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## **Cupid on a leash: sexual codes of conduct in Renaissance Italy, 1450-1550**

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# 1

## Universal codes of conduct

Fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian sources offer wide-ranging perspectives on what constituted the (main) purpose of sex and what type of behavior needed to be regulated. Regardless of these different views, however, theological, medical and literary sources all seem to share the same general code of conduct. It was of paramount importance to act in accordance with reason and moderation and to avoid being carried away by sexual desire. This code of conduct applied to all members of society. Men and women, the young and the old, the rich and the poor, all had to restrain themselves and act responsibly. In this chapter, the rationalization behind this universal code will be analyzed, first by establishing what were seen as the goals of sex, and then by investigating the boundary between what was allowed (and in accordance with these goals) and what was regarded as excessive (and thus a threat to these goals).

Although many restrictions regarding sexual intercourse will be discussed, the focus of this chapter is the prevention of excessive sexual desire in a more general sense. The code of moderation was not just aimed at preventing particular sex acts, but at avoiding all types of behavior that were the result of excessive desire. Reason and moderation were needed to curb the lovesickness, jealousy and madness that arose from sexual desire, and all the acts of violence (both towards the self and towards others) that these passions caused. The authors of theological, medical and literary sources all presented immoderate sexual desire as the direct cause for 'irresponsible' behavior. Clerics call certain acts a "sign of mortal concupiscence", physicians state that people who have sex in the wrong way

have been guided by their “lascivious lechery”, and characters in literary fiction are led by “disordinate appetite” and “unbridled lust”. The code of conduct prescribing reason and moderation was aimed at restraining this excessive desire in itself, thereby preventing dangers that were both social and individual, from the spread of venereal diseases, to suicides, the birth of leprous children, the loss of individual Christian souls, and the wrath of God over the entire community. The chapter is organized in accordance with the different types of dangers rather than the different types of misbehavior that caused them. Several types of misbehavior will therefore be discussed in more than one section, as acts were often frowned upon for various reasons.

## **The purpose of sex**

In the various discourses on sex in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy, five different purposes of sex can be discerned. The value of some of these goals was shared across the discourses, while others were more controversial. From a theological perspective, sex only served a purpose within marriage, and the rendering of the ‘marital debt’ was one of its most important goals. According to Scripture (1 Cor. 7:2-6), when a man and a woman get married, the body of the woman belongs to her husband, and that of the man to his wife. When one of the partners wants to have sex, the other is obliged to consent, “in order to obey God and because this is a work of justice”. If a spouse refuses to render the debt without a just or legitimate reason, for instance out of anger or contempt, they commit a mortal sin. The obligation to render the marital debt was very important, partly because it enabled the generation of legitimate offspring, but even more so because it could prevent extramarital relations. It was deemed praiseworthy to render the debt if a spouse asked for it, and even to take the initiative oneself when one suspected that a spouse was in danger of falling into temptation.<sup>1</sup> That the prevention

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<sup>1</sup> Silvestro Mazzolini da Prierio, *Summa summarum que Silvestrina dicitur* (Bologna: Benedictus Hector, 1515) *Debitum coniugale*, par. 12; Girolamo Savonarola, *Confessionale pro instructione confessorum* (Venice: Dianis de Persona, 1543) *De his que siunt in matrimonio*, 33r-33v; Pacifico da Cerano, *Summa Pacifica* (Venice: Domenico and Giovanni

of adultery was deemed even more important than reproduction is clear from the fact that people who were sterile were still allowed to get married and ask for the debt.<sup>2</sup>

The importance of the ability to render the marital debt is reflected in works of medicine. Pietro Bairo's *Secreti Medicinali* includes many medical recipes aimed at achieving a durable erection,<sup>3</sup> as well as remedies to enable vaginal penetration. Bairo mentions the existence of women "who suffer from pains in the *matrix* while sleeping with a man, and with whom this pain is persevering". He attributes the problem to their *natura* being swollen on the inside, and recommends applying "the milk of a woman who has given birth to a boy, mixed with white lead" to the "mouth of the uterus", to alleviate their pain.<sup>4</sup> In a casebook by the Florentine doctor Antonio Benivieni, he mentions a young female patient who was "already ripe for a husband and fully of marriageable age", but had a membrane obstructing her vagina. He cut it with two transverse cuts, treated her for her ulcers, and states that a few days later he left the girl "in good health and fit for marriage [*coniugio aptam*]"<sup>5</sup> Another gruesome case of a woman being 'prepared' for marriage is the tale of Margherita Farnese who married Vincenzo Gonzaga in 1583 at the age of 13. After two years, the marriage was annulled, because it had not been consummated. Evidence from extensive medical examinations shows that the reason for the annulment was said to be Margherita's "unbreachable gate". One court physician recommended surgery, but this was deemed too dangerous, while another prescribed the dilation of the vagina by the insertion of custom-made cones, but this

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Battista Guerra, 1574) *Maritati*, 183; Cherubino da Spoleto, *Regola della vita matrimoniale* (ed. by F. Zambrini and C. Negroni, Bologna 1888) 41-48.

<sup>2</sup> See chapter five.

<sup>3</sup> See chapter two.

<sup>4</sup> Pietro Bairo, *Secreti Medicinali* (Venice: Ventura de Salvador, 1585) 27.3: De dolori della matrice. Renaissance anatomists used many different words to describe the vagina and the vulva. The phrase *collum matricis* [the neck of the matrix] was used simultaneously with just *matrix*, a term that was also used to describe the uterus. Other terms used were *vulva*, *cervix*, *natura*, and *bocca della natura* [the mouth of the nature].

<sup>5</sup> Antonio Benivieni, *De abditis nonnullis ac mirandis morborum et sanitationum causis* (trans. by C. Singer, Springfield, IL 1954), Case 28: Naturalia occluded and cured by incision.

‘therapy’ was quickly suspended as it proved too painful for the bride. After the marriage was annulled, Margherita was forced to enter a convent.<sup>6</sup>

A second, closely related, purpose of sex was reproduction. Christian theology taught that the main goal of marriage was generating children who will be raised within the faith and who will live to serve God. When married people had sex with this intention in mind, it was seen as an act of worship.<sup>7</sup> The medical discourse was likewise focused on reproduction. In treatises on human anatomy, all body parts are described within the context of their ultimate goal, the purpose for which they had been naturally and divinely ordained, and the genitals are similarly described in these teleological terms. Jacopo Berengario da Carpi for instance notes that “the usefulness of the penis is chiefly for the preservation of the species”, and Alessandro Benedetti writes that “the function of the genital members was suited for perpetuating the human species through individuals in whom, as you know, God has placed the marvelous desire and incredible love of giving birth to their child”.<sup>8</sup> Viewed from this teleological perspective, sexual pleasure was not seen as a goal in itself, but served to entice people to have sex and continue the species. In his medical treatise *Il Perché*, Girolamo Manfredi provides a physiological as well as a teleological answer to the question “Why coitus is a pleasurable thing”. Nature has made sex delightful [*dilectabilissimo*] so that animals pass themselves on by generation, out of lust and desire [*turpitudine*] for performing this act.<sup>9</sup>

The belief that reproduction was the main purpose of sex was shared outside the medical and theological discourses as well, in texts ranging from personal correspondence to treatises on love. The Florentine widow

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<sup>6</sup> M. Bourne, ‘Vincenzo Gonzaga and the Body Politic: Impotence and Virility at Court’ in: S.F. Matthews-Grieco ed., *Cuckoldry, Impotency and Adultery in Europe (15th-17th century)* (Farnham/Burlington 2014) 35-58.

<sup>7</sup> Cherubino da Spoleto, *Regola della vita matrimoniale*, 46-48.

<sup>8</sup> Jacopo Berengario da Carpi, *Isagogae breves* (trans. by L.R. Lind, Chicago 1959) Book II, 73, 78; Niccolò Massa, *Liber introductorius anatomiae* (trans. by L.R. Lind: *Studies in Pre-Vesalian Anatomy: Biography, Translations, Documents*, Philadelphia 1975) Chapter XVII, 195; Alessandro Benedetti, *Anatomice* (trans. by Lind, *Pre-Vesalian Anatomy*) 89.

<sup>9</sup> Girolamo Manfredi, *Il Perché [Liber de homine]* (Bologna: Ugo Ruggeri and Donnino Bertocchi, 1474) Liber I, Cap. 5, 120.

Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi urged her sons to get married by reminding them in her letters that “the purpose of marriage is the procreation of children” and she warned them that “if everyone was as frightened of taking a wife as you two are, mankind would already have ceased to exist”.<sup>10</sup> In works of literary pornography, authors such as Pietro Aretino and Antonio Vignali use the sanctity of reproduction in order to defend the explicitness of their writings: instead of being ashamed and secretive about their own genitals, people ought to praise and celebrate them for their ability to create human life.<sup>11</sup> On the opposite end of the literary spectrum, even authors propagating Platonic love of a chaste and spiritual nature state that sex serves a purpose on a procreational level. Neoplatonic philosopher Marsilio Ficino wrote that having sex in order to reproduce is a good thing, as long as the desire does not become so excessive that it interferes with one’s spiritual fulfillment.<sup>12</sup>

While the importance of rendering the marital debt and producing offspring were broadly shared across the discourses, other goals of sex were more controversial. One of these was having sex for the purpose of preserving one’s health. According to medical thought, having sex could be beneficial for various reasons. It was believed to expel bodily superfluities which would otherwise start to putrefy and become poisonous. This expulsion was especially important for women, whose uterus would otherwise suffocate due to an accumulation of semen.<sup>13</sup> Another reason was that, through the expulsion of superfluous humors, the excessive humidity of the body was reduced. Excessive bodily humidity was believed to cause

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<sup>10</sup> Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi, *Lettere* (trans. by J. Bryce: *Letters to Her Sons, 1447-1470*, Toronto 2016), letters 59 and 65, p. 200 and 218.

<sup>11</sup> Antonio Vignali, *La Cazzaria* (trans. by I.F. Moulton: *The Book of the Prick*, New York 2003) 84; Pietro Aretino, *I Ragionamenti*, 317-318; and the introductory letter to Aretino’s *Sonetti Lussuriosi* in: L. Lawner, *I Modi: The Sixteen Pleasures: An Erotic Album of the Italian Renaissance* (Evanston, IL 1988).

<sup>12</sup> B. McGinn, ‘Cosmic and Sexual Love in Renaissance Thought: Reflections on Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, and Leone Ebreo’ in: A. Ferreiro ed., *The Devil, Heresy and Witchcraft in the Middle Ages: Essays in Honor of Jeffrey B. Russell* (Leiden 1998) 191-209: 206-209.

<sup>13</sup> See chapter three.

diseases such as epilepsy [*mal caduco*] and vertigo, as well as poor eyesight and swollen legs, because the excess fluids descend to the lower parts, drying out the eyes and filling up the legs. “Moderate sex at the proper time” was also deemed healthy, because the “hot fumes” that superfluous sperm normally sends to the head are evacuated. Sex was therefore said to lighten the body and counteract insomnia.<sup>14</sup>

These general health benefits did not mean that sex was equally beneficial to everyone. Age was an important factor, as young people could suffer a loss of heat more easily than older people, who had a colder constitution. Another factor was gender, as women were believed to be more humid and less likely to become dehydrated.<sup>15</sup> One had to pay attention to the constitution of the individual as well: Michele Savonarola believed that people with a choleric (warm) complexion could have sex more often than people with a melancholic (cold) complexion.<sup>16</sup> Having sex principally for reasons of health was controversial, as theological authors considered this a venial sin. Marriage had not been ordained for this reason, and confessors were therefore expected to warn their penitents about the sinfulness of these intentions. Doctors who advised their patients to have sex for health reasons were believed to commit a sin as well, because although their counsel may aid the health of the patient’s body, it endangers the health of the patient’s soul.<sup>17</sup>

An even more controversial purpose of sex was pleasure. The theological discourse regarded sexual pleasure with suspicion, even within marriage, and the medical discourse only discussed it as a way to entice people to reproduce, not as a goal in itself. Within the spacious domain of literary

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<sup>14</sup> Girolamo Manfredi, *Il Perché*, Liber I, Cap. 5, 115, 122-126.

<sup>15</sup> See chapters two and five.

<sup>16</sup> Michele Savonarola, *Ad mulieres ferrarienses de regimine pregnantium et noviter natorumque ad septennium* (ed. by L. Belloni: *Il trattato ginecologico-pediatrico in volgare*, Milan 1952) 10-11.

<sup>17</sup> Bartolomeo Caimi, *Confessionale sive Interrogatorium* (Heidelberg: Printer of Lindelbach (Heinrich Knobloch), before 1485) A coniugatis et curam rei familiaris habentibus, 108; A medicis phisicis et cirogicis, 129; Pacifico da Cerano, *Summa Pacifica*, Maritati, 184; Silvestro Mazzolini da Prierio, *Sylvestrina*, Debitum coniugale, par. 11; Cherubino da Spoleto, *Regola della vita matrimoniale*, 54-55.

fiction, however, where extramarital sex is the norm rather than the exception, the focus is usually on pleasure. In romance epics and novellas, sexual intercourse is first and foremost a pleasurable exercise. This emphasis on joy is reflected in the vocabulary the authors use. Sex is described as “being together with joy and delight” (*staran con zoia insieme e con diletto*), “enjoying their love” (*godettero loro amore*), or “the pleasure that is taken in bed” (*il piacer che si prende nel letto*). Authors often use metaphors such as “dance” or “game” to describe the act, and scenes involving sexual intercourse are full of “laughter and merriment, pleasure and gentle playfulness”. The lovers take their pleasure with each other, lie in each other’s arms, talking, laughing and jesting, and then “return anew to the amorous battle”. This emphasis on sexual pleasure can also be found in the lyrical poetry of female authors such as Gaspara Stampa. In her poems, inspired by her own extramarital love affairs, Stampa reminisces about “those nights, teeming with joy” when she lay in the arms of her beloved, and all that was bitter was rendered sweet. “Ah, my sweet Count,” she writes, “all those happy hours that passed between us in which you and I knew such pleasure”.<sup>18</sup>

In many of these sources, sexual pleasure is explicitly mentioned as love’s ultimate goal. In Bartolomeo Gottifredi’s *Specchio d’amore*, a treatise on how to have a love affair, the inexperienced Maddalena asks if she should allow her admirer to “do what he wants with her”. The older woman Coppina answers that she should, because this is the ultimate end of love. “No one falls in love for anything else”, she says, “and who says otherwise is dreaming”. According to her, all other aspects of a love affair are of lesser importance: “Seeing each other, fooling around, touching each other, and all the other pleasures of love are sorrows, miseries and rages, without the hope of that sweet end”.<sup>19</sup> In Alessandro Piccolomini’s *Raffaella*, an older woman likewise teaches her pupil that all pleasures are worthless without the final

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<sup>18</sup> Gaspara Stampa, *Rime* (trans. by J. Tylus: *The Complete Poems*, Chicago, 2010) 84, 104, 289.

