The Boy Stripped Bare by His Elders
Art and Adolescence in Renaissance Florence

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In the milieu of fifteenth-century Florence depictions of adolescent males were self-consciously employed in the training and socialization of youth. What makes the heuristic art of this period especially intriguing, and even paradoxical, is its frequent homoeortization of the young male subject. Here an effort is made to explain the reasons why this homoerotic element appeared in Florentine portrayals of adolescent males and how it may have worked on a quattrocento audience. By paying heed to the social foundations for these images, one discovers that the artistic treatment of youth, instead of proclaiming a liberation from social strictures, served as an instrument in the enforcement and reproduction of patriarchal authority.

"Boys will be men"—or so one might subtitle Ghirlandaio's double portrait (fig. 1) of a dignified man of affairs and his dreamy-eyed child. Ostensibly an image of the Florentine merchant Francesco Sassetti with his second son, Teodoro, whose names appear in an inscription at the top of the image,¹ the painting shows the father sitting with magisterial aplomb as the paterfamilias: strong, majestic, impassive, and possessed of the virtues of gravisitas and manly nobility that are endlessly extolled in the humanistic literature of the period. The boy, in pointed contrast, is a rather insubstantial creature and portrayed as a dependent: physically slight, even frail, his clothing and adornments deriving from his father's largesse. At an immature stage of physical development, he leans for support against the grown man's side, his gaze expressing awe and reverence for his elder while also appealing for paternal recognition. But, conspicuously, the boy's affections are not returned. The male parent remains the silent bulwark of the family and a distant idol for the youth's admiration; psychologically remote, the father is cut off from his son's entreaties. How is one to understand these disturbing inequalities portrayed in Ghirlandaio's painting? What is the nature of the emotional passivity of the elder, the anxious fixation of his son?

One may begin by considering the social status of adult men in quattrocento Florence.² To prepare themselves to assume the responsibilities of heading a family unit, males from this social environment customarily postponed their marriage and sired children only after they had achieved a measure of status in the community.³ The resultant gaps in age contributed to psychological rifts between husbands and their wives and between fathers and their children. In the special case of the father-son relationship, the division caused by the discrepancy in age was exacerbated by prevalent mores and patterns of social interaction. Boys were easily intimidated by fathers who adhered to the moral principles of gravity and self-control. The
The ethic of the Florentine merchant inhibited the display of affection and undermined strivings for emotional contact. Additionally, fathers of the mercantile elite took the business of rearing their male progeny with deadly seriousness. They aspired to raise dutiful and responsible heirs who would perpetuate the estate and augment the family’s honor, and, to these ends, a male child’s upbringing and education tended to be extremely strict and highly regulated. Florentine youth were not allowed to develop according to their innate tendencies or desires; rather, their conduct and actions were closely supervised by the controlling hand of fathers and their appointed surrogates. With no role in business or politics, excluded from adult organizations, and though sexually potent or at least incipiently so and as yet unmarried, male adolescents composed a marginalized population within quattrocento Florence, estranged in the indeterminate social space between the spheres of maternal care and adult male enterprise. For once a boy began to show the capacity to distinguish between virtue and vice, at around the age of seven, he left the care of his mother, “il sceno domestico,” in the words of Matteo Palmieri, for moral training and education under his father’s supervision. Throughout the difficult period of adolescence, while boys were required to leave behind feminine attitudes associated with the domestic realm, they were yet withheld the privileges and dignity reserved for grown men. In an effort to lay claim on the benefits of adulthood, youths often clashed with their fathers over economic resources and symbols of authority, thus tingeing the father-son relationship with an element of competition that occasionally erupted in envy, suspicion, and even open hostility. Sons resented their subordination and fathers feared betrayal. Francesco Sassetti, the very one purportedly shown with his son in the double portrait by Ghirlandaio, accused youth of harboring malevolent intentions toward their fathers: “A man wants to have sons. But five times out of six they become his enemies, desiring their father’s death so that they can be free . . . abandoning those for whom they should [be willing to] die a thousand deaths.” Chafing under the yoke of stern paternal rule, young men were pressed to rebel, either through acts of outright disobedience or in insolent displays of arrogance and prodigality. Although few works of art directly address this facet of Renaissance life, one or two images of puerile misconduct do exist, among them a painted birth salver in the Palazzo Davanzati showing adolescents engaged in some riotous game of slap-boxing beneath the shadow of patrician homes, and the theme of wayward youth is constantly bemoaned by fifteenth-century social commentators, who warn of the dangers of the burgeoning adolescent problem.

