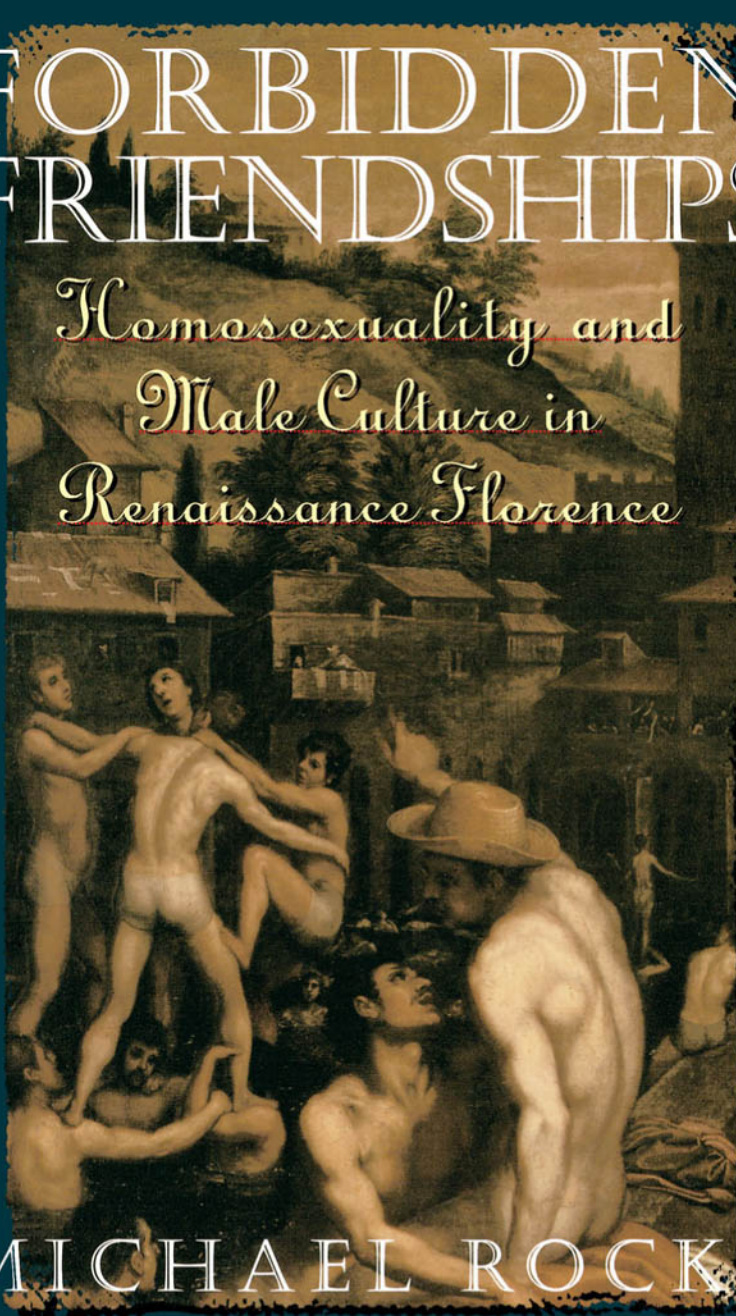
FORBIDDEN FRIENDSHIPS

Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence



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HOMOSEXUALITY AND MALE CULTURE IN RENAISSANCE FLORENCE

Michael Rocke

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To Richard C. Trexler

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

Introduction: Florence and Sodomy

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

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

Florentines owed part of their widespread infamy, according to another distinguished preacher, Girolamo Savonarola, to the fact that they "talk[ed] and chatter[ed] so much about this vice"; many evidently did not consider it so evil that they avoided its very mention.[5] Echoes of their chatter resound in the exceptional number and variety of Florentine and Tuscan literary sources on homoerotic themes, with a range of moral stances. Following the illustrious precedents of Dante's *Divine Comedy*—in which sodomites, duly placed in hell, are paradoxically accorded great

respect and affection (*Inferno*, cantos XV and XVI)—and Boccaccio's ambivalently witty tale in the *Decameron* (V, 10) of the sodomite Pietro di Vinciolo, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the subjects of love and sex between males abound in local novelle, anecdotes, and poems, ranging from biting satires to humanistic elegies, from condemnatory religious lauds to amatory verse.[6] Sodomy also furnishes a basic key to the complex code of sexual word plays that permeate the entire genre of "burlesque" poetry and bawdy carnival songs.[7] Verses on same-sex love were apparently even set to music. Although seldom enforced, laws dating from the early fourteenth century, and reinforced in the fifteenth, made it a crime, punishable by fines, to compose or sing songs about "such a disgraceful and impious act."[8] In Florence, the sin so terrible that it was not to be pronounced could not, in fact, be kept quiet.

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

During its seventy-year tenure from 1432 to 1502, this magistracy, with the limited participation of other courts, carried out the most extensive and systematic persecution of homosexual activity in any premodern city. Yet in doing so the courts also brought to light a thriving and multifaceted sexual culture that was solidly integrated into the broader male world of Florence. In this small city of around only 40,000 inhabitants, every year during roughly the last four decades of the fifteenth century an average of some 400 people were implicated and 55 to 60 condemned for homosexual relations. Throughout the entire period corresponding to the duration of the Office of the Night, it can be estimated that as many as 17,000 individuals or more were incriminated at least once for sodomy, with close to 3,000 convicted.[9]

These extraordinary figures, partial though they certainly are, begin to furnish a sense of the dimensions, the vitality, and the contradictory significance of homosexuality in the sexual and social life of Florence. Sodomy

was ostensibly the most dreaded and evil of sexual sins, and was among the most rigorously controlled of crimes; yet in the later fifteenth century, the majority of local males at least once during their lifetimes were officially incriminated for engaging in homosexual relations. The thriving world to which these numbers point, however, has remained obscured from historical view, virtually unexplored and uncharted. This book seeks to recover that world, to map out its social and spatial parameters, and to restore it to its legitimate place as an integral part of the society and culture of late medieval and Renaissance Florence.

