Virtue, Honour and Mischief:
The Role of Youthful Disobedience in Civic Humanism and
Masculinity in the Florentine Renaissance

Fig. 1. Giovanni di Ser Giovanni Guidi, *Il Giocco del Civettino*, c. 1450. Palazzo Davanzati, Florence.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the subversive world of male youths in Florence between the mid-fourteenth century and 1530. Whereas historians have emphasised the conservative foundations of Renaissance ‘virtue’ and ‘honour’ – values such as piety, thrift, self-restraint and political participation – this thesis evokes the ways in which unorthodox means of civic engagement were tolerated, and indeed celebrated, when perpetrated by young males for the benefit of the city. Through public ridicule, unauthorised violence and extra-marital sexuality, young males asserted themselves within the Florentine Republic, and this thesis highlights how that culture’s laudation of such dissident behaviour reflected its interpretation of civic humanism.
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**Introduction**

May I say it without offending you, O men of ancient times: the Golden Age is inferior to the time in which we now live. Was there ever more justice or more respect for the law? Has either piety or faith ever been more honoured? Cruel wars are no longer fought, since the neighbouring peoples have been vanquished. Has any time enjoyed greater peace? By virtue of its citizens, Florence has become paramount among Italian cities. Who, in fact, has ever equalled the honesty, intellect, and nobility of Cosimo de’ Medici and his two sons? Who has ever made use of his own abundant wealth with greater generosity? These are among the things which make us equal to the gods.¹

¹ ‘Mi sia lecito dirlo con vostra buona pace, o antichi: cedano i secoli d’oro di fronte al mio tempo. Quando vi fu maggiore rispetto del giusto e dell’equo? Quando la fede e la pietà furono più onorate? Vinti i vicini, si sono acquietate le guerre orrende: forse si è goduto mai di una pace più prospera? Per merito di tali cittadini la città di Firenze ha inalzato il capo più in alto delle altre città dell’Ausonia. E infatti chi fu pari a Cosimo de’ Medici e ai suoi due figliuoli per onestà, per ingegno e per nobili natali? Chi con maggiore generosità ha usato delle sue grandi ricchezze? Per questo noi possiamo essere pari agli dei’: Ugolino Verino, ‘Flametta’, in *Poeti Latini del Quattrocento*, ed. Francesco Arnaldi, Lucia Gualdo Rosa and Liliana Monti Sabia, vol. 15 (Milan and Naples: Riccardo Ricciardi, 1964), 863-5; Ugolino Verino, ‘The Glories of a New Golden Age’, in *Images of Quattrocento Florence: selected writings in literature, history and art*, ed. Stefano Ugo Baldassari and Arielle Saiber (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 94. Due to their superior elegance and accuracy, the majority of this thesis has depended upon published and available English translations of Italian and Latin texts. While the original language has been included for most quotes, some sources were unable to be acquired due to limited access to overseas archives. However, their translations have been taken from reputed, published sources, as made clear throughout the thesis.
To find a more praiseworthy account of a time and place would be an unenviable task. For Ugolino Verino, Florence in the fifteenth-century mirrored the divine worlds of his classical and religious education, a magnificence nurtured by the city’s unqualified personification of conservative virtues. Respect for law and custom underpinned the demi-god status of the citizens of Florence during the Renaissance. As Luca Pulci made similarly explicit, Florence was made up of a ‘civilised and pious’ people, ‘hostile to all crime’ and loyal to ordini sacri ['sacred orders'].

Justice, piety, faith, honesty, intellect, nobility, and generosity: in quattrocento Florence, these were the keys to greatness.

Male ‘honour’ and ‘virtue’ are often associated with these flagship values. Much of the historiography concerning the Florentine Renaissance considers onore to be tantamount to virtù: that pinnacle of civic respectability founded upon virility, thrift, devoutness and political participation. Honour was inherently connected to those qualities, and those characteristics indeed formed the blueprint for a honourable life. Yet, male honour was grounded upon a more fundamental exercise of authority. Whereas female honour was underpinned by chastity and other varieties of self-restraint, Florentine men were judged upon their ability to take control of their affairs and stake a claim on the public stage. Economically, such authority could be displayed through the confident lending of money or generous spending on civic and aesthetic enrichment.

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integrity of their ‘reputation, house, property, body, and womenfolk’.  

Politically, the easiest means of providing evidence of one’s honour was by service in office, and the homophonic similarity of onore and onori – ‘the term used for high-administrative offices in the city-state’ – reinforces the way in which some often perceived honour as indistinguishable from una vita politica.  

Thus, for those who had the capacity to convey such examples of authority, the attainment of honour was relatively straightforward. However, for many males between the ages of sixteen and thirty, onore was something that had to be garnered by alternate means. As Richard Trexler explains, the gerontocracy was ‘determined … to exclude the young from high political office’, and thus, with minimal income and no familial responsibilities, the traditional political, economic and social means of asserting one’s authority were limited. Giovanni di Paolo Morelli, that sober merchant diarist of the early quattrocento, made the point unequivocally, emphasising how the young man ‘is not eligible for public office and does not frequent the places where business is conducted, so he is ignored’. How, therefore, did males of this demographic engage in Florentine society? By what means did they aspire to honour and virtue?  

In his mid-fifteenth century History of Florence, Leonardo Bruni asserted that ‘it is a fact of human nature that, when the way lies open to greatness and honours,
people readily take it; when that way is blocked, they become inert and do nothing’. Of course, many youths of politically eligible families perceived the obstacles to honour as unsurpassable, modelling themselves on the qualities of their honourable ancestors and biding their time until they were of an appropriate age to contribute. However, to subscribe entirely to Bruni’s pessimism would be to ignore the ingenuity and opportunism of male youths that permeated the multifarious accounts of life in Renaissance Florence. Ronald Weissman explains how an eagerness to engage in the public life of the city was represented by the growth of youth confraternities in the fifteenth-century, with youths grasping the occasion to be exposed to ‘a sense of participation in the honours and obligations of the dominant republican culture’. Similarly, in his early fifteenth-century memoir, Buonaccorso Pitti elucidated the efficacy of youths in seizing chances for authority, ‘taking advantage of [the] dissension’ of the leaders of the early quattrocento and ‘worm[ing] their way into government’. Where there was an inkling of opportunity to contribute, there was a youthful hunger for social injection.

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Thankfully for the young men of Florence, opportunities to prove their worth were not limited to rare and fleeting glimpses of political participation. Indeed, political activism itself did not necessarily guarantee hierarchical ascent, for as the wise Gianozzo of Leon Battista Alberti’s *I Libri Della Famiglia* explicated, public life was full of ‘pretence, vanity, and lies’. Therefore, instead of trying to conform to a traditional means of social recognition that was as precarious as it was seldom available, youths sought unconventional approaches in their pursuit of honour. As the thirteenth-century *novellista*, Franco Sacchetti, made explicit, ‘a thing is very often achieved by departing from the usual methods which never would have been achieved by adhering to all the rules that ever were made’. It was with this creative spirit that Florentine youths interacted with the social sphere, for while they could not be *seduto* – placed in official power – they could still be *veduto* – seen.

The adolescent period of a Florentine male’s life was one of significant change, not unlike that of youths today. Physical transformations from childhood to manhood mirrored the social clash between a ‘need for independence’ and ‘paternal demands for respect’. From the age at which one commonly pursued an apprenticeship or sought further study (approximately fifteen years-old) to the age at which one began to hold political office (thirty years-old), males were known as *giovani*, and Ilaria Taddei has confirmed the prevalence of this defined group within

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the Florentine vernacular. In fact, this collection of unmarried youths – characterised by their immense freedoms and little responsibilities – was sometimes considered to include men as old as forty. However, the typical understanding of ‘youth’ was as a category that ceased to apply to males beyond the late-twenties.

What makes this age group of particular interest was the special place it held in Florence between the mid-trecento and 1530. Whereas contemporary civilisations looked instinctively towards suppression of the young as a means of control, Florence perceived its giovani as holding the keys to renewal and progress. Florence was a city that gave its illegitimate sons and foundlings a chance to thrive. It was a city in which sons expected to be accommodated for, such that any failure on behalf of a father may lead a disgraced youth to pretend to be from another family. Young men were the catalysts for change, be it in the form of reconciling inter-family feuds, or serving as the ‘true lamp’ for the city’s redemption from lapses into immorality.

As Lorenzo Polizzotto elucidates, ‘no other city established a comparable structure for

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18 See Bruni, History, 3:258-9.
19 See Bruni, History, 3:258-9.
the education and socialisation of its young’, 21 and Trexler reinforces the notion that Florentines were ‘out in front’ shaping this ‘new pathos’. 22

This sensitivity to youth emerged by the middle of the fourteenth century. Prior to that era, males were deemed to partake in one long period of growth until they were in their mid-twenties. In the early trecento, Dante Alighieri characterised all males between the ages of eight months to twenty-five years as being in a single state of social and economic dependence in which the chief virtue was obedience. 23 However, accounts of Florentine life from the mid-trecento started to appreciate the role of adolescents as a distinct class capable of initiative and civic engagement, a perspective that was prevalent until the collapse of the Florentine Republic in the early 1530s. After the restoration of the Medici, youths were afforded little scope for assertiveness; acquiescence and conformity were the hallmarks of the new order. As Polizzotto explains, youths ‘were no longer viewed as having a central role in the city’s destiny’. 24 An ethos of discipline characterised post-1530 Florence, such that honour was no longer associated with the ability to exercise authority within the civic space, but it was almost exclusively equated with titles bestowed by the Duke. 25

Combined with the austerity measures introduced by the Council of Trent in the mid-cinquecento, the suppression of youthful agency after 1530 was such that this thesis is concerned mainly with the culture that existed and evolved over the preceding one hundred and eighty years.

24 Polizzotto, Children of the Promise, 207.
25 Weissman, Ritual Brotherhood, 197.
This culture was characterised by its inherent contradictions and inconsistencies. Verino and Pulci may have celebrated the purity and magnificence of Florence in hyperbolic terms, but they were fanciful. Their triumphant descriptions of the Laurentian era ignored the fact that ‘men who [had] been sentenced to exile or death [did] not hesitate to walk freely in the city streets before everybody’s eyes’. As their contemporary, Mantuanus, made explicit, ‘the arts of adultery, murder, and sedition … hold sway among city men and city walls’, and Guido Biagi reinforces the notion that the Florentines of the Renaissance were ‘a population mediocre, full of thoughtless gaiety, small vices, and small passions’. Far from the ‘Golden Age’, the Florentine Republic was plagued by an inherent juxtaposition of upright Christian morals and baser civic customs.

The social toleration, accommodation, and indeed celebration of these customs, however inconsistent with the laws of the Church and state, are ripe areas for historical enquiry, and the way in which male youths sought to engage in such a turbulent social environment is the basis for this thesis. While confidence and ingenuity were commonly lauded as virtuous qualities, the extent to which their most mischievous displays seem to have excused otherwise discouraged behaviour makes for an illuminating insight into the non-conservative traits celebrated by contemporary commentators. When did recounts of adultery or cruel practical jokes cross from denunciations of vice to celebrations of virtù? To what extent did a young male’s avoidance of punishment through witticism earn him onore? If the holding of public

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office was restricted to males over the age of thirty, to what extent could younger men display a vita attiva through violence in the piazza?

These are the kinds of historical questions that beg for comprehensive discussion, and their answering rests upon the wide reading of multifarious primary sources. Therefore, this thesis will draw on evidence garnered from memoires, diaries, humanist treatises, formal histories, individual correspondences, literary and poetic pieces, sermons, court reports and other miscellaneous materials from the Italian Renaissance. By uncovering fragments of Florentine life from heterogeneous perspectives, this thesis will present a nuanced understanding that appreciates the complexity of the era. As Clifford Geertz explains, ‘it is through the flow of behaviours that cultural forms find articulation’; 29 and, by incorporating evidence of Florentine behaviour from a broad foundation of sources, this thesis endeavours to articulate the most peculiar of cultural anomalies that shaped the daily lives of male youths. As a result of this breadth of material, this thesis also addresses the experiences of young males from diversified backgrounds, indicating the variations of comportment between sons of nobles and those of artisans; young members of occupational guilds versus plebeian servants. In so doing, three varieties of subversive behaviour will be examined in detail.

Firstly, this thesis will evoke the contributions of youthful males to the festive and social life of the city, exploring the reactions to practical jokes and unruly carnival customs as indicators of the extent to which impish creativity was applauded. Humorous ridicule was one form of expressing authority, and despite its incompatibility with mainstream expectations of respect and obeisance, the fame that accompanied youthful pranksters highlights the extent to which minor transgressions

of social custom were tolerated. By first establishing the general Florentine appreciation for creativity and wit, this chapter will identify the gender, socio-economic and intellectual boundaries that governed public ridicule in Renaissance Florence. Moreover, a discussion of the innate civic consciousness that permeated the Florentine psyche will enhance an appreciation for the kinds of practical jokes that were met with praise, as opposed to the examples of deception that saw youthful perpetrators become the object of scorn.

Secondly, this thesis will explore the circumstances in which youthful violence was excused, or indeed admired, along the lines of onore. After delineating the propensity of young men to become involved in public confrontations – and how, unlike ridicule, the exercise of force was not exclusively the weapon of a wealthy and intelligent élite – this chapter will discuss the reconciliation of the humanist appeal to discipline versus the virtue that could be derived through daring physical encounters. Ultimately, what separated condemnation from applause was the extent to which the violent act served a civic purpose. Similar to demonstrations of ridicule, the reception of violence in Renaissance Florence was dependent upon its impression on the majority view, and thus this chapter will reinforce the notion that youthful transgressions of conventional onore were accepted where their impacts on the city-state were positive.

Thirdly, this thesis will discuss the toleration of sexual promiscuity as a result of civic considerations. Male youths were typecast as uncontrollably libidinous and therefore particularly vulnerable in a notoriously sexualised city. While legislators, judges and families were all responsible for trying to curb this immorality – especially the ‘unnameable vice’, sodomy – the continued proliferation of extra-marital sexual relations indicated a significant lack of vigour about such denunciations. Youths of all
classes were subject to a degree of leniency when it came to being convicted for sexual transgressions, and this was as much a result of their young age and corruptibility as it was necessary to uphold the glorious reputation of the city. The maintenance of familial networks, the protection of social and political harmony, and the defence of collective masculinity were all similarly crucial elements in the expedient toleration of sexual subversiveness, reinforcing the broader centrality of civic utility to the behaviour of male youths in Renaissance Florence.

This thesis aims to present an explanation as to how these three transgressions influenced a male youth’s social standing. On their face, they are seemingly incompatible with the traditional humanist qualities of virtù and onore. Yet, churlish examples of ridicule, unauthorised acts of violence and extra-marital sexual relations were forms of expression that Florentine giovani used as a means of engaging with the political and social arena. As Poggio Bracciolini explained pertinently in his fifteenth century treatise on nobility, ‘we ought to respect custom which, since it instils habit, exercises supreme power over human conduct’. The accommodation of subversive behaviour was one Florentine custom that held particular sway over the habits of male youths.

The conduct of younger demographics has been of particular interest to historians of the Florentine Renaissance over the past half-century. The archival richness of Trexler’s *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*, combined with his *The

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31 Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*. 
Children of Florence,\textsuperscript{32} provides a pioneering insight into the lives of children and families during that era. Similarly, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber’s 1985 publication, Women, Family and Ritual in Renaissance Tuscany,\textsuperscript{33} reinforces this historiographical interest in the Florentine generations that were previously overshadowed by a narrow obsession with ‘great men’. Highly specialised studies, such as Lorenzo Polizzotto’s history of the Confraternity of the Purification,\textsuperscript{34} Michael Rocke’s detailed canvassing of Florentine homosexuality,\textsuperscript{35} and Ronald Weissman’s analysis of confraternal bonds,\textsuperscript{36} have provided further insight into the way in which young people engaged in the life of Renaissance Florence, and have opened up many avenues for further enquiry.

The paradoxical championing of subversive behaviour by giovani in Renaissance Florence is one such avenue: an avenue as complex as it is largely untouched. Ultimately, as this thesis unveils, male youths formed a distinct sub-culture in Renaissance Florence. While a similarly fascinating sub-culture existed for their female counterparts, the substantial differences between the two genders’ experiences was such that this thesis will be chiefly concerned with questions of Florentine masculinity. Pieces of this history lie in diverse places, and this thesis aims to complete the currently scattered puzzle of mischievous male youths, revealing another layer of the city-state’s cultural complexity and inviting a questioning of the broader philosophical foundations of the Renaissance Italian world.

