

SYMBOLISM AND DESIRE: THE MEANING OF HOMOEROTICISM IN DONATELLO'S BRONZE *DAVID*

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Donatello's bronze statue of David (Fig. 1) is one of the most puzzling artworks of the Italian Renaissance.¹ Established facts about its provenance are scarce—the first free-standing work in bronze produced since antiquity, we know that it was displayed in the courtyard of the Palazzo Medici, but we do not know who commissioned it or when.² The role of homosexual desire in the creation and interpretation of the work has been the subject of much scholarship in recent decades. In this paper, I engage extensively with scholarly debate surrounding the meaning of this enigmatic work, and argue in favour of a homoerotic interpretation. I begin by introducing the classic case for homoeroticism, alongside an alternative, secular-civic reading of the work's iconography. Next, I develop a close formal analysis in which the erotic dimension is brought to the fore. I then examine a possible synthesis of the political and homoerotic interpretations through the humanist iconography of tyrannicide, before concluding with a contextual discussion of homosexuality in Renaissance Florence. Donatello's *David* shows us how a Renaissance artist could incorporate homoeroticism into his work as one dimension of meaning among many; the visual language of desire, including homosexual desire, could coexist with other aesthetic modes. Our readings of this work and others must be attentive to this semiotic pluralism.

The first art historian to suggest a homoerotic interpretation of the *David*, in 1957, was Horst W. Janson. In a short but highly influential passage of his critical catalogue of Donatello's oeuvre, he presents an argument based on two premises.³ The first is that Donatello was himself homosexual. He cites a sixteenth century publication, a collection of *Facetiae* (vulgar jokes and stories) compiled in the 1470s by a member of the Medici court; Albert Wesselski has attributed it to

¹ Donatello, *David*, c. 1426–1455, bronze, 158 cm, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence.

² John Shearman, *Only Connect: Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 17.

³ Horst W. Janson, *The Sculpture of Donatello* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), 85.

