the way that some men were crafted as caricatures of foolishness or idiocy. I will argue that such characters supported a sense of social cohesion through a process of derision and ridicule, while accentuating the success and praise of clever, witty, and often unkind men like Filippo Brunelleschi.

Chapter One: Citizen, Craftsman, and Rival

*‘The City of Florence has had some very pleasant and amusing fellows in times past, and this is especially true of recent times as, when in the year 1409, a certain group of honourable men found themselves together one night at dinner. This was a group composed of men dedicated to the public life: some were master artisans and craftsmen, some were painters, some were goldsmiths, some were sculptors, some woodworkers and other types of artisans’.*¹

With these words Manetti begins his version of the *Fat Woodworker*, an apocryphal tale from fifteenth century Florence, set in 1409. The dinner scene shown above acts as a catalyst for the rest of the plot, as the group’s socially inferior and unassuming member Manetto Ammannatini, also known as Grasso (the Fat Man), has neglected to join the party. This leaves Pecori’s companions feeling “a bit snubbed – since they were almost all of a higher rank and station than he”, and they soon formulate a plan for revenge – lead and articulated by the brilliant Brunelleschi. The tale that follows is essentially an account of how Brunelleschi and his companions dismantle their friend’s mental stability. In short, they convince him that he has become someone else – another member of the group called Matteo. This requires a complex series of manipulations that ultimately shame Grasso’s reputation, forcing him to relocate to a different city. The basic plot then is somewhat discomfoting for modern readers as we are disposed to ask moral questions of the story

¹ Manetti, *The Fat Woodworker*, p. 1.

and end up affronted by Filippo and his gang. A renaissance audience however, would not have shared this indignation. The story glorifies Filippo, and this suggests a set of values different from our own. It is not Grasso, but Brunelleschi, who is at the heart of the story. The account pays homage to the genius of the deceiver, rather than the innocence of the deceived.

Importantly for a historian then is that far from being a simple trick acted by one man upon another, the *Woodworker* features a complicated set of social expectations and interactions that turn Grasso's reality against him. The plot involves major apparatuses such as the law and the church, as well as a wide host of characters from an array of social and professional positions. Each of these is, knowingly or not, deployed in aid of Brunelleschi's machinations. What this means is that the story, aside from being undeniably funny, is a trove for studies into how particular men from fifteenth century Florence were fashioned in the realm of popular tales. Because the *Woodworker* is meant to be humorous, it necessarily points out props that supported Grasso's reality in order to satirize them, and the way that he arranged his world is illustrated simply to show how cleverly Brunelleschi displaces these arrangements. On a more subtle level, the presence of men such as Brunelleschi, Donatello, Pecori, and Rucellai – the other members of the dinner – brings into light an important circle of friends who, according to Manetti, gathered frequently to discuss both their professions and the life of the city. These men were important figures in Florence, and their fame and reputation was celebrated both at the time and in the centuries to come. When we see this group of mutually appreciating but professionally diverse figures gathered together in a Renaissance tale, questions that are historical as well as literary seem to demand asking: who was the most respected in the group; on what terms did their position stand; why was

Brunelleschi esteemed, considering his training as a goldsmith, when his fellow artisan Grasso was not? In short, what are the cultural and social meanings informing such a gathering?

Before looking closely at the dynamics of ascendancy and humiliation within the circle then, we should turn to the world that the dinner companions occupied. While these men are shown as part of the *Woodworker* story, the documentation surrounding them is rich and varied. Thus, we do know that they were contemporaries of each other, and that they interacted both informally and professionally in a way that influenced their public and private selves. The purpose of this chapter will be to outline aspects of the world that surrounded people like Brunelleschi and Grasso. While these men came to have an almost folkloric status in the fables of Florence, they were part of a tangible experience that is implicated in the tales surrounding them. One graduation of status that Manetti's introduction applies unanimously to the men seated at Pecori's dinner is their dedication to the 'public life'. This expresses the notion that they were all, in some professional capacity, contributing to the civic growth of Florence. This contribution was in turn a cornerstone of their respectability. It is to this – the importance of civic participation – that we may first turn our focus.

* * *

In the following section I will argue that Florentine writers during the fifteenth century had a tendency to define famous men in terms of their citizenship and their contribution to the

cultural growth of Florence. I will look particularly at the themes of Florentine grandeur and a relationship between the city and the citizen to suggest that when the achievements of men like Brunelleschi or Donatello were praised it was in a way that gave acclaim to both the artist personally and the city broadly. Such praise situated Florence's artisans within a wider trend of civic pride seen in fifteenth century humanist works, of which Leonardo Bruni's *Laudatio Florentine Urbis* is a particularly good example.

In 1402 Bruni, who was one of Italy's most notable humanists, was residing in Florence after having attended the city's university.² One of Bruni's teachers, Emmanuel Chrysoloras, had instructed his young protégé in studies of ancient Greek, and from these studies Bruni encountered Aelius Aristide's *Panathenaicus*, a work from the second century A. D. that praised Athens as a magnificent safeguard of liberty against the threat of Persian despotism.³ Inspired by the structure, rhetoric, and form of Aristide's work, Bruni wrote his own piece some twelve hundred years later, proposing Florence as a similarly wondrous metropolis, the republicanism of the city a defence against Milanese tyranny. This piece was called the *Laudatio Florentinae Urbis*, and it was more than a political statement, it was a claim of Florentine glory as a complete and perfect city-state. In looking at famous citizens, the *Laudatio* suggests ideas that would come to be extended into accounts of individual men, and the themes of the *Laudatio* became important influences on the way that famous men praised by well-read scholars such as Vasari or Manetti. Bruni devotes his panegyric to Florence carefully, looking at the moral and political virtue of the city in one section, and praising her visual and architectural splendour in another. He suggests that by excelling in

² The most significant teacher of Bruni was Coluccio Salutati, whose role in Bruni's education has fallen under the assessment of significant scholarship. A good introduction to both men and their intellectual relationship may be found in chapters seven and nine respectively of R., Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients: The Origins of Humanism from Lovato to Bruni* (Boston: Brill, 2000).

³ R., Witt, 'Introduction', in B. G. Kohl, & R. Witt, eds., *The Earthly Republic: Italian Humanists on Government and Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), p. 123.

every aspect of urban life, Florence was pleasing because she was harmonious, each part of her character in tune with the others.

“There is a proportion in strings of a harp so that when they are tightened, a harmony results from the different tones ... this very prudent city is harmonized in all its parts, so there results a single great harmonious constitution whose harmony pleases both the eyes and minds of men”.⁴

While Bruni himself does not pay homage to Brunelleschi or Donatello specifically, he does capture a notion that runs through the documents surrounding them: these men were understood as part of a Florentine harmony, as famous artisans were praised as human embodiments of their city’s virtue and prominence. Just as the *Laudatio* emphasized the coordination between Florence’s political, cultural, and artistic spheres, Manetti and Vasari sustain a relationship between the great artist and the great city. Manetti, indeed, begins his account of Brunelleschi’s life by acknowledging that Filippo was granted the “great distinction of being buried in the Santa Maria del Fiore”, which was the impressive Cathedral of Florence, an emblem of the city itself.⁵ Such a resting place is testament to Brunelleschi’s civic significance, and while his personal glory remains central to his biography, public honour had a key role to play in both Brunelleschi’s reputation and remembrance. Critics have noted that Manetti’s biography “aims at proposing Brunelleschi as the model citizen ... [and] from the very beginning, the author emphasizes the civic virtue of Brunelleschi and his father”.⁶ This required that Brunelleschi be appreciated as part of the city as a whole, and for the purposes of fame in Florence, we should remember that Brunelleschi was crafted a citizen as much as an artist. A man’s inclination towards the

⁴ L. Bruni, ‘Laudatio’ cited in Zervas, D., *The Parte Guelfa, Brunelleschi & Donatello* (New York: J. J. Augustin, 1987), p. 48.

⁵ Manetti, *Life of Brunelleschi*, p. 34.

⁶ S., Baldassarri, *Mythography and Rhetoric in Quattrocento Florence* (UMI Microform, 1999), p. 240.

“public life” meant that he was in tune with Florence, and it was upon this ground that a significant portion of his status was established.

Another writer from the fifteenth century, Leon Batista Alberti, captures the theme of collective brilliance and civic pride in his piece entitled *On Painting*. This work was completed sometime between 1435 – 36 and it is the first modern treatise on the theory of painting and the composition art.⁷ *On Painting* advances arguments about the role of the artist, the importance of fame, and the correlation between the splendour of Florence and the talent of the city’s artistic company. A passage of the work that addresses Brunelleschi, Donatello, Massacio, and Ghiberti, states:

“Since then I have been brought back here ... into this our city, adorned above all others. I have come to understand that in many men ... there is a genius for every praiseworthy thing”.⁸

By praising the city first and the artist second, Alberti suggests that Florence was adorned with quality and beauty, and that the man who was a “genius” was, really, part of this broader excellence. The famous metaphor of the cupola of the Santa Maria del Fiore as “ample to cover with its shadow all the Tuscan people” demonstrates how a work credited to one man was seen also as a feat of Florence’s collective ascendancy.⁹ Alberti and Bruni both exemplify the Florentine tendency to glorify particular artists in reference to the city’s broader cultural splendour. This impulse is seen in Manetti and Vasari’s biographies – as will be illustrated in detail in my second chapter – but for now we should note that the

⁷ J. Spencer, ‘Introduction’, in L., Alberti, *On Painting*, eds., trans., John Spencer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), p. 15.

⁸ L., Alberti, *On Painting*, eds., trans., John Spencer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), pp. 40.

⁹ Alberti, *On Painting*, p. 40.

intellectual context of these authors was one that valued praise directed to the artist and the city in reference to each other.

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One should note then, that a man like Brunelleschi did not have complete creative licence in his work, but was contracted by wealthy patrons to complete particular projects for predetermined purposes (including civic glory). If the outcome of such a project resulted in the praise of a craftsman, then the historian should understand that sometimes “the artist had very little say” in the shape of his work, and that the outcome of an artistic endeavour was as much to do with patronal guidance as it was to do with a craftsman’s individual skill.¹⁰ Below I will look at two instances within which the intention of an artist and the intention of a patron differed, to make some suggestions about how praise of a final product may be understood. Artists alone were not responsible for the cultural expansion of the Florentine renaissance, and scholars have illustrated that it was the conjunction of artistic talent and wealthy patrons that lead to the explosion of culture in the fifteenth century.¹¹ The civic aspect of an artist’s fame becomes less clear in these situations, as the nature of his craft was influenced by personal, familial, or political agendas.¹² The

¹⁰ R., Mackenny, *Renaissances: The Cultures of Italy, c. 1300 – c. 1600* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 105. Also of interest is his following observation on artistic “individuality”, which he shows as contestable due to the multifarious parties that both contracted *and* created a work. This will be looked at more closely below in my discussion of workshop culture.

¹¹ See Brucker, who states – “beginning around 1400 in Florence, with the innovations of Brunelleschi in architecture, Ghiberti and Donatello in sculpture, and Masaccio in painting ... the combination of artistic talent, of wealthy patrons eager to hire that talent, and a new style based on antique models contributed to an explosion of creativity that still dazzles us”. G., Brucker, ‘The Italian Renaissance’, in G., Ruggiero, eds., *A Companion to the Worlds of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), p. 30.

¹² The political purpose of public art is seen all over Florence, however it took on a particular poignancy in the Piazza della Signoria – the seat of Florentine government. It is no surprise that Donatello’s sculptures were on display both here and in the Medici Palace garden, both centers of political authority in the city. For a study of this, see M., Fader, *Sculpture in the Piazza della Signoria as an Emblem of the Florentine Republic*, (Michigan: University of Michigan).

importance of these relationships causes us to look more critically at the praise directed towards men like Brunelleschi or Donatello because they would appear to have been singled out as the heroes of a rather complex process, which in turn made them easier to place within the grand “harmony” of Florence.¹³ This is captured well in two sculptures done by Donatello for the Opera del Duomo (the council in charge of Florence’s Cathedral) of the Arte della Lana (the city’s wool guild, who had authority over the Cathedral’s patronage), and also in Brunelleschi’s construction of his famous cupola, which rested atop the same Cathedral - the Santa Maria del Fiore.

In 1408 Donatello was commissioned to complete a sculpture of David as part of a programme to decorate the Cathedral of Florence. He completed his sculpture a month after his fellow artist Nanni di Banco had finished a statue of Isaiah as part of the same program.¹⁴ We are told that upon submitting his work however, Donatello was informed that the statue was too small and would not have a commanding presence onto the street. In a world where visual literacy had an important function, and the purpose of artwork went well beyond simple decoration, “legibility was important”, meaning Donatello’s statue was simply too small for the buttress it was intended for.¹⁵ While historians have noted the significance of both Donatello and Nanni’s initial works – which heralded a decade of collaboration between the men and ignited a new style of free-standing sculpture – they were rejected by the Opera because they did not perform their contracted, civic, function.¹⁶

¹³ Bruni, ‘Laudatio’, p. 48.

¹⁴ J., Paoletti, & G., Radke, *Art in Renaissance Italy: Second Edition* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2002), pp. 197 – 198.

¹⁵ Paoletti & Radke, *Art in Renaissance Italy*, p. 198.

¹⁶ Olszewski picks up on this as he says that the Opera realized that the Cathedral was ill-suited for smaller sculptures, which is what resulted in the *Joshua*’s installation, but they still “confirmed the work’s importance by its readily visible placement in the Palazzo Vecchio. Meanwhile the *Joshua* effectively fulfilled its role upon the lofty buttress.” E., Olszewski, ‘Prophecy and Prolepsis in Donatello’s Marble “David”’, *Artibus et Historiae*, vol. 18, no. 36, p. 73.

The outcome of this was a new commission for Donatello in which the Opera told him to craft a much larger figure of Joshua, to be made out of the inexpensive and easily manipulated terracotta. This figure was mounted in 1410 and resided commandingly on a buttress of the Cathedral until it decayed some centuries later. The *Joshua* embodied a number of ideals: it was a contribution to the spiritual grandeur of the church, it was a domineering testament to the skill of its maker and the generosity of his patron, and it was a colossal work that competed with the grand sculptures of antiquity.¹⁷ All of this would have made it a source of pride for the Florentine's who witnessed it, while it was also a civic symbol of skill and grandeur on display to visitors of the city.¹⁸ What this tells us is that works were regularly crafted as part of a wider cultural or artistic program.¹⁹ While this does not erode the credit given to a man like Donatello, it does mean that there is an additional filter between individual craftsman and the creations that he was accredited with.²⁰ For Donatello this resulted in his initial work being rejected despite its artistic value, and praise of his skill was directed through the figure of *Joshua* instead, whose size, proportion, and material he did not choose.

Relationships between the Opera del Duomo and their contracted workers did not always follow such patterns, as Brunelleschi's now folkloric design of the cupola of Santa Maria del Fiore suggests. In the early stages of planning and developing the cupola Brunelleschi was faced with significant resistance in becoming the chief architect of the project – partially because the *operai* (the governing body of the Cathedral) were unsure of his expertise, and

¹⁷ Paoletti & Radke, *Art in Renaissance Italy*, p. 198.

¹⁸ Paoletti & Radke, *Art in Renaissance Italy*, p. 198.

