
Youthful Transgressions: Same-Sex Male Sexuality and Hierarchies of Masculinity in Renaissance Italy

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Abstract:

Between 1432-1502 as many as 17,000 males were incriminated for having sex with other males in Florence. Both Florence and Venice had special judiciary bodies that dealt exclusively with cases of sodomy during this period, and remarkably these records have survived almost in their entirety. As historical sources they map out an incredibly detailed landscape of sexual and gender practices that have proven to be fruitful for historians of sexuality and gender. This essay will examine the understanding of male same-sex sexuality through a gendered lens, drawing on R. W. Connell's theory of masculinities. During this period the biological sex of an individual was perpetually ambiguous and gender was not as closely associated with sex characteristics as it is in the present day. This essay argues that the responses to sexual encounters between males were conceptualised around gender, with these being an important site of constructing manhoods.

The homoeroticism of Renaissance artwork, such as Dürer's *The Bath House* (Fig.1), stands in stark contrast to the systematic persecution of men for engaging in same-sex relations in several European cities. Michel Foucault argued that modern sexual identity is a product of nineteenth century scientific and sexual discourses and before this period any notion of 'identity' in sexuality is an anachronism.¹ His thesis has perhaps had a reductive effect on the historiography as scholars search for the first 'genuine' gay man, which is now argued to be found in the eighteenth rather than the nineteenth century.² Arguably, the Western world is currently in the midst of a paradigm shift that has destabilised notions of a gender binary, with discussions of transgender and non-binary identities entering the public dialogue.³ Previous scholarship has been reflective of contemporary constructions of gender that are firmly rooted in discourses of biological difference between the sexes. Gender ambivalence has been understood within the parameters of a fixed gender binary, with challenges to this interpreted as a dissolution of binary logic.⁴ Renaissance medical discourses reveal a sex-gender system that is radically different from

¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans., Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1978).

² Tom Betteridge, *Sodomy in Early Modern Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p.3; see Randolph Trumbach, 'London's Sodomites: Homosexual Behaviour and Western Culture in the Eighteenth Century', *Journal of Social History*, 11:1 (1977), pp.1-33; Randolph Trumbach, *Sex and the Gender Revolution: Heterosexuality and the Third Gender in Enlightenment London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

³ For example, at the time of writing Scotland is currently conducting a public consultation on proposed changes to the Gender Recognition Act 2004 which would allow for a self-declaratory system for legal gender recognition, including non-binary people.

⁴ Ann Rosalind Jones, Peter Stallybrass, 'Fetishising Gender: Constructing the Hermaphrodite in Renaissance Europe', *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. by, Julia Epstein, Kristina Straub (New York: Routledge, 1991), p.105.

our own. However, our preoccupation with these discourses only replicate our own conceptions of gender. In early modern Europe, biological frameworks for gender were of secondary importance.⁵ Sexuality was organised around gender rather than modern conceptions of orientation or identity. This article will largely draw on evidence from Florence and Venice, but they were not by any means unique in their systematic persecution of sexual activity between men.⁶

Fig. 1: Albrecht Dürer, *The Bath House*, Nuremberg (c.1496)



For example, Ghent and Bruges had comparable rates of persecution and in Cologne, there were several secret commissions intended to gather information on the ‘unspeakable sin’ but there

⁵ Ann Rosalind Jones, Peter Stallybrass, ‘Fetishising Gender: Constructing the Hermaphrodite in Renaissance Europe’, *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. by, Julia Epstein, Kristina Straub (New York: Routledge, 1991), p.80.

⁶ Male same-sex sexual activity was persecuted under the crime of ‘sodomy’ which was any illicit sexual act considered ‘unnatural’; sex that could not result in pregnancy and bestiality were also considered sodomy. However, the most common form to be prosecuted was sex between men so it was likely the cultural connotation of the word in common usage; For attitudes outside of Italy see Mary Elizabeth Perry, ‘The “Nefarious Sin” in Early modern Seville’, *The Pursuit of Sodomy: Male Homosexuality in Renaissance and Enlightenment Europe*, ed. by, Kent Gerard, Gert Hekma (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp.57-91; Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982); Helmut Puff, ‘Homosexuality: Homosociabilities in Renaissance Nuremberg’, *A Cultural History of Sexuality in the Renaissance*, ed. by, Bette Talvacchia (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), pp.51-73.

