

Ruggiero, G

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II

MEAN STREETS, FAMILIAR STREETS, OR THE FAT WOODCARVER AND THE MASCULINE SPACES OF RENAISSANCE FLORENCE

GUIDO RUGGIERO

At the heart of the city there is a place full of joy. . . . Seek the grandeur of the high dome of Santa Reparata [the Cathedral] or ask for the magnificent church of God that shows the Lamb [the Baptistery]. Once there bear to the right a few paces . . . and ask for the Mercato Vecchio. There halfway down the street stands a happy whorehouse which you will know by the very smell of the place. Enter and give my greetings to the whores and madams. . . . The blond Helena and the sweet Matilda will greet you. . . . [Y]ou will see Giannetta and . . . the naked and painted breasts of Claudia. . . . Here . . . you can find anything that is illicit.¹

– Il Panormita

THIS DESCRIPTION OF THE HEART OF FLORENCE WRITTEN IN THE early fifteenth century by Antonio Beccadelli, known as Il Panormita, and dedicated to Cosimo dei Medici might seem largely alien to the brilliant early Renaissance flourishing of art and humanistic culture that we associate with the city. Certainly the spaces of Renaissance Florence were alive with a cultural and artistic excitement that was crucial for what has been labeled the Renaissance, but Panormita's equally lively description suggests many questions about how contemporaries actually lived in that cityscape.

One thing seems clear, however: Renaissance Florence, much like a Renaissance text, had many ways of being read and lived. For the upper classes, for example, the city was to a great degree a creation of their wealth, power, and imagination, and it both consciously and unconsciously incorporated, reflected, and reinforced their customs, values, and culture.² For others (the lower classes, marginal people, transients, perhaps women) there were other readings and other lives. But in this essay I would like to go beyond social readings to follow the smell of flesh in Panormita's streets, for that very smell suggests that the city was also built primarily by and for men, their pleasures, work, desires, fears; in that light we should expect that it has Renaissance

readings that are particularly conditioned by their values, visions, and ways of thinking.

One way of rethinking the spaces of Florence in the Renaissance, then, is by considering the way in which the city was lived, thought, and formed using what might be labeled its masculine culture. To a degree virtually all culture in the Renaissance was marked by masculine values and vision,³ and in turn it is clear that “masculine culture” regularly was intertwined with broader values that it would be reductionist to treat as merely male. Nonetheless, there are certain strains of the broader culture of the Renaissance that might be fruitfully separated out and examined from the perspective of gender – specifically masculine – if we keep in mind that what we are creating is largely an artificial category.

Especially important perhaps were three discourses: one on male friendship, a second on male honor, and a third on male pleasure. These discourses melded together into a broader regime of masculine sociability in the Renaissance that I will call the regime of *virtù* – an ongoing public display of male power, rationality, and control that was central to adult masculine identity, status, and discipline.⁴ Of course, the very etymology of the term *virtù* turns on its Latin root *vir*, meaning male, and suggests its intimate connection with male culture. At one level in the Renaissance the meaning of *virtù* was simple – in virtually every context it marked out those characteristics that set one man (*vir*) above another. But what those characteristics were was often hotly contested and changed over time, with Boccaccio finding *virtù* in the fourteenth century in the cunning rationality of his clever tricksters; fifteenth-century humanists finding it in a rational, controlled, classical approach to life and, for a time, service to the state; and courtiers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries finding it in the blending of service to a prince, manners, grace, and self-fashioning that entailed a delicate balance of aggression and passivity reflected in Ariosto’s male heroes, Orlando and Ruggiero.

Now it might seem that a concept as hotly debated and contested as *virtù* would not serve well for a regime, but, in fact, it was so hotly contested precisely because its rule was so omnipresent. If one could capture the definition of *virtù*, one could control real power; thus debates about *virtù* cut to the heart of how life should be organized and lived. And as a result the regime of *virtù* was ubiquitous in the Renaissance – humanist ideals and writing, governmental forms, social concepts and norms, art, literature, religion, even commercial organization and methods all to a degree turned on (in a real way were ruled by) its imperatives. Crucially, however, this regime was not merely verbal; nor was it internalized to the same extent or in the same way

as modern disciplining discourses are. Much of its weight was carried by the physical spaces of the city; by the sights, sounds, and smells of the familiar spaces of Florence. This regime, along with maleness, male culture, and masculinity, were literally thought through and written out on the spaces of Renaissance Florence. Males discovered and lived a masculine culture in large part in a city that was rich with signs and reflections of that culture. Even the Mercato Vecchio smelled of the flesh of their sexual desires, and Panormita could celebrate that expecting Cosimo de' Medici's approval.

But rather than continue in this theoretical fashion in this essay, I would like to use a *novella* (short story) set in quattrocento Florence, "The Fat Woodcarver" ("Il grasso legnaiuolo") by Antonio Manetti, as a concrete example for exploring the power of this way of looking at the city and the regime of *virtù* there. Actually, the tale has been looked at extensively both by art historians interested in the famous characters involved and by literary scholars interested in the claim that it is a literary description of real historical events. Much of that scholarship has been summed up by Lauro Martines in *An Italian Renaissance Sextet* – a volume in which he provides translations and a cutting-edge analysis of six Renaissance *novelle*, including this tale.⁵

It is a fascinating tale on many levels – first, simply as the story of a cruel joke that at the time seemed uproariously funny, even if it no longer seems so today. As Robert Darnton has pointed out, such moments of dead humor can be most revealing for discovering the distance of the past and its distinct meanings. Few today would laugh at the conceit of a group of friends who convince one of their number that he has been transformed into another person, especially when the joke's victim – Manetto, called Grasso (the Fat Woodcarver of the title) – comes close to going mad and eventually flees the city in dishonor. But the story is also interesting because apparently it was true, and the characters involved include some of the most famous artists and artisans of the period, including Filippo Brunelleschi, who was the mastermind of the joke. In a way then we have in this story a fifteenth-century representation of the masculine culture of some of the people who were crucial for the building of Florence and that very culture in the Renaissance. Last, and most important, the story is interesting because it speaks clearly the three discourses noted above and stages them in the spaces of Florence as an emblematic tale of the regime of *virtù* and its power.

