Persecution and Perversion: Patriarchal Values in Italian Renaissance Homoeroticism

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Bodies have been policed, revered, and abhorred for not only their physical appearance, but for the ways in which they interact with others. Homosexual bodies (or on a more broad scale, bodies that have participated in homoerotic activities and sexual behaviours) have been particularly susceptible to such treatment both historically and currently. During the Italian Renaissance, a paradoxical nature emerges surrounding the perception of homoeroticism. While religious and hyper-masculine-oriented texts condemned acts of homosexuality, particularly that of sodomy, Renaissance culture also emphasized the importance of homosocial relationships. Though not exclusively sexual in nature, homosocial interactions and relationships were necessary to perpetuate expectations of gender roles and responsibilities. This environment greatly impacted the ways in which masculinity and femininity were constructed during this time period. Following a brief clarification on the terminology and historical context, this paper aims to discuss the presence of patriarchal values in homoerotic and homosexual relationships during the Italian Renaissance and how this manifested for both male-male and female-female interactions, respectively. After a critical analysis of the presence of patriarchal dominance in these relationships, limitations and complexities of said research will also be discussed. Although a social construction, our contemporary definition of human sexuality (both homosexual and heterosexual) can ease the process in which we comprehend Italian Renaissance understanding of queer individuals and their relationships.

Sexual identities, lifestyles, and behaviours are all used interchangeably in both historical and contemporary discourse, making it difficult to come to a clear and entirely accurate understanding of sexual politics and history during the Renaissance. Michel
Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* (volumes one through three), published in 1976 and 1984 respectively, plays a vital role when utilizing terminology that relates to sexuality and sexual behaviour; the latter of the two is a social construction and invention of the late 19th century. Although a significant length of time separates these two periods of history, these are the limited terms in which historians must use in order to accurately describe situations and principles of Renaissance sexual morality and behaviours. As a replacement for the term “sexuality”, Foucault advocated for a more inclusive and accessible term in order to account for a more broad description of an individual’s decisions regarding their body and sexual politics. The term used in his *History of Sexuality* is “sexual lifestyle” and considers the following: sexual acts/behaviours, preferences, and self-identification. While the majority of scholarship has yet to utilize more non-assumptive language, terminology used in this paper will aim to be as accurate as possible, working with the limited amount of sources on this particular subject. Finally, the term “queer” will sometimes be used in lieu of the word “gay” or “lesbian” so as to not add to the emphasis on identities, but instead to focus on the non-heteronormative behaviours and acts being observed.

During the revival of Greek and Latin classical texts, the exchange of knowledge greatly impacted the ways in which homoeroticism and homosexual relations were interpreted by both the Church and the secular literate bodies. Latin was the, “language of

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law, diplomacy, and international trade. It was also the language of sexual knowledge.”

Access to such knowledge and subsequent power was reserved for the educated elite in society who knew the classical languages in which these texts were originally written. Because of this, “both Latin and Greek literature provided the educated men of the Renaissance with knowledge about various kinds of homoeroticism, knowledge that was, as a rule accessible to them only...” However, with such a limited demographic of educated individuals who were able to interpret and transcribe these texts and their ideals, this led to misinterpretations. As a result, a large portion of Renaissance texts with solely homoerotic themes are not, “easily separated from homoerotic texts that also make use of classical themes, forms, or allusions,” according to Stephen Guy-Bray. Such misunderstandings, Guy-Bray asserts, “may be the result of imperfect knowledge of the language in which the original to be imitated was written or they may come from the poet’s sense of what is useful for his own text.” Classical literature was essential to Renaissance education, and so it became a convenient way to disguise homoerotic desire in educators’ teachings. On the other hand, we also see a manipulation of classical texts in order to create and enforce a code of “sexual ethics.” Following the practice of male-dominance in regards to policing and establishing regulations, both clergy men and


4 Guy-Bray, Homoerotic Space, 4.

5 Guy-Bray, 5.

6 Guy-Bray, 8.

secular figures used these ethics and moral codes in order to constrain and penalize sexual behaviour. In Ignatius Loyola’s *The Spiritual Exercises*, both the fourth and fifth rule emphasize the vital importance of the virtues of chastity and virginity. By association, heterosexual behaviour, and only for the purposes of reproduction could also be included under ideal behaviours of individuals. While such moral standards were praised and valued in Renaissance literature and society, they were not always followed - even by their advocates (both secular and ecclesiastical).