In an effort to abate the threats represented by obstreperous youth, the adult community instituted social mechanisms for taming the independent wills of their sons. Adolescent confraternities and informal secular brigades channeled the energies of young men into the city’s ritual life; ecclesiastical schools and private humanist tutors inculcated Christian values and a deep respect for elders. Associative groups for young men are depicted in many works of art from the period, including Luca della Robbia’s cantoria reliefs for the cathedral, showing boys enrolled in an ecclesiastical choir, and Benozzo Gozzoli’s Cavalcade of the Magi, which is replete with portraits from a youth confraternity.

The popularity of bust-length sculptures of boys, such as Antonio Rossellino’s Young St. John the Baptist (fig. 2), probably arose from a desire on the part of private citizens to place images of sacralized children before the eyes of their offspring. The tender head of St. John betrays no appetite for petulance or folly but is imbued with sweetness and the chaste motives that were promulgated by humanist writers and ecclesiastical instructors. John is one of the protector saints of the Florentine Republic, and so his image is often encountered in Tuscan Renaissance art. However, whereas the trecento preferred images of the adult St. John, quattrocento patrons required images of the Giovannino. The image of a youthful St. John could of course speak more directly to adolescents and thus could be employed more effectually as an instrument of edification and social control. But by the same token, the Giovannino was pleasing to the adult population as an embodiment of the ideals they wished to inculcate in their own flesh and blood.

Whereas the vast majority of quattrocento artistic
depictions of male youth were not primarily intended to service moral training in a strict sense, nor directed in any purposive way to an adolescent audience, it is patent that even generalized images of youth in diverse secular and religious scenes tend to sustain those pedagogical and moral values that were promoted by humanists and embraced by the city's fathers. There evidently existed a strong desire in the adult population to view portrayals of idealized male youths. This does seem to be a curious phenomenon, and an explanation for it may lie in the particular way that this imagery appealed to the adult audience. Representations of youth could produce an inspiring effect on an adolescent audience. But one must also recognize that by giving visual form to the social concept of idealized youth, and by creating an artistic image of a perfected adolescent who would make a worthy heir, a trustworthy citizen, and who as an adult could lead the city into a future of material and spiritual well-being, works of art depicting young men honored Florence as a whole, its moral codes, and its aspirations. The city's youth represented the hope for the future, and because so much was invested in their training, their conduct and demeanor reflected the city's moral condition. In this way images that might have particular meaning to young viewers as models for proper behavior could also carry special significance for adults. Inscribed within these works of art is an image of Florence's moral-political identity as well as an ideal of dutiful youth.

Such idealized depictions of youth obscure the troubling reality of collusive, self-satisfying adolescents in tension with the patriarchal order. One characteristic type of image that completely effaces the difficult issues concerning youth presents a solitary figure stripped of his clothing and undertaking some form of self-sacrifice. Isolated from all corrupting influences—especially those of his unregenerate peers—the portrayed subject dutifully accepts a prescribed fate while exhibiting the most meritorious conduct. This formula is beautifully exemplified by a small predella panel from Domenico Veneziano's St. Lucy Altarpiece (fig. 3) that depicts St. John the Baptist foregoing the trappings of social life for a commitment to spiritual service. By discarding vainglorious robes, John cleanses himself of the lusty habits and pomp associated with adolescence, and, not yet clad in the rough hair-skin cloak that hangs loose across his shoulder, he stands momentarily unclothed. Thus shorn of youthful excesses, John makes no claims to status or property, and in his utter nakedness he has nothing to conceal. Stripped bare by the elders who commissioned the painting, the youth is shown undefended and fully subject to paternal control.

