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The Many Sides of the Beloved:
Symbolism and Significance of David and Ganymede in Italian Renaissance Art

There is no shortage of homoerotic imagery in Italian art of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. With the rise of Neo-Platonism came renewed interest in all things Greek, and thus a renewed recognition of the love that could exist between men. Yet the atmosphere was not truly favorable for active homosexuals during the Renaissance; most Italian cities had at least sporadically enforced sodomy laws, and the Church frowned as much as always on the practice of homosexuality. Under these conditions, homoerotic themes and subjects were often couched in more ambiguous contexts, symbolized by particular characters or situations. In this paper, I intend to discuss two symbols of the beloved youth (*eromenos*) of Greek tradition: Ganymede (Zeus' cupbearer in Greek mythology) and David (in his incarnation as the slayer of Goliath). Both of these characters appear repeatedly in Renaissance works, and are notable for their intense beauty and sensuality. They represent the *eromenos* in strikingly different, yet wholly realistic ways. For my purposes, I will focus particularly on the works of Donatello and Michelangelo, two Florentine artists of the highest order, as they not only display some of the finest in Renaissance art, but also contribute important elements to later Davids and Ganymedes.

The tradition of Ganymede as a symbol of homosexual desire or activity is as old as the myth itself. Ganymede appears for the first time in the *Iliad* of Homer in the eighth century B.C.E. He is described as "the most beautiful youth in the world," who

"because of his good looks was kidnapped by the gods to be cupbearer to Zeus" (Fone 16). Though sexual desire is not actually identified as a part of the relationship between Zeus and Ganymede, it was argued, even in ancient Greece, that the emphasis on the boy's beauty rendered that desire implicit, and that clearly the boy would serve in capacities besides that of cupbearer. Later the passage was used by Plato to justify Socrates' love for boys, and the name "Ganymede" became a term for a boy who engaged in homosexual acts (16). Virgil (in the *Aeneid*) and Ovid (in *Metamorphoses*) both make mention of Ganymede, with Ovid remarking that in him the god had found something he "would rather have been than what he was" (10:56-7, Fone 69). Throughout classical times, Ganymede was much represented as a homoerotic object in art and writing, and with the resurgence of classicism at the start of the Renaissance, he found his way again into creative works.

For David, it is more difficult to mark a clear homoerotic history in art. Historically, before the Renaissance, he was represented in his capacity as the king of Israel after Saul and the herald of the coming of Jesus, or as a shepherd in the fields with his flock. Not until Donatello was he represented as the beautiful youth who slew Goliath, the form in which he is most eroticized and therefore open to homoerotic interpretation. However, inherent in the life of David, there is a homosexual precedent: the story of his love for Jonathan, son of Saul, which is used by gay rights activists even today to counter readings of the Bible as anti-homosexual. The Bible tells us that David loved Jonathan "as his own soul," and that Jonathan's love for David "[passed] the love of women" (qtd. in Fone 10). The jury is still out on whether or not their relationship was

actually sexual or merely intensely emotionally intimate, but either way, the story establishes a certain place for David in the ranks of men who love men.

The change in the depiction of David and the reappearance of Ganymede can be at least partially explained by the nature of the Renaissance itself. James Saslow describes it as a rebirth "of Greek and Roman literature, art, philosophy, and science, and more broadly, of a thirst for secular and empirical knowledge" (*Pictures* 79). To look at classical works is to see an acceptance of eroticism in general, and homoeroticism in particular, that was mostly covered up in the provincial Christian society of the centuries before the Renaissance. Particularly in Florence, there emerged a lively homosexual subculture, which apparently thrived despite the best efforts of the Officers of the Night, a court created in 1432 especially to prosecute sodomites (83). As far away as Zurich, the verb "*florenzen*" was used to describe sodomitical behavior, "the vice of Florence" (83).

There was a specific character to male homosexuality in Florence, a code of honor that closely resembled the Greek ideals of *paiderastia*. The legal distinction was made between the "active" and "passive" participants in sodomy, and much more of a stigma was attached to the person who "willingly suffered the said crime to be inflicted upon him" (Rocke 89). Michael Rocke describes the form of Florentine homosexual relations as predominantly pederastic, occurring between an older man and a boy who was usually between the ages of thirteen and eighteen (95-6). In these sorts of relationships, the man was almost always the active partner—men who took the passive role were much more harshly treated than anyone else under the laws of the time (103). Only youths in this social hierarchy were really allowed to be the passive partner, and a little leeway was

granted to those around the age of twenty, who often played both roles for a short time before permanently assuming the more "masculine" part in sexual intercourse.(citation?)

