Introduction: Florence and Sodomy

Forbidden Friendship

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Florentine youths swimming in the Arno, as depicted in Domenico Cresti (called Pas­signano), Bathers at San Niccolo (1600). (Private collection)

Introduction: Florence and Sodomy

“In the whole world I believe there are no two sins more abominable than those that prevail among the Florentines,” commented Pope Gregory XI in 1376. “The first is their usury and infidelity,” he specified, alluding to the moneylending activities of international merchant-bankers that had made Florence one of the most prosperous and important cities in Europe. “The second,” he continued, hedging his words with care, “is so abominable that I dare not mention it.”¹ The sin the pope deftly avoided naming, using a standard euphemism for what the late medieval Church deemed the most evil and dangerous of carnal vices, was of course the “unspeakable” practice of sodomy. Although this term could denote a wide range of prohibited sexual behaviors deemed “contrary to nature”—so called because they did not lead to procreation, the sole “natural” purpose of sex according to Catholic dogma—it usually referred to sex between males.²

In underlining the predilection of Florentines for sodomy, Gregory was only lending the weight of papal authority to what was, in effect, a commonplace in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. If all of Italy was so defiled that it could be considered the “mother” of sodomy, as Bernardino of Siena complained in a sermon in the 1420s (voicing an opinion that other Europeans would hold for centuries to come), the notoriety of Florence far surpassed that of all other cities on the Italian peninsula.³ The sexual renown of Florentine males was remarked on by both local and foreign chroniclers, condemned by preachers, deplored by concerned citizens, derided—or occasionally admired—by writers and poets. Their erotic tastes were so well known even north of the Alps that in contemporary Germany “to sodomize” was popularly dubbed florenzen and a “sodomite,” a Florenzer.⁴

Florentines owed part of their widespread infamy, according to another distinguished preacher, Girolamo Savonarola, to the fact that they “talk[ed] and chatter[ed] so much about this vice”; many evidently did not consider it so evil that they avoided its very mention.⁵ Echoes of their chatter resound in the exceptional number and variety of Florentine and Tuscan literary sources on homoerotic themes, with a range of moral stances. Following the illustrious precedents of Dante’s Divine Comedy—in which sodomites, duly placed in hell, are paradoxically accorded great
respect and affection (\textit{Inferno}, canons XV and XVI)—and Boccaccio's ambivalently witty tale in the \textit{Decameron} (V, 10) of the sodomite Pietro di Vinciolo, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the subjects of love and sex between males abound in local novelle, anecdotes, and poems, ranging from biting satires to humanistic elegies, from condemnatory religious lauds to amatory verse. Sodomy also furnishes a basic key to the complex code of sexual word plays that permeate the entire genre of "burlesque" poetry and bawdy carnival songs. Verses on same-sex love were apparently even set to music. Although seldom enforced, laws dating from the early fourteenth century, and reinforced in the fifteenth, made it a crime, punishable by fines, to compose or sing songs about "such a disgraceful and impious act." In Florence, the sin so terrible that it was not to be pronounced could not, in fact, be kept quiet.

If many Florentines not only named the "unmentionable vice" but also commonly practiced it, this does not mean their community as a whole approved of sodomy or accepted it without misgivings. The passion for the classical world that characterized the elite culture of the Italian Renaissance did not, as has sometimes been uncritically assumed, revive some mythical Greek ethos in which sexual relations between males enjoyed widespread and unqualified tolerance. Quite the contrary. Many people, following the teachings of the Church, continued to regard sodomy as a serious and potentially destructive sin, and everywhere it remained a crime punishable by severe penalties, including death by burning. Especially in the fifteenth century, the ruling class of the Republic of Florence identified this sexual practice as one of the city's most pressing moral and social problems. To confront it, the government in 1432 created an innovative judiciary magistracy solely to pursue and prosecute sodomy. The evocatively titled Office of the Night (\textit{Ufficiali di notte}) was probably the first and certainly one of the few criminal institutions with this specific competency in the history of Europe.