¹⁹ For a comparable example see the development of the guild chapel Or San Michele from 1406 onwards. Each guild was pressured to decorate their space for the visual grandeur of the chapel and the city, and such opportunities allowed rival guilds to display their wealth in close proximity to each other. For a broad overview see Paoletti & Radke, *Art in Renaissance Italy*, pp. 199 – 202 or for a look at this chapel as well as the relationship between sculptors and their patrons – C., Avery, *Florentine Renaissance Sculpture* (London: J. Murray, 1970).

²⁰ Feinberg suggests that, while there was a number of patrons in Florence, the Medici were at the head of her sweeping humanistic and visual development, as (particularly Cosimo) sponsored some of the most significant works of the period. See chapter 3, "The Cultural Climate of Florence" in his book – L., Feinberg, *The Young Leonardo: Art and Life in Fifteenth-Century Florence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 17 – 25.

partially because he refused to share his plans. Through a number of ruses, in which Filippo supposedly outwitted the most renowned architects of Europe and fooled his rival craftsman Ghiberti into revealing his own ignorance, Brunelleschi eventually succeeded in winning sole dominion over the assignment that would solidify his fame. I mention the early tension between Brunelleschi and his patrons however, to make the point that despite the bickering between the *operai* and their architect, they stood on common, civic, ground in the goal of completing the dome. Some form of the cupola was always intended to be the capstone of the Cathedral, as was decided in the plans of the building's original architect Arnolfo di Cambio. The praise of Brunelleschi then, came from the fact that he able to vault a cupola that was far larger than anyone else could achieve, and that rose higher above Florence than even the original designs of Arnolfo would suggest. Because the final product was an icon of Florentine pride, the relationship between Filippo and the Opera came to be subsumed beneath the glory of his achievement - indeed Manetti and Vasari use the tense stages of development as evidence of their protagonist's brilliance.

As we can see, both the cupola and the *Joshua* were produced out of tense or wavering patronal relationships, and yet the works both were praised for their civic presence, as both the artist and his work became important icons of the city's stature. What this suggests is that while authorities other than the artist were important influences - the *Joshua* was part of a visual program and the cupola was always imagined as an impressive dome – Florentines held up particular men as the heroes of these endeavours. Brunelleschi won praise by mounting the dome in a “perfect” way and Donatello remains credited with crafting the *Joshua*.²¹ The consuls of the Arte della Lana themselves suggest the necessity of

²¹ Manetti states, “only one person in the world could have accomplished it and that was the one who had done it” - Manetti, *Life of Brunelleschi*, p. 94.

having glorified, archetypal, figures as both the functional and symbolic leaders of Florence's projects –

“Filippo Brunelleschi, an honourable Florentine citizen, expended his efforts with the greatest diligence and ingenuity in the building and construction of the Cupola of the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence ... it would be as fitting for the honour and fame of Filippo as for the honour of all Florence that gratitude be shown.”²²

What this culminates in is two themes – the artist as a civic figure, and the underlying influence patronal authority – that cannot be cleanly separated when looking historically at the lives of these men. It is also important however, to note that the artist and the patron *were* removed from each other in contemporary praise. The *Joshua* and the cupola illustrate that the intention behind a piece of architecture or sculpture developed out of collaboration between many parties, particularly if the piece was on display to the public. Citizens and patrons were good at taking meaning from visual stimulus. When studying Brunelleschi or Donatello then, one should be aware of the complicating factors implicit in their patronal relationships, however when looking at artistic *fame* the historian is left lacking in sources that give credit to establishments such as the Opera of the Arte della Lana. Alberti, or Manetti, or Vasari, tended to prefer directing credit for achievements to the skill of a particular man to the exclusion of his patronal relationships, and an artist's fame came to be supported by the most significant endeavours of his career. A poem from 1459 exemplifies this notion, as the poet suggests that the eternal glory of Brunelleschi and the physical wonderment of his cupola are one and the same:

“He vaulted without armature the Cupola

²² ‘Consuls of the Wool Guild (Arte Della Lana) of Florence: Provision of December 30, 1446’, in I. Hyman, eds., *Brunelleschi in Perspective* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1974), pp. 21 – 22.

Of the beautiful temple of Santa Maria del Fiore

That is as tall as a great mountain

Even if a body is dead fame does not die

Not that of Filippo di ser Brunellescho

Nor will it ever die until the end of time.”²³

What this suggests is that Florentines preferred to praise specific men rather than the collaborative effort that really worked behind any artistic, sculptural, or architectural endeavour, and that such characters were also understood as civic members of Florence. The artists was not praised as part of a collective working environment, but he *was* praised as part of a collective citizenry -indeed politically both Brunelleschi and Donatello were involved in the governing bodies of Florence during their lifetimes.²⁴ The tone of numerous sources from the period – of which Bruni’s *Laudatio*, Alberti’s *On Painting*, and the anonymous poem provide just a small example – is that famous men were imagined as part of Florence. Florentines were proud of their cultural stature, and this meant that when particular figures were praised they were fashioned as members of a civic identity. One of the priorities of both Manetti and Vasari also, is to craft their protagonists as uniquely Florentine, and this tells us that a famous man was elevated and respected – at least in part – on the basis of his contribution to his city. When the *Woodworker* begins with a statement of Brunelleschi’s dedication to the public life, it hints at the importance of being a citizen and of being in tune with Bruni’s allegorically labelled Florentine “harmony”.

²³ Anonymous, ‘Stanzas in Praise of Brunelleschi (1459)’, in Hyman eds., *Brunelleschi in Perspective*, p. 29.

²⁴ For a good assessment of the political lives of Donatello and Brunelleschi see the comprehensive study of Diane Zervas – *The Parte Guelfa, Brunelleschi & Donatello* (New York: J. J. Augustin, 1987).

* * *

Moving away from civic involvement, the historian studying famous artisans should be aware that at the heart of any artistic or architectural endeavour in Renaissance Florence there was a workshop, a place in which the master craftsman and his many assistants would work on their creation. These workshops however, were not simply areas from which a sculpture or an building would emerge, they were filled with their own social networks and professional interactions, and they were documented in particular ways by the chroniclers of the city. In looking at the workshop I will make two points: firstly, that a workshop intersected with an artisan's "self" on a fundamental level, as evidenced by men such as Grasso. This intersection however, did not *have* to be defined by a place, and as the *Life of Brunelleschi* suggests, the workshop may simply be wherever an artist's skill was on display. Secondly, the workshop was an important forum of both social and professional relationships between the artisans of Florence, and this lead to the image of a group of famous men working together to elevate their city – Donatello worked in Ghiberti's workshop, Brunelleschi and Masaccio (a fellow artisan and eminent painter who was a contemporary of Brunelleschi's) studied perspective, and Manetti revered the scene of Donatello and Filippo moving together to Rome. The workshop was a place through which the ideas of artists circulated, and through which their fame was understood and nurtured. To begin, it is important to note that workshops were places that were deeply entrenched in the urban fabric of Florence. They were areas of social, professional and cultural exchange

during trading hours, and they are often classified as public spaces (in the sense that while particular people worked in them, they opened onto the street and could be filled with any number of citizens throughout the day).²⁵ Estimates of the fifteenth century suggest that when Florence had a population of around sixty thousand, there were over two hundred established workshops scattered throughout the city, covering a range of professions from stonemasons, to sculptors, to woodworkers, to painters.²⁶ These workshops would generally be close to major patrons such as the Cathedral of Florence, as this was the most pragmatic location for their craft.²⁷ The *Woodworker* uses the experiences of workshop culture as a background for a popular satire, and in turn it suggests that a worker's identity and his shop were closely related, as Grasso's shop frames his character both in personal and social terms. When we are first introduced to Grasso we are told, "The woodworker had his workshop near Piazza di San Giovanni", suggesting that Grasso's shop was innately part of the introductory sketch of his character.²⁸⁻²⁹ Furthermore, after the tale has developed Grasso returns to his workshop to find a place of comfort and reassurance - "he returned to the contentment of being back as the Fat One [Grasso] and in possession of his own things".³⁰ What this tells us is that workshops had a fundamental influence upon an artisan's sense of self. The place was a reference point from which Grasso was fashioned personally, and from which others established a description of his character. For famous artists like Brunelleschi however, the workshop also took on additional meanings by being implicated in notions fame and reputation.

²⁵ See E., Welch, *Art and Society in Italy 1350 – 1500* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 83 – 90 for a good overview of Florentine workshop culture.

²⁶ Welch, *Art and Society in Italy*, p. 84.

²⁷ For a study of Florentine workshops, their locations, their composition, and their procedure, see A. Thomas, *The Painter's Practice in Renaissance Tuscany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Chapter two – "The Renaissance City" – is particularly helpful in socially and culturally looking at the workshop. Also see M. Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972).

²⁸ Manetti, *The Fat Woodworker*, p. 2.

²⁹ For a closer study of the way that title and introduction implies social stature see Martines, particularly his observations about Grasso and his association with his workshop. L., Martines, *An Italian Renaissance Sextet: Six Tales in Historical Context* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), p. 216.

³⁰ Manetti, *The Fat Woodworker*, p. 32.

During the construction of the cupola of Santa Maria del Fiore we see a unique kind of workshop in Brunelleschi's scaffolding. This was a complex project, raised hundreds of feet above the cathedral floor, and it was the place that Filippo literally built around his architectural endeavour.³¹ As a result, Manetti's biography coupled the scaffolding to Filippo's cleverness, and the innovative engineering became an integral part of the myth surrounding Florence's most popular edifice. This is exemplified in an anecdote where Manetti recounts how Brunelleschi tricked his co-leader, Ghiberti, into losing his job. This episode was played out in reference to Filippo's authority over *his* workshop, and thus it may be used to draw some conclusions about the place in sustaining eminence and repute.

Manetti's *Vita* tells us that when the cupola was in construction the workers became uneasy spending their days so high above the ground. Brunelleschi had not yet completed his scaffold and the men were unwilling to work without proper safety precautions. Filippo seized this as an opportunity to rid himself of Ghiberti, who was taking credit for a design that was (supposedly) entirely Brunelleschi's. Manetti tells us that that "Filippo did not leave his bed one morning. He remained there pretending to be ill".³² As a result, Ghiberti was forced to try and rectify the scaffolding that had been designed by his partner – "Lorenzo [Ghiberti] knew that the organization of the work was Filippo's and had to be followed".³³ This led to him attempting, and failing, to build upon the scaffolding, which in turn gave Brunelleschi grounds to claim his ignorance and have him removed from the project.

While this scene is relatively short, it suggests some ideas about Brunelleschi's working environment, and the complicating presence of other labourers and masters, that we should

³¹ For a fantastic break down of the building "site" of the cupola see G., Fanelli, & M., Fanelli, *Brunelleschi's Cupola: Past and Present of an Architectural Masterpiece* (Florence: Mandragora, 2004), pp. 23 – 28. The breakdown is detailed; even going into the hiring, payment, and distribution of the significant workforce that Brunelleschi had operating under him.

³² Manetti, *Life of Brunelleschi* p. 84.

³³ Manetti, *Life of Brunelleschi*, p. 84.

keep in mind. Firstly, Brunelleschi had to appease the worries of his workforce in order to keep his undertaking on track – he was not a craftsman here, but a project manager. This tells us that the master artist was expected to couple his own personal skill with a guiding hand over the workshop community, and as we see, Brunelleschi was part of a matrix of interactions and expectations that one scholar has labelled a “multimembered working collective”.³⁴ The master could not operate without the support of his workshop, and so he needed to negotiate any number of human demands – from safe working conditions to Ghiberti’s claims of credit – if he was to successfully deliver to his patrons. While such a statement seems obvious for a job as vast as the cupola, it remains consistent throughout the city’s various crafts, and despite the ideal notion of excellent men expressing themselves on canvas or in marble, the creative process was far more collaborative and far more mechanical than it may first appear.³⁵

Also, for biographers such as Manetti or Vasari, the workshop was labelled under the artist at its head, and this leads us to the idea that “workshops were people as well as places”, in the metonymic sense that while a workshop was a physical place, it was identified and credited to a person – *Grasso’s workshop, Brunelleschi’s scaffolding*³⁶ It is no wonder that Manetti emphasises Ghiberti’s failure in rectifying the scaffolding of the cupola because the workshop of the Cathedral fell under Filippo’s authority. Brunelleschi’s talent and reputation were at stake in his workshop, and so he removes the rival Ghiberti so that there would be no doubt about who should be credited with the ingenuity of designing the scaffold. An extension of this is that the social worlds and the working worlds of master craftsmen were

³⁴ M., Wackernagel, *The World of the Florentine Renaissance Artist: Projects and Patrons, Workshop and Art Market*, trans., Luchs, A. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 313.

³⁵ As Cole has suggested, in the Renaissance “pure artistic individuality ... did not exist.” B., Cole, *The Renaissance Artist at Work: From Pisano to Titian* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), p. 16.

³⁶ Welch, *Art and Society in Italy*, p. 84.

intricately linked.³⁷ The workshop however, was *not* simply synonymous with its master in a functional sense. Renaissance contract records have illustrated that a patron may include money for moving an entire shop when logistically required, and this suggests that benefactors were aware of the requirement of a wider “workshop” of tools and assistants.³⁸ Donatello’s oscillation between his shop near Santo Spirito, and his shops in the chapels of the Duomo is a good example of this, as the master artisan could not work by himself - he needed people and materials near his project.³⁹ For biographers and chroniclers who labelled a shop as synonymous with their protagonist, this meant that they isolated a man from a multifarious and complex web of people. The praise of Brunelleschi or Donatello as *the* men who revived Florence’s glory required a selective focus upon the individual master, which in turn excludes his assistants and underlings. This focus was part of a workshop’s natural hierarchy, but it should be viewed as something that consciously contributed to the ideal image of a famous man. It was more befitting for personal glory to avoid mention of (or praise for), a man’s assistants.

Scholars however, often stop their assessment of workshop culture here, at the claim that there were many people working under the title of a master craftsman. It seems though, that there was another level of complication in the idea that both patrons and artists themselves *wanted* to give credit to a reputable individual – it was not just chroniclers and biographers that isolated the skill of a single man. This is seen in the contracts of Florentine artists, which commonly included a *sua mano* (“cause to be done”) clause that demanded a master artist have managerial control over each part of his project.⁴⁰ Such contracts may

³⁷ Cohen and Cohen have illustrated this *social* working environment with the resonant claim that “Renaissance work was larger than the economy”, in the sense that “work and sociability mingled” in the Renaissance. E., Cohen, & T., Cohen, *Daily Life in Renaissance Italy* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001), pp. 270 – 272.

³⁸ M., O’Malley, *The Business of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 82 – 83.

³⁹ M., Wackernagel, *The World of the Florentine Renaissance Artist*, p. 308.

⁴⁰ O’Malley, *The Business of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 91 – 96.

also include demands of personal craftsmanship, as patrons wished to ensure that the man they were employing handled the major pieces of their commission.⁴¹ This suggests that patrons were aware of the delegation that came with any significant piece of work, and yet still wanted a famous man – a Brunelleschi, or a Massacio, or a Donatello – to be the one who brought their skill to bear upon the project. There was also a desire from the artist himself to harvest credit, and Brunelleschi's interaction with Ghiberti illustrates that while there were multiple parties in any project, the master craftsman was where the praise for a work was directed. Brunelleschi does not try to remove the labourers from his endeavour, just his co-leader, because it was only a fellow master that could claim a glory that was equal to his own. While shops were collaborative efforts, men sought to condense their achievements into a distinguished individual. Thus, the workshop was a place of both collaboration and personal glory.