\textsuperscript{32} Trexler, The Children of Florence.
\textsuperscript{33} Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).
\textsuperscript{34} Polizzotto, Children of the Promise.
\textsuperscript{35} Michael Rocke, Forbidden Friendships: homosexuality and male culture in Renaissance Florence (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).
\textsuperscript{36} Wiessman, Ritual Brotherhood.
Chapter One

Youthful Impishness, Practical Jokes and Public Ridicule:

subversive stamps of civic engagement and personal honour

Whether it is an accidental failing, stemming from our debased morals, or simply an innate attribute of men and women, I am unable to say; but the fact remains that we are more inclined to
laugh at scandalous behaviour than virtuous deeds, especially when we ourselves are not directly involved.  

Humorous ridicule was a central element of the Florentine Renaissance. As Giovanni Boccaccio suggested, comedic transgressions had an inexplicable attraction, an ability to transcend grave considerations of morality and generate positive reactions. In times of both prosperity and adversity, laughter was an essential ingredient of the social fabric, and those Florentines who had the capacity to add ‘a thread of colour to the monotonous web of their simple lives’ earned a special kind of respect. This recognition entailed both an appreciation for the rarity of genuine humour, and the broader symbolisation of power that it came to represent. Honour was founded upon the exercise of authority, and such authority was manifest in the ability to make fun of one’s enemies shamelessly, arbitrarily and spontaneously.

Ridicule was one unconventional method of attaining an honourable reputation. As Franco Sacchetti made clear, words had the potential to be ‘worse than blows’, and a ‘little thing’ such as a practical joke had the ability to throw down a man of ‘great state and pride’. Such was the potency of vindictive practical jokes that, as Trexler explains, ‘the government tried to monopolise the right to ridicule,

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38 Biagi, introduction to Tales from Sachetti, xii-xiii.
39 ‘parole che sono peggio che spontonate’: Sacchetti, Trecentonovelle, 405-6; English translation from Sacchetti, Tales, trans. Steegman, 206.
40 ‘Starà l’uomo con gran pompa e superbia, e una piccola cosa il metterà a dichino’: Sacchetti, Trecentonovelle, 149; English translation from Sacchetti, Tales, trans. Steegman, 54.
perhaps in part to make boyish activity superfluous’. Yet, through their insulting of traitors, bankrupts, iconoclasts and heretics, and their humiliation of prisoners of war, the Signoria of Florence only validated such public outbursts of condemnation as a means of civic engagement. Thus, masculine youths, with stringently limited avenues for significant expression, became renowned perpetrators of mischievous plots with ridicule as their central objective.

But who exactly participated in these elaborate pranks? What contextual circumstances were favourable to youthful vigilantism and expression? How was productive ridicule distinguished from destructive unruliness? This chapter will explore these questions, delineating the complex matrix under which masculine youths endeavoured to make their mark on the Florentine Republic through humour, daring and ingenuity.

_A sword and a shield: Florentine appreciation of creativity and wit_

… strive to make your goodness and merit and intelligence surpass what they appear to be … If you do this, you shall be appreciated, respected, and held in great esteem.  

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42 Pisan prisoners of war were ‘forced to kiss the rear end of the lion cub as they passed through the gate of San Frediano’: William Caferro, ‘Honour and Insult: Military Rituals in Late Medieval Tuscany’, in _Late Medieval and Early Modern Ritual: Studies in Italian Urban Culture_, ed. Samuel Cohn Jr., Marcello Fantoni, Franco Franceschi and Fabrizio Ricciardelli (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2013), 189.
Creativity and quick-wittedness were estimable qualities for a man in Renaissance Florence. Cleverness was inherently associated with the ability to surprise one’s contemporaries or display originality, and those that satisfied these delights were the recipients of high praise. Alberti is a clear advocate of this trait, with the young interlocutor of his treatise – Lionardo – stressing how the elderly Gianozzo was wise on account of his elegantissime e inaudite [‘elegant’ and ‘original’] discourse.44 A similar appreciation of astuteness was manifest in Angelo Poliziano’s account of Giuliano de’ Medici’s murder during the Pazzi conspiracy, an event that was made more tragic by the fact that the young victim ‘loved wit, and he himself did not lack of it’.45 As Trexler makes clear, humanist teachers within the Florentine Republic championed the ‘quick-witted, alert, sparkling, learned [and] spirited’,46 and the appreciation of these qualities was accentuated in light of their rarity. While his eclogues on Adulescentia are couched in a persistently negative tone, the experienced Baptista Mantuanus explained the common masculine tendency whereby ‘man flatters himself and wants to be thought a clever creature, but heedlessly he spreads many nets for himself and tumbles into pitfalls that he himself has dug’.47 Even Girolamo Savonarola – a man who dedicated his life to the thought that children were tantamount to citywide, moral renewal – admitted the generally limited cognitive

46 Trexler, The Children of Florence, 89.
47 ‘iipse sibi blanditur homo sollersque putari / vult animal; tamen incautus sibi multa tetendit / retia et in foveam cecidit quam fecerat’: Mantuanus, Adulescentia, 18; English translation by Piepho, 19.
capacities of children, for as he made clear in his first treatise, ‘the light of intellect is weak, especially in childhood’.\(^{48}\)

Consequently, rare flashes of youthful ingenuity became a basis of Florentine folklore from the early fourteenth century. Boccaccio’s *Decameron* is littered with praise for clever responses, highlighting the ability of a ‘ready wit’ to ‘bring a swift phrase, apposite and neatly turned, to the lips of the speaker’.\(^{49}\) While his tales are officially fictional, Boccaccio claims for them a ‘moral teaching and tendency’, and the notion that they are ‘no less true than entertaining’ reinforces their use to historians trying to tease out the social standards and expectations of Renaissance Florentines.\(^{50}\)

Of particular interest is Boccaccio’s introduction of Michele Scalza, a young man who had earned a reputation as ‘the most entertaining and agreeable fellow you could ever wish to meet’ on account of his ability to ‘always [come] up with some new-fangled notion’.\(^{51}\) The basis of Scalza’s popularity, to the extent that ‘the young men of Florence loved to have him with them when they were out on the spree together’, was flaunted when Scalza gave a *piacevole argomento* [an ‘ingenious


\(^{50}\) Biagi, introduction *Tales from Sacchetti*, vii-viii; Boccaccio, *Decameron*, trans. McWilliam, 561.

argument’] regarding the noblest Florentine family.\textsuperscript{52} As the young man posited, nobility was proportionate to old age, and thus the Baronci must certainly be the noblest of all families since their poorly-designed faces, ‘just like the ones that are made by children when they are first learning to draw’, was evidence of the fact that ‘the Lord God must have created them when He was still learning His craft’.\textsuperscript{53} The unanimous laughter that followed Scalza’s novel reasoning, along with the awarding of a supper for the witty youth and six of his companions, indicated the extent of praise that followed such humorous originality. A similar kind of praise was granted upon Betto Brunelleschi’s sophisticated deciphering of a joke.\textsuperscript{54} While it was the elderly Guido Cavalcanti who gave a polite, but cryptically insulting, retort to Betto and his companions, it was Betto who was considered a ‘paragon of shrewdness and intelligence’ by viewing the rebuttal as something more meaningful than the ramblings of a mad man.\textsuperscript{55} At least for Boccaccio’s group of ten youths escaping pestilence in the mid-trecento, the ability to perceive and explain things from a unique angle, or to fashion a previously unexplored argument with precision, found a well-disposed audience.

Sophisticated authority over language and creative problem solving became hallmarks of success – or, indeed, survival – within the social context of Renaissance Florence. Chroniclers throughout the Renaissance explicated the inherently


\textsuperscript{53} ‘sí come sogliono essere i visi che fanno da prima i fanciulli che apparano a disegnare … assai bene appare che Domenedio gli fece quando apparava a dipignere’: Boccaccio, \textit{Il Decameron}, 341; English translation from Boccaccio, \textit{The Decameron}, trans. McWilliam, 461.

\textsuperscript{54} Boccaccio, \textit{Decameron}, 346-7.

Manichaean encounters that characterised Florentine social bonds, epitomised by what Weissman has labelled an ‘agonistic character’ whereby ‘personal relations were perceived as being, at one and the same time, competitive encounters occurring between adversaries and supportive encounters occurring between friends’.\textsuperscript{56} In his mid-	extit{trecento} Book of Good Customs, Paolo da Certaldo emphasised the need to ‘take care not to say anything in the street or near a thin wall that you don’t want everyone to know’.\textsuperscript{57} Similarly, writing in 1434, Alberti portrayed Gianozzo’s typical exhaustion after spending a full day ‘talking and contending with malevolent, scheming persons’ that filled the Florentine streets.\textsuperscript{58} It is clear that these social dangers were still a cause for concern when Mantuanus wrote his eclogues in the late fifteenth century, those which reiterated the ‘constant need for toil and vigilance in a difficult, often dangerous world’.\textsuperscript{59} From the late-	extit{trecento}, when Sacchetti explained that ‘on all sides there are spread deceptions and frauds’,\textsuperscript{60} to the end of the fifteenth century, when Savonarola accepted that ‘the bad citizens always outnumber the good’,\textsuperscript{61} Florence was a notorious centre of ‘innumerable anxieties’.\textsuperscript{62}

Therefore, creativity in the form of shrewd cunning was a quality deemed essential if any form of control was to be imparted onto this ‘veritable cauldron of

\textsuperscript{56} Weissman, \textit{Ritual Brotherhood}, 27.
\textsuperscript{57} ‘ti guarda di non dire cosa lungo via o lungo parete d’assi o di sottile muro, che tu non voglia che ogni uomo il sappia’: Certaldo, \textit{Libro di Buoni Costumi}, 204; English translation from Certaldo, ‘Book of Good Practices’, trans. Baca, 81.
\textsuperscript{59} Lee Piepho, introduction to \textit{Adulescentia}, by Mantuanus, xxxiv.
\textsuperscript{60} ‘d’ogni parte sono testi gli inganni e’ tradimenti’: Sacchetti, \textit{Trecentonovelle}, 524; English translation from Sacchetti, \textit{Tales}, trans. Steegman, 280.
suspicion, mistrust and envy’. Alberti’s fourth book, thought to have been written around 1437, contains a multitude of perspectives in favour of social williness, with the wise Piero teaching his youthful listeners of his ‘various and different devices, [his] devious and seldom-used means’ that were ‘most useful to deal with men in civic life’. When Adovardo speaks of the necessary knowledge that one must learn from the public marketplace, he is alluding to the craftier techniques of public intercourse that one cannot ‘acquire in solitude, from silent and motionless books’. Watkins’ description of Adovardo as a ‘slippery fellow’ is not pejorative; it is an objective account of an individual who understood the precariousness of his social surrounds and thus became an expert in the ‘varied arts, varied manoeuvres’ required of those determined to assert some kind of order. The alternative, as Mantuanus accentuated, entailed a deleterious submission to the worst aspects of urban life:

They labour by force, fraud, and deception. Madman! don’t you know how they cruelly oppress us? with what cunning they enthrall us? To ensnare us with words they think a sacred, a lofty, pious act. To thus they impel their ears and eyes, their mouths and hands.

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64 ‘mie varie e diverse vie, mie caute e poco usate forse e raro udite astuzie, molto utilissime a conversare con buona grazia in mezzo el numero de’ cittadini’: Alberti, *Della Famiglia*, 328; English translation from Alberti, *The Family*, trans. Watkins, 252.
68 ‘vi, fraude dolisque laborant. / nonne vides, insane, ut nos crudeler urgent, / quo capiunt astu? Nos irretire loquendo / sacrum offerre putant et opus sublime piumque. /
In the city, the art of deception was mastered with quasi-religious zeal, and it was the prerogative of individuals to match or better this cunning. Yet, while deceptive and evil machinations could be found within all social contexts, the kind of creative wit and guile that distinguished itself from baser dishonesty was limited to an intellectual, wealthy, and male élite.

**Witty mischief: the weapon of the few**

H.W. Fowler rightly delineates the audience of ‘wit’ as ‘the intelligent’, 69 and sources from the Tuscan Renaissance evoked a similarly restricted class of *persone di spirito*. In his obscene Platonic dialogue circulated amongst the Siennese Academy of the Stunned in 1525, Antonio Vignali expounded the notion that ‘if one considers the wit necessary to find hidden ways and means, one will look among educated men’. 70 For Vignali, it was scholars who were ‘esteemed for their beautiful conversation, their sweet words, their pleasing entertainments, their jokes and amorous pleasantries’, 71 and their display of bold humour regarding *cazzo, potta e culo* [‘cocks, cunts and assholes’] was notably the product of an ‘intensely masculine’ and ‘sophisticated


academic’ culture. At least in early-cinquecento Siena, a novel argument marbled with humour was the precious weapon of an educated élite.

Similarly, in Renaissance Florence, the intellectual minority claimed a monopoly over cleverness and cunning, such that the unintelligent were stereotyped as being dolce di sale – that is, lacking ‘salt’, or wit. Boccaccio’s Decameron is enlightening in this respect, with the majority of its celebrations regarding wit and originality being centred on an intellectual protagonist. While Boccaccio included stories of oafish youths absolving themselves from blame due to a witty explanation, these tales are explained away as a result of Fortuna, with no one willing to accept any flash of ingenuity from a servant boy as autonomous. As Neifile expounded: ‘it sometimes happens that Fortune herself will come to the aid of people in distress by suddenly putting words in their mouths that they would never have been capable of formulating when their minds were at ease’. Therefore, the subsequent story of a servant’s use of a humorous and spontaneous response to avoid a beating from his master does not take on the same celebratory tone that accompanied similar displays of wit by élite intellectuals, but rather serves as an indication of the extent of luck that can sometimes assist vulnerable individuals. Over a century later, Mantuanus echoed this notion, arguing that ‘what ingenuity can’t accomplish, chance can’.

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72 Vignali, La Cazzaria, 41; English translation from Vignali, The Book of the Prick, trans. Moulton, 75; Ian Frederick Moulton, introduction to The Book of the Prick, 1, 4.
74 ‘secondo gli accidenti, a’ dicitori, la fortuna ancora, alcuna volta aiutatrice de’ paurosi, sopra la lor lingua subitamente di quelle pone che mai, ad animo riposato, per lo dicitore si sareber sapute trovare’: Boccaccio, Il Decameron, 336; English translation from Boccaccio, The Decameron, trans. McWilliam, 454.
75 Boccaccio, Il Decameron, 336-7.
76 ‘Quod nequit ingenium, casus facit’: Mantuanus, Adulescentia, 32, English translation by Piepho, 33.
the purity of wit remained with the intelligent class of men who claimed to control
themselves and their language more purposefully, and thus more virtuously.

It should also be made explicit that this class was exclusively male. The
misogynistic nature of Renaissance Florentine society has been well established by
almost all modern historians of the era, and this patriarchal influence extended to
interpretations of praiseworthy cunning versus condemnable deception. A poem by
the fifteenth century Florentine patrician, Giovanni Ciai, elucidated the repudiation of
dishonesty for immoral means:

If ever my tongue or hand
Has made false testimony against others,
On behalf of myself, my friend, or my neighbour,
God pardon me, and him
Whom I have offended, let him pardon me
Because it pains me that I was so wicked.77

Such indictable deception, as an evil that was overcome by the honourable and
necessary cunning explored above, was a quality attributed to the female constitution.
For many Florentine males, women were dangerously crafty, such that the best wives
were those who were ‘of the purest simplicity and free of any shade of cunning’.78

Impassioned by his experience of unrequited love, Mantuanus was staunch in his

77 ‘E se mai la mia lingua o la mia mano/ falsa testimonianz’ha contro altrui,/ per me
o per amico o prossimano,/ Dio mel perdoni, e piaccia ache a colui/ chef u l’ofeso
rendermi perdono,/ ché mi dolgo che si malvagio fui’: a 1469 poem by Giovanni Ciai,
quoted in Antonio Lanza, ed., Lirici Toscani del Quattrocento (Rome: Bulzone
editore, 1973), 387; English translation from Weissman, Ritual Brotherhood, 56.
78 ‘come quella la quale era di pura simplicità e d’ingegno non malizioso’: Alberti,
Della Famiglia, 284; English translation from Albertì, The Family, trans. Watkins,
221.
characterisation of women as, among many other things, *bilinguis* [deceitful] and *mendax* [untruthful], whereby ‘you cannot escape her schemes or defeat her cunning: so many are her arts, so great is her skill in doing harm’.\(^79\) Whereas shrewdness and cunning were laudable qualities for a young man in the face of an agonistic social context, the equivalent for the opposite sex was commonly associated with the exacerbation of that exact, adversarial public environment.