Scholars have long been familiar with the prominence that contemporaries ascribed to sodomy both in Florence and throughout Italy, and few have doubted that homosexual activity there was common. Until quite recently, however, the general prejudice against homosexuality, combined with an old ideological tendency to downplay features of this society thought unseemly for the edifying portrayal of the Renaissance as the noble cradle of modern civilization, effectively inhibited its study. Professional historians usually followed Pope Gregory's pious example and avoided acknowledging the topic altogether, or at best touched on it superficially, frequently with embarrassed apologies if not open disdain. Even the respected English scholar John Addington Symonds, himself homosexual and author of a pioneering apologetic on homosexuality in Greece, succumbed to prevailing moral judgments and self-censorship in his highly regarded *Renaissance in Italy* (1875–1886). He wrote dismissively that the subject of homosexuality here "belongs rather to the science of psychopathy than to the chronicle of vulgar lusts. . . . [The Italians'] immorality was nearer that of devils than of beasts."[10] Such attitudes and rhetorical tactics helped to perpetuate the stigmatization of homosexuality as an object of historical inquiry and to ensure that it remained firmly consigned, despite the wealth of contrary evidence, to the margins of representations of Renaissance society and culture.

In recent years, these barriers have to a large extent been broken down, as the visibility and acceptance of homosexuality have grown substantially and as social historians of late medieval and early modern Italy have devoted new attention to such diverse subjects as ritual, social networks, violence, criminality, prostitution, and gender, as well as to the history of the family and of subordinate groups such as women, children, and the laboring classes. Even before research and scholarly debate on homosexuality in premodern Europe began to flourish in the late 1970s and the 1980s,[11] studies by prominent historians, such as David Herlihy's on Florentine demography and family life and Richard Trexler's on boys' confraternities and state-sponsored prostitution, were overcoming the traditional reticence and raising new questions about the importance of homosexuality in Florence.[12] Since then, a number of specific works have appeared on the subject of sodomy—above all, its practice in the leading republics of Venice and, more recently, Florence. Both of these cities mounted unprecedented

efforts in the fifteenth century to police this "vice," and both uncovered thriving undergrounds of homosexual activity.[13] Only further research will show whether other cities or regions shared Venetian and Florentine preoccupations or developed similar sexual cultures. Nonetheless, these studies have opened a window onto a sexual universe the significance of which was far from marginal in several of the most dynamic urban societies of Renaissance Italy. Nowhere was this more the case than in Florence, where the "problem" of sodomy assumed exceptional dimensions and where homosexual behavior, as this book seeks to demonstrate, constituted a pervasive and integral aspect of male sexual experience, of the construction of masculine gender identity, and of forms of sociability.

Homosexuality was a deep-rooted and prominent feature of life in Florence, yet it also encountered vigorous opposition and was subjected to intensive persecution. While many Florentines may have defended sodomy as a venerable native "custom," as Bernardino of Siena despaired in a 1425 sermon, it was a custom that especially in the fifteenth century also evoked great hostility and that the government took extraordinary measures to control.[14] These endeavors to "root out" sodomy, the optimistic goal set in the founding law of the Office of the Night, failed resoundingly, for it resisted and thrived. But inevitably, the efforts of public authorities and the local community to regulate sodomy constitute a fundamental part of the story of homosexuality in Florence, not only because of their broad social impact, or because of the new light such efforts cast on attitudes toward sex and on the administration of justice, but also because they unearthed a remarkable amount of sexual activity. Consequently, the most abundant evidence on homosexual behavior derives from the city's unusually rich judiciary records.

One of the aims of this book, then, is to study the evolution, substance, and contexts of government policy toward sodomy from the early fourteenth to the mid-sixteenth century and, where feasible or most useful, to analyze how the courts operated and how legal prescriptions were enforced. In the organization of this work, public responses to sodomy constitute the main subject of parts I and III, which frame an in-depth investigation in part II of the organization of homosexual behavior and its relation to the broader male culture. Chronologically this study is loosely delimited, on one end, by the earliest extant republican laws against sodomy, from the 1320s, and, on the other, by a law of 1542, the first and apparently only edict on this sexual practice enacted after the fall of the Republic (1532) and during the two-century reign of the Medici dukes and, later, grand dukes. The long period these laws delineate allows one fully to grasp and assess, within the compact cultural and political context of the Florentine Republic, the variety and magnitude of the many changes in public policy regarding sodomy.[15]

Beyond their close association with the classic period of the Republic,

the boundaries these prescriptive norms stake out, though artificial, are in some respects quite significant. In particular, they help distinguish the contours of the first wide-scale persecution of homosexual behavior in European history, carried out by Florence and other Italian cities. The statutes of the 1320s embodied and codified the increasing intolerance and hostility toward homosexual activity that came to characterize all of European society in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.[16] By this time Florence, like a number of other cities in Italy, had established the most severe penalties for sodomy, including castration and death by burning.[17] With minor variations, these edicts remained the legal standard for this crime for nearly a century, until the transformation in its policing introduced with the Office of the Night in 1432. Following this innovation, sodomy for long became one of the most turbulent issues in the spectrum of Florentine criminal justice and public morality. In the 110 years between 1432 and 1542, the city's legislative councils passed no fewer than seventeen substantive reforms in the penalties prescribed for sodomy or in the institutions designated to pursue and prosecute it. At the same time, convictions proliferated to the astonishing levels noted previously. By the middle of the sixteenth century, however, in Florence, as in Venice, this sustained wave of official concern over sodomy subsided considerably. The law of 1542 in effect marked its conclusion. The harsh punishments it ordained would endure unaltered for centuries, and this immobility, together with the subsequent conspicuous decline in condemnations, indicate that sodomy was no longer the compelling issue, at least for the new ducal state, that it had been in the not very distant past.

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

The critical importance of the Office of the Night for the policing of

sex in itself makes it worthy of special attention. Its organization and operations are studied in chapter 2. Yet its significance also derives from the extraordinarily rich documentation it produced, a large amount of which has survived. In general, court records, as students of sexuality in medieval and early modern Europe have commonly pointed out, have serious limitations and pose particular problems of methodology and interpretation for anyone attempting to recover the historical character and meaning of sexual behavior.[18] Generated by instruments of repression and social discipline, judiciary records by their very nature normally represent the vision of only a hegemonic social and political elite. In addition, they are often fragmentary, superficial, or inaccurate; the details they record may correspond more to a need to observe proper bureaucratic form than to a concern to describe what really happened; the individuals or behaviors they document may not be representative of the broader universe of sexual activity. Furthermore—an especially crucial drawback in this case—prosecutions for sodomy focus relentlessly on sexual acts and usually reveal little about motives or about how the participants or the society around them interpreted these actions. To varying degrees, all these points are also applicable to the records of the Office of the Night.