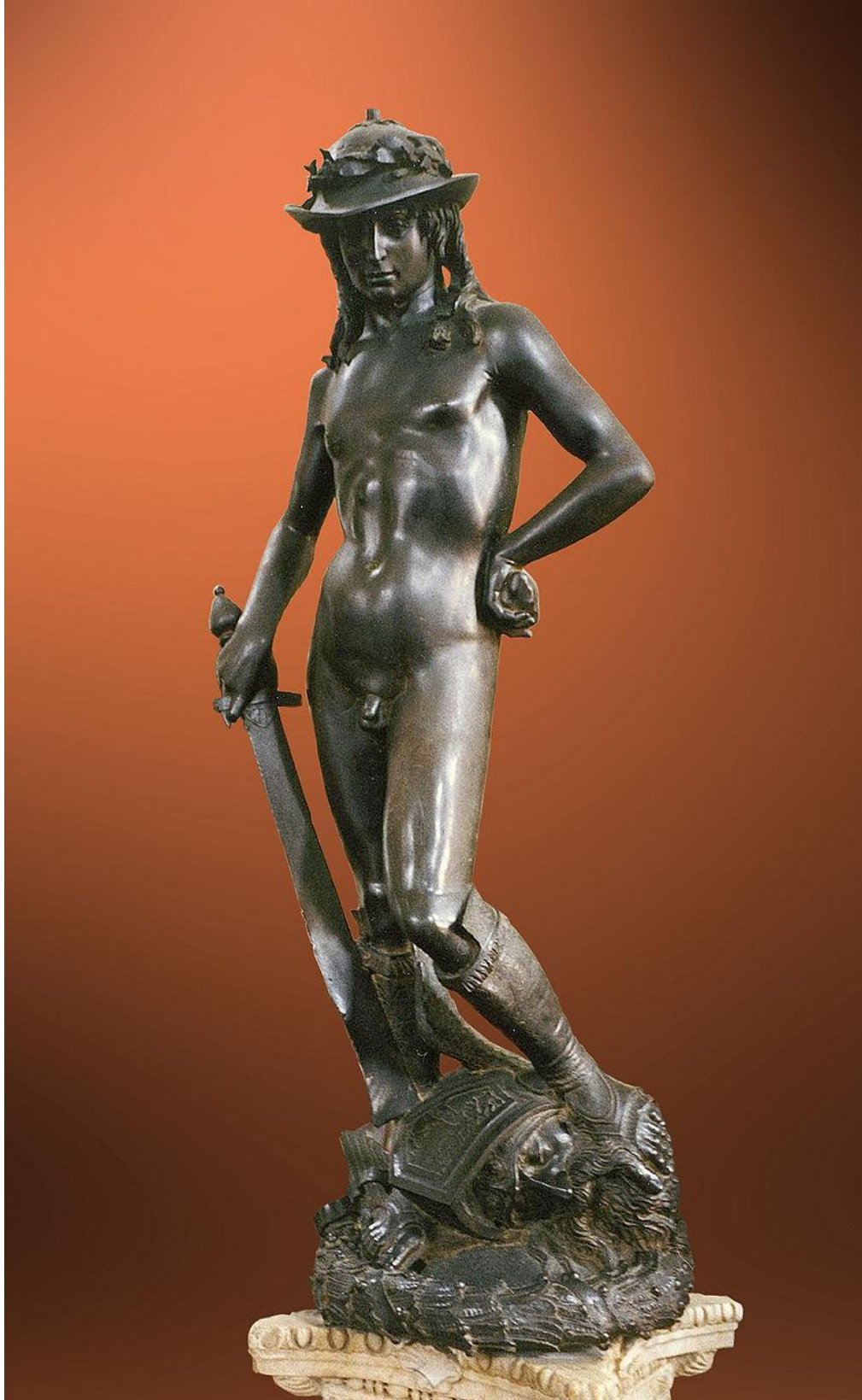


Fig. 1: Donatello. David. c. 1428-1455. Bronze, 158 cm. Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence.

the humanist poet Agnolo Ambrogini (known as Poliziano).⁴ Three anecdotes in this source, concerned with the artist's amorous pursuit of his beautiful apprentices, suggest strongly that Donatello was reputed to be a homosexual in his own time and in the circles in which he moved.⁵ The second premise, more firmly within the remit of the art historian, concerns the erotic character of the work itself. In a memorable turn of phrase, Janson describes Donatello's David as "*le beau garçon sans merci*," the beautiful, pitiless boy, "conscious only of his own sensuous beauty."⁶ For Janson, eroticism is writ large on the sculpture's body:

He is not the classical *ephebos* but the "beautiful apprentice"; not an ideal but an object of desire, strangely androgynous in its combination of sinewy angularity with feminine softness and fullness.⁷

On these bases Janson argues that the work really is an expression of the artist's own sexual desires. This theory has proved influential, especially against the background of change in the discipline as recent generations of art historians have worked to assert the place of sexuality as a legitimate object of scholarship in their field.⁸ In particular, it is his formal analysis that has guided most investigation into the erotic character of the work—with, as we shall see, some exceptions.

On the other hand, commentators who have opposed Janson's interpretation have tended to offer iconological readings of the work. At the beginning of the Renaissance, the figure of David, an important character from the Old Testament, already had a great deal of religious significance. Some of the most compelling iconological analyses of Donatello's rendition, however, emphasize the work's secular and civic iconography. These interpretations highlight David's role as tyrant-slayer. Christine M. Sperling has discovered a manuscript attesting that in the fifteenth century the *David* was inscribed with the following message:

The victor is whoever defends the fatherland. God crushes the wrath of an enormous foe.
Behold! a boy overcame a great tyrant. Conquer, o citizens!⁹

Sperling locates these words in the broader political context of early quattrocento Florence. The Republic had recently emerged from a series of wars in which it defended its autonomy from the expansionist and autocratic power of the duchy of Milan, which under the Visconti was militarily the strongest state on the peninsula. In the study of Florentine art produced against the backdrop of this conflict, David's brave defence of his people against a superior force, has been widely interpreted as

⁴ Albert Wesselski, *Angelo Polizianos Tagebuch* (Jena: E. Diederichs, 1929). The work was originally published in 1548.