However, in *The Decameron*’s seventh story of the eighth day, Boccaccio evoked the ultimate victory of male minds over those of their female contemporaries.\(^80\) As Pampinea tells, Elena successfully duped the love-struck Rineri into almost freezing to death, yet this cruel trick was avenged by the superior cunning of the young male scholar, who subsequently convinced Elena (through an elaborate plot) to strip and lie on the roof of a tower, where she was naked to the blistering sun and almost perished of the exposure. As Pampinea made clear to her female companions, ‘this was the foolish young lady’s reward for supposing it was no more difficult to trifle with a scholar than with any other man’.\(^81\) When it came to cunning, creativity, shrewdness and ridicule, the male intellectual class were the masters, and the fact that Rineri – that is, the literary alias for Boccaccio himself\(^82\) – ‘went happily about his business and said no more about [the incident]’, whereas Elena ‘wisely refrained from playing any more tricks or falling deeply in love with anyone’,

\(^{79}\) ‘*non potes insidias evader, non potes astum / vincere; tantae artes, sollertia tanta nocendi*’: Mantuanus, *Adulescentia*, 34, English translation by Piepho, 35.

\(^{80}\) Boccaccio, *Il Decameron*, 433–47.


indicates the degree of honour with which male perpetrators of cunning were able to carry themselves compared to their female contemporaries.  

With this understanding of the innately intellectualised and masculine context in which a ready wit – or una prontezza mentale – was fashioned, it must also be noted that the expression of creativity was also reserved for men of a certain economic status and their sons. There was understandably a correlation – at least in the opinion of the intellectual élite who wrote about such notions of creative genius – between intelligence and economic standing. In Alberti’s treatise, the youthful Lionardo made explicit the way in which ‘servants and even other members of the household are apt to be persons of small intelligence’, and the elder Ricciardo reinforced the young protégé’s understanding of the social hierarchy: ‘poverty, as anyone knows by experience, I won’t say wholly hinders man, but keeps his virtue in the shade and often leaves it hidden away in obscure squalor’. Exceptions to this rule certainly existed, and those of lower-economic standing who managed to impress their patrons or masters with unconventional creativity were indeed some of the most famous because of this triumph over adversity. Buto, an old servant of the Alberti family, was depicted as a man whose humour was indeed moulded by his ‘constant poverty’. Similarly, Sacchetti explicated how ‘it often happeneth that men of low

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83 ‘per la qual cosa la donna, dimenticato il suo amante, da indi innanzi e di beffare e d’amare si guardò saviamente; e lo scolare, sentendo alla fante la coscia rotta, pendendogli avere assai intera vendetta, lieto, senza altro dirne se ne passò’: Boccaccio, Il Decameron, 447; English translation from Boccaccio, The Decameron, trans. McWilliam, 610.
86 ‘uomo quale forse ancora la sua perpetua povertà e insieme al convenirli assentando e ridendo piacere apresso chi el discorreva per pascersi in varie e diverse altrui case,
degree with shrewdness overcome their superiors’, and the likes of Buonamico (a painter) and Gonnella (a jester) played a significant role in the folk-tales of Florence in the trecento.

Ultimately, however, these impoverished classes were removed from most considerations of respectable wit, for as Poggio Bracciolini explained, ‘we look down on this whole class of men’. The most vivid portrayal of ridiculing the naïve poor lies in Cambi’s account of St. John’s Day in 1514. On that day, una fusta piena di pazzi [or a ‘Ship of Fools’] was pulled through the streets, with two people being dragged onto it, put to oar and whipped with ‘clubs made of leather filled with wind’. Who were the two ‘fools’? One was a hood maker ‘who was a little silly but smart of tongue and pleasant’, whereas the other ‘much more foolish … because he was not able to do anything else than carry wool’. The poor were notoriously imbecilic, and they were publicly mocked for it at the turn of the sixteenth century.


‘così avviene spesse volte che gli uomini da meno con diverse astuzie vincono quelli che sono da piú’: Sacchetti, Trecentonovelle, 360; English translation from Sacchetti, Tales, trans. Steegman, 169.


‘uno, chera un pocho isciemo, ma era verbolo, e piacevole … che facieva chapucci’: Cambi, ‘Istorie’, 3:44; English translation from Minio-Paluello, Jesters and Devils, 4.

‘era piu sciocho assai di Maestro Antonio sopradetto, perche non sapeva far’ altro, che portare la lana’: Cambi, ‘Istorie’, 3:45; English translation from Minio-Paluello, Jesters and Devils, 4.
While some jesters may have found success in their theatrical humour, their impact was most often of a fleeting and light-hearted nature; their wit limited to the sole purpose of laughter and entertainment. Thus, the use of humour or creativity to bolster one’s claim to honour or virtù was restricted to an intellectual and wealthy class that could supposedly use their cleverness and cunning with much more civic purpose.

This reality was also a result of the extravagant environment in which tales of creative genius were shared and elaborate practical jokes planned. Boccaccio described the custom of a limited number of gentlemen in each quarter meeting ‘regularly in one another’s houses for their common amusement’, yet highlighted how ‘only those people who could afford to entertain on a suitably lavish scale were admitted to these coteries’. ⁹⁴ This description finds an example in the dinner parties with which Antonio Manetti’s *The Fat Woodcarver* opens and closes, ⁹⁵ and is reinforced by the prevalence of such ‘companies of pleasure’ in Sacchetti’s tales. ⁹⁶ Biagi confirms the existence of this custom from the second half of the fourteenth century, whereby a ‘certain class of men … spent their lives going from the house of one prominent citizen to another, enlivening banquets and supper-parties’ with ‘stories, anecdotes and witty sayings, and the repetition of the most highly favoured jokes and laughable incidents reported in the city’. ⁹⁷ However, only men of significant social standing and financial comfort were admitted into these forums where much of the celebration of spirito took place, precisely because they were only

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⁹⁷ Biagi, introduction *Tales from Sacchetti*, vii.
‘looking for members who [could] bear the costs of the rotating dinners’. It follows that the giovani who formed the basis of their conversations were those who had connections to such wealth, be it by familial network or economic partnership.

Moreover, wealthy families had fewer anxieties about economic survival compared to their poorer contemporaries, and thus their members (from the paterfamilias to his sons) naturally had more time to take delight in the kinds of creative plots that dominated Renaissance Florentine folklore. Whereas the children of artisans were encouraged to undertake apprenticeships from as young as thirteen, thus finding themselves occupied with financial pressures, the sons of aristocratic families were afforded significant time for leisure while they waited to pass from the ‘subordinate status of figliolo to the status of padre de famiglia’. It was in this state of limbo, between a lack of accountability as a child and an expectation of civic responsibility as an adult, that wealthy youths attempted to assert themselves as agents within the public sphere. The prevalence of these free-roaming youths was accentuated by the fact that rich families were ‘overflowing with young people and children’ in the quattrocento, for as Christine Klapisch-Zuber explains, ‘one-half of the poor were thirty five years old or younger when one-half of the rich were seventeen years old or younger’. Combined with the fashion of youthful agency under leaders such as Lorenzo il Magnifico, as well as the natural inclination of youths to mirror the example set by their umorismo-loving elders, acknowledging the sheer number of independent and relatively idle youths within the Renaissance

99 Roni Weinstein, “‘Thus Will Giovani Do’: Jewish youth sub-culture in early modern Italy”, in Eisenbichler, The Premodern Teenager, 52.
100 Klapisch-Zuber, Women, Family, and Ritual, 97.
101 Klapisch-Zuber, Women, Family, and Ritual, 17.
Florentine society furthers one’s understanding of the influence of this demographic within the public sphere.

The Renaissance Florentine persona di spirito was intelligent, male, and from a relatively wealthy family. While his wit, cunning and creativity may have earned him some esteem, was this ingenuity the basis of a honourable reputation in itself? Was there a distinction between deception employed for moral and civic purposes as opposed to cunning used by way of seeking immoral advantage? How was objectively cruel and vindictive ridicule celebrated? The answer to these questions lies in the mainstream emphasis on civic consciousness that lay at the heart of virtù, onore and the Florentine Republic.

Florentine civic consciousness: the fine line between accepted and rejected ridicule

Whoever acts against your city acts against you.\textsuperscript{103}

Florence set itself apart from other Italian cities because of its revival – not mere remembrance, but tangible adoption – of Ciceronian civic spirit. At the core of that Roman statesman’s De Officiis was a call to action: a refutation of Plato’s vita contemplativa and a championing of virtue found upon civic commitment. While Petrarch may have fallen into the same Stoic tradition that had dominated the thinking of humanists prior to the trecento,\textsuperscript{104} his contemporaries and successors exemplified a

resurrection of a *vita civilis*. The virtue formerly attributed to the philosopher-sage gave way to a celebration of the kind of honourable activity that was deemed ‘holy and holier than idleness in solitude’. Yet, activity was not honourable for its own sake, and as Buonaccorso da Montemagno explained in 1428, ‘the talents of mortal men will become more excellent if they are used for the commonwealth’. 

This *vita civile* epitomised Florence in the fifteenth century. In the 1430s, Alberti defined *virtù* as being consistently linked with the ‘ideal of ethical unity among men, service from each to all’, and thus while the Florentine ‘desire[d] the unity, calm and tranquillity of his own house’, he desired ‘much more those of the country and of the republic’. It was this civic consciousness that motivated Dati to serve amongst the Lord Priors of the city in the 1420s, an ‘onerous’ role yet one in which Dati was determined to leave ‘matters in a better way than [he] found them’. As Watkins explains, Florentine humanists ‘shared an ethic that called for active participation in the world’, and the emphasis on the collection and provision of

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105 ‘sanctum forte et sanctius quam solitarium ociari’: Coluccio Salutati, as quoted in Baron, *In Search of Florentine Civic Humanism*, 1:136.


alms was one such act displaying civic consciousness,\textsuperscript{111} as was holding political office.\textsuperscript{112}

However, beyond such conventional means of contributing to the progress of Florentine society lay the potential for less mainstream initiatives. If wit and creativity were laudable qualities, the extent to which their expression was celebrated depended upon their tangible impact on the city’s social and political scene. In his mid-
\textit{quattrocento} treatise on nobility, Bracciolini accentuated the significance of living \textit{una vita attiva}: ‘For what is the nobility of a philosopher, content with his studies, living obscurely in a library where even he hardly hears of himself, or of a man who lives moderately, uprightly, chastely and wisely in a hidden villa, while no one talks about him or praises him’.\textsuperscript{113} Bracciolini’s emphasis on public contribution as a prerequisite of social recognition shared similarities with the opinion expounded by Alberti, who ‘with the vigour of youth … put forward the rationale for a wise conduct of practical affairs’.\textsuperscript{114} As Watkins explains, Alberti ‘would not rest, nor let others rest, in eloquence, rationality or wit alone’,\textsuperscript{115} after all, ‘humanity consists in the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[113] ‘Nam quæ nobilitas inerit uel Philosopho, qui suis studijs contentus latebit in bibliothecula sibijspsi penèi ignotus, uel ei qui sobrie, pie, caste, sapienter uiuens, abditus in uillula, nullis hominum sermonibus celebris, nullo nomine illustris’: Bracciolini, \textit{Opera Omnia}, 82; English translation from Bracciolini, ‘On Nobility’, trans. Marsh, 144.
\item[114] Watkins, introduction to \textit{The Family}, 8.
\item[115] Watkins, introduction to \textit{The Family}, 8.
\end{footnotes}
participation in the life of society’.\textsuperscript{116} It was this translation of \textit{una prontezza mentale} into practical implementation that presented a potential source of honour for youths seeking to stamp their identity upon the Florentine cityscape.

It follows that practical jokes and displays of ridicule were accepted when they involved a civic dimension – that is, when their execution had the aim of righting a wrong or contributing to the advancement of society. Boccaccio was particularly critical of incompetence in high office and the professions, such that if the victim of a trick was ‘being hoist with his own petard, or … simply asking to be made a fool of’, those who orchestrated the trick upon him were ‘worthy rather of praise than of blame’.\textsuperscript{117} In one tale, Lauretta explicated the animosity that accompanied fellow-citizens of Florence who returned from Bologna as judges, physicians and lawyers, ‘tricked out in long flowing robes of scarlet and vair, looking very grand and impressive, but failing to live up to their splendid appearance’.\textsuperscript{118} In Lauretta’s ensuing tale, she recounted the way in which Master Simone da Villa, a physician returning to Florence ‘like the ass that he was, covered in vair from head to tail’, was soon discovered to be \textit{uno animale} [a ‘blockhead’] by the famously jovial pair of painters, Bruno and Buffalmacco, and he consequently found himself a target of shameless ridicule.\textsuperscript{119} Upon their identification of the physician’s ‘crass stupidity’, the

\textsuperscript{117} ‘chi fa beffà alcuna a colui che la va cercando o che la si guadagna … estimando che quegli che gliele fecero non da biasimare ma da commendarsieno’: Boccaccio, \textit{Il Decameron}, 451; English translation from Boccaccio, \textit{The Decameron}, trans. McWilliam, 616.
\textsuperscript{118} ‘co’ panni lunghi e larghi, e con gli scarlatti e co’ vai e con alter assai apparenze grandissime, alle quali come gli effetti succedano anche veggiamo tutto il giorno’: Boccaccio, \textit{Il Decameron}, 451; English translation from Boccaccio, \textit{The Decameron}, trans. McWilliam, 616.
contrastingly avveduti e sagaci ['shrewd and perceptive'] pair of painters decided to test their victim’s degree of gullibility by tempting him with tales of a secret society of revellers who, with the help of two magicians, met twice a month and were granted their wildest hedonistic wishes. The wealthy physician, desperate to gain entry into the secret company, pampered the two tricksters, and after displaying ‘boundless affection’ towards Bruno – to the extent that it ‘began to look as though the physician was unable to exist without him’ – the painters decided to initiate the worthy physician into the club. The following trick, which saw the physician trembling in the piazza at Santa Maria Novella, covered in manure from head to toe and reproached by his wife into the small hours of the morning, caused Boccaccio’s group of ladies to laugh ‘so much that the tears ran down their cheeks a dozen times at the very least’. As Lauretta moralised, this story was designed to highlight how ‘wisdom [was] imparted to anyone who [had] not acquired much of it in Bologna’.

Practical jokes were celebrated when they exposed fraudulence in professional and

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Bruno and Buffalmacco are also the perpetrators of tricks in stories VIII.3 and VIII.6: see Boccaccio, *Il Decameron*, 416-21, 429-32.  
civic roles such as that perpetrated by the physician, ‘the extent of whose medical knowledge was sufficient, perhaps, to treat an infant for thrush’.\textsuperscript{124}

The age of Bruno and Buffalmacco at the time of this tale is not clear. Nonetheless, Giorgio Vasari’s biography of Buonamico Buffalmacco in his \textit{Lives} accentuated the way in which the trickster developed his appetite for pranks while a youthful apprentice to Master Tafi.\textsuperscript{125} Moreover, regardless of the painters’ ages in Boccaccio’s tales, the example of laudable ridicule was set, and it is understandable that otherwise idle youths attempted to contribute to this celebrated form of social interaction. Boccaccio’s account of three young men pulling down the breeches of a judge in court, ‘who looked more like a coppersmith than anything else’, represented one such example of youths staking their claim in the city by humorously subversive means.\textsuperscript{126} As Filostrato explicated in his telling of that tale, ‘the chief magistrates of our city very often come from the Marches, and tend as a rule to be mean-hearted men, who lead a frugal and beggarly sort of life that anyone would think they hadn’t a penny to bless themselves with’.\textsuperscript{127} The three youths were thus praised for their creative exposure of the March-men’s \textit{innata miseria ed avarizia} ['inborn miserliness and avarice'], and by making explicit to the Florentines that the \textit{podestà} had ‘brought fools with him instead of judges so as to save money’, the youths asserted their

\textsuperscript{124} ‘la cui scienza non si stendeva forse piú oltre che il medicare i fanciulli del lattime’: Boccaccio, \textit{Il Decameron}, 454; English translation from Boccaccio, \textit{The Decameron}, trans. McWilliam, 620.
\textsuperscript{127} ‘nella nostra città vegnono molto spesso rettori marchigiani, li quali generalmente sono uomini di povero cuore e di vita tanto strema e tanto misera, che altro non pare ogni lor fatto che una pidocchieria’: Boccaccio, \textit{Il Decameron}, 426; English translation from Boccaccio, \textit{Decameron}, trans. McWilliam, 575.
presence on the public stage. Indeed, one of the youthful team’s members, Maso del Saggio, earned himself a reputation for being ‘a most agreeable, astute and successful young man’ through pranks such as this, and while their amusement and ability to arouse ‘a great deal of laughter’ no doubt contributed to this fame, the broader civic purpose behind the witty act was central to its positive reception.