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

It is not only its massiveness, but also the quality and unusual range of the evidence it yields, that makes this source so remarkable, however. Unlike most other court records of the period, these document the entire procedural course of cases that came to the Night Officers' attention, from denunciations to interrogations to sentences, permitting a systematic analysis of the officials' operations and effectiveness in enforcing the law. The records also contain an uncommon wealth of biographical data on incriminated individuals and detailed information on sexual relations, allowing one to assemble nuanced profiles of the participants and to sketch thickly textured descriptions of their sexual behavior. Finally, the Night Officers'

registers are nearly unique, at least for this city, in that they conserve hundreds of the accusations that Florentines made against people they claimed engaged in sodomy. The prime interest of these denunciations lies less in the dubious veracity of informers' specific claims (though many were confirmed) than in the values and mentalities they inadvertently reveal and in the lively personal and social context they restore to the more mechanical images produced by the court. They offer a rare opportunity to grasp how common people in one late medieval city viewed and interpreted homosexual behavior—often in ways that differed from the dominant and canonical representations of church and state—in the everyday life of their community.

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

For these reasons, an analysis that made use of computerized technologies became almost inevitable. Although fraught with difficulties, a quantitative study of the documentation from the Night Officers' records proved to be the most efficient and fruitful means to recompose the various parts of trial proceedings, to reveal general patterns of behavior and the social composition of discrete groups, and to reconstitute the case histories of individuals over time. It did not seem necessary, however, to analyze all

the available data; but while a small sample could have answered some of my questions, inconsistencies in the material increased the risk of distortion, and persons who engaged habitually in sodomy would have been harder to detect. I therefore took an intermediate course, opting for a detailed computerized analysis of all the extant procedural records during a limited period—the last twenty-four years of the Night Officers' tenure, from 1478 to 1502—combined with a more conventional study of the information from the remainder of their registers. Records survive for seventeen of these twenty-four years and document 4,062 individuals incriminated for homosexual sodomy. This group, examined from various perspectives, provides the documentary core for much of this book.

Throughout this study I have also tried to draw on other evidence that might help to verify or to cast additional light on the findings that result from the analysis of the Night Officers' documentation. The period covered by the main survey was selected in part because its early years coincide with the Florentine fiscal census, or *catasto*, of 1480, which provides information not only on the wealth of local households but also on their composition.[19] Of the 1,131 persons who were incriminated between 1478 and 1483, I have identified 183 in this census. This sample serves as a control group for questions relating to the ages of males who engaged in homosexual activity and provides additional perspectives on their relative wealth and, above all, their marital status. I have also utilized a survey of prosecutions for sodomy from 1478 to 1502 by the Eight of Watch (Otto di guardia), the city's central criminal magistracy. This tribunal played a more limited role than the Office of the Night in the policing of sodomy, but it was still quite important, functioning as a compliment to the latter's operations. The Eight's records furnish added evidence from the several hundred cases it tried, as well as a critical point of comparison with the documentation of the Night Officers. In addition to the abundant judiciary materials, wherever possible I have drawn on a wide array of less public and prescriptive sources, including sermons, the records of religious confraternities, local chronicles and histories, family journals, private letters, collections of anecdotes and witticisms, and various forms of literature and poetry. Together this unparalleled body of sources offers a wide variety of perspectives for recovering the world of homosexual experience in late medieval Florence.

Although sex between males was a common and integral feature of daily life in this city, it formed part of a universe of experience and values that differed substantially from our own. In the first place, the culture of late medieval and early modern Italy was not one in which men were clearly separated into the categories of "homosexuals" and "heterosexuals." In our own culture, it has become common to imagine sexuality largely in terms of a polar opposition between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Most people are thought to fall more or less neatly into either one category

or the other, but even the alternative "bisexuality" derives its sense from its hybrid position somewhere between these two extremes. Moreover, the notion that a person's homosexuality or heterosexuality profoundly defines one's personality and identity is nowadays taken practically for granted, and these categories are accepted with little questioning as part of some timeless and natural order. Yet much research by anthropologists, historians, and social theorists over the past few decades has shown, to the contrary, that such a way of construing erotic experience and sentiment is a very recent development, and one that is closely tied to the specific evolution of the contemporary Western world. Other cultures and people in other historical periods have conceived and organized sexuality in quite different ways.[20] Italians of the Renaissance would have found current beliefs about homosexuality and heterosexuality as well as much of modern sexual experience foreign indeed, and if one is to comprehend the nature and significance of homosexual behavior in this particular historical context, the parochialism of our own notions must be recognized and these cultural differences accorded their proper due.[21] A discussion of terminology will begin to demonstrate these claims, and to illustrate how certain terms will be used in this book.

People of the Middle Ages and early modern period lacked the words to convey the precise equivalents of the current "homosexuality" as a distinct category of erotic experience or "homosexual" as a person or a sexual identity. These words were coined only in the late nineteenth century, and only filtered slowly and unevenly into popular use. The terms "sodomy" and "sodomite," which were standard in the religious and juridical language of premodern Europe for conveying same-sex relations, might however seem to work as substitutes, for in some contexts they appear to have much the same meanings. From the thirteenth century on, most theologians, following the great classificatory work of Thomas Aquinas, defined sodomy as comprehending all sexual acts between persons of the same sex, whether male with male or female with female. On the basis of the gender of the sexual partners, therefore, some religious authorities differentiated sodomy from the other carnal vices "against nature," which included intercourse with animals, masturbation, and nonreproductive coitus between the opposite sexes.[22]

As these words were employed outside the subtle field of moral theology, however, "sodomy" was not strictly synonymous with "homosexuality," nor was "sodomite" the equivalent of the noun "homosexual." The tidy scholastic categories of "unnatural" practices collapsed in secular legal and judicial contexts, and apparently in popular conceptions as well. When governments came to persecute sodomy, with growing intensity from the thirteenth century on, both "homosexual" and certain "heterosexual" acts fell indistinctly into this category of sexual crime, and in some places other varieties of vice *contra naturam* did too. Florentine laws against sodomy, for example, often specified that they applied equally to both males and

females. Presumably these formulations included sexual relations between women, but in all cases the context strongly suggests that they referred instead to erotic acts deemed "contrary to nature" either between males or between males and females. The latter was in fact the only form of sex involving women that lay people occasionally denounced and the courts pursued as sodomy.[23] In other words, it was certain sexual acts alone that denoted sodomy, not (as in prevailing theological views) the gender of the persons who practiced them. Correspondingly, a sodomite was not, strictly speaking, a person who engaged in sex with members of his (or her) own biological gender; the sodomite, that is, was not a homosexual, but a person who committed the various acts defined as sodomy.