⁵ Janson, *Sculpture of Donatello*, 85.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁸ See, for example, Alyce Mahon, *Eroticism and Art* (Oxford: Oxford History of Art, 2007); Edward-Lilly Smith, *Sexuality in Western Art*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991).

⁹ Christine M. Sperling, "Donatello's Bronze 'David' and the Demands of Medici Politics," *The Burlington Magazine* 134 (1992): 218–219.

personifying “Florence’s dedication to [...] republican liberty.”¹⁰ Sperling argues that Donatello’s sculpture was commissioned by the Medici in or shortly after 1428, in honour of the favourable peace they had negotiated with the aggressors in that year.¹¹ This early dating is not uncontroversial; regardless of the specifics, however, political readings of the *David* enjoy wide support.¹²

The *David*, after all, is not a work of pornography; a strictly erotic reading would be inadequate. By the same token, however, I suggest that interpretations that downplay or dismiss the sexual dimension of the piece likewise fail to be, in John Shearman’s words, “consistent with everything the bronze itself can tell us.”¹³ The work has certain formal attributes for which de-eroticising iconological analyses struggle to account. To illuminate these characteristics, we might compare Donatello’s *David* to that of one of his near contemporaries. Verrocchio’s *David* (Fig. 2), completed circa 1474, is in many ways strikingly similar to our sculpture in its medium, its elegant *contrapposto*, the youthfulness of its model, and its placement of Goliath’s head beneath the boy’s feet.¹⁴ Representing the same figure in similar contexts, the two works share (or nearly share) an iconography.¹⁵ But no one would be likely to describe Verrocchio’s piece as *sensuous*, and still less *erotic*. By focusing on the peculiar attributes that distinguish Donatello’s *David* from his more conventional double, we can develop a formal analysis that more closely attends to the artwork’s unique characteristics. Such an analysis, I suggest, gives support to the homoerotic interpretation.

The most strikingly odd feature of Donatello’s sculpture is its attire—the clothes the boy lacks as well as those he wears. The modern viewer’s attention is immediately drawn to David’s elaborate hat. As Janson points out, it is a conventional piece of fifteenth-century traveller’s headgear that would not have struck contemporary viewers as out of the ordinary or particularly flamboyant.¹⁶ It would certainly have been unusual, however, to wear such a hat with military boots *and nothing else*. The hat and boots call our attention to the fact that he is unclothed; David, as John W. Dixon cleverly describes him, is not “nude” but “naked.”¹⁷ Peter Weller takes this as an argument against the erotic interpretation, juxtaposing this “angular adolescent” with the beauty of the classical nude.¹⁸ I would like to examine this idea more closely, in the context of broader discussions on the meaning of these two concepts of nudity and nakedness.

The nude, of course, is one of the central themes in Western art. Correspondingly, it has produced a wide art-historical literature. In modern times, Kenneth Clark’s 1953 work on the subject

¹⁰ Andrew Butterfield, “New Evidence for the Iconography of David in Quattrocento Florence,” *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 6 (1995): 116. For a particularly influential voice in propagating this reading, cf. Frederick Hartt, “Art and Freedom in Quattrocento Florence,” in *Essays in Memory of Karl Lehmann*, ed. L. Sandler (New York: New York University Press, 1964), 114-131.

¹¹ Sperling, “The Demands of Medici Politics,” 222.

¹² For the controversy around the dating of the work, see Janson, *Sculpture of Donatello*, 81. The matter has not been resolved since his time.

¹³ Shearman, *Only Connect*, 17.

¹⁴ Andrea del Verrocchio, *David*, c. 1473-1475, bronze, 125 cm, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence.

¹⁵ For a detailed iconological discussion of the relationship between sculptural representations of David in Florentine culture, see Butterfield, “The Iconography of David.”

¹⁶ Janson, *Sculpture of Donatello*, 84.

¹⁷ John W. Dixon, “The Drama of Donatello’s David: Re-examination of an ‘Enigma,’” *Gazette des beaux-arts* 92 (1979): 6.

¹⁸ Peter Weller, “A Reassessment in Historiography and Gender: Donatello’s Bronze ‘David’ in the Twenty-First Century,” *Artibus et Historiae* 33 (2012): 56.



