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

Hartog, M.I. den

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Sexual orientation

This final chapter is concerned with the codes of conduct for people with a sexual orientation that was not exclusively heterosexual. In fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy, classifications of people based on sexual orientations were not as defined as classifications based on age, gender or social class, but a separate chapter is nonetheless justified, because perceptions about people with (exclusively or predominantly) homosexual preferences did exist. Earlier chapters have already highlighted certain aspects of same-sex relations, including the importance of age distinctions in the division of active/penetrating and passive/receiving roles, and the attribution of same-sex acts and desires to certain groups as a means to emphasize social distinctions. This chapter is focused on reconstructing the different perspectives on same-sex behavior between men and between women, and analyzing the development of beliefs in the existence of a homosexual nature.

The first two sections of this chapter will discuss the different views on sexual relations between men. A moralist discourse, used in theological and legal as well as medical and literary sources, strongly rejected these relations, but there were dissenting voices as well, that justified or even celebrated them. The third and fourth sections focus on the minoritizing and universalizing discourses on same-sex desire between men, and on the question whether the origins of these desires were seen as innate or as an acquired lifestyle. The chapter will then move towards a discussion of female same-sex desire. The fifth section will discuss the relative lack of concern about sexual relations between women, compared to discussions about men.

The sixth and seventh sections will suggest two possible explanations for this relative lack of concern: the fact that male authors generally presented sexual relations between women as ultimately unsatisfactory, and the fact that their perception of a (predominantly) homosexual preference was less far developed for women than for men.

The sin of Sodom

The term sodomy refers to a story in Genesis about the prophet Lot who is visited by two male angels who want to investigate vice in the city of Sodom. Lot offers them lodgings, but the inhabitants of Sodom besiege his house and want to force Lot to hand over his guests so that they “may know them” [i.e. have sex with them]. God finally punishes the citizens for their crimes by destroying the city with fire and brimstone.¹ In Christian theology, the fate of Sodom became a popular *exemplum* for the consequences of divine wrath. In the early Middle Ages, the “Sodomitic sin” started out as a category including many types of sinful behaviour, not limited to those of a sexual nature. The cardinal Peter Damian (c. 1007-73) was one of the first to use the abstract noun *sodomia* and limit its meaning to sexual sins. Late medieval theologians increasingly connected this sin of *sodomia* to the “vice against nature” (*peccatum contra naturam*), which was not always specified, but included a number of infertile sex acts, such as *mollities* (voluntary pollution without coitus), sex between the thighs, anal sex, and sex with someone of the same gender.² The authors of sermons and manuals for confession in Italy between 1450 and 1550 did not share one fixed definition of the terms *sodomia* and *peccatum contra naturam*. Most of the times, *peccatum contra naturam* is used as a general category that includes different types of sin: sodomy, *mollities*, and bestiality. The definition of sodomy is sometimes limited to sex between two men or two women, but could also include infertile sex between a man and a woman.

¹ *Genesis*, 18-19.

² For a good introduction to the topic, see: M.D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago 1997).

The sin of Sodom was seen as a social issue, because the wrath of God that it supposedly provoked would not only target the culprits, but would take the entire community down with them.

According to fifteenth- and sixteenth-century preachers, the ubiquity of sodomy in Italy was the main cause of frequent calamities such as famines, pestilence, and earthquakes. “Oh ribald world”, the Southern Italian preacher Roberto Caracciolo exclaims,

oh human generation, you allow this grave and most serious sin to remain, because all Italy is abhorred, corrupted by devils and infested by this vice. And therefore the plague that God sends almost every year is not without cause, because you can smell the stench of mortal sin in Italy.³

Sodomy is presented as a symptom of the corruption and moral decay of a society, and Italy is presented as the country that is most afflicted by it. The preacher Girolamo Savonarola repeatedly orders the Florentine government to take radical measures against sodomites, ordering them to be stoned, burned or banished. Although he acknowledges that some people might accuse him of being cruel, Savonarola states that he is only strict out of clemency, punishing the individual to save the community. “Just as a small bit of yeast may corrupt an entire batch of flour, likewise one wicked man can do harm to many others”.⁴

While other sins like blasphemy, gambling, and immodest female apparel are also blamed for provoking divine wrath, sodomy was seen as the worst type of sexual impropriety. Roberto Caracciolo dedicates an entire sermon to sodomy in his *Quadragesimales de peccatis*, in order to explain why this one sin is so detestable that it exceeds all others: it damages the soul, displeases God, and goes against nature. From the perspective of theology, sodomy was seen as unnatural, because it went against the natural order that had been ordained by God. The male and the female body had been designed so that they could generate offspring and preserve mankind.

³ Roberto Caracciolo, *Sermo de luxuria*, 220.

⁴ Girolamo Savonarola, *Salmi* Vol. II, 158.

The kind of “vile commingling” [*commixtio vilis*] that sodomites engage in is sterile and therefore seen as a corruption of nature [*corruptio naturae*]. “Just like a woman who is deflowered screams because she is corrupted, likewise nature screams and complains over sodomites”. Caracciolo calls sodomites worse than beasts, because even lions, leopards, snakes, and dragons conserve their species through procreation, while sodomites work to destruct the human species: if all would commit this “nefarious vice”, no human being might ever be produced. Because of this, he says, those who commit the vice of sodomy commit homicide, even without using a sword.⁵ Authors operating in other genres often employed this moral rhetoric as well. The female character Gostanza in Agnolo Firenzuola’s novella collection *I Ragionamenti* states that “that abominable matter, that sin against nature, is forbidden by both human and divine laws”:

Nature created man and woman of the same species and with the same virtues and soul, and it was necessary to make such differences in their bodily attire, so that such a union could take place, with which nature has ordained to maintain the human generation (...) It is ordained that the beauty of women enkindles a great desire in the chests of men, while the beauty of men tenders more delight with women than with men.⁶

Moral rhetoric can likewise be found in the area of medicine. The various infirmities caused by “lecherous behaviour” described in Alessandro Benedetti’s *Anatomice* also include the involuntary flow of excrements that may be the result when anal muscles are “worn out with venery” [*in venere, sic*].⁷ In a chapter on the anus, Benedetti specifically mentions afflictions that could be caused by anal sex. While discussing *mariscae* (haemorrhoids) and *rhagades* (anal fistulae), Benedetti writes that

A lascivious lechery and a burning lust cause these ills, not without injury to nature and the divine majesty. Lust, the inventor of vices, neglecting

⁵ Roberto Caracciolo, *Sermones quadragesimales*, 84v.

⁶ Agnolo Firenzuola, *I Ragionamenti*, 58-59.

⁷ Alessandro Benedetti, *Anatomice*, 132.

nature, treads upon both civil and canon law and seeks low retreats; this is the way to ruin the human race.⁸

A similar passage was included in the anatomical treatise of Jacopo Berengario da Carpi (these passages are so similar, that he must have either used the same source as Benedetti, or read Benedetti's treatise itself).⁹

Wartlike excrescences also or certain tubercles, fig, and fungi are created in the anus, as well as piles and *rhagades*, or *rhagadiae*, which are accustomed to arise from its inflammation. Sometimes a lascivious lechery or burning lust in either sex by seeking low retreats or byways cause the ills. Neglected nature not without the injury of divine majesty itself brings about these injuries.¹⁰

Both physicians present anal sex as something that could have health risks, but they also condemned this act on moral grounds. They adopt a moral rhetoric using terms such as *lasciva* and *luxuria*, maintain that the act is against both the laws of man and of God, and emphasize its crime against nature. Benedetti even uses the same argument that Caracciolo uses about sodomites destructing the human race. These passages are quite exceptional, because physicians rarely commented on the relation between anal injuries and sodomy. The earliest example that George Rousseau has found, who has done research on this topic, was the university professor Amato Lusitano (1511-68). In the *Curationum medicinalium centuriae septem* (1551), which was published over fifty years after Benedetti's *Anatomice*, Lusitano stated that *cristas* (excrescent flesh growing around the anus) "occurred not only in

⁸ Alessandro Benedetti, *Anatomice*, 101.

⁹ I have so far been unable to trace the origins of this passage. Berengario Da Carpi and Benedetti both made use of Mundinus' *Anathomia corporis humani* (1316), but it is not part of this work.

¹⁰ Jacopo Berengario da Carpi, *Isagogae breves*, 76.

women but in young boys at Rome” as a result of the “vile” and “abominable” practice of sodomy.¹¹

Governmental authorities were concerned about sodomy as well. In most Italian cities, the legislation against sodomy prescribed capital punishment. Public castration as well as death by burning, decapitation or hanging was part of the legislation of cities like Florence, Padua, Lucca, Modena, Trieste and Ferrara. In Ferrara between 1441 and 1577 9 men were put to death for sodomy, in Florence between 1459 and 1502 3 death sentences seem to have been carried out, and in Venice between 1406 and 1407 16 young noblemen were executed. In the first half of the fifteenth century, special judiciary commissions were established to investigate the crime in both Venice (1418), Florence (1432) and Lucca (1448).¹²

From the 1450's onwards, the Venetian Council of Ten began to prioritize the prosecution of sodomy, spending much time and effort on its investigation. The rhetoric used shows that the Venetian government considered sodomy the most disturbing act of sexual transgression imaginable. Governmental decrees present sodomy as a terrible vice that goes against the propagation of the human species, as well as provoking God's wrath. In order to protect the city, this vice needed to be expelled, and several measures were taken to make this happen. Two noblemen were elected from each parish to spend a year investigating their neighborhood for any signs of sodomitic vice, paying special attention to suspicious gathering places and unusual contact between the old and the young. High rewards were instituted for anyone willing to bring cases of sodomy to light. In the 1450s and 60s, legislation was even repeatedly proposed (and finally accepted) to compel surgeons and barbers to report anyone treated for damages resulting from anal intercourse to the authorities so that they might arrest the culprit who inflicted them, and thus “eliminate the vice of sodomy from the city”. The number of prosecutions of sodomy increased

¹¹ G. Rousseau, ‘Policing the Anus: Stuprum and Sodomy According to Paolo Zacchia’s Forensic Medicine’ in: K. Borris and G. Rousseau eds., *The Sciences of Homosexuality in Early Modern Europe* (New York 2008) 75-91: 86.

¹² Davidson, ‘Theology, Nature, Law’, 89-90, 94-96; Ruggiero, ‘Sexual Criminality’, Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 76-79.

dramatically, when compared to the previous century. Between 1451 and 1500, 330 individuals were prosecuted for sodomy, in a total of 181 court cases.¹³

In Florence, the prosecution levels were even higher. In the 70 years of the existence of the Office of the Night (1432-1502), between 15,000 and 16,000 individuals implicated in homosexual activity came to their attention, and they probably levied over 2400 convictions. Including those convictions by other magistracies, the total number of convictions in these years approached 3000. The investigation depended on secret accusations, usually anonymous and without the need of the accuser to provide proof. An accuser could deposit his accusation in special boxes called *tambura*, and received a quarter of the fine if the accused was convicted. The Florentine prosecution of sexual relations between men was also exceptional because of the relatively lenient punishments. Of the sentences of the Office of Night, 90% were fines, and these fines were quite low, appearing to be more like a tax on sodomy than anything else, especially since the proceeds were used for charitable institutions. If a person voluntarily turned himself in, confessed and named his partners, he was absolved, so this was what many men would do when they feared exposure.¹⁴

It is important to note that cities often made clear distinctions between different types of offender, adhering to the traditional role division discussed in the chapter on age. Passive/receiving partners and those who were young were generally treated more leniently. In the statutes of Lucca after 1458, men aged over fifty were to be executed for a first conviction; but the rest were to be fined, imprisoned for a short time, or treated to some form of public exposure, depending on their age and the nature of their offence.¹⁵ In Venice, capital punishment was usually only reserved for the active/penetrating partner, the one who had initiated the act and carried it out, and was thus culpable for it. The passive/receiving partner often received a minor penalty, such as corporal punishment, detention or exile, or

¹³ Ruggiero, *Boundaries of Eros*, 117-118, 128, 135.