<sup>19</sup> Bartolomeo Gottifredi, *Specchio d’amore* (ed. by A. Di Benedetto: *Prose di Giovanni della Casa e altri trattatisti cinquecenteschi del comportamento*, Turin 1970) 582, 613.

consummation: “what’s love worth without its end? It’s like an egg without salt, and worse.”<sup>20</sup> The authors of novellas and romance epics describe sex as the greatest of all amorous experiences. It is “the pleasure which all lovers crave most” and “the pleasure which lovers call the ultimate delight of love”.<sup>21</sup> The discourse of literary pornography focuses most on sexual pleasure as a goal, as it explicitly argues that people should be allowed to fulfill their natural desires, even if this involves having sex out of wedlock or violating God’s commandments in other ways. In his *Ragionamenti*, Pietro Aretino has the characters argue that people are made of flesh and bone and forbidding them what they desire most has no use. The character Arsiccio in Antonio Vignali’s *La Cazzaria* boldly states that “it is Nature that teaches us to fuck, and if anyone should be blamed, it is her”. People should not be blamed for pursuing the pleasures of sex acts that Nature herself has made pleasurable.<sup>22</sup> With this emphasis on sexuality as natural, Aretino and Vignali were the forebears of later literary pornographers and of scholars like Michel de Montaigne and Hadriaan Beverland.<sup>23</sup>

One final purpose of sex, transcending the merely sensory goal of sexual pleasure, was its ability to establish or increase a romantic or even spiritual union between two people. The philosopher Leone Ebreo wrote a treatise on love that was inspired by Jewish mystical thought as well as Neoplatonic theory. In his *Dialoghi* (pub. 1535), he argued that a physical union could actually increase and perfect the spiritual love between a man and a woman. Although a corporeal union is not the ultimate goal of perfect love, it does help to sustain it.<sup>24</sup> One of the many works that show an indebtedness to

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<sup>20</sup> I.F. Moulton, ‘Vagina Dialogues: Piccolomini’s *Raffaella* and Aretino’s *Ragionamenti*’ in: J. Murray and N. Terpstra eds., *Sex, Gender and Sexuality in Renaissance Italy* (Routledge 2019).

<sup>21</sup> Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso* (trans. by G. Waldman, Oxford 1974) I.51; Antonfrancesco Grazzini, *Le Cene* (ed. by R. Bruscaagli, Rome 1976) I.10, II.5.

<sup>22</sup> Pietro Aretino, *I Ragionamenti*, 51; Antonio Vignali, *La Cazzaria*, 100, 122-123.

<sup>23</sup> On Montaigne, see: Waddington, ‘Rewriting the World’. On Beverland, see: K.E. Hollelland, *The Banishment of Beverland. Sex, Sin, and Scholarship in the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Republic* (Leiden 2019).

<sup>24</sup> S. Ebbersmeyer, ‘The Philosopher as a Lover: Renaissance Debates on Platonic Eros’ in: M. Pickavé and L. Shapiro ed., *Emotion and Cognitive Life in Medieval and Early Modern Philosophy* (Oxford 2012) 133-155: 146-148.

Ebreo's philosophy is the *Dialogo dell'infinità d'amore* by the female author Tullia d'Aragona. Following Ebreo's example, D'Aragona makes a distinction between "vulgar" and "honest" love. Vulgar love is solely aimed at experiencing pleasure by physically enjoying the beloved, while honest love is aimed at creating a spiritual as well as a physical union. People who only love someone in a vulgar sense, cease to love this person once they have reached their goal and had sex with them. Those who love another person in an honest way, however, will never cease to love, because their true desire, a complete unification with their beloved, is something that they strive for, but will never obtain.<sup>25</sup>

The spiritual connection established through physical union could be taking place outside of marriage as well. In Baldassare Castiglione's *Il libro del cortegiano*, the character of the philosopher Pietro Bembo describes the experience of a platonic lover who kisses his beloved. It is not sexual gratification that he is after, but the sensation of spiritual unification:

The rational lover delights when he joins his mouth to that of the lady he loves in a kiss, not in order to arouse in himself any unseemly desire but because he feels that this bond opens the way for their souls which, attracted by their mutual desire, each pour themselves into the other's body in turn and so mingle that each of them possesses two souls, and it is as if a single spirit composed of the two governs their two bodies. So the kiss may be called a spiritual rather than physical union.<sup>26</sup>

The romance epics of Ludovico Ariosto and Matteo Maria Boiardo include several scenes that reflect a perception of (extramarital) sex as a way to extend an emotional bond and establish a romantic union. The authors describe bodily movements as well as the emotional effect on the lovers, and the language they use is distinctively erotic. Sex is a romantic affair, with lovers holding hands and falling asleep in each other's arms. The description of the act is focused on the entanglement of the bodies, as well as their

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<sup>25</sup> Tullia d'Aragona, *Dialogo dell'infinità d'amore* (trans. by R. Russell and B. Merry, Chicago 1997), 89-90

<sup>26</sup> Baldassare Castiglione, *Il libro del cortegiano* (trans. by G. Bull, London 1967) 336.

proximity, reflecting the characters' desire to dissolve into one another, to merge their beings together and become one. The lovers are clutching each other so close that "no air could travel between them" and "no force could separate them", and their bodies are described as wrapping themselves around the other more tightly than vines entwine pillars or trees.<sup>27</sup>

This section of the chapter has shown that different assumptions about the (primary) purpose of sex could coexist. Two of these purposes, rendering the marital debt and producing offspring, were broadly shared across the discourses, whereas other goals of sex, including health and sexual pleasure, were more controversial due to their clash with theological doctrine. Despite the different perspectives on the purpose of sex, most of these discourses nonetheless shared the same general code of conduct: upholding reason and moderation. The following five sections of this chapter will discuss five warnings against the dangers of excessive desire, aimed at encouraging people to restrain themselves: the deterioration of individual health; the thwarting of the process of reproduction; the endangerment of the immortal soul; the loss of natural nobility; and the death of the individual as well as that of others. The last part of the chapter is focused on the question whether human beings were deemed capable of upholding this code of conduct.

## **Unhealthy sex**

In Renaissance Italy, excessive sexual desire was thought to have dangerous repercussions for people's bodily health, for various reasons. First of all, a fixation on an unattainable object of desire could cause a severe type of lovesickness. People who allowed themselves to be carried away by sexual desire weakened their bodies through deprivation of food and sleep and risked disturbing their humoral balance. In literary fiction, love and desire were often described in terms of pain and illness. According to the discourse

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<sup>27</sup> Compare the passionate encounter between Fiordelisa and Brandimarte in Matteo Maria Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato* (trans. by C.S. Ross, Berkeley 1989) I. 19, 56-64, with the love scenes of Ruggiero and Alcina, and Richardet and Fiorde spina in Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (VII.27-30 and XXV.69).

of courtly love, love is not only fun and enjoyable, but also causes a lot of suffering if it remains unrequited. The agony of a lover is like “freezing in fire and burning in ice, and in the middle of the sea, unable to extend your hand and take water, dying of thirst”.<sup>28</sup> Falling in love is comparable to “drinking amorous poison” or “being bitten by the amorous tarantula, whose venom penetrates deeply into the heart”. In the *Orlando Furioso*, love is a strange fever that makes people feel hot and cold, a disease that penetrates every sinew, bone or marrow of the human body until its victims slowly waste away.<sup>29</sup> Female poets beautifully describe this feeling of lovesickness as well. Gaspara Stampa compares it to “dining on ambrosia and poison”, while Chiara Matraini calls it “an icy flame that little by little burns and destroys me from within, but which is so sweet that my heart rejoices even as my soul shatters”.<sup>30</sup> The Neapolitan noblewoman Ceccarella Minutolo composed a letter addressed to a doctor, praying him to “remedy her incurable illness” because all the medical experiments and potions she tried were to no avail.<sup>31</sup>

While the characters and authors above state that it is “love” that is making them feel this way, lovesickness is not caused by a platonic type of love, something that could be cured by talking to or holding hands with a beloved, but rather by a strong urge to have sex with the object of desire. From a medical perspective, lovesickness, often called *amor heroes* or *amor heroicus*, was perceived as a disease close to melancholy caused by the sight of a beautiful person. Seeing this person brought about the (sexual) desire to possess that person, as well as a buildup of seminal fluids and an imbalance of the humors, which could cause grave physical and mental disorders. Satiating one’s desire by having sex with the beloved was the quickest way

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<sup>28</sup> Antonfrancesco Grazzini, *Le Cene*, III.5.

<sup>29</sup> Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*. For the topos of “love as disease”, see for instance: XIV.3, XIX.26-29, XXX.95, XL.81 and XLII.28.

<sup>30</sup> Gaspara Stampa, *Rime*, 231; Chiara Matraini, *Rime e prose* (ed. and trans. by E. Maclachlan, Chicago 2008) 48-49.

<sup>31</sup> Ceccarella Minutolo, *Lettere* (ed. by R. Morabito, Naples 1999), Letter XXIII, p. 63-65.

to cure the disease.<sup>32</sup> As one of the characters in Aretino's *Ragionamenti* states: "the miracle which transforms a man who gets back his woman is truly great. It is quite true that no sooner does he kiss and embrace her again than the color returns to his face, the strength to his body, gaiety to his brow, laughter to his eyes, and hunger, thirst, and discourse to his mouth".<sup>33</sup>

The underlying problem with lovesickness was that a person was feeling a sexual desire for a person who was unable or unwilling to have sex with them, for instance because they were already married, or because social circumstances prevented them from getting married. Although, from one point of view, it was difficult to blame people for their feelings, as one cannot choose with whom one falls in love, people were nonetheless held responsible for curbing their desire and not making matters worse. Literary sources like novellas show what happens to people who nurture their own fixation: they are unable to eat, drink, or sleep, and become too weak to even leave their beds.<sup>34</sup> Many authors offered remedies to cure those who were afflicted by lovesickness, counteracting both the physical and psychological causes. The Neoplatonist philosopher Marsilio Ficino, who describes the disease as a form of insanity brought on by an agglomeration of black bile or burned blood, advises medical treatments such as bloodletting, purgation, sweating, and exercise. The humanist author Platina (1421-81), drawing inspiration from Ovid's *Remedies for Love*, suggests disparaging the beloved by making others talk ill of them, or distracting the patient with other activities. Many authors believed that having sex with someone other than the object of desire could be helpful as well: this would draw off surplus humors, thus relieving the physical cause of the disease, as well as cure patients of their psychological fixation.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> J. Cadden, 'Western Medicine and Natural Philosophy' in: V.L. Bullough and J.A. Brundage eds., *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality* (New York/London 1996) 51-80: 65-66.

<sup>33</sup> Pietro Aretino, *I Ragionamenti*, p. 330.

<sup>34</sup> For instance: Matteo Bandello, *Le Novelle*, II.55.

<sup>35</sup> M.F. Wack, *Lovesickness in the Middle Ages: The Viaticum and Its Commentaries* (Philadelphia 1990); D. Beecher, 'Quattrocento Views on the Eroticization of the Imagination' in: D. Beecher and M. Ciavolella eds., *Eros and Anteros : The Medical Traditions of Love in the Renaissance* (Ottawa 1992) 49-65: 55-57, 63; D. Jacquart and C.

Apart from lovesickness, another reason why excessive sexual desire was deemed unhealthy, was because these desires could entice people to have sex in an irresponsible way. First of all, excessive sexual desire could make people have sex in a frequency that was immoderate and ultimately affected their health. By overindulgently engaging in the act, the body could expel so much bodily superfluities that it was deprived of its nutrition. The conviction that intercourse makes you weak was based on the theory of pangenesis: the idea that all body parts contribute genetic material for the sperm. The extraction and whitening of the sperm from the blood diminishes the nourishment of other body members. Having too much sex, and losing too much sperm, leads to a loss of humidity, heat, and nutrition, and results in dehydration, hypothermia, and general weakness. In the most extreme cases, a loss of semen may even be fatal. Antonio Benivieni writes in his medical casebook that “the excessive outflow of semen very often causes human consumption, and after a long period of time, they waste away”. He mentions the case of a fifteen-year-old girl who was completely emaciated, her eyes hollow and her skin very pale. Many doctors tried to cure her, but were unable to find the cause for her disease. When she was on the verge of death, Benivieni finally convinced the girl to confide in him and diagnosed her with a disease called *spermatorrèa*, which was believed to cause an involuntary outflow of semen.<sup>36</sup> Whereas this case concerns a female patient, it was generally believed that men suffered more from sperm loss than women, as they had a much dryer constitution.<sup>37</sup>

Physicians paid much attention to the harmful effects of excessive sperm loss. According to Girolamo Manfredi, among those body parts that are most afflicted are the eyes, hips and kidneys, because these have to assemble the humidity needed to make and expel the sperm. Having sex without moderation could be particularly harmful for people who are already suffering from fever, leprosy, scabies, or gout, as it could intensify the

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Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages* (Oxford 1988) 84-85, 147-58; Cadden, ‘Western Medicine’, 65-66.

<sup>36</sup> Antonio Benivieni, *De abditis nonnullis*, Case 156.

<sup>37</sup> Girolamo Manfredi, *Il Perché*, Liber I, Cap. 5, 126.

disease and weaken them even further.<sup>38</sup> Alessandro Benedetti believed that having too much sex could result in hair loss (“the congenital hairs of those people who are worn out with sex drop out more early”) and pain in the loins (“the loins grow weary with venery and are often tormented by pain”).<sup>39</sup> Most remarkably, it might even lead to a shrinkage of the brain. Wanting to prove Galen’s theory about the material for generation being extracted from the brain, Benedetti included an anecdote about the dissection of the head of a lecherous man, whose brain turned out to be abnormally small.<sup>40</sup> These medical arguments were used beyond the realm of medicine as well. Franciscan friar Cherubino da Spoleto warns the readers of his treatise on marriage that having “superfluous and indiscrete carnal conjunction” can be bad for your health. It can lead to infirmity, weakness, premature aging, and even madness, due to the loss of natural forces and vigor. He (mis)quotes the Persian philosopher Avicenna who stated that one act of coitus weakens the body more than ten bloodlettings.<sup>41</sup>

Apart from having too much sex, excessive sexual desire may also encourage other types of ‘irresponsible’ behavior that could be unhealthy. Medical and theological discourse often overlapped in their warnings about particular sex acts. Anal sex, which was prohibited by canon law on grounds of it being “unnatural”, was also prohibited by medical discourse because of its supposed danger to bodily health. Alessandro Benedetti and Jacopo Berengario da Carpi both warn that anal sex causes hemorrhoids, anal fistulae, and the involuntary flow of excrements, due to the “lascivious lechery” and “burning lust” of irresponsible participants.<sup>42</sup> Sex during

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<sup>38</sup> Ibidem, Liber I, Cap. 5, 115, 122-126.

<sup>39</sup> Alessandro Benedetti, *Anatomice*, 114 and 131.