Fig. 2: Verrocchio, Andrea del. *David*. Circa 1473–1475. Bronze, 125 cm. Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence.

has been especially influential. He conceives of nudity as an ideal state of being, and nakedness as a worldly one:

To be naked is to be deprived of our clothes, and the word implies some of the embarrassment most of us feel in that condition. The word 'nude', on the other hand, carries, in educated usage, no uncomfortable overtone. The vague image it projects into the mind is not of a huddled and defenceless body, but of a balanced, prosperous, and confident body: the body re-formed.¹⁹

It is to Clark's critiques, however, that we should turn to make sense of the nude/naked distinction in the case of the *David*—especially to feminist critics such as Leslie Bostrom and Marlene Malik, who detect something sinister in this uncoupling of idealised and material forms. For them, the idea of the nude serves to mask the basic reality of the studio, in which the artist is clothed and the model is unclothed.²⁰ Part of what is masked is sexual desire, which normally comes into play when one person disrobes in front of another; through Clark's *re-forming* of the body, through its reduction to pure forms, this element can be suppressed, or side-stepped altogether. Nudity, in other words, is a conceptual device for de-eroticising nakedness.

In applying these concepts to the work at hand, we are again well served by a comparative analysis, with yet another Florentine David: that of Michelangelo (Fig. 3).²¹ Executed in marble between 1501 and 1504, this work could without exaggeration be termed the exemplary Renaissance nude. Clark describes it as “the visual form of Michelangelo's aspirations”; by this he means that it fully embodies the artist's ideals of classical purity and perfection.²² The *David's* heroic stature, its distant gaze, its mathematical proportioning and anatomical precision, all render it remote from the viewer, situating it in “the realm of nonattachment.”²³ Not so Donatello's sculpture. The figure's conspicuous nakedness grounds the work in the here-and-now; we encounter not an idealised form but a living, breathing youth captured in bronze. The suppression of eroticism, characteristic of the nude, does not take place. This is the fault in Dixon and Weller's argument: it is precisely *because* the *David* is “neither beautiful nor classical” that its erotic dimension can express itself.²⁴ Our attention may be called to the artist's gaze upon his model, the “privileged and peculiar” dynamic described by Bostrom and Malik.²⁵ We may recall Donatello's reputation for desiring the young men working in his studio, one of whom may plausibly have been the model for the piece; in light of this, Janson's characterisation of David as the “beautiful apprentice” is quite convincing.²⁶ A formal reading of the sculpture's attire thus leads us, persuasively in my view, to a homoerotic interpretation of the work.

Another feature of the piece that defies iconological interpretation is the pair of wings rising from Goliath's helmet (Fig. 4). These peculiar feathers, not metal ornaments but “live wings” which

¹⁹ Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), 3.

²⁰ Leslie Bostrom and Marlene Malik, “Reviewing the Nude,” *Art Journal* 58 (1999): 43.

²¹ Michelangelo, *David*, c. 1501–1504, marble, 517 cm, Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence.

²² Clark, *The Nude*, 48–63.

²³ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁴ Weller, “A Reassessment,” 56.

²⁵ Bostrom and Malik, “Reviewing the Nude,” 43.

²⁶ Janson, *Sculpture of Donatello*, 85.



Fig. 3: Michelangelo. David. Circa 1501–1504. Marble, 517 cm. Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence.



Fig. 4: Donatello. *David*. Detail: leg with feathers.

seem to be quite out of place in the context of the giant's armor, draw the viewer's gaze as they sweep up the inside of the boy's right leg.²⁷ The sensual quality of this gesture, the invitation to imagine the tactile sensation of soft barbs against sensitive flesh, is very clear. This artistic choice, in Laurie Schneider's view, "must have been erotic in intent."²⁸ She extends this argument further, perhaps, than it ought to be extended, linking Goliath's head to the apotropaic winged phalluses of Roman antiquity via a Freudian correlation between decapitation and castration.²⁹ The logic is tendentious, and depends in part on a conception of homosexuality that strikes the twenty-first century reader as outmoded. We do not, however, have to indulge in such psychoanalytic flights of fancy in order to recognise the erotic physicality of that wing. There is even something tender in the way this extension of the slain man's body caresses the boy's thigh; we may go so far as to wonder whether this David, like Judith (Donatello's statue of whom was also displayed in the Medici palace), has vanquished his enemy by seducing him.³⁰

The meaning of a work of art is necessary plural; this is especially true of one as ambiguous as the *David*. In the quattrocento as in our time, Francis Ames-Lewis has suggested, Donatello's piece "was in all probability able to stimulate a variety of interpretations."³¹ A formalistic, homoerotic reading of the work is not inherently incompatible with any of the possible iconological readings. In fact, meaningful (if somewhat obscure) connections can be drawn between the work's iconography and its homoeroticism.