¹⁴ Roche, *Forbidden Friendships*, 47-53.

¹⁵ Davidson, 'Theology, Nature, Law', 95.

none at all.¹⁶ In Florence, adult first time offenders had to pay 50 florins, and the fifth conviction resulted in a capital sentence. Adolescents between 12 and 18 were given a fine of 10 florins the first time, and the seventh conviction was a capital sentence, but only if they were older than 18. Minors and receiving partners went unpunished.¹⁷

While Florence and Venice were exceptional in their efforts of prosecution, in Milan, Ferrara, Bologna and Sicily, cases were quite rare, with prosecution and punishment concentrating almost exclusively on marginal and extreme cases such as foreigners who sodomised children.¹⁸ It is possible that this new rigor in the government's response to sodomy, which we also find in other urbanized parts of late medieval Europe, was the result of the actual growth or increased visibility of a distinctive and socially diversified homosexual subculture. It may, however, also be the case that the fear of sodomy was only marginally related to changes in the sexual practice itself. The demographic catastrophe due to the recurring plague could have been an important factor, as it heightened the fear of the wrath of God, and inspired a new focus on the value of marriage and procreation. Other causes could be political, as the institution of special task forces occurred during a time when Florence and Venice became regional powers in need of a more centralized and efficient program of justice and social control.¹⁹

Voices of dissent

Within theological, literary, legal, and medical discourse, sex between men was often presented as a great vice provoking the wrath of God. However, this moralistic view was not the only perspective on love and sex between men available in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy. The renewed attention to the art and literature of classical antiquity had a great impact on the culture of the period. Many authors took the example of classical

¹⁶ Ruggiero, *Boundaries of Eros*, 110-111, 121.

¹⁷ Roche, *Forbidden Friendships*, 51, 63.

¹⁸ Dean, *Crime and Justice*, 143-144.

¹⁹ Roche, *Forbidden Friendships*, 26-29; Ruggiero, *Boundaries of Eros*, 135-137.

authorities as a justification for writing their own works with the same liberal attitude towards love and sex between men.²⁰

The theory of Platonic love set out in Plato's dialogue *Symposium* (written in the fourth century B.C.) provided the means to defend a chaste and intellectual type of love between men. In this dialogue, Socrates defines *eros* as a desire for something not possessed, a longing that starts at the sight of a beautiful young man. If the soul is to experience true *eros*, the lover should refrain from physical satisfaction, and elevate his desire for the corporeal beauty of this young man to a longing for his spiritual beauty, and ultimately, a longing for universal beauty and wisdom. Platonic theory witnessed a rebirth in the second half of the fifteenth century, when Marsilio Ficino translated the complete works of Plato and Plotinus. Both Marsilio Ficino and the philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola repeated the classical Platonic idea that *eros* is triggered by male beauty, and that only love between men can lead the soul in its upward path towards God, as the sharpness of intellect is stronger in men than in women.²¹

Plato had already emphasized that this perfect love between men was supposed to be a non-sexual affair, and Renaissance Neoplatonists like Ficino and Pico della Mirandola continued to do so. The authors of Ficinian-inspired lyrical poetry of a homoerotic nature, such as Michelangelo Buonarroti Il Vecchio (1475-1564), Antonio Brocardo (d. 1531), Benedetto Varchi (1503-65) and Coppetta (1509-53), likewise protested the honesty of their intentions and the chastity of their passion.²² Despite their efforts, advocates of Platonic thought were still haunted by the accusation that their doctrine covertly tried to justify sex between men. Baldassare Castiglione and Francesco Sansovino raised doubts about the non-sexual nature of Platonic relationships, arguing that if men were really striving for spiritual

²⁰ P. Findlen, 'Humanism, Politics and Pornography in Renaissance Italy' in: L. Hunt ed., *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800* (New York 1993) 49-108: 83.

²¹ McGinn, 'Cosmic and Sexual Love'.

²² D. Romei, 'Saggi di poesia omoerotica volgare del Cinquecento' in: E. Boillet and C. Lastraioli eds., *Stravaganze amoroze: L'amore oltre la norma nel Rinascimento* (Paris 2010) 235-262: 238-241.

perfection, they would choose an older and wiser man as their partner, rather than an inexperienced youth. Moreover, if their love was truly spiritual, men would not leave their young lovers once these reached a more mature age, as in reality was often the case, according to Sansovino.²³ Giovanni dell'Orto has argued that the concept of *amor socraticus* was actively used as a disguise for hiding sexual relations. While writing poetry aimed at male beloveds, or when faced with legal accusations of sodomy, men defended themselves by stating that they only loved men in the same way that Socrates did. One example is the poet Benedetto Varchi, who was notorious for his sexual relations with young men, and arrested and tried for sodomy in 1545. Varchi wrote a number of sonnets for a 16-year-old pupil, and claimed that the love expressed in these sonnets was chaste and Platonic. Among his contemporaries, however, Varchi's ardent expressions of love and elaborate descriptions and praise of the young man's body, received a great deal of critique and suspicion.²⁴

Authors felt the need to reconcile the classical theory of Platonic love with contemporary Christian morals by expressing their abhorrence of sodomy and emphasizing the chaste intellectual and moral zeal of men who love boys.²⁵ The Florentine writer Agnolo Firenzuola in his treatise *Delle bellezze delle donne* (1548) gives a number of examples of love between men that was 'honourable' (limited to contemplating each other's beauty) and 'dishonourable'. He did not condemn same-sex love in itself, but only the lower, physical type of love.²⁶ One rare example of a female author who discusses the topic is Tullia d'Aragona in her *Dialogo dell'infinità d'amore*. In real life, Tullia had a friendship with Benedetto Varchi, and in this dialogue, two characters with their names discuss the nature of love. When Varchi asks Tullia what she thinks about "those men who love boys", Tullia expresses her disapproval of this practice, saying that these men are unnatural, deserve both divine and civil punishment. She scarcely believes

²³ Francesco Sansovino, *Ragionamento*, 653. Baldassare Castiglione, *Il Cortegiano*, 248.

²⁴ Dall'Orto, 'Socratic Love'.

²⁵ See also: Nelson, *Renaissance Theory*, 72.

²⁶ J. Murray, 'Agnolo Firenzuola on Female Sexuality and Women's Equality', *Sixteenth Century Journal* 22.2 (1991) 199-213: 203, 207, 211.

that people “who practice such an ugly, wicked and hideous vice” are real human beings. She then asks Varchi for his opinion, as she knows “very well that in classical Greece the opposite notion was common and that Lucian wrote a dialogue in which he praised this vice, as did Plato”. Interestingly, considering the reputation of the real-life persona, the character Varchi actively condemns the vice, saying that Tullia is greatly mistaken if she believes that Plato praised “such filthy wickedness”. Although Plato and Socrates were indeed open about their love for youths, “they did not love them the way that people commonly interpret and apparently you also believe”.²⁷ A much more radical way of reconciling classical Platonic theory with contemporary morality, apart from emphasizing the chastity of male-male relations, was the ‘heterosexualization’ of the concept of Platonic love. Pietro Bembo, in *Gli Asolani* (1505), was the first to attribute to women the kind of personal beauty that triggers Platonic love in men, and his example was soon followed by Mario Equicola and Baldassare Castiglione. In Leone Ebreo’s *Dialoghi d’amore* (pub. 1535), noteworthy for its original philosophical ideas, Platonic love is likewise defined as the ultimate goal of male-female relationships.²⁸

While Platonic theory only served to justify chaste love, classical texts such as Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* provided a more liberal perspective on sexual relations between men as well. Kenneth Borris has shown that the question of who ‘invented’ sexual love between men [*masculae veneris*], was frequently explored in Italian encyclopedias and reference works. The authors mention legendary originators such as Jove, Thamyris the Thracian, and Laius, who all carried off young male lovers, as well as famous exemplars, such as Alexander the Great and Nero. They describe the same-sex acts and inclinations of peoples known as the Itali and the Tyrrhenians, state that the ancient Romans considered masculine love honest and just, and list Greek laws and customs that favored male homoeroticism. Although the

²⁷ Tullia d’Aragona, *Dialogo*, 96-97.

²⁸ N.A. Robb, *Neoplatonism of the Italian Renaissance* (New York 1968) 179-194; S. Ebbersmeyer, *Sinnlichkeit und Vernunft: Studien zur Rezeption und Transformation der Liebestheorie Platons in der Renaissance* (Munich 2002) 191.

authors of these works often employed a moralist rhetoric, calling sexual love between men “the most dirty thing” [*spurcissimae rei*] and “this shameful practice” [*ritum hunc turpissimum*], they nonetheless showed that other perspectives on the topic were possible, and that the attitudes towards same-sex relations of several admired authorities from classical antiquity differed greatly from their own norms and values.²⁹ According to Giovanni Dell’Orto, the argument that sodomy could not really be evil, because kings, popes and even ancient gods practiced it, was a constant source of self-justification for many male homosexuals in Renaissance Italy.³⁰ Agnolo Poliziano’s *Favola di Orfeo* (c. 1480) includes a long speech in which Orpheus claims that all men should flee women to enjoy instead the “holy love” of “the superior sex,” like the Greek and Roman gods and heroes.³¹ Classical examples inspired many authors to write their own erotic poetry celebrating love and sex between men. Referring to powerful classical authorities and imitating their style, provided authors with a moral alibi. The composers of lyrical poetry adopted the bucolic classicism of Virgil’s second eclogue, writing their poems from the perspective of the shepherd Corydon who loved a young man called Alexis.³² Many authors also chose to write their poetry in Latin or Greek, thus restricting their work to an educated audience: Angelo Poliziano’s (1454-94) Greek epigram “Love Song for Chrysokomos”, Antonio Beccadelli’s (1394–1471) Latin *Hermaphroditus*, and Pacifica Massimo’s (c. 1400-c. 1500) Latin *Hecatelegium* were particularly explicit, including detailed descriptions of sexual acts.³³

The most radical legitimization of sex between men directly challenged the theological doctrine that called these acts sinful and unnatural. One of the best examples is Antonio Vignali’s satirical dialogue *La Cazzaria*, that celebrates and defends the pleasures of sex between men. The character Arsiccio challenges theological doctrine in three ways. First, he points out

²⁹ K. Borris, *Same-Sex Desire in the English Renaissance: A Sourcebook of Texts, 1470-1650* (New York/London 2004) 198-201.

³⁰ Dall’Orto, ‘Socratic love’, 35.

³¹ Borris, *Same-Sex Desire*, 264.

³² Romei, ‘Saggi di poesia’, 256.