Another significant aspect of the tale is the fact that although it was written down in the form discussed here in the 1480s by the Florentine architect and writer Antonio di Tuccio Manetti (1423–79), the events were reported to have taken place in 1409, well before he was born. Manetti, however, knew Brunelleschi, even wrote an account of his life, and thus could claim to have

heard the story from the ringleader himself.⁶ But it was a story whose fame had grown over the years largely because it was too good an exemplar of *virtù* in action not to have captured the Florentine imagination; thus, it reflected a lively oral tradition as well. And like all good stories – even when heard from the mouth of one of the protagonists – we may assume that it had a tendency to grow and become more refined and, in a way, more true as it was retold and committed to writing: more true, in that details that did not add to the central themes tended to drop away, and nuances that enhanced those themes tended to be highlighted. Thus, the tale became more true to its themes and the cultural values of its time as it became more false to actual events. Nonetheless one must not be too positive about the way in which its retelling enhanced its truth, for even approximately seventy years of remembering it meant refashioning it over more than two generations of vibrant changes – changes whose impact on the tale are difficult to judge today. Perhaps most pertinently over that period many of the characters went from being promising young artisans and intellectuals to the heroes of a great generation of artistic and intellectual creation, arguably one of the most creative and successful in the Renaissance. Still, thinking about the story of the Fat Woodcarver as a tale (an emblematic moment of the regime of *virtù*) that in a way grew across the fifteenth century in Florence rather than as a mere account of an event in 1409, makes it richer yet.⁷



THE TALE BEGINS WITH A GROUP OF YOUNG FRIENDS GATHERED ONE evening for dinner at the house of Tomaso Pecori, a prominent Florentine of good family. A congenial group, they were drawn, as the narrator notes, “from the governing class and from among the masters of the more intellectual and imaginative crafts, such as painters, goldsmiths, woodcarvers, and the like” (172–3). After dinner, as it was a cold winter night, the group gathered around the hearth to continue their conversation. Already several things stand out that relate to masculine culture and the use of space in Florence. First, of course, the fact that these friends are all male. Women may have prepared and served the meal, but they are invisible. Second, male friendship here reaches across formal class boundaries: Chatting together are artisans and members of the governing class, men of more important old families, and some newer men as well.⁸

In a socially sensitive age where, arguably, social boundaries were being more strongly marked out and a new aristocratic ethos was gaining ground, one might wonder what was the basis for friendship in such a diverse group.

The key, at least in Manetti's telling, seems to be a respect for talent and intellectual accomplishment, a respect for *virtù*. For it is not just any artisan who is admitted to this circle of friends but those dedicated to "the more intellectual and imaginative of the crafts," along with men "from the governing class." Here then, before the fire of Pecori's home, men gathered together to enjoy themselves in conversation united by friendship and a common respect for each other's *virtù*. A third thing one might note is how hearth and table have become, in a way, "public" spaces. What might be labeled domestic space with a wife and family gathered around on a similar winter night, here has become a quasi-public space where male friendship dominates. Hearth and table are transformed from the domestic to the public by male use; and the tale makes this perfectly clear, briefly noting that the conversation turned on matters of their crafts and professions. How space is used, then, can transform it profoundly, and here the gendered use of space breaks down the modern concept of public and private that seems to turn around the home.⁹

After a while, however, the conversation turned to the fact that one regular member of the company was not there – Grasso the Woodcarver. Tellingly, the tale in part identifies Grasso, as many men were still identified in the fifteenth century, by his physical place in the city. He was not only labeled a skilled craftsman and a heavy young man of 28, he was identified by the location of his shop, "in the Piazza di San Giovanni" (172). That location was revealing. It suggested that he was an artisan of some stature, for his workshop occupied a central location – the Piazza di San Giovanni was the site of the Baptistry and stood before the cathedral. Already a Renaissance man would begin to know Grasso by the space his workshop occupied.

Although Grasso's friends, his space, and the compliments in the tale about his skill as an artisan served to confirm his importance – his place in the regime of *virtù* – his friends were about to reposition him radically. His rejection of dinner, upon reflection, was interpreted as a snub. Snubs may be a crucial trial for friendship in any culture, but the context of this snub begins to reveal something of the different flavor of male friendship in Renaissance Florence. The tale lets the cat out of the bag rather quietly, noting that this snub was particularly galling because his friends "were almost all of a higher rank and station" (172). Now *virtù* could overcome a degree of social disparity, but rank had its weight even in friendship – in fact one might argue that it was vital, for friendship implied support, and socially superior friends had patronlike qualities. But, of course, superior men (especially patrons) required a respect and consideration that made Grasso's refusal to attend dinner a serious matter indeed. Attendance marked in the quasi-public space of Pecori's dinner table Grasso's participation in the group's friendship, patronage,

honor, and *virtù*; his absence could be seen as marking a rejection of same – a most serious matter in the regime of *virtù*. The discourse of male friendship, in fact, was wide-ranging including a host of relationships central to the political and social world of Florence. Included was a spectrum of relationships that swung from the sexual, with both sodomy and the illicit world of prostitution often being organized around male friendship, on to male sociability and everyday support networks, on to work relationships, and to patronage; thus in the masculine world of Renaissance Florence it is not unusual to find a patronage component in friendship, just as it is not unusual to find a sexual one.