Sacchetti was similarly celebratory of youths who took it into their hands to remedy the defects of society through clever and cunning ways. Like Boccaccio, Sacchetti’s aim was ‘essentially objective’, desiring to ‘represent in his pages the most curious, amusing, and original aspects of the daily life of his own times’. As Biagi contends, Sacchetti was ‘less an inventor of strange adventures than a faithful and witty chronicler of the daily happening in the city’, and the fact that his stories are not ordered so as to fit into a preconceived design, instead appearing as they occurred to the author, reinforces the argument that he aimed ‘less at producing an artistic work than a shrewd and careful account of the social life and customs of the men and women amongst whom he lived’. Consequently, Sachetti’s tales provide a rich insight into the Florentine psyche, and his particular celebration of youths who endeavoured to expose avarice within the city’s walls reinforces the broader appreciation of entertaining civic engagement by young males.

In one case, Sacchetti praised the wit of a young student whose stepmother grumbled about the fact that his father regularly sent him money so that he would be

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130 Biagi, introduction to Tales from Sacchetti, x.
131 Biagi, introduction to Tales from Sacchetti, ix, xiii.
able to bring the family honour by becoming a doctor of civil law. The stepmother, ‘seeing how often this money was sent and reflecting that for this reason her allowance was diminished’, complained about this wastage of wealth on the student, whom she referred to as a *corpo morto* [carcass], or useless person. Consequently, when the student returned home, the stepmother encouraged her husband to make the student carve a roasted capon so as to see ‘whether he hath learnt anything’, upon which the young student cut the bird in such a way that displayed both his wit and his stepmother’s avarice. As the spiritual father, the priest was given the crown of the capon to symbolise his wearing of *la cherica* ['the shaven crown’]; as the head of the family, the father was given the head; as the person in charge of household affairs (a task that required going up and down), the stepmother was given the legs and feet; as maidens who would soon *hanno tosto a uscire di casa e volare fuori* ['leave home and fly away’], the sisters were given the wings; and, since the young student was a carcass, he gave himself the rest and ‘began to eat heartily’. Sacchetti celebrated this creative means of rectifying greed, highlighting how ‘with half a jest, [the student] showed his stepmother her error’.

The humorous denunciation of avarice was directed particularly at the clergy. While Sacchetti’s anti-clerical bent may have exaggerated his representation of this repudiation, he was certainly supportive of youths who dedicated their creative vigour to the denunciation of a flawed ministry, explaining how ‘the greater number of

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readers must surely rejoice exceedingly when jests … are played upon men so avaricious, and especially upon the clergy, in whom there reigneth every vice of cupidity’.137 This sentiment is elucidated in the tale of youths tying the feet of a bear to the bell-ropes at Santa Maria in Campo, the racket of which drew ‘all the Florentines’ to the church.138 While the young and ‘merry jesters’ were never identified, it was remarked that ‘whoever it was, [they] did very well, for that door [to the church] always standeth open and neither the bishop nor the priest will spend a farthing to put a bolt upon it’.139 Therefore, the clergy were deemed to have ‘deserved’ to be the butt of the trick, since they let ‘all of their churches and their houses go to ruin before they [spending] the smallest sum’.140

This element of civic purpose was the same as that which accompanied the gang of youths’ theft of a goose from Messer Filippo Cavalcanti.141 Determined to keep the feast of All Saints sanza fatica e sanza costa [‘without trouble and without cost’], the youths decided to go about certain bakehouses and take away the roast geese from the servants who were carrying them to their various destinations.142 However, while they refrained from taking the geese belonging to the Medici, Ricci or Adimari, they decided to steal the goose of Cavalcanti, a canon of Santa Reparata.

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137 ‘Molto dee essere caro a’ piú de’ lettori quando sí fatte beffe veggono fare agli uomini cosí avari, e spezialmente a’ cherici ne’ quali ogni vizio di cupidità regna’: Sacchetti, Trecentonovelle, 503-4; English translation from Sacchetti, Tales, trans. Steegman, 271.
138 Sacchetti, Trecentonovelle, 466-9.
139 ‘Chiunque fe fece molto bene, ché sempre sta quella porta aperta, ché non ispenderebbe né ’l vescovo né il prete un picciolo per mettervi uno chiavistello’: Sacchetti, Trecentonovelle, 468; English translation from Sacchetti, Tales, trans. Steegman, 254.
140 ‘che tutte le chiese e le loro case lasciano andare a ruina prima che vogliano fare una piccola spesa’: Sacchetti, Trecentonovelle, 469; English translation from Sacchetti, Tales, trans. Steegman, 254.
141 Sacchetti, Trecentonovelle, 417-9.
142 Sacchetti, Trecentonovelle, 417; English translation from Sacchetti, Tales, trans. Steegman, 212.
By waiting to steal it from the servant right as he reached the canon’s door, the youths ensured that the subsequent outrage of the canon would be as public as possible. Therefore, as well as providing for the poorer members of the city, the youths served a broader civic function by exposing the gluttony of its clergymen.

The example set by these trecento tales of civic ridicule filtered through to the youthful generations of the ensuing century and a half, particularly with respect to anti-clericism. Landucci’s account of i tiepidi [the ‘lukewarm’] mocking Savonarola at the pulpit, sneering at the fact that the preacher was ‘excommunicated, and he [gave] the Communion to others’, indicated that such methods of derision were adopted as much at the end of the fifteenth century as they were in the middle of the thirteenth century.\textsuperscript{143} Even Landucci, an outspoken believer in Savonarola’s movement, was affected by this jeer, preferring not ‘to endanger [himself] by going to hear him’ on account of the logical condemnation expounded by i tiepidi.\textsuperscript{144} While that group of anti-Savonarolan Florentines was inclusive of a broad range of publicly active males, its ranks were made up significantly of youthful rebels, and the extent to which they influenced this kind of intellectualised scorn should not be understated.

Less intellectual or elaborate ridicule was tolerated, but not with the same vigour of idealisation that accompanied particularly creative methods of addressing civic concerns. Charivaris were one such example of a simple, yet important, custom designed to maintain community expectations about morality and honour. While Trexler attempts to discount the prevalence of youthful unruliness in the


\textsuperscript{144} ‘E benchè a me e’pareva errore, ancora che gli credessi; man non volli mettermi mai a pericolo andare a udirlo, poichè fu scomunicato’: Landucci, \textit{Diario}, 163; English translation from Landucci, \textit{A Florentine Diary}, trans. de Rosen Jervis, 131.
neighbourhoods of Renaissance Florence,¹⁴⁵ the weight of historiographical argument stands against him,¹⁴⁶ and the traditional raucous behaviour from youths that accompanied second marriages held an important place in the social customs of the city. Certainly, the official legal position of the city-state was against these mock celebrations for the re-marriage of widows or widowers, as evidenced by the harsh penalties introduced by 1415 Florentine statutes for nocturnal musicians who, armed with ‘bagpipes, trumpets or any other instrument’, went through the streets ‘playing music, singing, or making mattinatas [i.e. charivaris]’.¹⁴⁷ Yet, while ‘the representatives of the middle class who were in power had every intention of controlling nocturnal agitations and delinquency’, as Klapisch-Zuber explains, ‘these level-headed men also sought to curtail amorous courtships and liaisons that imperilled lineages and family fortunes’.¹⁴⁸ While the Church and government wanted to contain the rowdy tumult of the mattinata, they also did not want to directly confront and oppose a custom that actually served a civic purpose in avoiding an abundance of ‘abnormal’ and ‘ridiculous’ marriages.¹⁴⁹ Despite not forming the basis of high praise or individual honour for those who partook in them, the charivaris portrayed a kind of simplified ridicule that was only half-heartedly suppressed. As Weissman explains, such ritualised festivities ‘allowed Florentines opportunities to reconstruct and reshape, if only for a brief, precious moment, their community’.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁶ Klapisch-Zuber is one historian who presents an opposite view to Trexler’s assertion that ‘there were no charivaris’ (Trexler, The Children of Florence, 113; Klapisch-Zuber, Women, Family and Ritual, 261-82), and Trexler’s general minimisation of the importance of neighbourhood sodalities in Renaissance Florence has been discounted by most historians in the field: see Weissman, Ritual Brotherhood, 21.
¹⁴⁷ Klapisch-Zuber, Women, Family, and Ritual, 267.
¹⁴⁸ Klapisch-Zuber, Women, Family, and Ritual, 272.
¹⁴⁹ Klapisch-Zuber, Women, Family, and Ritual, 277.
¹⁵⁰ Weissman, Ritual Brotherhood, 41.
*Giovanì* were invited to vent about the social status quo, and the fact that those responsible for public order were only ‘feebly encouraged or supported by their pastors to track down jokesters’ reinforces the implicitly significant agency that socially-conscious youths expressed in the Florentine *piazze*. 151

Furthermore, the centrality of a civic purpose to the acceptance of acts of ridicule was manifest in the denunciations of creative deception where it was employed as a means of attaining some unethical end. As Biagi makes clear, the kinds of people who ‘fall under the lash of [Sacchetti’s] sarcasm’ are ‘most notably those who combine smooth words with evil deeds’, and this is particularly so with respect to avaricious tricksters. 152 The Florentine repugnance to greed has been established above, and thus it should not come as a surprise that elaborate schemes to bring oneself gain at the expense of the broader community were not met with praise, regardless of their ingenuity. This was made explicit in the case of Antonio, a rich man who attempted to avoid paying the Florentine customs duty by smuggling eggs into the city in his breeches. 153 Sacchetti highlighted how the plan of the *tristo ricco* [greedy wretch] was foiled by the customs guards, who forced him to sit down on his two-dozen eggs and thus humiliated the ‘miserly creature’ and ‘brought disgrace upon him’, to the extent that ‘the story was continually talked of, and even to [Sacchetti’s] day [was] talked of more than ever’. 154

Youths played an active role in exposing such false cunning, as was exemplified by the band of young men who foiled a ‘wicked’ man’s plan to smuggle

152 Biagi, introduction to *Tales from Sacchetti*, xvi.
into Florence a pig inside another pig so as to only be levied on one of them. In fact, the fraudster had successfully passed the gatekeeper as planned, and if it was not for the group of ‘youths, gamesters and idlers, such as often gather together at the gates’ who inspected the pigs and noticed a third hind leg, then he may have gotten away with the deceptive plot. This tale reinforces the criticism that followed examples of cunning where it was used for the ‘taking of other people’s goods for [one’s] own use’, as opposed to the celebration that accompanied tricks executed for a civic purpose. It also reinforces the presence of young, idle men in the streets of Florence, and the vigilantism that they conveyed in this tale is a further sign of their desire to hold some stake in the public sphere of the city.

The creative vigour of youth had immense potential as an agent of civic progress. The inherent quick-wittedness of young male, intellectual minds was something that excited elder members of society, and the relative independence afforded to wealthy sons created an opportunity for this creativity to be fashioned into a means of humorous, yet purposeful, public expression. Ridicule certainly found a favourable audience in even its most basic or purposeless forms, such as the relatively harmless stealing of a meal, or the casual mocking of a painter’s simple-mindedness. After all, as Francesco Petrarca explained, ‘men strive after things of trivial worth,/ And sigh for that which matters not at all’.

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Yet, if Florentine youths were to seek onore by their impishness, their ridicule and practical jokes had to contain some kind of civic purpose. Be it the exposing of incompetence in high office, the uncovering of avarice in the clergy, or the simple unveiling of a master’s lack of care for his apprentice’s much needed sleep,\textsuperscript{161} the worth of a prank was determined by its practical influence. Giovanni di Paolo Morelli made as much explicit at the beginning of the quattrocento: ‘if it is necessary to use different words, even unreasonable ones, to further your cause, do so, but let the outcome be reasonable’.\textsuperscript{162} This practicality was the essence of the vita attiva, and the fact that examples of selfish cunning were met with reproach illuminates the centrality of civic purpose to the subversive methods of otherwise irrelevant youths.

\textsuperscript{161} Sacchetti, Trecentonovelle, 438–42.
\textsuperscript{162} ‘se bisogna usare parole diverse e non ragionevoli per aumentazione della parte tua, fallo, ma il fine sia ragionevole’: Morelli, Ricordi, 282; English translation from Morelli, ‘Memoirs’, trans. Baca, 162.
Chapter Two

Youthful Violence as a Form of Civic Expression and Basis of Masculine Honour

Strong men transgress and reject the laws that seem suitable enough for the weak, for cowards, for pedlars and the miserable rabble, for the lazy and the poor … It is a fact that all great deeds worthy of being remembered have their origin in injustice and violence, in short, in the breaking of the law’.\(^\text{163}\)

It is easy to typecast young men as unruly and brash, and violent expression is certainly not unique to the Florentine Renaissance. Youthful rioting indeed occurred in Florence as recently as November last year. However, the notion that violence can be praised, as a method through which youths proved themselves as ‘strong men’, finds particular currency in the Tuscan centre between the mid-\textit{trecento} and 1530. Whereas the exclusive social and intellectual élite often used wit and cunning to further their ambitions, brawn enabled a means of expression that did not discriminate between varying classes of education or wealth. Therefore, for a demographic

excluded from conventional means of civic participation, public manifestations of unauthorised force became an effective method of engaging in the communal life of the city and asserting one’s place within it.

By firstly discussing the centrality of masculine youths to militaristic endeavours and festive displays of violence, this chapter will delineate the pertinence of public violence as a means of symbolic communication. While conservative humanists preached the need to discipline the passions and to show temperance in the face of adversity, these mainstream doctrines were contradicted by the simultaneous social emphasis on virility and daring, two qualities that found supreme demonstration through raw force. This interplay between competing conservative and customary virtues found its ultimate yardstick in the purpose of violence. What separated mindless street-fights from honourable acts of vengeance? Who was deemed to be a saviour of the city as opposed to a damnable conspirator? How was public disorder praised and distinguished from repudiated factionalism? Similar to the qualified celebration of subversive ridicule, this chapter emphasises the centrality of civic utility to the justification of youthful vigilante force.

**Masculine youths as violent actors within the public domain**

The violent tendencies of masculine youths in Renaissance Florence were manifest most explicitly by their prevalence within informal militias. In 1342 and 1343, Walter of Brienne’s rule, albeit short-lived, was dependent upon his allying with ‘a group of upper-class giovani … and with a mass of … garzoni [shop boys]’. Three decades later, the Ciompi revolt was similarly dependent upon an

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‘alliance with aristocratic youths’,¹⁶⁵ and an anonymous chronicler at the time explicated how it was ‘young men’ who ‘went up to the tower’ and rang the bells to signal the victory which they had won.¹⁶⁶ Alberti’s account of Stefan Porcari’s conspiracy against Pope Nicolas in 1453 conveyed a similar propensity of Italian youths to be drawn into violence.¹⁶⁷ Not only did Alberti evoke the way in which ‘brawls broke out among some of the young men’ on a day of customary public games, he highlighted how Porcari, in assembling ‘accomplices … he thought useful’, sent his ‘young nephew … excited and eager to fight’ to round up ‘a band of brigands like himself’.¹⁶⁸ When a militaristic force needed to be gathered, young men were the primary recruits, and Donato Giannotti’s characterisation of male youths as bravi [‘toughs’] who ‘threaten bar keepers, dismember [statutes of] saints, and break pots and plates’,¹⁶⁹ reinforces the notion that this spirit was as infectious in the mid-trecento as it was at the turn of the sixteenth century.

According to Savonarola, Lorenzo de’ Medici had ‘followers everywhere who tried to draw the young men to themselves and provoke them to evil’, and this mobilisation of young males was similarly exploited by the religious orders. As Tribaldo de’ Rossi explained, the Franciscan preacher Fra Bernardino da Feltre ‘urged children and youths to come to his sermons, and … he appealed to them to serve as his soldiers’. Ironically, as Giotto’s 1320 fresco portrays, militant children and youths were at the forefront of St Francis of Assisi’s persecution, and this violent precedent would have only reassured Bernardino’s pitch to the young male demographic.

Fig. 2. Giotto di Bondone, St Francis Renouncing his Worldly Goods, c. 1320. Basilica di Santa Croce, Florence. In each corner of the painting – that is, on both sides of the dispute – is a boy throwing stones at St Francis.