Other youthful saints are portrayed like John, denuded and chastised, among them the frequently depicted St. Sebastian. Medieval and trecento images of Sebastian present him as a mature, bearded man, but in the quattrocento he is transformed into a handsome youth. Antonio del Pollaiuolo's altarpiece in London (fig. 4) shows Sebastian raised on a tall post to become the target for six adult bow-
men. Stripped almost entirely bare, his low-slung loincloth only calls attention to the genital area and svelte physique. He is isolated in horrific torment, and yet he suppresses the urge to resist. Bearing his sufferings with grace and stoicism, he raises his eyes upward toward his heavenly Father whose will he has dutifully obeyed even at the cost of his own destruction.

Sebastian's glance is reminiscent of the beseeching look that Teodoro Sassetti directs toward the image of his biological parent in Ghirlandaio's double portrait. Each boy submits to his elder's compelling directives and yearns for some sign of approval. Although one painting shows a religious scene in which a youth serves the divinity and the other a secular portrait of a boy and his natural parent, the analogy drawn here between these depicted relationships is not merely fortuitous. Marsilio Ficino stated that in the eyes of a child the male parent should appear as a god, because he provides his son “life, nourishment, and commands.” Configured in paintings and sculptures of saintly adolescents stripped and bowed before the divinity, one may perceive reflections of the familial relationship (distilled and idealized) between a Florentine boy and his father: an “earthly god,” as Ficino describes, to whom a child owes reverence arising from a “fearful love . . . composed of shame and obedience.”

The most celebrated of quattrocento adolescents is of course Donatello’s bronze David (fig. 5). Inspired in its pose by ancient statuary, the figure’s open stance, bony angularity, and soft musculature nonetheless distinguish it from known classical prototypes. The David is discernibly not an all’antica artistic form transmuted into a religious subject, as is sometimes argued; the naturalistic figure is...
instead a common juvenile stripped bare, with all his adoles-
cent attributes intact, and in this aspect the bronze boy
would have appeared to the quattrocento audience as a
contemporaneous Florentine dressed, or undressed as the
case may be, in the guise of a biblical hero.

The image of David is an age-old symbol of the Flo-
rentine Republic, and there can be no doubt that specific
political associations were brought into play when the
Medici family exhibited the statue in the courtyard of their
private palace. But David also stands as a traditional
examplum of virtue, signifying the triumph of humility over
luxury and lust; this moral value of the personage was cer-
tainly united with the political reference expressed in
Donatello’s work. The statue is both politically engaging
and morally uplifting, and, indeed as has already been sug-
gested, the full political weight of images of youth like this
one is enhanced because the heroic figures are presented as
ideal youths.

The artist has rendered David as a lanky and some-
what withdrawn boy who in his combat with Goliath has
exercised a precocious masculine power. Without reveling
in his newly found potency, the youth relaxes in a soft con-
trapposto, his head demurely lowered, exhibiting the
restraint and reticence expected of Florentine adolescents.
David has given service to his community and his elders,
and now that the heroic moment has passed, he reassumes
the attitude of a self-effacing dependent.

A widely publicized theory has put forward the sug-
gestion that Donatello’s statue exhibits—in words until
recently passed each semester to thousands of undergradu-
ate students through Frederick Hartt’s textbook on Renais-
sance art—a “lascivious content” which—the textbook
continues—“may reveal aspects of Donatello’s own char-
acter,” thereby implying that the sculpture is expressly
sexual and quite possibly a confession of the artist’s closet-
ed homosexuality. Whatever a modern viewer may wish
to see within the image, there can be little doubt that nei-
ther Donatello nor his Medici patrons intended to convey
an overtly homosexual message. Beyond the fact that no
reliable evidence attests one way or the other to Donatello’s
sexual preferences, the very idea that a full-figured bronze
proclaiming homosexual convictions would be commis-
sioned by the city’s most exalted citizen and then installed
at the epicenter of his familial and social life defies all that
is known about public attitudes of the period. By no means
did the elite of Renaissance Florence openly encourage
homosexual styles of life. Though homosexuality appears
to have been quite common in the quattrocento, it was
unequivocally condemned by the city’s officialdom. Legis-
lation made sodomy illegal and harshly punishable, and
moralists such as Alberti and preachers such as Bernardi-
no da Siena railed against any sign of homosexual behav-
or. Under these conditions, it would simply be unthinkable for a prominent Florentine to place in the
midst of his family home a large statue proclaiming homo-
sexual desires. On the other hand, it must be stressed that
these observations certainly do not mean that the David
carries no erotic force. It is self-evident that the nude fig-
ure, so beautifully revealing of bodily charms, elicits a
homoerotic response. The question is, in what terms was
this response framed so as to be compatible with social
prohibitions and widely held standards of moral conduct,
especially as they pertained to young men, and how did
this response work on the minds of the statue’s beholders?

