“A Veil of Ice between My Heart and the Fire”: Michelangelo’s Sexual Identity and Early Modern Constructs of Homosexuality

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The painter, sculptor, architect, and poet Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564) presents a tantalizing dilemma of gender and sexual identity, for these issues occupied an important but obscure place in his life and work. A central figure of the Italian Renaissance, Michelangelo is the first creative artist in early modern Europe whose inner and outer life is recorded in almost day-to-day detail and one of the earliest personalities whose emotions toward other men are known in any depth. But the voluminous sources are often frustratingly silent, ambiguous, or misleading about the artist’s love life, sexual attitudes, and self-image. Michelangelo’s biography illustrates in miniature several historiographical problems inherent in current attempts to resurrect and characterize homosexual behavior and identity in the period before 1700. This essay seeks to outline the issues and obstacles in fifteenth- to seventeenth-century history through the lens of what we know, do not yet know, and may never be able to determine about even an exceptionally well-documented individual.

Although Michelangelo wrote a great deal, all of it must be decoded through multiple layers of ambivalence, confusion, and fear. The difficulties of unraveling his actions, values, and self-concept regarding sex and gender fall into three categories: the shortage of surviving evidence, the strong partisan bias of virtually every outside commentator, and the differences between the conceptual grid through which Renaissance culture classified and interpreted sexual behavior and our own modern constructions of sexuality. Although these obstacles are shared in some degree by all biographers, each is particularly acute for the history of homosexuals and has nuances unique to their changing social and legal position.

This much we do know. As his repeated poetic images of fire, arrows, and slavery reveal, Michelangelo held love to be the highest and most urgent of earthly desires, second only to that love for God to which it formed the terrestrial counterpart. He was painfully aware of his overwhelming attraction to other men and ex-

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plicitly disparaged the love of women. In painting and sculpture, his lifelong subject was an obsession with the ideal nude male form, to the point of endowing such female subjects as the Doni Madonna and the Sistine Chapel Sibyls with masculine anatomy and proportions.

His immediate and excited attachment in 1532 to the twenty-three-year-old Roman art lover Tommaso de' Cavalleri, though not unlike his other emotionally charged relationships with young men, was the most profound and long-lasting of his life. He presented Cavalleri with numerous impassioned love poems and drawings on erotic allegorical subjects, all of which reveal both his deep love and his ambivalence about that feeling.² By most accounts Michelangelo remained celibate, describing his infatuations as "chaste" and insisting on their purely spiritual ecstasy. At the same time, his writings and drawings, especially those given to or inspired by handsome young men, reveal his full knowledge of both historical and contemporary homosexuality, from Plato's Symposium to accusations leveled against the artist himself.⁴

The first obstacle to reconstructing the meaning of these experiences to Michelangelo and his contemporaries is the limitations of surviving sources. From the standpoint of modern inquiry, these are deficient in two respects: they are relatively uninterested in recording sexual matters or in relating them to other aspects of personality.

Direct evidence about private sexual activity is, of course, hard to come by for most people of any orientation. But while heterosexuals at least give prima facie evidence through their children, for most homosexuals (and, e.g., childless married couples) the first question to be answered is: did they engage in overt genital activity? The question is critical because scholars uncomfortable with homosexuality often attempt to dismiss considerations of orientation in cases where behavior is inconclusive and are quick to interpret lacunae in documentation as evidence that the practice was rare. So it is unfortunate that chroniclers like Michelangelo's close friend Giorgio Vasari, the first modern art historian and our prime source for many Renaissance artists, were generally not concerned to document sexuality except when behavior was eccentric or publicly scandalous. Vasari mentions homosexuality per se only once—in relation to the painter Sodoma, whose derogatory nickname I will return to later.⁵