During its seventy-year tenure from 1432 to 1502, this magistracy, with the limited participation of other courts, carried out the most extensive and systematic persecution of homosexual activity in any premodern city. Yet in doing so the courts also brought to light a thriving and multifaceted sexual culture that was solidly integrated into the broader male world of Florence. In this small city of around 40,000 inhabitants, every year during roughly the last four decades of the fifteenth century an average of some 400 people were implicated and 55 to 60 condemned for homosexual relations. Throughout the entire period corresponding to the duration of the Office of the Night, it can be estimated that as many as 17,000 individuals or more were incriminated at least once for sodomy, with close to 3,000 convicted. Of these extraordinary figures, partial though they certainly are, begin to furnish a sense of the dimensions, the vitality, and the contradictory significance of homosexuality in the sexual and social life of Florence. Sodomy was ostensibly the most dreaded and evil of sexual sins, and was among the most rigorously controlled of crimes; yet in the later fifteenth century, the majority of local males at least once during their lifetimes were officially incriminated for engaging in homosexual relations. The thriving world to which these numbers point, however, has remained obscured from historical view, virtually unexplored and uncharted. This book seeks to recover that world, to map out its social and spatial parameters, and to restore it to its legitimate place as an integral part of the society and culture of late medieval and Renaissance Florence.

Scholars have long been familiar with the prominence that contemporaries ascribed to sodomy both in Florence and throughout Italy, and few have doubted that homosexual activity there was common. Until quite recently, however, the general prejudice against homosexuality, combined with an old ideological tendency to downplay features of this society thought unseemly for the edifying portrayal of the Renaissance as the noble cradle of modern civilization, effectively inhibited its study. Professional historians usually followed Pope Gregory's pious example and avoided acknowledging the topic altogether, or at best touched on it superficially, frequently with embarrassed apologies if not open disdain. Even the respected English scholar John Addington Symonds, himself homosexual and author of a pioneering apologetic on homosexuality in Greece, succumbed to prevailing moral judgments and self-censorship in his highly regarded \textit{Renaissance in Italy} (1875–1886). He wrote dismissively that the subject of homosexuality here "belongs rather to the science of psychopathy than to the chronicle of vulgar lusts. . . . [The Italians'] immorality was nearer that of devils than of beasts." Such attitudes and rhetorical tactics helped to perpetuate the stigmatization of homosexuality as an object of historical inquiry and to ensure that it remained firmly consigned, despite the wealth of contrary evidence, to the margins of representations of Renaissance society and culture.

In recent years, these barriers have to a large extent been broken down, as the visibility and acceptance of homosexuality have grown substantially and as social historians of late medieval and early modern Italy have devoted new attention to such diverse subjects as ritual, social networks, violence, criminality, prostitution, and gender, as well as to the history of the family and of subordinate groups such as women, children, and the laboring classes. Even before research and scholarly debate on homosexuality in premodern Europe began to flourish in the late 1970s and the 1980s, studies by prominent historians, such as David Herlihy's on Florentine demography and family life and Richard Trexler's on boys' fraternities and state-sponsored prostitution, were overcoming the traditional reticence and raising new questions about the importance of homosexuality in Florence. Since then, a number of specific works have appeared on the subject of sodomy—above all, its practice in the leading republics of Venice and, more recently, Florence. Both of these cities mounted unprecedented
efforts in the fifteenth century to police this "vice," and both uncovered thriving undergrounds of homosexual activity. Only further research will show whether other cities or regions shared Venetian and Florentine preoccupations or developed similar sexual cultures. Nonetheless, these studies have opened a window onto a sexual universe the significance of which was far from marginal in several of the most dynamic urban societies of Renaissance Italy. Nowhere was this more the case than in Florence, where the "problem" of sodomy assumed exceptional dimensions and where homosexual behavior, as this book seeks to demonstrate, constituted a pervasive and integral aspect of male sexual experience, of the construction of masculine gender identity, and of forms of sociability.