Although not necessarily attached to a homosexual lifestyle, homoeroticism and sodomy were two predominant threats to the masculine identity that was idealized and constructed through Renaissance bravado. Italian Renaissance milieus and private spaces were patriarchal in nature, placing the male at the top of the chain of command. In the home, achieving a “full” masculine identity was through the creation of a household that was simultaneously a “productive and reproductive unit.” While proving himself a leader in his own home, it was also essential to emancipate oneself from the patriarchal dominance that the community perceived through family relations. For example, the adult male, according to Sandra Cavallo, had to “free himself from his subordination to the father or other figures of authority, and show himself capable of performing a leading role in relation to individuals dependent upon him through their sex, age, or

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status.”\textsuperscript{11} It was essential for a young male to subvert a patriarchal system in a familial context in order to form his own family and place himself at the top of the new family’s patriarchal structure. While this sometimes manifested in both violent and extreme forms, “the actions of young bachelors were tolerated... because they were associated with the shaping of the masculine identity,” that perpetuated the larger, male-dominated structures of Italian Renaissance society.\textsuperscript{12} This demonstrates the value and supposed vital importance for the state to sustain the idealized male identity. Alternative means for proving masculinity were made available for young men who remained dependent on father figures. Cavallo points to recent studies in her article that suggest “violent actions, such as fights between rival groupings, and through drinking contests and exhibitions of sexual bravado” were also acceptable forms of proving hyper-masculine status.\textsuperscript{13} This, however, does not hold true for crimes that involved sexual violence.\textsuperscript{14} Homoeroticism and (consensual) sodomy were seen as acts that not only undermined the centrality of masculinity in the Italian Renaissance, but went against religious dogma and ultimately prevented the growth of the state.

The severity of punishment that sodomy was met with indicated that it was considered a threat to the established power dynamics of hyper-masculine and the hetero-

\textsuperscript{11} Cavallo, “Bachelorhood and Masculinity in Renaissance and Early Modern Italy”, 378.

\textsuperscript{12} Cavallo, 387.

\textsuperscript{13} Cavallo, 386.

\textsuperscript{14} Note: Sexual crimes and violence, in particular were not tolerated at all, regardless of age and who they were committed against. For more information on the penalization of young, adult males, Michael Rocke’s Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence provides a thorough chronicle and explanation of the various punishments inflicted upon said individuals.
sexual lifestyle of Renaissance society. Sharing the same legal status as, “murder, repeated theft, and counterfeiting,” sodomy had been codified across the continent of Europe since the late thirteenth century.\textsuperscript{15} While financial as well as corporal punishment were common sentencing outcomes for individuals who committed sodomy, the death penalty was also used in some cases.\textsuperscript{16} This was mostly observed in extreme cases, and not always under Italian law. However, it is important to note that sodomy was not the, “sole moral and sexual concern of the governors of Florence in this period, [as] the disorderly excesses of prostitution and sacrilege of sex with nuns, among other aspects of public morality, also fell subject to tighter regulation.”\textsuperscript{17} As a response, less severe cases of homoerotic and homosexual behaviours (though still considered morally and legally wrong) were met with increasingly weaker punishments. This, according to Michael Rocke in his study on homosexuality (male-male) culture in Renaissance Florence, amounted to a, “vast, if piece-meal, governmental program to reform and discipline that community’s morals and behaviours.”\textsuperscript{18} This is not to say, however, that all of Italy during the Renaissance openly condemned and actively punished individuals for homosexual sodomy.

Certain spaces in Italian society did not regard sodomy, and by extension - homosexuality, as large of a social evil as it was made out to be. Juliana Schiesari com-


\textsuperscript{16} According to Rocke, in Palermo, under Spanish dominion, approximately 100 men faced the death penalty for homosexual sodomy between the years 1567 and 1640 (page 47).