were no penal consequences.⁷ Florence and Venice had special judiciary bodies that dealt exclusively with sodomy; the Office of the Night, which later became The Council of Ten in Venice. Remarkably, their records have survived almost in their entirety, mapping out an incredibly detailed landscape of sexual practices and attitudes. This article will examine the understanding of male same-sex sexuality through a gendered lens, drawing on R. W. Connell's theory of masculinities.⁸ The central argument is that the responses to sexual encounters between males were conceptualised around gender, with these relations being an important site for the construction of manhoods.

Hegemonic masculinity can be understood as the legitimising force of patriarchy which guarantees the dominance of men and the subordination of women.⁹ Few men can successfully embody hegemonic masculinity, but the majority of men enjoy the benefits of the patriarchal dividend.¹⁰ Connell argues that homosexual masculinities are positioned at the bottom of the gender hierarchy amongst men, as they can be assimilated into femininity, with misogyny arguably at the root of homophobia.¹¹ However, heterosexuality as a prerequisite to a hegemonic masculinity is product of modern society. In the period, men who had sex with men were not excluded from hegemonic masculinity on those grounds and were able to achieve an ideal renaissance manhood without violating the gender order. The defining characteristics of manhood during this period have been heavily debated, but the conflicting evidence is in itself evidence of multiple masculinities that were continually being constructed and negotiated. Masculinity cannot meaningfully be reduced to a set of characteristics as it is a dynamic site of gender relations that exists both as a product and a producer of history. Valeria Finucci argues that it was paternity rather than sexual potency that came to be the essential quality of renaissance manhood.¹² Whereas, Sandro Cavallo finds that bachelorhood did not exclude men from holding public office, nor did fatherhood constitute the condition of achieving full

⁷ Bernd-Ulrich Hergemöller, 'The Middle Ages', *Gay Life and Culture: A World History*, ed. Robert Aldrich (London: Thames and Hudson, 2006), p.71; Also see Louis Crompton, *Homosexuality and Civilisation* (U.S.A: Harvard University Press, 2006).

⁸ R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.77.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.79.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.78; R. W. Connell, 'A Very Straight Gay: Masculinity, Homosexual Experience, and the Dynamics of Gender', *American Sociological Review* 57:6 (1992), pp.735-751.

¹² See Valeria Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade: Masculinity, Paternity and Castration in the Italian Renaissance* (U.S.A: Duke University Press, 2003).

manhood.¹³ The socially and culturally dependent nature of gender suggests that searching for a singular ideal renaissance manhood is misplaced.¹⁴ The analysis of manhood has been dominated by the paternalist head of household figure which has adhered to a restrictive definition of a 'household'.¹⁵ Manhood did not necessarily constitute a patriarch. The past has been viewed through a heteronormative lens which has dealt with those outside of this pattern as 'others', placing them analytically on the fringes of the gender order rather than within it. The evidence from both Florentine and Venetian records indicate that sex between men was a somewhat common occurrence that was tacitly accepted socially and did not necessarily constitute a life-long orientation.

Early modern Italy was a patriarchal and patrilineal society which placed great importance on patrician women remaining chaste, but no such standard for men was expected.¹⁶ However, sexual expectations for men were still largely defined in patriarchal terms. Men tended to marry relatively late in life, late twenties to early thirties, and this resulted in a prolonged state of adolescence where sexual transgressions were viewed as rites of passage on the way to full manhood.¹⁷ Masculinity and male sexuality were closely related to the life-cycle and during adolescence, sex with mature men was viewed as part of their youthful sexual exploration. Mature men would be expected to assume the dominant role in sex, anally penetrating adolescent boys who were considered a passive partner. Sex with boys was acceptable within the cultural conventions as long as they subscribed to the hierarchy of age and sexual role.¹⁸ The prescribed hierarchy essentially reproduced the patriarchal gender order, with the older man remaining the masculine and dominant force and the younger male being constructed as feminine and

¹³ Sandra Cavallo, 'Bachelorhood and Masculinity in Renaissance and Early Modern Italy', *European History Quarterly* 38:3 (2008), p.377; also see Androniki Dialeti, 'Defending Women Negotiating Masculinity in Early Modern Italy', *The Historical Journal* 54:1, (2011), pp. 1–23.