Within this small segment of society, there was much variety in the character of relationships. Rocke describes them as stretching "from rape to prostitution, from casual encounters to affairs that could last for years" (161-2). Sexual violence was not unknown in Florence, though it is not necessarily easy to find documentation on, and often boys were coerced into relations with the men they worked for, given the prevalence of adolescent labor (163). The classic story concerning masters and apprentices is that of a father who brought his son to Michelangelo, touting the boy's bedroom ability as well as his artistic talent. Michelangelo responded with scorn, saying he would not wish to deprive the father of his son's talents by taking the boy on (recounted in Saslow, *Ganymede* 49). Not all boys felt the system so harshly as those who were forced into the service of older men. Some enjoyed the gifts often given them by their lovers, some the measure of control they could exert over men who were really fond of them. One of Leonardo's assistants, a boy nicknamed "Salai," was kept on by the artist for twenty-five years despite his being a "thief, liar, pighead, [and] glutton" (Saslow, *Pictures* 89).

Donatello, Saslow posits, was likely working on his bronze *David* at the time of the institution of the Officers of the Night (*Pictures* 83). Whether or not we believe this, the statue—completed sometime before 1469—is certainly a daring undertaking and one of great importance to the history of art, being "the first freestanding life-size nude male since Roman monuments" (83). The *David* is not, it must be said, precisely classical in form. He is too young, not one of the commanding, god-like figures of Greek and Roman sculpture but very much a boy. As H. W. Janson says, he is the "'beautiful

apprentice' . . . strangely androgynous in its combination of sinewy angularity and feminine softness and fullness" (85). The reason *David* appears to echo the classics is more psychological, in that his body is more expressive than his face, giving him the vague inaccessibility of Greek or Roman art (85).

David becomes a sexual symbol in probably much the same way an apprentice would. Although he is not immediately remarkable for his strength, he is very beautiful, and apparently unaware of his beauty. His easy contraposto imbues him with a quiet confidence, and his slightly awkward grip on his sword makes him at once boyish and dangerous, as if we could not already discern his dangerousness from the head of Goliath between his legs. The head itself is one particularly sexualizing element in the work, the feather from Goliath's helmet stretching upward along the boy's inner thigh. Saslow reminds us of the relationship of feathers to Ganymede and his eagle, and saying that "metaphorically, Goliath, like [Zeus] and Donatello, has 'lost his head' over a handsome youth" (*Pictures* 83). Even David's downward gaze implies a kind of demureness that was apparently much-desired in boys who were to become the *eromenos* of men. Antonio Rocco in his defense of sodomy, *L'Alcibiade fanciullo a scola*, describes the "coy rebuffs [of the teacher Philotimus by his pupil] which but kindle lust and add spice to wantonness" (qtd. in Fone 154). By not directly addressing us with his gaze, David makes himself even more a sexual object, wholly different from Donatello's marble *David* of 1409.

The marble version of *David* was one of Donatello's earliest finished works, and where the bronze looks like a delectable apprentice, the marble seems a haughty young nobleman. Obviously, he is clothed, but that is certainly not the most striking difference

between the two. The marble *David* lifts his chin and looks straight ahead, as if he is having his portrait painted after his triumph over the Philistine. He is, in a way, just as inaccessible as the bronze, but in this case the feeling is conveyed by the stiffness of his body rather than any element of his expression. While the line of the fabric running along his right leg invites us upward, we are thwarted by the modesty of his dress. He has no real relationship with the head of Goliath at his feet either. It faces outward and looks as if it might simply have been placed in front of him, like an element of still life. Though the marble *David* is quite beautiful, he has none of the sensual power of the bronze.

Though the evidence is as apocryphal as much else in the Renaissance, we can be fairly sure that Donatello was deeply attached to his apprentices, at least emotionally. A collection of *Facetaie* dating from the 1470s supplies us with anecdotes concerning the artist and his boys. Apparently, when one of his disciples ran off to Ferrara, Donatello was so distraught that he had Cosimo de'Medici send word to the Count of Ferrara, telling him that the boy's master intended to go there and kill him. The Count gave his permission, but when Donatello encountered the wayward youth, he was so overjoyed that he did nothing but laugh at the boy (recounted in Janson 85). If we are to take this story as true (and Janson sees a number of reasons why we should) it places Donatello firmly in the homosexual set.

There is, these days, very little question attached to the issue of Michelangelo's sexuality. We have many of his letters and poems, as well as his artwork and accounts of him from art historians and others. Most interesting, perhaps, and almost certainly most revealing, are his letters and poems to Tommaso de'Cavalieri, a Roman nobleman some

thirty years his junior, to whom his *Rape of Ganymede* drawing was sent. The artist describes himself in one poem to Tommaso as "an armed cavalier's prisoner" and his love in another is a "violent burning" which melts the heart (qtd. in Fone 147). The conceit of love as flight, inherent to the Ganymede myth, enters into Michelangelo's poetry as well. "Love stirs and wakes us, and feathers our wings," he says, and how can we help but think of Zeus taking the form of the eagle to abduct his beloved (147)? Michelangelo continues on to say that only the love of men is so uplifting, for the love of women "draws [one] down to earth" (148). This reveals the misogynistic undertones common in Renaissance homoerotic expression. Even Ganymede, drawn up to be cupbearer to Zeus, was replacing a (theoretically inferior) girl: Hebe, the favorite of Hera.