³³ Borris, *Same-Sex Desire*, 264, 340-41.

the inconsistencies of the Church's rules, stating that the argument that anal sex wastes human seed, violating the commandment 'be fruitful and multiply', is hypocritical. After all, he says, clergymen themselves refuse to procreate, "fleeing the inconveniences of wives and the annoyance of children". A second attack goes even further, openly questioning whether the Church's moral doctrines have any truth in them at all. To emphasize the amount of time clergymen spend masturbating, Arsiccio writes that "they 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 – which I doubt, since I've seen the licentiousness of these friars – 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.*"³⁴ With this phrase, Arsiccio seems to argue that the hypocritical and lecherous behavior of the clergy are a sign that the doctrine of the Church may be faulty. A third angle from which to legitimize sex between men is to reject the claim that it is "unnatural" by discussing semantics. Arsiccio states that it is impossible for anal sex to be "against nature", because if it was, Nature would have made it neither pleasurable nor physically possible. "If Nature had not wanted men to bugger each other, she would not have made it such a pleasant thing." Nor, he argues, would she have allowed for the possibility of anal sex, but she would have reduced the size of the anus, so that a penis would not be able to enter it.³⁵ This text by Vignali resembles the seventeenth-century libertinism of Antonio Rocco's *L'Alcibiade fanciullo a scola* (pub. 1651), which portrayed Mother Nature as affectionate and benevolent rather than cruel, providing men with sexual organs so that they could use them and enjoy them.³⁶

One final way of legitimizing sexual relations between men was a pragmatic perspective that, although maintaining the sinfulness of these relations, alleviated some of the severity by considering them as a lesser evil

³⁴ Antonio Vignali, *La Cazzaria*, 88-90. For more on the topic of semen having a soul, see the section on infertile behavior in chapter one.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, 100.

³⁶ G. Dall'Orto, "'Nature is a Mother Most Sweet': Homosexuality in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Italian Libertinism' in: G.P. Cestaro ed., *Queer Italia: Same-Sex Desire I Italia Literature and Film* (New York 2004) 83-104: 85-86.

when compared to adulterous relations with married women. A good example of this attitude can be found in a novella by Masuccio Salernitano. In this story, a jealous shoemaker dresses his wife as a male scholar while travelling, believing that he can better protect her honour that way. While staying at an inn, a knight with whom the couple has become acquainted, and who knows that the woman is wearing a disguise, tricks the shoemaker into leaving his wife for a while, so that he can have sex with her undetected. When the knight and the woman are in bed together, the innkeeper walks in on them, and immediately goes to warn the shoemaker. The innkeeper still thinks that the woman was in fact a male scholar and that he had just walked in on an act of sodomy. He laments to the shoemaker that the knight, “overtaken by foul vice, had lasciviously known the pretty scholar, whom he had been left to guard”, and calls him *un gran ribaldo*. He scolds the shoemaker for allowing this to happen, saying: “Have you never been warned of how evil and corrupt the world is, and that it is way more difficult to guard boys [*fanciulli*] than women?” However, he also states that, now that it has happened, he does not think that the shoemaker should lose such an important friend as a knight over such a “minor inconvenience” [*minimo dispiacere*]. After all: it is not as if the boy could get pregnant (*O cridi tu che se ingravide?*).³⁷

Through the words of the shoemaker, Masuccio presents sexual relations between men as a sign of the corruption of the world, but also as a minor issue, as it did not have any of the severe consequences that sex with a married woman may have: the danger of illegitimate offspring and the potential loss of family honour. In a novella by Matteo Bandello, sexual relations between men are likewise presented as something to be preferred over adulterous relationships with women. In this story, the notorious adulterer Cocco, who often has sex with married lower-class women, finally decides to stop approaching women outside the house, because he was “afraid of being mocked by the crowd”. In exchange, he starts to “throw himself at some boy” whenever he feels the urge, someone with whom he

³⁷ Masuccio Salernitano, *Il Novellino*, Novella 11.

could fulfil his “dishonest appetite” for two or three *baiocchi* (coins).³⁸ Apparently, having paid sex with young male prostitutes was seen as a more discreet and potentially less shameful habit than approaching (married) women.

Many scholars have commented on the double moral standard concerning the topic of sodomy. There was an opposition between the public, official morality of broader society, which was reflected in theological and legal thought, and the more tolerant private morality of particular groups. For Girolamo Savonarola, the reason why Florence had become infamous for this sin all over Italy, was due to the Florentines themselves, because everyone talked and gossiped about it so much.³⁹ According to Roberto Caracciolo, one of the worst characteristics of the sodomites of his time was their “impudence” [*impudentia*], because rather than beings ashamed, they boasted about this ‘vice’.⁴⁰ Michael Rocke has shown that sodomy in Florence had a distinctively collective character, taking place within a “context of typical forms of male sociability and of social bonds and networks such as youth gangs, neighborhood, work, the household, and even clientage”.⁴¹ Guido Ruggiero’s study of Niccolò Machiavelli’s correspondence showed that friends could discuss the homosexual preferences of one of the members of their circle in a casual manner.⁴²

Sexual relations between men were particularly accepted within the context of the educated elite. As was shown in the previous chapter, particular attitudes towards sexuality could be a means of establishing or confirming class distinctions. By exchanging homoerotic works of art and literature and thereby imitating the masters of classical antiquity, people could demonstrate their erudition and worldliness and become part of the humanist subculture. For this reason, visual artists like Michelangelo, Bronzino and Cellini also wrote homoerotic poetry in order to establish their intellectual credentials. As the celebration of love and sex between men was

³⁸ Matteo Bandello, *Le Novelle*, I.40.

³⁹ Girolamo Savonarola, *Aggeo*, 45, 220; *Salmi* Vol. II, 34.

⁴⁰ Roberto Caracciolo, *Sermones quadragesimales*, 85r.

⁴¹ Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 150.

⁴² Ruggiero, *Machiavelli in Love*, 126-132.

only accepted within their own exclusive and restricted circle of educated and enlightened individuals, these representations linked elite men with other elite men.⁴³ As long as ancient eroticism was accessible only to a select circle of authors, friends, and patrons with a humanist education, it was considered harmless. Antonio Vignali states that he had written his *La Cazzaria* in Latin because “that way, only learned men would read it. And even though it is a shameful book, it would not make their manners any worse than they are.”⁴⁴ As Paula Findlen writes, “men of wit, honor and social prominence were deemed capable of flirting with dangerous subjects without contributing to public vice”, because their erudition would be the guarantor of moral probity.⁴⁵

The limits to this tolerance are visible in cases in which this private world of humanist libertinism became public and clashed with the traditional norms of general society. One example is the critical response to the homoerotic poetry of Benedetto Varchi, which was caused by the explicitness of his poems as well as their publicness, because unlike most authors, Varchi chose to publish them in print.⁴⁶ Another fascinating example is Antonio Beccadelli’s *Hermaphroditus* (1425) which was initially praised by prominent humanists such as Guarino da Verona and Poggio Bracciolini, but was publicly burned at the stake after the popular preacher Bernardino of Siena attacked it and influential scholars like Lorenzo Valla and Leonardo Bruni condemned it. The problem with this work was not its contents, but the fact that Beccadelli had published it for a wider audience and dedicated it to Cosimo de’ Medici, a prominent leader of state.⁴⁷ One final example, described by James Saslow, is the case of the artist known as “Il Sodoma”. Gianantonio Bazzi had adopted this derogatory nickname as his own public identity, even writing poetry filled with homoerotic innuendo. Within the

⁴³ Puff, ‘Homosociabilities’; J.M. Saslow ‘Gianantonio Bazzi, Called “Il Sodoma”: Homosexuality in Art, Life, and History’ in: J. Murray and N. Terpstra eds., *Sex, Gender and Sexuality in Renaissance Italy* (New York 2019).

⁴⁴ Antonio Vignali, *La Cazzaria*, 122.

⁴⁵ Findlen, ‘Pornography’.

⁴⁶ Romei, ‘Saggi di poesia’, 238-241.

⁴⁷ Findlen, ‘Humanism, Politics and Pornography’, 83.

context of his own libertine subculture, this identity did not harm his reputation at all, but when he asked the heralds to announce his name as Sodoma when he won at the races, a group of enraged elders incited a mob attack, during which he narrowly escaped being stoned to death.⁴⁸ Sodoma's joke backfired, as it violated the unwritten rules aimed at protecting the boundaries between private and public morality.

Acts and identities

In the first volume of Michel Foucault's *Histoire de la Sexualité*, Foucault stated that historians ought to make a distinction between the modern concept of the homosexual and the premodern concept of the sodomite. He argued that it was not until the nineteenth century that people came to see the homosexual as a distinct type of individual whose moral disqualification was determined by a supposedly anomalous sexual nature. Before that time, a legal discourse was dominant that punished people who performed the act of sodomy not for their deviant nature, but for their supposedly immoral behavior.⁴⁹ Some scholars used this argument to lend authority to the theory that a more general distinction should be made between a premodern time in which people only thought in terms of legitimate and illegitimate sexual acts, not distinguishing between different sexual actors, and a modern time in which those acts were perceived as a sign of a person's sexual identity. Although this conclusion was based on a misreading of Foucault's text, as classicist David Halperin has argued, it nonetheless resulted in what was called the "acts versus identities" debate, opposing essentialist and social-constructivist perspectives on premodern sexuality.⁵⁰ According to a strict social-constructivist perspective, historians should make a sharp distinction between modern times, in which individuals themselves are believed to have

⁴⁸ Saslow, 'Il Sodoma', 183-184.

⁴⁹ M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1: An Introduction* (trans. by Robert Hurley, New York 1978) 43.

⁵⁰ D.M. Halperin, 'Forgetting Foucault: Acts, Identities, and the Histories of Sexuality', *Representations* 63 (1998) 93-120: 95-97.

sexual identities, and premodern times in which ideas about sex were focused only on behavior.⁵¹ According to the essentialist or universalist perspective, sexual identity is perennial and pan-cultural, and we should perceive homosexual individuals as a group that shares a continuous history.⁵²

Considered through a universalist or social-constructivist lens, fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italians either thought in terms of a sodomite/homosexual identity, or they did not, and considered acts of sodomy as something unrelated to a person's identity. However, such a sharp distinction did not exist in reality: neither an essentialist nor a strictly social-constructivist reading can explain all that is found in the sources. Over the past decades, several scholars have shown ways to move past the oversimplified acts/identities dichotomy. Carla Freccero, for instance, has argued that in premodern times, identities could be created through acts. Premodern people did not look at sexual acts merely as behavior to be fitted into legal categories separate from the person enacting them. Rather, these acts were related to a person's sexual desires and preferences, and defined an aspect of their character.⁵³ Another approach was provided by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who made a distinction between coexisting minoritizing and universalizing discourses that use certain sexual behavior to create a fixed minority, while at the same time also seeing that behavior as an issue of general importance for all people across the spectrum of sexualities.⁵⁴ Both approaches will be used in this section of the chapter to analyze the perception of male same-sex preferences in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy.

From one point of view, sexual desire between men was presented as universal: all men could be attracted to someone of the same gender. Having sex with another man was seen as an act that all men could occasionally engage in, without it having any consequences for how they were perceived,

⁵¹ E.g. K.M. Phillips and B. Reay, *Sex Before Sexuality: A Premodern History* (Cambridge 2011).

⁵² E.g. J. Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago 1980).

⁵³ L. Fradenburg and C. Freccero, *Premodern Sexualities* (London 1996).