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171 Brucker, Society of Renaissance Florence, 248.
Thus, there was a widespread perception in Renaissance Florence that masculine youths had a violent streak, hence Guido Ruggiero’s characterisation of *i giovani* as ‘the ideal denizens of the dangerous spaces’. 172 This was indeed encouraged as part of the city’s culture, be it through boyish rock-fights (deemed to have divinatory properties in predicting the outcome of wars), 173 or mock cavalcades and adolescent fistfights (symbolising neighbourhood ties and brewing dissensions). 174 Yet, beyond these ritualised forms of violence lay a much more profound fear of the potential force that unruly youths presented. As Trexler explains, ‘the lower classes and youths of good family, both constitutionally excluded from the political process’ presented a dangerous force, desperate for expression and some kind of significance within the social fabric of the city. 175 Thus, one can understand how ‘the nightmare of a city full of bonfires with groups of toughs doing battle … haunted citizens’ minds’, 176 and as Carol Lansing makes clear, it was most often within groups of idle young men, ‘some of them trained in the military and most of them left with few responsibilities’, that one found ‘breeding grounds for violence’. 177

Similar to the initiative shown by youths in the context of public ridicule and practical jokes, subversive acts of violence were motivated in part by their efficacy as a mode of political communication in light of a lack of reasonable alternatives. The 1393 account of two hundred boys ‘armed with stones’ serves as a pertinent example

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of this mass, public outburst of emotion.\textsuperscript{178} As the body of an executed conspirator was being returned to the palace of the Signoria, the youthful vigilantes surrounded the deceased’s house, ‘broke open a door and tried to set fire to the house’, shouting their intentions to kill the deceased’s mother, whom they regarded as the truly responsible murderer for having raised such an abominable child.\textsuperscript{179} The fact that ‘if the Signoria had not sent four troops of police, they would have burned down the house’ evokes the extent to which the boys found tremendous satisfaction in carrying out the violent act in solidarity, enjoying a rare moment of empowerment within the public domain.\textsuperscript{180} It was the threat of their sheer force that made \textit{i giovani} of Renaissance Florence ‘the bellwethers of the political winds’.\textsuperscript{181}

This was particularly so because of the indiscriminating accessibility of public places and their significance to Renaissance Florentine life. As a city of no more than fifty-five thousand people that took twenty minutes to cross on foot from side to side,\textsuperscript{182} the densely populated, rumour-filled, under-policed and class-neutral streets of Florence were the hub of the city’s communal dynamic and thus naturally chosen as the setting for social and political statements. Writing in 1408, Gregario Dati explicated his frustration at his business partner ‘who had grown very impatient’ and therefore ‘kept complaining in public’.\textsuperscript{183} This reflex to use the public space as a platform to vent one’s gripes only fuelled its ambiance as a centre of controversy, and this in turn attracted more and more citizens to its hot-spots. As Weissman elucidates,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{178} Brucker, \textit{Society of Renaissance Florence}, 70-3.
  \item \textsuperscript{179} Brucker, \textit{Society of Renaissance Florence}, 73.
  \item \textsuperscript{180} Brucker, \textit{Society of Renaissance Florence}, 73.
  \item \textsuperscript{181} Trexler, \textit{The Children of Florence}, 105.
  \item \textsuperscript{182} Gene Brucker, \textit{Living on the Edge}, 115; J. R. Hale, \textit{Florence and the Medici: The Pattern of Control} (Great Britain: Thames and Hudson, 1977), 15.
  \item \textsuperscript{183} ‘il mio compagno male paciente a fare gran doglienze e a tenere modi contrarii alla salute de’ fatti nostri’: Dati, ‘Libro Segreto’, 88; English translation from Dati, ‘Diary’, trans. Martines, 131.
\end{itemize}
‘the piazza … became the stage upon which honour was won and lost’, and it was this exact exposure to public scrutiny that made cities the ripest environment for societal acceptance and ascension.

… it is in the city one learns to be a citizen. There people acquire valuable knowledge … they notice how handsome is honour, how lovely is fame, how divine a thing is glory. There they taste the sweets of praise, of being named and esteemed and admired. By these wondrous joys the young are awakened to the pursuit of excellence and come to devote themselves to attempting difficult things worthy of immortality.\(^{185}\)

Of course, these spaces were less charged at times of pestilence. However, at all other times during the Renaissance, as Rosenthal explains, ‘the public arena was a place in which all men had a legitimate stake, a place where male honour was asserted and codified’.\(^{186}\) As F.W. Kent confirms, ‘honour does not dwell in the woods … worthy men are made in the cities’.\(^{187}\)

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\(^{186}\) David Rosenthal, *Kings of the Street: power, community, and ritual in Renaissance Florence* (Belgium: Brepols, 2015), 120.

Therefore, youthful males engaged in their violent displays of civic engagement within such centres of attention, and the significance of the public sphere to youthful expression was manifest explicitly in 1493 when a Spanish Jew was found guilty of defacing a series of images of the Virgin Mary. As a contemporary chronicler explains, ‘the entire population of Florence ran to see’ this horrid vandalism, and as the offender was being transported to have his hand amputated, the cart was seized by ‘a crowd of men and boys’ who stoned the condemned man to death and ‘dragged his body through the streets of Florence, beating the corpse with clubs’.\textsuperscript{188} Such primitive and spontaneous means of social expression served as a means of asserting the youths’ presence upon the Florentine public arena. Where the established modes of justice failed to satisfy the mob, the mob took matters into their own hands, and at the forefront of that mob were giovani. In the streets and squares, young men perceived themselves to be the upholders of the city’s honour. This honour, however, involved a complex synthesis of juxtaposed virtues.

\textit{Violence and virtù: a reconciliation of estimable qualities in male youths}

Have restraint in all of your dealings so that you shall not err,
for he who is restrained shall conquer every vice.

Paolo da Certaldo, c. 1360.\textsuperscript{189}

Don’t be timid or hesitant, but put yourself forward frankly.
In this way, you shall be honoured and respected and reputed

\textsuperscript{188} Brucker, \textit{Society of Renaissance Florence}, 249-250.
to be a valorous man, and you shall be feared so that you shall receive no insult from anyone, and shall fully receive your just due.

Giovanni di Paolo Morelli, c. 1403.\textsuperscript{190}

Florentine humanists championed a disciplining of one’s emotions. For Alberti, virtù was attained through the moderation of passion, a degree of self-control such that one was ‘never impetuous or unrestrained’.\textsuperscript{191} With its roots in Platonic rhetoric, the doctrine of ataraxia [or serene calmness] was thrust upon a notoriously sensitive and volatile demographic. Young males were expected to show the same temperance that was supposedly manifest in all established citizens of Florence. For Petrarch, anger destroyed free will,\textsuperscript{192} and this was the basis of Certaldo’s maxim that ‘restraint will triumph’.\textsuperscript{193} As that fourteenth century merchant advised, ‘when you hear or see noise or brawling in a place where you are, leave immediately, and do not return, for nothing but evil can come to you there’.\textsuperscript{194} Reckless outbursts of passion were reproached by the sober minds of Renaissance Florence.

As well as undermining one’s capacity for self-management, violence was discouraged by Renaissance humanists as a purposeless custom of Florentine life. While being engrossed by warlike sports and tournaments in his youth, Gianozzo –

\textsuperscript{190}‘E non essere timido né peritoso, ma mettiti innanzi francamente: e per questa via sarai onorato e riguardato e riputato valente uomo, e sarai temuto per modo non riceverai nuno oltraggio da persona e arai pienamente tuo dovere’: Morelli, Ricordi, 277; English translation from Morelli, ‘Memoirs’, trans. Baca, 160.

\textsuperscript{191}Watkins, introduction to The Family, 13.

\textsuperscript{192}Baron, In Search of Florentine Civic Humanism, 1:148.


\textsuperscript{194}‘Quando odi o vedi in alcuno luogo romore o zuffa, partiti immanantane, e non v’andare, ch’altro che male non vi puoi acquistare’: Certaldo, Libro di Buoni Costumi, 90; English translation from Certaldo, ‘Book of Good Practices’, trans. Baca, 50.
the elderly interlocutor in Alberti’s treatise on *la famiglia* – matured to perceive fighting as ‘useless, expensive and dangerous’.195 Gianozzo’s denunciation of hunting was grounded in a similar lack of civic purpose: ‘I would rather see our youth active in better ways and engaged in matters more worthy of our name’.196 In his *Istorie*, Iacopo Nardi praised the Savonarolan suppression of ‘that stupid and brutal game of stone-throwing’,197 and the overarching criterion of communal expediency was reinforced by Landucci’s similar celebration of Savonarola, whose *fanciulli* stopped ‘committing follies, such as throwing stones’ and instead began to use their free time ‘to beg and collect money for the needy’.198 Brash and aimless violence were two behaviours that detracted from one’s attainment of *virtù*.

However, one should not overlook the admirable virility that was exemplified by certain displays of brute force and bravery. Indeed, violence was often considered to be the first and best course to respond to an attack on one’s honour. Mantuanus makes as much clear within his *Adulescentia*, with one of his interlocutors being immediately inclined to violence upon being taunted: ‘See, Bembus, how he openly insults me? I foresee that this quarrel must be conducted with fists, not words. It is my custom to refute insults not with my tongue but with my right hand’.199 The correlation between violence and honourable masculinity is reinforced by Poliziano’s

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195 Watkins, introduction to *The Family*, 17.
account of the Pazzi conspiracy, a tragedy that was heightened in light of the fact that
the victim – Giuliano de’ Medici – had shown ‘his remarkable valour in a jousting
tournament’ a few years prior, ‘a deed that usually endears one to the multitude’. 200
Whether in formal and festive contexts or informal defences of one’s honour, violence
was a means of asserting one’s virility within the public arena.

Moreover, the innate danger involved in violent clashes accentuated one’s
virile nature. Be they merchant diarists, humanist philosophers or bawdy poets,
Renaissance Florentines celebrated daring as a cornerstone of masculinity and virtù.
Buonaccorso Pitti’s memoir provides some evidence of this laudation of bravery,
opening with an explanation of how ‘being young [twenty-two years old],
inexperienced, and eager to see something of the world, [he] joined forces with a
merchant and great gambler’ and set off on an impulsive European adventure. 201 The
Florentine appreciation for daring is conveyed especially through Pitti’s tendency to
break out of the fast-paced nature of the memoir to elaborate on a particularly
courageous action on his behalf. In what is a relatively short account of his entire life,
Pitti elaborated on these localised tales as if they were central turning points,
expanding on them more than he does on the birth of his children. In one such
account, Pitti stressed how ‘all the roads were guarded and [he] was in constant
danger of being captured, yet [he] did not begin to be frightened’, and similar self-
aggrandisement is implicit in his recounts of riskily travelling to Paris via Lombardy
in July 1396, riding on through the snow at the foot of Arlberg mountain in January

200 ‘Conciosiachè celebrandosi pochi anni sono un magnifico torneo, il valore di
Giuliano tutto vincendo, palme e spoglie ne riportava; lo che molto amica la plebe’: Poliziano, Congiura de’ Pazzi, 69; English translation from Poliziano, ‘The Pazzi
201 ‘essendo io giovane e sanza aviamento e desiderando d’andare per lo mondo a
cierchare la ventura, m’accompagnai con Matteo de lo Scielt Tinguhi, il quale era
mercatante e grande giuchatore’: Pitti, Cronica, 36; English translation from Pitti,
1397, and riding from Padua to Ferrara ‘without pausing to eat or drink’. 202 As Giovanni Ciapelli explains, ricordanze were ‘not conceived in a vacuum; they tend to follow a scheme’, and the selective kind of memory that permeates Pitti’s memoir reinforces how his prioritisation of accounts of daring was endorsed by fairly conservative citizens of the politically active Florentine élite. 203

This admiration of bravery found its roots in antiquity, and thus Renaissance Florentine philosophers and historians alike sanctioned its contemporary displays. Bruni’s History of Florence contained explicit endorsements of confidence in the face of adversity, juxtaposing the infirmi tamen vir animi ['cowardly spirit'] of Metius Fufetius with the romani fortuna et bellacissimi ['Roman fortune and boldness'] of Tullius Hostilius and reinforcing the supremacy of the latter due to his merciless killing of Metius and razing of his city. 204 Bruni’s championing of Attila and Totila was based upon their similar capacities for ‘force and cunning’ as a reliable means of attaining authority and glory, 205 and a similarly outspoken advocate of daring was Niccolò Machiavelli, who elucidated the feminine nature of Fortuna and highlighted how she will always be well disposed to the kind of boldness that is characteristic of aggressive young men. 206 Ultimately, a mid-cinquecento poem by Luigi Tansillo

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204 Bruni, History, 1:30; English translation by Hankins, 1:31.
205 ‘Denique denique potentia simul atque ingenio ferox’: Bruni, History, 1:70, 1:80; English translation by Hankins, 1:81.
206 ‘Io iudico bene questo: che sia meglio essere impetuoso che respettivo; perché la fortuna è donna, ed è necessario, volendola tenere sotto, batterla e urlarla. E sì vede che la si lascia piú vincere da questi, che da quelli che freddamente procedono; e però sempre, come donna, è amica de’ giovani, perché sono meno rispettivi, piú feroci e con piú audacia la comandano’: Niccolò Machiavelli, Il Principe (De principatibus), ed. Brian Richardson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979), 74; English
epitomised the idealisation of virile audacity that had been so constant throughout the preceding two centuries.

When I have spread my wings to sweet desire,
As ‘neath me ever vaster space I spy,
Proudly I cleave the air and raise me higher,
And scorn the earth and yearn towards the sky.

Nor am I daunted by the cruel death
Of young Icarus, nay, I do but dare
The more, and though down-hurled, bereft of breath,
What life would win this death of mine compare?

I hear how on the breeze my heart doth call:

“Whither away, O reckless one? Descend,
Oft too great daring hath a bitter end!”

Whereupon I answer: “Fear not the dire fall,
Go, rend the clouds, then die contentedly
If with such glorious death Heaven favour thee!”

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The Renaissance Florentine admiration of daring was central to the way in which violence was accepted and praised, particularly violence perpetrated by youths. *Buona audacia* [boldness] and *corraggioso* [courage] were the qualities that Morelli stressed to his descendants, and Alberti’s account of the Porcari conspiracy highlighted this celebration of combative virility. Despite describing the conspiracy as a ‘hideous crime’ such that ‘from the very beginning of human history till today nothing more horribly destructive, shameless, and totally cruel has been plotted by anyone, however lawless’, Alberti still found it necessary to recount the bravery of Porcari’s young nephew, who, ‘sword in hand, managed to cut a path through the midst of the enemy [Pope Nicolas’ men] and escape’. While Alberti seemed eager to distance himself from the shame of Porcari, he shared the conspirator’s belief that ‘if anyone still had some of the ancient spirit and valour, he could not show it without danger to his life’.

Aristotelian temperance and moderation were optimal for the humanists of Renaissance Florence. However, as Sacchetti made clear, ‘this world belongeth to the

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Fortitude and anger – were as natural and laudable qualities to men of the Renaissance as they were to the antiquated civilisations with which the Florentine humanists were obsessed. As Hans Baron posits, ‘if passion was to be excluded as a moral force, what would become of the warrior’s bravery and the will of citizens to oppose injustice or make great sacrifices for their community?’ A flurry of passion through a violent display of virility did not necessarily invite condemnation. As will become evident, acceptance or rejection was predicated upon the civic purpose of the violent act.

Civic utility: the defining factor of accepted forms of youthful violence

Foolish and mindless violence was met with repudiation in Renaissance Florence. Whether it came in the form of Alberti’s denunciation of warlike games or Savonarola’s discouragement of stone-throwing, violence for its own sake was not lauded by those who took it upon themselves to raise the next generation of virtuous Florentine citizens. This was certainly the attitude expounded in relation to brigate, a gathering of youths ‘who were in the habit of riding together’ and were associated with violence, gambling, drinking and general public disorder. A 1461 submission to the courts against Lorenzo Altoviti concentrated particularly on the accused’s consorting with ‘a band of toughs … [a] gang of armed hoodlums, eating and drinking

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212 ‘Questo mondo è degl’impronti’: Sacchetti, Trecentonovelle, 388; English translation from Sacchetti, Tales, trans. Steegman, 185.
213 Baron, In Search of Florentine Civic Humanism, 1:143.
and carousing in the houses of the citizenry’. As Trexler puts it, these young ruffians were ‘to the domestic quiet of the city what foreign mercenaries were to diplomatic tranquillity’, such that ‘many fathers lived too long, only to see [their] name besmudged by the activities of unmarried sons who wasted their limited substance in the lascivious company of a brigada’.

Unauthorised force such as that perpetrated by youthful brigands detracted from their families’ honour precisely because it had no civic purpose. In fact, such violence detracted from the harmony and solidarity of the city. It was this kind of mindless violence that found repudiation in Sacchetti’s tales, with one particularly humorous story telling of forty ‘blockhead’ soldiers who, after drinking ‘very deeply’, decided to trial their fighting skills against a ‘great rick of straw’. After waking up in the straw entangled – to the extent that they required a passer-by to beat their legs so that they could recognise them – the soldiers were then ‘vanquished without attempting to defend themselves’ by enemy forces. Unsurprisingly, Sacchetti finished the cautionary tale with an indictment of those gagliardi [‘fine fellows’], suggesting that their consequent loss of teeth and ears in prison were deserved punishments for conducting themselves so idiotically. Purposeless violence was a source of rebuke in Renaissance Florence.

However, violence that was orchestrated for some greater civic good was celebrated as an expedient means of maintaining authority and a legitimate medium of social communication. For example, the 1378 Ciompi revolt was celebrated by some

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216 Trexler, *The Children of Florence*, 84, 86.
who shared its political grounding, for as a contemporary chronicler explained, the revolt brought about the completion of a new scrutiny list, which ‘satisfied many people, who had never partaken of office before and who had always been put to expense because of the government’.