The idea of collaboration within a workshop however, was not restricted to the hierarchical interactions between patron, master and assistants. Shops - and artisan culture more broadly – were spheres of interaction and connection between fellow workers.⁴² These places were a necessarily social environment, and collaboration was natural aspect of the workshop's social culture.⁴³ Men like Donatello, Brunelleschi, or Masaccio were often in contact and this resonated powerfully for their biographers. This is hinted at by the *Woodworker*, which claims that "Once they [Pecori's dinner companions] had dined cheerfully, they sat together here and there in small groups ... conferring among themselves

⁴¹ O'Malley, *The Business of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 91 – 96.

⁴² It is common knowledge in modern scholarship that "the production of art was, first and foremost, a cooperative venture." A good study of the social aspect of workshop and artisan life is found in, B., Cole, *The Renaissance Artist at Work: From Pisano to Titian* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), p. 13.

⁴³ For a social and cultural look at a particular workshop see Covi's work on Verrocchio. He illustrates the milieu of social and professional interactions that occurred within a particularly homely décor of bookshelves, games, music, and beds. D., Covi, 'Four New Documents Concerning Verrocchio', *The Art Bulletin* vol. 48, no. 1, (March, 1966), pp. 97 – 103.

upon the highest aspects of their arts and professions".⁴⁴ The dinner companions were recognized as the vanguard of a new cultural and political expansion in the quattrocento, and that they shared a social world was significant to their distinction. In *On Painting* Alberti doesn't pick out any single figure of greatness, he highlights a group that included Brunelleschi, Donatello, Ghiberti, and Lucca della Robbia who had a "genius for [accomplishing] every praiseworthy thing".⁴⁵ This links together a set of heroic individuals while being dismissive to the huge numbers of practitioners working throughout the city. What this illustrates is that while there were a many workers involved in Florence's artisan culture, particular individuals were elevated as the popular embodiments of her achievements, and in the context of this very restricted focus, there was an ideal image of collaboration between groups of reputable masters. This can be illustrated by looking at Vasari's idealistic recording of Brunelleschi and Masaccio's pioneering of perspective. Vasari tells us "Brunelleschi spent much time studying perspective, the rules of which were imperfectly understood".⁴⁶ This study however, is followed with an image of Filippo spreading his revelations into Florence – "Other artists began to study perspective with great zeal. To the young Masaccio, in particular, Filippo taught his art."⁴⁷ The famous artists of Florence did not exist in isolation, and so they are celebrated for being improved by each other's advances. This also occurred naturally in workshops, as the form of a master would be passed onto his apprentices, as the entire workshop had to uphold a consistent style.⁴⁸ It is no surprise then that two of the most celebrated examples of perspective emerge from the same city in the same decade. In the 1420's Brunelleschi proved his concept of single

⁴⁴ Manetti, *The Fat Woodworker*, p. 1.

⁴⁵ Alberti, *On Painting*, p. 39.

⁴⁶ Vasari, *Lives*, p. 70.

⁴⁷ Vasari, *Lives*, p. 70.

⁴⁸ For a clear and useful analysis of this functional aspect of the workshop, and its social and creative implications, see A. Thomas, *The Painter's Practice in Renaissance Tuscany*, particularly chapter 10 – "The Workshop and Stylistic Development".

point perspective by drawing the baptistery with such accuracy that his image could not (supposedly) be distinguished from the reality.⁴⁹ To achieve this, Brunelleschi drew the building mathematically, its measured proportions being manipulated to fit within a schema of receding lines (moving towards a vanishing point) in order to give the appearance of being three dimensional. Brunelleschi then used burnished bronze as the sky for his canvas, and drilled a small hole into the centre of the work before placing the entire ensemble on the steps of the Duomo at the exact point that he had painted the image. The theory was that a person would look through this hole and see the real baptistery, before then holding up a mirror to look Brunelleschi's drawing (the moving sky reflected in his burnished bronze), and supposedly being unable distinguish between the lived reality, and the reflected painting.⁵⁰ Whether this is legend is accurate we will never know, however Brunelleschi was credited with the skill and talent to create such a masterpiece, and he remains attributed with the development of the artistic and architectural uses of linear single-point perspective, as is exclaimed by Vasari. In the same decade Masaccio crafted his celebrated *Trinity* as a fresco on the wall of the Santa Maria Novella, which had receding layers of space, giving the appearance of multiple spaces that would have a lasting impact on the world of painting.⁵¹ That these works emerged out of collaboration between Masaccio and Brunelleschi emphasized by Vasari, and this suggests is that cooperation – or even simple awareness of each other's work – was important for the city's eminent artisans. In terms of fame, such collaboration had the implied effect of elevating an endeavour to greater repute because of the many virtuosos behind it. Donatello and Brunelleschi's studies

⁴⁹ Malcolm Park has looked at this episode both mathematically and historically to suggest the accuracy and significance of Brunelleschi's experiment, while also giving a good overview of the research surrounding the demonstration. This is particularly interesting considering that the work is lost to modern historians. M., Park, 'Brunelleschi's Discovery of Perspective's "Rule"', *Leonardo* vol. 46, no. 3, (2013). For Manetti's account of the demonstration itself see Manetti, *Life of Brunelleschi*, pp. 42 – 44.

⁵⁰ Again, for a full account of the theory behind this achievement, see M., Park, 'Brunelleschi's Discovery of Perspective's "Rule".'

⁵¹ For studies of the *Trinity* in particular, but also of Masaccio's social and patronal world, see the collection: R., Goffen, eds., *Masaccio's Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)

in Rome are a good example of this, as Manetti records the learning of antiquity with an almost religious reverence.⁵² Furthermore, texts such as *On Painting*, or the *Woodworker*, or Vasari's *Lives*, paint the image of a famous collective, a group of men who, through shared brilliance, lifted their city to greatness, even as they are singled out as the models of a complex and multimembered matrix. Casting specific masters as prominent over their contemporaries in this context of shared brilliance required the introduction of another dynamic: competition.

* * *

Competition was an important part of a craftsman's relationships in fifteenth century Florence. Between fellow artists rivalry was a way to establish superiority and reputation, and while men such as Donatello and Brunelleschi were friends, they often contended against each other professionally and personally. In addition, wealthy patrons sometimes held competitions for potential employees, considering various works before one or two men were granted a full commission – as is seen in the Arte di Calimala (the Florentine cloth guild's) contest for the bronze Baptistery doors, or the Opera del Duomo's invitation of suggestions for the vaulting of the Cathedral's cupola.⁵³ Furthermore, for the companions of Pecori's dinner, undertones of contest and posturing would have established a kind of informal (and partially formal) sense of status among men who were from a variety of social

⁵² This episode will be unearthed in more depth in my second chapter. The scene in question takes place in Manetti's *Life*. Manetti, *Life of Brunelleschi*, pp. 56 – 64.

⁵³ For accounts of these together, see Hyman, eds., *Brunelleschi in Perspective*.

casts.⁵⁴ Rucellai and Pecori were the most socially elevated men at the dinner, yet Brunelleschi was described with similar respect to his patrician companions due to his intellectual ascendancy over them. This extends to the prank upon Grasso, as by outsmarting a man with similar professional life, Brunelleschi practised and reinforced his elevated station. Similar themes could be extended into the city more broadly, as “competition existed not only among artists and their patrons, but between cities”, and the grandeur of Florence’s Cathedral was a source of pride – in part – because it symbolised a cultural ascendancy over other Italian urban centres.⁵⁵ For individuals then, while competition was not the only means of heightening oneself, it was a way of distinguishing fame within a collective of important men.

In his *Lives* Vasari covers the social sphere of Brunelleschi in brief, running through a few of his important known associations. Towards the end of this, Filippo’s companion Donatello is mentioned – “with whom he held friendly conversations, both men taking pleasure in each other’s company”.⁵⁶ It seems jarring that the following passage tells a story of pride and competition rather than camaraderie. We are told that “Donatello had completed a Crucifix in wood”, and that when he asked Brunelleschi’s opinion of it he earned the reply he had “placed a peasant [sic] on the cross”.⁵⁷ Rather than supporting his friend, Brunelleschi spends several months crafting his own wooden Crucifix, which he ultimately unveils to Donatello as a surprise before one of their meals together. Donatello’s response is to drop his groceries in awe, as he “proclaimed the work to be a miracle.”⁵⁸

⁵⁴ For a closer assessment of social status at this dinner, see Martines, *An Italian Renaissance Sextet*, p. 216.

⁵⁵ R., Turner, *Renaissance Florence: The Invention of a New Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997), p. 70.

⁵⁶ Vasari, *Lives*, p. 141.

⁵⁷ Vasari, *Lives*, p. 141.

⁵⁸ Vasari, *Lives*, p. 142.

There are two things that Vasari values in this episode – the skill of Brunelleschi, and the humility of Donatello – as praise from a fellow master was the highest level of flattery Filippo could receive. For Vasari, contest was ideally taken in good faith between parties, and Donatello's claim to have been nourished implies that his companion improved his expertise rather than slighted his pride. The companionship of Donatello and Brunelleschi was founded upon mutual respect rather than mere congeniality, as Alberti notoriously claimed – “How can anyone dream that mere simplicity and goodness will get him friends?”⁵⁹ The image of a collective group becomes coupled with a theme of competitiveness, as Filippo and Donatello elevated each other and distinguished themselves through contest.

Such episodes though, were delivered in particular ways by the men who recorded them, and in the broader context of his *Lives* Vasari's use of competition is as much rhetorical as it is biographic. By having a work that advances art in a teleological manner towards the perfection of Michelangelo, Vasari naturally establishes a finishing point against which past artists, or indeed entire ages, may be judged or evaluated.⁶⁰ As such, the source records rivalry between contemporaries to build a sense of stature within their own time, while also suggesting that competition – if coupled with concession and wisdom – was integral to the progression of art towards its highpoint. The artists in Vasari tussled against each other to “insure the uniqueness of [their] achievement”, which in turn established individual figures that were not entirely subsumed beneath an overarching and unidirectional narrative.⁶¹

Furthermore, Vasari uses different anecdotes to distinguish between “good” forms of

⁵⁹ L. B., Alberti, *Della Famiglia*, cited in Martin, J. J., ‘The Myth of Renaissance Individualism’, in Ruggiero, G., eds., *A Companion to the Worlds of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), p. 215.

⁶⁰ J., Clifton, ‘Vasari on Competition’, *The Sixteenth Century Journal* vol. 7, no. 1. (Spring, 1996), p. 24.

⁶¹ E., Kris, & O., Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 121.

competition and “bad” forms of competition, as while men like Brunelleschi and Donatello competed without envy, Vasari tells of other artists who through jealousy acted detrimentally to their profession.⁶² This is seen in the joint life of Andrea del Castagno and Domenico Veneziano, as while Castagno was a truly skilled painter, he was more notable (to Vasari) for his rancorous envy, which led him to murder his “too-successful colleague” Veneziano by bludgeoning him to death with lead weights.⁶³ The exaggerated rhetoric of the episode – which was entirely fictitious – illustrates that Vasari was making a conscious statement about rivalries that inhibited artistic progress by generating spite and even murder. Ambition was praised while envy was not. Introducing Brunelleschi, Donatello, Ghiberti, Uccello, and Masaccio as the heralds of art into its second age of progress, Vasari states –

“It is Nature's custom, when she creates a person of great excellence in any profession, to create not just one man alone but another as well, at the same time and in the same part of the world as his competitor, so that both of them may profit from each other's talent and from the rivalry.”⁶⁴

For Vasari, competition was ideally seen in terms of profit, and as such it became a kind of rhetoric within his *Lives*. Contest was a vantage from which to praise the achievement of a man, while also admiring – or critiquing – the response of his competitor. Furthermore, in a document that held a collective of artists, competition was a way for Vasari to overcome the issues inherent in his teleological narrative by allowing room for the praise of individuals who were not Michelangelo. While Brunelleschi was a member of the imperfect second age,

⁶² Clifton, ‘Vasari on Competition’, p. 26.

⁶³ Clifton, ‘Vasari on Competition’, pp. 26 – 27.

⁶⁴ Vasari, *Lives*, p. 128.

he is still acclaimed by Vasari due to his ascendancy over his contemporaries and his rivalry with them.

Such a deliberate handling of competition can also be seen in instances of more professional contentions that centred upon artists vying for glory and patronage. Numerous parties often documented such contests and this allows us to draw some different conclusions about the importance of contest to praise and fame. In the famous contest for the commission of crafting the bronze doors of the Baptistery of Florence, a number of artists, including Donatello, Ghiberti, and Brunelleschi, competed for the prize of crafting one of the city's significant visual displays. The contest required the participants to submit trial pieces as examples of their skill, and both Brunelleschi and Ghiberti's submissions have survived "virtually side by side, as though permanently competing for attention and comparison, and for adjudication."⁶⁵ Below I will illustrate that this competition was recorded in different ways by different authors to propose different men as the successors of the challenge. Manetti's *Life*, Vasari's description of Brunelleschi, and Ghiberti's *Commentaries* (which were treatises on art history and theory), all provide different versions of the same story, and this suggests some ideas about the role that competition played in establishing fame and reputation.⁶⁶

Turning to the story itself one should note that the authors share the same basic plot, telling us that around 1401 the *operai* of the Baptistery of Florence declared a competition between several artists, requiring that each present a bronze tablet detailing the Sacrifice of Isaac. The artists would submit their pieces, and the *operai* would declare a victor who

⁶⁵ M., Levy, *Florence: A Portrait* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996), p. 116.

⁶⁶ For all three accounts collected together, see Hyman, eds., *Brunelleschi in Perspective*, pp. 38 – 43.

would be granted the honour of crafting the bronze doors of the Baptistery.⁶⁷ Donatello, Brunelleschi, and Ghiberti all entered this competition, and ultimately Ghiberti was commissioned as the winner. His success however, was contentious. Many imagined Brunelleschi as equal to Ghiberti in his submission, and this led to contrasting versions of the story, and subsequently, praise for different men.

In his *Commentaries* Ghiberti only briefly covers his submission for the baptistery, and this brevity is a result of the sweeping authority with which he claims to have won the contest. He states that “Universally I was conceded the glory ... At that time it seemed to all, after great consultation and examination by the learned men, that I had surpassed all the others”.⁶⁸ There is no mention of Brunelleschi in this account (aside from including him in the list of competitors) and, if Ghiberti is to be believed, he was simply the most well equipped man for the job. Manetti’s *Life of Brunelleschi* however, tells a different story. Manetti tells us that Ghiberti heard of Brunelleschi’s brilliance, and because he was “shrewd” he asked for advice from a number of people for the method and arrangement of his tablet. He loses credibility in the eyes of Manetti here because he relies upon the help of others while at the same time corrupting the wider competitive process - “operai and officials of the church were [also] advised by the very people Lorenzo had singled out”.⁶⁹ Competition in the renaissance, from artistic rivalry to physical duelling, was conducted under certain expectations of honour and integrity.⁷⁰ Thus, Manetti claims that the judges of the contest erroneously commissioned Ghiberti under the belief that no one could compete

⁶⁷ For an artistic assessment of the submission pieces themselves, see F. R., Shapely, & C., Kennedy, ‘Brunelleschi in Competition with Ghiberti’, *The Art Bulletin* vol. 5, no. 2, (December, 1922), pp. 31 – 34.