\textsuperscript{17} Rocke, \textit{Forbidden Friendships}, 19.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
ments on the “relative tolerance in many parts of Italy for homosexuality and sodomy, particularly in artistic milieus [and] even when homosexual behaviour was officially forbidden, such restrictions turned out not to be enforced in practice.”

This sense of tolerance, however, can be challenged by the notion that gender also played a large factor in the amount of tolerance and understanding that these behaviours were met with. Manifestations of tolerance differed greatly for males than for females based on who was demonstrating tolerance (or a lack thereof). Outside of artistic social environments, aspects of tolerance of homoerotic and homosexual acts were also observed in literary and upper-class circles. In a letter to Machiavelli, Vettori recommended that the father “not fret [and] advise[d] him to remember his own youth.” At the time, Machiavelli was concerned about a possible homoerotic and/or homosexual relationship between his son (Lodovico) and another young man. Guido Ruggiero points out the, “association of sexual pleasure with play” in this exchange and also implies a sense of nonchalance about the affair. This can also be tied to the principle that such behaviours were not permanent. Homosexual behaviour between men, “however intense or engaging it may have been, did not constitute a permanently ‘deviant’ condition, but


20 Note: Tolerance should not be conflated with the concept of acceptance. Distinguishing between these two aids our understanding of the experiences of those being persecuted. While tolerance implies a sense of charity and reluctance, acceptance (generally) has no sense of obligation or oppression attached to it.


22 Ruggiero, Machiavelli in Love, 248.
was, for most, an occasional or temporary transgression that did not preclude sex with women.” Historical evidence in Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence suggests that this behaviour was even a type of rite of passage for some. Rocke interprets this evidence by saying that, “many, if not most, Florentine males engaged in homosexual activity at some point in their lives... [and that] their same-sex erotic relations, often casual and limited to brief periods in their life, commonly evolved in the context of typical forms of male sociability and of social bonds and networks such as youth gangs, neighborhood, work, the household, and even clientage, and less so or not at all within a well-defined sodomitical underworld.” Through a process of normalization, homoerotic relationships are not entirely separated from sexual behaviours and identities, but are given an aspect of youth-like innocence and sociality. Yet, instead of making a clear distinction between sexual relationships and friendships, Stephen Guy Bray describes this phenomenon as a “potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual,” much like the formulation presented by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. While this holds true to the presence of male-male interactions, it does not consider the erasure and variance in treatment as woman-woman pairings.

Occurrences of homosexual behaviours and identities between women are rarely traced in history due to the small existence of tangible documents and sources. This, however, does not necessarily mean that we cannot learn from this. Lesbianism and its

23 Rocke, 15.

24 Rocke, 150.

25 Guy-Bray, 11.
erasure in Italian Renaissance culture suggests that there were, “parameters of a largely negative, prescriptive world for women and sexuality.”

With a male-centric society, however, this observation does not seem surprising. Women’s agency in sexual heterosexual discourse is scarce, and is usually met with either scorn or is attached heavily to religious contexts, as seen with Theresa of Avila’s experience of being “utterly consumed by the great love of God.” Queer, or homosexual women’s histories in the Italian Renaissance does not lack agency, but instead lacks the sheer amount of documentation in order for it to have consistent and compelling discourse. The lack of discourse (or “silence) on homosexual behaviours between women, according to Foucault was a discourse in itself and these acts can be seen as a reaction to, “heterosexism [and] was complemented by homosociability.”

While the former assertion that erasure is a form of discourse absolutely holds true, the latter, claiming these relationships to be reactionary can be seen as a diminishment and essentialization of lesbian or queer women relationships as a simple political statement. Patricia Simons exclaims that very few documents indicate women, “addressing each other in terms of desire” and such evidence show a mixed response from society that, “lesbian behaviour was muted but not absent.”