Homosexuality was a deep-rooted and prominent feature of life in Florence, yet it also encountered vigorous opposition and was subjected to intensive persecution. While many Florentines may have defended sodomy as a venerable native "custom," as Bernardino of Siena despaired in a 1425 sermon, it was a custom that especially in the fifteenth century also evoked great hostility and that the government took extraordinary measures to control. These endeavors to "root out" sodomy, the optimistic goal set in the founding law of the Office of the Night, failed resoundingly, for it resisted and thrived. But inevitably, the efforts of public authorities and the local community to regulate sodomy constitute a fundamental part of the story of homosexuality in Florence, not only because of their broad social impact, or because of the new light such efforts cast on attitudes toward sex and on the administration of justice, but also because they unearthed a remarkable amount of sexual activity. Consequently, the most abundant evidence on homosexual behavior derives from the city's unusually rich judiciary records.

One of the aims of this book, then, is to study the evolution, substance, and contexts of government policy toward sodomy from the early fourteenth to the mid-sixteenth century and, where feasible or most useful, to analyze how the courts operated and how legal prescriptions were enforced. In the organization of this work, public responses to sodomy constitute the main subject of parts I and III, which frame an in-depth investigation in part II of the organization of homosexual behavior and its relation to the broader male culture. Chronologically this study is loosely delimited, on one end, by the earliest extant republican laws against sodomy, from the 1320s, and, on the other, by a law of 1542, the first and apparently only edict on this sexual practice enacted after the fall of the Republic (1532) and during the two-century reign of the Medici dukes and, later, grand dukes. The long period these laws delineate allows one fully to grasp and assess, within the compact cultural and political context of the Florentine Republic, the variety and magnitude of the many changes in public policy regarding sodomy.

Beyond their close association with the classic period of the Republic, the boundaries these prescriptive norms stake out, though artificial, are in some respects quite significant. In particular, they help distinguish the contours of the first wide-scale persecution of homosexual behavior in European history, carried out by Florence and other Italian cities. The statutes of the 1320s embodied and codified the increasing intolerance and hostility toward homosexual activity that came to characterize all of European society in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. By this time Florence, like a number of other cities in Italy, had established the most severe penalties for sodomy, including castration and death by burning. With minor variations, these edicts remained the legal standard for this crime for nearly a century, until the transformation in its policing introduced with the Office of the Night in 1432. Following this innovation, sodomy for long became one of the most turbulent issues in the spectrum of Florentine criminal justice and public morality. In the 110 years between 1432 and 1542, the city's legislative councils passed no fewer than seventeen substantive reforms in the penalties prescribed for sodomy or in the institutions designated to pursue and prosecute it. At the same time, convictions proliferated to the astonishing levels noted previously. By the middle of the sixteenth century, however, in Florence, as in Venice, this sustained wave of official concern over sodomy subsided considerably. The law of 1542 in effect marked its conclusion. The harsh punishments it ordained would endure unaltered for centuries, and this immobility, together with the subsequent conspicuous decline in condemnations, indicate that sodomy was no longer the compelling issue, at least for the new ducal state, that it had been in the not very distant past.

While this broad chronological scope has served to reveal long-term shifts in the orientation of public policy toward sodomy, the seventy years of the operation of the Office of the Night, from 1432 to 1502, constitute this book's central focus. This magistracy, whose creation was the result of heated agitation during the preceding three decades for more energetic repression (examined in chapter 1), formed the institutional cornerstone of governmental efforts to police sodomy until the beginning of the sixteenth century. Its role and impact were decisive. Through a combination of intensified surveillance, rapid summary proceedings, and radical innovations in penalties, the Office of the Night transformed the control of sodomy in Florence. With this magistracy, the government abandoned the previous judiciary praxis of harsh but sporadic punishment directed mainly against violent same-sex rape or child abuse. Instead, it initiated a new regime of routine and fairly mild disciplining of mainly consensual homosexual relations, which were much more diffused. Through this institution, the local ruling class deployed a "benign," but perhaps more effective, strategy of managing sodomy, the political acumen of which was attested by the thousands of prosecutions and convictions that were its most tangible results.