⁶⁸ L., Ghiberti, *Commentaries*, in *Brunelleschi in Perspective* p. 39.

⁶⁹ Manetti, *Life of Brunelleschi*, p. 48

⁷⁰ For an assessment of the framework of honour within which artistic competition operated, see Holman’s analysis, which uses the example of an artistic “duel” between Giovanni Bernardi da Castel Bolognese and Benvenuto Cellini to make some suggestions about the social and cultural codes of such a contest. B., Holman, ‘For “Honour and Profit”: Benvenuto Cellini’s *Medal of Clement VII* and His Competition with Giovanni Bernardi’, *Renaissance Quarterly* vol. 58, no. 2, (Summer, 2005), pp. 512 – 575.

with his design, a decision aided by his corrupt method of crafting his work. When Filippo unveiled his tablet to the panel, Manetti tells us that they “changed their opinion” in favour of the new submission.⁷¹ Because the *operai* could not retract their previous decision, Manetti claims that Ghiberti and Brunelleschi were offered co-leadership of the doors, and Brunelleschi refused such a humiliating offer. Levey sums up the tension between the accounts well: “As Ghiberti triumphed, his account of the judging is both sweeping and gleeful ... [while] According to Manetti, the judges eventually decided that both trial pieces were ‘*bellissimi*’ ... [and] public opinion in the city was completely divided, and remained so.”⁷² Vasari’s account is different again, because while he captures the rivalry between the artists, he also claims that it was Filippo who ended up *convincing* the committee to hire Ghiberti. In this, Vasari continues his ideal of humility because Brunelleschi’s actions allow him to maintain his artistic integrity, while Ghiberti is credited with a superior work – “Happy spirits who, while assisting each other, rejoice in praising the work of others!”⁷³ As we can see, the authors offered strikingly different accounts of events, and this suggests that contest between artists could be viewed, and utilized, in different ways.

Manetti and Ghiberti both demonstrate that competition was a way for an artist to excel, to establish his authority, and to try and be remembered favourably. The authors both write with a preference for their own protagonists, and this is the reason that they managed to conjure contradictory accounts of the same event. Part of this would certainly come from the fact that a jury judged the contest, and there would inevitably have been differences among the judges, and “their disagreement no doubt had repercussions in talk all over

⁷¹ Manetti, *Life of Brunelleschi*, p. 48

⁷² Levey, *Florence*, p. 117.

⁷³ Vasari, *Lives*, p. 72.

town".⁷⁴ The way that the authors tweak the story however, suggests that episodes like this were an important part of a man's fame, because if Brunelleschi or Ghiberti wished to be viewed as Florence's most capable craftsman, then they would need to surpass each other in terms of skill. Just as Castagno sought to outdo his equally talented companion Veneziano, Ghiberti and Brunelleschi were determined to prove their ascendancy over each other – an endeavour taken up in their various biographies. Fame and reputation were at stake in such challenges, and this is the reason that both sources appear to have doctored parts of their accounts. What this culminates in is a paradox –artists such as Brunelleschi, Ghiberti, and Donatello were commonly seen as part of an ideal group of craftsmen who were elevating each other and the city, yet this image was coupled to dynamics of personal glory and competitiveness among friends and rivals, as individual men vied for their own fame, patronage, and remembrance.

* * *

The endeavours of famous artists in fifteenth century Florence were part of a vibrant, expansive and competitive culture that characterised the professional worlds of Italian craftsmen. Master artisans were part of a multimembered workshop experience, and their interactions with apprentices, patrons, and fellow masters had an important influence on the way that a project was developed within the workshop, and was praised by chroniclers and biographers. The separation of eminent men from the diverse and eclectic experience of the Florentine workspace then, meant that reputable figures like Brunelleschi or

⁷⁴ R., Krautheimer, 'The Contest for the Baptistery Door', in Hyman, I., eds., *Brunelleschi in Perspective*, p. 51.

Donatello were consciously isolated from a world filled with the influence of many contributors and workers. In the realm of master artists there was also a civic and intellectual ideal of collective Florentine brilliance gaining momentum in the fifteenth century, and the rhetoric of biographies and chronicles often meant that acclaimed individuals were crafted both as citizens of Florence and part of a wider group of talented men. Within this group, dynamics of competition and rivalry re-established the skill of the individual craftsman, as a man like Brunelleschi was praised in reference to his contemporaries and his workshop, but was also fashioned into the realm of remarkable and unique master. With this in mind we may proceed to my second chapter, which will deal in closer depth with the conscious crafting of Filippo Brunelleschi's in Manetti's account of the *Woodworker*, and his biography the *Life of Brunelleschi*.

Chapter Two: Praise

“Filippo di Ser Brunellesco, architect, was of our city and in my time I knew him and spoke to him. He came of good and honourable people. He was born in the year of Our Lord 1377 in our city and there, for the most part, he lived, and there, according to the flesh, he died.”¹

Antonio Manetti, as seen in the above quotation, claims to have known Filippo Brunelleschi personally, and he uses this to grant his recordings of the man a sense of authority. In the following chapter I will address the way that Manetti uses his perspective on Brunelleschi to craft a particular impression of his protagonist’s fame and character, seen in both his biography and his version of the apocryphal *Woodworker* tale. It is to this popular story that we may first direct our attention, as the *Woodworker* captured a number of assumptions behind famous and reputable figures, centring on a group of companions who are gathered together at a dinner. While I have illustrated the importance of a group mentality to such a gathering, in a source written by Manetti there is – predictably – one figure that is the intellectual head of the party. Manetti tells us “Among the fellows of the group was Filippo di ser Brunelleschi, a man of marvellous genius and intellect, as most people already knew.”² In a world where the notion of a “Renaissance Man” neither existed, nor would have had any value, Manetti’s introduction invites curiosity about what it was that made

¹ Manetti, *Life of Brunelleschi*, p. 36.

² Manetti, *The Fat Woodworker*, p. 2.

Brunelleschi so admired.³ The first mention suggests that his intelligence was his defining characteristic, however this is also framed by his reputation: “Once again the group recognized Filippo to be a great genius – how sad is the blind man who cannot see the sun”.⁴ The aggrandizing metaphor establishes Brunelleschi as the centre of the dinner, and of any further developments in the saga. Thus, the joke on Grasso will be understood as a performance from a clever genius, eager to display his finesse in a world where the artist could evolve “from craftsman to a more elevated person”.⁵ We are told that “people judged the prank to be totally impossible”, and indeed it would be a great accomplishment for Filippo to invert a man’s entire reality through little but his own unassailable cleverness.⁶ While I make no assertions of Manetti’s accuracy, the *Woodworker* was a popular tale that flourished in both written and oral form in the fifteenth century, and so the behaviour of the characters is entrenched in their time. We may approach the story in a similar way to how Patricia Rubin has approached contemporary paintings that deal with public life, saying that they are “better viewed through [their] verisimilitude ... similar to life, [they are] a figure for the hierarchies, operations, ties, actions, and expectations that constituted life in the period.”⁷ That there are such clear archetypes is actually very useful, as the apocryphal story exaggerates the assumptions and values that separated clever men such as Brunelleschi from bumbling ones such as Grasso.

In looking at Brunelleschi in the *Woodworker* I will make two related points. Firstly, while the story recounts the experience of Grasso, it has Brunelleschi at the centre - it is he who engineers the trick and benefits most directly from the tale’s popularity. Contingent to this

³ P., Emison, *The Italian Renaissance and Cultural Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 186 – 189.

⁴ Manetti, *The Fat Woodworker*, p. 3.

⁵ Martines, *An Italian Renaissance Sextet*, p. 221.

⁶ Manetti, *The Fat Woodworker*, p. 3.

⁷ P. L., Rubin, *Images and Identity in Fifteenth-Century Florence* (New Haven: Yale University Press), p. 3.

then is the notion that such an ingenious ploy did more than amuse the dinner companions, it treated the fame of the man at its core. Trickery and humour in the fifteenth century was “cultivated by wealthy, class-conscious patricians” and so a prank was a clear way for Brunelleschi to enhance his own social stature.⁸ The second point to take from the tale is that ideally a man was both intellectually and physically dexterous. We have seen that Brunelleschi’s intelligence was a cornerstone of his public self, and Manetti is careful to match this with a physical handiness that reflects his skill as a craftsman.⁹ The importance of physical skill is supported by the obesity of Brunelleschi’s counter-character Grasso, who – while a talented woodworker – was inferior to the mastery of Filippo. This is also symbolised by Brunelleschi’s deft breaking and entering of the woodworker’s home. Brunelleschi in the *Woodworker* was famous, intelligent, physically capable, and on display to the audience of the city.

The day after Pecori’s gathering, Brunelleschi starts to deploy his plan to fool Grasso into believing he has become someone else, and this begins with a seemingly innocent visit of the woodworker’s workshop near the Piazza di San Giovanni. The visit itself is in no way suspicious, Filippo and Grasso are good friends, and as Manetti reiterates – “As a friend, Manetto confided everything in Filippo, otherwise Filippo would not have been able to do what he planned”.¹⁰ Grasso simply assumes that Filippo has dropped by to exchange conversation and keep in touch at the end of the workday. Such visits produce the image of a close friendship between two artisans in the socially and culturally loaded setting of the workshop, as Brunelleschi ironically illustrates his connection to the artisan world before he proceeds to transcend and invert it. It is then not long before a messenger (hired by

⁸ P., Barolsky, *Infinite Jest: Wit and Humor in Italian Renaissance Art* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978), p. 18.

⁹ Martines notes that the men at the dinner occupied a social and professional world “that mixed manual dexterity with intellect and imagination Martines, *An Italian Renaissance Sextet*, p. 221.

¹⁰ Manetti, *The Fat Woodworker*, p. 4.

Brunelleschi) arrives, informing Filippo that his mother has fallen ill. Filippo immediately excuses himself, and while Grasso quickly offers his assistance Filippo asks him to remain in the shop just in case he needs him. The point of this is to keep the woodworker away from his home so that Filippo can prepare the next stage of his plan. This exchange, while brief, captures the basic structure of the story: Grasso acts in a manner that is both well intentioned and predictable, while Brunelleschi manipulates this expectedness in order to further his strategies. He is a puppeteer over the social pressures upon his artisan friend and it seems that mischief and wit are more respectable, and more helpful, than camaraderie.

That Filippo would so readily toy with a colleague with whom he was “on very friendly terms” begs the question – what is at stake? On one level the answer may be self-validation. Vasari tells us, in his introduction to Brunelleschi, that there are men who are “endowed with spirits so full of greatness” that they are compelled to bring impossible tasks to completion to the “astonishment of those who witness them”.¹¹ Brunelleschi’s endeavour to invert a man’s reality was such a task, and while it was nothing but a prank, the cleverness with which it was orchestrated lifted its significance, reinforcing the cleverness of its engineer. It also however, spread the knowledge of this skill. Reputation and fame are at stake here, as any prank that circulated within the city naturally embellished, or tarnished, perceptions of the man at their core. The tale’s popularity illustrates its impact on Filippo’s reputation, as displays of intellectual ability helped fashion the impression of a man who was deserving of social esteem.¹² Contextually this would have been significant for an artist/architect who was essentially dependent upon patronal relationships, because if one crafted a favourable “construction” of himself, then he could generate new commissions

¹¹ Vasari, *Lives*, p. 137.

¹² Emison tells us that the fifteenth century was marked by a rise in esteem for the intellectual ability of men as the “mind was newly given prestige ... with consequences ... [of] social mobility”. Emison, *The Italian Renaissance and Cultural Memory*, p 28.

due to what one scholar has called “chains of recommendation”.¹³ As Brunelleschi himself tells Grasso at the conclusion of the tale (after the woodworker has moved abroad to work for a Florentine called Spano, who was the General of Hungary’s army under the leadership of King Sigismund): “This will give you much more fame than anything you have ever done with the Spano or Sigismund. People will still be talking about you for a hundred years”.¹⁴

The implication from this is that people will be talking about *Brunelleschi* in a hundred years.

The prank serves to maintain Filippo’s identity, which rests at the intersection of his brilliance and his fame. In a joke that we might see as cruel, a central aspect of renaissance eminence is unearthed – notoriety and respect supported by manipulation and unkindness.

With this in mind, we can turn our attention to the actions of Filippo after he has left Grasso stranded in the workshop. We are told:

“Filippo left, leaving the Fat One at the shop and, pretending to go into his own house, he went secretly to the Fat One’s house, which was near Santa Maria del Fiore. Filippo expertly opened the lock with a knife – as one who knows how – entered the house and locked himself in”.¹⁵

What kind of person does Manetti mean when he says “as one who knows how”? If the extract were read in isolation then a natural assumption would be a thief – practised in breaking and entering. Such an identity however, does not fit well with the Brunelleschi we have encountered thus far. It seems that Manetti is seizing upon an opportunity to glorify his hero, and the kind of fellow who knew how to do such things extends into the kind of fellow who knew how to do *all* things. More specifically, the ability to pick a lock is a small

¹³ P., Mclean, *The Art of the Network: Strategic Interaction and Patronage in Renaissance Florence* (London: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 164 – 165.

¹⁴ Manetti, *The Fat Woodworker*, p. 52.

¹⁵ Manetti, *The Fat Woodworker*, p. 5.

way of capturing the demands of physical dexterity from the quattrocento artisan. Throughout the tale we receive an image of Filippo as not just intelligent but skilled with his hands, and this demonstrates that his cleverness was only one part of his reputable character. Brunelleschi was a craftsman and so the deftness with which he breaks into Grasso's home is a way of suggesting his physical superiority over the woodworker despite their similar professions. The story further emphasises the contrast between the two men by casting Grasso comically in his very name, 'il Grasso', the Fat Man. This nail is driven home by the fact that it is Grasso's home that Brunelleschi breaks into, as the physical barriers surrounding the woodworker are just as malleable as the mental ones, particularly for a man of Brunelleschi's skill. Brunelleschi readily occupies and controls the two most fundamental places of Grasso's self, his home and workshop, and this suggests that socially and physically he was more capable than the woodworker. Brunelleschi had a real engineering ability to match his clever manufacturing of Grasso's social interactions. Such craftsmanship is seen on a larger scale in the construction of the cupola, yet the picking of a lock, while a comparatively small achievement, is something that tells one almost exactly the same things about Filippo – being able as a craftsman was valued, useful, and a cornerstone of Brunelleschi as a renaissance archetype.