<sup>40</sup> Ibidem, 96. Benedetti is probably referring to an anecdote by Albert the Great, who mentioned a monk from a rival order who died “half-starved” after he had “desired” a beautiful lady “seventy times before matins was rung”, and whose autopsy revealed the emptiness of his brain, which had been reduced to the size of a pomegranate, and whose eyes had been destroyed. “This is the sign that coitus drains, above all, the brain”, Albert concluded. See: Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine*, 55-56.

<sup>41</sup> Cherubino Da Spoleto, *Regola della vita matrimoniale*, 81. The original quote by Avicenna actually mentions forty bloodlettings instead of ten: Simons, *Sex of Men*, 165.

<sup>42</sup> Alessandro Benedetti, *Anatomice*, II.26 and V.21; Jacopo Berengario da Carpi, *Isagogae breves*, 76. For more on this topic, see chapter seven.

pregnancy was frowned upon by theologians, but even more so by medics. Michele Savonarola tried to give women an extra incentive for refraining by warning them that their “ardent appetite” could have risks for their own health as well. As the menstruation is retained during pregnancy, having sex will make a pregnant woman vomit or become nauseous, and it will affect her brain and heart.<sup>43</sup> Sexual positions other than the conventional ‘missionary’ position could be sinful, but medical discourse also advised against them because they could be detrimental to (male) health. Michele Savonarola, in his *Practica Maior*, states that “the man should stay above the woman, and not the other way round, so as to prevent the female sperm falling into the penis, and so that he will not become tired” and that “the standing position is very exhausting, which is why it is not allowed”.<sup>44</sup> The male discomfort caused by the woman-on-top position is also the topic of the fourteenth sonnet of Pietro Aretino’s *Sonetti Lussuriosi*, accompanying an engraving of a man in a crouching position, propping himself up on both arms, with a woman on top of him.<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, in Aretino’s satire *I Ragionamenti*, extravagant acrobatic positions with names such as “the tortoise” and “the crane”, are described as detrimental to female rather than male health. The courtesan Nanna complains that gentleman customers “dislocate the bones” and “distort the pelvic regions” of women by making them twist into these positions.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, apart from enticing people to have sex in an ‘irresponsible’ way or frequency, excessive sexual desire could also tempt them into having sex with ‘irresponsible’ partners, risking the contraction of dangerous venereal diseases. In a story by Matteo Bandello, the wife of a merchant has sex with a leprous man while her husband is away on business. She has heard others claim that lepers know much better than other men how to please women, and that they last much longer in “the act of grinding”. Curious to find out

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<sup>43</sup> Michele Savonarola, *Ad mulieres ferrarienses*, 48.

<sup>44</sup> Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine*, 133.

<sup>45</sup> B. Talvacchia, *Taking Positions: On the Erotic in Renaissance Culture* (Princeton, 1987) 220-221. See also: M.I. Den Hartog, ‘Women on Top: Coital Positions and Gender Hierarchies in Renaissance Italy’, *Renaissance Studies* 35.4 (2021) 638-657.

<sup>46</sup> Pietro Aretino, *I Ragionamenti*, 188, 266-277.

for herself whether this is true, she selects a leprous man and has sex with him multiple times. After she has “satiated her lust”, however, she becomes afraid of having contracted leprosy herself. When her husband comes home, she confesses to him, and he, loving his wife very much, asks a number of physicians for their advice. These doctors state that the best way to cure female leprosy is for them to have as much sex as possible. Their advice for this woman is to have sex multiple times a day, for about three to four months, with different people. Every time she had sex, she would purge herself of the disease by transferring part of it to the other person, and this would eventually cure her. Convinced by the doctors’ counsel, the husband gives his consent.<sup>47</sup> At the end of this story, the irresponsible, promiscuous behavior of one woman has not only caused her own illness, but that of many others as well.

According to the doctors in Bandello’s story, a woman suffering from the “French disease” would benefit from the same treatment. This *morbo gallico*, now known as syphilis, had been transported from the New World to Spain and from Spain to Naples by the Spanish fleet, and was then spread further across the Italian peninsula by the French troops of Charles VIII during the Italian wars. The disease was first described in medical writing in the 1490’s by military doctors such as Alessandro Benedetti, and most medics quickly agreed on both its American origin and its sexual transmission.<sup>48</sup> The immense impact of this disease on society is reflected in the various sources used for this research. Both the daughter and the husband of marchioness Isabella d’Este died as a result of syphilis. In her letters, she refers to their health as well as to the syphilitic ailments of her favorite jester and one of her pages.<sup>49</sup> Doctor Antonio Benivieni mentions several patients

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<sup>47</sup> Matteo Bandello, *Le Novelle*, I.37. Original Italian: *purgarsi che daria il male ad altri ed ella si sanerebbe*.

<sup>48</sup> D.O. Hughes, ‘Bodies, Disease and Society’ in: J.M. Najemy ed., *Italy in the Age of the Renaissance, 1300-1550* (2004) 103-124; K. Park and C. Pennuto, ‘Science and Medicine’, in: M. Wyatt ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Italian Renaissance* (Cambridge 2014) 363-385: 377.

<sup>49</sup> Isabella d’Este, *Lettere* (trans. by Deanna Shemek, Tempe, AZ 2017), 66 (her page), 122 (her jester), 357 (her husband), 543 (her daughter).

whom he treated for this disease in his casebook,<sup>50</sup> and Jacopo Berengario da Carpi is said to have made a lot of money by treating upper-class patients with ointments.<sup>51</sup>

Although prostitutes received the greatest part of the blame for spreading syphilis, one female character in Pietro Aretino's *Ragionamenti* points the finger at their customers: "it was not the whore who incited the man (...) and so if men were the first to ask for our services, they were also the first to give it [i.e. the disease] to us".<sup>52</sup> Interestingly, physician Alessandro Benedetti similarly seems to blame the sexual desires of men for the spread of the disease. While discussing the process of arousal for the male member in his *Anatomice*, Benedetti's anatomical lecture suddenly becomes a moralist sermon. He writes that "the skin which covers the penis is not simple but sinewy in nature and *possesses a great sense of touch*", and that "*for this reason* through venereal contact the new Gallic disease has crept upon us from the west under the influence of a pestilential star (...) with such disfigurement and torture to the members especially at night that it even surpasses incurable leprosy or elephantiasis in horror, to say nothing of its danger to human life".<sup>53</sup> Benedetti makes a direct connection between male sexual pleasure and the spread of venereal disease, warning the reader that acting on their desires in an irresponsible way could have fatal results.

## Infertility

Excessive sexual desire was also frowned upon because it could entice people to have sex in a way that deliberately or unconsciously thwarts the process of reproduction. Apart from contraceptive acts, and acts that did not

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<sup>50</sup> Antonio Benivieni, *De abditis nonnullis*, Case 1, 30 and 132.

<sup>51</sup> Benvenuto Cellini mentions Jacopo Berengario da Carpi in his autobiography. According to him, Berengario da Carpi made thousands of ducats by treating rich patients in Rome, but after he had left, "all those whom he had treated were a hundred times worse than before". See: Benvenuto Cellini, *La Vita di Benvenuto Cellini scritta da lui medesimo* (trans. by A. Macdonnell, New York/London 2010), 48-49 and 257.

<sup>52</sup> Pietro Aretino, *Ragionamenti*, 261-262,278.

<sup>53</sup> Alessandro Benedetti, *Anatomice*, 98.

“serve the proper vessel”, these deviant acts also included behavior that was believed to decrease the chances of conception or increase the risk of weak, deformed or stillborn children. The theological and medical discourse shared a focus on reproduction, and many types of sexual behavior which were frowned upon as they were sinful or unhealthy, were also frowned upon for fertility reasons.

The first type of ‘irresponsible behavior’ was deviating from the appropriate sexual position. Theological doctrine taught that the only proper position for having sex was the one we now call ‘missionary’, with “the woman lying on her back and the man lying on her stomach, heeding the proper vessel”. Deviations from this position were not only sinful, but also said to be less likely to generate offspring. Fifteenth- and sixteenth-century manuals for confession follow the theological authority Albert Magnus (c. 1200-80), who had commented on several of these deviations. According to Albert, if a couple has sex from behind, the sperm will not be deposited close enough to the mouth of the uterus; if they are standing, the woman will not be able to contain the semen; and if the woman is on top, conception is impeded because her womb is turned over.<sup>54</sup> Deviations from the ‘missionary’ position, could be a mortal sin if they caused the man to ejaculate outside of the proper vessel or if they made it impossible for the woman to contain the semen, and theologians actively debated issues such as whether a woman who sat on top would be able to keep the semen inside.<sup>55</sup>

Another type of ‘irresponsible behavior’ deemed capable of thwarting the process of reproduction concerned the frequency of sexual relations. Friar Cherubino da Spoleto warns his readers that having too much sex could be harmful for the children that come of it. As these children are generated

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<sup>54</sup> J. Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge 1993) 245.

<sup>55</sup> Bartolomeo Caimi, *Interrogatorium*, A coniugatis et curamreifamiliarishabentibus, 108; Girolamo Savonarola, *Confessionale*, 33r.

See chapter three for a discussion of the woman-on-top position. For the pre-fifteenth-century debate on sexual positions, see: P.J. Payer, *The Bridling of Desire: Views of Sex in the Later Middle Ages* (Toronto 1993) and J.A. Brundage, ‘Let Me Count the Ways: Canonists and Theologians Contemplate Coital Positions’, *Journal of Medieval History* 10 (1984) 81-93.

by weakened bodies, they will be weak, sickly, and short-lived. Some couples, he writes, will not be able to conceive at all, because having too much sex is counterproductive: imagine that you have a field and you sow it, and eight days later you come back and sow it again, then again and again, how much produce do you think you will have in a year?<sup>56</sup> Cherubino's warning about the dangers of too much sex was supported by contemporary medical science, as Alessandro Benedetti and Michele Savonarola argued that the sperm of those who have sex too often becomes impure and infertile.<sup>57</sup> Unlike theologians, however, medics argued that too much abstinence is not beneficial either. Michele Savonarola states that those who want to have children have to find the right balance. They should not have sex too frequently, thus making the sperm grow cold, nor postpone it too much, because abstinence dissolves the heat as well.<sup>58</sup>

So what was the proper frequency that medics and theologians recommended for those who want to have children? Michele Savonarola states that, as a general rule, having sex every five days suffices. Some people, such as those who have a choleric constitution, can do it more often, while those who are melancholic, can do it much less often, and the decision should be left to the discretion of the individual.<sup>59</sup> Cherubino does not provide a general rule, arguing that this is impossible because it is dependent on individual constitutions. He states that everyone should let their conscience guide them towards what is good for them. The friar's remark about the sowing of the field nonetheless shows that he did not believe that once every eight days, let alone once every five days, could be a proper frequency.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Cherubino da Spoleto, *Regola della vita matrimoniale*, 84-85.

<sup>57</sup> Alessandro Benedetti, *Anatomice*, 97; Michele Savonarola, *Ad mulieres ferrarienses*, 9.

<sup>58</sup> Michele Savonarola, *Ad mulieres ferrarienses*, 42. Savonarola's general argument concurs with modern science: for purposes of conceiving, both having sex too frequently and abstaining for too long is ineffective. Savonarola's precise recommendation regarding the frequency, however, is a bit too conservative, as abstaining for more than 48 hours can lead to a low sperm count. See: J.S. Hyde and J.D. DeLamater, *Understanding Human Sexuality: Thirteenth edition* (New York 2017) 118.

<sup>59</sup> Michele Savonarola, *Ad mulieres ferrarienses*, 10-11.

<sup>60</sup> Cherubino da Spoleto, *Regola della vita matrimoniale*, 86-88.

The ‘irresponsible’ timing of sexual relations was believed to thwart the process of reproduction as well. Fifteenth- and sixteenth-century sources show a firm belief in the possibility that having sex during menstruation could harm the offspring. Michele Savonarola claimed that this behavior could generate “leprous” and feeble children, and it is much better to have sex about eight days after the menstruation has stopped, because then the uterus has been “modified” [*mondificata*] and “receives the semen with much more appetite and delight”.<sup>61</sup> The physiological principle behind this, although not mentioned by Savonarola himself, was the belief in the innate coldness of women. Contact with the menses would deprive a man of his essential health-giving heat, and a child formed from such matter would be devoid of natural warmth.<sup>62</sup> Clerics used the same medical argument to warn their readers about the dangers of this behavior: fra Cherubino da Spoleto for instance states that having sex during menstruation could generate children who are “monstrous and infected, or leprous and scabrous, or blind or deaf or crazy, or otherwise defective”.<sup>63</sup>

Medics and clerics, however, disagreed about the gravity of this deed. While medics were mainly preoccupied with reproduction, clerics also needed to weigh the importance of the marital debt, thus legitimizing sex during menstruation on some occasions. The question whether asking for or rendering the marital debt during menstruation was a mortal sin, depended on a number of factors. One of them was knowledge. A woman who is aware that she is menstruating always commits a mortal sin if she asks for the debt. Her husband, however, only commits a mortal sin if he knows about it. Another important factor was the danger of adultery. If a woman is unable to deny her husband and only consents because she wants to prevent him

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<sup>61</sup> Michele Savonarola, *Ad mulieres ferrarienses*, 24. While Savonarola’s claim about sex during menstruation causing the birth of feeble offspring has no scientific basis, his recommendation to have sex about eight days after the menstruation has stopped, does comply with modern knowledge about the menstrual cycle. See: Hyde and DeLamater, *Understanding Human Sexuality*, 117.

<sup>62</sup> J.A. Tasioulas, ‘Sex, Medicine and Disease’ in: R. Evans ed., *A Cultural History of Sexuality in the Middle Ages* (Oxford 2011) 119-138.

<sup>63</sup> Cherubino da Spoleto, *Regola della vita matrimoniale*, 65-69.

from cheating on her, this is not a mortal sin. Nor, Silvestro Mazzolini da Prierio claims, is it a mortal sin for her husband to ask it, if this is the only way to avoid adultery. Apart from ignorance and the prevention of adultery, there were two other ‘loopholes’. According to Cherubino, if the woman has an “unnaturally inordinate and almost permanent flux”, it is not forbidden to ask for the debt, because with such a continuous flux she cannot get pregnant anyway. Angelo da Chivasso believed that the sinfulness of the act can only be determined by the final outcome: if after having sex during menstruation the child turns out to be leprous, it is a mortal sin, if it turns out healthy, it is only a venial sin.<sup>64</sup> In theory, a couple could take the risk, and postpone repenting until they were sure it was necessary.