The critical importance of the Office of the Night for the policing of
sex in itself makes it worthy of special attention. Its organization and operations are studied in chapter 2. Yet its significance also derives from the extraordinarily rich documentation it produced, a large amount of which has survived. In general, court records, as students of sexuality in medieval and early modern Europe have commonly pointed out, have serious limitations and pose particular problems of methodology and interpretation for anyone attempting to recover the historical character and meaning of sexual behavior. Generated by instruments of repression and social discipline, judiciary records by their very nature normally represent the vision of only a hegemonic social and political elite. In addition, they are often fragmentary, superficial, or inaccurate; the details they record may correspond more to a need to observe proper bureaucratic form than to a concern to describe what really happened; the individuals or behaviors they document may not be representative of the broader universe of sexual activity. Furthermore—an especially crucial drawback in this case—prosecutions for sodomy focus relentlessly on sexual acts and usually reveal little about motives or about how the participants or the society around them interpreted these actions. To varying degrees, all these points are also applicable to the records of the Office of the Night.

Despite their inevitable shortcomings, however, these records are exceptional, and this book draws heavily on them. Indeed, they probably constitute one of the richest sources in premodern Europe for the reconstruction of homosexual experience and of a single community’s responses toward it, as well as for the study of its practical control at the judiciary level. The Night Officers’ extant registers contain information on some 10,000 persons incriminated for homosexual activity and on their various sexual relations. The degree to which this multitude reliably represents the universe of homosexual activity is, of course, a problem that requires careful assessment. Not all were found guilty, but many who by their own admission engaged in sodomy were not convicted, and most accusations were not even pursued. It would be perilous indeed to imagine that the Night Officers’ proceedings compose some kind of “census” of homosexuality in the city. Nonetheless, the sheer number of people involved enhances the likelihood that a portrayal drawn through judicious analysis will be fairly true to life.

It is not only its massiveness, but also the quality and unusual range of the evidence it yields, that makes this source so remarkable, however. Unlike most other court records of the period, these document the entire procedural course of cases that came to the Night Officers’ attention, from denunciations to interrogations to sentences, permitting a systematic analysis of the officials’ operations and effectiveness in enforcing the law. The records also contain an uncommon wealth of biographical data on incriminated individuals and detailed information on sexual relations, allowing one to assemble nuanced profiles of the participants and to sketch thickly textured descriptions of their sexual behavior. Finally, the Night Officers’ registers are nearly unique, at least for this city, in that they conserve hundreds of the accusations that Florentines made against people they claimed engaged in sodomy. The prime interest of these denunciations lies less in the dubious veracity of informers’ specific claims (though many were confirmed) than in the values and mentalities they inadvertently reveal and in the lively personal and social context they restore to the more mechanical images produced by the court. They offer a rare opportunity to grasp how common people in one late medieval city viewed and interpreted homosexual behavior—often in ways that differed from the dominant and canonical representations of church and state—in the everyday life of their community.

In determining how best to exploit the evidence in these records, I was guided by two main considerations. The first was my desire to reconstruct, as far as possible, a comprehensive panorama of homosexuality in Florence, one that would highlight the norms and conventions of sexual behavior, collective portraits of participants, and the general features of the policing of sodomy, but that would also be capable of capturing nuances and variety. This encouraged a systematic and inclusive study rather than an impressionistic one based on isolated cases, an approach, in other words, that could reveal both the ordinary and the exceptional in homosexual experience. The second consideration was more practical, having to do with the nature and organization of the records. As a summary court, the Office of the Night was designed, in effect, to expedite the prosecution of large numbers of individuals, a function the officials had to carry out especially in the century’s second half, when several hundred suspects came to their attention every year. Their written proceedings reflect the rapid “processing” of people accused. Confessions were recorded by the magistracy’s notaries in a fairly regular format that evidently corresponded to standard questions intended both to disclose the identity of the person’s sexual partner(s) and to draw out a skeletal description of the times, places, and “mechanics” of their sexual encounters. The information noted is usually brief and straightforward; the entire account often consists of no more than a few lines of text for each partner indicated. As a consequence, despite the thousands of homosexual relations these records catalogue, they contain few personal stories, few descriptive narratives that by themselves might evoke the world of love and sex between males. A comprehensive picture, therefore, has literally to be pieced together from myriad fragments.