Looking beyond the *Woodworker*, physical excellence was seen as more than a necessary component of an artist's professional life, it was part of the way that masters proved their abilities against each other. If we look again at the contest for the baptistery doors, the competition involved a number of men from a variety of professions (sculptors, goldsmiths, painters), and yet each had to craft and manipulate an identical bronze tablet.¹⁶ Professional training and specialist skills are less important here than a natural ability to craft the

¹⁶ R., Krautheimer, 'The Contest for the Baptistery Door', in Hyman, I., eds., *Brunelleschi in Perspective*, p. 51.

material before them, and it was inherent physical talent that would determine the contest's victor. This captures the idea that truly reputable craftsmanship was a gift given to only a few important man, and while preparation and professionalism were important parts of an man's skill, biographers seem to suggest that Florence's greatest men were endowed with a natural, inherent, ability with their hands. Manetti attributes Brunelleschi with great manual dexterity in both the *Woodworker* and his *Life*, and Vasari similarly heralds Filippo's craftsmanship as the pinnacle of his age. Vasari also, however, begins his description of Brunelleschi with an impression of poor physical bearing – “small and insignificant in appearance” – before cautioning that “we should never turn up our noses when we meet people who in their physical appearance do not possess the initial grace and beauty that nature should bestow upon skilful artisans”.¹⁷ It seems important for Vasari that while Brunelleschi was possessed of artistic skill and status, he was in some way physically imperfect - just as Grasso was aesthetically lacking in the *Woodworker*. Appearance was a way for Vasari to subtly support the rhetoric of his wider work, which scholars have suggested was ultimately about Michelangelo.¹⁸ Brunelleschi and his companions were part of the important but still incomplete second age, and so Brunelleschi – despite his achievements – could not be the physical embodiment of the perfection that was to come. This is supported by Leonardo da Vinci's introduction, which is also concerned with physical appearance. Vasari tells us that sometimes a “single body is lavishly supplied with such beauty, grace, and ability that wherever the individual turns, each of his actions is so divine that he leaves behind all other men”.¹⁹ These are the words that herald the third age of Florentine artists, and it seems that physical form was to be used as an allegorical

¹⁷ Vasari, *Lives*, p. 137.

¹⁸ See Barolsky, *Giotto's Father and the Family of Vasari's Lives* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press).

¹⁹ Vasari, *Lives*, p. 284.

expression of artistic refinement. What this suggests is that physicality was an important way of expressing or symbolising talent. Vasari's recognition of Brunelleschi's skill as a craftsman is tempered with a description of poor physical appearance, and this means that Filippo is consciously located in the hierarchy of the *Lives* and for Manetti, Brunelleschi's authority is established through both his skill and the obesity of his adversary. Physical appearance and manual dexterity were important to fame and praise in renaissance Florence.

Turning back to the *Woodworker*, the episodes mentioned above give a taste of the story and the way that Filippo works within it – he is always in the background, adjusting Grasso's interactions, keeping track of different things that have happened, and always several steps ahead of the dim woodworker. Grasso cannot help but stumble through a confused and disorientating three days. The prank works perfectly, and near the end of the tale Grasso comes to the Santa Maria del Fiore in an attempt at self-affirmation. Here he finds Filippo and Donatello waiting casually for him. As they begin to needle him, barely containing their laughter, Grasso slowly pieces together what has happened, realizing he has been duped. As the story spread, supposedly 'everyone' in the city was laughing at him – an important fact for Brunelleschi. The prank, in Manetti's version, became instantly popular, circulated through the workshops and streets of Florence, and thus we are told of Grasso's departure:

“He went around Florence on horseback to see what little he could of the city in the brief time that remained, and he dismounted in some places where he heard his case being discussed, each person laughing and making jokes about it”.²⁰

²⁰ Manetti, *The Fat Woodworker*, p. 49.

The joke spread like wildfire around Grasso, forcing him to avoid public spaces and to ultimately seek work outside of Florence. This is a result of the tale's instant popularity, inseparable from which was Filippo. He rested at the heart of the story. Apocryphal tales such as this did much to establish popularity and prominence in a way that preserved the identity(s) at their core. The full extension of this is that audiences, even six centuries later, read this story and put together an impression of Brunelleschi as a character, framed and informed by the themes and interactions of the fable. Yet while modern audience may read the *Woodworker* expecting a hero and a villain, a renaissance audience it seems, expected a clever trickster and a dim-witted victim, the goodness of these characters being sidelined to the central focus upon physical and intellectual deftness – or lack thereof. Brunelleschi's role in what could be described as a pseudo-fiction makes him heavy with the cultural assumptions of his popularity.

The *Woodworker* is a helpful source for looking at the way that Brunelleschi was praised and elevated in the context of a close social world of companions, rivals, and co-workers, however – because it is focused on a particular event with particular people – it doesn't capture the more universal sentiments of glory that rested behind his celebrated achievements. Brunelleschi was more than a member of Pecori's dinner, he was one of the key protagonists of Florence's cultural development in the fifteenth century. Manetti's *Life of Brunelleschi* then, is a source that lends itself to be studied alongside the *Woodworker*, as it picks up some of the broader ideas behind Filippo's fame. The *Life* suggests that Filippo's prominence came from two things. Firstly, that Brunelleschi was the central figure from which "that manner of building, called *alla Romana* or *alla antica* ... was restored"; and

secondly, “he was a man of great intellect, great resoluteness, and extraordinary talent”.²¹ By linking Brunelleschi so closely to ancient Rome, and simultaneously emphasizing his individual brilliance, Manetti is directing particular – and at times paradoxical – sentiments of classicist inspiration and Florentine uniqueness into a single glorified hero. In the fifteenth century, Florentine sculptors, painters, and humanists were responding to the city’s Roman past in diverse ways, however a common theme was being inspired by antiquity, and using this to further the glory of their own native city. Brunelleschi’s recovery of *alla antica* meant that he was one of the artistic heroes through which Florence established her cultural prominence, as “artists were regarded as the symbol of Florence’s primacy in the visual arts. They represented the Florentine genius by virtue of their knowledge, artistic originality, and wit”.²² Brunelleschi embodied ideals of grandeur, of discovery, and of Florentine inventiveness that – for Manetti - captured the essence of the city’s cultural rise.²³ As such, throughout the *Life* Brunelleschi is held in a symbolic dialogue between his own unassailable intellect, and the wonders of Roman architecture. It is on this base that Manetti credits him with the honour of the city, and as a result the *Life of Brunelleschi* can be viewed as a document within which Manetti is less interested in casting Filippo as a trickster, and is more focused on praising him broadly and launching him into posterity as one of the city’s artisan heroes. The remainder of this chapter will argue that it was in the conjunction of Brunelleschi’s turn to antiquity and his own personal, Florentine, cleverness that he was praised.

Manetti’s biography tells us that after his failed bid for the construction of the Baptistery doors, Brunelleschi left Florence for Rome, “where at that time one could see beautiful

²¹ Manetti, *Life of Brunelleschi*, p. 34.

²² Baldassari, *Mythography and Rhetoric*, p. 234.

²³ Baldassari, *Mythography and Rhetoric*, p. 238.

works in public places.”²⁴ Filippo’s observation of these “marvels and beautiful things” inspired his extensive studies of architecture, as “he observed the method and symmetry of the ancients’ way of building [and] He seemed to recognize very clearly a certain arrangement of members and structure”.²⁵ Alongside Donatello, Filippo is seen in a ritual of careful study, mastering and understanding the ruins of Rome.²⁶ This is a romantic and impassioned scene, as the great architect of Florence finds inspiration among the crumbling ruins that lie at the heart of both the lost Roman Empire, and the mythical origins of his native city.²⁷ The importance of this experience is not lost among other writers, and Vasari particularly celebrates that Filippo’s “studies were so intense that his mind was capable of imagining how Rome once appeared even before the city fell into ruins.”²⁸ The great Rome of old was an idyllic image for Florentines, and that Brunelleschi could imagine himself into its landscapes through diligence and study was an important sentiment. Just like Petrarch before him, and Machiavelli after him, Brunelleschi is celebrated for his almost conversational relationship with the ancient masters.²⁹ It is important that Filippo

²⁴ Manetti, *Life of Brunelleschi*, p. 34.

²⁵ Manetti, *Life of Brunelleschi*, p. 50.

²⁶ Johnston’s lively – if contentious – journey through quattrocento Florence picks up on this moment in a similar fashion. She tells us that “Plenty of talk could be heard in Florence about their [Brunelleschi and Donatello’s] doings in Rome ... [where] they examined exhaustively every available example of ancient building or sculpture, made their notes and their drawings ... they dug in likely places in hope of finding fresh treasures”. M., Johnstone, *Life in Florence in the Fifteenth Century* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1968), p. 92.

²⁷ There has been significant scholarship surrounding the origin myth of Florence, which developed and changed through a number of different chronicles. The first Florentine Chronicle, the *Chronica* written anonymously in the thirteenth century, emphasizes two ancestors – Rome and Fiesole. These both gave Florence a sense of importance, as Rome was the antique capital, and Fiesole was (mythically) founded by Atlas, and was the base from which his sons founded Troy and Sicily. Later accounts also brought Charlemagne into the origin story by crediting him with Florence’s redemptive reconstruction after the hordes of Totila. The consistent theme among each chronicle, from the *Chronica* through to the fifteenth century was the importance of a Roman republican lineage. Florence was the reincarnation of Rome’s most glorious state, and so famous identities such as Brunelleschi were naturally linked into the myth of this noble ancestor. On the mythic origins of Florence see S., Baldassarri, ‘Like Fathers like Sons: Theories on the Origins of the City in Late Medieval Florence’, *MLN*, vol. 124 no. 1, (January 2009), pp. 23 – 44. Also, C., Benes, *Urban Legends: Civic Identity and the Classical Past in Northern Italy, 1250 – 1350* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011).

²⁸ Vasari, *Lives*, p. 145.

²⁹ A good source for Petrarch, which includes the importance of such discourses to his levels of self, is Mazzotta’s comprehensive analysis – G., Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch* (Durham: Duke University, 1993). Of particular interest is his first chapter, “Antiquity and the New Arts” in looking at the Petrarch’s humanist parallels to Brunelleschi’s relationship with antiquity. Machiavelli’s discussions with the ancients are famously captured in his letter to Francesco Vettori in December 1513, as he allegorically feeds on “the food that alone is mine and that I was born for”. An online translation of the text is provided by Aberystwyth University. N., Machiavelli, ‘Letter from Niccolo Machiavelli to Francesco Vettori’, accessed via Aberystwyth University, <http://users.aber.ac.uk/via/it105-web/machiavelli/index_machiavelli.htm>

understood the forms of antiquity because it was these that elevated him above the other workmen of his age.

If we look more closely at Manetti's description of this episode, we can see that these years are described as almost sacred, as Filippo and Donatello expend all their effort in extracting lost architecture from the decay of time; "Neither of them paid much attention to what they ate and drank or how they were dressed or where they lived, as long as they were able to satisfy themselves by seeing and measuring".³⁰ This passage reveals much about Manetti's conception of Brunelleschi, and the hallowed significance of his studies. By discarding any concern for home, for dress or for livelihood, Donatello and Brunelleschi transcend common fifteenth century social trappings because in the context of the biography such things are simply not a part of their character. While standards of dress were an important way that Italians performed themselves in public, Brunelleschi and Donatello had no time for such things – even though the author could easily have implied that their appearance remained untarnished.³¹ That Manetti explicitly removes such trivialities could suggest two things. Firstly, he does not need to embellish the men with the accessories that accompanied the patrician world because their value lay in their intellect and industry. The other possibility is that the ruins of Rome were so sacred to the *Life* that they were seen as a pseudo-private space; a consecrated area of reflection and exertion within which only one concern could ever be at the fore. There is a ceremonial aspect to the this episode, and as a result Manetti could be excusing Brunelleschi and Donatello from the usual expectations of public space to help generate the aura of the setting - "Here the image of Brunelleschi bent on seeking the ancients' artistic elegance, possesses an almost religious intensity. All of his actions ... are

³⁰ Manetti, *Life of Brunelleschi* pp. 52 – 54.

³¹ For the importance of clothing to social, cultural, and political performance see the index of R. T rexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980).

described as stages in a mysterious and awe-inspiring ceremony”.³² By weaving this mystique around Brunelleschi’s studies, the *Life* suggests that the work of Donatello and Brunelleschi was comprehensible only to them, and this exaggerates the impression that the companions were deploying their unassailable intellects to the task of unearthing, and understanding the Roman ruins. The significance of their work, and of the setting, gives this episode great importance to the biography.

The dual traits of intellectual and physical dexterity are prominent here as well, as the companions study from the vantage of theoretical knowledge but with the aid of Brunelleschi’s clever hands. His skill as a craftsman allowed him to record accurate and vast dimensions in such ingenious ways that Manetti actually implies that it was in Rome that both the scaffolding of the cupola, and the discovery of linear perspective, had their roots. The symbolic culmination of this episode is the label that Donatello and Brunelleschi supposedly receive from the local Romans - “treasure hunters”.³³ Because Manetti’s contact with the people witnessing the scene is questionable, it is important to view this label as symbolic rather than factual. Manetti is giving allegorical significance to the ‘rediscovery’ of ancient elegance and style – a treasure itself. The ‘treasure hunters’ left Florence for the most architecturally rich site in Italy, Rome. Through their labours Filippo became a man of distinction whose learning and study funnelled the cultural eminence of antiquity to the grandeur of his native city. Thus we are told that when confronted with the challenge of vaulting the cupola, Brunelleschi “investigated the methods of the ancient masters employed in the problems he encountered and he noted various solutions ... so great was his desire for honour and excellence and the glory of his genius”.³⁴ Brunelleschi’s study of

³² Baldassarri, *Mythography and Rhetoric*, p. 241.

³³ Manetti, *Life of Brunelleschi*, p. 64.

³⁴ Manetti, *Life of Brunelleschi*, p. 64. (Emphasis is my own).

the ancient masters is a significant moment in the *Life*, as it was here that his knowledge of architectural form had its roots. By putting together a scene that was almost ritualistic, Manetti tells us that Filippo's cultural value had a strong anchor in classicism.

On one of Brunelleschi's visits to Florence in 1417, the *operai* (the governing body of the Santa Maria del Fiore) – who were aware of his growing reputation – contacted Filippo asking for advice in finishing Arnolfo di Cambio's Cathedral. While Brunelleschi worked on countless buildings in his life, some of which Manetti mentions, this moment is particularly important because it sparks a fire within Filippo, and his every action is then described as part of a plan to secure control of the cupola.³⁵ Brunelleschi's other projects are subsumed beneath the endeavour that would embellish Florence, preserve his intellect, and illustrate his architectural mastery. When he returned to Rome it was "with the aforementioned church in Florence always in his thoughts and with some expectation of having to take care of it".³⁶ This is almost a paternal image, as Brunelleschi understands that he alone would be capable of vaulting the cupola without a central support pillar, and it is an enterprise that he desired for the honour of both himself and of his city. Realising his expertise, the *operai* asked again for Filippo's advice in 1419, after he has studied *alla Romana* as it may help with the project. His response is to suggest that all the best architects of Europe be gathered together, each posing a resolution to the problem. This would seem like sound advice if not for the fact that Filippo then illustrated the flaws of every new design until only his (unexplained) model remained. Filippo had called the gathering to demonstrate his cleverness to an international audience, before intending to convince the *operai* that he was the only logical craftsman for the job. The *operai* however remained uneasy in contracting

³⁵ For a good study of Brunelleschi's other building see the work of Howard Saalman, who has provided significant research on the world, and works, of Filippo. H., Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi: The Buildings* (London: Zwemmer, 1993).