⁵⁴ E. Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley 1990) esp. 40-47.

and/or without precluding the possibility of a sexual attraction to women. The perception of sexual relations between men as sins that any man might commit, is reflected in theological sources. In manuals for confession, questions about these relations were included in the general line of interrogation concerning the sin of *luxuria*. During confession, the confessor should ask his male penitent if he had kissed or embraced “a woman not his own or even a man”, if he had tried to seduce either women or male adolescents to commit sinful acts, and if he had had sinful desires about having sex with either a man or a woman.⁵⁵ This universalist perspective is evident in literary fiction as well. In Masuccio Salernitano’s novella, the knight who (supposedly) has sex with a young scholar is not given a deviant sexual identity that sets him apart from the other characters. Rather than assuming that the knight’s preference for young men is exclusive, they believe that he had performed the act because he had been “overtaken by dishonest vice” [*dal disonesto vizio assalito*] at the sight of the exceptional beauty of the young scholar (who was actually a woman in disguise).⁵⁶ By portraying the character as someone who is overwhelmed by a feeling of uncontrollable lust, sexual attraction to other men is presented as a slumbering tendency present in all men.

Some sources imply that sexual relations between men were seen as a result of excessive lust (mis)directing itself towards the wrong sexual object. The anatomist Alessandro Benedetti describes anal sex as the result of a “lascivious lechery” [*lasciva luxuriae*], a strong feeling of lust, which seeks “low retreats” [*diverticula queritando*].⁵⁷ This seems to imply that this behavior is avoidable if proper actions are taken, and the impulses are guided in the ‘right’ direction, that is: towards vaginal sex. The same idea is also reflected in the conviction among civic governments that promoting

⁵⁵ Bartolomeo Caimi, *Interrogatorium*, De luxuria, 88: “Si osculat et vel amplexat vel alias tetigit aliquam *mulierem non suam vel etiam masculum* cum libidinosa delectatione mortaliter peccat.” Girolamo Savonarola, *Confessionale*, 32r-v: “Si desideravit cognoscere *masculum aut feminam*.” and “(...) ut placeat alicui *mulieri vel adolescenti*, quam vel quem desiderat ad peccatum tale inducer”.

⁵⁶ Masuccio Salernitano, *Il Novellino*, Novella 11.

⁵⁷ Alessandro Benedetti, *Anatomice*, 101.

prostitution could help counteract sodomy. In 1525, the government of Lucca argued that the perceived increase in sodomy was linked to a recent decline in the number of female prostitutes, and designed new legislation to ensure that prostitutes could live safely inside the city walls.⁵⁸ The physician Michele Savonarola referred to a fictitious story about the city council of Negroponte which had compelled all women to walk around topless to counteract sodomy. Savonarola argued that the main purpose of breasts (apart from nourishing children) is to enhance the beauty of women and to incite men to have sex with them, thus deflecting them from sodomy.⁵⁹

The same-sex preference of men was often presented as part of a more generally deviant sex life and character. The letters of courtesan Camilla Pisana claim that her married lover, the rich banker Filippo Strozzi had “many women, youths, boys, and kids of every sort at his service.” Duchess Ippolita Maria Sforza likewise complained about the infidelity of her husband Duke Alfonso of Calabria who, according to ambassadors, frequently had sexual relations with boys as well as women.⁶⁰ This image is also reflected by literary fiction. One of Matteo Bandello’s novellas tells the story of a gentleman who rather has sex with boys than with his own wife. This preference is described as “another blemish” [*un'altra taccarella*] on his character and another aspect of his lecherous “accustomed style of living” [*consueto stile di vivere*]. Apart from having sex with boys, this nobleman also has sex with the wives of bakers and farmers.⁶¹ As we have seen in the chapter on social class, various groups were stereotyped as having a particular preference for sodomy. Some authors pointed the finger at *pedagogi*, while others blamed clergymen or friars, or turned sodomy into a particular preference of the upper classes, but sodomy was only one of the sexually transgressive crimes with which these groups were accused.

These examples of universalist discourse could coexist with a minoritizing discourse portraying the sodomite as an individual with an

⁵⁸ Davidson, ‘Theology, Nature, Law’, 91.

⁵⁹ Michele Savonarola, *Ad mulieres ferrarienses*, 28.

⁶⁰ Camilla Pisana, *Lettere*, 52-55; Ippolita Maria Sforza, *Lettere*, 114.

⁶¹ Matteo Bandello, *Le Novelle*, I.40.

exclusive sexual preference for men. Within the literary domain, many characters who are described as notorious for their same-sex acts and desires can be found. Their exclusive sexual preference for men has become a social identity which they themselves defend and which is recognized by other characters. In one novella, a Florentine merchant becomes the object of a joke when he arrives at the court, because “his appetite for kid’s flesh” and his ability “to teach bees how to make wax” (both metaphors for sodomy) were known to all those present.⁶² A well-known tale by Matteo Bandello tells the story of the poet Porcellio who works at the court of Duke Francesco Sforza, and is based on the real-life fifteenth-century writer Porcellio Pandone, who had an infamous reputation for being a sodomite. The character Porcellio is described by Bandello as renowned for his work, but “his excellence in letters and the luster of his muse were far surpassed by the many and enormous vices that abounded in him,” the worst of these being his “appetite for kid’s flesh.”⁶³ Paolo Pucci analyzed the story of Porcellio together with three other Italian novellas about male protagonists with a sexual preference for men, and concluded that in all these stories, the object of homosexual desire could in fact determine the identity of the subject, both in his own eyes and in those of the community.⁶⁴ Guido Ruggiero reached the same conclusion in his analysis of the character of the stable master in Pietro Aretino’s comedy *Il marescalco* (1533), whose exclusive sexual preference for young men has become a social identity (or consensus reality) that he himself defends and that is recognized by the other characters of the play as well as the Renaissance audience.⁶⁵

Some men were also known for their same-sex preferences in real life. Guido Ruggiero used the personal correspondence between Niccolò Machiavelli and Francesco Vettori to show that the sexual preferences of one of their friends, Donato del Corno, were not understood as mere sex acts, unrelated to his persona, but as an important aspect of his social identity.⁶⁶

⁶² Ibidem, III.48.

⁶³ Ibidem, I.6.

⁶⁴ Pucci, ‘Tra atto sessuale’, 25-27.

⁶⁵ Ruggiero, *Machiavelli in Love*, 29.

⁶⁶ Ibidem, 126-132.

The preferences of other men were even public knowledge. In his sermons, the famous preacher Girolamo Savonarola repeatedly urges his Florentine audience to report notorious sodomites to the authorities, as among them “there are many who are infamous, and don’t need further examination” and because “those who are public sodomites have no need of witnesses.”⁶⁷ As was shown in the previous section, the sexual preferences of Gianantonio Bazzi became a lifelong social identity, reflected in his nickname *Il Sodoma*. Bazzi took glory in this name, even singing about it and having it proclaimed in public at the races – something that led James Saslow to argue that, even without reverting to over-simplified essentialism, “one can still maintain that someone calling himself Mr. Sodomite is a good place to start looking for the roots of a homosexual identity”.⁶⁸

The belief in the universal ‘bisexuality’ of all men coexisted with a fear that the same-sex desire of some men could be accompanied by a total indifference, disgust, or hatred towards women, and a rejection of marriage and procreative sex. In his sermon on sodomy, the Southern Italian preacher Roberto Caracciolo lists seven “characteristics of sodomites” [*conditiones sodomitarum*]. One of these is the exclusivity of their desire for men, resulting in a general aversion towards women. Caracciolo writes that sodomites “desire men more than women (...) with an irrational, even bestial evil extinguishing the love for women and inciting the ardor for men and males against every obligation.”⁶⁹ Caracciolo may have been inspired by the famous fourteenth-century preacher Bernardino of Siena who attributed local population losses to the sodomites’ erotic apathy toward women. According to him, “the cursed sodomites are so blind in this wickedness of theirs that no matter how beautiful a woman may be, to him she stinks and is displeasing.”⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Girolamo Savonarola, *Ezechiele* Vol. 1, 101; *Salmi*, Vol. 2, 158.

⁶⁸ Saslow, ‘Il Sodoma’, 198.

⁶⁹ Roberto Caracciolo, *Sermones quadragesimales*, 85r: “Quarta conditio sodomitarum erat ardor desiderii. Plus enim desiderabant illi in viros que in mulieres. (...) Denique irrationabile et plusquam bestiale malus quo extinguitur amor ad mulieres et icenditur ardor contra omne debitum ad viros et masculos.”

⁷⁰ Roche, *Forbidden Friendships*, 28, 39-41.

This threatening image described by preachers is mirrored in literary fiction. In the satire *La Cazzaria*, the character Arsiccio repeatedly emphasizes his own sexual preferences for men and his first-hand knowledge about anal sex, bragging about the “secret touches” that he has learned from practical experience, and praising the pleasures of anal sex with a beautiful young man.⁷¹ Apart from praising the male body, the character repeatedly emphasizes his fear of women and disgust for the female body. He described women as ferocious, insatiable creatures, whose vaginas have frighteningly enormous dimensions, a great putrid smell, and a menstrual flow that is like “a purge from a malignant infected wound” that “greatly harms anything that it touches.”⁷² These misogynist remarks and fear or disgust of the vagina seem to reflect Caracciolo’s belief that one of the harmful effects of sodomy was the hatred and disgust towards women that resulted from it. But the causality can also be reversed, meaning that the disgust of women resulted in sodomy rather than the other way around. The theological authority Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) actually warned menstruating wives not to refer to their condition openly, because this could cause their husbands to be so disgusted by them that they would turn to sodomy – a warning that was repeated by Bernardino of Siena in one of his sermons.⁷³

A lifestyle choice?

In fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy, engaging in same-sex relations was frequently presented as a lifestyle choice. This is reflected in the language that the authors of novellas use. The wife of a character who is notorious for engaging in sodomy hopes that her husband will one day “change his habits” [*mutar vezzo*]. Another character’s preference for boys of is talked of as part of his “accustomed style of living” [*consueto stile di vivere*].⁷⁴ In sermons, sodomy is often presented as an acquired lifestyle as well. It is a bad habit

⁷¹ Antonio Vignali, *La Cazzaria*, 87, 93, 114.

⁷² Ibidem, 109, 135-137, 156. On the fear of menstrual blood, see chapter three.

⁷³ Elliot, ‘Bernardino of Siena’, 174.

⁷⁴ Matteo Bandello, *Le Novelle*, I.6 and I.40.

that people should avoid or rid themselves of. In his sermon on sodomy, Roberto Caracciolo speaks of it in terms of “contagion”, following the example of theological authorities like Albert Magnus. It is a vice that has “infected” the whole of society and which is so widespread that no one is safe. People who see others committing this sin are very likely to copy each other, and children, especially, should be protected from bad influences.⁷⁵

Many sources, however, can also be found that reflect the perception of same-sex preference as a natural, in-born inclination. One of the discourses providing an explanation for the existence of same-sex desire was Platonic philosophy. In Plato’s *Symposium*, a myth told by the character Aristophanes relates that at the beginning of time, all human beings had two heads, four arms, four legs, and two sets of genitalia. There were three sexes: those who were all male, those who were all female, and those who were half male, half female. After they tried to rebel against the gods, Zeus chopped them in half, separating the two bodies. Ever since that time, people have been looking for their one true love, their other half, to literally make them feel whole again. Thus, there are men who are looking for other men, women who are looking for other women, and men and women who are looking for love in the opposite sex. It is with this myth that Plato explained and justified homosocial if not homoerotic relations, and this passage of the *Symposium* was often commented on by fifteenth- and sixteenth century writers.⁷⁶

One popular way to explain same-sex desire were divinatory sciences such as astrology and physiognomy, a topic to which Kenneth Borris and George Rousseau have dedicated a foundational collection of essays.⁷⁷ Discussions about innate sexual preferences were already taking place from the late twelfth century onwards – triggered by the study of ancient and medieval texts like Avicenna’s *Canon*, Aristotle’s *Problemata*, and the astrological manuals of Ptolemy, Pseudo-Ptolemy and Firmicus Maternus –

⁷⁵ Roberto Caracciolo, *Sermones quadragesimales*, 85r-v. Reference to Augustine found in: P.G. Maxwell-Stuart, ‘Representations of Same-Sex Love in Early Modern Astrology’ in: K. Borris and G. Rousseau eds., *The Sciences of Homosexuality in Early Modern Europe* (New York 2008) 165-182: 176.