For these reasons, an analysis that made use of computerized technologies became almost inevitable. Although fraught with difficulties, a quantitative study of the documentation from the Night Officers’ records proved to be the most efficient and fruitful means to reconstitute the various parts of trial proceedings, to reveal general patterns of behavior and the social composition of discrete groups, and to reconstitute the case histories of individuals over time. It did not seem necessary, however, to analyze all
the available data; but while a small sample could have answered some of my questions, inconsistencies in the material increased the risk of distortion, and persons who engaged habitually in sodomy would have been harder to detect. I therefore took an intermediate course, opting for a detailed computerized analysis of all the extant procedural records during a limited period—the last twenty-four years of the Night Officers’ tenure, from 1478 to 1502—combined with a more conventional study of the information from the remainder of their registers. Records survive for seventeen of these twenty-four years and document 4,062 individuals incriminated for homosexual sodomy. This group, examined from various perspectives, provides the documentary core for much of this book.

Throughout this study I have also tried to draw on other evidence that might help to verify or to cast additional light on the findings that result from the analysis of the Night Officers’ documentation. The period covered by the main survey was selected in part because its early years coincide with the Florentine fiscal census, or catastro, of 1480, which provides information not only on the wealth of local households but also on their composition. Of the 1,131 persons who were incriminated between 1478 and 1483, I have identified 183 in this census. This sample serves as a control group for questions relating to the ages of males who engaged in homosexual activity and provides additional perspectives on their relative wealth and, above all, their marital status. I have also utilized a survey of prosecutions for sodomy from 1478 to 1502 by the Eight of Watch (Otto di guardia), the city’s central criminal magistracy. This tribunal played a more limited role than the Office of the Night in the policing of sodomy, but it was still quite important, functioning as a compliment to the latter’s operations. The Eight’s records furnish added evidence from the several hundred cases it tried, as well as a critical point of comparison with the documentation of the Night Officers. In addition to the abundant judiciary materials, wherever possible I have drawn on a wide array of less public and prescriptive sources, including sermons, the records of religious confraternities, local chronicles and histories, family journals, private letters, collections of anecdotes and witticisms, and various forms of literature and poetry. Together this unparalleled body of sources offers a wide variety of perspectives for recovering the world of homosexual experience in late medieval Florence.

Although sex between males was a common and integral feature of daily life in this city, it formed part of a universe of experience and values that differed substantially from our own. In the first place, the culture of late medieval and early modern Italy was not one in which men were clearly separated into the categories of “homosexuals” and “heterosexuals.” In our own culture, it has become common to imagine sexuality largely in terms of a polar opposition between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Most people are thought to fall more or less neatly into either one category or the other, but even the alternative “bisexuality” derives its sense from its hybrid position somewhere between these two extremes. Moreover, the notion that a person’s homosexuality or heterosexuality profoundly defines one’s personality and identity is nowadays taken practically for granted, and these categories are accepted with little questioning as part of some timeless and natural order. Yet much research by anthropologists, historians, and social theorists over the past few decades has shown, to the contrary, that such a way of construing erotic experience and sentiment is a very recent development, and one that is closely tied to the specific evolution of the contemporary Western world. Other cultures and people in other historical periods have conceived and organized sexuality in quite different ways. Italians of the Renaissance would have found current beliefs about homosexuality and heterosexuality as well as much of modern sexual experience foreign indeed, and if one is to comprehend the nature and significance of homosexual behavior in this particular historical context, the parochialism of our own notions must be recognized and these cultural differences accorded their proper due. A discussion of terminology will begin to demonstrate these claims, and to illustrate how certain terms will be used in this book.