The response of Grasso's friends to his snub was one for which Florentines were famous: the *beffa*, a cruel trick or joke that dishonored the victim and, to a degree, restored the honor of those who had been dishonored. Interestingly, while truly great *beffa* like that played on Grasso had to demonstrate a maximum amount of ingenuity and *virtù*, they served to bind groups together and discipline male relationships as well – in sum, they served as key moments of the regime of *virtù*.¹⁰ And for our discussion it is suggestive that most *beffe*, like this one, turned on the clever use of the masculine spaces of the Renaissance city. Filippo Brunelleschi, the architect of the trick, suggested: "In revenge for his not coming this evening . . . we'll make him believe that he has become someone else" (173).¹¹ The plot was launched the next evening, when Brunelleschi visited Grasso in his shop as he had done "a thousand times before." This was not by accident, for artisans' shops were important spaces for male sociability; premodern work habits made for a radically different workplace. With Grasso's shop at the center of the city, friends and acquaintances moved in and out maintaining the networks that made the social, political, and economic world of Florence work – networks that for the most part were viewed within the framework of friendship and *virtù*. Grasso could in turn step out to lounge in the street before his shop and encounter passing friends, visit the shops of his compatriots, or even stroll on with comrades for a drink to the nearby taverns the Porco and the Malvagia (just a few paces from his shop in the warren of streets dominated by the palaces of the Adimari and Medici families) – for in many ways Renaissance Florence was a small, intimate space where friendship was constantly being demonstrated and vetted in its streets and shops.¹²

With a vision of work that saw work time and social time as integrated rather than distinct, Grasso would have been free to maintain his contacts largely because of that intimate space, which made it possible to sustain contacts traveling short distances on foot. One needs then to think of a workday that had the potential at least to be highly social, and of the shop again not

simply as a place of production. Or perhaps it would be better to think of the shop as a place that produced more than products. It produced identity (as noted earlier), and it helped to produce the networks, friendships, and contacts central to the male world of Florence. This was so much the case that shops could even take friendship to an erotic level, as Michael Rocke has pointed out in his work on homosexuality in Renaissance Florence: "Often it was the sociable bonds forged in the all-male environment of neighboring shops that provided both companionship and a supportive environment for sodomy." In fact, one of the areas of workshops heavily identified with this activity was the famed Ponte Vecchio, again right at the heart of the Renaissance city. There the butcher shop of the del Mazzante brothers was virtually a hotbed of such activities.¹³

So Brunelleschi visited Grasso in his shop as a friend ordinarily would, but the familiar security of this space and their friendship was quickly overturned. With the pretense that his mother had fallen ill unexpectedly, Brunelleschi used Grasso's offer of aid – an offer that *virtù* led him to expect – to hold Grasso in his shop waiting to hear if help was needed. Then Brunelleschi circled back to Grasso's home near the cathedral, just a short walk away. Knowing that Grasso still lived with his mother, who was away, Brunelleschi broke in and bolted the door behind him. Later when Grasso arrived home, finding the door bolted, he assumed that his mother had returned. But calling her to let him in, Brunelleschi, imitating Grasso's voice, responded, calling him Matteo, the name of a local wastrel. Brunelleschi's *beffa* had begun. He had taken Grasso's most secure place in Florence – his home – and his voice and was now using them to undermine Grasso himself. When Grasso insisted that he was Grasso, Brunelleschi, again imitating Grasso's voice, dismissed him saying he did not have time for jokes – a nice irony lost on Grasso, increasingly caught up in Brunelleschi's cruel joke.

The importance of place in all this is underlined by Grasso's thought process in the face of this spatial deconstruction of self. "What does this mean?" he asked himself. "That fellow *up there [in my house]* seems to be me, to hear him say that Filippo was in *his shop* . . . and his voice sounds just like mine. Am I losing my mind?" (175; italics mine). We might reply that he was not so much losing it as it was being stolen by Filippo, who was literally taking away the places by which Grasso thought himself in Renaissance Florence – his home and his shop. When Grasso stepped back into the street, another friend and conspirator, the sculptor Donatello, sauntered by as if by accident and remarked, "Good evening, Matteo, are you looking for Grasso? *He went into his house* a little while ago . . ." (175; italics mine),¹⁴ and continued on his way. Again we see the close familiarity of the city, but once more Donatello

was deconstructing it, informing him that he was Matteo and that the real Grasso was in his house.

Increasingly lost, Grasso decided to use the masculine culture of the spaces of Florence to relocate himself. "Startled and stunned . . . Grasso set off toward the Piazza di San Giovanni, saying to himself: 'I'll stay here until someone who knows me passes by and says who I am. . .'" (175).¹⁵ The Piazza di San Giovanni was the square of the Baptistery, the very center of Grasso's world, hard by his home and his shop. Walking through his familiar masculine world, Grasso should have quickly refound himself in his daily spaces encountering the friends and acquaintances that made him Grasso; but Brunelleschi's *beffa* was just taking shape, and the familiar streets suddenly turned mean when there appeared a group of officials from the Merchant's Court, who arrested Grasso as Matteo for his debts. Protests that he was not Matteo were ignored as a particularly inept, perhaps even deranged, attempt to avoid arrest. Hauled before a clerk of the court, he was registered as Matteo and thrown in jail. Fortunately for the plot, the other prisoners knew Grasso and Matteo only by reputation; thus, hearing him referred to as Matteo, they accepted him as Matteo.

Suggestively, now even the space of his city was conspiring against Grasso, for although men from all stations in life found themselves at one time or another in prison, especially debtors' prison, it was for men of Grasso's status a dishonorable space and hence relatively unfamiliar. As a result Grasso/Matteo was faced with a particularly difficult problem: In this alien space, how was he to find the friendship and support to refind himself and gain his release? He saw two options – accept his new identity and seek out the help of Matteo's family and friends, or insist that he was Grasso and use his old friends to prove it. The latter was more appealing to him – suggesting the strength of his inner conviction that he was Grasso. But again place conspired against him as he reasoned, "If I send word *home* to my mother, and Grasso is at *home* (for I heard him *there*), they'll make a laughingstock out of me" (178; italics mine). Ultimately the intimacy of Florence and the ties of friendship seemed to offer his only hope. He decided to stay by the window of the jail next morning until someone passed by who recognized him: The Merchant Court and its jail lay near the northeast corner of the Piazza della Signoria a place of heavy foot traffic, which augured well for his plan.