One may begin by suggesting that whereas Donatel-
lo’s David was owned by a grown man—presumably Cosi-

FIG. 5 Donatello, David, ca. 1453, bronze, 63 3/16 inches. Museo Nazionale
del Bargello, Florence.
mo (il Vecchio) de’ Medici, even though it is not document-
ed within the Medici Palace until 1469, four years after his
death—and whereas it was intended primarily for an adult
audience (as were almost all major works of art from this
period), it yet meaningfully addresses the character of
youth. Like the images of religious subjects already men-
tioned, the David embodies prescriptive ideals for the
younger generation and would have been admired by ado-
lescents as well as their elders. One may further suppose
that even if the statue did not actually succeed in eliciting
admiration from a youthful audience and inspiring them to
moral behavior, it nevertheless embodies a prevailing con-
cept of well-trained youth. One might therefore ask, what
response was the homoerotic element of the sculpture
designed to provoke in the minds of young Florentines of
the mid-quattrocento?

Certain modern theories of childhood psychology
may be of value in addressing this question of response.
According to Jacques Lacan’s concept of the mirror stage,
the formation of an individual’s self-image is rooted in the
infant’s recognition of his or her own reflection in a mirror,
a process by which the child perceives that he or she is an
objective entity like all the other things in the world.
Through this initial infantile self-recognition, Lacan
argues, all later ego identifications are prefigured; mean-
ing, that even as the child matures, it is by projecting a
self-image onto others that he or she develops self-aware-
ness and a model for the kind of person he or she would
like to become.17

Taking Lacan as a starting point, one can imagine how
a naturalistic sculpture of a bared youth, reflecting in utmost
detail the physical likeness of its adolescent spectators,
could serve a function similar to that of the mirror in the for-
mation of the infant’s ego identity. As an essentially reflective
image, it might be suggested that the sensual charms of the
bronze David were most likely not intended to arouse erotic
desires in the genital or anaclitic sense—given the moral
tenor of the Renaissance, it is quite improbable that quattro-
cento spectators were meant to enjoy the subject in any
imaginative carnal encounter—rather, David’s physical
beauty may have been developed and exposed to stimulate
in the mind of the viewer a basic empathy for the portrayed
subject.18 In the specular recognition of his self within the
form of a bronze boy who appears self-absorbed, sensually
aware, and gentle and beautiful in movement, the adolescent
viewer becomes more keenly attuned to his own thoughts,
senses, and physical attributes.

The social instrumentality of images of adolescents
like the David proceeds from an ambivalent relationship
arising between the spectator and the portrayed figure.
Designed and crafted as an accurate reflection of youth’s
physical form, the figure is at the same time an ideal of
physical beauty, bodily integrity, and moral virtue. When
the adolescent viewer is drawn into an affectively charged
dialogue with the reflective image, he becomes enamored
of a particularized model of physical and moral perfection.
The desire triggered by the statue is, then, narcissistic, as
the spectator comes to adore a likeness of himself—a like-

ness that is, however, made beautiful and elegant, that
exhibits virtuous humility, and that undertakes praisewor-
thy action in the service of the fatherland. Through this
narcissistic attachment to the portrayed figure, the adoles-
cent formulates an ideal image of his own self and seeks to
satisfy his longing by becoming more like the work of art.
Of course, because this ideal image is developed through
the encounter with a work of art, it is by necessity fictional.
Self-identity fashioned through this process is thus orient-
ed toward a contrived ideal: it is built on a fictional image
of youth promoted by the city’s patriarchy and devised
through the agency of painters and sculptors.