People of the Middle Ages and early modern period lacked the words to convey the precise equivalents of the current “homosexuality” as a distinct category of erotic experience or “homosexual” as a person or a sexual identity. These words were coined only in the late nineteenth century, and only filtered slowly and unevenly into popular use. The terms “sodomy” and “sodomite,” which were standard in the religious and juridical language of premodern Europe for conveying same-sex relations, might however seem to work as substitutes, for in some contexts they appear to have much the same meanings. From the thirteenth century on, most theologians, following the great classificatory work of Thomas Aquinas, defined sodomy as comprehending all sexual acts between persons of the same sex, whether male with male or female with female. On the basis of the gender of the sexual partners, therefore, some religious authorities differentiated sodomy from the other carnal vices “against nature,” which included intercourse with animals, masturbation, and nonreproductive coitus between the opposite sexes.

As these words were employed outside the subtle field of moral theology, however, “sodomy” was not strictly synonymous with “homosexuality,” nor was “sodomite” the equivalent of the noun “homosexual.” The tidy scholastic categories of “unnatural” practices collapsed in secular legal and judicial contexts, and apparently in popular conceptions as well. When governments came to persecute sodomy, with growing intensity from the thirteenth century on, both “homosexual” and certain “heterosexual” acts fell indistinctly into this category of sexual crime, and in some places other varieties of vice contra naturam did too. Florentine laws against sodomy, for example, often specified that they applied equally to both males and
females. Presumably these formulations included sexual relations between women, but in all cases the context strongly suggests that they referred instead to erotic acts deemed “contrary to nature” either between males or between males and females. The latter was in fact the only form of sex involving women that lay people occasionally denounced and the courts pursued as sodomy. In other words, it was certain sexual acts alone that denoted sodomy, not (as in prevailing theological views) the gender of the persons who practiced them. Correspondingly, a sodomite was not, strictly speaking, a person who engaged in sex with members of his (or her) own biological gender; the sodomite, that is, was not a homosexual, but a person who committed the various acts defined as sodomy.

This generally being the case, when Florentines used the words “sodomy” and “sodomite” in a generic way they probably had sexual relations between males in mind, since these were by far the most common and conspicuous, and aroused the greatest public concern. These terms, then, unless otherwise qualified, will be used with this sense throughout this book. Yet despite the high visibility of male homosexual activity, people in this society had no way to distinguish verbally, either with these official designations or with other vernacular terms, a man who engaged in sex with males from one who committed precisely the same acts with women, whether occasionally or even exclusively. Generally speaking, both were simply called sodomites. In a culture such as ours, accustomed to classifying people on the primary basis of the gender of their sex partners as homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual, this apparent lack of clarity may be surprising, if not disconcerting. Today it would hardly be doubted that such men, regardless of the specific practices they engage in, possess fundamentally divergent sexual natures and should accordingly be labeled in ways that convey that difference. Although late medieval Italians, in contrast, might well have recognized that a man’s tastes or habits inclined him toward one sex or the other, or both, they evidently did not find this compelling grounds on which to organize their understanding and representation of sexuality.

It is not only the absence of conceptual categories based on sexual object choice that distinguishes how people in this culture experienced and comprehended sex between males, however. As discussed in chapter 3, certain social and cultural conventions quite unlike those prevailing today governed the physical expression of homosexual acts and shaped their meanings in significant ways. The evidence shows beyond much doubt that in Florence, and probably elsewhere as well, sodomy between males normally assumed a hierarchical form that would now be called “pederasty” (though this term, too, was virtually absent from the otherwise rich local sexual lexicon). Homosexual relations, that is, were usually characterized by a disparity in the age of the two partners and by a correspondingly rigid adherence to culturally prescribed roles in sexual intercourse. Normally men over the age of eighteen took the so-called active role in sex with a passive teenage adolescent. Relations in which roles were exchanged or reversed were rare and occurred almost solely between adolescents, while sex between mature men was, with very few exceptions, unknown. These patterns situate homosexual behavior in Florence firmly within an age-graded model that had ancient roots throughout the Mediterranean world and would prevail in Europe until at least the eighteenth century, when most research indicates that new forms and conceptions of homosexuality first began to appear.