Whether sex during pregnancy was allowed, was likewise a topic for debate. Theological authorities like Albert Magnus expressed concern about sex during pregnancy, especially in its early and final stages, as there could be a risk of harming the unborn child. Generally, however, theologians appear to be less strict about sex during pregnancy than about sex during menstruation (which might be explained by the ancient anxiety about menstrual blood).<sup>65</sup> Following traditional doctrine, the authors of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century manuals for confession warn against the dangers, but do not prohibit it entirely, only considering it a mortal sin if there is a danger of miscarrying.<sup>66</sup> Medics were much more strict about this, as they were convinced that having sex during pregnancy could be very harmful for the unborn child, even if the woman did not miscarry. Michele Savonarola states that having sex while pregnant can make a woman conceive a new fetus

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<sup>64</sup> Angelo da Chivasso, *Summa Angelica de casibus conscientiae* (Venice: Georgius Arrivabenus, 1487) Debitum coniugale, par. 32; Bartolomeo Caimi, *Interrogatorium*, A coniugatis et curam rei familiaris habentibus, 108-109; Pacifico da Cerano, *Summa Pacifica*, Maritati, 184-185; Silvestro Mazzolini da Prierio, *Sylvestrina*, Debitum coniugale, par. 6; Cherubino da Spoleto, *Regola della vita matrimoniale*, 65-69.

<sup>65</sup> Payer, *Bridling of Desire*, 103-104. See chapter three for more information about the apprehension towards menstrual blood.

<sup>66</sup> Angelo da Chivasso, *Angelica*, Debitum coniugale, par. 33; Bartolomeo Caimi, *Interrogatorium*, A coniugatis et curam rei familiaris habentibus, 108-109; Pacifico da Cerano, *Summa Pacifica*, Maritati, 185; Silvestro Mazzolini da Prierio, *Sylvestrina*, Debitum coniugale, par. 5; Cherubino da Spoleto, *Regola della vita matrimoniale*, 60-62.

alongside the older one in a process he calls *superimpregnatione*. Alessandro Benedetti mentions this process as well, stating that some women enjoy sex so much that they “superfetate”.<sup>67</sup> Savonarola feels very strongly about this and calls it an abomination of nature. He states that by generating a new fetus, nutrition is taken away from the first one, and this either results in miscarriage or in the birth of a very weak and sickly child that will die young. To make his case, Savonarola claims to have seen a woman who gave birth to quintuplets, of whom three died in the next two days, the fourth lived about two months, and the fifth only seven months. Savonarola severely judges women who take this risk, warning them that because of their “ardent appetite” they will become the murderer of their own child.<sup>68</sup> Some of these medical theories found their way into literary fiction as well. In Antonio Vignali’s satire *La Cazzaria*, the character Arsiccio claims that women who have sex during pregnancy will “cast sperm on top of sperm”. According to him, this will not result in the birth of twins, but in that of a “monstrous creature with too many heads or too many limbs”. To avoid giving birth to a deformed child, Arsiccio suggests having anal sex instead. The couple should also only do so from the front, not from behind, because if the pregnant woman lies on her stomach, the cumulative weight of her own body and that of the man will be on top of the unborn child, which could result in a miscarriage.<sup>69</sup>

Other types of sex acts were frowned upon because they were not aimed at procreation. Theological doctrine denounced all sex acts that did not serve “the proper vessel” [*debitum vas* or *vaso debito*] as mortal sins. God has given each body member its own purpose: the eyes to see with, the feet to walk with, and the genitals to preserve the human species, and people should

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<sup>67</sup> Alessandro Benedetti, *Anatomice*, 100. Superfetation, the simultaneous occurrence of more than one stage of developing offspring in the same animal, is claimed to be common in some species of animals. The existence of this phenomenon in humans, however, is unlikely, and if it does exist, it is extremely rare. See: H.C. McNamara e.a., ‘A Review of the Mechanisms and Evidence for Typical and Atypical Twinning’, *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* 214.2 (2016) 172-191.

<sup>68</sup> Michele Savonarola, *Ad mulieres ferrarienses*, 29-30.

<sup>69</sup> Antonio Vignali, *La Cazzaria*, 91 and 99.

only conjoin in those parts that had been ordained by God in order to procreate. Theological discourse employs different terms to describe acts deviating from penetrative vaginal sex, most commonly “sodomy” and “the sin against nature”. *Peccatum contra natura* is often used as an umbrella term that includes three different types of sin: sodomy, *mollicies* and bestiality. Sodomy signified sex between people of the same gender, but could also include sex between a man and a woman outside of the proper vessel. *Mollities* or *imunditia* was the act of voluntary pollution without coitus, which includes masturbation, as it is sometimes described as a solitary act. Giacomo della Marca instructs the penitent to contemplate whether he has “sinned by himself against nature” and “if he has touched himself dishonestly with the intent to *luxuriare*”.<sup>70</sup> Other authors also pay attention to the possibility of voluntary pollution through the “dishonorable touches” of another person, but emphasize that it is not necessary for the confessor to know whether their penitents did it by themselves or with someone else, because in neither case the proper vessel has been served.<sup>71</sup>

Finally, excessive sexual desire thwarted the process of reproduction because it enticed people use birth control. Married couples might want to have sex on a regular basis, even though they were not prepared to raise any more children, while couples who were not married wanted to hide their fornication or adultery. Manuals for confession mention several possible motives, from not being able to nourish children or finance dowries, to “wanting to preserve their own life or honor”, wanting to “be free to do as they like” and even “fear of losing their beauty”, but all of these motives are considered unlawful. The overwhelming majority of theological authors stated that contraceptive methods such as *coitus interruptus* were a mortal sin.<sup>72</sup> The only dissenting voice is that of Angelo da Chivasso, who accepts family planning as a legitimate excuse. Other authors are much more critical:

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<sup>70</sup> Giacomo della Marca, *Confessione*, De luxuria & Li V sentimenti del corpo.

<sup>71</sup> Bartolomeo Caimi, *Interrogatorium*, Sextum preceptum est non mechaberis, 57; Girolamo Savonarola, *Confessionale*, De luxuria, 32r; Pacifico da Cerano, *Summa Pacifica*, Delle circostantie necessarie alla confessione, 20-21.

<sup>72</sup> For more on this topic, see esp. Noonan, *Contraception*.

Cherubino da Spoleto for instance states that if men do not want any more children, they should abstain, rather than “sow their seed on the rocks”.<sup>73</sup>

Some authors even claimed that contraception should be seen as murder, because the semen itself already has a soul. Bartolomeo Caimi for instance states that giving someone a poison of sterility that makes them unable to generate or conceive should be perceived as homicide.<sup>74</sup> A reference to this same idea can be found in the pornographic satire *La Cazzaria*. The character Arsiccio states that friars are so addicted to masturbation that their houses have “no room, no bed, no chamber, or latrine that is not full of sperm and thus of unborn embryos. And if our doctrine is true (...) on the Day of Judgment you will see so many unfinished spirits and bodies coming out of those bordellos that Paradise will not be able to receive them all”.<sup>75</sup> This theory about sperm having a soul derives from twelfth-century canon law authorities such as Peter Lombard and Gratian, who taught that there should be no interference with natural procreation at all, and the status of the fetus is of no importance.<sup>76</sup> Not all theologians agreed with this rigid view, however. A more common argument, based on church father Augustine’s interpretation of Aristotelian doctrine, states that the soul does not enter the fetus until the fortieth day after conception, and the laws of homicide therefore do not apply to those who remove a fetus before that day. This view was held by influential theologians like Albert Magnus, Thomas Aquinas and Giles of Rome.<sup>77</sup> A fifteenth-century Italian representation can be found in the manual of Pacifico da Cerano. Pacifico writes that “If a pregnant woman voluntarily causes herself to miscarry and if this happened for a male child forty days after the conception, and for a female child thirty days, because according to saint Augustine this is the time it takes for bodies to

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<sup>73</sup> Pacifico da Cerano, *Summa Pacifica*, Maritati, 186-187, Medici, 223; Cherubino da Spoleto, *Regola della vita matrimoniale*, 99-102; Angelo da Chivasso, *Angelica*, Debitum coniugale, par. 27.

<sup>74</sup> Bartolomeo Caimi, *Interrogatorium*, Preceptum quintum est non occidendo, 54-56.

<sup>75</sup> Antonio Vignali, *La Cazzaria*, 89-90.

<sup>76</sup> J.M. Riddle, *Eve’s Herbs: A History of Contraception and Abortion in the West* (Cambridge, MA 1997) 93.

<sup>77</sup> Riddle, *Eve’s Herbs*, 29, 78-84.

take complete form as well as a soul, then they have committed murder and thus a mortal sin”.<sup>78</sup>

Medics were less strict on the topic of contraceptive and abortive medicine. Pietro Bairo’s *Secreti Medicinali* includes a small chapter with the explicit title “Of those things that prohibit the conception” [*Di quelle cose che vietano la concietione*]. In this chapter, Bairo violates the prohibitions of the church by providing the reader with a number of contraceptive and abortive remedies. He does, however, warn physicians only to use these methods for “a legitimate cause” such as the preservation of the life of the woman. Family planning was another legitimate excuse, but only in some cases: one of his recipes is recommended for “a woman who has given birth and for some good cause [*per qualche buona causa*] does not want to get pregnant for some time”.<sup>79</sup>

## Sinful sex

Another reason why excessive sexual desire was dangerous, was because it could entice people to have sex in a way that was sinful and endangered the state of their immortal soul. The capital sin of lust, or *luxuria*, was perceived as an immediate consequence of the original sin. In the book of Genesis, the first thing that Adam and Eve notice after they have eaten from the Tree of Knowledge is that they are naked. The direct result of the original sin of disobedience is a feeling of shame – while before they were unashamed, they now use fig leaves to cover themselves. Therefore, even though sex played no part in either the temptation to the first sin or the sin itself, the connection was nonetheless made, because, as Pierre Payer has put it, “the immediate manifestation of the effects of the first sin was understood to be felt in the genital area”.<sup>80</sup> According to the doctrine of original sin, theorized by Augustine and systematized by Peter Lombard in the twelfth century, after

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<sup>78</sup> Pacifico da Cerano, *Summa Pacifica*, Dell’Homicidio, 82-83.

<sup>79</sup> Pietro Bairo, *Secreti Medicinali*, 25.2: Di quelle cose che vietano la concietione. For a more detailed discussion of contraceptive medicine, see chapter two.

<sup>80</sup> Payer, *Bridling of Desire*, 45.

Adam and Eve disobeyed God, their genitals began to refuse to obey their own rational and volitional commands. While before they were able to move their genitals as if it were their arms and legs, they were now subjected to the capricious impulses of sexual desire (*concupiscentia*).<sup>81</sup>

In manuals for confession and sermons, *luxuria* includes sexual sins of various sorts. Girolamo Savonarola instructs confessors to interrogate their penitents about the sin of *luxuria* on three different levels. The first consists of acts of sexual intercourse; the second concerns other acts aimed at lecherous delight [*actu luxurioso non consumato*]; and the final level inquires into any lecherous thoughts that penitents may have had.<sup>82</sup> All these acts and thoughts may be sinful, and there was an ardent debate among theologians about which sins were mortal and which were venial. The distinction between a venial and a mortal sin was important, because only mortal sins could make someone lose the love and grace of God and could make them liable to eternal damnation, necessitating a penitent's confession and contrition in order to be saved.<sup>83</sup> While sexual relations had their uses, sexual behavior could be sinful for three different reasons: if it thwarted the process of reproduction, if it took place outside of the legal bounds of marriage, and if the primary goal of the participants was sexual pleasure rather than procreation or avoiding adultery. As infertile acts were already discussed in the previous section of this chapter, this section will focus on extramarital acts and acts aimed at pleasure.

Canon law taught that all extramarital acts were mortally sinful, although some were deemed worse than others. Manuals for confession generally include a list of the different varieties of sinful sexual intercourse, in ascending or descending order of gravity. The least grave type of sin was fornication, which was sex between two people who were both unmarried. After that came *stuprum*, a specific category for “deflowering” or “violating” an unmarried virgin. Worse than fornication and *stuprum* was adultery. This could be single adultery, when only one of the partners was married, or

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<sup>81</sup> Baldwin, *Language of Sex*, 117-118.

<sup>82</sup> Girolamo Savonarola, *Confessionale*, De luxuria & eius speciebus.

<sup>83</sup> Tentler, *Sin and Confession*, 145.

double, when both of them were. After adultery followed *raptus*, which entailed the (violent) abduction of a virgin, married woman, a widow or a nun, either against her own will, or against that of her parents, husband or guardians. Next was sacrilege, when the act included a member of the clergy, a monk, a nun, or someone who had taken holy vows – like adultery, the sin of sacrilege could be either single or double. After sacrilege followed incest, which entailed marriage and sexual relations between two people who were affiliated by laws of consanguinity (blood relations), affinity (in-laws) or spiritual affinity (godparents). The gravest category of sin was called *peccatum contra natura*, and commonly included *mollicies* (“voluntary pollution”), sodomy, and bestiality.

Apart from actual intercourse, it was also possible to commit the sin of *luxuria* through other extramarital acts aimed at lecherous delight. In manuals for confession and sermons, these acts were often categorized under the five bodily senses. Under the rubric of sight, it was both mortally sinful to look at someone lasciviously and to “lecherously show off your own members for dishonest reasons”. Under the rubric of touch, kissing, embracing, or in any other way touching someone outside of wedlock could be a mortal sin, but only if this was aimed at libidinous delight, and/or if one took libidinous pleasure in it. Sins also included seduction techniques, such as giving people something to eat to make them have sex with you (taste), seducing them with serenades and lascivious conversation (hearing), and putting on perfume (smell).<sup>84</sup> As fra Bernardino da Feltre describes it, “he who is in love does not have a body member that does not sin. His ears, eyes, nose, mouth, hands, etc. sin – ears, listening to messages, eyes, looking at what they desire *in malum*, nose, smelling her gifts, mouth, talking carnally about her, hands, touching her in dances, or elsewhere, or her things and gifts, feet, walking after her on feast days as well as non-feast days.” The

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<sup>84</sup> All these themes are mentioned in: Angelo da Chivasso, *Angelica*, De luxuria; Bartolomeo Caimi, *Interrogatorium*, De luxuria; Bernardino da Feltre, *Confessione generale*, El nono commandemento & De luxuria; and Pacifico da Cerano, *Summa Pacifica*, Della Lussuria. Special attention to the topic of luxuria and the five senses is given in: Giacomo della Marca, *Confessione*, Li V sentimenti del corpo; and Girolamo Savonarola, *Confessionale*, De luxuria.

friar warns that touching people for lecherous delight, “whether above or below, whether clothes or flesh” is always a mortal sin.<sup>85</sup>

Penitents could also commit extramarital sins in their thoughts, fantasizing about someone and thinking about ‘dishonorable’ things. After all, the commandment “Do not desire the wife of your neighbor” meant that God had forbidden every deliberate consent of wanting to have carnal relations outside of marriage. Likewise, Christ had said that “Whoever looks at a woman with lecherous desire, has already committed fornication with her in his heart”. The consensus among theologians on whether these sins were venial or mortal focused on the penitent’s intention. Anyone who deliberately, with consent of reason, took delight in thinking about these things, even if they did not intend to act on them, has committed a mortal sin.<sup>86</sup> Pacifico da Cerano helpfully clarifies that, as each lecherous thought counts as one mortal sin, desiring one hundred different people in one hundred different thoughts amounts to one hundred mortal sins, while fantasizing about these people all at once only counts as one mortal sin.<sup>87</sup> As Thomas Tentler has explained, the concept of willful consent was key in determining guilt and the gravity of sins. The penitential system of the medieval church was founded on the premise that people are only responsible for the acts, thoughts, and words to which they had deliberately consented. This is also the reason why children, fools, and people who are asleep could not sin mortally. Sexual desire was only a mortal sin when it

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<sup>85</sup> Bernardino da Feltre, *Quaresimale* (ed. by C. Varischi da Milano: *Sermoni nella redazione di fra Bernardino Bulgarino da Brescia*, 3 vols., Milan 1964) Vol. III, De inamoratis seu indiavolatis, 110-113.