⁷⁶ Murray, ‘Agnolo Firenzuola’, 203-211.

⁷⁷ Borris and Rousseau eds., *Sciences of Homosexuality*.

yet fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian scholars seem to have been particularly fascinated by it.⁷⁸ According to natal astrology, a person's sexual inclinations were determined by the configuration of masculine and feminine planets in relation to masculine and feminine zodiacal signs at birth. Marsilio Ficino for instance states that "some men, either on account of their nature or their training, are better equipped for the love of the soul than for those of the body" and "therefore naturally love men more than women." He claims that "this is especially frequent in people for whom Venus was in the masculine sign and in conjunction, termination or opposition with Saturn."⁷⁹ Giovanni Pontano's (1426-1503) *De rebus coelestibus* states that when Venus and Mars are only found in feminine signs in a man's horoscope they predict that he will be a *cinaedus* – a common word used to describe the receiving partner in anal sex.⁸⁰ Leone Ebreo states that men in whose nativity Venus is in the house of Mercury, and Mercury in the house of Venus are inclined to "foul and unnatural lust". Among these men there are those who take the penetrating as well as the receiving role and whom Ebreo calls "hermaphrodites".⁸¹ Girolamo Cardano (1501-76) states that Venus's presence in the first house determines the birth of "beautiful people, favored by pleasantry of speech", but also makes them likely to develop same-sex preferences.⁸² These theories were applied to real-life people as well. Girolamo Cardano and Luca Gaurico (1476–1558) both published a collection of celebrity horoscopes, discussing the genitures of princes, Popes and other famous men. Their horoscopes for the notorious poet Francesco Filelfo (1398-1481) attributed his alleged sexual vices, including his preference for boys, to the malefic influences of Mars and Venus at his time

⁷⁸ K. Borris, 'The Prehistory of Homosexuality in the Early Modern Sciences' in: K. Borris and G. Rousseau eds., *The Sciences of Homosexuality in Early Modern Europe* (New York 2008) 1-40: 6, 29.

⁷⁹ Dall'Orto, 'Socratic Love', 37-39.

⁸⁰ Maxwell-Stuart, 'Representations', 170.

⁸¹ Borris, *Same-Sex Desire*, 171.

⁸² Giglioni, 'Bolognan Boys', 205.

of birth.⁸³ The biography of Michelangelo published in 1553 by his pupil Ascanio Condivi assigned him a horoscope with a conjunction of Venus and Mercury.⁸⁴

A related field of study was physiognomy, which claimed to reveal an individuals' sexual tendencies by examining their hands, foreheads, and other bodily features. One of the most important physiognomers was Bartolomeo della Rocca, also known as Cocles (1467-1504). According to him, the bodily features of the *cinaedus* include a tendency to lean to the right when walking, a high, soft or cracking voice, soft flesh, and a pale skin. These were all believed to be signs of a cool and moist and therefore relatively feminine constitution. It was implied that, although these men have a bodily constitution that is 'hot' enough to be genitally male, they are too cool and moist to become normatively masculine in their appearance, behavior and preferences. The penetrating partner, whom Cocles calls the pedicator, has a more sanguine complexion (hot and moist), which is associated with sensuality, and they are described as hairy and muscled.⁸⁵ Girolamo Cardano makes a distinction between three different types. The "obsequious" type, who "hangs on to young boys" can be recognized by the lines between the eyebrows. The "mentally deranged" type, who "rejoices at frequenting the company of boys, women, and mean inexperienced people" has a pointed head, thick eyelids, and a sharp voice. "Lascivious" types who "abandon themselves to filthy and depraved forms of copulation" including pedication and fellatio, have a hairy body, effeminate voice, and bend to the right while walking.⁸⁶

Other explanations for an innate same-sex preference were based on human anatomy. Within the area of medicine and natural philosophy, there was a debate on the origins and causes of homosexual desire. It was triggered by a work known as the *Problemata*, attributed to the ancient Greek

⁸³ H.D. Rutkin, 'Astrological Conditioning of Same-Sexual Relations in Girolamo Gardano's Theoretical Treatises and Celebrity Genitures' in: K. Borris and G. Rousseau eds., *The Sciences of Homosexuality in Early Modern Europe* (New York 2008) 183-200: 192-197.

⁸⁴ Borris, *Same-Sex Desire*, 157.

⁸⁵ Borris, 'Sodomizing Science', 138-147, 153.

⁸⁶ Giglioni, 'Bolognan Boys', 204-205.

philosopher Aristotle, and was focused on trying to explain why some men enjoy the receiving role in sex, and some both the receiving and the penetrating role. Joan Cadden, who has analyzed this debate in medieval medicine from the late thirteenth until the fifteenth century, showed that scholars used ‘nature’ as well as ‘nurture’ types of argumentation. Medieval authors stated that some men are born with anatomical defects that divert the semen from its proper path. In some of them, the passages for the sperm were said to be directed towards the anus instead of the penis, or to the anus as well as the penis, and therefore these men seek anal stimulation so that the sperm can be expelled. This anatomical explanation could also be connected with astrology, as the Greek scholar George of Trebizond (1395-1486) believed that “when [Venus] is in conjunction with [Saturn] it obstructs and closes the seminal passageways of men.”⁸⁷

In fifteenth-century Italy, physician Alessandro Benedetti came up with a different explanation. Benedetti claims that the pleasure that receiving partners experience during anal sex is due to the fact that one of the four muscles of the anus is connected to the penis. Because of this connection, he says, “when this muscle is titillated, pathics [*pathici*] by the unspeakable vice of their nature burst forth in lust.”⁸⁸ This passage, brief as it is, is particularly interesting, as it reveals the coexistence of minoritizing and universalizing discourses. On the one hand, the biological explanation for pleasure that Benedetti provides here, a connective muscle between anus and penis, could be applied to any man, ergo, any man might experience pleasure this way.⁸⁹ On the other hand, Benedetti explicitly distinguishes a particular group of men, the *pathici*, who enjoy being penetrated this way because of their “nature”. This perspective on sexual pleasure appears to be similar to what

⁸⁷ Cadden, *Nothing Natural is Shameful*, 3-5, 36, 46, 75, 101.

⁸⁸ Alessandro Benedetti, *Anatomice*, 132. Original Latin: “Ex reliquis unus cum membro virili committitur, cuius titillatu infando naturae vitio pathici in libidinem erumpent.”

⁸⁹ The erogenous function of the connective “muscles” [*musculis*] that Benedetti is describing might be a reference to the relatively high concentration of nerve endings which makes the anus an erogenous zone. Specifically, it might refer to the pudendal nerve which branches to supply the external anal sphincter, as well as branching to the dorsal nerve of both the clitoris and the penis. See: B.R. Komisaruk et al., *The Orgasm Answer Guide* (Baltimore 2009) 108-109.

David Halperin has found for ancient Greece, where the ability to enjoy the receiving role in sex was both seen as an identifier for a small group of deviant males, the *kinaidoi*, and as a potential threat to the masculine identity of every male.⁹⁰

The problem with all of these explanations for same-sex desire was that their emphasis on inborn sexual preferences seemed to challenge the theological doctrine on free will and moral responsibility. If people are born with these preferences, acting upon them accords with their nature, meaning that they cannot be held accountable for their sins. Authors of divinatory works often encountered problems with the religious authorities, and many of their texts were banned by the papal Indexes of prohibited books. For this reason, scholars themselves tried to downplay the deterministic implications of their theories: natural inclinations could explain same-sex desires, but were not meant to legitimize same-sex acts.⁹¹ In his commentary on Pseudo-Aristotle's *Problemata*, Giulio Guastavini (fl. 16th century) insists that people always retain their free will and hence their full moral responsibility. He states that even a man who by birth has been given an anatomy that entices him to sodomy, with his "channels blocked and the semen flowing towards the fundament", can still resist vice, just as not all eunuchs are pathics, and some are very chaste.⁹² Pietro d'Abano (c. 1257-1316) and Giambattista della Porta (1535?-1615) claim that *cinaedi* could alter the phlegmatic constitution that encouraged their sexual proclivities by living in hot, harsh, windy places, ingesting food and drugs "of a drying nature", and devoting themselves to exercise.⁹³ Astrologers often defended their theories by stating that the stars incline but do not compel, and that individual choices and moral character have an important impact. Marsilio Ficino states that, regardless of the power of the heavens, people still retain free will in

⁹⁰ Halperin, 'Forgetting Foucault', esp. 100-101.

⁹¹ Borris, 'Prehistory of Homosexuality', 27, 29.

⁹² F. Wallis, 'Giulio Guastavini's Commentary on Pseudo-Aristotle's Account of Male Same-Sexual Coitus, *Problemata* 4.26' in: K. Borris and G. Rousseau eds., *The Sciences of Homosexuality in Early Modern Europe* (New York 2008) 57-74: 61.

⁹³ Borris, 'Prehistory of Homosexuality', 14.

managing their lives.⁹⁴ The philosopher Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) argues that Socrates deserves to be praised for his continence, because his physiognomical profile revealed a “natural leaning towards the filthy love of boys” [*la sua natural inclinatione al sporco amor di gargioni*], but he succeeded in resisting these inclinations.⁹⁵

Other explanations for same-sex preferences were focused on acquired experience rather than innate characteristics. The boundary between ‘nature’ and ‘nurture’, however, was not that strict, because deeply ingrained habits were deemed capable of transforming into a new nature. Aristotle’s *Problemata* taught that some men are born with anatomical defects, while others develop their sexual preferences based on experiences early in life, following a sequence of pleasure, memory of that pleasure, and the desire to feel that pleasure again. The age at which the experiences occurred and the memories formed is a significant factor, as “for those who get used to doing such things around the time of their youth [*iuventute*], habit is thereafter nature in them.”⁹⁶ According to Pietro d’Abano, these men are much more culpable than others, because instead of being born that way, they developed these sexual appetites “on account of depraved and filthy habit”.⁹⁷ Astrology likewise considered the influence of acquired experiences. Girolamo Cardano believed that a full astrological assessment of a person’s sexual proclivities should discuss developments later in life as well as significant non-astrological factors such as cultural patterns and personal experiences. Cardano states that Italians were less strict towards sodomy than Germans, because “over a long period of time, forcible acts transform into one’s nature”. He mentions the importance of the working environment and the people by which one is surrounded, as certain occupations such as painting, sculpture and music especially “incline men to the lust for boys” [*libido puerorum*].⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Maxwell-Stuart, ‘Representations’, 175.