This generally being the case, when Florentines used the words "sodomy" and "sodomite" in a generic way they probably had sexual relations between males in mind, since these were by far the most common and conspicuous, and aroused the greatest public concern. These terms, then, unless otherwise qualified, will be used with this sense throughout this book. Yet despite the high visibility of male homosexual activity, people in this society had no way to distinguish verbally, either with these official designations or with other vernacular terms, a man who engaged in sex with males from one who committed precisely the same acts with women, whether occasionally or even exclusively. Generally speaking, both were simply called sodomites. In a culture such as ours, accustomed to classifying people on the primary basis of the gender of their sex partners as homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual, this apparent lack of clarity may be surprising, if not disconcerting. Today it would hardly be doubted that such men, regardless of the specific practices they engage in, possess fundamentally divergent sexual natures and should accordingly be labeled in ways that convey that difference. Although late medieval Italians, in contrast, might well have recognized that a man's tastes or habits inclined him toward one sex or the other, or both, they evidently did not find this compelling grounds on which to organize their understanding and representation of sexuality.[24]

It is not only the absence of conceptual categories based on sexual object choice that distinguishes how people in this culture experienced and comprehended sex between males, however. As discussed in chapter 3, certain social and cultural conventions quite unlike those prevailing today governed the physical expression of homosexual acts and shaped their meanings in significant ways. The evidence shows beyond much doubt that in Florence, and probably elsewhere as well, sodomy between males normally assumed a hierarchical form that would now be called "pederasty" (though this term, too, was virtually absent from the otherwise rich local sexual lexicon). Homosexual relations, that is, were usually characterized by a disparity in the age of the two partners and by a correspondingly rigid adherence to culturally prescribed roles in sexual intercourse. Normally men over the age of eighteen took the so-called active role in sex with a

passive teenage adolescent. Relations in which roles were exchanged or reversed were rare and occurred almost solely between adolescents, while sex between mature men was, with very few exceptions, unknown. These patterns situate homosexual behavior in Florence firmly within an age-graded model that had ancient roots throughout the Mediterranean world and would prevail in Europe until at least the eighteenth century, when most research indicates that new forms and conceptions of homosexuality first began to appear.[25]

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

The conventions that defined sodomy and the meanings ascribed to them, therefore, represent specific ways of conceptualizing and experiencing sex between males that current sexual classifications and terminology fail to capture and convey adequately. The men and boys who are the subject of this book engaged in what today would be cast indiscriminately as "homosexuality," and on this basis they would probably be considered—and in other studies of late medieval Italy are often called—"homosexuals," or at most the more fashionable "bisexuals." One might point out that the application of such reductive labels to people in this distant

society is, in the best of cases, a blind leap of faith, even more so when the evidence consists, as it frequently does, of a conviction for a single homosexual act. For how can it be assumed that this embraces the full range of someone's affective and erotic experiences? More important, these terms at once evoke sexual subjectivities that would have meant little to Florentines themselves, and collapse distinctions and obscure nuances of meaning to which they assigned vital importance. The different conceptual boundaries that delineated their sexual landscape emerge clearly in the specific way they employed "sodomite," which will be followed throughout this book. While this term, as mentioned earlier, included both a man who had sex with boys and a man who engaged in the same illicit sexual acts with women, it virtually never included their "passive" partners of either sex. Not all who engaged in homosexual activity, therefore, were considered sodomites, but only those who took the dominant, "active" role. According to this schema, men who sodomized boys and men who penetrated women had more of a common character and identity than did two males who coupled sexually, whose physical union normally embodied unbridgeable distinctions of age, sexual role, and ascribed gender values.

The social and cultural conventions outlined here also played important roles in shaping other aspects of homosexual experience that are central to the concerns of this book. Chapter 4 reassembles the social profiles of men and boys implicated in sodomy in the later fifteenth century. The composite portraits that emerge not only show that homosexual activity flourished at all levels of Florentine society, from humble textile workers and artisans to members of the great banking and commercial families that formed the local patriciate, but also reinforce the argument that it had little relationship to current notions of more or less fixed sexual categories and identities. To a considerable extent, in fact, sodomy was associated with different stages or situations in the life course of local males. David Herlihy was the first historian to suggest that the sexual debauchery—including the "abominable vice"—for which this city was infamous was related in part to local marriage patterns, especially the unusually late age of marriage for men, around thirty or thirty-one on average, and to the resulting profusion of youthful bachelors. According to fiscal censuses of 1427 and 1480, only about one of every four youths between the ages of eighteen and thirty-two was or had been married.[26] Moreover, a large proportion of Florentine men, some 12 percent of those who survived to around the age of fifty, probably never took a wife. This study demonstrates that those most frequently incriminated for sodomy were indeed adolescents and unmarried youths below marriageable age and, to a lesser degree, older bachelors. For most males, homosexual relations represented a fairly common form of sexual solace and companionship during the prolonged years of adolescence and bachelorhood before taking a wife, as the majority sooner or later probably did, even though marriage did not definitively exclude the sexual pursuit of boys. Other evidence further sug-

gests that while vast numbers of local males engaged in sexual relations with other males, most did so only sporadically or over relatively brief periods of time. Only a small group of "habitual" sodomites, mainly older unmarried men, can be identified who pursued relations with boys throughout a considerable part of their adult lives. Men's homosexual behavior, however intense or engaging it may have been, did not constitute a permanently "deviant" condition, but was, for most, an occasional or temporary transgression that did not preclude sex with women either concurrently or during other periods of their lives.

