



HOMOSEXUALITY in RENAISSANCE ITALY: Volume Three

Michael Hone

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It's been a great pleasure writing this book on Italian male-to-male relations because the Renaissance is the period I prefer. Florence was the place to be, the most beautiful city in Europe, adorned by the most beautiful people God has had the genius to create. There was always something going on, be it the life and scandals of Michelangelo and da Vinci, the plots against the life of the great Lorenzo il Magnifico, the hanging of the Pazzi from the tower of the Palazzo della Signoria, the scandals around Lucrezia Borgia and her brother (and some say paramour) Cesare. Modern biographers go out of their way to deny the obvious homoerotic content of a poem or a painting dating from that period. A case in point is Caravaggio's works, one of which, *The Musicians*, shows four young boys, singers and musicians, nearly nude, painted while Caravaggio inhabited the palace of Cardinal Francesco Maria del Monte, a man known for his paternal interest in boys in general and homosexual artists in particular, who introduced homoerotic art into the Vatican, and was known to have been homosexual himself. The palace housed as many as fifty boys, artists like Caravaggio, actors who took part in plays dressed as women when the role demanded it, and castrati, one of whom Caravaggio portrays in his painting *The Lute Player*. Another of his paintings, *The Boy with the Basket*, is of a lad known to be his lover, also semi-nude, also as languorous as the boys in *The Musicians*, his lips sensually parted, his basket filled with fruit known for its sexual symbolism at the time—figs, apples and pomegranates—symbolism so sexually charged that during a priest's discourse, when mentioning fruit before his congregation, he brought on guffaws from the men and snickers from the women (a little like today in Turkey where it is impossible for a woman to order a cucumber because of its other meaning in that language, obliging her to say, "Give me one of those salad things"). Da Vinci was arrested for sodomy, along with three friends, at age 24. He was held overnight and had to go through a month of hell between two attempts to prove his guilt. As iron proof was not forthcoming, he got off. The penalty was death, but even the few thousands convicted, out of tens of thousands charged, escaped with a fine—a large one for the perpetrator, a small one for the boy if he had given himself freely—and a slap on the wrist. As girls were locked away in Brinks-like security, boys naturally gravitated towards each other, especially as there were no clear-cut rules concerning homosexuality and heterosexuality, and, indeed, the words themselves wouldn't be invented for another 400 years! We'll begin this book with the Medici and the Borgia. Cesare Borgia was accused of sodomizing and then killing the boy many considered as the most beautiful during the Renaissance, Astorre Manfredi, 17, and his brother, age 15, before throwing their bodies, tied together and weighted down, into the Tiber. But before we enter the Florence of the inimitable Lorenzo de' Medici, logic obliges me to give the first honor where the greatest honor is due, to dedicate a few short pages to the greatest artist, the most original mind, the most perfect destiny of all, a man moderate in his life, his tastes and his loves, a man said to have brought joy to all who knew him, and perhaps even preceded Astorre Manfredi in beauty, Leonardo da Vinci.

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