Sacchetti reinforced the ability of youthful agents to make a social contribution through their violent suppression of certain evils that plagued the trecento cityscape. As discussed above, avarice and greed were two characteristics that invited ridicule, and this exposing of damnable vices was often tolerated even in its most brutal forms. Be it the ‘belabouring’ of the thieving Gonnella with ‘as many blows and kicks’ as possible, or the bestowing of twenty-five lashes to an usher after it was revealed that he sought his own good rather than that of the King of France, Sacchetti champions the use of violence as a tool in the maintenance of order and reinforcing of moral expectations. Even the shameless murderer of a dice maker was exonerated in light of all the ‘evils that come from play’, and the murderer – who had no greater motive than an uncontrollable anger after losing all of his money – was indeed championed for having ‘extinguished throughout [the] territory this worst of sources, this most malignant root of evil’.

However, the kind of civic violence that was tolerated or celebrated by the Florentines of the Renaissance was dependent upon majority support. For a violent act to be acceptable, it had to be so for the predominant perspective of the time. Alberti conveyed this pre-eminence of the majority view, stressing how ‘all that human reason judges of happiness and unhappiness merely accords with common

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221 Sacchetti, Trecentonovelle, 386-90; English translation from Sacchetti, Tales, trans. Steegman, 183-7.
222 Sacchetti, Trecentonovelle, 447-50; English translation from Sacchetti, Tales, trans. Steegman, 238-41.
223 ‘considerando quanti mali dal giuoco vengono … E cosí spense per tutto terreno questa pessima barba e questa maligna radice’: Sacchetti, Trecentonovelle, 246-7; English translation from Sacchetti, Tales, trans. Steegman, 97-8.
opinion’. Mantuanus made the same notion explicit in his eclogues: ‘Men value glory above their lives. But what are glory and praise? What is fame? What is honour? – the word and opinion of the mob!’ Therefore, for violence to be deemed honourable according to the civic purpose that it served, that purpose had to be aligned with the point of view of the majority. Any disjunction of purpose was inherently deleterious to a violent actor’s reception.

The Pazzi conspiracy of 1478 demonstrated the significance of employing violence for the benefit of the majority – in that case, Medicean sympathisers who avenged Giuliano’s murder. As Poliziano explained, ‘large crowds of armed men began to gather in the main square’ and pursue the fleeing conspirators. The violence was so extreme and widespread that, as Poliziano elucidated, a patrol provided by the Commune of Eight was required ‘to prevent the crowd from tearing [Iacopo] apart’. As Baldassarri and Saiber emphasise, ‘Poliziano presents the dismemberment of the conspirators’ bodies by the Florentines, although horrifying in its cruelty, as an act of justice’, since the enemies of the Medici were essentially the enemies of the state. While Poliziano labelled the ensuing disgracing of Iacopo’s body as ‘something of an abomination’ – whereby a large crowd of children and adolescents dug it up, stoned it and dragged it through the street before dumping it in the Arno River – he still found it necessary to include in his account a joke about

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228 Baldassari and Saiber, Images of Quattrocento Florence, 97.
Iacopo’s fame. As Iacopo’s body ‘floated along, a crowd of peasants followed, shouting obscenities. Someone said that Iacopo’s dreams would have come true if, during his life, he had had the popular following he was now enjoying in death’. While Poliziano was so grave as to reproach the vehement episode, it is evident that the commoners and youths had no hesitation to ridicule a heretic violently and publicly, and Poliziano’s inclusion of the humorous quip indicated his own implicit condoning of such civic violence, however repulsive it may have seemed.

The 1478 conspiracy brought to light many heroic members of the Florentine community. Alessandro, the twenty year-old farmer who caught Iacopo Pazzi, found himself responsible for the city’s maintenance of justice, as did the ‘worthy young man’ Pier Corsini, who opposed the ‘violent and rabid Vespucci’ who had been looting and causing ‘great danger to the whole city’. Masculine youths saw the tumult as an opportunity to display one’s daring and bravery for the good of the city, and this youthful enthusiasm to engage in the bloody salvation of Florence was what made it ‘impossible to curb the wrath of the multitude’. The thirty or so ‘lads’ of the Canto della Macina exemplified this attitude, writing to Lorenzo after the conspiracy to express their steadfastness in the face of grandissimo pericholo ['great

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229 ‘ciò s’ebbe a miracolo’: Poliziano, Congiura de’ Pazzi, 81; English translation from Poliziano, ‘The Pazzi Conspiracy’, trans. Baldassari and Saiber, 100-1.  
231 ‘se non accorreva ad opporsi il prode Pier Corsini, erasi forse per avere un sacco generale’: Poliziano, Congiura de’ Pazzi, 79; English translation from Poliziano, ‘The Pazzi Conspiracy’, trans. Baldassari and Saiber, 100.  
danger’] when hunting down the traitors in the city. That band of giovani and garzoni was determined to convey their loyalty to the ‘magnificent and powerful Lorenzo’, and the fact that they did not sign their letter to the city’s leading citizen has been interpreted as evidence of their familiarity with il Magnifico. Violence was a means of forging personal bonds, earning private favour and asserting political capital for the young men of Florence in the quattrocento.

Most significant, however, was that these youths were fighting for the preservation of a state and system of governance that found support in the majority of Renaissance Florentines. Their violent enemies, on the other hand, were not celebrated for their similar acts of bloodshed. While Rinuccini deemed the conspiracy a ‘glorious act, worthy of the highest praise’, the majority of Florentines did not believe in the nobility of a family attempting to restore their own liberty ‘and that of the state’. Therefore, youthful sympathisers of the Pazzi agenda were responsible for a ‘heinous act’ as opposed to a glorious one, and this distinction reinforces the necessity of an alleged civic purpose that reflected the majority’s sentiment. Any other kind of resort to iniquamente, inganno e tradimento [‘crime, deceit, and treason’] would likely undermine a young male’s scaling of the social ladder in Renaissance Florence.

Furthermore, the centrality of majority approval to accepted occasions of violence was highlighted by responses to the Savonarolan movement. The Compagnacci was one such group of i tiepedi who sought to undermine the austerity

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measures of Savonarola through violent and destructive means. Landucci’s
description of the Bonfire of the Vanities included an account of how ‘it was
necessary to have armed men guard [the bonfire frame] at night, for … certain
youngsters called Compagnacci wanted to damage it’.\(^{238}\) As Rocke explains, this band
of aristocratic youth was responsible for all kinds of public disorder against
Savonarola, disrupting his sermons, harrying his followers, and ‘torment[ing] his
troops of boys by insulting them and attacking their processions’.\(^{239}\) While Rocke
describes these youths as being ‘almost universally cast as dissolute young bravos
who chafed under Savonarola’s sexual and other restraints’ – reminiscent of the kind
of brigata that experienced a similarly scathing reputation for their lavishness and
depraved motives – it is significant that their role in the demise of Savonarola and his
army of fanciulli certainly earned them some appreciation.\(^{240}\) As Trexler illustrates,
this ‘militarily more potent youth … talked of saving the commune’ from foreigners
like Savonarola, and they presented such a formidable force that the Dominican friar
felt the need to appease them, supporting ‘moves designed to ease their admission to
the Grand Council and therewith the right to hold office’.\(^{241}\) During this time, males
over the age of twenty-five were granted access to hold office in the Grand Council,
compared to the standard limitation of having to be twenty-nine years of age.\(^{242}\) While
followers of Savonarola rejected the actions of the Compagnacci, the youths certainly
made themselves heard within the public sphere, and the fact that this political weight
came out of smearing pulpits, creating rackets during sermons and attacking boys in

\(^{238}\) ‘fu necessario la note dinanzi tenere la guardia di molti armati a guardare, perché

\(^{239}\) Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 222.

\(^{240}\) Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 222.


processions reinforced the legitimation of those forms of expression within Renaissance Florence.

A band of young Florentine males brought an end to Savonarola’s moral terror. It was out of this context that Machiavelli would champion the creation of a citizen militia,\(^{243}\) and it would be from this example that the city would turn to its twenty-year olds to be the saviours of the Last Republic between 1527 and 1530.\(^{244}\) During the Spanish siege of the city-state in those years, chroniclers highlighted how ‘the gioventù [took] upon itself the protection of the whole popolo’,\(^{245}\) granting the Last Republic a ‘lease on life it would otherwise not have had’ and thus explicating the civic consciousness that had been developed among youths over the preceding one hundred and eighty years.\(^{246}\) However, such licence to exercise authority was only awarded to youths on an exceptional basis, and was only customarily accepted if it was congruent with the general interest of the community. Rocke explains how Savonarola’s fanciulli failed in their attempt to ‘march on city hall and petition the government to institutionalise their reform and their police’,\(^{247}\) and this fear of empowering adolescent gangs was something that Trexler identified as a real concern throughout Italy until the end of the fifteenth century: ‘granting arms to its youngsters was a luxury that the gerontocracies of Italian republican cities had not been able to


\(^{244}\) Trexler, *The Children of Florence*, 6.


\(^{246}\) Trexler, *Public life*, 533.

\(^{247}\) Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 211.
afford for centuries’. 248 Even when the city was surrounded in 1530, fathers were hesitant to allow i giovani to bear arms. 249

Certainly, youths had been celebrated in cases where they upheld their honour or defended their interests. Student revolts against landlords or inter-gang quarrels in the piazze presented ripe opportunities to delineate one’s social and political significance. 250 However, accepted forms of violence were necessarily narrow so as to avoid the kind of chaos that resulted from a boy striking an official in the face with a pipe, or a public riot against the imprisonment of a heretic. 251 After all, boyish rule was a subject of scorn for Florence, as epitomised by Fra Gregario in the wake of Savonarola’s child soldiers: ‘I am amazed that the Florentines, who are considered so expert, [and] men of the most acute spirit, have come into such decline and lowness, that the very fanciulli emerge with the upper hand and want to govern’. 252 This was the sentiment that accompanied fifteenth century perspectives on the 1342 or 1378 revolts, events that Trexler considers to have ‘almost ended all law and order’. 253

Yet, there was an important distinction between boyish militarism en masse and the more directed and individualised violence propagated by young men seeking a political stake in the city. While not all vigilantism on behalf of those giovani merited praise, many cases of defending one’s honour through combat or violently suppressing a threat to the city’s wellbeing earned respect for the next generation of Florentine leaders and defenders. The Medici Restoration in 1530 would quell this forceful influence of youths, resulting in the capitulation of youthful initiative and ushering in of a new extreme of subservience for anyone outside of the ruling

249 Trexler, Public Life, 533.
252 Quoted in Trexler, The Children of Florence, 103.
family’s inner sanctum. Yet, for the better part of the two centuries prior, masculine youths were considered agents of change, and their proficiency when it came to active combat, as well as their yearning for political and social relevance, meant that certain kinds of violence were excused. Whereas contemporary humanists and historians condemned mindless, irrational and purposeless viciousness, violence that was grounded in civic utility brought praise to its protagonists, and served as evidence of one’s manhood, one’s fitness for citizenship, and one’s worthiness of ‘being remembered’.  

254 Polizzotto, *Children of the Promise*, 108.  
Chapter Three

The Toleration of Youthful Promiscuity in Accordance with Civic Priorities

Just as cultures throughout history have characterised masculine youths as mischievous and violent, so too have young men found themselves stereotyped as libidinous agents of extra-marital sexuality. This chapter explores the extent to which such licentiousness has been notoriously attributed to i giovani of Renaissance Florence. From mid-trecento tales of youthful promiscuity until the post-1530 reversion to strict chastity, Florence was renowned for its laxity regarding adultery, however the driving force behind the city’s infamy was its accommodation of the ‘unnameable vice’: sodomy. Therefore, while this chapter includes an analysis of youthful heterosexual relations, it will focus principally upon the role of young men involved in sodomia – a term that was used occasionally in a broad sense to designate both homosexual and heterosexual ‘crimes committed against nature’, but predominantly linked to male-male relations.256 By the late quattrocento, Savonarola described the city’s sexual immorality as causing it to be ‘defamed throughout all of Italy’, 257 and this sentiment was reinforced by the Dominican friar’s followers,

257 ‘quello maladetto vizio della soddomia, del quale tu sai che per tutta Italia Firenze ne è infamata’: Savonarola, Prediche sopra Aggeo, 220; English translation from Rocke, Forbidden Friendships, 205.
describing Florence as ‘a second Sodom, certainly a horrendous thing’. Describing Florence as ‘a second Sodom, certainly a horrendous thing’. This chapter seeks to determine how a city obsessed with its glory and honourable reputation – indeed lauded by Savonarola as ‘the greatest Christian city’, or the ‘New Jerusalem’ – tolerated such widespread sinfulness, ultimately delineating the way in which the city received its most defiant perpetrators: masculine youths.

If the Italian peninsula was the ‘mother’ of sodomy, then Florence was her beating heart. As Michael Rocke makes clear, the ‘erotic tastes’ of the Florentines were ‘so well known even north of the Alps that in contemporary Germany “to sodomise” was popularly dubbed florenzen and a “sodomite”, a Florenzer’. Certainly, this sexuality was not unique to the Florentine Republic, with Vignali making vividly clear that the rifeness of sodomy in Sienna was such that by the late 1520s he deemed it ‘not … long before assholes [would] need buttons’. However, one cannot ignore the focus on Florence as a hub of sexual depravity throughout the Renaissance, and the fact that it had an institution set up in 1432 solely to prosecute sodomy – the Ufficiali di notte, or Office of the Night – indicated its awareness of the issue as being particularly potent within the city’s walls. While Landucci wrote of the piccolo tenpo santo [‘brief holy period’] during the height of Savonarola’s influence,

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260 Quoted in Gene Brucker, Living on the Edge, 120
261 As held by Bernardino of Siena in a 1427 sermon in Sienna, cited in Trexler, Public Life, 380
262 Rocke, Forbidden Friendships, 3.
263 ‘non ci passa molto che i culi averanno bisogno di bottoni’: Vignali, La Cazzaria, 60; English translation from Vignali, The Book of the Prick, trans. Moulton, 92.
in which ‘everyone kept away from dishonest things, and especially from the unnameable vice’, this period ‘did not last long’.\textsuperscript{264} Ultimately, ‘the wicked … proved more powerful than the good’, \textsuperscript{265} and thus, apart from a supposed temporary reprieve in the 1490s, the history of Renaissance Florence was permeated by clandestine sexual depravity.

By firstly understanding the prevalence of youthful male actors within Florence’s sexualised social arena, this chapter will explore the occasions whereby extra-marital sexual relations were tolerated, accommodated or indeed praised. Michael Rocke’s \textit{Ritual Brotherhood} is a pioneering source of rich archival materials and quantitative data regarding sexuality in Renaissance Florence, and many of his historical findings form the foundations of this chapter. However, whereas Rocke’s study was somewhat limited in its specialised focus on homosexuality, this chapter contextualises adolescent sexuality within a broader culture of youthful disobedience, elucidating the distinctions between condemnation and praise in light of contradictory patriarchal doctrines. If youths were instructed to moderate their passions, why were they championed for outbursts of lust? If the assumption of a passive sexual role was contrary to traditional expectations of virility, why were sodomised male adolescents absolved from legal and social repercussions? What motivated some fathers to lead their sons into pederastic relations, while other parents scolded such debasement? How and when did legal and social reactions to adolescent sexuality differ or complement each other? The answering of these questions reinforces the tendencies of male youths in Renaissance Florence to seek out unconventional means of civic


\textsuperscript{265} ‘Anno potuto più e tristi ch’e buoni’: Landucci, \textit{Diario}, 124; English translation from Landucci, \textit{A Florentine Diary}, 101.
engagement, and this chapter further illustrates the reasons of expediency that excused youthful subversiveness. To fully appreciate this cultural phenomenon, one must first understand the characterisation of masculine youths at that time as vulnerable and libidinous individuals.

*Sheep without a shepherd: masculine youths as vulnerable, sexual agents*

Adolescents are innately vulnerable. Immature in both body and mind, young people are exposed to multifarious threats, and a lack of experience of defending oneself against negative influences is a fact of growing up that is as applicable today as it was to Renaissance Florentines. This is true at least up until the age of eighteen, if not into one’s early twenties, and these realities are manifest in historical evidence from the Italian Renaissance.