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

Homosexuality was deeply integrated into that cluster of social structures, gender values, and forms of aggregation that together helped constitute male culture in Florence. It was this profound penetration of the male world that, in turn, made the regulation of sodomy there such a peculiarly volatile and problematic issue. The control of homosexual behavior as well as the ethos of same-sex relations themselves were part and parcel of the tensions that animated the social, cultural, and political ferment of one of the premier cities of the Renaissance during a period that was among the most dynamic and celebrated of its history. The changes that transformed public life in Florence—the decline of a corporative "popular" regime based on guilds and its substitution with an oligarchy of the merchant-banking elite in the late fourteenth century; the ascendancy of the Medici in the 1430s and the subsequent sixty years of their quasi-princely hegemony; the revival of republicanism in the 1490s and the holy terror of Savonarola; the restoration of the Medici in 1512; the definitive fall of the Republic in 1532 and the installation of a duchy under Medicean rule—all had significant consequences as well for the policing of sodomy. Shifts in the forms and equilibriums of power produced, almost as an inevitable consequence, a continual reelaboration of the public strategies and means for managing and containing homosexual behavior. By the same token, however, homosexuality and its control can serve as a kind

of prism for illuminating the structures and exercise of power. In this way, the restoration of homosexual behavior to its proper place as an integral part of Florentine life seeks not only to throw new light on the history of sexuality in one late medieval Italian setting, but also to open fresh perspectives on the society, politics, and culture of Renaissance Florence.

PART I

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1

Making Problems: Preoccupations and Controversy over Sodomy in the Early Fifteenth Century

> Those marvelous competitions of fencing, tournaments, and high jousts are no longer furiously performed for women; he who best can, now does his shows for young lads. Domenico of Prato (1389–1432?)[1]

Domenico of Prato, a notary and rather old-fashioned poet from a small town near Florence, depicted this evocative scenario of men competing fiercely for the attentions of boys in a poem he composed "in opprobrium of sodomy" probably in the 1410s or 1420s. Not content to follow the divinely ordained example of Adam and Eve, he lamented, men were abandoning "just matrimony" to pursue this "filthy infamy," and "it seems that blessed is he who most satiates himself." According to the poet, the love of men for boys was so widespread, and not only in Florence, that it no longer troubled anyone. Now more than ever before, as he put it, everyone visited the seductive lands of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Whether the erotic desires of Florentine men were undergoing the dramatic transformation Domenico of Prato imagined is hard to determine. But the preoccupations his verses manifest expressed well a current of fear and anxiety over sodomy that had been gaining force in his society since the beginning of the fifteenth century. A sense of urgency about the "abominable vice" troubled a generation of civic leaders and moralists, producing, over three decades, numerous laws against it and leading in 1432 to the creation of the Office of the Night, the special commission charged with policing sodomy.

To be sure, sodomy was not the sole moral and sexual concern of the governors of Florence in this period. The disorderly excesses of prostitution and the sacrilege of sex with nuns, among other aspects of public morality, also fell subject to tighter regulation in what amounted to a vast, if piecemeal, governmental program to reform and discipline the community's morals and behaviors. But of all the carnal sins it was sodomy, thought to

flout not only the edicts of God and man but also the very laws of nature, that most came to embody the evils and uncertainties of an imperfect world and to evoke the terror of divine vengeance. Voicing such fears in a law of 1418, the government proclaimed its desire "to root out the vice of the Sodomites and Gomorrhans, contrary to nature itself, for which the anger of the omnipotent God is incited in terrible judgment not only against the sons of men, but against the country and against inanimate objects."[2] An exemplary passage from a sentence that the recently instituted Night Officers pronounced against a sodomite in 1436 catalogued the universal ills that sodomy was believed to incarnate and affirmed the safe-guarding function its repression was intended to serve. Sodomy was so evil and offended God so grievously, it was said, that God declared sodomites sinners against nature and rebels from his mercy, and damned them to the eternal flames. The diligent exercise of justice against such wicked ones, however, helped appease the divine essence and stay his wrath. "In this way," the officials sweepingly asserted, "the city and its upright citizens may be freed from all commotion, wars ended, plague abolished, enemy plots curbed, and cities turned toward good government and praiseworthy conduct."[3]

Sodomy certainly acquired a portentous rhetorical meaning in the early fifteenth century, with its control acclaimed as a sort of panacea for society's ills. Yet on close examination, the official response to this "vice" was not as coherent or resolute as such extravagant claims and the various laws against it imply. Marked by hesitation, bland or failed initiatives, and apparent divisions within the regime, the troublesome issue of how to control sodomy effectively dragged on unresolved for thirty years before the creation of the special magistracy in 1432. These discordant responses played a large role in determining the radical innovations adopted at that time, and provide a telling indicator of the problematic nature of sodomy in Florence.

Traditional Controls

The institution of the Office of the Night marked a decisive turning point in the policing of sodomy, culminating a thirty-year period of agitation and legislative measures aimed at rendering its control more incisive. Yet long before the creation of this magistracy, sodomy had been an extremely serious offense. Since at least the late thirteenth century—the century when growing hostility toward homosexual activity was being codified across Europe—sodomy had shared the legal status of murder, repeated theft, and counterfeiting as an "atrocious crime" (*enorme delictum*).[4] A study of prescriptive norms and judiciary practice regarding sodomy before the founding of the Night Officers helps to illuminate the clamor for reform and to explain the nature of the sweeping changes introduced with the new magistracy.

Before 1432 the surveillance and punishment of sodomy fell indiscriminately to the city's three main tribunals: the podestà, the capitano del popolo, and the esecutore degli ordinamenti di giustizia. According to the statutes of the podestà of 1325, both his court and that of the capitano were responsible for investigating evidence of sodomy in the city at least once every month, proceeding either ex officio—that is, on the court's own initiative—or in response to denunciations. In the latter case, informers' identities were to be kept secret, and if a conviction were handed down they were to receive a reward of half of any fine levied.[5]

Florentine law prescribed harsh punishments for sodomy and for facilitating it in any way, though penalties changed considerably over the course of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. The earliest surviving legislation, the fragmentary statutes of the podestà of 1284, lacks penalties for sodomy but reveals indirectly that it was punishable at least by exile.[6] By 1325, when new statutes were redacted, penalties were severe. This code prescribed castration for a man found to have sodomized a boy; boys aged fourteen to eighteen who allowed someone to sodomize them were to be fined 100 lire, and those under fourteen fined 50 lire or flogged nude through the city.[7] The last punishment was stipulated as well for women over fourteen (presumably this refers to females sodomized by males, not to sexual relations between women). These statutes also drew a sharp distinction between the persons just mentioned and *trapassi* or *malandrini*, evidently foreign vagabonds or common criminals, who forced Florentine boys to commit sodomy with them. The latter were treated in a separate rubric seething with fiery rhetoric and images that are completely lacking in the first rubric, which seems to refer only to residents. Unlike others caught sodomizing, such foreigners found abusing local boys could be caught and beaten by people of the community without fear of penalty, tortured by the authorities and, if found guilty, burned to death.