¹⁴ See Alex Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); 'the social practice of manhood was enormously diverse, contingent, and contradictory, influenced by and informing distinctions of age, social status, marital status, and context.', p.1.

¹⁵ Cavallo, 'Bachelorhood', p.377.

¹⁶ Women belonging to patrician families who were unable or unwilling to marry would usually join a convent. Nunneries were an attractive alternative to women who did not want marriage and there is evidence of same-sex relationships taking place at Italian convents; see Judith C. Brown, *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Similarly, monasteries during the period appear to have often had cultures of same-sex relations between male monks; see Randolph Trumbach, 'From Age to Gender, c. 1500-1750: From the Adolescent Male to the Adult Effeminate Body', *The Routledge History of Sex and the Body 1500 to the Present*, ed. by, Sarah Toulalan, Kate Fisher (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp.126-8.

¹⁷ Michael Roche, 'Gender and Sexual Culture in Renaissance Italy', *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy*, ed. by Judith C. Brown, Robert C. Davis (New York: Routledge, 1998), p.168.

¹⁸ Michael Roche, *Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.97.

submissive. Religious discourses denounced this activity as sodomy, but at a lay level it appeared to have been tacitly accepted. The Dominican friar, Savonarola (1452-1495), preached that Florentine parents feared so much the pregnancy of an unmarried daughter that sons were encouraged to engage in the 'lesser evil' of sex with men.¹⁹ In Florence, the patterns of sexual activity between men complemented the hierarchical social networks as they were organised along the lines of neighbourhoods and confraternities.²⁰ These relationships were part of the social fabric of the city, helping to articulate the boundaries between boyhood and manhood, and were far from being relegated to a fringe culture. Viewing these relationships with a rigidly binary conception of gender is not reflective of the societies in which they were created, where the dichotomy was perhaps less rigid than has been previously assumed. Informers reporting to courts often referred to adolescent boys within these relationships as 'being kept as a woman', sometimes even a 'wife'.²¹ Furthermore, derogatory feminine terms were exclusively used against the passive partner, such as *cagna in gestra* meaning 'bitch in heat'.²² The power dynamics of these sexual acts mirrored the existing patriarchy; the boys were gendered as feminine as a result of assuming a subordinate sexual position, not due to physical appearance. Gendering young boys as feminine allowed them to be constructed as objects of desire for older men. Despite engaging in sex with other males they were still able to benefit from the patriarchal dividend as their sexuality was framed by a gender hierarchy rather than sexual difference. When the gender roles were subverted, with older men assuming the passive position, a far more violent response was evoked from magistrates.

The Office of the Night in both Florence and Venice, and later the Council of Ten in Venice, relied on informants for their prosecutions. In Florence, between 1432-1502, as many as 17,000 males were incriminated for sex with other males.²³ Michael Roche finds that by the end of the fifteenth century, by the time most men reached 40, two in three had been implicated in sodomy.²⁴ Randolph Trumbach argues that this statistic was reflective of almost all Florentine men engaging in sex with other men at some point in their lives.²⁵ However, many of the accusations brought before the Office of the Night were never taken seriously or investigated

¹⁹ Roche, 'Gender', p.164.

²⁰ Helmut Puff, 'Early Modern Europe, 1400-1700', *Gay Life and Culture: A World History*, ed. by Robert Aldrich (London: Thames and Hudson, 2006), p.86.

²¹ Roche, *Forbidden Friendships*, p.107.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Roche, 'Gender', p.166.

²⁴ Roche, *Forbidden Friendships*, p.4.