A broad study of the period provides snippets of occasions whereby young males found themselves led astray or preyed upon. The account of boys who were coaxed into a stranger’s house by the offering of a ball or an orange accentuates the ease with which defenceless adolescents could fall into sodomy,\(^{266}\) similar to the instruction given to taverns not to stock too many sweets so as to mitigate the enticing of young boys into such hubs of debauchery.\(^{267}\) Boccaccio’s tales evoke this susceptibility of pubescent males, most notably that of the ‘buxom young woman with red hair and a passionate nature’, who, frustrated due to her husband’s alleged homosexuality, enticed a young boy into her home while the husband was away.\(^{268}\)

When the husband returned and discovered the boy hiding under a chicken coop, the

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\(^{266}\) Brucker, *Society of Renaissance Florence*, 204.


couple resolved to exploit the young boy for both of their various gratifications, such that ‘the young man was found the next morning wandering about the piazza, not exactly certain which of the pair he had spent the greater part of the night’.269 Such ‘insidious persons’ were the kind that Alberti warned against in his treatise on family, since ‘young people find it very hard to defend themselves against such persons’,270 and thus it is not difficult to see how the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries were notorious for similarly ingrained issues.

While the pious Mantuanus avoided explicit reference to sexual promiscuity, his indictment of sensual love explicated his caution of its potency, describing love as a ‘universal error to youthful years’ whereby ‘he who loves … follows his lover as a captive … and like an ox he draws the plough’.271 According to Mantuanus, ‘we have all been crazy once’,272 and his attribution of such unrestrained passion to youthful males – whom he characterises as ‘dull-witted’, ‘consider[ing] everything safe and … believ[ing] that what please[s] also profits’ – reinforces the notion that young men lose all faculties in the wake of sensual cravings.273 It was with this same understanding that Lorenzo de’ Medici wrote to his son, Cardinal Giovanni, in March 1492, warning him of the many acquaintances who would likely cause his son ‘to slide into the same ditch into which they themselves have fallen, counting on success because of

269 ‘so io ben contanto, che la mattina vegnente infino in su la piazza fu il giovane, non assai certo qual piú stato si fosse la notte o moglie o marito, accompagnato’: Boccaccio, Il Decameron, 322; English translation from Boccaccio, The Decameron, trans. McWillliam, 440.
272 ‘semel insanivimum omnes’: Mantuanus, Adulescentia, 8, English translation by Piepho, 9.
273 ‘omnia tuta putas et quod placet utile credis more iuventutis stolidae’: Mantuanus, Adulescentia, 64, English translation by Piepho, 65.
Similarly, Savonarola preached of how ‘terribly dangerous’ it was if young minds were turned towards evil, ‘for then they are hard to heal and will probably propagate a multitude of sins on earth’.

As Lodovico Alamanni confirmed in 1514, the younger generation is ‘malleable’ between the ages of twelve and twenty, and it is no coincidence that the youth confraternities of the *quattrocento* targeted this age bracket, ‘the most numerous but also the most vulnerable segment of the population’.

Ultimately, wrote Morelli, a young male left to his own devices would not last long:

> Once sheep have lost their shepherd, the wolves devour them, for they are ungoverned, and have no one to defend them.

However, the branding of young males as vulnerable was lined with their notorious libidinousness. As the poets of the Florentine Renaissance made explicit, youth was a time for pleasure; youth was ‘beautiful’ according to Lorenzo *il Magnifico*, and Pietro Bembo reinforced this in describing it as life’s ‘best

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277 Polizzotto, *Children of the Promise*, 45.


Even that infamous cynic, Niccolò Machiavelli, championed the centrality of indulgence to the human condition:

Since life on earth is fleeting
And many are the sorrows
That every man must bear from dawn to morrow.

We do whate’er we will,
We live from day to day in search of pleasure…

For many, youthful pleasure came in its most sensual form, and Boccaccio explicated as much in his poetry: ‘I am young and fain to sing/In this happy tide of spring/Of love and many gentle a thing’. Boccaccio’s tale of the ruin brought about by the recklessness of youthful lovers emphasised the extent to which young age was associated with irresponsible licentiousness, and the humanist commentators of the ensuing two centuries reinforced this stereotype.

Alberti was one such humanist who was unforgiving in his condemnation of those who surrendered themselves to base inclinations, asserting that ‘there is no mental suffering greater than that which is imposed upon itself by an undisciplined

282 ‘Io mi son giovinetta, e volentieri / m’ allegro e canto en la stagion novella / merzè d’amore e de’ dolci pensieri’: de’ Lucchi, Anthology of Italian Poems, 90-1.
283 Boccaccio, Il Decameron, 234-8.
and unreasonable spirit’. According to Alberti, this mental suffering found itself predominantly in the minds of *la gioventú lasciva* [the ‘pleasure-seeking youth’], since ‘young people almost all enjoy gathering new affection’, and do so recklessly. It was this propensity to be drawn into sexual encounters that Mantuanus described as a ‘hidden fire’, and its widespread nature was epitomised by Vignali’s assertion that a conversation between young men will inevitably turn to the subject of ‘buggery’. As Polizzotto explains in his study of youth confraternities, their function was above all to keep its young male members busy and distracted, ‘because even the smallest things could trigger lust’. Ultimately, Florentine youths were regarded as ‘profligate rakes’ by the elder citizens of the time, be it notary Lorenzo Violi’s indictment of young men as ‘licentious youth … accustomed to engaging in every vice’, or Florentine historian Iacopo Nardi’s assertion that those who opposed Savonarola were ‘sensual persons, less correct and less easily disciplined, as young men commonly are’. As Morelli made clear, ‘youth is difficult to rein in’, and the fact that he explicitly advised his youthful descendants to ‘go to the country’ and ‘take some exercise’ in order to ‘get [their]

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286 Lee Piepho, introduction to *Adulescentia*, xxxiv.


288 Polizzotto, *Children of the Promise*, 37.

289 Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 146.


mind[s] off sex’ reinforces the overt Florentine sensitivity towards youthful licentiousness.\textsuperscript{292}

According to the \textit{catasti} of 1427, only twenty-five per cent of men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-two were married.\textsuperscript{293} Therefore, without political or familial duties, and encouraged to explore their sexual desires so as to flaunt their virility, it is not surprising that male youths played a prominent role in the sexualised social arena of Renaissance Florence. By the time Renaissance Florentines reached the age of thirty, one in two males had been formally implicated in sodomy to the Night Officers’ Court alone.\textsuperscript{294} Florence was a city notorious for sexual immorality, and much of this licentiousness was attributed to its sexually energised and curious youth. An understanding of the biological and social inclinations experienced by pubescent males, combined with an appreciation of how those urges could be manipulated by others, is essential in appreciating the city’s accommodation of otherwise condemnable behaviour when perpetrated by young males.

\textit{The protection of the courts: legal sensitivity to youthful transgressions}

The accommodation of youthful subversiveness in Renaissance Florence was manifest particularly through the city’s legal concessions to \textit{i giovani}. Whereas there was no immunity or sentence reduction on behalf of young age in nearby Bologna,\textsuperscript{295} Florentine court reports from the late fourteenth century reveal a distinct

\textsuperscript{294} Rocke, \textit{Forbidden Friendships}, 115.
\textsuperscript{295} Ottavia, ‘Rituals of Youth’, 78.}
consciousness of the need to reform rather than suppress youthful delinquency. Whether it was the reduction of a twenty year-old man’s sentence ‘on account of his age’, or a 1399 decision to fine a twenty-four year-old male instead of sentencing him to death, Florentine courts conveyed an understanding of the inherent difficulties associated with youth. Therefore, they shifted their focus from traditionally uncompromising punishment to a more nuanced approach to the law that incorporated the belief in the potential for redemption of the city’s future citizens. This philosophy was consistent throughout the quattrocento as well, such that even conspirators against the Medici were excused due to their youth. As Poliziano recounted, Galeotto, the youngest brother of Renato Pazzi, was ‘still an adolescent’ and therefore ‘thrown into prison’ instead of facing the death penalty of his older brother. If punishments were the bonds of law, and thus ‘must be greater for great and powerful men’, the converse was similarly true, and the lack of traditional political and social importance of youthful males nurtured a general leeway in the face of their legal transgressions.

Most illuminating, however, was how this laxity of punishment was applied even to that vice which was so contrary to Christian law and morality that its name was rarely uttered: sodomy. In the early sixteenth century, Vignali quoted Petrarch in his defence of youthful promiscuity, arguing that ‘all errors are more excusable in young people than in the maturity of old age’. While Vignali wrote for a group of

296 Brucker, Society in Renaissance Florence, 162, 177.
299 ‘è più escusabile ne la gioventù che non è ne la matura vecchiezza’: Vignali, La Cazzaria, 86; English translation from Vignali, The Book of the Prick, trans. Moulton, 117. Petrarch was of a similar opinion in the fourteenth century, highlighting how 'che’ n giovenil fallir e’ men vergogna' ['in youthful failings there is less shame']: Francesco Petrarca, Le Rime di Francesco Petrarca Secondo la Revisione Ultima del
scholars in Sienna, the idea that there was less shame in youthful failings was one that had emerged from the preceding century-and-a-half of a heavily sexualised Florentine civilisation. Rocke elucidates how under the seventy-year long jurisdiction of the Office of the Night, youth under the age of eighteen were awarded lighter penalties regardless of their active or passive role, with the 1432 legislation justifying this stance ‘since youth is less capable of deceit’.300 Even after a seventh conviction for sodomy, a youth could only be sentenced to death if he had passed his eighteenth birthday, and the fact that young, passively sexual partners were not even interrogated (let alone punished) by a special agency designed solely to suppress sodomy reinforces this reluctance to come down harshly on male youths.301 Even Savonarola, who proposed severely strict laws for any sodomite (active or passive) convicted over the age of eighteen, decided to leave the punishment of anyone under that age threshold to the court’s discretion.302

The Florentine sensitivity to adolescent delinquency does not impress the modern-day Western reader, whose legal systems are ingrained with accommodations and immunities for minors and juveniles. However, to dismiss the Florentine focus on youth discipline as a simple pre-cursor to modern sensibilities would lead one to ignore the reasons behind and implications of such concessions. Sexual immorality, particularly sodomy, was not only a source of intense embarrassment for Florence in a diplomatic sense, but it was also believed to be the pre-eminent factor that limited the glory of the city in the eyes of God. The Office of the Night was funded at great expense to the city in the hope that it would somehow curb the unnameable vice and

Poeta, ed. Giuseppe Salvo Cozzo (Firenze: G.C. Sansoni, 104), 204; my English translation.
300 Office of the Night legislation, quoted in Rocke, Forbidden Friendships, 51.
302 Rocke, Forbidden Friendships, 206.
restore the city’s purity. Yet, despite the extent of this moral crusade – one that saw the handing down of thousands of convictions – youths found themselves escaping punishment with relative routineness. Certainly, the mercy of the courts was appropriate in light of the naturally vulnerable and libidinous nature of adolescent males. But the question remains: why was such youthful licentiousness tolerated if it was deemed to be the most cursed element of Florentine civic life? If ‘carnal delights outside of matrimony were mortal sins that killed the soul’, how was their official permission justified? The acceptance – and sometimes praise – of dissipated behaviour among youths, much like responses to acts of ridicule and violence, depended upon their role within a broader civic purpose. Three prominent societal concerns dictated this toleration.

### i. Expedient protection of the reputation of Florence

Firstly, the accommodation of youthful participation in sodomy was the most expedient means of mitigating its damage to the reputation of the city. The widespread nature of sodomy in Florence, such that two thirds of all males had been incriminated by the age of forty, meant that there was an accepted degree of inevitability about the unnameable vice that played on the minds of those legislating against it. As Bernardino da Siena lamented in 1424, ‘there are so many corrupted men that nothing is being enforced … Justice has vanished and things get worse’. While the Officers of the Night attempted to introduce extremely harsh penalties for those convicted, this only drove the practice underground, where it was harder to

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305 ‘cattivi sono tanto più quantità che nulla s’osserva … La giustizia è perita, la cosa va male’: Debby, *Renaissance Florence*, 152.
control and delineate the most egregious of crimes. Therefore, as Rocke explains, the Night Officers developed a ‘new, benevolent and somewhat accommodating strategy of social control and discipline, aimed less at repressing homosexual activity rigorously than at containing it within tolerable bounds’. By increasing surveillance and the number of charges, the Night Officers covered more of the city and ensured that anyone implicated in sodomy would likely face legal action. However, by softening the penalties of a conviction, and promising immunity for anonymous self-denunciations by passive adolescents, the Night Officers were able to sketch the network of homosexual relations throughout the city and prosecute its worst offenders – that is, the violent, repeating and elder actors.

At this point, one should pause to clarify the nature of these homosexual relations. Rocke’s study elucidates the pederastic nature that dictated most relations, with a young adolescent assuming a passive role while an older youth or man played the active role. According to Rocke, ninety per cent of males implicated in the passive role between 1478 and 1502 were under the age of eighteen, whereas over eighty-two per cent of active partners were over the age of eighteen. With the mean age of a passive partner being sixteen years old and that of an active partner being twenty-seven, it is not difficult to appreciate the significant age gap that existed in most relations and the power imbalances that resulted. And while this age gap was not peculiar to same-sex relations, with men of approximately twenty-seven traditionally marrying girls of eighteen years, it is essential to note that a ‘hierarchy

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306 Rocke, Forbidden Friendships, 47.
307 Rocke, Forbidden Friendships, 12.
308 Rocke, Forbidden Friendships, 96.
309 Rocke, Forbidden Friendships, 96.
of age and sexual role was … one of the fundamental traits of the social organisation of homosexual sodomy in Florence’.  

This is significant because it relates directly to the kinds of offenders who were sought out and punished by the Night Officers. Rocke explicates how for most males, sodomy was a ‘temporary transgression’ that ‘did not constitute a permanently “deviant” condition’; eighty-five per cent of those incriminated in the 1478-1502 survey were incriminated only once and with only one partner. The Night Officers were less concerned with those exceptional cases and more focused on the chronic sodomisers, those who were mature men that propagated the evil and were responsible for corrupting the vulnerable younger generations. Therefore, by promising immunity to those who confessed to their participation in sodomy and named the other party or parties, the Night Officers were not condoning the immoral actions of youths, but rather pursuing the best means of starving the city-wide vice of its source. The method was more effective than the previous austerity, and this strictly practical approach was employed similarly in relation to prostitution, as Paolo da Certaldo evoked in 1360:

If you frequent women of the world, you lose your honour and your money; however, if you must of necessity frequent such women, do what you need to do quickly, then pay and leave.

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While extra-marital sexuality was officially lewd, and the ‘sin of lust’ considered to be ‘very grave and perilous and displeasing to God’, the judiciary of the Florentine Republic seemed to prefer expedient, clandestine continuance of sexual impurity to a strict and unforgiving devotion to standards of piety. Until 1530, which saw the introduction of strict laws against sodomy that applied almost equally to minors as they did to elder citizens, Florence’s governing bodies avoided any moral assessment of youthful sexuality beyond generic, and what might be deemed token, discouragement. To delineate fully the juxtaposing extents of condemnation and support for youthful sexuality, one must delve into the murkier social customs of the Renaissance city.

ii. Maintenance of social networks and political harmony

How exactly youthful sodomy was received by the Florentine population at large was manifest most explicitly by the reactions of families to their sons. Due to the humanist emphasis placed upon honour, many elders scolded adolescent delinquents who in any way threatened to sully the family’s good name by their youthful actions. Alberti was a particularly strong advocate for stringent paternal influence, explaining how he would ‘vehemently condemn the father who does not at least attempt to turn their sons away from their appetites before he decides to help them toward their satisfaction’. This sentiment echoed the 1380 vow of a father to

315 Rocke, Forbidden Friendships, 233.
chastise his son for having betrayed the family, and Rocke’s account of the humiliation suffered by the fourteen year-old Guerrieri di Tribaldo de’ Rossi – suffering the taunts of his peers, losing his job and undergoing family discipline – reinforces the way in which youthful sodomy was sometimes met with profound repudiation. While the courts seldom punished boys who had been sodomised, their dishonourable submission was met in the streets and homes with a strong social stigma.

However, this ostracism was often subdued if it ran contrary to political or social considerations. As Rocke contends, ‘homoerotic bonds, despite their interdiction, were also woven securely into [the] web of sodalities’, and Trexler reinforces how ‘political factions were insolubly held together by homosexual allegiances’. Therefore, sodomy was often excused where its youthful actors played a significant role in the consolidation of these networks, with some families even going ‘so far as to facilitate the homosexual activity of their sons or brothers’ considering the multitude of ways in which it could serve the family ‘by producing material or other benefits, by creating ties through sons or siblings with other men, by reinforcing relations with the domestic group’. The moral repugnance of the unnameable vice was tolerated where such immorality actually served to preserve the ever-important harmony of social connections.