<sup>86</sup> Girolamo Savonarola, *Confessionale*, De luxuria, 32v; Roberto Caracciolo, *Quaresimale volgare* (ed. by E. Esposito: *Opere in volgare*, Galatina 1993) QXXX, 206; Cherubino da Spoleto, *Regola della vita matrimoniale*, 52-53; Bartolomeo Caimi, *Interrogatorium*, A coniugatis et curam rei familiaris habentibus, 108; Silvestro Mazzolini da Prierio, *Sylvestrina*, Debitum coniugale, par. 2.

<sup>87</sup> Pacifico da Cerano, *Summa Pacifica*, Della lussuria, 98-100, and Maritati, 184; Cherubino da Spoleto, *Regola della vita matrimoniale*, 52-53; Bartolomeo Caimi, *Interrogatorium*, A coniugatis et curam rei familiaris habentibus, 108; Silvestro Mazzolini da Prierio, *Sylvestrina*, Debitum coniugale, par. 2.

was given full consent: people were not culpable for the first temptations that appeared in their thoughts.<sup>88</sup>

The previous acts were all sins because they were extramarital. Married people, however, could likewise sin mortally, if during conjugal relations they did not have proper intentions or the right state of mind and were focused too much on sexual pleasure. In his *Regola della vita matrimoniale*, Cherubino da Spoleto lists four reasons for which husband and wife may conjoin. The first of these is aimed at procreation (generating children and raising them in the faith), the other three are all aimed at preventing extramarital sex (rendering the marital debt, preventing one's spouse from committing adultery or other sins, and avoiding adultery and other sins oneself).<sup>89</sup>

In manuals for confession published between c. 1450-1550, the first two reasons for having sex are generally seen as meritorious. Producing children and raising to praise God is an act of worship, while rendering the marital debt is an act of justice. The third reason, asking for the debt to prevent your spouse from sinning, is perceived as either without sin, or even as meritorious, as it is an act of charity. The last goal of marital sex, asking for the debt in order to avoid adultery and other sins oneself, was a little more problematic, because it was difficult to distinguish this from the desire to ask for the debt in order to satisfy lust. Asking for the debt to prevent oneself from sinning was nonetheless only seen as a venial sin, and some authors even argued that under certain circumstances, it could be no sin at all. Silvestro Mazzolini da Prierio states that if there is no other way for someone to escape temptation, for instance when a man has to meet with another woman in private and seeks to prevent temptation by having sex with his wife beforehand, asking for the debt is without sin. He even calls this an act of prudence or chastity.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Tentler, *Sin and Confession*, 149-151.

<sup>89</sup> Cherubino da Spoleto, *Regola della vita matrimoniale*, 46-50.

<sup>90</sup> Girolamo Savonarola, *Confessionale*, De his que siunt in matrimonio, 33r-33v; Pacifico da Cerano, *Summa Pacifica*, Maritati, 183; Cherubino da Spoleto, *Regola della vita matrimoniale*, 46-48; Silvestro Mazzolini da Prierio, *Sylvestrina*, Debitum coniugale, par. 12. See also: Payer, *Bridling of Desire*, 112, 116.

In these considerations, fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian theologians were much more tolerant than their predecessors. During the twelfth century, the Bolognese school of Huguccio da Pisa taught that no sexual desire was ever without sin, not even marital sex. Marital sex motivated by the wish for progeny or rendering the marriage debt was a venial sin, while marital sex for the sake of satisfying sexual desire was a mortal sin.<sup>91</sup> The reason for the relatively tolerant attitude of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century theologians is twofold. From the start of the thirteenth century, the penitential system had been on a course of moderation, and the idea that a confessor had to protect the laity from the extremes of rigorist thought (which could lead to defeatism) became central in manuals for confession.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, from the middle of the fifteenth century onwards, many theologians had started to privilege the rights and needs of married people, based on the consideration that preventing extramarital sins was much more important.<sup>93</sup>

There were, however, limits to this relative tolerance. Having sex for the sake of satisfying lust and experiencing sexual pleasure was generally considered a venial sin, and could be a mortal sin as well, under certain circumstances. Many authors focused on the question whether the lust was intentionally aroused, following the example of Huguccio da Pisa.<sup>94</sup> The gravity of the sin depended on the question whether the feeling of lust came forth from the natural infirmity of the flesh, or was voluntarily incited, for instance with “thoughts, touches, and hot drinks”.<sup>95</sup> Another factor in determining the gravity of sexual pleasure, was if this pleasure “crossed the limits and goals of marriage”. Theologians often referred to a late antique text by Sextus the Pythagorean, which taught that “every too ardent lover of his own wife is an adulterer”. The standard interpretation of this text was that

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<sup>91</sup> Baldwin, *Language of Sex*, 125.

<sup>92</sup> Tentler, *Sin and Confession*, 10-11, 16, 49-51.

<sup>93</sup> P.L. Trombetta, *La confessione della lussuria: Definizione e controllo del piacere nel cattolicesimo* (Genoa 1991) 30, 84-85.

<sup>94</sup> Payer, *Bridling of Desire*, 111.

<sup>95</sup> Bartolomeo Caimi, *Interrogatorium*, A coniugatis et curam rei familiaris habentibus, 108; Pacifico da Cerano, *Summa Pacifica*, Maritati, 183-184.

a man is too ardent when he is so moved to have sex that even if this woman were not his wife he would still be resolved to have sex with her. As Pierre Payer has shown, this text became a moral trope for the judgment of excessive marital sexual relations, a way for theologians to emphasize that even though marriage had been instituted as a sexual outlet, this did have its limits.<sup>96</sup> Many fifteenth- and sixteenth-century authors mention the trope as well, and according to Cherubino da Spoleto, experiencing this much pleasure and carnal delight in one's spouse is a mortal sin.<sup>97</sup>

Another factor which could turn marital sex into a mortal sin, was if a person violated the laws of the Church merely because they wanted to increase their pleasure. Many things were venial sins as long as they were done with the right intention, but became mortal sins if they were solely aimed at pleasure. This was for instance the case with deviating from the conventional 'missionary' position. Basing themselves on Albert Magnus, fifteenth- and sixteenth-century manuals for confession state that deviations from this position can be a "sign of mortal concupiscence" and even an actual mortal sin if they had no 'rational' reason to do so.<sup>98</sup> Another case in which the degree of sinfulness was determined by the intention, is having sex on holy days. At certain times of the year, including Lent, Sundays, and feast days, asking for the debt for just reasons was a venial sin or not even a sin at all, but asking for the debt merely for reasons of lust and pleasure was a mortal sin.<sup>99</sup> Likewise, having sex in holy places such as churches or cemeteries was deemed sinful, either because this showed a lack of reverence towards God or because the effusion of human semen could

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<sup>96</sup> Payer, *Bridling of Desire*, 121-128.

<sup>97</sup> Cherubino da Spoleto, *Regola della vita matrimoniale*, 50-51.

<sup>98</sup> Bartolomeo Caimi, *Interrogatorium*, A coniugatis et curam rei familiaris habentibus, 108; Pacifico da Cerano, *Summa Pacifica*, 184; Girolamo Savonarola, *Confessionale*; Brundage, 'Count the Ways'.

<sup>99</sup> Angelo da Chivasso, *Angelica*, Debitum coniugale, par. 29; Bartolomeo Caimi, *Interrogatorium*, A coniugatis et curam rei familiaris habentibus, 109; Girolamo Savonarola, *Confessionale*, De his que siunt in matrimonio, 33v; Pacifico da Cerano, *Summa Pacifica*, Maritati, 185; Silvestro Mazzolini da Prierio, *Sylvestrina*, Debitum coniugale, par. 11; Cherubino da Spoleto, *Regola della vita matrimoniale*, 55-60.

desecrate these places, but it was a mortal sin if it was done without the right intention.<sup>100</sup>

Finally, marital sex could be sinful when husband and wife touched or kissed each other ‘dishonorably’. This was perceived as a venial or even a mortal sin, and as a sign of excessive sexual desire that was inappropriate for conjugal relations. In a discussion about the “abuse of the five sentiments and bodily members”, Cherubino da Spoleto states that senses such as the eyes, the ears, the nose, the hands and the tongue all have their own function, and should not be used in the marital act. Married people are not allowed to see each other naked during sex because “this act is allowed to do, but not allowed to see”. They are only allowed to kiss each other’s “honest parts”, and should only touch each other’s “shameful parts” out of necessity, and not in order to increase their delight. “Saint Paul has said that the husband has to hold his wife in honor and sanctification. What sanctification and honor is this, when such shameful things happen between you?”<sup>101</sup> The preacher Bernardino da Feltre agrees with him, stating that touching people for delight is always a mortal sin.<sup>102</sup> There was some debate among authors of manuals for confession about whether these acts were venial or mortal sins. Angelo da Chivasso states that it is a venial sin for a husband and wife to kiss and touch each other, even if they do not intend to arrive at the conjugal act. It is only a mortal sin if it leads to pollution outside of the proper vessel. Girolamo Savonarola agrees with him, stating that when a husband and wife touch each other dishonorably out of lust, “not wanting to arrive at the act of marriage”, this is prohibited because it is a sign of concupiscence and “makes a whoredom out of marriage”, but it is not a mortal sin. Silvester da Prierio Mazzolini is a little more strict, believing that it is mortally sinful to touch each other with the deliberate intention of not consummating the act. Only when a couple “shamelessly touches” each other out of lust without thinking about coitus, and the idea of having coitus is neither intended nor

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<sup>100</sup> Pacifico da Cerano, *Summa Pacifica*, Maritati, 185-186; Cherubino da Spoleto, *Regola della vita matrimoniale*, 76-77; Silvestro Mazzolini da Prierio, *Sylvestrina*, Debitum coniugale, par. 3.

<sup>101</sup> Cherubino da Spoleto, *Regola della vita matrimoniale*, 94-98.

<sup>102</sup> Bernardino da Feltre, *Quaresimale*, Vol. III, De inamoratis seu indiavolatis, 113.

excluded, the sin is venial. Another prerequisite is the location: couples should only start touching each other if they are in a suitable place, so that if a desire to have sex develops, they are capable of acting on it.<sup>103</sup>

## Bestiality

Another reason why excessive sexual desire was frowned upon, was because it was deemed capable of reducing people to the level of animals. In his sermon on *luxuria*, preacher Roberto Caracciolo explains that Lust deprives people of all three nobilities that human beings possess. Apart from losing their “temporal” and “spiritual nobility” (their worldly reputation and immortal soul), people also lose their “natural nobility”, because they act like beasts.<sup>104</sup>

According to Neoplatonic philosophy, sexual desire reduces people to an animal state of being, and it is very important to guide oneself towards a more spiritual type of love, one that elevates rather than debases. This doctrine of Platonic love was first formulated by Marsilio Ficino, in his commentary on Plato’s *Symposium* (pub. 1484). Ficino originally described Platonic love as quintessentially male-oriented, but his ideas were soon ‘heterosexualized’ by authors like Pietro Bembo, who used the theory of Platonic love to design a code of conduct for extramarital relations between men and women.<sup>105</sup> In Bembo’s *Gli Asolani*, three speakers discuss the nature of love. After Perottino has complained about the evils of love, and Gismondo has praised its pure goodness, the third speaker Lavinello says that both of them are wrong. The nature of Love is neither good, nor bad, but depends on one’s intentions. If the object of your (extramarital) love is a

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<sup>103</sup> Angelo da Chivasso, *Summa Angelica*, Debitum coniugale, par. 26; Girolamo Savonarola, *Confessionale*, De his que siunt in matrimonio, 33v; Silvestro da Prierio Mazzolini, *Sylvestrina*, Debitum coniugale, par. 7.

<sup>104</sup> Roberto Caracciolo, *Sermo de luxuria* (ed. by O. Visano Ravaioli: ‘Testimonianze della predicazione di Roberto da Lecce a Padova’ in: *Predicazione francescana e società veneta nel Quattrocento: committenza, ascolto, ricezione. Atti del II Convegno internazionale di studi francescani* (Padua 1995) 185-220: 214-216.

<sup>105</sup> See chapter seven.

virtuous lady whom you love for her grace and qualities instead of her body, your love is good, and it will ennoble you. If, however, you love a loose, dishonest lady, or if you love a noble woman for indecent reasons, this love is “wicked and depraved because the thing you seek is in itself depraved”. In fact, it should not even be called love, but rather “disordered and unnatural appetite”. A good lover should desire a woman for the beauty of her mind as well as her body, and should use only a limited number of senses to enjoy that beauty. While looking at the woman and listening to her is allowed, he should not touch her or pursue a physical union with her. When you allow yourself to be guided by the senses, you use your free will not to raise yourself up, but to lower yourself to the level of animals. Just as plants distinguish themselves from objects because they are alive, and animals distinguish themselves from plants because they use their senses, human beings ought to distinguish themselves from animals by using reason.<sup>106</sup>

Baldassare Castiglione’s discussion of the nature of love in *Il libro del cortegiano* is heavily indebted to Pietro Bembo: the character who instructs the company on Platonic love actually carries his name. The character of Pietro Bembo makes a distinction between love caused by the senses, and love generated by the intellect. Outside the bounds of marriage, sensual love aimed at physical union is not only evil, but ultimately dissatisfactory as well. “Anyone who thinks to enjoy beauty by possessing the body is deceiving himself”, because “the pleasure that follows is necessarily false and deceptive”. Those who try to satisfy their “impure desires” in a physical way, will never achieve true satisfaction. Some of them will start to feel indifference, distaste or even hatred towards the person they desired before. This is caused by remorse for the fact that they allowed themselves to be carried away by the senses. Others, even though they believe they have experienced pleasure, will not enjoy rest or satisfaction either, because they will soon start to experience the same desire again. The only pleasures these lovers experience are the same as those enjoyed by irrational animals.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Pietro Bembo, *Gli Asolani* (trans. by R.B. Gottfried, Bloomington, IND 1954) 100-102, 154-158, 175-177.

<sup>107</sup> Baldassare Castiglione, *Cortegiano*, 326-328.