Fifteenth-century Italians were alert to the role of
psychological projection in forming a self-image, and ped-
agogues of the time explicitly advised that these processes
be closely supervised and controlled. According to Gio-
vanni Dominici’s treatise On the Education of Children, a
mother should see to it that images of child saints are made
visible to her young: "pictures . . . in which your child . . .
may take delight . . . Jesus nursing, sleeping in his moth-
er's lap or standing courteously before her . . . So let the
child see himself mirrored in the Holy Baptist clothed in
camel's skin." (emphasis mine)19 The influential quattro-
cento educator Pier Paolo Vergerio recommends that boys
should contemplate their own reflection in a mirror while
constructing a mental image of the kind of person they
would like to be. Vergerio even suggests that a similar
operation might take place before a painting or sculpture of
an admirable historical figure.20

The inspiring effect of boys looking at boys is reen-
acted in many modern-day environments. As a young stu-
dent, each morning as I entered the front door of my day
school in Cleveland, Ohio, I came face to face with the
image of my bronzed twin: a near reflection of my self (fig. 6).
Clad in a toga, the youth holds articles that are emblemat-
ic of manual training and academic instruction. But espe-
cially noteworthy is the sparseness of the dress. The skirt is
drawn high on the leg and most of the chest is bared. This
is not simply an image of an industrious, corn-fed, mid-
western youth, it is a boy who has been laid nearly nude for
the eyes of his fellows. The adolescent spectator is directed
to admire the virtues exemplified by the figure while pro-
jecting his own self-image onto the model. I believe that
Donatello's David and other contemporaneous images of
stripped adolescents commanded a similar response. Just
as they were designed as inspirational figures calling
young men to seek an identification with biblical exempla,
so they also admonished adult viewers to rear their chil-
dren in the image of boy-heroes and thrilled them with a
portrayal of perfected Florentine youth who would fulfill
the city's millenarian dreams.

The ideal of well-tutored youth is again reflected in a
bronze portrait bust in the Bargello Museum (fig. 7). The
sculpture offers a bare-chested adolescent who carries on
his bosom a cameo relief related to a passage in Plato’s
Phaedrus, in which the image of winged genii driving pairs
of horses is discussed as a symbol of the soul.21 The mad-
ness of carnal desire is likened to the raging horses and the
genii to divine inspiration, which tames love and drives the
soul to higher levels of enlightenment. In association with
the medallion, the portrait represents an adolescent whose
libido has been tamed under the whip of self-discipline and
voluntary sublimation. The themes expressed in
images of youthful saints and biblical heroes are here
reworked in the symbolic language of humanistic educa-
tion.22 Although the bust seems to represent its subject
with due fidelity to natural appearance, it also preserves
his youthful image as the product of the diligent training of
humanistic instructors in his father's employ. He is denud-
ed like his saintly brothers, made docile and obedient;
stripped bare of youth's idolatries, he carries only the
badge of humanistic discipline.

As the fifteenth century progressed, adolescents
became increasingly channeled into organized ritual activ-
ities. Gathered into corporate groups, the city's youth par-
ticipated in ever larger numbers in festivities, pageants,
jousts, and miracle plays, so that by the 1470s, the youth
cohort had emerged as a major element in public life.23
The spectacle of the city's youth engaging in ritual celebra-
tions and parading through the urban landscape could only
have pleased the adult population, which was granted a
contrived view of a disciplined and morally regenerate ado-
lescent community. It must have been uplifting to see the
future of the city assembled before their very eyes and dis-
playing those values that they, the parents of Florence, had
worked to instill into their progeny. The prominence that
young men had gained in the city's ritual life and the ideal
image that they presented in public ceremonies are alluded
to in several Madonna paintings by Botticelli, including the
resplendent Madonna of the Magnificat (fig. 8), in which
Mary and the Christ Child are encircled by juveniles—
unhaloed and unwinged—who sing and pray as if involved
in a pious festivity.

When the city was calm and life flowed in its regular
patterns, the youth cohort would exert itself only in
planned festivals and celebratory activities, but in
moments of political turmoil it could be unbridled to take
decisive action. Impetuous and aggressive, adolescents
were among the first to take up arms in the defense of one
cause or another and hotly to pursue enemies of the regime, sometimes with extreme violence.24 Behind the tranquil facade of divinely inspired youth, so lovingly recalled by Botticelli, was a newly emergent social power to be reckoned with. Quick to mobilize, idealistic, emotional, and zealous, the youth of Florence awaited its charismatic leader.