Already by this time, the Commune had also attempted to extend its controls over the social and urban environment thought to foster sodomy. The 1325 statutes set a fine of 500 lire for pimps or intermediaries, for men who enticed boys by offering them money or gifts for sex, and even for fathers who persuaded or allowed their sons to commit sodomy. The house or building where sodomy was committed with the owner's permission, or simply his knowledge, was to be burned down. If a man was found in a garden or an edifice with a boy unrelated to him, in circumstances deemed suspicious, he could be fined 500 lire merely on the presumption of his evil intentions. This code prescribed a fine of 10 lire even for composing or singing poems or songs about sodomy, which authorities evidently feared might help popularize the practice. Following a typical medieval assumption that rich foods and sensuality went hand in hand, the statutes of the capitano (1322–1325) forbade innkeepers to serve a long list of delicacies and sweets, because they were said to attract "many boys

and men" who might fall into vice and "perpetrate wicked sins that are abominable before God and men," clearly meaning sodomy. Innkeepers also had to deny entrance to *malandrini* or *trapassi* and to any boy with them; if they allowed anyone to commit sodomy in their establishment, it was to be burned to the ground.[8]

A new law in 1365 increased and made more arbitrary many of these penalties, for unknown reasons; the law's preamble cites only the usual fear of divine wrath erupting against the city.[9] Dropping the distinction between *trapassi* or *malandrini* and other offenders, this law mandated that anyone who committed sodomy, whether "active" or "passive," or who facilitated it in any way, could be burned to death. The podestà, however, retained wide discretion to apply this penalty depending on the "age, quality, and condition" of the persons involved. The one exception was for "passive" minors under the age of eighteen, who could not be executed under any circumstances; their punishment was left to the court's choice and could even be waived altogether. For a man who sodomized someone against his will or who aided a violent sexual assault, the law unconditionally prescribed death by burning, while the victim was to be absolved. Harsh penalties were also set for attempted sodomy, ranging from fines or corporal punishment to execution if the perpetrator used violence.

Moreover, the 1365 law included new measures to facilitate the identification of suspects and to encourage confessions. For example, if a boy under eighteen who had been sodomized, or a close relative, voluntarily revealed his sexual relations before he was denounced or arrested, then he was not to be punished, a strong incentive for him to implicate his partners. Traditional standards of proof were also lowered, the normal tax on accusations was abolished, and a reward was assured to informers even when the courts levied nonmonetary penalties. Finally, this law gave judges exceptionally broad authority to torture persons accused or suspected of sodomy.

The wide-ranging norms contained in the laws of the fourteenth century imply that homosexual activity was fairly common, for they suggest that male prostitution existed, that fathers sometimes promoted their sons' trysts, that innkeepers and property-owners often accommodated them, that people sang and wrote of sodomy's pleasures, and that any encounter between nonrelated men and boys could be suspect. These laws also give an impression of tight surveillance and unrelenting repression of sodomy. But a study of how the courts prosecuted sodomy, rather than of prescriptive norms, provides a different picture. Despite the seemingly broad surveillance, the harsh rhetoric and penalties, and evidence that sodomy was rather commonplace, convictions were both infrequent and limited in scope.

Although a full survey of the massive extant judiciary records is impossible, several samples point to similar conclusions. First, up through the early fifteenth century the courts, which normally pursued sodomy ex of-

ficio, handed down very few convictions. Often they condemned no one for this crime in any given year or even in several consecutive years, as at least two studies found.[10] Another survey, for the years 1352 to 1355 and 1380 to 1383, documented respectively eight and five convictions.[11] My own study of all extant court sentences from 1390 to 1410 located thirty-three persons convicted in cases involving sodomy, including ten for attempted sodomy only, and in twelve of these twenty-one years there were no condemnations at all.[12] As will be discussed later, it was in these years around the turn of the century that new concerns over sodomy appeared, and in fact half of the convictions followed calls in 1403 and 1404 for rigorous repression. Except for this brief reaction, sodomy failed to attract much attention from the courts in Florence, a situation analogous to that of fourteenth-century Venice.[13]

Second, if prosecution was infrequent, the character of the sexual activity the courts pursued was also highly circumscribed. Most often, these cases dealt with homosexual rape or other assaults, with sodomy perpetrated on young children, or with men who committed serious crimes in addition to sodomy; few individuals were condemned in this period for what might be considered, on the basis of the descriptions provided, consensual or non-coercive sexual relations alone. In sufficiently documented cases involving fifty-six persons condemned for sodomy or related crimes between 1348 and 1432, the year the Office of the Night was created, over three-quarters of the convicted were found guilty of violent attacks, child abuse, or multiple crimes. The courts levied forty-four death sentences and two of castration, while the other penalties were usually huge fines of 1,000 lire or more. Not all of these cases involved homosexual sodomy: three men had sodomized girls aged five, six, and seven, and one woman had prostituted her daughter to men for sodomy (for which she was beheaded).[14] Another seventeen cases dealt either with sodomy committed on a boy aged twelve or under, with an assault with the intent to commit sodomy, or with rape, which often resulted in severe anal injury.[15] And twenty-two men were convicted not for sodomy alone, but because they had also committed theft, assault, murder, or extortion; had attempted suicide; or had kidnapped someone for ransom and repeatedly raped him.[16]

Although the few remaining cases reportedly did not involve violence or child abuse, they usually dealt with another special class of offenders—men who engaged in sodomy with several partners or habitually over a long period. Often such a man was labeled a *publicus et famosus sodomita*, implying notoriety and a long history of sodomitical activity. For example, in 1352 Miniato di Lapo was charged with having sodomized Antonio di Salvestro "many, many times," the motive for his prosecution, but his sentence also noted that Miniato, who had fled, was known to be a "public and notorious sodomite, defiled with wicked desire and the sodomitical vice, who has practiced the vice of the sodomites for a long time in the city of Florence publicly and openly, with many, many boys."[17] In another

exemplary case from 1348, Agostino di Ercole, described as "dedicated . . . to the vice against nature," first recounted his attempt to sodomize a youth in an inn, foiled by the suspicious host, who threw them out. Then he named ten others he had sodomized on various occasions. Finally Agostino admitted that he had engaged regularly in sodomy—escaping the courts' notice and certain punishment—for the previous twelve years.[18] These and similar cases suggest that a good deal of noncoercive homosexual activity probably went on in Florence "publicly and openly," as it was said, without arousing much concern among either the community or the authorities.