Texts that were legal, medical, and/or religious in nature acknowledged the existence of possible intimacy between females, but with minimal understanding and effort. Popular


27 Theresa of Avila, Ecstasy


29 Simons, 82.
belief during the Italian Renaissance held that women, “who had some sexual experience had a hard time doing without sex and would resort to subterfuges to get it anyway.” These instances of deceit and trickery, as shown in Italian Renaissance dramas and comedies, took the form of homosexual relations between women.

Similar to the artistic milieus that were accepting of male-male relationships, there was a similar sense of tolerance for woman-woman companionship as well. Although theatrics during this time contained representation of woman-woman relationships that were both romantic and erotic, “they were [still] laced with the dominant patriarchal vision of family, gender, sex, and marriage,” in order to be carefully criticized and sometimes mocked. These portrayals mirrored what was expected by Renaissance audiences in that they still displayed typical manifestations of masculinity and femininity. Playwrights did this in terms of, “contemporary social and cultural assumptions... displaying signs that worked not just at the level of the physical and the body, but also in terms of behaviour and manners, signs carefully mobilized to present credible characters.” More often than not, these relationships, both on stage and off, challenged the notion that men were the superior sex when it came to meaningful and fulfilling relationships. Giannetti describes this phenomenon as a way of, “challeng[ing] the phallocentric logic that maintained that women lacked what was necessary to function sexually, as well as that they adhered to the basic passive/active dichotomy of sex and gender divi-


The emerging presence and fascination with queer women’s intimate lives and/or stories not only acts as a political response to patriarchal dominance, but out of patronage and female literacy as well. Socioeconomic factors, such as the printing press becoming more readily available, encouraged women’s “participation and access in/into written culture,” in Renaissance Italy. Instead of female characters mirroring the passive and subservient models in society that were often valued, strong female protagonists, particularly in queer theatre productions take center stage. Donning characteristics that were typically prescribed to male characters, such as heroism and bravery, “women lovers had become, for a moment at least, heroic even as they remained an impossibility.” The dynamics between the queer female couples, however still reinforced values of masculinity as attractive and alluring to women.

Italian Renaissance comedies, although progressive in that two women are able to find love and attraction for/to one another, still enforce the binary of a masculine individual being paired with a feminine individual. In contemporary terms, this phenomenon or pairing is described as “butch” and “femme” and can be interpreted as a conservative and limited understanding of the broad spectrum of female-female relationships. These literary works demonstrated “the significance of cultural presuppositions about such [gender presentation binary] practices; most notably they underlined the assumed superiority of the male sex in satisfying women and the supposed female [and feminine] in-

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33 Laura Giannetti, “Ma che potra succedermi se io donna amo una Donna”: Female-Female Desire in Italian Renaissance Comedy, Renaissance Drama, Vol. 36/37, Italy in the Drama of Europe (2010) 120.

34 Laura Giannetti, “Ma che potra succedermi se io donna amo una Donna”, 101.

35 Giannetti, “Ma che potra succedermi se io donna amo una Donna”, 105.
capacity to do the same.” As previously discussed, women did have greater access to having creative license and input into female-female relationship portrayals; however, on the whole, the evidence for lesbianism in the Italian Renaissance remains, “fragmentary as well as entirely originating from male voices,” according to Simons. In addition, it was only the masculine-presenting female characters that donned armour and performed heroic deeds, as it was by definition gendered male. These characters were seen as no more than “fictional or allegorical.” While less traditional in nature, Renaissance literature needed to adhere to some societal expectations in order to avoid complete censorship and/or abandonment from patrons. Male homoerotic companionships also reflected the gender presentation binary, as Renaissance Florence homosexual culture often referred to, “an older, dominant partner [that] took a younger, subordinate one [that was] ‘like a woman’.” Femininity is still associated with a passive nature and weak, even in exclusively male partnerships. Homosexual behaviour between men was, “condemn[ed] as effeminizing while praising male heterosexuality and manly.” Because the patriarchal concept of hyper-masculinity and inherent superiority of the active nature of typical male characteristics is applied to relationships that did not even involve

36 Giannetii, “Ma che potra succedermi se io donna amo una Donna”, 103.

37 Simons, 83.


men, it demonstrates the ever-present nature of the need to perpetuate and uphold traditional masculinity.