⁹⁵ Dall’Orto, ‘Socratic Love’, 49-50.

⁹⁶ Cadden, *Nothing Natural is Shameful*, 3-5, 74, 82, 91.

⁹⁷ Cadden, *Meanings of Sex*, 216.

⁹⁸ Rutkin, ‘Astrological Conditioning’, 184-186; Giglioni, ‘Bolognan Boys’, 201, 212.

In fifteenth-century sermons, sodomy is often presented as an acquired sin as well. Roberto Caracciolo talks about sodomy as “contagious” in the sense that people are introduced to this sin through the example of others. However, although the preacher presents sodomy as a lifestyle that men voluntarily engage in, he also states that it is a habit that may become very difficult or even impossible to break. In a sense, a same-sex preference can become a new nature, especially if a person has been having sex with men for a long time. According to Caracciolo, one “characteristic of sodomites” is the “tenacity of their desire” [*tenacitas voluptatis*]. He compares this tenacity to “bituminous soil” [*gleba bituminis*], a kind of tarry substance gluing people to the earth, making them unable to move. Age is once again portrayed as an important factor in determining a person’s proclivity for same-sex desire. Whereas youth entices people to experiment with new things, old age prevents them from breaking bad habits. For this reason, “those who have become old in this vice are not allowed [or: able] to return to penitence.”⁹⁹ Caracciolo’s predecessor Bernardino of Siena had likewise commented on the difficulty of giving up sodomy. Bernardino saw the age of 32 or 33 as a crucial turning point: it was almost impossible for a man to change his habits after that age.¹⁰⁰

The belief about habit becoming a new nature also has literary examples. At the end of Pietro Aretino’s *Il marescalco*, when the stablemaster marries his boy bride, one of the characters comments that “you never get the frog out of the marsh”. Kenneth Borris believes that this comment not only implies that the stablemaster’s habits are incorrigible, but also that his homosexual preferences set him apart from other people, as a different species with a different way of life that is appropriate to him, like the marsh is appropriate to the frog.¹⁰¹ Another example is Matteo Bandello’s story about Porcellio. The court poet, notorious for his “appetite for kid’s flesh,”

⁹⁹ Roberto Caracciolo, *Sermones quadragesimales*, 85r: “Sexta conditio fuit tenacitas voluptatis: que illos inveteratos in hoc vicio ad penitentiam non sinebat redire. Huic tenacitati correspondet gleba bituminis quam locus ille multifarie vomit: bitumen autem est quedam terra sicut colla adherens.”

¹⁰⁰ Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 39-41 and 114-115.

¹⁰¹ Borris, *Same-Sex Love*, 350.

had finally married at the urge of his patron, but neglected his new wife and continued having sex with boys. When Porcellio falls ill, his wife becomes frightened for the state of his soul, and invites a friar to take his confession, explaining to him that her husband has often “sinned against nature.” However, when Porcellio is asked whether he has committed *peccato contra naturam*, he acts as if he were scandalized and says that he does not know what the friar is talking about. The friar, ashamed of ever having asked such a question, quickly moves on to other things and gives him absolution. When the wife hears of her husband’s denial she sends the friar back into the room, but the husband denies again, and the friar finally goes back a third time. “Alas, son,” he says, “I don’t know what to make of you. You have denied to me that you have committed the sin against nature, (...) and yet I am sure that you are a thousand times more eager of boys than goats are of salt.” Hearing this, Porcellio shakes his head and replies: “Ho, ho, reverend father, you did not know how to question me. To divert myself with boys is more natural to me than eating and drinking to man, and you asked me if I sinned against nature!” The friar, shocked at these words, sighs and leaves.¹⁰² The pun in this scene, of course, is based on the ambiguity of the term “natural”: sexual relations between men were seen as “unnatural” in a teleological sense, as their body parts were not serving divinely ordained goals, but could nonetheless stem from the “natural” inclinations of these men.

The story about Porcellio combines the different perceptions on same-sex desire that have been discussed in the previous two sections of this chapter. Sexual relations between men were simultaneously discussed as a sinful act and as a marker for identity. According to Paolo Pucci, the ontological contribution by the character of Porcellio anticipates the moment in which the concept of sodomy passes from unrelated sex acts to a mark of identity.¹⁰³ To this, I would add that the story simultaneously discusses homosexual preference in terms of a habit or lifestyle and in terms of a natural inclination, and that Porcellio’s response represents the moment in which a habit becomes a new nature.

¹⁰² Matteo Bandello, *Le Novelle*, I.6.

¹⁰³ Pucci, ‘Tra atto sessuale’, 38.

A lesser evil

While numerous sources from Italy between 1450-1550 reflect on sexual relations between men, sources on sexual relations between women are much rarer. To a large extent, the invisibility of these relations is due to the fact that the overwhelming majority of the available source material was written by male authors. Although there was a significant number of female authors, their works rarely mention homosexuality, either male or female. To the male authors studied for this book, sexual desire between women was apparently a topic of minor interest. While preachers were anxious about illicit relations between men, and the authors of manuals for confession included questions on male-male relations, these texts do not mention sexual relations between women. Likewise, whereas sexual relations between men were discussed by physicians, they paid no attention to same-sex desire between women.

Literary sources, which do mention sexual desires or sex acts between women, are much more lenient in their judgment than they are in case of male same-sex desires and sex acts. Although narrators and characters often reprove male characters, most literary sources do not contain moralistic judgments of female same-sex relations. Even Pietro Aretino, who regularly has his characters express their disapproval of particular sex acts, does not include negative comments on the topic. In many stories, sexual desire between women is portrayed as either comical or harmless. In the *Orlando Furioso*, Richardet introduces the Bradamante/Fiordispina story as something amusing to pass the time with, and states that he does not believe there can be a story more beautiful than this one.¹⁰⁴ In the *commedie erudite* studied by Laura Giannetti, sexual relations between women are presented as innocuous. Male characters state that there is no harm in women touching and kissing each other, and that it is something you see every day. No moralistic comments condemning sexual and romantic desires between women are included, nor are the female characters portrayed as wicked and

¹⁰⁴ Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, XXV.27.

lecherous, but they are invariably set in a positive light, often even as heroic.¹⁰⁵

The lack of concern is reflected by legal records as well. From a theoretical perspective, female acts of sodomy were seen as legally equivalent to male sodomy. Legal historian Louis Crompton has documented many medieval and early modern law codes that prescribed capital penalties for sexual acts between women.¹⁰⁶ In practice, however, women appear to have been prosecuted far less often than men. While there are numerous sources recording the prosecution of sexual relations between men in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy, sexual activity between women is much less conspicuous. For the entire medieval period until 1500, only about a dozen cases against alleged female sodomites have (so far) been found for the whole of Europe. These cases almost exclusively date from the fifteenth century, and most of them involve women from the Low Countries or the Holy Roman Empire.¹⁰⁷ The evidence for the Italian peninsula is fragmentary. The oldest medieval case of female sodomy concerns a woman from Bologna, who in 1295 was accused of using dildos to penetrate other women.¹⁰⁸ In 1501, a Venetian noblewoman was burned to death in Rome for engaging in sexual practices with a girl of about eleven years old.¹⁰⁹ In the early seventeenth century, a nun called Benedetta Carlini was accused of performing “immodest acts” with one of her fellow nuns.¹¹⁰

An important explanation for the lack of interest in or concern about sexual relations between women is the “lesser evil” argument. Sexual relations between women were seen as more harmless than extramarital relations between women and men, because there was no risk of engendering

¹⁰⁵ Giannetti, *Lelia's Kiss*, 76-77, 101.

¹⁰⁶ L. Crompton, ‘The Myth of Lesbian Impunity’, *Journal of Homosexuality* 6 (1980-1) 11-25.

¹⁰⁷ For an overview of twelve of these cases, see: J.M. Bennett, “‘Lesbian-Like’ and the Social History of Lesbianisms”, *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9.1-2 (2000) 1-24: 3.

¹⁰⁸ For a study of this case, see: C. Lansing, ‘Donna con Donna? A 1295 Inquest into Female Sodomy’ in: P.M. Soergel ed., *Sexuality and Culture in Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (New York 2005) 109-122.

¹⁰⁹ Giannetti, *Lelia's Kiss*, 83.

¹¹⁰ Brown, *Immodest Acts*.

illegitimate children. This argument is occasionally made explicit by authors from Renaissance Italy. During a dialogue on the nature of love in Firenzuola's *Ragionamenti*, the female character Fioretta asks the leader of the discussion whether it would not be more convenient to direct her love at a beautiful woman, for which she would never be reproved, than to direct it at a handsome man, as this could potentially endanger her honor.¹¹¹ In one of the *commedie erudite*, a father who has heard about his daughter's secret *rendezvous* with a (cross-dressing) man, uses the fact that she was actually hoping to meet a woman as a mitigating factor.¹¹² At first glance, this "lesser evil" argument does not seem to explain the double standard for sex between women and sex between men: neither produces illegitimate children, so why would one be considered more innocuous? This, however, may be explained through the double standard for male and female sexuality in general. Female transgressions posed a much greater risk to both personal and family honor, so women who engaged in same-sex acts in order to prevent fornication or adultery with men were a lesser evil. For men, on the other hand, extramarital relations with women were generally considered as more innocuous, so having sex with other men could be perceived as a less justifiable alternative.

Another belief supported this "lesser evil" argument: the conviction that same-sex relations would never alienate women from men completely. As was shown in the previous sections of this chapter, part of the anxiety about male-male relations lay in the fact that these relations could cause men to despise women and give up marriage and procreative sex entirely. In a similar vein, in Firenzuola's *Ragionamenti*, the character Gostanza answers Fioretta's question about the advantage of lesbian love by stating that if all women were to award their love to other women, this would lead to a perpetual war between women and men.¹¹³ The possibility of all women renouncing sexual relations with all men, however, was considered much smaller than the reverse. This was the result of two beliefs about female same-sex desire that will be discussed in the following two sections. First,

¹¹¹ Agnolo Firenzuola, *I Ragionamenti*, 57.

¹¹² Giannetti, *Lelia's Kiss*, 105.

¹¹³ Agnolo Firenzuola, *I Ragionamenti*, 59.

unlike sexual relations between men, sexual relations between women were not seen as (fully) satisfactory. Secondly, male homosexuality was more conceivable than female homosexuality.

Unfulfilled desires

As we have seen in the previous sections of this chapter, the pleasures to be found in male same-sex relations were emphasized in many different sources. The authors of lyrical poetry celebrated them, anatomists tried to explain them, and preachers portrayed them as so addictive that they were almost impossible to give up. This emphasis on sexual pleasure is not as apparent in discussions of female same-sex desire. For a large part, this was the result of phallogentric ideas about sexuality: male authors found it difficult to imagine sexual activity when there was no penis involved. As long as women did not use dildos or other devices that mimicked penises, their relations were not seen as fully sexual.¹¹⁴

Some authors portray female characters as completely unaware of the possibility to enjoy sex with another woman. In Matteo Maria Boiardo's romance epic *Orlando Innamorato*, princess Fiordespina falls in love with the female warrior Bradamante. As Bradamante is lying asleep by a stream wearing full armor, Fiordespina thinks that she is a male knight. When Bradamante wakes up and sees the infatuated Fiordespina looking at her, she sighs and thinks: "One of us will not be pleased. She is deceived by what she sees. When grate grates on grate [instead of cheese], not much is gained [*ché gratugia a gratugia poco acquista*]." The narrator considers Fiordespina's love comical and misplaced, calling it a "vain love" [*vano amore*] and stating that he knew quite well what Bradamante lacked [*quelche li manca ben sapre' dirio*].¹¹⁵ As Boiardo left this scene unfinished, the story was

¹¹⁴ E.g. P. Simons, 'Lesbian (In)Visibility in Italian Renaissance Culture: Diana and Other Cases of *donna con donna*', *Journal of Homosexuality* 27.1 (1994) 81-122; and J. Murray, 'Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible: Lesbians in the Middle Ages' in: V.L. Bullough and J.A. Brundage eds., *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality* (New York 1996) 199-222.