The Ficinian theory of Platonic love taught that the perfect lover should refrain from a physical satisfaction of his desire entirely, and elevate himself by following the steps of the “ladder of love”. A desire for the beauty of a particular person should step by step be transformed into, first, a love of all corporeal beauty in general, second, a love of beautiful souls and minds, third, a love of the beauty of institutions and laws, fourth, a love of the beauty of sciences and wisdom, and finally, a love of divine beauty and the Final Cause (i.e. God), after which one will have become truly virtuous.<sup>108</sup> Although not everyone is capable of achieving this perfect Platonic love, it is nonetheless what all people should strive for. As love of a particular person’s beauty is only the first step of the ladder, not even the platonic love of a woman is truly virtuous, unless one uses this love to climb towards the love of true, divine beauty. The character of the hermit in *Gli Asolani* warns that it is dangerous to remain on the slippery slope between sensual and Platonic love, as it is easy to slide back into the depths of “bestial desires”.<sup>109</sup> The character of Bembo in *Il Cortegiano* likewise states that the only way to enjoy beauty without suffering is to ignore “the blind judgment of the senses” and to use reason in order to transfer the desire from a beautiful person to universal beauty.<sup>110</sup>

A good example of an author shaping his own persona in accordance with the dictates of Platonic love was the Florentine statesman Lorenzo de’ Medici. Lorenzo, who in his youth had been tutored by Marsilio Ficino, wrote an autobiographical commentary on his own love sonnets that was heavily inspired by Neoplatonic philosophy. In this *Comento de’ miei sonetti* (1473-92), Lorenzo describes the development of his love for a woman whom he first saw at a feast. He loves and desires her from afar, but as soon as the lady returns his love, placing a hand on his chest, he decides to break off the affair. According to Lorenzo, real love entices people to do great and excellent things so as to be worthy of the object of their love, and is a way for people to find their own perfection and ultimately rest in the “supreme

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<sup>108</sup> Nelson, *Renaissance Theory*, 67-68.

<sup>109</sup> Pietro Bembo, *Gli Asolani*, 186.

<sup>110</sup> Baldassare Castiglione, *Cortegiano*, 338.

beauty” [i.e. God]. This type of love, however, is very rare, and does not justify acting on your desires in a physical way. Lorenzo states that someone who falls in love loses all his rational and sensible potencies, because these are in the hands of his beloved, and all that is left is his “vegetative” potency. The misery of lovers is beyond every other misery, because repressing their desire will make them suffer, but acting on it, and trying to see and touch their beloved will only increase their longing. As giving in to bodily passions will result in a severe feeling of remorse caused by the intellect, the best possible solution is abstinence and self-restraint. After a thorough process of introspection guided by Platonic thought, the protagonist decides to repress his instincts and love his admired lady as a true Platonic lover.<sup>111</sup>

While the Neoplatonic thought in *trattati d’amore* like those of Ficino, Bembo, Castiglione and Lorenzo recommended complete sexual abstinence in order not to degenerate into bestiality, other texts advised the reader to uphold moderation instead. To make their point, authors often drew a comparison between sex and eating and drinking. All of these are valuable and necessary, but they also need to be moderated. In her treatise on love, Tullia d’Aragona argues that sex is not bad in itself, and people should not be reprehended for this “instinctive drive that arises from our nature”, just as no one should be blamed for eating and drinking. However, although sex in itself is natural, people should not allow their sensual appetite to become unbridled and overpowering. “Just as we can blame and chastise someone who eats or drinks more than is reasonable, or at the wrong place and time, in a way that things that were supposed to benefit him actually harm him, so we ought to chastise and blame far more vigorously those persons who yield to the passions of the flesh without due limit and moderation”. Those who have too much sex, are guilty of “subordinating reason, which ought to be the queen of the body, to the senses” and in doing so “quickly turn from being rational men into being brute animals”.<sup>112</sup>

The connection between sex and eating and drinking has its origins in the works of Cicero and Aristotle, and became an especially popular trope

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<sup>111</sup> Lorenzo de’ Medici, *Comento de’ miei sonetti* (ed. by T. Zanato, Turin 1992).

<sup>112</sup> Tullia d’Aragona, *Dialogo*, 94-95.

from the end of the twelfth century onwards. Temperance was narrowly defined as the restriction of sex and eating and drinking, because these activities represent the two most basic drives of our animal, sensual nature: self-preservation and the preservation of the species.<sup>113</sup> In fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy, the comparison was not only made in treatises on love, but also in treatises on marriage, both by secular and religious authors. The humanist author Francesco Barbaro (1390-1454), in his *De re uxoria*, uses the metaphor of gluttony to recommend moderate indulgence in sexual pleasure.<sup>114</sup> Cherubino da Spoleto's *Regola della vita matrimoniale* states that food and drink are useful and necessary, but eating or drinking too much is harmful. Likewise, performing the marital act with discretion is not bad in itself, but when you do so excessively, it is harmful and dangerous. During the act, "the soul becomes all carnal and loses every spirituality", and for that reason, having sex too often can make people lose "every spiritual virtue".<sup>115</sup> Medics made use of the comparison as well. Alessandro Benedetti found it crucial to establish the difference between what is natural, and what is excessive. Even though "nothing exists in nature that is not admirable", it is necessary to "condemn those who pursue the wantonness of the stomach and the violence of lust", because these people "unseasonably degenerate into the forms of various beasts".<sup>116</sup> One physician even states that while sex and eating may seem comparable, lust is even worse than gluttony. In his regiment on health, Girolamo Manfredi formulates an answer to the question "Why man is ashamed of admitting his desire for coitus, and not ashamed of his desire to eat or to drink or similar things". According to Manfredi, the reason is that eating and drinking are necessary to life, while the act of coitus is not. Moreover, coitus and concupiscence are "disordinate movements" that "above all other passions obscure the light of the rational soul and the intellect and turn men into brute animals".<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Payer, *Bridling of Desire*, 133-134.

<sup>114</sup> Maclean, *Renaissance Notion*, 105 n. 54.

<sup>115</sup> Cherubino da Spoleto, *Regola della vita matrimoniale*, 83.

<sup>116</sup> Alessandro Benedetti, *Anatomice*, 89.

<sup>117</sup> Girolamo Manfredi, *Il Perché*, 122.

Excessive sexual desire not only enticed people to have sexual relations in immoderate frequencies, but was also believed to influence other ‘irresponsible’ choices that could reduce people to a level of bestiality. Physician Michele Savonarola for instance states that having sex during pregnancy, and thereby causing superimpregnation, turns men into beasts, because only animals, not humans, should have multiple young.<sup>118</sup> Having sex from behind, the most sinful of all sexual positions, was likewise considered ‘bestial’. Manuals for confession often describe it as “the way of animals” or “the way of livestock” [*bestialiter, con modo bestiale, more iumentorum*], Cherubino da Spoleto teaches that “during the marital act, man and woman have to look at each other’s face like friends who love each other, not turn their backs on each other like enemies who hate each other, and not like dogs and animals”.<sup>119</sup>

Certain behavior was even said to reduce people to a level inferior to that of animals. Cherubino, basing himself on Albert Magnus, advises against sex during pregnancy, because humans are supposed to be better creatures than animals and not even pregnant elephants have sex.<sup>120</sup> The friar also admonishes people not to have sex in public, but to go somewhere private, because many animals do so as well, and people who do not care if they are seen are therefore worse than animals.<sup>121</sup> Another type of behavior which was often forbidden on these grounds, was sexual relations with a member of the same sex. Preacher Roberto Caracciolo, in his sermon on sodomy, states that those who commit this ‘vice’ are worse than beasts, because even lions, leopards, snakes, and dragons only have sex in order to generate offspring and conserve their species.<sup>122</sup> In the romance epic *Orlando Furioso*, the character Fiordespinga, having fallen in love with another woman, laments the ‘folly’ of her own infatuation by stating that it is not even found among beasts: “neither among humans nor among beasts have I

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<sup>118</sup> Michele Savonarola, *Ad mulieres ferrarienses*, 29-30.

<sup>119</sup> Cherubino da Spoleto, *Regola della vita matrimoniale*, 91-93.

<sup>120</sup> Ibidem, 60-62. See also: Payer, *Bridling of Desire*, 103.

<sup>121</sup> Cherubino da Spoleto, *Regola della vita matrimoniale*, p. 76-77.

<sup>122</sup> Roberto Caracciolo, *Sermones quadragesimales de peccatis* (Venice: Andrea Torresani, 1488) 84v.

ever come across a woman loving a woman; to a woman another woman does not seem beautiful, nor does a hind to a hind, a ewe to a ewe”.<sup>123</sup>

Interestingly, libertine writers such as Pietro Aretino actually used the comparison with animals to argue for the human right for freedom rather than restrictions. In the dedication to Aretino’s *Sonetti Lussuriosi*, accompanying sixteen erotic engravings by Marcantonio Raimondi, the author states that those who find fault in this work are nothing but hypocrites, too scared to look at what they desire the most. “What harm is there in seeing a man mounting a woman?”, he exclaims. “Should beasts, then, be more free than we are?”<sup>124</sup>

## **Killer sex**

While clerics and medics focused on procreation, bodily health and the state of the soul, the authors of literary fiction were most preoccupied with the violent and fatal results that excessive sexual desire could have, not only causing the deaths of the infatuated themselves, but those of others as well. On the first day of *Gli Asolani*, the melancholic character Perottino describes love as the source of all suffering. Love leads people headlong into perilous disorders and a thousand miseries, and as they voluntarily enslave themselves, they procure their own shame and ruin. “Who will deny that everyone whom love-folly so lightly tumbles to destruction dies foolishly and wretchedly?”, he asks.<sup>125</sup> On the second day, the more optimistic Gismondo rebukes Perottino’s statements. According to him, love is by nature “sober, reasonable, and good”, and the emotion that leads to all kinds of evil is not love but “disordinate appetite”.<sup>126</sup> Matteo Bandello agrees with him, often warning the reader about the dangers of “disordinate passions” in his *Novelle*. While love is a sacred and divine thing, giving birth to virtues, all the evils in the world are caused by people who cannot discern between

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<sup>123</sup> Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, XV.35.

<sup>124</sup> See: Lawner, *I Modi*, 8-9.

<sup>125</sup> Pietro Bembo, *Gli Asolani*, 26, 30, 45, 48.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibidem*, 100-102, 114.

love on the one hand, and lust and desire [*appetito* and *voglia*] on the other. Becoming ensnared in “lewd and false love”, blindly following “the governance of the senses” and casting right and reason aside, leads to bloodshed and violence.<sup>127</sup>

One reason why excessive sexual desire was believed to be fatal, is because it entices people to have extramarital relations and cause their own demise. In many novellas, characters who commit sexual crimes are executed or murdered. In Masuccio Salernitano’s *Novellino*, two common soldiers are executed for raping two noble virgins. They were so “ardently in love” with the beautiful women that they decided “to put their unbridled lust before all the honest obligations of reason” and “resolved to carry out their wicked and villainous deed, even though it might cost them their lives”.<sup>128</sup> In another story by Masuccio, a young widow is executed for tricking her son into having incestuous relations with her. The narrator uses her as an example for the fact that women will do anything to satiate their appetites, regardless of the consequences.<sup>129</sup> In novellas by other authors, members of the clergy are often punished for breaking their chastity vows. These punishments include fines, imprisonment, and expulsion from their offices, but often consist of the ‘poetic justice’ of castration as well. These examples of *stuprum*, incest, and sacrilege were perceived as very serious offenses, because they were an attack on some of the foundations of social order: the distinction between social classes, the bond between parents and children, and the exemplary role of clerics within society.<sup>130</sup>

The judgment of adultery and fornication by authors of novellas was more ambiguous. Novella collections generally include both tragic and comic stories, and the plot of many comic novellas revolves around the (elaborate) tricks that people use to get away with extramarital sex. Often, the transgressions in these stories are to some extent justified because the (old, impotent, jealous, and/or cruel) husband deserves to be punished, or the

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<sup>127</sup> Matteo Bandello, *Le Novelle*, II.24 and III.4.

<sup>128</sup> Masuccio Salernitano, *Il Novellino* (ed. by A. Mauro, Bari 1940; trans. by W.G. Waters, London 1895) Novella 47.

<sup>129</sup> Masuccio Salernitano, *Il Novellino*, Novella 23.

<sup>130</sup> See chapter six.

crimes are deemed insignificant because they involve an upper-class man and a lower-class woman.<sup>131</sup> However, even though these stories were meant to be funny and entertaining, they could nonetheless contain moral messages about the dangers of excessive desire. This can for instance be seen in Agnolo Firenzuola's *Ragionamenti*, in the response to a story about a young man who disguises himself as a maid to have an affair with a married woman. While this story makes the whole company laugh, they also reprove the youth for allowing himself to get carried away by the desire to satiate his "dishonest appetite". The leader of the discussion states that "there are few reasonable men who will be eager to pluck the fruits of this kind of love and friendship, because in order to obtain these, one has to climb up the kitchen stairs, until the good wind topples them over and drops them to the ground".<sup>132</sup> Although the young man in this story was able to get away with his crime, others may not be so lucky.

In novellas about extramarital relations of a more tragic nature, the perpetrators are punished for adultery and fornication, and the moral message is more explicit, as the narrator often advises the reader to draw learning from their example. Masuccio Salernitano's *Novellino* includes many tales that end with 'honor killings'. Apart from three stories in which a husband murders his adulterous wife, there is also a tale about a son who has his adulterous mother executed, and a father who sentences his unmarried daughter to death on the grounds of fornication. The women are scolded for allowing themselves to get carried away by their "unbridled lust" and "lecherous appetite" [*frenate libidine* and *libidinoso appetito*] and their death sentence is perceived as just [*iustamente*].<sup>133</sup> Some of Matteo Bandello's *Novelle* end in domestic violence as well. Although Bandello has a much more critical attitude towards 'honor killings' than Masuccio, he likewise offers moralistic warnings in the pro- and epilogues to some of these

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<sup>131</sup> See chapters four and six.

<sup>132</sup> Agnolo Firenzuola, *I Ragionamenti* (ed. by A. Seroni: *Opere*, Florence 1958) I.2.

<sup>133</sup> Masuccio Salernitano, *Il Novellino*, Novella 22, 23, 28, 42, 45.

tales.<sup>134</sup> People who give in to their passions, he says, “often bring themselves to an ill end”.<sup>135</sup>

Another dangerous result of excessive sexual desire was that it could make people lose their minds and have them commit murder and suicide. The character of Pietro Bembo in Castiglione’s *Libro del cortegiano* states that “the anguish and distress invariably experienced by the young in the form of jealousy, suspicion, disdain, anger, despair and a certain tempestuous fury occasionally leads them so much astray that some not only beat the women they love, but take their own lives”.<sup>136</sup> In Matteo Bandello’s *Novelle*, several characters kill themselves because of a desperate jealousy for a beloved. According to Bandello, the emotion that made these people commit suicide should not be called love, but rather madness and “disordinate appetite”.<sup>137</sup> He uses the pro- and epilogues to these stories to urge the reader to control their emotions. When a man hangs himself out of jealousy for a married woman, Bandello writes:

Such end, then, the unhappy Francesco had of his ill-regulated love. Let God keep us all from loving after that fashion. Because all our actions, when they digress from the right path of reason, can never be good, and will always end badly, as can be seen from the thousand examples that occur every day. Let each love temperately and never leave the reins of his passion in the power of the appetites.<sup>138</sup>

Apart from suicide, desire-induced madness could also make people commit murder. In his sermon on *luxuria*, preacher Roberto Caracciolo explains that one of the many evils that arise from the sin of Lust is called *infatuatio*. Many foolish things are done out of infatuation, because, as church father Jerome had stated, “the love of physical things is the loss of reason and the proximity

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<sup>134</sup> Matteo Bandello, *Le Novelle*, I.9, I.29, IV.20. For more on ‘honor killings’, see chapter four.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibidem*, I.9.