Swayed by the promises and flatterings of the Dominican preacher Fra Girolamo Savonarola, in the final decade of the century young men rallied under the banner of religious orthodoxy.25 The friar exhorted the boys along much the same lines as had their former instructors. He stressed unsullied purity, pious devotion, and submission to authority. The critical distinction is that he transformed the city’s youth into an organ of militant religiosity. Their festive assemblies were now arranged with the strictest discipline: rows of boys clad uniformly in white robes marched through the streets in perfect rank and file, and they terrorized their fellows and the adult community, pouncing on the slightest show of vice and proclaiming that a new spiritual age was descending on Florence. For a brief moment, the youth of the city found respite from overbearing parental supervision, though this loosening of the chains came only through the exaggerated enactment of well-worn ideals. By taking their moral instruction to its logical if extreme conclusion, young men discovered a social power that previously had been held out of reach. The mass assemblies, gang activities, and spectacles of the Savonarolan youth cohort marked a moment of narcissistic fulfillment and ecstasy, as young men appeared to have become united with their ideal image and to have attained the illusory mastery and self-sufficiency made visible to them in depictions of exemplary heroes.

At first the behavior of Savonarola’s young following was applauded by the city’s elders, for they perceived at the outset that the pious actions of the youth cohort could effect the salvation of the entire community. They indulged the rabid evangelism of their sons because it seemed to actualize the ideal of youth that had been constructed over several decades, and because it appeared to manifest a millenarian prophecy about the destiny of the Florentine polity.26 However, by 1498 the strictures of the Dominican and the intimidating enforcements of his young followers had become intolerable. Older adolescents grew nostalgic
for the more festive period under the Medici, while the adult population could no longer bear Savonarola’s excessive injunctions. Isolated with his boys and uncompromising followers, the preacher was at last overwhelmed by the many forces arrayed against him.

For the adolescent population, Savonarola’s fall was an unrecoverable setback. The new processional order of the post-Savonarolan period is marked by the relative unimportance of youth. Not only did the friar’s citywide organization of boys disappear, and with it their moral policing, but boys lost their central role in communal rituals. It seems also that at this time the ideal image of youth that had been patiently built up during the quattrocento was likewise abandoned.

When, in 1501, Michelangelo was asked to furnish a large-scale public monument, he offered, not a sanctified ephebe, but a giant of a man, virile and muscular, passionate and determined (fig. 9). The marble David came to symbolize the Republic’s unified will, its mature pride and potency. No longer a delicate boy stripped and ruled by his elders, the colossus is an idol of masculinity and fierce independence. Whereas Donatello’s reticent boy-hero lowers his head in humility and self-contemplation, the predatory glance of Michelangelo’s combatant flashes outward on his adversary; his body flexes with atavistic vitality and the self-confident power of a mature individual. The ideal image of the soulful and spiritualized adolescent has been dispelled, and the boy has grown up to become a man.

This paper has attempted to show how images of adolescence in fifteenth-century Florence are highly particularized. They are determined by a set of very specific social values related to the training of young males and informed by the political ideals of the city. (Although the specific configuration of values outlined here is unique to the Florentine situation, the instrumental use of art in the socialization of youth is not an isolated phenomenon but is very much at issue in later periods and in our own times, thus inviting further inquiry into a wider problematic.) This essay has also suggested that the homoerotic element, far from contravening established codes of deportment, is integrated into the edifying function of the imagery. Lastly, it has been seen that the artistic treatment of youth is not fixed and inviolable within this epoch. There is a history to the genre that is subject to gradual development and precipitous change, and that represents a site for social conflict and decision.

Notes
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1. Federico Zeri, with the assistance of Elizabeth E. Gardner, Italian Paintings: A Catalogue of the Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Florentine School (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1971), 44–46, pl. 78. The identity of the sitter is subject to doubt, as the inscription is not of the same period as the painting. Although the face of the father is largely repainted, he was always shown frontally, as revealed through infrared reflectography (Keith Christiansen, private communication). The figure of the boy is in good condition. For a general discussion of portraits showing men with their sons, see Patricia Simons, “Alert and Erect: Masculinity in Some Italian Portraits of Fathers and Sons,” in Gender Rhetorics: Postures of Dominance and Submission in History, ed. Richard C. Trexler (Binghamton: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, State University of New York at Binghamton, 1994), 163–75.