We may look for this connection in fifteenth-century humanist scholarship. David, as we have seen, functioned as a powerful symbol of the Florentine Republic's resistance to foreign tyranny. Schneider identifies a possible connection to same-sex desire via the writings of Plato. The *Symposium* is a philosophical dialogue on the subject of *eros*, romantic or sexual love. In Pausanias' speech we find extensive praise of love between men, and in particular between mature men and youths.³² For Pausanias, the virtue of this form of desire has political ramifications—like philosophy and physical exercise, it engenders "great thoughts" and "strong friendships" and is thus inimical to tyranny.³³ He illustrates his point through the example of Aristogeiton and Harmodius, two lovers celebrated as tyrannicides for their attempt on the life of the Athenian dictator Hippias.³⁴ Sarah Blake McHam considers these two figures to be of particular importance to the iconography of Donatello's work. The anti-tyrannical inscription on the base of the *David* links it, in her view, to the famous classical Athenian sculptures of the two assassins known as the *Tyrannicides* (Fig. 5), which are similarly inscribed.³⁵ The Medici court could plausibly have known about the sculpture group from

²⁷ Ibid., 84.

²⁸ Laurie Schneider, "Donatello's Bronze David," *The Art Bulletin* 55 (1973): 216.

²⁹ Laurie Schneider, "Donatello and Caravaggio: The Iconography of Decapitation," *American Imago* 33 (1976): 79–83.

³⁰ For a comparative discussion of these two works, see Sarah Blake McHam, "Donatello's Bronze *David* and *Judith* as Metaphors of Medici Rule in Florence," *Art Bulletin* 83 (2001): 32–47.

³¹ Francis Ames-Lewis, "Donatello's Bronze David and the Palazzo Medici Courtyard," *Renaissance Studies* 3 (1989): 238.

³² Plato, *The Dialogues of Plato, Volume II: The Symposium*, trans. R. E. Allen (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 120–125.

³³ Plato, *The Symposium*, 122.

³⁴ Ibid., 122.

³⁵ Kritios and Nesiotes, *Tyrannicides*, c. 477 BCE, marble (Roman copy after Greek bronze), Museo Nazionale, Naples; McHam, "Donatello's Bronze *David* and *Judith*," 37.



Fig. 5: Kritios and Nesiotes. *Tyrannicides*. Circa 477 BCE. Marble (Roman copy after Greek bronze).
Museo Nazionale, Naples.

descriptions in classical texts.³⁶ As Aristogeiton and Harmodius overthrew Hippias (and as Florence defeated Milan), David slew Goliath; perhaps Donatello took from these classical exemplars, and represented in bronze, the notion that homosexual desire and the defence of civic liberty are connected.

Dixon objects to this line of reasoning, pointing out that the first Latin translation of Plato, that of Marsilio Ficino, was not completed until 1468, well after the creation of the statue.³⁷ I am unconvinced by this objection. Two manuscripts of Plato's complete writings are attested to have arrived in Florence in 1424.³⁸ Even if Donatello could not read these texts himself, he moved in humanist circles in which classical ideas had great currency. It is entirely plausible that he was exposed to Platonist philosophy through discussions with scholars at the Medici court. We can even imagine that, if Donatello indeed had a reputation as a homosexual among his learned contemporaries (the attribution of the collection of *facetiae* referenced by Janson to Poliziano suggests he was), he might have been specifically introduced by his friends to those key homophile passages of the *Symposium* in which he could have been expected to take a particular interest—though this, of course, is only speculation.