²⁵ Trumbach, 'From Age to Gender', p.125.

and despite their authority to do so, magistrates were reluctant to enforce the death penalty. Perhaps, the humiliation of a political opponent or a troublesome neighbour may account for a proportion of the accusations. There was also financial incentives to hand over the names of sodomites which could be done anonymously.²⁶ Nonetheless, the Florentine records provide a rich source of testimony that give us a glimpse into the lived reality which was clearly at tension with conflicting moral codes; one from the Church which explicitly condemned any sexual activity they considered illicit and the other, a social acceptance of youthful sexual transgressions. The records highlight that sodomy was engaged in by people across the social stratum, from aristocratic men to barbers; yet those on the fringes of society - beggars and those supported by charity - were never implicated. The magistrates were clearly uninterested in these groups and targeted those who were responsible for the production of goods and the procreation of children.²⁷ Sexual activity that defied the dichotomy of feminine passivity and masculine dominance undermined the legitimacy of the patriarchy and threatened social disorder. Thus, magistrates appear to have focused their efforts on the 'pillars of society'.

The late age of marriage denied young men economic power as they required legal emancipation on the death of their father as an alternative source of autonomy, and even marriage did not always result in legal and economic rights.²⁸ When denied access to hegemonic forms of masculinity, alternative sources of power could be sought and manhoods constructed in relation to their peers. One of the most striking characteristics of the Florentine records is the proportion of sexual assaults that were carried out by groups of young men, typically between 3 and 6.²⁹ For example, in 1497, a 30 year old servant named as Costanza was sexually assaulted by a group of 14 youths.³⁰ The prevalence of assaults carried out by groups of young male assailants indicate that this was a site where manhood was actively constructed through sexual violence and demonstrating virility to peers. The sexual 'possession' of boys by groups of young men was not uncommon, with Savonarola writing in a sermon - considered to be based on Lorenzo de' Medici - that 'no well-favoured boy is safe'.³¹ He details the kidnapping of 'wives and daughters'

²⁶ Hergemöller, 'Middle Ages', p.75.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.73.

²⁸ Sandra Cavallo, 'Bachelorhood and Masculinity in Renaissance and Early Modern Italy', *European History Quarterly* 38:3 (2008), pp.380-1.

²⁹ Rocke, 'Gender', p.164; 39% of sexual assaults against women in Florence between 1495-1515 were carried out by two or more men.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Girolamo Savonarola, 'Treatise on the Rule and Government of the City of Florence, Written at the Request of the Most High Lords of the City', *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola: Religion and Politics, 1490-1498*, trans., Anne Borelli, Maria Pastore Passaro (Yale: Yale University Press, 2006), p.193.

during 'great banquets', where they were taken through 'secret passageways to the rooms' and subsequently 'taken in the snare.'³² Boys, girls and women were constructed as submissive, weak and therefore feminine and susceptible to men's attraction.

The most harshly punished instances of sodomy were ones in which the hierarchy of age and normative sexual role were violated. Mature men assuming the passive position in sex with a younger man was one way in which the hierarchy of masculinities was subverted, but there are cases where masculinity was either denied by society or rejected by the individual. The scholarship has generally viewed these cases as oddities or as men who embodied an effeminate masculinity. Arguably the males engaging in sex with other males whilst 'cross-dressing' can be viewed as assuming social womanhood.³³ A sermon of Savonarola's reflects the tension between the lived reality of gender as opposed to Christian teachings:

'Young lads have been made into women. But that's not all: fathers are like daughters, brothers like sisters. There is no distinction between the sexes or anything else anymore.'³⁴

The moral panic surrounding certain forms of same-sex relations between males indicate a gender order that was in crisis. With the difference between the sexes framed in a vastly different way from modern understandings, the biological underpinning of gender was not in the cultural logic and a lack of essentialist discourse on gender made it inherently fragile. Although Christian writings presented the gender binary as the 'natural order', this was evidently in conflict with a far more incoherent gendered reality. How same-sex male sexuality was framed provides some of the most illuminating insights into the underlying assumptions about gender in early modern Italian culture. In 1374, a barber around eighteen years old named Simeone appears in the Venetian records labelled as a 'passive' partner in sodomy. Traditionally the punishment for a man was cutting of his hands, which humiliated him as a worker, but Simeone was punished by cutting off his nose; a punishment usually assigned to women, as their value was perceived to be

³² Girolamo Savonarola, 'Treatise on the Rule and Government of the City of Florence, Written at the Request of the Most High Lords of the City', *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola: Religion and Politics, 1490-1498*, trans., Anne Borelli, Maria Pastore Passaro (Yale: Yale University Press, 2006), p.193.