Although Florentines showed little concern about distinguishing sharply between “heterosexuals” and “homosexuals,” they were very alert to the oppositions in sexual roles in homosexual behavior and to the conventional links between these roles and age. These distinctions figure prominently in the formal representations of sodomy in law and trial proceedings as well as in the descriptions and vernacular terminology found in popular literature and denunciations. Violations of the expected norms evoked the indignant or harsh reactions of both courts and community. A central argument of this book is that these conventions and their proper observance mattered so greatly to Florentines because, as their own expressions and images reveal, they were tightly bound up in the culture’s notions of what it meant to be male. The oppositions of age and role inherent in sodomy, as it was lived and conceived, not only helped delineate the contours of successive biological and social stages in males’ lives, from adolescence to youth and adulthood, but also played a related and significant part in the fashioning of masculine gender identity, as people commonly construed the active–passive sexual roles in terms of such value-laden dichotomies as masculinity and femininity, dominance and submission, honor and shame. The “active” and usually penetrating role substantially conformed to the behaviors and ideals that were defined as virile, and consequently a man’s sexual relations with a boy, when enacted within these conventions, did not call into question his status as a “normal” and masculine male. To take the “passive” role in sex with a male, however, was deemed “feminine” and dishonorable, but since this role was in effect limited to the biological period of adolescence it was only a temporary wayward turn on a boy’s path to full-fledged manhood. The restriction of the “womanly” role to adolescents actually permitted all mature men to engage in sex with boys without jeopardizing their “manly” gender identity.

The conventions that defined sodomy and the meanings ascribed to them, therefore, represent specific ways of conceptualizing and experiencing sex between males that current sexual classifications and terminology fail to capture and convey adequately. The men and boys who are the subject of this book engaged in what today would be cast indiscriminately as “homosexuality,” and on this basis they would probably be considered—and in other studies of late medieval Italy are often called—“homosexuals,” or at most the more fashionable “bisexuals.” One might point out that the application of such reductive labels to people in this distant
society is, in the best of cases, a blind leap of faith, even more so when
the evidence consists, as it frequently does, of a conviction for a single
homosexual act. For how can it be assumed that this embraces the full
range of someone’s affective and erotic experiences? More important, these
terms at once evoke sexual subjectivities that would have meant little to
Florentines themselves, and collapse distinctions and obscure nuances of
meaning to which they assigned vital importance. The different conceptual
boundaries that delineated their sexual landscape emerge clearly in the spe-
cific way they employed “sodomite,” which will be followed throughout
this book. While this term, as mentioned earlier, included both a man who
had sex with boys and a man who engaged in the same illicit sexual acts
with women, it virtually never included their “passive” partners of either
sex. Not all who engaged in homosexual activity, therefore, were consid-
ered sodomites, but only those who took the dominant, “active” role.
According to this schema, men who sodomized boys and men who pen-
etrated women had more of a common character and identity than did
two males who coupled sexually, whose physical union normally embodied
unbridgeable distinctions of age, sexual role, and ascribed gender values.