The *virtù* of the plotters, however, thwarted his hopes: In the morning another conspirator, the powerful Giovanni di Messer Francesco Rucellai, showed up at the jail. Rucellai was from a noted Florentine family, and his friendship with Grasso had strong overtones of patronage, as Grasso often had carried out commissions for him. Thus, when he saw a powerful friend and

patron like Rucellai glancing around, he had every reason to smile hopefully – he fully expected that the traditional alliances of friendship and power would reidentify him. Such hopes were quickly dashed, however, when Rucellai pretended not to know him and he was forced to conclude, “Giovanni Rucellai . . . didn’t recognize me – he who’s *always in my shop*. . . . It’s certain that I’m no longer Grasso and have become Matteo” (179; italics mine). Just as the social space of Grasso’s shop and his friendships were central in how he thought himself, now they had become crucial in how he was unthinking himself, becoming Matteo.

As Martines notes in his discussion of this tale, more telling yet is an apparent detail in the anxious self-examination that followed. Grasso worried that if he had lost his mind along with his identity – as seemed the case – he would be chased after and ridiculed by children in the streets of Florence. Such fears suggest that streets and public spaces were not only familiar stages to display male friendship and connectedness, but could also be cruel courts trying honor. Insults, threats, and merely dishonoring gestures were carefully noted and evaluated. Violence, for which Florence was famous in the Renaissance, was often the only acceptable response – even the psychological violence of a cruel *beffa*. But violence had to be carefully applied in a way that could be evaluated publicly within the masculine world of violence itself and within the context of family and group. And the price of violence or vendetta miscalculated was often escalating violence and the breaking of ties of friendship – a cruel spiral where those very ties that bound society together became what dissolved it.¹⁶ Thus the streets of Florence had a rather Manichaeian quality: either warm and familiar with the smiles of friends or cold, cruel, and physically dangerous for those who had lost honor and friendship. Grasso’s position was worse yet, as he saw all too clearly; for not only had he lost his friends and identity, he was losing his mind, which meant that even little children could dishonor him in the streets – ultimately, madness threatened his place in the regime of *virtù*. Notably, all this was thought through and understood within the context of the masculine spaces of the city.

Grasso, denied access to the spaces and connections of Florence, found that his day went from bad to worse. But finally Matteo’s brothers showed up to move the *beffa* on to its final phase. They had Grasso called over as Matteo and, when he accepted that identity, bawled him out for his foolish wasting of his wealth in gambling and evil living – the origin of Matteo’s debts that had led to his arrest. Significantly their complaints centered on the fact that he was no longer a youth, and they insisted that it was high time that he grew up and started living honorably. Honor and shame, maturity and immaturity,

responsibility and pleasure provide the positive and negative poles of their complaints – certainly a quotidian lament that explained the indebtedness of many a young Florentine. For another significant area of male friendship and sociability was the illicit world of the city that focused on drinking, gambling, and sex – the very world that Panormita celebrated. These three were closely associated in Renaissance Florence and a prominent feature of the center of the city where Grasso lived and worked – and where, as Matteo, he had supposedly fallen into debt and eventually jail.

The narrow warren of streets leading off from the Mercato Vecchio and surrounding the old Roman and medieval heart of the city was loaded with small-scale prostitution, taverns, baths, and inns that offered a fairly complete if largely illicit package of wine, women, gambling, and perhaps even song (as music was often associated with Renaissance prostitution). There one could find also a public brothel – set up by Florence's government to try to contain the dangers of prostitution and perhaps turn a profit as well. This zone and its immediately surrounding area contained a host of taverns including the Bertuccioni, Chiassolino, Fico, Malvagia, Panico, and Porco, names that in themselves virtually promised the whole program of the illicit world (respectively: the Monkey/Pussy/Ugly Whore, the Little Whorehouse/Little Confusion/Little Outhouse, the Fig/Cunt, the Wicked Woman, the Panic, and the Pig/Depraved).¹⁷ There, beyond drink, men could find prostitutes, both female and male, gambling, and apparently plenty of trouble to go along with male conviviality.¹⁸

Suggestively, however, Grasso/Matteo's new brothers bawled him out because he was no longer a youth, implying that maturity meant that he should no longer be frequenting this area of the city *for illicit pastimes*.¹⁹ Implicit in their complaint was a distinction between youthfulness and maturity that was pivotal, for at least ideally this illicit world at the heart of Florence turned on a specific period in the life course of males that stretched from the early teens to about thirty years of age. Occasionally referred to as adolescence in Renaissance texts, it is perhaps more appropriate to use the terminology used more regularly at the time for this age period, *gioventù*, in order to stress the fact that Renaissance *gioventù* was culturally constructed in ways that were decidedly different from modern adolescence. Most obviously it involved more years and, given shorter life expectancies, comprised a larger portion of one's life; but perhaps most significantly it was virtually entirely a masculine phenomenon. In Renaissance Florence women, especially upper-class women, ideally married in their early teens and entered virtually immediately into their adult world of maternity and domesticity. Males instead passed

a long *gioventù* that could stretch out to fifteen, even twenty years, a fact that both fascinated and troubled the Renaissance.

For our discussion, however, such young men, *gioveni*, were the ideal denizens of the dangerous spaces at the heart of Florence. Sex there was intertwined with a host of other activities attractive to this largely wayward youth culture, including gambling (not just with cards and dice, but also turning on general fisticuffs, cockfights, and other forms of microviolence, plus early forms of lottery and numbers scams), hard drinking, and cons of every type. Less noted but nonetheless important were the services that this world furnished for the perceived needs of such young men – love magic, magic to gain friends, cures for sexual disease, loans, and various schemes to help the young lighten the purses of their fathers to finance such pleasures.²⁰

Some have been unwilling to see the significance of (or even see) this world at the heart of Renaissance Florence, and to some extent their reservations are well taken. It clearly would be wrong to think of the heart of Renaissance Florence in terms of the red-light districts or degraded centers of many modern cities. At the simplest level the life of the city coursed through these same streets, and the illicit was not cut off from the everyday. In fact, across the Renaissance this world continuously spilled out from the center along commercial routes, and even beyond the gates of the city, at the same time that the government launched a series of failing initiatives to contain the illicit in specific areas or at least isolate it from the ceremonial and spiritual centers of urban life.²¹ In addition the strong disciplining forces of honor and shame had not yet been fully mobilized to isolate this world or the men, especially young men, who frequented it. Illicit masculine pleasures still had a place in the regime of *virtù*.