Homosexual and homoerotic behaviour was seen as a means of undermining the importance of the patriarchal power dynamics that formed the very basis of Italian Renaissance society. In Florence, “homosexual sodomy [and homoerotic behaviour, it can be argued]... was intimately bound up in notions of male status and identity, and played an important role in the cultural construction of masculinity,” and this can be seen as a microcosm for the rest of Italian society as well. The intricate connections between sexual behaviour and male-centric identities acted as a means of regulating and enforcing traditional and conservative ideals of gender roles. On the other hand, “sexual transactions,” as Meredith K. Ray observes in her analysis of communications between women in letter-writing, which Guido Ruggiero would agree with, “notoriously escape[d]... rigid schemas of order.” Female sexuality and homoeroticism that involved women seems to be particularly true to this circumstance. Homosociability among women was greatly encouraged in both court culture and through the laity. There were a number of spaces in Renaissance society where women could, “form their own networks and establish ties of affection,” such as nunneries, palaces, brothels, or prisons. As a consequence, these sorts of relations between women were either perceived as platonic or overlooked for their lack of a male presence that was seen as necessary.

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41 Rocke, 89.


43 Simons, 82.
Relationships between women, whether they were, “familial, matrimonial, and/or sexual” were all under the direct scrutiny of patriarchal views.\textsuperscript{44} The erasure or act of overlooking female-female homoerotic relationships serves as an interesting comparison to the ways in which male-male homoerotic relationships were penalized and policed.

Although there is a lack of academic scholarship for this topic and assertion, it can be argued that although homosexual behaviour among men received more violent responses than female homoeroticism, it does not mean that there was an absence of anti-queer attitudes for women. The discrimination that male-male sexual partnerships faced matched the bravado and extroversion that was valued in male embodiments. Violent punishments, such as castration and a myriad of examples of biblical texts all served as a warning for any individual who outwardly expressed their desires for other males (and sodomy) in a homosexual context.\textsuperscript{45} Regardless of matrimonial condition, social rank, and age, males who partook in homosexual behaviours were punished severely, if persecuted and found guilty, even though sodomy and erotic sexual acts were not necessarily, “limited to any particular social group or permanent homosexual identity.”\textsuperscript{46} Italian Renaissance society used less violent but still discriminatory practices to both limit agency in female sexuality, as well as diminish any notion of romantic and legitimate value that was associated with it. Any sort of acceptance of female-female


\textsuperscript{45} Christianity still played an important role in governing bodies in Italian Renaissance society. Ecclesiastical rhetoric describes the engagement of all sexual behaviours that did not result in reproduction as the waste of a man’s seed. Although this is including acts such as masturbation and oral sex, the most severe condemnations are responses to the willing participation of/in homosexual activities and behaviours.

\textsuperscript{46} Rocke, 146.
sexual behaviour was viewed as no more than instances of “homosexual desires,” but rejected content and the principle of a female “homosexual identity.” While sexual identity is a construct of later centuries, the erasure or selective representation of female-female sexual and romantic relationships is still evident and no less oppressive. Queer female relationships and their characteristics in Italian Renaissance society were largely social and cultural constructions and were used in artistic milieus as “a relative convention rather than an absolute truth.” Not only was representation of female homoerotic relationships limited and problematic within a gender presentation binary, it was almost always degraded to no more than plot fodder.

The internal struggle of a woman who dressed as a man, or as the feminine lover who fell for someone whom she thought was a man seemed to be a common trope and plot twist in Italian Renaissance comedies. Contemporary literature regarding the representation of female homosexual relationships suggests that tolerance is often laced with objectification and fetishization of sexual behaviours between women. While this is not the case for Italian Renaissance literature, the progression of limited representation and utilization of female queer partnerships as comedic and theatrical value to modern sexualization is an interesting consequence of patriarchal and anti-feminine discourse in literature. The simple fact that these relationships were being presented in a comedy is also a straight-forward enough implication that on the whole, female-female homoerotic story-lines were not taken very seriously or given nearly as much emotional death as their heterosexual counterparts.