In that pre-Freudian era, connections between an individual's sexual psychology and other behavior were not so readily assumed or investigated. In his treatise on painting, L'Artevino, Ludovico Dolce observantly contrasted Raphael, whom he praised for properly delineating the appropriate physical qualities of each sex, with his rival Michelangelo, who "does not know or will not observe those differences" since all his figures look like men. But Dolce makes no attempt to relate this stylistic dichotomy to the parallel contrast between Raphael's interest in beautiful model-mistresses and Michelangelo's love of male companionship and male beauty. To give an analogous lesbian example discovered by Judith Brown, when the seventeenth-century nun Benedetta Carlini claimed to have visions that required her cellmate to masturbate her, she was not punished for lesbianism as such but for blasphemy.⁶
The second of our three obstacles—the biases of outside commentators—is sometimes difficult to disentangle from the first: it is not always clear whether a chronicler neglects homosexual implications because they genuinely did not cross his mind or because he knew all too well that such connections were being drawn, to Michelangelo’s discredit, and protectively sought to downplay or omit them. Conversely, sources that do mention homosexuality are seldom objective or complete. This problem of partisanship, while universal, is particularly acute for sexual matters: the need to “take sides” in reporting Michelangelo’s sexuality is a direct consequence of the sixteenth century’s strong civil and ecclesiastical penalties for homosexuality, which increased in severity during his lifetime as the Catholic Counter-Reformation gathered momentum.¹

Not surprisingly, Michelangelo’s enemies were quickest to assert his sexual misbehavior, while friends steadfastly maintained his total chastity. We do not know the identities of the “evil, foolish and invidious mob” whose smutty insinuations Michelangelo protests in poem 83; but many people apparently assumed he was actively homosexual, including such relative strangers as the father of a prospective apprentice who offered as an added incentive the boy’s services in bed (which Michelangelo indignantly refused).²

One major accuser, the often bawdy writer Pietro Aretino, offers a fascinating case study in ambivalence and unscrupulousness. In a letter of November 1545, Aretino criticized Michelangelo’s Last Judgment fresco in the Sistine chapel for its lascivious nudity and then threatened blackmail over Michelangelo’s delay in responding to a request for some of his drawings: “If you had sent me what you had promised, you would have done only what it was in your best interest to do, since by so doing, you would have silenced all those spiteful tongues, who say that only certain Gherardos and Tommasos can obtain them.”³ The snide insinuation about two of Michelangelo’s young innamorati, Gherardo Perini and Tommaso de’ Cavalieri, shows Aretino willing to exploit fear of public exposure; yet Aretino himself had earlier fled Venice to escape a sodomy charge, and he wrote frankly about his homosexual inclinations to both his patron and, jokingly, to a woman he was courting.⁴ We may never be able to resolve the question whether Aretino constitutes an especially reliable witness because of his personal familiarity with the subject, or whether his testimony is tainted by a cynical willingness to employ a double standard for personal gain.

At the opposite extreme from Aretino, but equally suspect for their polemical tone, are records like the worshipful biography written by Michelangelo’s disciple Ascanio Condivi in 1553. Condivi’s pointed defense of Michelangelo’s chastity was virtually dictated by the artist in a thinly veiled attempt to refute his critics. Whereas in his editio princeps (1550) Vasari had devoted a full page to Michelangelo’s singular love for Cavalieri and his admiration of the youth’s “infinite beauty,” Condivi mentions Cavalieri only in passing, and his explicit refutation of those who suspect that Michelangelo’s love of beauty is “lascivious and indecent” is clearly motivated by the desire to assert Michelangelo’s orthodox piety in the face of persistent rumors to the contrary. Apparently sensitized to Michelangelo’s touchiness on the subject by the Condivi account, Vasari paraphrased it in his
second (1568) edition, adding that the artist loved beauty, "but not with lascivious and disgraceful thoughts, which he proved in his way of life, which was very frugal." 11