But having said that, we have merely said that the illicit world of Renaissance Florence is not to be confused with modern ideas of such spaces and cultures. That much is clear, but it does not mean we should ignore the fact that there was a formally illicit world at the heart of Renaissance cities like Florence, one largely created and maintained for male pleasure. Although women played a role in this world, it was theoretically at least merely as objects of male pleasure. Moreover, what crucially distinguished it from other forms of male pleasure was that those central building blocks of Renaissance society – the family and the church – were largely ignored there. Also, tellingly, social hierarchy broke down in this world. Gentlemen associated with lower-class women; males of the lower classes made love to males of the upper and vice versa; male groups formed and reformed around pleasures and vices rather than around issues of work or politics or more recognized forms

of power. In fact, it may well be that 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 and the social and cultural construction of national loyalties. Could it be that Panormita's celebration of Florence dedicated to Cosimo was intended also to play on such sentiments?

Clearly, however, this social mix at the heart of Florence often functioned to reinforce or even build masculine lines of friendship and camaraderie, especially for young men. At times those relationships involved even more; for as Rocke argued in *Forbidden Friendships*, in Florence male friendship had an important sexual dimension, and this too was intimately related to *gioventù*. In fact, Rocke contends that such sexual relations were largely confined to that period of life and that they were so common then that they were virtually a normal part of life – a point that is well taken.²² But it needs to be remembered that much of this activity was, in the eyes of the Church, sinful; in the eyes of contemporaries, formally illicit; and in the eyes of Florentine government, illegal as well. In fact, here we see how discourse and the practice of living often part ways. In grammar and language opposites do not go together; in everyday life they frequently do. Thus, the illicit world of Renaissance Florence shared the same spaces and in some ways reinforced and interacted with the city's licit world and culture.

Again this world of male friendship and sexuality was written across the city, especially its heart. The same central areas that hosted female prostitutes were frequented by males seeking partners for sodomy; in fact, female partners or male ones were apparently often viewed as interchangeable in the many taverns, inns, and houses of prostitution. Still, some areas in the city were more associated with sodomy, and young males who sought those particular pleasures knew where to find them. The via dei Pellicciai, running from the west side of the Mercato Vecchio south past the via Porta Rossa, for example, was a famous haunt at the end of the fifteenth century. And the two taverns most noted for sodomy – the Buco (near the Ponte Vecchio, in an alley that still bears its name) and the Sant'Andrea or del Lino (located behind the church of the same name, not far from the Mercato Vecchio and just east of the via dei Pellicciai) – were apparently not frequented by female prostitutes. Some, perhaps seeking a bit more privacy, abandoned the city center for the open spaces just beyond the walls. Finally, rather fittingly given our tale, Brunelleschi's dome itself became so noted for such activity that in the sixteenth century young males were banned from the area!²³

Across the Renaissance, it seems that older men's participation in the illicit world became progressively more questionable; I would suggest this was in

part due to the logic of the regime of *virtù*. For mature men the ideal was increasingly that *virtù* should dominate passion – which is not to argue that it did, but rather to suggest an important split was developing between the ideals of masculine maturity and of *gioventù*. Yet for young men this world may have been seen as offering an opportunity to build networks based on friendship – a hypothesis supported by fears expressed that the process could go wrong and that some contacts formed in the illicit world might be counterproductive. Friendship after all was fine up to a point, but one needed the *right* friends for success. Close ties based on sex and friendship to the right males could build the basis for a successful life; ties to the wrong individuals could spell disaster. This may help explain Rocke's interesting finding that some families actually encouraged their young son's sexual relationships with older men. When their partners were important, parents could hope that their children were in good hands and were building a network of friendship that would lead to success.²⁴

Be that as it may, it is suggestive that the characters of our tale are themselves either *gioveni* or just leaving that period behind. Brunelleschi, the master plotter, not yet the master architect, is in his early thirties. In the tale's retelling Grasso has become twenty-eight, although contemporary documentation suggests that he was actually closer to twenty-four in 1409.²⁵ Suggestively, the older males in the story seem much more the masters of *virtù*. They control the action with mature male rationality and power; they work the streets and institutions of the city masterfully. Grasso, in contrast, is still not beyond the passions of youth and thus is an easy mark. In this vision of the tale, Brunelleschi's evident *virtù* might be seen not as a premonition of his later artistic accomplishments but as a proof of his newly attained adult male status; thus, with his *beffa* he demonstrates for a Renaissance audience that he has mastered the regime of *virtù* – in a way, this is his masterwork to become an adult.

There may be a deeper level yet that has to some extent dropped out of this later retelling of the story. If Rocke is right in asserting that a very high proportion of Florentine males during *gioventù* participated in sodomy, often subsumed under the rubric of friendship, the close friendship of Brunelleschi and Grasso might be read in another way. In fact, this whole grouping of young friends so relaxed about status might be read differently. Could it be that the *virtù* of the members of the group that helped to explain their egalitarian friendships was a later addition to make the story work better, and that a more significant reason was the cross-class sexual attractions common within the illicit world of Florence? And could it be that Grasso, several years younger than his close friend Brunelleschi, was once his lover, reflecting the

classic age patterns of Florentine homoerotic relationships? In this interpretation both men had now grown too old for their relationship: Brunelleschi in his early thirties was ready for adult male status; Grasso in his twenties was ready for taking at the very least the active role in sex with other younger males or women. Could it be that this cruel joke motivated so thinly in this retelling masked a different original *beffa* that also turned on friendship – a shift from a sexually based youthful friendship between Grasso and Brunelleschi to a mature nonsexual relationship? Certainly in that context Grasso's emotional flight from the city and his old friend, and their eventual reestablishment of a relationship on other terms, make eminent sense.