³⁶ Manetti, *Life of Brunelleschi*, p. 64.

him because they had not yet seen his model. They compensated by asking him to complete smaller works successfully (which he did) and to hire him on probation with poor pay.

Despite these exigencies, Filippo Brunelleschi was made “chief headmaster” of the vaulting of the cupola in 1420, proceeding “because of honour” – there was too much fame at stake in the feat for Filippo to ignore.³⁷ The preoccupation with reputation and fame is important here, as self-promotion was vital for Brunelleschi. He not only wished to achieve great feats, he wanted people to know that it was he who achieved them, as his gathering of Europe’s greatest architects would suggest.

Looking at the actual construction of the cupola, Brunelleschi’s leadership follows a predictable pattern: he is faced with challenges, and he overcomes these in a way that is both perfect and distinguished. Noticeable – as we have seen – is the credit given to Brunelleschi’s clever methods of scaffolding, which allowed efficient work high above the chapel floor. There are also other small stories, such as the strike of the masonry workers, however they are all delivered through similar schema: Brunelleschi knew and was prepared for every eventuality. An important point is that Brunelleschi is shown as active, involved and knowledgeable in every part of the Cupola’s development. The diversity of his skill as a craftsman is celebrated with the unlikely claim that “During his life not a small stone or brick was placed which he did not wish to examine to see whether it was correct ... He [Brunelleschi] seemed to be the master of everything”.³⁸ Artisans, while often associated with a particular skill, were ideally men of all trades. Manetti implies that Brunelleschi could have built the cupola entirely with his own hands if he had the time, and this represents a unification of his intellectual and physical dexterity that, while questionable, reinforces the

³⁷ Manetti, *Life of Brunelleschi*, p. 78.

³⁸ Manetti, *Life of Brunelleschi*, p. 94.

perception of him as broadly learned and skilled. The perfection of Brunelleschi, and his utter suitability to the project, is the final impression that Manetti leaves us with: “only one person in the world could have accomplished it and that was the one who had done it, by which was meant that it was truly the work of God”.³⁹

This idealized account of what would have been a complex, and at times uneasy, period of construction develops the impression of Brunelleschi as a unique and Florentine talent. It was not enough for him to be the channel through which the methods of *alla antica* were brought into prominence; rather he was prized because he allowed the city to go beyond recapitulating the ancients to bettering them. We have seen that competition played an important role between individuals, and it seems that there was also a broader sense of competitiveness between Florence and her glorified ancestors.⁴⁰ In this the cupola was a symbol of Florentine ascendancy because it was intended “to outdo in height and splendour the supreme achievements of the Greeks and the Romans at their greatest. *It was a very Florentine ambition.*”⁴¹ As a result, when Manetti claims that there “was only one person that could have done it” he links Filippo to the significance of his edifice. As Alberti celebrated that the cupola allowed Florence to cast the countryside in its shadow, so too does Brunelleschi garner “the greatest fame and glory for himself” out of success of his project.⁴² This suggests that images of celebrated men and images of the wonderful city were working together in a syncretic way, as the city itself was imagined as magnificent, but particular men were selected to embody and promote this ideal. When Ugolino Verino, a

³⁹ Manetti, *Life of Brunelleschi*, p. 94

⁴⁰ This compulsion is captured by Bruni in his *Laudatio*, as he states that “Since Florence derives from such noble forebears, it has never allowed itself to be contaminated by sloth and cowardice, nor has it been content to bask in the glory of its progenitors or rest on its laurels at ease and leisure. Since it was born to such an exalted station, Florence has tried to accomplish these things that everyone expected and desired it to do”. L., Bruni, *Laudatio Florentinae Urbis or Panegyric to the City of Florence (c. 1403-4)*, accessed via the University of York, <<http://www.york.ac.uk/teaching/history/pjpg/bruni.pdf>>, p. 3.

⁴¹ T., Holme, *Vile Florentines: The Florence of Dante, Giotto, and Boccaccio* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), p. 129. (Emphasis is my own).

⁴² Manetti, *Life of Brunelleschi*, p. 94.

notary from the fifteenth century, suggests that “the beauty of Florence surpasses that of Ancient Athens” he does not detail her collectively but instantly states that “I shall name the many illustrious sons of Florence ... No other city can claim so many men of outstanding genius”.⁴³

What this tells us is that Brunelleschi was fashioned on a number of different levels. In the *Woodworker* he was ascendant among social group of craftsmen and patricians, as his skills and his reputation elevated him above his dining companions. In the illustrious instance of the cupola however, he was harnessed as an embodiment of Florence herself. For Manetti, Filippo was the human incarnation of his city’s pre-eminence over antiquity. Florence’s unique cultural stature was captured in the cupola and as such it was extended to the man that was synonymous with the achievement. The city and the glorified individual are found in a state of interaction, and while Brunelleschi had been praised previously for his work on perspective, “it was after the realization of this daring project, that the Florentine architect started being regarded as a local glory.”⁴⁴ Thus, the intersection of Rome, of personal cleverness, of the cupola, and of Florence’s cultural orientation was where Brunelleschi’s status rested in Manetti’s *Vita*.

In time the cupola came to its completion, and while Brunelleschi did not see the Lantern finished atop his Dome, he left careful instructions behind for its design and build.⁴⁵ The cupola was the fulfilment of ideas that were shaping the cultural, social and physical existences of the Florence. These evolved during the quattrocento, and were clear influences on the man that is conjured and preserved by Manetti. In the dome of Santa

⁴³ U., Verino, ‘The Beauty of Florence Surpasses that of Ancient Athens’, in Baldassarri, S. U., & Saiber, A., eds., *Images of Quattrocento Florence: Selected writings in Literature, History, and Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000) p. 208.

⁴⁴ Baldassarri, *Mythography and Rhetoric*, p. 239.

⁴⁵ The cupola was famously completed in 1471 as Verrocchio’s engineering marvel – his copper orb – was mounted atop the Lantern, earning him the name *Verrocchio dell Pall* (of the ball). Feinberg, *The Young Leonardo*, p. 18.

Maria del Fiore Florence found her symbol of uniqueness, and in its architect her hero. As such “the cult of Florence as the Renaissance art city par excellence had begun.”⁴⁶ This was instigated with a turn towards the antique for inspiration before a platform of uniquely Florentine glory was developed, and it was in this shroud that his biographers crafted the fame and credit of Filippo Brunelleschi.

⁴⁶ Baldassari, *Mythography and Rhetoric*, p. 242.

Chapter Three: Exclusion

“He was a wonderful person, as were most fat men. He was about twenty-eight years of age, and he was large and robust; and for this reason he came to be known by one and all as the “Fat One”. He was actually a bit simple ...”¹

In contrast to famous and reputable men such as Brunelleschi or Donatello, there were characters in Florence that were viewed as fools and were excluded and ridiculed on the basis of their dimness. In assessing the exclusion of these figures I will begin by turning to the Manetti’s depiction of Brunelleschi’s victim in the *Woodworker*, Grasso, in order to make two main points in relation to such archetypal characters: firstly, that a sense of self was bound together with a sense of place, and that the contrast between people like Grasso and people like Brunelleschi is captured by the different areas that supported their personalities. Grasso’s identity rested somewhere between his personal relationships and his connection to his home and workshop, while Brunelleschi’s fashioned fame was propped up by public buildings, edifices, and social interactions. Secondly, that the relationship between Brunelleschi and Grasso is one that is dominantly about exclusion, as Filippo fastens his social community – the dinner companions and their friends – together by excluding the woodworker in a process of ridicule and humour.² Grasso meanwhile, finds himself without an identity because the machinations of Brunelleschi fundamentally

¹ Manetti, *The Fat Woodworker*, p. 2.

² The importance of exclusion to social cohesiveness was first brought to my attention in the work of Edward Muir, who argues community as “social interaction in an institutional guise, community as a certain kind of space, and community as a process of social exclusion.” E. Muir, “The Idea of Community in Renaissance Italy”, *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 55, no. 1, (Spring, 2005), p. 4.

excluded him from the home and family that he calls his own, leaving him stranded and disoriented.

In the previous chapter I examined Brunelleschi's burglary of Grasso's home, where he then sits in wait for the woodworker to return from work. The scene that follows, while being a relatively brief interaction between Grasso, Brunelleschi, and Donatello, is filled with assumptions about space, family, and community that make it an important source for studying the way that a self was crafted, as the social worlds of these men collide in a way that leaves the woodworker disoriented and perplexed.

When Grasso comes home from work he finds another "Grasso" bickering with his mother. The real Grasso is caught outside on his own doorstep, uncertain of what is going on until the man inside his home calls to a Matteo, telling him to leave and return another time. Brunelleschi cleverly arranges for Donatello to pass by at this moment, and greet Grasso with the words: "Good evening, Matteo, are you looking for Manetto the Fat? He has been home for a little while."³ Before Grasso can do much to understand why a stranger is refusing him entry to his home, or why Donatello has mistaken him for somebody else, he is publically arrested for debt, being told repeatedly by the creditor that he is called Matteo. The conclusions that Grasso draws from this scene ultimately drive the remaining story, inflamed and helped along by the constant involvement of Brunelleschi.

If we now step back and picture the scene - we see Grasso walking home after a long day in his workshop, intending to walk up his stairs and enter through his front door, supposedly to begin his dinner or to converse with his mother – it's a ritual he has performed almost daily throughout his professional life. The automated process is shattered however, when Grasso

³ Manetti, *The Fat Woodworker*, p. 7.

finds his door locked from the inside, and a voice just like his own calling “Beh! Matteo, go on. I have had a mountain of troubles today”.⁴ Grasso is thrown. “What does this mean?” he asks himself. Someone is inside his home, scolding his mother for coming home from the countryside late and fussing over what should be his supper! For Grasso, there seems to be a very important link between his house and his identity – it is natural for one to fill the other. This is perhaps the reason for his sudden descent into confusion, as he doesn’t consider the fact that the voice is simply somebody else, because it would only make sense for him to be inside his home. The claim that “It seems to me that whoever is in there is me” comes almost instantly.⁵ It is no coincidence that the story uses the home as the first area for Brunelleschi to undermine, because this forces the woodworker into the street. In public Grasso does not have the control he enjoys inside his home, and so he becomes subjected to more disorienting interactions, and is far more malleable without his household to anchor his identity to – suddenly Grasso becomes more easily duped by his higher class “friends”.

When Grasso is stranded on the street, the second important ploy in the scene takes place – Donatello walks by and delivers the seemingly flippant comment; “Good evening, Matteo, are you looking for Manetto the Fat? He has been home for a little while”.⁶ While the address of Grasso as Matteo is strange, the rest of the encounter seems normal; it was not an odd thing for Donatello to be wandering the streets hailing his friends in this way. The street was an area for common and spontaneous interactions, and these existed in reference to the landmarks around them.⁷ The exchange between Donatello and Grasso is

⁴ Manetti, *The Fat Woodworker*, p. 6.

⁵ Manetti, *The Fat Woodworker*, p. 6.

⁶ Manetti, *The Fat Woodworker*, p. 7.

⁷ A parallel to this observation is found in Gordon’s work on the folkloric tales surrounding the death of Buondelmonte which ignited the Guef / Ghibelline division in Florence. He argues the importance of familial and political authority over a particular place

based on the assumption that if a man was outside Grasso's home, then he must be looking for the woodworker within, as the home perceived as part of Grasso's identity. By continuing to view the home as Grasso's, Donatello emphasizes the woodworker's confusing situation and thus causes him to spiral further into a sense of disorientation - "If Grasso was amazed before, he was more amazed than ever now". As a result, Donatello's usually unremarkable greeting leaves Grasso "overcome with confusion".⁸

This scene is filled with meanings about the importance of places like the home in sustaining (or upsetting) a notion of self. The argument that community is a type of space helps us understand what exactly is going on here, as the disturbing depth of Brunelleschi's scheme is revealed. Grasso's home was a place in which his most intimate and immediate community operated, and it was the symbolic and sentimental embodiment of the family within.⁹ What this means is that even if Grasso had stumbled through a completely disorienting and confusing day at work or in the Piazza, he could still come home and be reassured by the normality waiting for him – his mother and his house. By crossing the threshold of this place, and re-engineering the human element of the home and its immediate extension into the street, Brunelleschi effectively removes this sense of self from the woodworker.¹⁰ His most fundamental and accessible anchor to reality is turned against him and the elaborate scene of trickery that follows is much more efficacious with Grasso unsure of himself from the very beginning.

because of the presence of certain houses, these being the cause of Buondelmonte's death. He tells us that "location not only provided the assumed knowledge to make sense of the story, but ... it also provided a symbolic structure for social life". This observation is clearly transferable to the symbolic structure of Grasso's life and his domestic community – captured within their home and its immediate presence upon the street. N. P. J., Gordon, 'The Murder of Buondelmonte: Contesting Place in Early Fourteenth-century Florentine Chronicles', *Renaissance Studies* vol. 20, no. 4., (2006), p. 463.

⁸ Manetti, *The Fat Woodworker*, p. 7.

⁹ For a comparable assessment of local church districts in Renaissance Florence see Jill Burke's article. She uses a similar perspective on the relationship between identity and place by proposing that the symbolic and sentimental nature of neighborhood churches defined and maintained the local identities of those who patronized and used [them]". J., Burke, 'Visualizing Neighborhood in Renaissance Florence: Santo Spirito and Santa Maria del Carmine', *Journal of Urban History* vol. 32, no. 5, (July 2006), p. 707.

¹⁰ Again this is comparable with Burke's assessment of neighborhood churches, as her argument claims that these institutions defined the boundaries of the neighborhood community, just as the home defined the boundaries of the filial community. J., Burke, 'Visualizing Neighborhood in Renaissance Florence', p. 693.

There is a second dynamic in play, as Grasso is not only confusingly stranded outside his home, he actually commanded away from it – “Beh! Matteo, go on. I have had a mountain of troubles today”.¹¹ Muir tells us that renaissance people “fought or negotiated for their own spatial autonomy and distinctive place in the community”, and this autonomy demanded the exclusion of others to sustain social authority.¹² What this means is that by commanding an authority over a particular place, a person or a collective group naturally established both their own cohesion, and the alienation of those who were outside their space, or ordered to leave it. Unity and marginalization were the two themes of spatial authority. When Brunelleschi assumes the voice and position of Grasso he stresses the autonomy of his fake community and in turn solidifies the woodworker’s feeling that this home and this family is simply not his domain – the only logical conclusion is that he is either mad, or that he is not the man to whom he knows the home belongs. The process of exclusion is disorientating because it leaves Grasso in an indeterminate position on the public threshold. Grasso’s reality is turned against him and from the first acts of the ploy he is alienated from his most intimate familial and social sense of self.

Brunelleschi’s motivation in manipulating Grasso’s life here is complex. One important point that I would make is that Brunelleschi is using Grasso as a counter-point to himself – the foolish woodworker was the perfect scapegoat against whom Filippo may establish his own fame.¹³ Furthermore however, interaction between Brunelleschi and Grasso punishes the dim woodworker by consciously excluding from a group of friends, partly as payment for his small offence, but more significantly as a means to reinforce the group’s own cohesion. The social ascendancy of Brunelleschi and the reinforcement of his extended circle is the

¹¹ Manetti, *The Fat Woodworker*, p. 6.