The tendency to obscure or regularize Michelangelo's true feelings persisted after his death. When his poems were first published in 1623, his moralizing grandnephew and editor, Michelangelo the Younger, changed the genders of many passionate poems' addressees from male to female as well as rewriting other passages that seemed to flirt with heretical doctrine. Although this obstacle was effectively removed in the later nineteenth century, when editors consulted the autograph manuscripts, other omissions and misrepresentations were perpetuated much longer by embarrassed or hostile modern scholars. 12

While these scattered and contradictory bits of evidence are painfully inadequate, the knottiest problems in interpreting such biographical data are ultimately not so much documentary as conceptual. Beyond the issue whether Michelangelo engaged in sexual activity lie several deeper questions as to how he and his contemporaries understood whatever homosexual behavior they did practice. The so-called essentialist school of gay historians, holding that homosexual behavior and identity are fundamentally the same throughout history, seeks to interpret past sexuality in terms of transhistorical constants of inherent personality. The opposing social constructionist school, building on the insights of Michel Foucault about radical breaks in Western epistemology, stresses instead the discontinuities between historical epochs and the influence of larger cultural forces in constructing shifting paradigms for the expression of humankind's implicitly malleable bisexual potentialities.

According to the social constructionists, two crucial factors in defining the modern "gay" identity are a sense of core individual identity as an inherently homosexually oriented person and a sense of group identity based on this shared orientation and participation in collective social institutions. Neither, it is argued, could come into existence prior to the rise of self-aware urban subcultures in the eighteenth century and the invention of the medical-psychological term, hence the social category, of "the homosexual" in the nineteenth. 13

This school is undoubtedly correct to emphasize the determining role of these social phenomena, and such scholars as Jeffrey Weeks and Alan Bray have outlined several fundamental respects in which the moral and philosophical taxonomies of Michelangelo's time differed from our modern notion of homosexuality as a discrete, all-encompassing psychological identity. There was no single Italian term corresponding to our definition of "a homosexual," indicating that male homosexuality was recognized only vaguely as an intrinsic way of being, or what we would now call "orientation." Theologically and legally, sodomia was defined as certain physical acts that might be engaged in sporadically by a variety of people, and such taboo same-sex behavior was sharply separated from other equally intense same-sex emotions, which were highly valued.

This conceptual framework obviously had a controlling effect on Michelangelo's sexual self-awareness. By his own insistence and that of most other witnesses, he remained celibate (though we are far less informed about his activities prior to
age thirty, the period of his first surviving letters and poems). The sharp distinction in Renaissance thought between being and doing, between desire and action, meant that by avoiding any sexual acts, Michelangelo was probably able to maintain a conscious self-image of "not homosexual" despite his avowed passionate feelings for men.

It remains an open question, therefore, whether calling him homosexual as it were "against his will" is an impermissible anachronism. To assert that he was nonetheless homosexual in some fundamental "orientation" requires at least the addition of such Freudian concepts as repression and sublimation. Michelangelo did once suggest an awareness of something of that kind: when a priest friend told him it was a shame that Michelangelo had never taken a wife, his excuse was that his "demanding art" had been his wife, and his works would be his sons.14

I would contend that evidence from Michelangelo and his contemporaries should lead us to reconsider whether there was not in fact more continuity between the Renaissance and modern social/conceptual matrices than the established social-constructionist viewpoint can account for. Regarding the sociological underpinnings of "modern" homosexuality, recent research has uncovered recognizable homosexual subcultures as far back as the medieval and early modern periods.15 When the existence of this substratum is coupled with recorded attitudes by and about individual "deviants," I think we can push back the temporal frontier of an emerging sense of distinctive homosexual identity, at least in embryonic form, to the beginning of the sixteenth century.