WHATEVER THE HISTORY OF HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH BRUNELLESCHI, young Grasso languished in jail for the supposed sins of Matteo until his brothers returned after dark to free him. The rationale was that darkness would protect honor: The return of the prodigal son would go unnoticed in the mean streets of Florence. Thus, after nightfall they took Grasso/Matteo home; now his place was in the Oltr'Arno district just across the Ponte Vecchio, "near the church of Santa Felicita, at the beginning of the Costa San Giorgio" (186). Placed as Matteo, Grasso was virtually Matteo. Home at last he sat down to dinner with his brothers, almost as if the social moment of male kin eating together confirmed his new identity and the success of Brunelleschi's *beffa*. But, of course, his brothers were *not* kin, and they immediately betrayed him by slipping him a powerful sleeping potion. As he was dropping off, the last words he heard were a report of a conversation they claimed they had overheard walking through the Mercato Nuovo. Someone behind them had said, "Do you see that fellow who's lost his memory and forgotten who he is. . ." To which his friend had replied, "That's not the fellow, it's his brother" (192). The shame and dishonor of the mean streets of Florence were always at work, and it seemed that there would be no real rest for Grasso/Matteo. More accurately, in the imaginary streets of Brunelleschi's clever *beffa*, Grasso was being continually remade Matteo – but those streets only worked in Grasso's imagination because they mirrored the fact that exactly such masculine evaluation of honor and shame in the streets of Florence worked continuously in forming and disciplining men. There, without laws, without formal pronouncements or policing, men were formed and reformed by the regime of *virtù*.

Deeply drugged, the ex-Grasso was ready for the climax of his trials. Brunelleschi and six of the original group arrived, loaded their victim into a

hamper, and carried him back across the Arno to Grasso's home. There they put him in his own bed and placed his clothes where he normally left them – though, to complete their joke, they could not resist putting his feet where his head normally lay. Renaissance humor was fascinated by and heavily reliant on reversals; reversing their victim in perhaps the most private space he had, his bed, was one last trick too good to pass up. Then, “they took the key to his workshop. . . . went there, entered, and moved all the tools . . . turning the blades upside down, and the same with the handles of his hammers. . . . and they did this to all the tools that lent themselves to such reversing, and turned the whole workshop topsy turvy” (193). Thus in a way his most familiar spaces, bed and workshop, were reversed one last time.

The morning of the third day brought the resurrection of Grasso, and once again the places of Florence were so central that the tale speaks for itself: “awakening to the sound of the Angelus from Santa Maria del Fiore . . . he recognized the sound of the bell, and opening his eyes . . . realized that he was in his own house, and his heart was suddenly filled with great joy, for it seemed he had become Grasso again . . .” (193–4). In a walking city (like Renaissance Florence), without the roar of traffic, waking in the morning to the familiar local sounds of church bells and the familiar voices of passers-by and familiar shops opening, the city whispers in the sleeper's ear place and identity. Grasso's return to himself was marked by hearing his bells from his bed in his house in his city, and the tale evokes that once common measure of place and self perfectly to re-place Grasso.

The *beffa* was still not complete, however. First, finding everything reversed in his familiar spaces kindled doubts; then, Matteo's brothers arrived and, no longer recognizing him as Matteo, asked for their brother, who had disappeared; and finally, Brunelleschi and Donatello worked him over one last time in public, aided by the reappearance of the real Matteo. But Grasso, back in his places and recognized in the streets as himself, had used the spaces of Florence to become himself again. One last detail is worth noting: As Grasso left Brunelleschi and Donatello, Filippo brought his *beffa* full circle. The whole plot had been set in motion by a snub – Grasso refusing to dine with his friends; now Filippo turned to him and offered, “We must have supper together one evening . . .” (207). Friends had been rejected, the price had been paid, and now mockingly or seriously the circle had been completed with a new offer of dinner friendship.²⁶ Tellingly for the future, however, Grasso left without responding, and he soon learned that he had been the victim of his friends. With that realization came the cruel understanding that although he had not gone mad and had always really been Grasso, it really did not matter – the regime of *virtù* ruled. In the mean streets of Florence he had become

the infamous victim of a famous *beffa*, and that meant that not only had he been publicly dishonored by his friends, but that in the end even children would mock him in the streets. His worse fear had come true.

As all this turned on the spaces of Florence and their use by a masculine culture of friendship and honor – a change of space was a virtually necessary response. And that is exactly what Grasso chose: He sold his shop and left Florence, accepting the offer of a friend to go with him to serve the king of Hungary. Tellingly, as he was leaving the city, the tale confirmed one last time his worst fear: “Before mounting the horse [to leave], as he was walking through Florence . . . he happened to go by several places where he heard people talking about what had happened to him, and everyone was laughing and joking about it” (209).²⁷

Fortunately for Grasso escape from the mean streets of Florence made his fortune. Leaving behind his dishonor and the friends who dishonored him, Grasso’s skills made him a valued retainer of the king of Hungary, and that in turn made him a rich and noted craftsman who, many years later, could return to Florence and laugh with Brunelleschi about the cruel joke: In a way, what the regime of *virtù* had taken away, *virtù* had given back. In fact, on later visits Brunelleschi and Grasso often talked about how Grasso had experienced the *beffa*, and Manetti pauses to note that this was crucial for the tale’s richness, as “most of the funny things had happened, so to speak, in Grasso’s mind” (212). At one level that is true, of course: The internal workings of Grasso’s mind are developed in this tale as in few other Renaissance *novelle*. But it is interesting to note how intimately intertwined Grasso’s thoughts were with the spaces of his city Florence. Home, shop, streets; hearth, dining table, bed; Baptistery, cathedral, Mercato Vecchio, Mercato Nuovo; church bells, familiar sights and sounds – all were tools in Grasso’s thinking and important elements in the masculine world of Florence and its culture. Honor, friendship, and pleasure all played a role in a regime of *virtù* that truly ruled there, a rule that was deeply intertwined with the spaces of an intimate city and its familiar, mean streets.