In the cases examined, the courts normally punished only men who took the "active" role in sex, in part because "passive" partners were so often hapless victims of violence or abuse and hence considered innocent. Yet as far as can be determined, even those who willingly let themselves be sodomized usually went unpunished, probably out of regard for their consistently young age.[19] Of the fifty-six persons convicted in these cases, only four—at least three of whom were in their teens—were sentenced for voluntary "passive" sodomy, even though numerous others were implicated in relations of an apparently noncoercive nature. Most of these cases involved unusual circumstances that may account for the convictions and harsh punishments; it is also probably no coincidence that three cases date from 1404 and 1405, in the wave of condemnations mentioned earlier after the repressive appeals of 1403 and 1404. One youth of nineteen was the companion of a married man for two years; a second, aided by three of his lovers, murdered another unwelcome suitor.[20] A third, fifteen-year-old Giovanni di Giovanni, convicted in 1365, had willingly let himself be sodomized for some time by many men, including several reputedly infamous sodomites. His sentence unusually labels Giovanni himself a "public and notorious passive sodomite," and for this reason the podestà inflicted on him an exemplary and barbaric punishment. After being paraded on an ass to the "place of justice" outside the city walls past the Franciscan basilica of Santa Croce, he was to be publicly castrated. Then, so that he would be punished "in that part of his body where he allowed himself to be known in sodomitical practice," he was to be mutilated between his thighs with a red-hot iron.[21] With this gruesome spectacle played out on the body of a mere fifteen-year-old, coming shortly after the passage of the harsh 1365 law, the authorities undoubtedly intended to terrorize other youngsters who might have been tempted to yield obligingly to men's desires.

Of all these cases, only one, from 1404, was said to involve a long and captivating affair, and in its very singularity it illustrates the sort of consensual relations that the courts in this period apparently tended to ignore. Salvestro di Niccolò Alamanni and Jacopo d'Amerigo da Verrazzano came from well-to-do and prominent families in the neighboring parishes of Santa Lucia de' Magnoli and San Niccolò. Salvestro was thirty-six years

old and married with a two-year-old son when, according to his confession, he and Jacopo, probably aged seventeen, began their relationship in 1402. For the next two years, they carried on a steady affair, perhaps aided by influential friends: among the places where they had slept together were houses of the patrician families Ardinghelli and Bardi, the Peruzzi bank where Salvestro worked, and the palace of the podestà in the town of Fucecchio. Clearly enamored of his young friend, Salvestro admitted that he had given him gifts of clothing and money worth the considerable sum of 250 florins or more, and even confessed that he preferred Jacopo to his own wife.[22]

It is hard to imagine that a relationship of this length, sentiment, and relative visibility completely escaped the notice of authorities. In fact, it might only have been in response to new calls to repress sodomy in 1403 and 1404 that the esecutore finally investigated and arrested the two early in 1404. Both confessed and were penalized severely: Salvestro was fined the staggering sum of 1,500 gold florins and exiled to Genoa for six years, while Jacopo was fined 1,000 lire (roughly 250 florins) and exiled to Venice for four years, and both were interdicted from public office.[23] But tellingly, by the end of the year, in response to their appeals, the government significantly reduced Salvestro's sentence and canceled Jacopo's altogether.[24]

To summarize the characteristics of the policing of sodomy in this period, then, the courts rarely prosecuted this crime, and when they did, they proceeded on their own initiative and not on accusations. The few cases they pursued overwhelmingly involved violent acts of assault or rape, the violation of young children, sodomy committed together with other crimes, and, less frequently and often only after years of illicit sexual activity, publicly known habitual sodomites. These cases undoubtedly capture some common and frankly deplorable features of sexual and social life in late medieval Florence. Yet it is improbable that the picture that emerges from them, mainly one of reckless child abuse and of a violent criminal underground, accurately represents homosexual behavior in the city at this time. Indeed, these cases differ dramatically both in number and in character from the homosexual relations that were prosecuted from the 1430s on. Their peculiar emphases suggest that in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries the authorities singled out only the most brutal, morally reprehensible, or conspicuous cases of sodomy for exemplary punishment, while they willfully ignored a good deal of sodomitical activity that was more discreet or less troubling to collective sensibilities.

At least one man understood, and resisted, his being made an expiatory example by the courts' discriminatory practices. The words of Agostino di Ercole, the "dedicated sodomite" convicted in 1348 after admitting his twelve-year involvement in sodomy, are all the more extraordinary since the censorious machinery of the judiciary system so seldom allowed the voices of sodomites to filter through. According to his trial protocol, Ago-

stino, "as a man who was and is totally inflamed by such a serious crime, said he did not believe this crime was so serious, and that if for this reason he, the guilty Agostino, should be sentenced to death, then many others were also to be considered deserving of death." At this point the censor prevailed, for before being dragged off to be burned at the stake, Agostino also said "many other detestable and unpleasant things, which are thought best to leave in silence."[25] The stifled protest of one common man who defended his homosexual relations as a relatively innocent practice shared by many others reveals some small sense of a system of values and behaviors quite at odds with official representations of sodomy.

Agitation for Reform, 1400–1432

Against this background of selective and sporadic punishment, concerns about sodomy and about how to control it more effectively emerged forcefully in the early fifteenth century. Poets in public squares and preachers from city pulpits derided and condemned the practice and demanded harsher measures against it. At the same time, the Commune adopted wide-ranging measures to intensify the repression of sodomy, to promote sexual alternatives for males, and even to screen sodomites from the governing class, before finally creating the special magistracy for sodomy in 1432.