47 Schiesari, Beasts and Beauties, 79.

48 Giannetti, Leila’s Kiss, 25.
However, this should not condemn every portrayal of queer female relationships, as there were a number of progressive and fairly unproblematic theatrical productions, such as Bernardo Dovizi’s *La Calandria* and Nicolò Secchi’s *Gl’inganni*. The scripting of such phenomenons represented a, “complex balance of and/or tension between diverse factors, including most notably: social custom and practice, the rules of canon and civil law, misogynist prejudices, proto-feminist influences of the *querelle des femmes*, erotic influences from translations of Latin literature, and the impact of philosophical debates on love and everyday attitudes towards women.”

*Gl’inganni* can be used as a paradigm to represent the strange dual nature of the scripting of female-female relationships. Giannetti asserts that the confusion of the main characters (Tullio and Massimo) is, “indicative of what may be seen as the two most widespread cultural assumptions at the time about love between women: one the one hand, that it was impossible - a cultural prejudice typical of a phallocentric society that assumed that women could not have sexual relations with other women - and, on the other hand, that physically intimacy between women was innocuous, as it did not threaten the family or society.”

Romantic and sexual relationships between women were seen as much less harmful to the hyper-masculine and patriarchal society during the Italian Renaissance because of its erasure, yet selective representation in prescriptive literature. These portrayals, even though they remained “anathema for the church and the occasional target of moralists... helped to render such desires and deeds less troublesome in everyday culture onstage.

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49 Gianetti, “Ma che potra succedermi se io donna amo una Donna”, 101.

50 Gianetti, “Ma che potra succedermi so io donna amo una Donna”, 100.
and off.”\textsuperscript{51} However, these are still fictional depictions of the realities of female-female sexual behaviour and should be analyzed with a critical eye. While homoerotic and sexual desires between women was imagined as possible in Italian Renaissance comedies, it was, at the same time, “proclaimed not to exist” because of the fact that at least one of the women was pretending to be a man.\textsuperscript{52} Instead of using blatant oppressive rhetoric in order to portray and condemn situations of female-female sexual interactions, Juliana Schiesari exclaims that these portrayals are laced in elements of fantasy and the extraordinary. The “lesbianism masquerades” in such texts could not exactly compare but instead could act as a contrast to the “stereotypes that conjoin[ed]” male homosexual desire with “blackness, ugliness, monstrosity, and dirtiness.”\textsuperscript{53} Misogynistic and patriarchal principles established the clear boundaries and double standard for homosexual desire and homoerotic behaviours between the the male and female sex.

One demographic, though small, that was both sexually fetishized and discriminated by a lack of fair representation, however, were intersex and androgynous individuals. Given their gender ambiguous status, Valeria Finucci examines their portrayals in a patriarchal context. According to The Manly Masquerade: Masculinity, Paternity, and Castration in the Italian Renaissance, non-binary individuals were distinguished “not by gender but by sex: one is \textit{libidio} and the other \textit{libidio femina}.”\textsuperscript{54} Much like the woman-woman relationships in Italian Renaissance comedies, any sort of partnership with gen-

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{52} Gianetti, “Ma che potra succedermi so io donna amo una Donna”, 101.

\textsuperscript{53} Schiesari, 26.

\textsuperscript{54} Finucci, \textit{The Manly Masquerade: Masculinity, Paternity, and Castration in the Italian Renaissance}, 201.
nder non-conforming or biologically ambiguous individuals was seen as a plot device and means of comic relief. While the assessment of this practice is accurate, the terminology used by Finucci is not. Valeria Finucci uses the term “hermaphrodite” in her book, which is a highly pathologized and more recently considered a derogatory term used to describe individuals with ambiguous genitalia.\textsuperscript{55} Characters that did not fit the gender roles and expectations of Italian Renaissance patriarchal values were used as either a character foil to male (and presumably heterosexual) protagonists and/or a plot twist to add some sort of comedic element to the storyline.