MEN AND WOMEN

II. MEAN STREETS, FAMILIAR STREETS, OR THE FAT WOODCARVER AND THE MASCULINE SPACES OF RENAISSANCE FLORENCE

1. Quoted in Richard C. Trexler, "La Prostitution florentine au XV^e siècle: Patronages et clientèles," *Annales: Économies, sociétés, civilisations* 36 (1981): 983–1015, at 988–9. Given the dedication of this work to Cosimo de' Medici, it is interesting to note that it seems that Panormita has placed this whorehouse on the east side of the Mercato along the axis that runs from just to the west of the Baptistery following via della Macciana and eventually becoming Calimala. If that is the case, the visitor would pass through two warrenlike blocks of buildings dominated by Medici palaces and find it lying near the church of San Tommaso, a church where the Medici had had sole patronage rights from at least the late 1340s and that was their main church until the completion of San Lorenzo in the 1460s. Medici palaces were ubiquitous in the area; thus, in a way in celebrating this place of masculine pleasure at the heart of Florence, Panormita was celebrating also a place intimately associated with Cosimo and one of the city's most powerful families. For the small church of San Tommaso, see John T. Paoletti, "Cosimo de' Medici, Patronage, and the Church of San Tommaso in the Mercato Vecchio," *Pantheon* 58 (2000): 54–72. I would like to thank John Paoletti for this suggestion, and both him and Roger Crum for their thoughtful reading and comments on this essay.
2. On this, see Lauro Martines, *Power and Imagination: City-states in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Knopf, 1979). For a suggestive discussion of how one encounters a city, see Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), esp. 91–130.
3. Which is perhaps just another way of restating Joan Kelly's negative response to her question, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" in Kelly, *Women, History and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 19–50.
4. For an interesting look at similar issues from the perspective of artistic representations, see Patricia Simons, "Alert and Erect: Masculinity in Some Italian Renaissance Portraits of Fathers and Sons," in *Postures of Dominance and Submission in History*, ed. Richard C. Trexler (Binghamton, N.Y.: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1944), 163–75. In this chapter I use the term "regime" as a premodern substitute for Foucault's term "discipline." A *regime* is a group of discourses coupled with signs, gestures, and other nonverbal indicators, such as the spaces of a city, that serves to order, control, and discipline (in the narrow sense of the term) people. It seems more appropriate for the premodern era than "discipline," because a regime does not have the formal rules, methodology, or practitioners of modern disciplines, nor does it work in the same way – there is a modern discipline of psychology, but there was no formal premodern discipline of "princeology." I would suggest that there were a number of regimes in the premodern world beyond the obvious political ones that ordered, controlled, and disciplined the lives of people without formally existing as a discipline – one of the most significant being the Renaissance regime of *virtù*.
5. Lauro Martines, *An Italian Renaissance Sextet: Six Tales in Historical Context*, trans. Murtha Baca (New York: Marsilio, 1994), 171–241; the translation of the *novella* is

- on 171–212; Martines's analysis, 213–41. Given Martines's perceptive analysis and knowledge of Renaissance Florence, much of what follows is indebted to him: At best this essay uses his original insights and reading as the key to an exploration of the masculine culture and masculine spaces of Florence.
6. *The Life of Brunelleschi* by Antonio di Tuccio Manetti, ed. and intro. Howard Saalman, trans. Catherine Enggass (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1970). This edition also contains the Italian original. Interestingly, the manuscript of the life begins in the autograph manuscript immediately after the *novella* and seems a direct continuation of the former: "Girolamo [Benevieni], you wish to know who that Filippo was who played the practical joke you admire so much on il Grasso, the true account of which I related to you" (34).
 7. Manetti refers to this growth, emphasizing the superiority of his account and how the story had been passed down among some of the most important artists of the fifteenth century – a group he actually lists apparently to stress the artistic ambience of the tale. For the English translation I am following Martines, *Sextet*, 171–212, page references to which are given parenthetically in the text; see 212 for the list. For the Italian text I have used the edition published in *Prosatori volgari del Quattrocento*, ed. Claudio Varese (Milan/Naples: Riccardo Riccardi, 1955), 769–802.
 8. For Martines's social analysis of the group, see *Sextet*, 220–3.
 9. For an interesting discussion of similar issues, see Lauro Martines, "Séduction, espace familial et autorité dans la Renaissance italienne," *Annales: Histoire, sciences sociales* 53.2 (1998): 255–90, at 266–9.
 10. Here I am not suggesting that this *beffa* created a scapegoat that bound together the group. That might seem to be the case, but such a reading is a modern one that misses the nuanced way in which Renaissance men used the *beffa* to discipline their public lives. As will become clear here, the *beffa* is much more a part of a complex honor–shame dynamic; in this interpretation I am following Martines. The fascination with the *beffa* in Renaissance *novelle*, and especially Florentine *novelle*, is a testament not only to the cleverness that Florentine masculine culture appreciated so much, but also to a powerful and usually public tool that men used to discipline their relationships.
 11. It is interesting to note that, at the time this form of the tale was written down, Brunelleschi had become one of the heroes of a generation of great artists in Florence. But at the time it supposedly occurred in 1409, he was merely a promising young craftsman, primarily a goldsmith–sculptor, and actually at what might be seen as a low point in his career, having just failed to win the commission for the Baptistery doors. In fact, as Manetti notes in his biography, during this period Brunelleschi spent most of his time in Rome with his friend Donatello, studying antiquities to equip himself for his ongoing rivalry with Ghiberti. On this, see *Life of Brunelleschi*, 62 ff. And tellingly, when Manetti later relates Brunelleschi's cunning feat of building the dome for the cathedral – stressing his cleverness and ability to manipulate the officials overseeing the project, and tricking his opponents as well – he once again seems emblematic of the regime of *virtù*.
 12. On this intimate nature of the city, see David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, who estimate the population in 1427 as 37, 144 and see population as never much exceeding 40,000 across the century in *Tuscans and Their Families: A Study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 74, tab. 3.5.