³³ For the theory of gender performativity and the subversive nature of 'drag' see Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York, Routledge: 1993).

³⁴ Quoted by Roche, 'Gender', p.150.

reliant on their beauty.³⁵ This does not indicate a subordinate masculinity but social womanhood as Simeone was treated as a woman. In 1354, the case of Rolandino Ronchaia was tried in Venice.³⁶ He is noted as having a more feminine appearance than masculine, with pronounced breasts which Guido Ruggiero interprets as a hormone imbalance, but perhaps what we would now consider intersex.³⁷ However, our concern with certain sex characteristics in relation to gender are reflective of our current point in history and were likely of less importance to pre-Enlightenment society. Rolandino was socialised as male and had married a woman, but it failed due to his impotence. Failure to gain an erection was grounds for a divorce in early modern Italy, where virility was an important aspect of manhood.³⁸ After his divorce, Rolandino moved to Padua where he established a sexual relationship with another male, assuming the passive role, and later returned to Venice having changed his name to Rolandina. She lived successfully as a woman and supported herself through sex work, where it is recorded that customers never discovered that Rolandina was male.³⁹ Rolandina's sexual transgressions were viewed as violations of the natural order in the same way that females assuming a dominant position in sex was also sodomy, but her ambivalent gender position was not the root of the anxiety. Women appear in the records less frequently for sodomy, perhaps due to the legal code punishing active partners more harshly, but they were still culpable. In 1598 The Ten condemned female sex workers for wearing male clothes in order to 'attract and ensnare young men'.⁴⁰ The inventory of a Venetian sex worker, Giulia Lombardo reveals that she kept male clothes in her wardrobe, likely to wear at the request of her male clients.⁴¹ There was clearly a desire for sexual encounters with someone who could embody a form of masculinity whilst remaining a passive partner. Arguably, these individuals were engaging in a fluid practice of gender, moving from masculine to feminine.

Sex between men was framed within the gendered hierarchy. Men negotiated their sexual experiences through gender and were able to engage in sex with other men without necessarily compromising their masculinity. Dominance and sexual prowess could just as easily be

³⁵ Guido Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros: Sex Crime and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p.121.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.136.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Rocke, 'Gender and Sexual Culture', p.153.

³⁹ Ruggiero, *Eros*, p.136.

⁴⁰ N. S. Davidson, 'Sodomy in Early Modern Venice', *Sodomy in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by, Tom Betteridge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p.69.

⁴¹ See Cathy Santore, 'Julia Lombardo, Somtuso Meretrize: A Portrait by Property', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 41:1 (1988), pp. 44–83; Davidson, 'Sodomy', p.69.

demonstrated with subordinate male partners than with women. When men assumed passive sexual roles, they would seek alternative forms of masculinity or perhaps embrace femininity, as Rolandina did, and were positioned socially as a type of woman. The historical record maps a gendered landscape that is radically different from our own; the biological sex of an individual was perpetually ambiguous with the binary sex system very much a product of post-enlightenment Europe. Gender was not as closely associated with sex characteristics as it is today, where the binary system has been replicated in conceptualising 'homosexuality' as the opposite of 'heterosexuality'.⁴² Early modern men, women and those beyond the binary had no comparable categories in which to understand their sexual experience. Ruggiero identified a 'homosexual subculture' in Venice, indicated by The Ten's growing assumption that homosexuality was associated with certain spaces; such as schools, apothecary shops and gymnasiums.⁴³ However, the men he identifies as engaging in a subculture had no language in which to conceptualise themselves as engaging in 'homosexual' activity or as being 'homosexual' men. As historians, we will never fully escape the trap of ethnocentrism as we will always be viewing the past through our own particular point in history, which can often lead to anachronisms. Many of the men implicated in these records would undoubtedly be considered homosexual if they were alive today, others would likely be viewed as having transgender or non-binary identities. Yet, by retrospectively categorising individuals using contemporary logic we remove them from their cultural contexts. They were conducting their gendered lives within a vastly different conceptual framework to our own and we must challenge our underlying assumptions about the nature of gender when interpreting the past.

⁴² See Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out* (London: Quartet Book, 1983), p.11.

⁴³ Ruggiero, *Eros*, pp.138-9.

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