I will consider here five factors that imply a somewhat greater degree of protomodern "homosexual consciousness" than has previously been posited in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. First, while the construction of thought in terms of polarized opposites (such as would later lead to "heterosexual/homosexual") was not formalized until the seventeenth century, Renaissance theorists were at pains to contrast relationships on the basis of the two genders of object choice. Allied to this development, a complex terminology existed for male homosexual behavior and the individuals who practiced it, terms which suggest some rudimentary notion of an associated personality type. The conceptual separation between love and sex was more fluid in practice than in theory. Some individuals known or suspected of homosexual behavior, Michelangelo among them, articulated their sense of persecution and strategies for evading or resisting it; and Michelangelo's writings also evince sporadic attempts to find an alternative vocabulary for "anomalous" desires and values.

As to the first point, the lack of our modern terms "heterosexual" and "homosexual" did not prevent Renaissance theorists from marking a clear division between two kinds of love differentiated by the gender of one's chosen object. One of Michelangelo's sonnets analyzing his feelings for Tommaso de' Cavalieri takes as its theme precisely this opposition:

    Violent passion for tremendous beauty
    Is not performed a bitter mortal error,
    If it can leave the heart melted thereafter,
    So that a holy dart can pierce it quickly . . .

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The love for what I speak of reaches higher;
Woman's too much unlike, no heart by rights
Ought to grow hot for her, if wise and male.

(Ed. Girardi, no. 260; trans. Gilbert, no. 258)

Of course, we are not yet here at "homosexuality," since this idealized male love is still officially modeled on such classical exemplars as Socrates' chaste love for Alcibiades. In this taxonomy, male-male love is understood in terms of classical amicitia. Its goal is fundamentally spiritual—as Michelangelo implies, it is anagogic to the higher love of the (male) godhead. There is, then, a second complicating factor in classifying types of male love besides gender: that is, the presence of lustful desire (toward women) or its absence (toward other men).

Nevertheless, the distinction was made and, slightly later, a more pointedly contrasting vocabulary developed for it. In a gloss on the young character of Colin Clout in Edmund Spenser's The Shepherd's Calendar (1579), who rejects the attentions of an older male shepherd and himself pursues the maid Rosalind, "E. K." declared "paederastike much to be preferred before gynerastike, that is the love which enflameth men with lust toward womankind." 16

If there was a vocabulary for object choice, there was also an extensive terminology for male homosexual activity and individuals who engaged in it, suggesting that some rudimentary notion existed of their distinctive psychological "nature." Unlike modern constructs, however, this conception was not inclusive of both parties: the terms used by Castiglione, Aretino, and other sixteenth-century authors distinguished between an active and passive partner. There is some faint indication that the active partner had a definable variant personality: in a comic tale by Matteo Bandello, the poet Porcellio declares that "to divert myself with boys is more natural to me than eating and drinking." However, to the extent that a predilection for sodomitical acts was seen as implying any distinctive personality traits, these were imputed almost exclusively to the passive partner; most of the nouns referring to him—androgyne, hermaphrodite, ganymede—were derogatory terms misogynistically imputing causality to a degree of effeminacy or gender confusion.

In contrast to the humor or scorn attached to "feminine" passivity, the "masculine" actions of the aggressive/penetrating partner, while legally culpable, were somewhat tolerated socially as not involving any abdication of the prerogatives of adult male dominance, and no special terms evolved for these individuals. In consequence, some phenomena that we would consider informed by homosexual experience or sensibility passed conceptually unnoticed. Since Michelangelo was consistently the older and thus presumably dominant "masculine" partner (the objects of his affection were in or barely out of their teens), it would barely have occurred to such contemporaries as Lomazzo to look for any character traits in him different from those of heterosexual men, whose relations with women were constructed on a similar basis of superior age and power. 17

Perhaps the most suggestive evidence that the Renaissance conception of homosexuality was beginning to approach later conceptions is that the boundary between spiritual and physical passion was more vague and permeable in prac-
tice than in theory, a fact not unknown to the theoreticians. Montaigne, Erasmus, and Bacon all wrote in praise of the approved spiritual love between men, but Bacon, at least, understood a further dimension of such affairs, since he also had sex with his servants and followers. The Mantuan humanist Mario Equicola took care to insert in his treatise *On Love* a caveat that "not a word of this work is to be understood as the love of boys or sexual acts against nature."18