Actually, such numbers misrepresent the size of the male population that mattered. A large proportion of the urban population comprised day laborers in the cloth industry, who did not really count in the eyes of Brunelleschi, Grasso, and their friends. If we consider the “meaningful” people they would actually be encountering in the shops and streets of their city, we would be hard pressed to reach a total of five thousand men. (For this figure, see 126, tab. 4.6.) And in this context one might argue that one of the primary problems in establishing a princely regime for the Medici in Florence was breaking that intimacy and establishing the distance necessary to maintain an ideology of superiority. The second half of the fifteenth century and the sixteenth century in many ways saw the restructuring of the city to fit just such needs. On this, see *Il potere e lo spazio: La scena del principe*, ed. Franco Borsi (Florence: Electa, 1980).

13. Michael Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 186, for the quote, and 186-7. Perhaps one of the most remarkable representations of this erotic context of the shop is the painting by Vasari, now in the Uffizi, that represents an older nude male working in his shop surrounded by nude apprentices, a painting whose fascinating mix of male power, sensuality, and eroticism might be seen as emblematic. It has been suggested that this painting represents Benevenuto Cellini and his workshop; as Cellini was actually prosecuted for a long-term sexual relationship with one of his shop assistants, the erotic context would be yet stronger if this were the case.
14. In 1409 Donatello was a good friend of Brunelleschi, in fact, sharing with him both a deep animosity to Ghiberti and a good deal of time in Rome studying antiquities, as noted earlier. Donatello had just finished his marble *David* and would work together with Brunelleschi on a failed project for a sculpture for the cathedral in 1412, involving an innovative use of lead sheathing over marble.
15. Here I do not mean to suggest that the piazzas of Florence were strictly masculine spaces. Clearly women, especially lower-class women, did not have the economic resources to be locked up at home, and they frequented these spaces as well. Nonetheless, women were largely extraneous to the masculine culture that Grasso was attempting to use to find himself. On this, see Martines, “Séduction,” esp. 266-75.
16. See my *Binding Passions: Tales of Magic, Marriage, and Power at the End of the Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), esp. 57-87.
17. Exact translations are difficult because, like many of the slang terms used in the illicit world of the Renaissance, these terms could be quite flexible depending on their contexts. On this, see Jean Toscan, *Le Carnaval du langage: Le Lexique érotique des poètes de l'équivoque de Burchiello à Marino (XV^e-XVII^e siècles)*, 4 vols. (Lille: Atelier de reproduction des thèses, Université de Lille, 1981 [Ph.D. diss., Université de Paris, 1978]).
18. On this, see *The Society of Renaissance Florence: A Documentary Study*, ed. Gene Brucker (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 183-204; Trexler, “Prostitution”; Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 151-61; and especially Maria Serena Mazzi, *Prostitutes e lenoni nella Firenze del Quattrocento* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1991), who gives a good account of this area and its vicissitudes across the fifteenth century, 249-92. Interestingly, given our tale, the palaces of the Brunelleschi family were also located nearby, at the north-west corner of the Mercato Vecchio.

19. Of course Grasso frequented this area of the city and probably daily. His home and shop were hard by this area, and as it was alive with shops, churches, guildhalls, and the economic life of the city center, both he and Matteo must have been frequently there; thus, my italics are meant to stress again that it was the *use* of these spaces that changed their meaning.
20. A favorite theme of Renaissance comedies was the intrigues of *gioveni*, often aided by clever servants, to gain money from their fathers to pay for their illicit adventures – a theme that reflects the financial difficulties of not gaining a patrimony until *gioventù* had passed. For a more legalistic discussion of this, see Thomas Kuehn, *Emancipation in Late Medieval Florence* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1982). For the artistic representation of this relationship, see Simons, “Alert and Erect,” 165–9.
21. Mazzi, *Prostitute*, 268–92, gives a detailed picture of these developments in Florence. For a more theoretical overview of these changes from a Venetian perspective, see my *Binding Passions*, 29–56.
22. Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 95–7 ff. Although Rocke’s statistics have been aggressively questioned, he presents compelling evidence that sodomy was perceived in Florence as a relatively normal practice for youths. In fact, I showed similar patterns with much the same age distinctions for males in Venice in my earlier book, *The Boundaries of Eros: Sex Crime and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); for a comparison, see there 121–5 and 160–3.
23. According to Rocke, in the period 1478–1502 accusations of sodomy concentrated on four main categories of place: public streets or open areas (28%), private homes (36%), workshops (15%), and taverns (15%). Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 153, and for the above, see 154–61.
24. Curiously Rocke, after laying out all the details of a subculture of sodomy in the city, argues that it did not exist in any way distinct from the more general illicit world of Florence. For his position, see *Forbidden Friendship*, 149 ff. and 191; for evidence to the contrary, see 64–8, 74–5, 126 ff., 162 ff., and 279 n. 190. But clearly, even at the level of seeing sexual relationships between males leading to friendships and networks of connections that will serve later in life for broader purposes, we are into a significantly different sexual dynamic and culture from that associated with prostitution.
25. Martines, *Sextet*, 218.
26. If we opt for the sexual reading suggested above, we might argue that the offer of dinner signaled the successful breaking of sexual intimacy, which now would be replaced by an adult friendship. Brunelleschi had proven himself an adult in the regime of *virtù*, dishonored his old friend, and now could reaccept him in a more mature relationship. In this reading the story becomes emblematic for the process of becoming an adult in Renaissance Florence.
27. The fear of being laughed at in the streets and treated as a madman, ironically and suggestively, is echoed in Manetti’s life of Brunelleschi, with Filippo himself being the victim. Manetti relates that in the early stages of Brunelleschi’s attempts to win the commission to build the dome of the Duomo, his plan was rejected as mad, and that Brunelleschi reported: “he was ashamed to go about Florence. He had the feeling that behind his back they [the people in the streets] were saying: look at that mad man who utters such nonsense.” *Life of Brunelleschi*, 68.