Family complicity in the wake of sodomy evokes the pre-eminence of civic concerns to the Renaissance Florentine. Bernardino of Siena was outspoken in his reproach of parents who ‘prostituted’ out their sons ‘in order to obtain civic offices or

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319 Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 149.
320 Trexler, *Public Life*, 381.
321 Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 175.
money’, and while the frequency of this familial support is unknown, the report of Bernardo di Lorenzo Lorenzi’s open toleration of his family’s homosexual relations – ‘because it is useful for the family’ – confirms that it did occur.\footnote{322} As Rocke makes clear, ‘most of the young men’s sexual friends who were identified by name … came from families of higher status’, and the fact that a youth was ‘accepted as a son-in-law’ into his sodomiser’s household explicates how the bonds created via the otherwise prohibited act ‘vegged on kinship’.\footnote{324} Where it presented a tangible benefit to the family, the unnameable vice was often tolerated, and its youthful agents were exonerated from the customary shame that usually accompanied it.

Moreover, the impact of social and political harmony to the Florentine perception of sodomy was evidenced by the legal leniency shown to certain citizens. For one, the Florentine judiciary was reluctant to embarrass the most eminent of families by charging their men for sodomy, and such caution indicated the way in which the regulation of the unnameable vice was ‘bound up in considerations of political prudence and in the dynamics of kinship, clientage and friendship’.\footnote{325} Similarly, married men were afforded a degree of discretion, for although their homosexual activity was deemed particularly shameful for its threat to disrupt domestic life, it was held that severe punishment of such perpetrators would only exacerbate familial stress.\footnote{326} Therefore, as Rocke explains, ‘as long as they were discreet and publicly devoted to their families, married men might have been able to

\footnote{322} ‘consentino per avere o offizii o denari’: Fra Bernardino da Siena, 	extit{Le Prediche Volgari}, ed. Ciro Cannarozzi (Florence: E. Rinaldi, 1958), 2:100; English translation from Rocke, 	extit{Forbidden Friendships}, 175.
\footnote{323} Rocke, 	extit{Forbidden Friendships}, 177
\footnote{324} Rocke, 	extit{Forbidden Friendships}, 178, 180.
\footnote{325} Rocke, 	extit{Forbidden Friendships}, 145, 76.
\footnote{326} Rocke, 	extit{Forbidden Friendships}, 129, 131.
act on their homosexual desires with relatively little risk of public reprimand’. The fact that the Medici were opposed to stricter legislation regarding punishment, so as to maintain the political support of the many youths engrossed in l’amore muscolino, reinforces the extent to which the social and political forces within Renaissance Florence responded to sodomy not through a strict moral lens, but in accordance with shifting civic priorities. Adolescent boys became pawns in this game of societal strategy, and the extent of this exploitation is exemplified by an analysis of sodomy’s inextricable link to virility.

iii. The defence of masculine identity and consolidation of virtuous qualities

‘Honour and shame … are social as much as personal values’.

The manhood of a Florentine citizen dictated the virility of the city as a whole, just as any shameful effeminacy would damage the reputation of Florence. As has been discussed, a variety of humanist qualities underpinned virility, such as physical athleticism, humorous creativity and targeted daring. The active role within homosexual relations was similarly attributed to displays of one’s masculinity, and some mature men along with more senior youths perceived this unorthodox avenue as a means of staking their claim in the social life of the city. Sodomy could be used as a status symbol, and the often-aggressive style of the act – combined with its rigid age structure and role divisions – served to express the social subordination of the young

327 Rocke, Forbidden Friendships, 131.
328 Rocke, Forbidden Friendships, 43, 65.
329 Rocke, Forbidden Friendships, 103.
boys compared to the authority wielded by those who sexually subjugated them. By asserting control over vulnerable adolescents, older men confirmed and extended their manliness, and thus many stakeholders in Renaissance Florentine society quietly supported the proliferation of the unnameable vice.

Whereas the story of an older male assuming the passive role constituted the ‘greatest and most indecent case that has ever been heard’, the developing gender identity of adolescents excused their passivity within sexual relations, that which was deemed to be ‘only innocent boyish foibles’. As Rocke makes clear, ‘adolescents could “take it from behind” because this was seen as appropriate to their age and subordinate status, but older men who did so undermined a collective masculine identity formed around serious, mature governors that was at the centre of the city’s public image’. A male over the age of eighteen could not engage in sexual relations with a similarly aged male, nor would he dare corrupt the sacred chastity of the city’s girls. Therefore, boys became the ‘wives’ or ‘lovers’ to Florentines over the age of eighteen who were eager to prove their virility without undermining civic principles, and this greater consideration for the reputation of the city justified the ‘freedom to experiment’ afforded to youths under that age.

Moreover, the allowance of sexual subjugation of twelve to eighteen year olds was deemed essential for their eventual transition into men of the city. Rocke illustrates this point pertinently, explaining how ‘sodomy helped to articulate the distinctions between boyhood and manhood, to mark more clearly the boundaries

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330 Rocke, Forbidden Friendships, 207
332 Rocke, Forbidden Friendships, 103-4.
333 Rocke, Forbidden Friendships, 95.
between immature adolescence and the physically mature and socially dominant status of youths and adult men. Homosexual relations were therefore tolerated as a source of civic education, an unconventional means of imparting knowledge about virile authority that was necessary for the future governance of Florence, but which may have lacked impact had it been taught through more sober channels. Sexual subversion of the law was another means through which youths could brandish the kinds of masculine creativity and daring that they were lauded for in other, less controversial, public manifestations.

It must be noted that Renaissance Florentine celebrations of sexual bravado were predominantly in relation to heterosexual contexts. Nonetheless, the fact that adulterous relations were the source of praise reinforces the support of lewd transgressions when perpetrated by i giovani. Boccaccio’s Decameron did not shy away from tales of youthful promiscuity, and the story of un giovane de’ leggiadri [a ‘sprightly young gallant’] cuckoldling a gullible man of lowly condition was a particularly entertaining example of the younger demographic asserting itself within the social arena. With his lover’s husband returning home early, the young Gianello hid in the bathtub, at which point his lover convinced the husband that Gianello was there to purchase the tub. While this stroke of ingenuity was purely that of his female lover, Gianello is the focus of much of the story’s success, for as the wife bent over the tub to instruct her husband who was cleaning it, Gianello, ‘in the manner of a wild and hot-blooded stallion mounting a Parthian mare in the open fields … satisfied his

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334 Rocke, Forbidden Friendships, 111.
young man’s passion’. 336 Gianello’s subsequent demand that the oafish husband carry the tub over to his house was the ultimate insult, and the fact that the story was the source of ‘a good laugh’ highlights Boccacio’s appreciation of such a subversive show of authority. 337

One hundred and seventy years later, Niccolò Machiavelli conveyed a similar appreciation for youthful mischief within a sexual context. His early cinquecento play, Mandragola, championed the way in which a young Florentine merchant (Callimaco) successfully tricked his way into the bed of a sterile lawyer’s wife, thus ‘merit[ing] honour and esteem’. 338 In this comedic tale, one is presented with the standard stereotypes of the youthful Florentine, a vagabond ‘inflamed with … burning desire’ such that he was prepared to do ‘anything, no matter how brutal, cruel or foul’ in order to satisfy his craving. 339 Yet, where Callimaco earned praise was not by allowing his passion to rule his senses. Instead, the humour of the tale came from Callimaco’s devising of an elaborate plot, in which he pretended to be a doctor and convinced the lawyer that in order to cure his wife’s ‘barrenness’, she must drink a concoction made of the mandrake root and then sleep once with a stranger so as not to endanger her husband’s life. By then proceeding to be that ‘stranger’, Callimaco earned the favour of the lady, and their continuance of their affair well into the future.

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336 ‘in quella guisa che negli ampi campi gli sfrenati cavalli e d’amor caldi le cavalle di Partia assaliscono, ad effetto recò il giovenil disidéro’: Boccaccio, Il Decameron, 367; English translation from Boccaccio, The Decameron, trans. McWilliam, 494.
337 ‘Non seppe si Filostrato parlare obscuro delle cavalle partice, che l’avvedute donne (non lo intendessero e alquanto) non ne ridessono’: Boccaccio, Il Decameron, 368; English translation from Boccaccio, The Decameron, trans. McWilliam, 495.
was justified in light of not only the lawyer’s infertility – a severe blow to his virility – but also the fact that he was considered the ‘simplest and most foolish man in all of Florence’.

340 Just as ridicule and violence were used by youths to convey an honourable sense of authority over the Florentine public sphere, so too were sexual relations employed as means of expression. While the fame that accompanied youthful sexual conquests was a cultural phenomenon throughout the Italian peninsula, forming as much the basis of Masuccio’s *novelle* from Salerno as they did in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, the Florentine Republic approached such subversive behaviour through an accentuated civic mindset. Whereas the young bachelor of Masuccio’s twelfth novel was absolved from scrutiny simply because of the complacency of his lover’s husband, the positive Florentine reception of sexual transgressions was dictated by their role within more meaningful civic objectives, of which the honourable defence of the city’s collective manhood served as a prime consideration.

Indeed, the defence of this virility overshadowed almost all other considerations, and was at the foundation of the Florentine Republic’s misogynistic make-up. Laying down the basic tenets of Florentine society in the mid-trecento, Paolo da Certaldo elucidated this patriarchal mentality, instructing his readers not to let oneself ‘be moved by fury or anger against those young men’ who might eye one’s girls and young women, instead encouraging his readers to ‘chastise and admonish the girls’.

342 Male youths, whether in a passive, homosexual role or an active,

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342 ‘E ben che, come molte volte avviene, ch’elle o alcuna di loro sieno guatate da giovani, non ti muovere a furore né a ira contro a tali giovani, anzi gastiga e
heterosexual role, were consistently exempt from punishment. Thus, whereas the affair between a grown man and a maidservant was recorded by Bernardo Machiavelli in the late quattrocento as being the cause of ‘the devil of a fuss’,\textsuperscript{343} many male youths were idolised as a result of their sexual conquests, and their participation in this ‘rampant’ immorality, be it heterosexual or homosexual, was excused according to overarching considerations of civic virtù, that loaded term ultimately derived from virilitas – manhood.\textsuperscript{344}

Subversive sexuality was ingrained in Renaissance Florentine life. As Ruggiero explains, ‘the illicit heart of the city helped not only to create the masculine social networks that made the city function, but also to foster an emotional attachment to the city in an age before nationalism’.\textsuperscript{345} Whether in the form of homosexual relations tolerated on a confidential basis, or tales of scandalous adultery that formed the foundations of humorous conversations,\textsuperscript{346} promiscuity was a tenacious social reality that cut across age and class barriers and found itself irrevocably grounded in the sexual energies of young males. As explicated by accounts of brigate parading their bardasse (or boyish ‘conquests’) through the streets at the height of Savonarolan austerity,\textsuperscript{347} youths had an irrepressible stake in the sexualisation of the city, and the accommodation of such subversiveness was most often in accordance with social considerations. Sodomy was met with limited legal resistance when it was deemed best for the maintenance of the city’s reputation, and where it was congruent with social and familial harmony, or integral within the state’s public expression of virility,


\textsuperscript{344} Garin, Italian Humanism, 57.

\textsuperscript{345} Ruggiero, ‘Mean Streets’, 306.

\textsuperscript{346} See Alberti, The Family, 212.

\textsuperscript{347} Rocke, Forbidden Friendships, 189.
religious or moral concerns did not feature. Therefore, it is understandable that
masculine youths would perceive such activity, albeit contrary to humanist doctrines
and fundamental Christian precepts, as a legitimate means of engaging within the
social and political life of the city. While this may not have equated to the same
degree of honour or virtù that accompanied elaborate practical jokes or daring
displays of violence, it certainly reinforced the prevalence of subversive behaviour as
recourse for otherwise disenfranchised male youths.
The Italian Renaissance produced some extraordinary expressions of stylised ideals of humanity. In art, Leonardo da Vinci’s drawing of the Vitruvian man depicted an image of human perfection, and it had its literary counterpart in Baldassare Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier*. But these were no more characteristic of Renaissance culture than Piero della Francesca’s warts-and-all portrait of Federico da

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Montefeltro, or the earthy bawdiness of Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. The tension between the ideal and the realistic was a fundamental source of Renaissance creative expression. *Civic humanism* was not a standard of perfection; it was based on an understanding and acceptance of the whole human condition.

The subversive behaviour of *i giovani* was the source of significant commentary in Renaissance Florence, and the appreciation of particularly mischievous displays of civic engagement epitomised this holistic interpretation of humanity. Males under the age of thirty were excluded from holding political office, as were they incapable of evoking their influence over economic and familial affairs. However, as this thesis has explored, masculine youths found other ways to prove their civic consciousness and social authority, and the fact that these alternate methods were accommodated and encouraged, in spite of their flirtation with the bounds of moral and legal standards, reinforces the intrinsically contradictory, yet realistic, approach to raising the next generation of Florentine citizens. Transgressions were met with little resistance if their purpose was ingrained in the betterment of the city-state.

Humorous ridicule was one such act of rebellion that often received praise rather than blame. Whereas elaborate practical jokes and witty retorts were the weapons of those sons of relatively wealthy and intellectual élites, most male youths were capable of simpler charivaris and other ritualised means of derision. Nonetheless, all varieties of impishness were subject to the same primary criterion for success: a civic purpose. Be it an intricate prank designed to illustrate the avarice of the clergy, or the basic creation of a racket to discourage inappropriate marriages, the male youths of Florence found little resistance when their undermining of established individuals and institutions were warranted as a means of protecting the city.
Similarly, violence was a legitimate recourse for young men who were otherwise excluded from conventional means of expression. The humanist obsession with emotional discipline was juxtaposed with the celebration of daring, and calls for restraint yielded to virile demonstrations of defending the onore of both the individual and the city. Like creative mockery, the acceptance of unauthorised force was dependent upon its employment for the betterment of the Republic. Whereas drunken brawls were condemned as mindless examples of surrendering to base passions, violence for the sake of the city – such as the hunting down of seditious conspirators or the beating of thieves – was a necessary transgression through which young men contributed to the public good. Of course, resorting to violence was not the routine method of solving civic issues, and the exoneration of its protagonists was dependent upon a significant backing of the majority. However, the prominence of youthful violence within the chronicles of the Florentine Renaissance reinforces the acknowledgment of subversive conduct as a genuine means of asserting a young man’s authority upon the social and political sphere.

The toleration of sexual promiscuity confirmed the place of civic utility at the core of Florentine society. While the legal leniency afforded to young males implicated in sodomy reflected an understanding of their natural vulnerability and licentiousness, it was predominantly founded upon an expedient attempt to manage the unnameable vice and mitigate its damage to the reputation of the city. The social stigma surrounding homosexuality was similarly suppressed in light of the financial and social benefits that accompanied pederastic relations, and the symbolic nature of these interactions was deemed to accentuate the virility – and therefore, the virtù – of the Republic. Heterosexual promiscuity played a similar role as an indication of masculine honour, and the championing of those youths who made cuckolds of
impotent or foolish men reinforced the accommodation of traditional immorality when used to combat social weakness. With gentlemen associating with lower class women and youths of the lower classes consorting with males of the upper, this illicit world broke down social hierarchy, offering an unsurpassable opportunity for the disenfranchised giovani to engage in the life of the city, albeit via unconventional means.

A desire to ridicule, a propensity for violence and an uncontrollable sexual eagerness were three character traits that ran contrary to the model of a perfect Florentine citizen in the Renaissance. However, they were natural impulses for young males, and as much a part of the human condition as a yearning for social respect, familial security and a sense of belonging. While humanist treatises are often associated with lofty rhetoric concerning piety and nobility, by no means were baser realities of humanity completely taboo. Despite all of the illusions about moral purity and ‘respect for the law’, one need only consider the honest considerations of Bracciolini, a man who was the Chancellor of the city in 1453 and thus, one would assume, one of its greatest supporters:

If you choose to be guided by the beliefs and habits of people in general, however, you will find that there is no basis at all for nobility, for these popular beliefs and customs differ widely and contradict each other.349

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Propositions such as this underpinned the complexity of the era, and they were undoubtedly the catalyst for André Chastel’s assertion that historians of the Florentine Renaissance encounter more questions than they do answers. Hence Edward Muir’s perspective that ritual is ‘inherently ambiguous’, or Geertz’s claim that ‘cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete’.

Yet, as Geertz also posits, ‘our knowledge of culture grows in spurts’. Through the lens of youthful subversiveness, historians can refine their understanding of humanism as it applied to the tangible economic, political and social spheres of Renaissance Florence. They can delineate the extent of civic consciousness that played on the minds of those inhabitants, and they can perceive the influence of a father’s status on the behaviour of his sons. They can nuance their assertions regarding the patriarchal foundations of the city, and they can re-address the neighbourhood networks that both held together and divided the Republic. This thesis is another historical investigation into the fascinating world of Renaissance Florence, and while the conduct of mischievous youths may be unseemly for some, Boccaccio made clear that ‘no story is so unseemly as to prevent anyone from telling it’.

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352 Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 29.
353 Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 25.
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