3. Data taken from the Florentine tax returns of 1427 record a surprisingly large age difference between men and their spouses. While the average age of marriage for young women was 17, for men it was close to 30, so that the average disparity between spouses married in that year was 13.6 years. Children were sired by fully mature fathers. The average baby born in 1427 had a father nearly 40 years of age; David Herlihy, “The Generation in Medieval History,” Viator 5 (1974): 347–64. For the family, see also Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), esp. the chap., “Childhood in Tuscany at the Beginning of the Fifteenth Century,” 94–116.

4. Matteo Palmieri, Vita Cisale, ed. Gino Belloni (Florence: Sansoni, 1982), 24–35; Palmieri defines adolescence as “the age at which a boy becomes com-

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sicious of himself and has the freedom of choice and power to live in his own way. Here he begins to know his own mind and nature. . . . The child’s transfer from maternal care to parental supervision was a well codified social practice based on the principle, itself grounded in classical pedagogy, that “training (educatio) is by the mother . . . while instruction (erudition) is by the father; and so it can be said that each makes a contribution to the common benefit”; Leonardo Bruni, Notes to bk. I, chap. 3, of the pseudo-Aristotelian Treatise on Economics (1421/2), in The Humanism of Leonardo Bruni, Selected Texts, ed. Gordon Griffin, James Hankins, and David Thompson (Binghamton: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, State University of New York at Binghamton, 1987), 314.

5. Educators warned against effeminacy; see, for example, Pier Paolo Vergerio (Pietro Paulus Vergerius), “The Treatise De ingenio moribus,” in Vittorio da Fel- tre and Other Humanist Educators, ed. William Harrison Woodward (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1963), 118. Bernardino da Siena also warned mothers about having their sons and dressing them in frivolous clothing: “O donna che hai li figliuolo già grandicetto, fallo ben bello, adornalo perché egli piaccia bene . . . e sai che? Che non v’è pericolo: non v’hai a mettere nulla, sai! Egli è maschio: se fosse femina, forse non faresti così, perché ingiudicarrebbe; e perché egli non ingiudiceva, e tu ne se’ contenta”; Bernardino, predicato volgari, III, 136, XV (1424), quoted in Luigi Scrinemi, “Savonarola educatore e la psicologia sessuale,” Genesis, rassegna di studi sessuali ed eugenico 12 (1932): 96. Thomas Kuenhn, Emanicipation in Late Medieval Florence (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1982), 68–69 and 81; Kuenhn shows that the duration in which young men were economically subordinated to their fathers increased over the course of the fifteenth century.

6. Alberti, The Family in Renaissance Florence, trans. Renee New Watkins (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1969), 36: “But who does not know the dubious ways of the young? If they have some vice, they keep it covered up and hidden from parents or elders for fear or shame. Only later is it revealed and expressed. The more young people lack awe and reverence, the more various vices grow in them from day to day. Sometimes they are deprived and corrupted in their own native inclinations, sometimes inspired to evil and wholly ruined by the bad conversation and customs among them.” The same theme runs throughout humanistic treatises on the family and appears in a colorful colloquy in Leon Battista Alberti, Dinner Piece: A Translation of the Interceres, trans. David Marsh (Binghamton: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, State University of New York at Binghamton, 1987), 105–6.


10. At the Scuola di San Marco, older than eighteen were excluded from many activities. For Savonarola’s relationship to youth, see Trexler, Power and Dependence, 99–112; G. Gnerghi, “Gerolamo da Cremona: Poeta e Scholastico nel secolo XV,” in Il Rinascimento a Firenze, ed. Federico Zeri (Milan: Electa, 1984), 122–27.


16. For the role of humanist educators, see Walter J. Ong, Latin Language Study as a Renaissance Puberty Rite,” in Rhetoric, Romance, and Technolo-


20. At the Scuola di San Marco, older than eighteen were excluded from many activities. For Savonarola’s relationship to youth, see Trexler, Power and Dependence, 99–112; G. Gnerghi, “Giramondo Savonarola e i fanciulli,” Rassegna nazionale 117 (1991): 345–70; Scrinemi, “Savonarola educatore e la psicologia sessuale,” 86–100.


22. For the political mobilization of previously docile youth groups in twentieth-