The social and cultural conventions outlined here also played important
roles in shaping other aspects of homosexual experience that are central to
the concerns of this book. Chapter 4 reassembles the social profiles of men
and boys implicated in sodomy in the later fifteenth century. The com-
posite portraits that emerge not only show that homosexual activity flour-
ished at all levels of Florentine society, from humble textile workers and
artisans to members of the great banking and commercial families that
formed the local patriciate, but also reinforce the argument that it had
little relationship to current notions of more or less fixed sexual categories
and identities. To a considerable extent, in fact, sodomy was associated
with different stages or situations in the life course of local males. David
Herlihy was the first historian to suggest that the sexual debauchery—
including the “abominable vice”—for which this city was infamous was
related in part to local marriage patterns, especially the unusually late age
of marriage for men, around thirty or thirty-one on average, and to the
resulting profusion of youthful bachelors. According to fiscal censuses of
1427 and 1480, only about one of every four youths between the ages of
eighteen and thirty-two was or had been married. Moreover, a large pro-
portion of Florentine men, some 12 percent of those who survived to
around the age of fifty, probably never took a wife. This study demon-
strates that those most frequently incriminated for sodomy were indeed
adolescents and unmarried youths below marriageable age and, to a lesser
degree, older bachelors. For most males, homosexual relations represented
a fairly common form of sexual solace and companionship during the pro-
tracted years of adolescence and bachelorhood before taking a wife, as the
majority sooner or later probably did, even though marriage did not de-
finitively exclude the sexual pursuit of boys. Other evidence further sug-
gests that while vast numbers of local males engaged in sexual relations
with other males, most did so only sporadically or over relatively brief
periods of time. Only a small group of “habitual” sodomites, mainly older
unmarried men, can be identified who pursued relations with boys
throughout a considerable part of their adult lives. Men’s homosexual
behavior, however intense or engaging it may have been, did not constitute
a permanently “deviant” condition, but was, for most, an occasional or
temporary transgression that did not preclude sex with women either con-
currently or during other periods of their lives.

Homosexual activity thus formed part, at one time or another and with
varying significance and degrees of involvement, of the life experience of
very many Florentine males of the late Middle Ages and Renaissance. De-
spite the pervasiveness of sodomy, however, the ethnographic account of
the organization and character of homosexual behavior developed in chap-
ter 5 suggests that this sexual underground did not constitute a separate
world or a truly distinctive “subculture.” Both casual sexual encounters
and more durable relationships occurred or evolved in largely familiar,
everyday social contexts, and were tightly insinuated into other typical
forms of male sociability, from the camaraderie of gangs of youths or the
bonds of work and neighborhood to relations between patrons and clients
or the sodalities of kin and friendship networks. Sodomy was one of the
many strands that composed the fabric of male experience, one that not
only grew out of established social bonds and patterns of collective life but
also contributed in creative ways to fashioning and reinforcing them.

Homosexuality was deeply integrated into that cluster of social struc-
tures, gender values, and forms of aggregation that together helped con-
stitute male culture in Florence. It was this profound penetration of the
male world that, in turn, made the regulation of sodomy there such a
peculiarly volatile and problematic issue. The control of homosexual
behavior as well as the ethos of same-sex relations themselves were part and
parcel of the tensions that animated the social, cultural, and political
ferment of one of the premier cities of the Renaissance during a period that
was among the most dynamic and celebrated of its history. The changes
that transformed public life in Florence—the decline of a corporative
“popular” regime based on guilds and its substitution with an oligarchy
of the merchant-banking elite in the late fourteenth century; the ascen-
dancy of the Medici in the 1430s and the subsequent sixty years of their
quasi-princely hegemony; the revival of republicanism in the 1490s and
the holy terror of Savonarola; the restoration of the Medici in 1512; the
definitive fall of the Republic in 1532 and the installation of a duchy under
Medicean rule—all had significant consequences as well for the policing of
sodomy. Shifts in the forms and equilibriums of power produced, almost
as an inevitable consequence, a continual reellation of the public strat-
egies and means for managing and containing homosexual behavior. By
the same token, however, homosexuality and its control can serve as a kind
of prism for illuminating the structures and exercise of power. In this way, the restoration of homosexual behavior to its proper place as an integral part of Florentine life seeks not only to throw new light on the history of sexuality in one late medieval Italian setting, but also to open fresh perspectives on the society, politics, and culture of Renaissance Florence.