¹¹⁵ Matteo Maria Boiardo, *Orlando Innamorato*, 3.8.64-65 and 3.9.4-5, 11, 25-26.

continued by Ludovico Ariosto in his *Orlando Furioso*. Ariosto similarly describes Fiordispina's love as vain, calling it unnatural and impossible to satisfy: an *amor impossibilis*.¹¹⁶ Bradamante tries to deflect Fiordispina from what she calls "this insane and profitless craving" and Fiordispina herself laments her cruel fate. She states that the love she feels is "an even greater folly" than loving your own son, or father, or a bull (referring to classical stories), because at least those desires can be consummated. With any other type of love, good or bad, she could hope to reach "the desired end" [*desiato fin*, i.e. consummation], while her desire alone can have no fulfillment [*è senza fine*].¹¹⁷ To Fiordispina, the only conceivable resolution is for her beloved to be turned into a man, and this is how the author finally resolves the story. As it turns out, Bradamante has an identical twin brother called Richardet, who secretly takes his sister's place in Fiordispina's bed. After he has told her that a nymph has magically transformed Bradamante into a man, Fiordispina inquisitively fondles "the thing which she had craved" and gladly accepts Richardet as her lover.¹¹⁸

Other authors do show an awareness of the pleasures of female same-sex relations without the use of penis-like devices, but they still present it as inferior to having sex with a man. In a novella by Agnolo Firenzuola, a young woman called Lavinia arranges to sleep with her maid Lucia while her husband is away, as she "longed for someone who could shake the dust of her fur coat [*scoteva la polvere del pelliccione*] better than her husband". While they are in bed, "she started with great delight [*con grandissimo disio*] to embrace and kiss her, and thus continuing her frolicking [*scherzando*], she put her hands there where we distinguish men from women." At this point in the story, however, the description of the (supposedly) lesbian sex scene is broken off, as Lavinia finds out that her bedfellow is actually a man in disguise. After she has recovered from the shock, her desire for her bedfellow increases. She is impressed by the beauty of the young man and believes

¹¹⁶ For an in depth discussion of the literary topos of queer female desire as an *amor impossibilis* in medieval literature and in the Italian romance epics, see: M. DeCoste, *Hopeless Love: Boiardo, Ariosto, and Narratives of Queer Female Desire* (Toronto 2009).

¹¹⁷ Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, 25.34-35.

¹¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 25.58-69.

“that this transformation must have been caused by a miracle, so that she could truly [*sicuramente*] enjoy the years of her youth.”¹¹⁹ Laura Giannetti’s inspiring study of the *commedie erudite* also includes several female characters who take the initiative to have sexual relations with other women. In the anonymous comedy *La Veniexiana*, a young widow crawls into bed with her servant girl. In other comedies, female characters who are cross-dressing as a man, fall in love with another woman, and arrange an amorous *rendez-vous*. Even in these stories, however, sex with a man is presented as superior. The cross-dressing women are glad that their beloveds turn out to be male, and for the young widow in *La Veniexiana*, the embraces of her maid are only a temporary substitute – she would much rather be with the handsome man she is in love with.¹²⁰

Interestingly, the literary portrayal of sex without a penis or penis-like device as something that is ultimately unsatisfactory was not due to a lack of (medical) knowledge. Even before the supposed “rediscovery of the clitoris” in the 1550s, evidence can be found for a medical awareness about the possibility of female orgasm through external stimulation of the genital area and digital penetration.¹²¹ Michele Savonarola, in his treatise on pregnancy, advises the male partner to rub the place “between the sex and the nature” [*fra il sexo e la natura*] with his fingers, because this is a particularly sensitive spot, and to bring the penis [*l’oxelazo*] near without actually penetrating [*oxelare*]. As was discussed in chapter three, the goal of this foreplay was to entice the woman to ejaculate her sperm, so that she is able to conceive. Savonarola warns men “to be prudent with these caresses,” because some women have a hot complexion and could “spill their seed” [*seminare il suo grano*] prematurely (i.e. before penetration and male

¹¹⁹ Agnolo Firenzuola, *Ragionamenti*, I.2.

¹²⁰ Giannetti, *Lelia’s Kiss*, 94-112.

¹²¹ Two rival anatomists, Gabriele Falloppio in his *Observationes anatomicae* (written around 1550 but not published until 1561), and Realdo Colombo in his *De re anatomica* (pub. 1559) both claimed to have discovered the clitoris. See: K. Park: ‘The Rediscovery of the Clitoris: French Medicine and the Tribade, 1570-1620’ in: C. Mazzio and D. Hillman eds., *The Body in Parts: Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe* (New York 1997) 171-193: 177.

ejaculation).¹²² Even though this text is focused on sex between men and women, it does show an awareness of the fact that the non-penetrative rubbing of the genitals could provoke female orgasm. This idea can also be found in Pietro Bairo's *Secreti Medicinali*, which, as we have seen in previous chapters, advises the rubbing of the "mouth of the nature [*bocca della natura*]" with an oiled finger as a way to expel retained semen and prevent uterine disease.¹²³ Although Bairo's description is unclear on who ought to perform this procedure, Galen and Avicenna both stated that the procedure should be executed by a midwife, making it possible to see it within a context of sex acts between women.¹²⁴ The work of medics like Bairo and Savonarola shows that there was an awareness of the fact that non-penetrative sex could produce female orgasm. The consequences of this fact for female same-sex relations, however, were not elaborated upon in the literary sources of Renaissance Italy.¹²⁵

In line with phallogocentric ideas, the only female characters who climax through masturbation or sex with another woman are those who engage in penetrative sex with penis-like devices. However, it is important to note that even these women complain about dildos being meager substitutes for the real thing. In Pietro Aretino's *Ragionamenti*, nuns make use of glass dildos to penetrate each other. One of the nuns fits the dildo between her thighs, while the other lies on her back and puts her legs on the other's shoulders, who starts "poking her now in the good way, now in the bad" until she had "made her do what she had to do" [i.e. climax]. Then, they switch positions.¹²⁶ Even though the nuns are capable of bringing about each other's

¹²² Michele Savonarola, *Ad mulieres ferrarienses*, 40-42.

¹²³ Pietro Bairo, *Secreti Medicinali*, 27.1: "Della suffogation della matrice". For more on this topic, see the section on female illness in chapter four and the section on nuns in chapter six.

¹²⁴ Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine*, 174-176; Cadden, 'Western Medicine', 58-59.

¹²⁵ Interestingly, from the late sixteenth century onwards, we see a profusion of discourse on the topic in medical as well as literary sources, especially in France and England. See for instance: V. Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge 2002).

¹²⁶ Pietro Aretino, *I Ragionamenti*, 47.

orgasm, they nonetheless consider the use of dildos unsatisfactory. They call it “madness, to think that our appetites can be satisfied by these filthy things, that can give no kisses, and don’t have tongues or hands to touch keys”. They emphasize the importance of replacing an artificial penis with a real one: “If we get such pleasure from painted pictures [*dipinti*], then what would we get from living things [*vivi*]?”¹²⁷ Aretino’s monastery scene bears a close resemblance to an older novella by Giovanni Sercambi (1348-1428) in which a group of nuns makes use of a silken dildo filled with millet that they strap on to penetrate each other. The women are very pleased with this arrangement, until a young man disguises himself as a nun and introduces them to the sensation of a real penis. From that moment onwards, the nuns only have sex with men, as none of them want to use dildos anymore.¹²⁸

Sercambi’s novella similarly focuses on the opposition between the lifeless dildo and the actual penis made from flesh, but what makes this story even more interesting is the emphasis on the ability of the penis to ejaculate. Angelo, the male character disguised as a nun, is exposed because of his ejaculation, and it is exactly this ejaculation that the other nuns crave for: the narrator states that the abbess wanted Angelo “to deposit the same liquid in her basket [*sua secchia*]” that he had given to the other nun Rosa before.¹²⁹ In medieval medicine, receiving the male sperm was believed to be a source of female pleasure. Before the middle of the thirteenth century, several medics had stated that women experience greater pleasure in sex because they experience it in more ways: both emitting and receiving semen.¹³⁰ This argument was still common in the medical discourse of fifteenth-century Italy and can for instance be found in Girolamo Manfredi’s *Il Perché*.¹³¹ The importance of male ejaculation might be an additional explanation for the fact that sex between women is presented as unsatisfactory in general, and that even penetrative sex with a dildo is not considered as satisfactory as penetration with an actual penis. This theory concurs with Patricia Simons’

¹²⁷ Ibidem, 27-28.

¹²⁸ Giovanni Sercambi, *Il Novelliere* (ed. by L. Rossi, Rome 1974) 190-195.

¹²⁹ Giovanni Sercambi, *Il Novelliere*, 194.

¹³⁰ Cadden, *Meanings of Sex*, 151, 158; Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine*, 81.

¹³¹ Girolamo Manfredi, *Il Perché*, Liber I, Cap. 5, 120.

argument that the male ability to ejaculate was more central to male sexuality than the ability to penetrate. Simons mentions examples from late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century French literary pornography, in which the flow of male semen is presented as essential to female pleasure.¹³² Other evidence for this theory are archeological finds of hollow dildos with a pump mechanism that enables the release of liquid. Simons mentions one eighteenth-century ivory example from England,¹³³ but there are earlier examples as well. Two seventeenth-century wooden dildos with a pump mechanism have been found in an archeological site in the Netherlands. One of them was a very naturalistic imitation of a penis, including a scrotum; the other was a smaller, more stylized type. Possible uses for these objects include vaginal douching for contraceptive purposes, or inserting medicinal herbs to increase fertility, but they could also have been used as a means to induce female orgasm, for reasons of pleasure or health.¹³⁴

But these were few

While medical, theological, and literary sources describe men who have an (almost) exclusive sexual preference for other men, the desire of a woman for another woman is seldom presented as exclusive. Stories by Ariosto, Firenzuola and Aretino show that it was deemed possible for a woman to fall in love with or become aroused by another woman, but all of these stories emphasize that, to women, the gender of their beloved is irrelevant.

Sometimes, female characters initially believe that their beloved is a man, but their desire remains unchanged when this man turns out to be a woman. Princess Fiordispina, for instance, falls in love with a female warrior while believing that she is a male knight. When Bradamante reveals to the damsel that she is in fact a woman, this does not change the latter's desire for her. Bradamante "tactfully had her known that she was a maiden,"

¹³² Simons, *Sex of Men*, 210, 214.

¹³³ *Ibidem*, 215-216.

¹³⁴ H. Clevis and M. Klomp, 'Uit Zwolse klei getrokken. Team Archeologie bestaat 30 jaar', *Zwols Historisch Tijdschrift* 34.3 (Zwolle 2017) 119-120.