Michelangelo's *Rape of Ganymede* itself is interesting even without observing its history. Though the final drawing is now lost, we have what is apparently an earlier version. In it, Ganymede hangs in the grip of Zeus the eagle, a heavily muscled adolescent with an oddly babyish face and a mass of light-colored curls. Though his body is twisted in the eagle's grasp, Ganymede's expression is calm and his arms rest across its back and left wing. His right hand droops against the eagle's wing in a pose reminiscent of the Sistine Chapel Adam in *The Creation of Adam* twenty-five years earlier. Ganymede has submitted totally to the authority of his captor. The proximity of the two figures may imply another sort of submission as well. Saslow points out the difference between Michelangelo's positioning of the figures and others of the previous century, which Saslow describes as "boy dangling below bird" (*Ganymede* 39). The earlier Ganymede is usually clothed, with a clear space between himself and an eagle "who grasps him gingerly . . . in his talons" (39). In both aspects, Michelangelo's

drawing breaks the mold. His eagle grips Ganymede's legs firmly, spreading them and offering us an even fuller view of the boy's genitals and a teasing implication of what may be occurring behind. If we look at the sexual implications of the drawing, it is easy interpret Ganymede's strangely peaceful expression as the ecstasy of complete submission.

Michelangelo's *David*, carved in the first decade of the sixteenth century, represents the polar opposite of submission. He is on the verge of adulthood, like Michelangelo himself at the time of the statue's creation, preparing to make the leap from beloved to lover. Shown in the moment before he flings his stone at Goliath, he is intent and commanding. No longer is David Donatello's slim, beautiful boy, but a muscular youth, much closer to the ideals of classical proportion. His oversized head, hands, and feet merely add to our sense of his power, the weight of his body. Every muscle is outlined by tension, and we can see the tendons in his hands and neck straining as he prepares for battle. The sheer physicality of the statue is what makes this *David* just as sexually charged as Donatello's, the immediacy of flesh, muscle, and bone. Unlike most, if not all, figures of his time, Michelangelo's David even has pubic hair.

The influence of Donatello and Michelangelo can be seen in a number of works on these subjects from later years. Donatello's eroticization of David opened the way for later artists like Verrocchio, who characterizes David once again as a pretty, desirable boy. The nudity of the bronze *David* contributed to a new influx of nude male figures, as well, including those of Michelangelo. Michelangelo's nearly obsessive love for the male body led him to create such statues as the *Bacchus* of 1497. Bacchus, like Donatello's *David*, does not represent an ideal form but one appropriate to his station, his

essentially well-proportioned body slightly softened by wine and gaiety. Behind him, a mischievous little satyr nibbles at his handful of grapes, wearing an expression described by Saslow as "lascivious" (*Pictures* 96). Even more erotically charged is his *Dying Slave*, made for the tomb of Pope Julius II, who seems, like Ganymede, to be luxuriating in captivity.

The repercussions of Michelangelo's *Rape of Ganymede* can be even more directly traced. Besides a version of Michelangelo's original, we have numerous contemporary copies. There are drawings, like the one in the Royal Collection at Windsor, which is faithful to the original nearly line-for-line; and there are engravings like that of Achille Bocchi, who reverses the swing of the eagle's head, but is clearly working from Michelangelo's design (Saslow, *Ganymede* 19, 25). Battista Franco's *Allegory of the Battle of Montemurlo*, painted in 1555, contains an exact copy of Michelangelo's *Ganymede*, apparently representing the rising of a soul into heaven, a common Christianized reading of the myth (166-7). Though eventually the attributes of Ganymede changed, for a number of years, Michelangelo's was an important inspiration to other artists.

Although they come from very different sources, David and Ganymede serve an interestingly similar iconographic function. Both are youths with a great deal of seductive charm, particularly in a homosexual context. David, as portrayed by both Donatello and Michelangelo, is a conqueror, overthrowing an older man with his beauty. We should not take Saslow's comment about Goliath's "losing his head" too lightly as that is truly what David accomplishes. Because of the feeling he arouses in other men, he can get his way, just as certain boys did in Florence at the time. Ganymede, on the other

hand, reinforces the existing power dynamic between young and old. He is taken by an older man and belongs fully to him. Though it may seem paradoxical that both of these characters could exist in the limited context of Renaissance Florence, they surely did. History tells us both of men who were conquered by vibrant Davids, and boys made as passive as Ganymede. And, at least in art, their beauty survives to enthrall and serve countless new generations.

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