<sup>136</sup> Baldassare Castiglione, *Cortegiano*, 338.

<sup>137</sup> Matteo Bandello, *Le Novelle*, I.50.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibidem*, I.43,

of insanity” [*amor formae rationis oblivio est et insaniae proximus*]. Caracciolo gives the example of a woman who convinced her lover to kill her husband so that she could be with him, as well as a gruesome tale about a woman who killed a three-year-old girl in order to use her bones for a magical experiment to win the heart of her beloved.<sup>139</sup> While some people kill due to blind infatuation, others kill out of jealousy and desperation. In a tale by Agnolo Firenzuola, a young man is driven mad by a widow who alternately seduces and rejects him, and kills her after he catches her having sex with another man.<sup>140</sup>

One final reason why excessive sexual desire was believed to be fatal, is because it could set events into motion that cause bloodshed on a much wider scale. In the words of Caracciolo, another evil that arises from the sin of *luxuria* is called *occisio*, because multiple deaths can result from sexual transgressions. He mentions the example of an ‘honor killing’ where the husband killed his wife and her lover, but the husband himself was then also killed by the adulterer’s friend and accomplice.<sup>141</sup> In a novella by Bandello, a friar who tricks a woman into having sex with him causes the woman’s suicide, but also the death of her newborn baby, who falls from the bed, and the death of her brother, who dies in an attempt to avenge her.<sup>142</sup> The excessive desire of one individual could inflict collateral damage, sometimes even of massive proportions. As the character Perottino says in *Gli Asolani*, “Love not only produces individual deaths, but even the ruin of ancient seats, of mighty cities, and of whole provinces besides”.<sup>143</sup> The most famous example of this precept (mentioned by Caracciolo and Perottino as well as in many other texts) was the destruction of Troy, caused by the kidnapping of the married woman Helen. A story closer to home was that of the Florentine nobleman Buondelmonte del Buondelmonti, who broke off his engagement because he desired another woman. According to Matteo Bandello, who based himself on Dante Alighieri and Giovanni Villani,

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<sup>139</sup> Roberto Caracciolo, *Sermo de luxuria*, 219.

<sup>140</sup> Agnolo Firenzuola, *I Ragionamenti*, II.2.

<sup>141</sup> Roberto Caracciolo, *Sermo de luxuria*, 217.

<sup>142</sup> Matteo Bandello, *Le Novelle*, II.24.

<sup>143</sup> Pietro Bembo, *Gli Asolani*, 26.

Buondelmonte's betrayal not only led to his own assassination, but also triggered the start of long-lasting, and often violent party strife between Guelphs and Ghibellines.<sup>144</sup>

In fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy, allowing oneself to get carried away by one's passions was seen as antisocial behavior because it could endanger the community. The struggle between individual needs and those of the community was connected to the Renaissance ideal of *civiltà*. Guido Ruggiero, in his compelling survey of the Italian Renaissance, describes *civiltà* as a discourse or ideology that developed in Italy over the course of the fourteenth century, when the newly independent city states had to formulate a civic identity that would connect all of their citizens and tie the community together. To keep the peace in these densely populated communities, violence and disorder had to be checked as much as possible, and the ideal of *civiltà* came to dominate the perception of what *virtù*, or virtuous behavior, entailed. This new urban vision of *virtù* was different from the values of the medieval warrior elite. Traditional values such as violently defending one's honor became less important than the civic values of peace, carefulness and rationality. The key to being a good citizen was self control: one needed to curb one's passions, and keep a peaceful, mannered conduct.<sup>145</sup>

When individual desires were prioritized over the needs of the community, this was believed to result in disaster. The authors of romance epics repeatedly show that sexual desire could make people lose their mind, forget their duties and cause a great deal of bloodshed. In *Il Morgante*, the Saracen king Manfredon is infatuated with a princess who has rejected him, and he forces his men to attack the troops of her father, King Caradoro. This war turns out to be a lost cause, and most of his soldiers lose their lives. "Is your wicked lust now satisfied?", his people cry, "That princess was by no means worth the high price that we are paying still!" King Manfredon returns home, disconsolate and in tears, and the narrator uses his tale as an

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<sup>144</sup> Matteo Bandello, *Le Novelle*, I.1

<sup>145</sup> G. Ruggiero, *The Renaissance in Italy: A Social And Cultural History Of The Rinascimento* (Cambridge 2014) 80, 113.

exemplum: “all men who to their passion bend, reason no more and suffer in the end”.<sup>146</sup> In the *Orlando Furioso*, many of the characters neglect their duty because of their desires. Orlando himself is a prime example of the devastating effects love can have, as his ‘love’ for Angelica, or rather his desire to take her virginity, literally drives him to insanity. After discovering that she loves another, the “enamored” Orlando becomes the “furious” Orlando, tearing off all his clothes and running across the world like a whirlwind of destruction, killing everyone and everything crossing his path. Many modern critics of the *Orlando* epics have emphasized the conflict between individual and community in these works. Andrea di Tommaso, in his study of the *Orlando Innamorato*, has shown that love endangers the community, because of the inability of the characters to choose public duty above private fulfillment. Because of his desire for Angelica, Orlando first becomes a stranger, and then a threat to his community, alienating himself from his cousin Rinaldo and making himself abandon his feudal lord Charlemagne in his hour of need.<sup>147</sup> Jane Everson emphasized the two conflicting notions of love present in both the *Innamorato* and the *Furioso*. Love urges people to improve themselves and do the right thing, but can also endanger to the community, because Venus and Mars, Love and War, are inherently connected.<sup>148</sup>

Theological discourse likewise emphasized the danger that individual desires posed to the entire community. The doctrine of divine retribution taught that God’s punishment for sexual offences would fall on the community as a whole rather than on individual offenders, in the form of wars, plagues, earthquakes, famines, and other disasters. Preachers often mentioned the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah in order to warn their audience about the wrath of God, but they also referred to more contemporary examples. According to Roberto Caracciolo, the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople and Negroponte was a warning that God will always punish

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<sup>146</sup> Luigi Pulci, *Il Morgante* (trans. by J. Tusiani, Bloomington, IN 1998) VIII.6.

<sup>147</sup> A. Di Tommaso, *Structure and Ideology in Boiardo’s Orlando Innamorato* (Chapel Hill 1972) 61-66.

<sup>148</sup> J.E. Everson, *The Italian Romance Epic in the Age of Humanism: The Matter of Italy and the World of Rome* (New York 2001) 200-205.

cities for their sins.<sup>149</sup> Girolamo Savonarola proclaimed that King Charles VIII of France, who invaded the Italian peninsula in 1494, had been sent by God to reform the church. In the sermons to his Florentine audience, he constantly used the threat of “a great war” to convince them to repent.<sup>150</sup> The goal of these warnings was twofold. Apart from urging individual sinners to reform themselves, he also tried to convince the community to reform, punish, or even execute individuals for the benefit of the common good. Savonarola constantly urged the government of Florence as well as the citizens themselves to execute notorious sodomites. While acknowledging that some people might accuse him of being cruel, he defended himself by saying that he was only being strict out of clemency, because he wanted to protect the community from the wrath of God by punishing the individual sinners:

“Do you want to ruin your entire city for one ribald? (...) Because of one, I say, much harm may befall on many (...) People, you need to stand up and take one of these ribalds here and say ‘This one deserves to die, this one we want to perish’. (...) Bring him here and say ‘This is your place of justice, otherwise you will perish and your city with you’.”<sup>151</sup>

## The suppression of passion

Many dangers could arise from getting carried away by excessive sexual desire. Resisting one’s impulses, however, was often portrayed as difficult or well-nigh impossible. The last section of this chapter is focused on the question to what extent people were deemed capable of living up to the code

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<sup>149</sup> Roberto Caracciolo, *Quaresimale volgare*, QXII 138; Idem, *Sermo de luxuria*, 220.

<sup>150</sup> D. Weinstein, *Savonarola: Rise and Fall of a Renaissance Prophet* (New Haven 2011) 87-96; Idem, *Savonarola and Florence: Prophecy and Patriotism in the Renaissance* (Princeton 1970) 143. For examples of sermons in which Savonarola threatens his audience with “a great war”: *Prediche sopra Aggeo* (ed. by L. Firpo, Rome 1965) Vol. II, 42; *Prediche sopra I Salmi* (ed. by V. Romano, Rome 1969-1974) Vol. I, 157; *Prediche sopra Amos e Zaccharia* (ed. by P. Ghiglieri, Rome 1971-1972) Vol. I, 48-49; and *Prediche sopra Ezechiele* (ed. by R. Ridolfi, Rome 1955) Vol. II, 26.

<sup>151</sup> Girolamo Savonarola, *Salmi*, Vol. II, 158.

of reason and moderation. Later chapters will show that this ability was believed to be strongly dependent on age, gender, and social class, but the focus here lies on human agency in general.

The concept of Love as a powerful force that coerces its victims to do its will was a popular literary trope in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy. It is part of the lyric poetry of Gaspara Stampa and Chiara Matraini, who describe Love as cruel and themselves as powerless, and of *trattati d'amore* like Pietro Bembo's *Gli Asolani*, wherein the character Perottino states that "no appetite has so much power over us, nor carries us so forcefully towards the object it desires, as that which Love spurs and scourges with his whip".<sup>152</sup> In novella collections, the narrator often presents his characters as will-less victims of Amor and Fortuna, and the characters themselves use this trope to try and justify their infatuation for someone who is ill-matched. Internal monologues reflect the characters' moral struggle, but they decide to give in to their desires nonetheless. A Muslim woman who falls in love with a Christian slave, finally gives into her desires, arguing that she, as a woman, is incapable of offering resistance:

Why do I go against my desires? Why don't I obey my wishes? Why do I think that I can resist the laws of Love? Oh, how could I undo my thoughts, and how could I, feeble woman, and the proper target of his weapon, be able to disdain that which thousands of sage men could not? And thus, my desire conquers every other reason and the feeble strengths of a tender young woman are no different than those of a powerful gentleman.<sup>153</sup>

Likewise, a man from the lower nobility who falls in love with a queen states that "Love loosens his bolts as he pleases and has no regard for the degree or the condition of people (...) I have striven to the utmost of my power to free myself of this ill-omened venture and put my thoughts to something else, all my endeavors have been in vain and every resolve has proven fruitless".<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Chiara Matraini, *Rime e prose*, 59 and 65; Gaspara Stampa, *Rime*, 67; Pietro Bembo, *Gli Asolani*, 47.

<sup>153</sup> Agnolo Firenzuola, *I Ragionamenti*, I.1.

<sup>154</sup> Matteo Bandello, *Le Novelle*, I.45.

The trope is particularly recurrent in romance epics, where Love is presented as a god who actively guides love affairs, “correcting his subjects to do his will”. When a character falls in love, it is Love who “transfixes the heart” and entices them to “cast forth ardent darts through their eyes”.<sup>155</sup> Love is described as cruel and unforgiving towards ‘ungrateful’ people who reject their admirers. One of his “statutory laws” is that someone who is loved but does not reciprocate, must in turn love someone and be rejected, so as to feel the same pain and restore the order of Amor’s empire.<sup>156</sup> In the *Orlando Furioso*, Angelica rejects every man she meets, until one of Cupid’s bows finally forces her to fall in love with Medor, because “her arrogance had come to the attention of Cupid, who would brook it no longer”.<sup>157</sup> Characters express their sense of powerlessness and inability to resist their desire. Rinaldo says that he cannot leave Antea, because of an illness in his bone of which he cannot cure himself. Chiariella states that “Cupid commands and I blindly obey”.<sup>158</sup> Characters blame Amor for their fate, describing him as unjust and cruel, frustrating any reasonable plans they had made.<sup>159</sup> Modern critics have often drawn a connection between romance epics and (theological) debates on free will in the fifteenth and sixteenth century. Giuseppe Mazotta argues that the impotency of the characters in the *Orlando Innamorato* offers a counterpoint to the arguments of humanists such as Lorenzo Valla and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, who emphasized the power of free will.<sup>160</sup> Robert Griffin makes a similar argument for the *Orlando Furioso*, stating that the lack of human agency and free will of the characters could be seen as the “profane analogues” to the theological debates about free will in the sixteenth century.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Luigi Pulci, *Il Morgante*, IV.79-81.

<sup>156</sup> Matteo Maria Boiardo, *Orlando Innamorato*, II.15.54.

<sup>157</sup> Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, XVIII.19.

<sup>158</sup> Luigi Pulci, *Il Morgante*. XVI.55, XIII.11

<sup>159</sup> Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, II.1, V.7, XIII.4-6, XIII.20.

<sup>160</sup> G. Mazotta, ‘Italian Renaissance Epic’ in: C. Bates ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Epic* (Cambridge 2010) 93-118: 103.

<sup>161</sup> R. Griffin, *Ludovico Ariosto* (New York 1974) 89.

However, even though the narrators as well as the characters refer to the infinite powers of Love, the infatuated are also portrayed as capable of change. In Luigi Pulci's *Il Morgante*, the knights often refuse to leave their beloved and state that they are unable to do so, making ample use of the discourse of courtly love, but they easily move on once duty calls, and after abandoning one lady, soon fall in love with another. The power of love is just a trope that these men use: their eternal flame is much rather a fleeting infatuation.<sup>162</sup> In the *Orlando* epics, the passion runs much deeper, and the characters indeed fall victim to forces beyond their control, but it is expected of them to at least try to resist these powers, and some of them actually succeed in doing so. Jo Ann Cavallo has argued that the *Innamorato* and the *Furioso* are stories in which the main characters learn how to place their own private needs below those of the common good.<sup>163</sup> In the *Orlando Innamorato*, Orlando is an anti-example because of his "passive subjection to numerous sensual distractions" and his "inability to place his reason over his senses", while Rinaldo is immune to female charms, and is characterized by his "active refusal to comply with the dictates of eros".<sup>164</sup>

Other literary genres also include characters, male as well as female, who manage to suppress their passions. It is frequently stated that women who resist their desires do so for the love of virtue and the fear of losing their chastity and honor, while men do so because of their power of reason. Matteo Bandello, for instance, scolds "men who, casting *reason* behind their backs, give rein to their passions" together with "women who, making no account of their *honor*, than which they should hold nothing goodlier and dearer, suffer themselves to be swayed by amorous desire".<sup>165</sup> Bandello's *Novelle* include several stories about women who were in love, but protected their chastity by refusing to have sex with their admirer before they had married them, while his stories about men who restrain themselves are focused on

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<sup>162</sup> Carlo Pellegrini was one of the first to mention Pulci's ironic stance towards courtly love: C. Pellegrini, *Luigi Pulci: L'uomo e L'artista* (Pisa 1912) 31-32, 139-140.