Before examining these developments, it might well be asked whether this sudden agitation was a response to a conspicuous growth or a new visibility of sodomitical activity in Florence. Some contemporaries, such as Domenico of Prato, as quoted in the epigraph to this chapter, and Bernardino of Siena in his sermons from the 1420s, did imply that sodomy, while perhaps not new, was flourishing as never before. Moreover, although convictions for sodomy in these years remained low, they would soon soar, from one or two a year to more than fifty a year after midcentury. This might seem to indicate a corresponding increase in sodomy. In Venice, too, where new concerns about repressing sodomy were appearing in the same decades, prosecutions rose considerably. On the basis of this expansion and, in particular, of the more frequent conviction of noblemen and of what look like extended circles of males with the same homoerotic tastes, Guido Ruggiero has proposed that this new rigor was the Venetian government's response to the emergence or greater exposure in the early fifteenth century of a distinctive and socially diversified homosexual subculture.[26]

The problem of "homosexual subcultures" will be taken up at greater length at a later point (chapter 5). Here it should be said, however, that if indeed the practice of sodomy was becoming more open and assuming new and characteristic collective features, this probably did not resemble anything like the highly visible, organized subcultures of the modern world populated by a consciously distinct and coherent category of persons who

today might be called "homosexuals," an anachronistic model that hardly applies to these traditional societies.[27] More to the point here, it is questionable whether any of the available evidence proves sufficiently that sodomy was increasing or assuming new traits, or that this in itself provoked the reactions of Italian civic leaders in the early fifteenth century. The pious complaints of moralists that sodomy was spreading can scarcely be taken at face value (in any case, the preacher Giordano of Rivalto had already claimed as early as 1305 that "nearly all . . . or at least the majority" of Florentine men were sodomites).[28] Such charges might have made for good polemics, but they were far from being objective observations. The explosion of prosecutions for sodomy can also be misleading. It may be tempting to deduce that more trials mean more sodomy or that changes in the character of prosecuted activity mirrored real variations in behavior. Yet the judiciary records are not so transparent. It has already been seen how selective the fourteenth-century Florentine courts were. And the huge increase in convictions in the fifteenth century, both in Venice, as Ruggiero points out, and in Florence, was so clearly the result of new, specialized institutions and more effective methods for policing sodomy as to render comparisons of the extent or the nature of this practice over the two centuries problematic at best. While laws and prosecutions can reveal something about fluctuating concerns and the administration of justice, what they can convey about the incidence of sodomy over time or about the chronology or causes of possible changes in its character is much less certain.

Indeed, it may be that the agitation over sodomy was related in only a limited or an indirect way to this sexual practice in itself. In Florence, at least, other social and political factors played a decisive role in shaping the new repressive orientation in the early fifteenth century. Florentine society in this period was undergoing a series of crises and transformations that, on the one hand, led to broad changes in the administration of justice and, on the other, induced a stronger preoccupation about regulating many aspects of public morality, especially sexuality.

Between the 1380s and the 1430s, Florence undertook a campaign of expansion that made it the region's dominant power, but also created serious fiscal strains and new challenges in governing a vast regional state. At the same time, the corporative foundations of the old medieval commune were eroding as the social base of the political class shrunk and power was increasingly concentrated in the hands of a more managerially oriented merchant oligarchy.[29] All this generated political and social demands for a more centralized and efficient system of justice and a more direct role for the local elite in the maintenance of public order.[30]

One manifestation of this process was the creation of several permanent judicial commissions to confront special problems, especially matters of public morality. These commissions were staffed by citizens rather than by the foreign dignitaries who presided over the traditional courts (podestà,

capitano, and esecutore). Empowered to administer summary justice, the new magistracies helped to weaken the roles of the foreign rectors and gave the local patriciate more flexibility and influence in regulating these sensitive areas. The regime instituted citizen magistracies in these years to uncover and prosecute political conspiracies (1378),[31] to regulate prostitution and administer municipal brothels (1403),[32] to protect the inviolability and sexual purity of convents (1421),[33] to enforce the norms of public office holding (1429),[34] and, finally, to pursue and punish sodomy (Officers of the Night, 1432).[35] The policing of sodomy was only a single facet of a broad effort to manage sexuality and public morality, all part of a more concentrated and efficient program of social control.[36]

Other social concerns, interwoven with these developments, heightened a sense of urgency about controlling sodomy. In particular, the demographic catastrophes linked to recurring plague, and related insecurities about marriage, children, and family life, nourished perceptions that the nonprocreative sins "against nature" posed a threat to the very foundations of human society. The cultural resonance of this continent-wide demographic crisis may go some way toward explaining similar shifts in attitudes toward sodomy and in efforts to control it that occurred at roughly the same time in numerous Italian and European cities.[37]

In Florence and Tuscany, the effects of this crisis were especially sharp. The Black Death of 1348 swept away as many as 80,000 Florentines, two-thirds of the estimated population of 120,000 in the 1330s. The second great wave of plague in 1363 and 1364 took its highest toll among children, while the brutal "plague of the Bianchi" in 1400 claimed 12,000 lives out of a populace that had recovered to some 60,000. Serious outbreaks occurred again in 1417, 1423/1424, and 1430. The population of Florence fell to its lowest point probably in the 1410s and remained stagnant for several decades at around 40,000 inhabitants. Only after 1460 did population growth show signs of renewed vigor.[38]

To be sure, none of the laws of this period explicitly linked demographic crisis and stronger controls over sodomy, though it is suggestive that laws and public discourse on sodomy often followed close on the plague.[39] The connection, however, did not escape contemporaries such as the influential preacher Bernardino of Siena, who made it a major theme of his terrifying sermons against sodomy in Florence and Siena in the mid-1420s. As will be seen, Bernardino not only blamed sodomites for causing the plague, which he claimed was God's retribution for their sins, but also attributed local population losses to sodomites' alleged erotic apathy toward women, reluctance to marry, hatred of children, and sterile sexual practices.

High mortality and uncertainty over the future also engendered fears about the survival and stability of family lineages. Such concerns were reinforced by local marriage practices and were sometimes perceived to be related to sodomy. As noted earlier, Florentine men normally put off marriage until the average age of thirty or thirty-one, and a large proportion