Patriarchal values and the formation of the masculine identity have an abundance of sources that can be found, even though this sample size is diminished when adding the criteria of queer relationships. The majority limitations to the assertions made in this paper, however, largely stem from a lack of secondary sources that discuss the presence of lesbian or queer woman sexual relationships. Feminist ideals in the Italian Renaissance and the history of sexuality do not intersect as effectively in terms of non-heterosexual practices. Legal and punitive practices were largely reserved for male homosexual behaviours, and so documents and records that have been studied very rarely touch upon sexual “crimes” that involved women, with the exception of sodomy, adultery, and sexual assault. As well, using terms such as heterosexuality and homosexuality in a historical period when such identities did not exist has the effect of overlooking any sort of fluid sexual behaviours of individuals who do not solely have attraction for one gender presentation. The changing and dynamic nature of homoeroticism

\textsuperscript{55} As a replacement, the term “intersex”, which shares both legitimate biological and academic meanings, is used.
also makes the study of such traditions and representations difficult to trace in academic texts. Literature from ancient Greece to the sixteenth century and onwards, “does not extend... in a continuous manner... partly because the Renaissance had a very different idea of homoeroticism.”56 This is why an emphasis on correct terminology and a non-presentist view when analyzing Italian Renaissance homosexual behaviours is important. Homoeroticism and homosexuality also have a tendency to carry different meanings. While homoeroticism carries connotations of both romantic attachment or desire, as well as some form of physical desire, homosexuality does not necessarily imply a romantic or emotional connection between the affected parties. Italian Renaissance writers were able to “construct a homoerotic tradition out of the classical works that they had been enjoined to study, and that by following these classical models, they were also able to continue this tradition.”57 Subsequent scholars from centuries that followed have continued with this practice in order to build upon pre-existing interpretations of sexual behaviours and create our contemporary understanding of sexuality, sexual behaviour, and identities. Finding sources that do not impose presentist views on historical evidence and situation, especially when dealing with issues such as sexuality, that are relatively new fields of study, are hard difficult to find.

Italian Renaissance scholarship corroborates the notion that although there was relative tolerance towards homoerotic relationships and even homosexual desires, there were many double standards that enforced values of hyper-masculinity and anti-feminism within this small milieu of lenience. While male-male partnerships that were more

56 Guy-Bray, 9.

57 Guy-Bray, 5.
than strictly platonic were met with more violent and extreme forms of discrimination, this does not go to say that women’s sexuality received “easier” treatment for their homosexual desires. The heteronormative and patriarchal assumption that women were unable to sexually satisfy female partners played a direct role in the erasure and oversight of important non-platonic relationships between women in Italian Renaissance society. Hyper-masculinity also dictated that in literature where female-female homosexual and homoerotic partnerships actually existed, there was a consistent need to give at least one of the partners traits and phenotype that embodied the male gender or a form of masculine presentation. The enforcement of a gender binary, along with conservative and traditional ideals of sexual morality contributed to what could be interpreted as state regulation of sexual behaviour in Italian Renaissance society. While this greatly impacted the perception of how meaningful female homosexual and homoerotic relationships were in reality, the effects of patriarchal dominance and hyper-masculinity were perhaps the most detrimental and devastating for a much smaller demographic of the population: intersex and biologically gender non-conforming people. The phallocentric, and by extension male-centric, society with which individuals with homosexual desires lived in often perpetuated negative stereotypes and ideals that placed homoerotic tendencies on the same level as serious and violent crimes. Fortunately, artistic spaces and playwrights use their limited understanding and slightly more tolerant views on homosexual relationships to try and re-establish less exaggerated personae in Italian Renaissance comedy and drama, though this is still but a fictional representation of the realities of non-heterosexual partnerships. The history of sexuality in Renaissance Italy still has much discourse to be explored and interpreted; however, based on the patriarchal struc-
tures and underpinnings of society, it is likely that much of the subtleties and intricate
details of homosexual and homoerotic lifestyles (particularly those pertaining to women)
are scarce.
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