<sup>163</sup> Cavallo, *Boiardo's Orlando Innamorato*, 85, 137-138, 150.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibidem*, 52, 77, 90-91.

<sup>165</sup> Matteo Bandello, *Le Novelle*, 1.29.

reason and proving masculinity through self-control.<sup>166</sup> This division, however, is not as strict in the works of female authors, who were preoccupied with the value of female chastity, but also emphasized their own intellectual capacities. Gaspara Stampa and Laura Cereta both make use of the metaphor of the steering of a ship to describe the subjugation of their own desire. Stampa writes that God gave her “the light and skill” to release herself from her infatuation and steer her boat clear from treacherous sandbanks, with reason as her sail, and her own willpower as the oars.<sup>167</sup> Laura Cereta writes in a letter that she is confident of her ability “to relinquish desire, trampling it underfoot. (...) For I have reason, which can subvert passion, in my arsenal, and because virtue, not pleasure, is my mainstay”.<sup>168</sup>

It was often stated that resisting one’s desire is not a matter of not being able to, but rather a matter of not wanting to. Ceccarella Minutolo writes that “love is by nature weak in its blows, and those who resist him can easily defeat him”, but “he who does not want to resist is easily defeated”.<sup>169</sup> Chiara Matraini likewise emphasizes human agency. “We cannot reasonably say that Love has forced us to any unseemly act, for Nature, which in truth can never err, would not have given our free will the power to lead us astray following our feelings, if she had not also given us the power – by sending us reason – to make us rise. (...) If we let ourselves be conquered and overcome by our bodily senses, the defect is truly ours, and we come by it ourselves”.<sup>170</sup> People ought to take responsibility for their actions, rather than blaming Love for their misery. As the character Gismondo says in *Gli Asolani*, “It would better suit a man enjoying his freedom to confess his weakness and accuse himself rather than to shirk his own responsibility by putting all the blame upon another”.<sup>171</sup> According to Matteo Bandello, “it certainly is a parlous thing that we daily see a thousand scandals and yet we

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<sup>166</sup> Ibidem, 1.7, 1.18, 1.22, 1.33, 1.49, 2.31

<sup>167</sup> Gaspara Stampa, *Rime*, 135 and 239.

<sup>168</sup> Laura Cereta, *Epistolae familiares* (trans. by D. Robin: *Collected Letters of a Renaissance Feminist*, Chicago 1997) 108-109.

<sup>169</sup> Ceccarella Minutolo, *Lettere*, Letter IX, 44-45.

<sup>170</sup> Chiara Matraini, *Rime e prose*, 103-104.

<sup>171</sup> Pietro Bembo, *Gli Asolani*, 74.

still do not know how to control our carnal passions. No, while I said ‘we *know* not’, I should rather say ‘we *will* not’, because if we would resist, no one could succeed in forcing us”.<sup>172</sup> Bandello praises the power of human virtue, because even those who are “overcome by amorous passions and disorderly appetites” can always change their ways and better themselves.<sup>173</sup>

The discussion about the power of human agency was of course an important part of theological discourse as well. Sermons and manuals for confession urge the audience to conform to the rules of the Church, but also acknowledge that this is difficult, because human beings are feeble and constantly plagued by their desires. As Girolamo Savonarola puts it, “the human flesh is weak and counteracts reason, and because of this fragility, or for ignorance, or very often out of malice, all sins are born in us”. Lust is a very strong force that has been given to animals to preserve the species and it draws all the senses to corporeal things. It is therefore “no wonder that lustful people do not believe and that they lose all their natural judgment and ability to reason”. People are made of two contraries that pull them in opposite directions, the soul directing them upwards towards God, and the body and the senses dragging them down towards corporeal things. “And because of this, a continuous war takes place within man, his life is a continuous battle”. Although difficult, it is not impossible to win this battle. Every rational and intellectual creature has been given a free will [*il libero arbitrio*], and God gives sufficient help to apply this free will to do the right thing.<sup>174</sup> Preachers often reproached people who claimed that they were unable to resist their desires. In their sermons, they use the rhetorical device of fictitious dialogue to ridicule people’s excuses. Bernardino da Feltre admonishes his audience that if something is difficult, this does not give you license to stop trying:

Someone says: ‘I cannot live chastely’. Alas, what a sin is this! But he says: ‘Oh it is difficult’. I believe that it is, but not impossible. Virtue consists of

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<sup>172</sup> Matteo Bandello, *Le Novelle*, II.37.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibidem*, I.19 and III.45.

<sup>174</sup> Girolamo Savonarola, *Aggeo*, 25; *Amos* Vol. I, 183 and 321-322; *Salmi* Vol. II, 29 and 183-184.

what is good and difficult. (...) And don't excuse yourself, because no excuse is valid. Take a wife, if you do not want to stay chaste. 'Oh, but I am in a state that makes it impossible'. Then stay chaste. 'Oh, but I am in a state that makes it impossible'. Then throw water onto the fire through prayer, fasting, discipline.<sup>175</sup>

Preachers offered several methods to repress (sexual) desires, and prevent sinning. Many of these can be found in Bernardino Da Feltre's sermon "On remedies against bad habits". The *remedium meditativum* recommends "purging" yourself of the habit and returning to God through prayer and contrition. The *remedium conversazione* advises to talk with good, honest people who will guide you towards the right way. The *remedium elongatione* recommends removing yourself from these bad habits by fleeing the place (*localis*), the company (*socialis*), and the occasion (*occasionalis*) in which you would normally give in to them. Avoiding bad situations is vital: preacher Roberto Caracciolo likewise urges his audience to "remove the wood from the fire" and flee every occasion that may tempt them to sin.<sup>176</sup>

Remedies for repressing desire could also be found in books of conduct and works of medicine. A text known as the *Fior di virtu*, already written some time before 1325 but still circulating widely in both manuscript and print in the sixteenth century, recommends avoiding dangerous situations – such as dances and feasts, discussions about sex, and conversations with the opposite sex – as well as preventing idleness by keeping oneself occupied, and moderating food and drink. *El costume delle donne* (1536), a book of conduct directed at (unmarried) women, likewise advises to limit the consumption of undiluted wine and warns against the dangers of idleness.<sup>177</sup> Compilations of medical recipes, such as Pietro Andrea Mattioli's *Discorsi* include lists of herbal remedies that provoke sexual desire as well as repress it. Anaphrodisiacs include asparagus, lettuce, rue, dill, hemp, hemlock and *vitice*, a small Mediterranean tree commonly known as *agnocasto*

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<sup>175</sup> Bernardino da Feltre, *Quaresimale*, Vol. III, De luxuria, 146-151.

<sup>176</sup> Ibidem, Vol. I, De remediis contra malam consuetudinem; Roberto Caracciolo, *Quaresimale volgare*, QI, 87; Idem, *Sermo de luxuria*, 214-216.

<sup>177</sup> Bell, *How to Do It*, 171-72.

(“chastetree”).<sup>178</sup> An anonymous sixteenth-century collection of alchemical recipes recommends a balm of honey and *opium thebaicum*, applied directly to the male member, for curbing sexual desire.<sup>179</sup>

Preachers who wanted to encourage people to refrain from sin had to carefully balance their rhetoric. On the one hand, they needed to avoid defeatism, making sure that potential penitents believed that their souls were still viable for salvation. Roberto Caracciolo, for instance, states that even the most “habitual sinner” who claims that he is so “tied down” that he is unable to confess and abandon his lecherous life, soon “sheds the chains of sin” once he is “enlightened by God, starts to recognize his miserable life, and is touched by contrition and confession”.<sup>180</sup> On the other hand, preachers needed to convey the urgency of the need to repent. Girolamo Savonarola warns his audience that of those people who wait to confess until the last possible moment, 99 out of 100 are damned. He provides an exemplum about a young man who delayed his confession until it was too late. While his friend constantly tried to persuade him to stop sinning because God would punish him, he always replied that he was still young, and wanted to have a good time, and that God would have mercy on him. Even when he became ill, and was begged to take confession, he still refused, believing that his illness was not that bad and that he would soon recover.<sup>181</sup> Savonarola warns that those who sin out of weakness or ignorance can easily be saved by God, but those who “are obstinate in their malice” are not saved as easily. Even though God helps His creatures to turn their free will towards the good, His patience is not infinite, and He may decide to no longer help someone who has crossed the “secret limit” [*termine secreto*] by committing one sin too many.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Pietro Andrea Mattioli, *Discorsi* (Venice: Vincenzo Valgrisi and Baldassar Costantini, 1557) Tavola delli rimedii di tutti i morbidi del corpo, Vescica, A prohibire il coito.

<sup>179</sup> M.K. Ray, ‘Impotence and Corruption: Sexual Function and Dysfunction in the Early Modern Italian Books of Secrets’ in: S.F. Matthews-Grieco ed., *Cuckoldry, Impotency and Adultery in Europe (15th-17th century)* (Farnham/Burlington 2014) 125-146: 133.

<sup>180</sup> Roberto Caracciolo, *Sermo de luxuria*, 214-216.

<sup>181</sup> Girolamo Savonarola, *Amos*, Vol. I, 132.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibidem*, 183.

Regardless of the warnings of preachers, not everyone may have been as convinced about the urgency to repent and reform. Like the young man in Savonarola's *exemplum*, the female characters in Pietro Aretino's *Ragionamenti* state that "there's always time to repent".<sup>183</sup> The courtesan Nanna is convinced that her soul will be safe, despite all of her transgressions, because before she dies she will "have made so many holy pilgrimages, bought so many indulgences, and traversed so many stations of the cross that my soul will not be the last in the next world, just as my body has not been the last in this one".<sup>184</sup> Nanna and her friend Antonia have great faith in the easy remedies the Church provides for sinners, arguing that "with the petition of a little penance and two drops of holy water, all whorishness will leave the soul".<sup>185</sup>

## Conclusion

In fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy, there were many different perspectives on what constituted the (main) purpose of sex. Some discourses, authors, or texts focus on the marital debt and procreation, while others pay attention to health, pleasure or spiritual union. Despite these differences, most discourses nonetheless share the same general code of conduct for dealing with sexual desire: upholding moderation and avoiding excess. The goal of this chapter was to reconstruct the particular restrictions that were part of this universal code of conduct and to analyze the rationalizations and underlying causes for their existence.

While a few types of behavior were only discouraged by one specific discourse, such as the theological prohibition against having sex on holy days and in holy places, most restrictions on sexual desire and sex acts transcend the boundaries of genre and discourse. The same type of behavior was discouraged in sources as varied as anatomical treatises and manuals for

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<sup>183</sup> Pietro Aretino, *I Ragionamenti*, 353.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibidem*, 129.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibidem*, 150. The same reference to holy water as a quick fix for removing sin can be found in Alessandro Piccolomini's *La Raffaella*. See: Moulton, 'Vagina Dialogues', 213.

confession, and sometimes in novellas, romance epics and *trattati d'amore* as well. Restrictions on sexual desire and sex acts range from lecherous thoughts to coital positions and inappropriate timing, but two main categories of perceived transgressions can be distinguished. The first category can be summarized as the kind of behavior that does not produce healthy offspring. It includes deviating from the traditional 'missionary' position, having sex during menstruation or pregnancy, having anal sex, and having sex too often. All these types of behavior were either infertile, believed to generate weak offspring, or believed to thwart the chances of conceiving. The second category of transgressions can be summarized as any type of sexual desire or sexual intercourse outside the bounds of wedlock. It includes prohibitions against sex acts such as adultery and fornication as well as a warning against cultivating desire for an inappropriate object.

Authors made use of various arguments in order to legitimize these restrictions, emphasizing the dangers this behavior posed to individual bodily and spiritual wellbeing as well as to the lives of others and to society as a whole. Genre often dictated which of these arguments was prioritized. One may for instance expect to see sin-based arguments in sermons and manuals for confession, and health-based arguments in works of medicine. Comparing different sources, however, also makes clear that the use of particular arguments was not limited to genres: the authors of theological, medical and literary sources all made ample use of the language of Christian theology, medical science, Platonic philosophy, and courtly love. While it is impossible to say for certain which of the arguments was considered decisive by an individual author, let alone by Italian society as a whole, a comparison of different sources does provide insight into which arguments were most widespread. In the case of sex during pregnancy, for instance, the belief that this could harm the unborn child was a very common argument to justify restrictions: it is mentioned in works of medicine, as well as in works of theology and in literary pornography. In the case of anal sex, the argument that this was a "corruption of nature" because of the improper use of body members, was most common.

Two primary goals of sex, producing healthy offspring and preventing adultery, seem to underlie most of the restrictions, but it is important to note that authors used many other arguments in order to make their point. The prohibition against alternative sexual positions was partially motivated by fertility-arguments, but arguments based on individual health were more common among medics and were reflected in literary pornography. Health risks were commonly used as a warning against extramarital desire and relations as well: literary fiction and works of medicine both mention the dangers of lovesickness and venereal disease. The restriction of the frequency of sexual relations was legitimized with health- as well as fertility-arguments, by medics and clerics alike, but the argument that overindulging in sex could make people lose their natural nobility was even more commonly used. The consequences of certain behavior for society as a whole were a popular topic as well. The belief that sexual desire for an unattainable beloved could lead to jealousy-induced madness, causing the infatuated to commit both suicide and murder, was present in treatises on love and novellas as well as in sermons, while the belief that sexual desire and extramarital relations could cause bloodshed on an even wider scale was likewise broadly shared.

As the goal of this chapter was to reconstruct a universal code of conduct, it has focused on similarities rather than differences. Although occasional attention has been paid to differences of opinion (such as those between theological and medical authors regarding the proper timing and frequency of sexual relations) I have endeavored to pinpoint those general restrictions that transcend the boundaries of discourse. Likewise, I have treated Italian society as a whole, without making a distinction between its different members. This approach has made clear that, to a certain extent, the different discourses on sex that were present in Renaissance Italy all agreed that people in general were expected to control their sexual desire and refrain from behavior that could bring harm to themselves or others. This broad image of social perceptions on sexuality will function as a starting point that, in the course of this book, will be nuanced and problematized ever further, by focusing on differences rather than similarities. It will be shown that the

code of reason and moderation that was prescribed to all members of society coexisted alongside many other codes that could support and reinforce, as well as challenge and undermine it. The next three chapters will pay attention to gender, as this was one of the most crucial distinctions challenging the universality of codes of conduct regarding sexuality.