Against the force of formal evidence, some scholars opposed to the homoerotic interpretation have advanced a contextual argument based on the premise that such a reading would have been considered “simply indecorous” to the artist's presumably homophobic contemporaries.³⁹ However, a closer examination of intellectual and social life in Renaissance Florence undermines the credibility of this claim. Expressions of homoerotic desire were not, in fact, an unthinkable response to works of art for Renaissance intellectuals. In a poem of circa 1550, Antonio Francesco Grazzini praises one of Donatello's most famous works: his *San Giorgio*, displayed in a niche outside the Orsanmichele building (Fig. 6).⁴⁰ Grazzini calls the sculpture his “beautiful Ganymede,” declaring it preferable to a live boyfriend—no less charming, but unmarred by inconstancy, temper, and jealousy.⁴¹ There is no reason to suppose that such a response should not have been possible for an observer of the quattrocento—even if no poet expressed such sentiments as directly as Grazzini. Indeed, explicitly homoerotic literature was published in Tuscany in Donatello's lifetime. The humanist poet Antonio degli Beccadelli's *Hermaphroditus*, published in 1426, describes sex between men explicitly; it was dedicated to Cosimo de Medici.⁴² Homosexual desire had its place in elite culture in the Florentine Renaissance.

³⁶ Among these texts is Pliny's *Natural History*, which describes the *Tyrannicides* as one of the first bronze statues; perhaps Donatello saw a connection between these first classical bronzes and his own, the first of modern times. Cited in McHam, “Donatello's Bronze *David* and *Judith*,” 38.

³⁷ Dixon, “The Drama of Donatello's *David*,” 10.

³⁸ R. R. Bolgar, *The Classical Heritage and its Beneficiaries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 483.

³⁹ Robert Williams, “‘Virtus Perfecitur’: On the Meaning of Donatello's Bronze ‘David,’” *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 53 (2009): 217. See, for example, Christopher Fulton, “The Boy Stripped Bare by His Elders: Art and Adolescence in Renaissance Florence,” *Art Journal* 56 (1997): 35.

⁴⁰ Donatello, *San Giorgio*, c. 1415–1417, marble, 209 cm, Orsanmichele, Florence; Lex Hermans, “Going Local: Three Sixteenth-Century Florentine Views on Donatello's St. George,” in *The Transformation of Vernacular Expression in Early Modern Arts*, eds. Joost Keizer and Todd Richardson (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 113.

⁴¹ Antonio Francesco Grazzini, “Capitolo in Lode della Statua di San Giorgio di Mano di Donatello a Orsanmichele in Firenze,” in *Le Rime Burlesche ... di Anton Francesco Grazzini*, ed. Carlo Verzone (Florence: 1882), 526–529.

⁴² Antonio Beccadelli, *Hermaphroditus*, trans. Eugene O'Connor (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2001).



Fig. 6: Donatello. *San Giorgio*. Circa 1415–1417. Marble, 209 cm. Orsanmichele, Florence.

More broadly, detractors overlook Florence's contemporary reputation as a "modern Sodom."⁴³ Michael Rocke has established that homosexual relations were pervasive in quattrocento Florence.⁴⁴ One statistic is particularly indicative: in the seventy-year period between 1432 and 1502, of a population of 40,000, the city judiciary accused 17,000 people of sodomy—a significant number of Florentine men in the later quattrocento were thus incriminated for homosexual activities.⁴⁵ Though it was persecuted, homosexuality clearly played an important role in Florentine culture; it is unreasonable to claim that these dynamics had no impact on high art.

To ask *if* homoeroticism was present in the artistic culture of the Italian Renaissance is to begin our scholarship with the wrong question. Same-sex desire exists in all societies; the task of the art historian is to investigate *how* it expresses itself in art. Donatello's *David* offers us an answer to this question. Confidently homoerotic, the work blends sexuality with a complex program of political iconography. The piece demonstrates that, for Renaissance artists and patrons, homoeroticism could function as one aspect of a work's meaning among many. That he enabled such a slight and introspective figure to express so much is testament to Donatello's genius.

⁴³ Wesselski, *Angelo Polizianos Tagebuch*, xxxi f.

⁴⁴ Michael Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 4–5.

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