Ariosto writes, but these revelations “did not quench but a single spark” of Fiordispina’s passion. “To Fiordispina, Bradamante’s face seemed no less beautiful for this, her eyes and movements no less graceful. Her heart, which had already parted from her to bask in Bradamante’s adorable eyes, did not return to her because of this.”¹³⁵ Even when Fiordispina dresses her beloved in female clothing, hoping to dispel her own infatuation by enhancing Bradamante’s femininity, this does not diminish her desire.¹³⁶ At other times, the situation is reversed: some female characters are convinced that their beloved is female, but their desire stays the same when this woman turns out to be a man. This is the case with Lavinia, as well as with a number of women in the *commedie erudite*. Lavinia was at first quite shocked when she discovered that her bedfellow was a man. Having put her hands “there where we distinguish men from women” and “finding her there not a woman like herself”, she was “heavily astonished, and in one movement she pulled her hand back, completely stupefied, as if she had found a serpent inside a basket of herbs.”¹³⁷ The women in the *commedie erudite* are likewise shocked and even a little upset when their beloved turns out to be male.¹³⁸ Once these characters have recovered from the shock, however, all of them are equally content with a man.

In each of these stories, the author emphasizes that the female character would like a man just as much as a woman. Some of them, like Fiordispina, even prefer a man. Fiordispina has dreams “in which it seemed that Heaven had granted her a Bradamante transformed into a preferable sex” and prays to “Maccone [i.e. Muhammad] and all the gods” to grant her this wish. Some female characters even fantasize about a man whilst having sex with a woman. The nuns in the *Ragionamenti* become aroused by looking at a book with pornographic pictures of men and women having sex, and have sex with each other while “seized by a great desire to try the painted positions”.¹³⁹ The

¹³⁵ Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, 25.31-33.

¹³⁶ *Ibidem*, 25.40-41.

¹³⁷ Agnolo Firenzuola, *I Ragionamenti*, I.2.

¹³⁸ Giannetti, *Lelia's Kiss*, 96-112.

¹³⁹ Pietro Aretino, *I Ragionamenti*, 47.

widow in *La Veniexiana* fantasizes about the male object of her desire while embracing and kissing her maid.¹⁴⁰

While literary fiction does not include any female characters who have an exclusive, or predominant preference for women, other sources show that a belief in an innate female same-sex preference did exist. The divinatory sciences include several references to female homosexuality – even though these are very infrequent when compared with references to men. Giovanni Pontano, following the ancient authority of Ptolemy, states that when Venus and Mars are found only in masculine signs in a woman’s horoscope, they predict that a woman will “perhaps abandon customary feminine [sexual] practice and begin to do what is more appropriate to a man”.¹⁴¹ Bartolomeo della Rocca claims that certain signs on a woman’s hands denote her inclination towards morally offensive lust [*nephande luxurie*]. This type of lust includes incest, masturbation and bestiality, but sexual relations with other women as well: “in women, morally offensive lust can be understood when women come together vulva to vulva and rub one another, of which Juvenal writes in this verse: ‘They ride one another, turn and turn about, and disport themselves for the Moon to witness.’ And such women are called by the ancient term tribades.”¹⁴² There are a few examples of these divinatory theories being applied to particular individuals (in a mid-sixteenth-century Swabian chronicle, the same-sex desire of a servant woman is attributed to an “inverted, unnatural constellation of the stars at her birth”), but I have not come across any examples from 1450-1550 Italy.¹⁴³

The myth of Aristophanes provided another explanation for same-sex attraction between women, although its implications for female same-sex desire were rarely elaborated upon. Jacqueline Murray has identified Agnolo Firenzuola’s discussion of this myth as a fascinating exception to this rule, because apart from acknowledging the existence of women whose desires are by nature focused on other women, he even gives a number of examples.

¹⁴⁰ Giannetti, *Lelia’s Kiss*, 94.

¹⁴¹ Maxwell-Stuart, ‘Representations’, 170; Rutkin, ‘Astrological Conditioning’, 190.

¹⁴² Borris, *Same-Sex Desire*, 179.

¹⁴³ Puff, ‘Homosociabilities’, 68.

Firenzuola makes a distinction between chaste and unchaste types of love. Two contemporary women, Laudomia Forteguerria and Margaret of Parma, are said to have “loved each other’s beauty” in a “pure and honorable way” [*puramente e santamente*], whereas the ancient Greek poet Sappho and the contemporary courtesan Cecilia Venetiana (with whom both Firenzuola and Aretino were acquainted) loved women in a “lascivious way” [*lascivamente*].¹⁴⁴ The same-sex desire of Cecilia is not mentioned elsewhere,¹⁴⁵ but these other three women were the most widely known examples of love between women in sixteenth-century Italy. The Sienese noblewoman Laudomia Forteguerria (1515-55) wrote five sonnets in which she declared her love for Margaret, praising her physical beauty as well as her other qualities. The humanist author Alessandro Piccolomini celebrated her poetry as “an example of a most ardent Love that exists (...) between two most unique and divine women”. Other male authors such as Benedetto Varchi and Agnolo Firenzuola followed his example. These authors, however, all described this love as completely chaste.¹⁴⁶ The ancient Greek poet Sappho (c. 630-570 BCE) was the most famous example of a woman who had sexual relations with other women. Bartolomeo della Rocca/Cocles for instance mentions her in his astrological treatise as an example of a tribade.¹⁴⁷

Although there is some evidence for a belief in the existence of women who had predominantly same-sex desires, these women are presented as very rare. Even Sappho was commonly believed to have eventually chosen men over women. Ovid’s epistolary poem *Sappho to Phaon*, rediscovered in the early fifteenth century, played an important part in the Renaissance reception of Sappho. In this poem, believed to have originally been written by Sappho herself, the poet renounces her sexual affairs with women because she has

¹⁴⁴ Murray, ‘Agnolo Firenzuola’. Agnolo Firenzuola, *I Ragionamenti*, 542. Italics are my own.

¹⁴⁵ This passage by Firenzuola was later included in a discussion on female same-sex relations by the French author Pierre Brantôme (1540-1614). See: Simons, ‘Lesbian Invisibility’, 89.

¹⁴⁶ Borris, *Same-Sex Desire*, 272-274; K. Eisenbichler, *The Sword and the Pen: Women, Politics, and Poetry in Sixteenth-century Siena* (Paris 2012) 101-164, esp. 114-121.

¹⁴⁷ Borris, *Same-Sex Desire*, 179.

fallen in love with a handsome man called Phaon.¹⁴⁸ Even Agnolo Firenzuola, who was one of few authors to acknowledge the possibility of exclusively female-oriented women, presents it as the most rare type of sexual preference imaginable. Firenzuola writes that among the original people, “some were male in both halves; others female, *but these were few* [*che furono pochi*]; and the rest, who were the greater number, were one half male and the other half female.”¹⁴⁹ The rarity of female-oriented women is emphasized a second time, when Firenzuola writes that those women who voluntarily become and remain nuns to flee from men are very few in number [*poche*], because most women living in monasteries are forced to stay there and are very unhappy.¹⁵⁰

Conclusion

Sexual relations between men were perhaps the most controversial type of sex act in Renaissance Italy. From one point of view, they were an embodiment of all the dangers of excessive desire discussed in chapter one. Sex between men was said to inflict physical as well as spiritual harm, and to reduce people to a level below that of animals. Apart from that, it was seen as a crime against both divine and natural order that could destroy mankind and provoke God’s wrath over the entire community. This moralist perspective was widespread, and can be found in theological and medical texts, as well as in literary fiction and legal sources. Even so, the dominant code of conduct proscribing sexual relations between men was challenged as well. First of all, this was due to the revival of classical antiquity, as many authors used the more liberal perspectives of classical authorities as a moral excuse to defend or even celebrate sex between men. A more radical means

¹⁴⁸ Ibidem, 310-311.

¹⁴⁹ Agnolo Firenzuola, *I Ragionamenti*, 542. Italics are my own. Original: “alcuni maschi in tutt’a due le parti; alcune femine, che furono pochi; il restante, ch’era il maggiore numero, erano per l’una parte i maschi e per l’altra femine.”

¹⁵⁰ Ibidem, 542-543. Original: “e queste dobbiamo credere che sien quelle che si fanno monache volentieri e volentieri vi stanno, che sono poche; percioché nei munisteri le più vi stanno per forza e vivonvi disperate.”

of defending these relations, occasionally found in works of literary pornography, challenged the traditional arguments used by the Church to criminalize them. Age as well as social class played a role in challenging the prohibition against same-sex relations as well. Legal sources show that age was an important mitigating factor in the judgment of sodomy cases, with young men often receiving a minor penalty or none at all. For (aspiring) members of the elite, a liberal attitude towards male-male relations was a way to distinguish themselves from commoners, and as long as this elite culture did not become too public, it was broadly tolerated. Occasionally, a pragmatic perspective also portrayed sex between men as a somewhat lesser evil compared to adulterous relations with women.

Two contradicting perspectives on sexual preferences and orientations can be distinguished, and both of these reinforced the dominant code of conduct that proscribed sexual relations between men. From one point of view, sexual desire between men was universal, and same-sex acts were something that all men could occasionally engage in. From another point of view, the “sodomite” was a minority, a distinct type of individual with a natural inclination that caused an exclusive sexual preference for men and a hatred, disgust or indifference towards women. From a moralist perspective, both of these views were equally frightening and reinforced the need for a heavy-handed approach: according to “universalizing” discourse, it was very easy for this “sin” to spread, and according to “minoritizing” discourse, the preferences of certain men could make them reject marriage and procreative sex entirely. Beliefs about natural inclinations, however, could also provide a challenge to this code of conduct, as it could be said that it was difficult to hold people who are born with homosexual preferences accountable for their acts. The idea that some men are naturally inclined towards same-sex desire, either because of nature or nurture, was widespread: it can be found in works of Platonic philosophy and astrology, as well as in works of medicine and sermons, in biographies and in literary fiction. But apart from a few literary characters, natural inclinations were never explicitly used as an excuse for engaging in same-sex acts.

From a theoretical perspective, all same-sex relations were considered legal equivalents, but for women, this official code of conduct is much less conspicuously present in the sources. Female same-sex desires were ignored by theological and medical authors, and portrayed in a comical and light-hearted manner in literary sources. Two foundational aspects of sexuality in Renaissance Italy seem to underlie this relative lack of concern. One of these is the double standard for male and female sexuality: as heterosexual extramarital relations initiated by women were considered a much greater threat to family honor and social stability, sex between women was seen as a much lesser evil. A second aspect is the notion of male superiority in general, and the phallogocentric view on sexuality in particular. Sex between women was perceived as ultimately unsatisfactory, and unlike a male same-sex preference, a female same-sex preference was only very rarely seen as exclusive. Because of this, sexual relations between women were not considered as big of a threat to social order. A married woman like Lavinia, amusing herself with her maid Lucia just to while away the hours when her husband is away, did not pose much of a threat to male-female relations and family life, precisely because her desires were never thought to be exclusive, and in the end, she would always prefer a man. One of the possible reasons why female homosexuals were spared the severe persecution and moral judgment to which male homosexuals were subjected, may have been the fact that the belief in the existence of a male same-sex orientation was much further developed than the belief in a female same-sex orientation. However, it could of course be argued that a denial of one's existence is a worse fate than persecution.