¹² Muir, ‘The Idea of Community’, p. 13.

¹³ For a comprehensive study of the *Woodworker* that encompasses the image of Grasso as a scapegoat, see Martines, *An Italian Renaissance Sextet*, pp. 213 – 241.

background upon the story is played, as the laughter that Brunelleschi's companions enjoy at his trickery causes them to coalesce around the dim Grasso's confusion and distress.¹⁴

This theme of social unity through exclusion will be illustrated in reference to two Florentine comedies: the *Woodworker*, and Machiavelli's play the *Mandragola*.¹⁵

The themes of wit and exclusion can be found widely in Renaissance Florence, and the city was home to numerous plays and stories that invite comparison with Manetti's text.¹⁶ One such source is Machiavelli's *Mandragola*. Machiavelli introduces a strikingly familiar cast of characters to the *Woodworker*, and while his play is allegorically political, there is a sense of comedy that parallels Manetti's text in many ways.¹⁷ The play recounts a series of events in which the protagonist, Callimaco, tricks his way into sleeping with the young Lucrezia, who was the wife of an elderly judge named Nicia. Callimaco uses the infertility of the judge as leverage by pretending to be a doctor who provides Nicia with a potion for his wife, guaranteed to make her pregnant. He also however, warns Nicia that the potion will kill the next person to sleep with Lucrezia, and so he advises the use of some unassuming young man to bed with her and cleanse her of the poison. Nicia reluctantly lets a disguised Callimaco into bed with Lucrezia where he sleeps with her and then reveals his scheme. Lucrezia decides that if a man had so cleverly tricked her into breaking her marriage bonds, then she was divinely ordained to be with him, and she declares herself to Callimaco behind the judge's back.

¹⁴ For a wider study upon the social purpose of the wit and humor cultivated by class conscious patricians in Florence see Barolsky, particularly the way that he looks at jest in the city's visual culture. The purpose of being playful in art parallels many of the motivations behind Brunelleschi's prank, and of particular interest is his study of Donatello and the social promotion that accompanied his own nuanced wit in toying with the conventions of Roman sculpture. P., Barolsky, *Infinite Jest: Wit and Humor in Italian Renaissance Art* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press), pp. 18 – 25.

¹⁵ The translation that will be used is: Machiavelli, N., *Mandragola*, trans., Newbiggin, N., (2009), accessed via University of Sydney <http://www-personal.usyd.edu.au/~nnew4107/Texts/Sixteenth-century_Florence.html>

¹⁶ For a broader history of Florentine comedy, and Machiavelli particularly, see Brand, P., "Machiavelli and Florence", in J., Farrell, & P., Puppa, eds., *A History of Italian Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 51 – 58.

¹⁷ J., Tylus, "Theatre and Its Social Uses: Machiavelli's *Mandragola* and the Spectacle of Infamy", *Renaissance Quarterly* vol. 53. no. 3. (Autumn, 2000), p. 657.

In getting an impression of Machiavelli's characters, the first man that the audience encounters is Callimaco, who had been absent from Florence for some years living in Paris. We are told that while away, he conducted his affairs such a way that he "was friend to burghers and nobles, expatriates and Parisians, rich and poor".¹⁸ Immediately one begins to get an impression of the man as worldly, successful, clever, and amiable with a broad spectrum of social worlds. The parallels between Machiavelli's Callimaco and Manetti's Brunelleschi are already clear. Callimaco reveals his lustful reasons for returning to Florence, before beginning to assess the obstacle to his impulses: Lucrezia's husband – Messer Nicia Calfucci. Nicia was a man of high station, and we are told that he was a judge and that his family were "seriously rich".¹⁹ Callimaco is asked how he plans to manipulate his way into this man's bed, and he tells us that his ambitions are based on two things:

"The first is Messer Nicia's simple-mindedness ... [he was] the most foolish man in Florence.

The other is the desire that they both nurture to have children, and being married for six years, and not having had any."²⁰

Nicia was a man characterized by his dimness and ineptitude. Furthermore, his intellectual inferiority to Callimaco is coupled with a clear (and symbolic) physical weakness – he cannot make his wife pregnant. Nicia then, while different from Grasso, becomes cast into a very similar role, and it is no surprise that the exclusion and ridicule of Nicia unifies the play's audience in gaiety just as Brunelleschi companions coalesce in laughter at Grasso. While scholars seem inclined to study the *Mandragola* through its allegorical political theory, one should not miss that at its heart it was a funny performance that satirized Florentine

¹⁸ Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, Act 1, Line 10.

¹⁹ Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, Act 1, Line 27.

²⁰ Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, Act 1, Line 27.

archetypes.²¹ A further point to note about the play is that the ascendancy of the trickster over his inept adversary is captured in his occupation of the man's home (and of his bed), as the audience – a social group that is neither literarily nor historically removed from the source – joins together in merriment at the scene before them. As a play it is cruel, corrupt, explicit, and incredibly funny. The *Mandragola* and the *Woodworker* both document the exclusion of a foolish man, whose authority is embodied – and then overturned – within his home. This then leads to his ridicule in a way that unites a social audience.

In the *Woodworker*, the true machinations of Filippo's prank come to take effect in a conversation that Grasso has with a priest of Santa Felicita, in the home of the Mannini brothers, where we are told that: "At that instant, the Fat One had absolutely no doubt that he was Matteo."²² Before this occurs, Grasso spends a night in jail and converses with a judge over his predicament, where the Mannini brothers then pay his false debt and take him home; scolding him for the trouble he has caused them. Once Grasso is in their house the brothers treat him like family – albeit reproachfully as is fitting. One of the brothers brings in their local priest, telling him that Matteo has lost his wits and is causing himself and their family great dishonour with his behaviour. The priest consents to sit down with Matteo (who is Grasso) and tries to guide him back to normality. It is interesting that the advice of a man who was not (knowingly) contributing to the scheme should be what pushes the woodworker into his new sense of self.

I will make some proposals about the way that Grasso is manipulated, and influenced, in the episode with the priest, and these will be supported by interactions seen in the

²¹ A complex literary and political reading of the play is seen in G., Thomas, "The Parasite and the Virtuoso: Sexual Desire and Political Order in Machiavelli's *Mandragola*", *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* vol. 30, no. 2, (Spring, 2003), pp. 179 – 195. Also of interest is, J. R. Meyer, *A Political Interpretation of Machiavelli's "Mandragola"* (California State University: UMI Dissertations Publishing, 1996) (Accessed via ProQuest).

²² Manetti, *The Fat Woodworker*, p. 26.

Mandragola. Notably, both sources illustrate the importance of the home in manipulating a man's sense of reality, as Grasso's entrance into the Mannini household entrenches him into their family, while Callimaco's control over Lucrezia and Nicia is supported by his open invitation into the home of the judge. I would also suggest that both protagonists seem to accept their situations because of their fear of social exclusion, which is the caution that rests at the heart of Grasso's conversation with the priest, and of Nicia's fear of not rearing a male child. Both sources illustrate that ridicule accompanies socially inept men, and for Grasso this is what pushes him to tell "the priest that from that point forward he would make every effort never again to believe himself to be the Fat one", while for Nicia, this is the pressure that forces him to grant a complete stranger entrance into the bed of his wife.²³ It is ironic that both Grasso and Nicia's fear of being *seen* as socially marginalized is the pressure that causes them to succumb to Brunelleschi's prank and Callimaco's trickery.²⁴

A common idea to note is that when both Callimaco and Brunelleschi fool their subjects, they occupy (and indeed master) the environment in which their victim's authority is most obviously at stake – the home. Management and control of his house was both a right and a duty of a man, and the failure of both Grasso and Nicia to close their houses against the interference of other characters is an important part of their exclusion.²⁵ In the *Woodworker* Brunelleschi trips the lock of Manetti's home, gaining entry and symbolically showing his mastery over the world of the Fat Man. Callimaco's entrance into Nicia's home, while different in its method, embodies almost exactly the same thing – he had toyed with the idiotic judge, and by securing an open invitation into his house (and bed) he illustrates his

²³ Manetti, *The Fat Woodworker*, p. 26.

²⁴ Martin has suggested that a "performative self" was important in the Renaissance, and that people were consciously aware of the interface between self-presentation and their identity – it was in the performance of himself that a man such as Grasso interacted with his home, his profession, and his social group. J. J. Martin, "The myth of Renaissance Individualism", in G. Ruggiero, eds., *A Companion to the Worlds of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 208 – 224.

²⁵ For a broad discussion of the home, and the relationships therein, see G. Martinelli, eds., W., Darwell, trans., *The World of Renaissance Florence* (London: Macdonald, 1968), pp. 85 – 109.

ascendancy over the foolish character. In both sources this is seen in physical terms – picking the lock for Brunelleschi, sexual virility for Callimaco – and social ones – Donatello’s loaded greeting, and Callimaco’s façade of friendship and assistance towards Nicia. As such, *Mandragola* and the *Woodworker* enforce the view that clever, dexterous men had the ability to fundamentally invert or overrule the most important aspects of a foolish man’s character. For the *Mandragola*, this also locates the play within traditional patterns of theatrical comedy, as a hero and his companions use their *ingegno* to contrive a trick that fools a female’s protector, in turn making the woman a prize “to be won if the trick succeeds”.²⁶ While the gendered assumptions behind such a plot invite criticism, the male-centred aspect of the *Mandragola* is one of exchange between a gang of tricksters, and a controlling (foolish) husband.

The *Woodworker* meanwhile, goes further that simply excluding Grasso from his home – Brunelleschi intends to completely *invert* his victims reality, and this requires that he come to accept another home as his own. The dynamics of exclusion become turned into a sense of *inclusion* to further throw Grasso away from his actual identity, and the dynamics of this manipulation are seen in his occupation of the Mannini household. When the brothers collect Grasso from the jailhouse he is in a state of discontentment – he has not eaten all day, two strangers are reprimanding him for something that he had not done, and he has just spent a night and a day in the city’s jail. As such, when the brothers treat him like a poorly behaved sibling, Grasso is “beside himself and simply [goes] along with them”.²⁷ Grasso is taken into unfamiliar streets and unfamiliar neighbourhoods, while two unfamiliar men berate him about his sense of honour. It is no surprise that when the woodworker

²⁶ M., Gunsberg, *Gender and the Italian Stage: From the Renaissance to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 23.

²⁷ Manetti, *The Fat Woodworker*, p. 21.

finally finds himself inside a home (even if it is not his own) being treated like family, that he responds positively to being called Matteo.

If we go back to the idea that community was lived as a kind of space then Grasso's position in the home of the Maninni brothers takes on some important meanings. Over the course of the *Woodworker*, Grasso has been manipulated in reference to a series of rejections: he excluded Pecori's dinner, he was excluded from his own home, and he was then excluded from the city by being locked inside a physical version of marginalisation – a jail. Time in jail had an important impact on the commune's perception of a man as is evident in the Mannini brother's stealthy collection of Grasso under the cover of darkness. Indeed, time in jail left a person in a socially marginalized place even after his release, as was seen in the extreme in the case of a man named Barolemeo di Antonio in 1461, who was imprisoned, and upon his discharge he had to either leave Florence, or have his foot cut off.²⁸ The implication of this is that one could not recover his complete self in the city after a period of imprisonment. Grasso's time in jail then, would have been a particularly distressing experience, especially after the exclusions he has already been subjected to, and by the time he is picked up by the brothers, he is disoriented and uncertain. When Grasso is finally granted acceptance into the Maninni household however, this series of exclusions becomes rapidly turned into an episode of admittance. The dialogue of the brothers is one concerned with their family's dishonour – “They informed him of the displeasure he had given their mother, and they reminded him of the promise they had made to him that they would never tolerate this type of behaviour from him again”.²⁹ By keeping Grasso at the centre of

²⁸. “*ASF, Soprastani alle Stinche – Inmates of the Stinche*”, in G., Brucker, eds., *The Society of Renaissance Florence: A Documentary Study* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1971), pp. 166. For a wider study of Florence's legal systems and the legal and cultural implications of punishment, see Stern's study – Stern, L. I., *The Criminal Law System of medieval and Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1994).

²⁹ Manetti, *The Fat Woodworker*, pp. 20 – 21.

these concerns, even suggesting a history of trespass, the brothers begin to work him into their own family. It is almost natural for him to follow them home and join them in their living room. In spatial terms Grasso's entry into the house almost perfectly juxtaposes his rejection from his own home the day before. While the streets and the people are unfamiliar, the simple ritual of coming to a home and then entering that home develops the tangible reality of a sense of self. This is reinforced in the visit from the parish priest, as the priest addresses Grasso with the words, "I am your spiritual father and it is my duty to counsel all of my people".³⁰ Such words follow a reminder to the priest that the Maninni family was part of his religious neighbourhood, and thus it was his duty to ensure the wellbeing of his flock. The implication of his greeting is that Grasso is part of the neighbourhood and its contingent interactions, which compliments his location in the Maninni home to suggest that he truly has become somebody else.³¹ Grasso's spatial relocation into a new neighbourhood and a new home manipulated him into a place where he could accept a new reality, as the social, familial, and religious frameworks of the Mannini home supported him after a series of events that had left him bewildered and uncertain. The home of another man was where Grasso was most ready to accept his new identity. In a wider sense then, both sources illustrate the spatial significance of the home in fashioning – and manipulating – Florentine senses of self.

Both Grasso and Nicia are also victims of social exclusion because their good intentions are marginalized by their foolishness and the comparative cleverness of their rivals. For Nicia, the entire plot of *Mandragola* is driven by his desire for a fertile wife, and this is because there was a social value behind rearing a family that was linked to the sexual expectation of

³⁰ Manetti, *The Fat Woodworker*, p. 26.

³¹ See Burke, 'Visualizing Neighborhood in Renaissance Florence' pp. 693 – 708 for an analysis of the importance of churches to neighborhood identity, and visa versa.

virility.³² Nicia is careful to exclaim that his lack of children is not his own fault – “Me? Impotent? Oh, you make me laugh! I don’t think there’s a stronger, more vigorous man in Florence than me” – and this illustrates his concern with conforming to social norms.³³ His claim however, is later undermined by Lucrezia’s pregnancy at the hands of Callimaco, and the impotence of Nicia and the virility of his adversary compounds the ridicule already directed at the judge. This derision, which builds consistently throughout the play because of Nicia’s foolish actions, ultimately prompts the audience to mock the judge and simply enjoy the spectacle of his world being torn apart by the lustful intentions of Callimaco. Brunelleschi unifies his social group through the humour of Grasso’s downfall, and in a similar way the audience of the *Mandragola* performance unify at the show that is played out before them. Historically, a play implies the physical presence of an audience, and frequently throughout *Mandragola*, characters finish a scene with personal reflections to the spectators. Eisenbichler has recently illustrated the relevance of studying renaissance plays in terms of their audience rather than their content, looking at educational plays performed for Florentine youth confraternities to “examine not so much what play-scripts tell us, but how the plays themselves were seen, understood, and received by eye-witness spectators”.³⁴ The audience of the *Mandragola* then, may be seen as more than an implied member of the Machiavelli’s script, and will instead be regarded as a social group that coalesced in laughter around the scene on the stage. This is suggested in one of the character’s many asides to his renaissance audience, as Siro reflects upon the comedy that rests at the heart of the performance.

³² For a study of gender and sexuality see Rocke’s work. He tells us that “Centuries-old philosophical, medical, legal and religious discourses on sexual difference continued to sustain the notion that women were inferior in all ways to men and subject to their dominion”. M., Rocke, “Gender and Sexual Culture in Renaissance Italy”, in Brown, J. & Davis, R. C., eds., *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy* (London: Longman, 1998), p. 151.

³³ Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, Act 2, Line 29.

³⁴ K., Eisenbichler, ‘How Bartolemeo Saw a Play’, in K., Eisenbichler, & N., Terpstra, eds., *The Renaissance in the Streets, Schools, and Studies: Essays in Honour of Paul F. Grendler* (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2008), p. 262.

“If all judges were like him, we’d be running riot all over town. This villain Ligurio and my madman of a master are leading him into some shameful trap, to be sure ... He’s such a buzzard, who wouldn’t laugh.”³⁵

The first thing to note here is that the judge is a social archetype, a man crafted for the purposes of satire rather than a reflection of actual men in the city. This makes it easy for him to be viewed as idiotic because his lack of intelligence separates him from an audience who follow along with Callimaco. This is captured by the use of the collective “we”, as if Siro and the audience were astute together, mocking the judge and pondering the fun that they would have if all judiciaries were like him. Contingent to this are the labels of “villain” and “madman” for Ligurio and Callimaco, which are endearing rather than critical, as the cleverness of Callimaco is appreciated by renaissance Florentines. What grounds does this appreciation stand on? Spiro tells us in the simple statement, “He’s such a buzzard, who wouldn’t laugh”.³⁶ Nicia is so foolish that he demands ridicule, and the witty protagonists deliver this in a way that both furthers their own ends, and promotes laughter at their adversary. Nicia’s desire to act like an upstanding citizen by being pragmatic about the flaws of his wife, attempting to raise a reputable family, and asserting his sexual, masculine, virility, all suggest that he was compelled towards behaving in a way that with both acceptable, and predictable. The clever tricksters toy with such behaviour and in turn leave the judge in a state of turmoil while prompting the audience to unite in glee at the foolish man before them. Machiavelli’s is aware of the humour that came with having a foolish man deceived by a clever trickster.

³⁵ Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, Act 2, Line 52.

³⁶ Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, Act 2, Line 52.

We have seen the importance of such dynamics in the *Woodworker*, however the scene within the Mannini household takes the theme of exclusion as a social glue a step further in suggesting that fear of rejection was an important pressure upon the actions of Grasso himself - just as Callimaco abuses Nicia's desire for a child, Brunelleschi toys with Grasso's longing for acceptance in a situation where he is uncomfortable and disoriented. This is most clearly seen in the Grasso's discussion with the priest of Santa Felicita, as the entrance of the Father means the introduction of a message that is not religious, but social. Siting across from Grasso the priest implores –

“My Matteo, I don't want you to act like this anymore. For the love of me and for your honour and the honour of these two brothers ... promise me that hence forward you will rise from this fantasy and attend your own business, as upstanding people do and other men who have some sense.”³⁷

The priest's entreaty illustrates that Grasso's social existence was being risked in his madness, and if he continued behaving strangely then he would come to be excluded from his family and from society – “your brothers will leave you ... and for this you will be in trouble and loathed for the rest of your life”.³⁸ He was encouraged instead, to be a normal upstanding citizen who attended to his affairs. As such, this warning plays upon Grasso's own fear of constant exclusion. He has already been removed from his home, his workshop, and his friends, and so the impulse to avoid more rejection seems to be the main reason he accepts a new reality - “If I say again that I am the Fat One, perhaps they will want me and not the Fat One, and I will have lost their house as well as my own.”³⁹ This does not suggest

³⁷ Manetti, *The Fat Woodworker*, p. 25.

³⁸ Manetti, *The Fat Woodworker*, p. 26.

³⁹ Manetti, *The Fat Woodworker*, p. 21.

that Grasso was logically convinced by his situation – he was still in possession of his previous experience and of the woodworker’s memories – but his fear of exclusion was so powerful that he convinced himself to become part of a situation that was both alien and inexplicable.

Grasso’s subscription to the identity of Matteo confirms that Muir’s emphasis on exclusion and community is correct on many levels.⁴⁰ The priest, by cautioning Grasso that both his family and his city would ostracize him, suggests that exclusion was an important part of Florence’s social world – a collective judged a man’s value, and included or excluded him on the basis of that judgment.⁴¹ As we have seen, a person who was excluded became a form of social glue that held companions or gatherings together – often in the form of humour or gossip. The scene also suggests that exclusion fastened groups by controlling the behaviour of their members. The fear of exclusion normalized Grasso’s behaviour (albeit as a different person), and this tells us that men were self-consciously aware of the consequences of misconduct – this entire story comes from Grasso failing to attend a socially loaded dinner gathering. In the home of the brothers Grasso did not want to be seen as a fool, and as a result he was compelled to act normally despite his extraordinary circumstances. His desire for human acceptance – which was framed by a new family and a new neighbourhood – meant that he was convinced to adopt a new reality. When “the Fat One heard with how much love he was told these things ... [he] had absolutely no doubt that he was Matteo.”⁴²

What we take from both the *Woodworker* and *Mandragola* is that wittiness and trickery were important during the renaissance, as by establishing particular men as bumbling,

⁴⁰ Muir, ‘The Idea of Community’, p.

⁴¹ Martines captures this by suggesting the perspective of the priest – “The matter for him [the priest] is perfectly mundane: either Grasso is Matteo, or he belongs to that everyday occurrence of children laughing and jeering at fools and madmen in the streets”. Martines, *An Italian Renaissance Sextet*, p. 230.

⁴² Manetti, *The Fat Woodworker*, p. 26.

foolish, or idiotic, clever men developed their own dexterity, won the “prize” of a beautiful woman in Callimaco’s case, and fastened a social group together through a collective process of ridicule. In the *Woodworker*, Grasso and Brunelleschi are clearly juxtaposed characters, and while one is manipulated and removed from a group, the other is a clever, sociable, trickster who relives the prank in fits of laughter with his friends. They did, however, share some common ground. Both were artisans (at least partially), both were skilled in their craft (even though Filippo was more so), and they were both connected to the group at Pecori’s dinner. More importantly however, both were defined by the reactions of others.⁴³ Although Brunelleschi’s intelligence was his own, as was Grasso’s workshop experience, they were fashioned by the reactions of others – Brunelleschi’s fame and Grasso’s marginalization. As such, while Brunelleschi and Grasso are obvious counterpoints to each other, they are two sides of the same coin. What this suggests is that both clever men, and foolish men, operated in a realm that was public and discussed. By being involved in extraordinary circumstances - praiseworthy or humorous – both figures occupied an archetypal role in the minds of Florence’s occupants. This is also seen in Machiavelli’s *Mandragola*, as both Callimaco and Niecea are literally placed upon a stage in clear view of their audience. While the status of these men is rooted in Machiavelli’s script itself, the consequences of their relationship extends to the historically present audience, who unify in enjoyment of the scene before them. As such, ridicule and humour had an important, cohesive, social role in Renaissance Florence, meanwhile the fear of such derision was an important way of normalising behaviour, which in turn made the mocking of a prank’s victim all the more funny.

⁴³ The reflections of Pitt-Rivers upon honour (in the Mediterranean, but not necessarily during the Renaissance) captures this idea - “Honour is the value of a person in his own eyes, but also in the eyes of his society. It is his estimation of his own worth, his *claim* to pride, but it is also the acknowledgement of that claim, his excellence recognized by society, his *right* to pride”. J., Pitt-Rivers, ‘Honour and Social Status’, in Peristiany, eds., *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974) p. 21.

An additional theme to be taken from the assessment above is that the exclusion of such men seems to have had an anchor in the places that supported a sense of “self” in Florence. The home is where the authority of both Grasso and Nicia is most clearly contested, and it is also in the home of another man that Grasso accepts his change of identity. In the *Woodworker* this takes on an interesting significance, as whilst Grasso’s domestic and working worlds are where his identity is maintained, Filippo Brunelleschi’s ‘places’ are wider – his architectural feats, his sculptures, his patrician dinners, (the cupola would ultimately become the most obvious incarnation of his identity). These are the embodiments of Brunelleschi’s fame, and they were grander than the humble places of his artisan companion. What this means is that when Grasso fails to show up for dinner, he excludes the community where Brunelleschi is most frequently fashioned. This would have dented Brunelleschi’s pride, but the insult also contained the seed of Filippo’s revenge: he would exclude Grasso from the community that was closest to *him* – the private areas of home and workshop. Thus, the success of Brunelleschi and the ridicule of Grasso develop out of different versions of social exclusion captured within their different “kinds of space”, as Brunelleschi’s community clashes with Grasso in a tale of jest that left Grasso in exile and Brunelleschi as the hero of another popular story.⁴⁴ Such ideas are also evident in the *Madragola*, as Callimaco’s success over the foolish Nicia reaches its culmination in the judge’s own home. The play adds additional sexual and gendered connotations by having Callimaco and Lucrezia’s union occur within the bed of Nicia himself, however at its core, the physical and intellectual ascendancy of the lecherous trickster is embodied by his entrance into the home of his victim. Both Nicia and Grasso fail to fasten their social and personal worlds against the machinations of the clever tricksters, and this results in their

⁴⁴ The notion of community as a “kind of space” comes from Muir. E., Muir, ‘The Idea of Community in Renaissance Italy’, p. 4.

shame, and subsequently, their status as figures of ridicule for wider audiences. The importance of humour should not be dismissed in studies of Renaissance Florence, particularly in its fictive or apocryphal forms, and both the *Mandragola* the *Woodworker* suggest that comedy had important implications for the fame of some men and the rejection of others.⁴⁵ Both Grasso and Nicia are figures of mockery who provided a social function in defining a community through their exclusion and their foolishness.

⁴⁵ William Wallace's work on Michelangelo is a good example of how themes of comedy and jest could work within popular imaginings of famous figures. He works with the account of Vasari, and grapples with where the line between Vasari's wit, and Michelangelo's gest, resides – however he does support the idea that famous men enjoyed “roaring with laughter”. W., Wallace, “Michelangelo Ha Ha”, in Barriault, A. B., et. al., eds., *Reading Vasari* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, and Georgia Museum of Art, 2005), pp. 235 – 243.

Conclusion

On the 15th of April 1446 Filippo Brunelleschi passed away, marking the end of a life that would become celebrated in Florence for centuries. During his life, and even more so after his death, Brunelleschi was an emblem of public honour and Florentine glory, and Manetti and Vasari both reiterate that he was granted the merit of being buried in the Santa Maria del Fiore. Carlo Marsuppini, a Florentine humanist and chancellor, wrote the following epitaph that would become part of the wall monument honouring Brunelleschi in the Cathedral:

“How Filippo the Architect excelled in the Daedalian art not only this celebrated temple with its marvellous shell but also the many machines his divine genius invented can document. Wherefore because of the distinguished singular gifts and virtues of his mind on the XV of April in the year MCCCCXLVI a grateful country decreed that his deserving body be buried in this grave”.¹

Marsuppini’s epitaph is a condensed account of Brunelleschi’s character, and it singles out a specific theme of his life – ingenuity and skill as a Florentine architect – as the most resonant ideal from which to remember him by. Dedalus was the legendary craftsman of antiquity who constructed the labyrinth of Crete containing the Minotaur, and who famously invented wings that allowed him to fly, and Brunelleschi is proposed as Florence’s

¹ C. Marsuppini, ‘Epitaph Commemorating Brunelleschi’, in I. Hyman, eds., *Brunelleschi in Perspective*, p. 24.

own reincarnation of Daedalian skill and talent.² Marsuppini's description represents less of an effort to capture Brunelleschi's character and more of an attempt to fashion him as a member of Florentine glory, immediately describing him in reference to the "celebrated temple" of the Santa Maria del Fiore, while giving his "genius" significance only because a "grateful country" decreed it valuable. This was a civic kind of testament to the famous artisan, and it was crafted to suit the public resting place of his body. What Marsuppini illustrates is that men like Brunelleschi were remembered selectively. While such a claim would be almost self-evident for a source that was so brief and so public, it is a theme that moulds the way that we receive famous renaissance characters from the documents of the period. Accordingly, the main assertion of this thesis is that fifteenth century Florentines celebrated artisan men in a conscious way, crafting their fame and using them to embody certain ideals and values. Whether it was a brief selective epitaph, Vasari's extensive canon of important craftsmen, or Manetti's account of the apocryphal *Woodworker*, sources from renaissance Florence crafted their subjects deliberately, and artisans became more than simply clever individuals, they became archetypes to be handled consciously by those who recorded their fame.

In the introduction to this thesis I cited John Jeffries Martin's suggestion that renaissance individuals were layered and complex, with many competing influences that guided a sense of identity in reference to both "internal" and "external" selves.³ The "self" of a craftsman was defined both by their accomplishments and the way they were remembered externally. In documents written by Antonio Manetti for instance, Brunelleschi emerges as a civic hero, an architectural prodigy, a caring companion, and a mischievously clever trickster. There is

² See I. Hyman, 'Introduction', in I. Hyman, eds., *Brunelleschi in Perspective*, pp. 1 – 20.

³ Martin, *Myths of Renaissance Individualism*, p. 7

no definitive way of identifying the man, and so historians should remain interested, even six hundred years later, in uncovering new ideas about the way that contemporaries celebrated, remembered, and fashioned reputable craftsmen. The stories that developed around famous artists were as multilayered and complex as the characters themselves, and historians should be constantly engaged in building new ideas about why such conscientious crafting of fame occurred, and advancing arguments about what cultural burdens were propped up by the caricatures both of clever men, and of stumbling fools.

I have also explored the way that wit, ridicule, and humour reinforced Florentine archetypes by looking at the dynamics of ascendancy and derision between clever and dim-witted characters. Guided by a central argument that clever men were developed partly through the exclusion of others, I have suggested that comedy was an important medium for both satirising and reinforcing stereotypes of acclaim and ridicule. The lens of comedy and laughter however, is one that may be applied carefully to other works that have hints of playfulness within them. Historians have become increasingly interested in reading sources like Vasari's *Lives* or even Donatello's sculpture through hidden, and not-so-hidden, suggestions of jocular and cleverness.⁴ Studies of identifiably comedic works from the fifteenth century are common, however the presence of bawdiness, satire, and mockery in the ventures of innumerable patricians and craftsmen tells us that humour had an important, and often subtle, presence in renaissance society. Florentines enjoyed laughing, and, as the *Woodworker* suggests, appreciated eminent characters for both their civic contribution and their quick-witted intellects. In the context of this understanding, it seems that there is a place in renaissance scholarship for careful studies of sources that were not

⁴ For an example of humour in Donatello's sculpture, see Barolsky's assessment of the 'Bacchic Revel' found at the base of Donatello's *Judith* statue. Barolsky, *Infinite Jest*, pp. 21 – 24.

overtly comical, but that had brief episodes or hints of humour, in an attempt to unearth more about the relationship between being playful and being respected. The historian should never assume to have completely understood their sources, and future studies may revisit well known works in different ways in order to uncover new arguments about the world laughter and jest in fifteenth and sixteenth century Florence.



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