The problem stems from the ambiguity of Renaissance language about love: the sources use the same words to refer to actions and relationships that appear to have been located at quite different points along the continuum of eroticism from purely emotional affinity to genital expression. In the shortage of unambiguous first-person testimony, one group of scholars, such as Bray, emphasizes the "official" spiritualized content of ideal classical *amicitia*; the extreme of this argument interprets any expression of male-male passion or love as merely a conventional formula of friendship phrased in the high-flown language of Neoplatonic allegory. Others, most recently Joseph Pequigney in his study of Shakespeare's sonnets, read every sexual metaphor, however tenuous or veiled, as an allusion to overt behavior.19

Consequently, any remark about Michelangelo's love life is still open to a spectrum of interpretations. Vasari and Benedetto Varchi, for example, both state that he greatly loved Tommaso de' Cavalieri (and the artist's own writings say so repeatedly), but we still do not fully understand what degrees of "love" the term implied for them. When Vasari records that the love between the painters Polidoro da Caravaggio and Maturino Fiorentino grew so great that "they determined like brothers and true companions to live and die together" as well as collaborate professionally all their lives, he says nothing expressly about sexual love; but the relationship bears suggestive parallels with two earlier Venetian boatmen who lived and operated a business together for several years before being arrested for committing sodomy aboard their craft.20

The porous boundary between passionate but chaste Neoplatonic language and everyday practice, at least in the popular mind, can be inferred from the frequency with which Michelangelo, on his own or through Condovi, denied rumors and accusations of homosexual activity. Despite his protestations of "chaste love" and "honest desire," other people seem to have presumed that his stated desire to have Cavalieri "in my unworthy ready arms for always" also bespoke a less philosophical interest in handsome young men.

To be sure, this suspicion, which may well derive (in Michelangelo's phrase) from "those who see themselves in others," says little about his actual behavior, but the potential for a spillover into overt eroticism must have seemed plausible (if distasteful) even to Cavalieri, whom he reassuringly admonishes for "giv[ing] heed to such falsehood." Small wonder that Cavalieri did, since virtually every symbol of ideal male relations Michelangelo could have chosen had by this time become hopelessly contaminated or conflated with erotic associations as well. The gratifying of elevated, explicitly Christian motives onto classical exempla had always been selective and inherently unstable: his gift to Tommaso of the paired drawings of the *Rape of Ganymede* and the *Punishment of Tityos* is officially inter-
interpreted as representing sacred versus profane love, but Plato himself acknowledged the former myth's pederastic content, and the word "ganymede" had denoted a boy used for sexual purposes since the Middle Ages. Even the language of Condici's rebuttal was readily open to a self-defeating second meaning. He compares the master's love of young men to that of Socrates for Alcibiades, but the (unwillingly) chaste young man of Plato's Symposium also figured in bawdy Renaissance literature (though perhaps only somewhat later) as a symbol of a youth's initiation into sodomy.21

While these statements were meant to establish publicly that he drew a clear-cut line between passionate amicitia and sexual activity, Michelangelo's words also testify that this theoretical cleavage was no clearer or easier to maintain in his mind than it had become in his ambiguously conflated sources. His later poems allude to "my evil, deadly desires" and lament that "my senses and their own fire have bereft / all . . . peace from my heart."22 There would be no reason to feel guilty about a male love unless it did, contrary to dogma, contain some component of forbidden physical desire; nor would it be necessary to "lose peace" over that desire unless he was conscious of what it meant and the need to struggle against it.

If Michelangelo's understanding of such critical terms as "love" and "desire" still remains obscure, the foregoing analysis should make clear that these words were not, as some have maintained, reserved exclusively for contexts of emotional intimacy, while sexual attraction would have been described primarily in other terms. A more sophisticated linguistic analysis is still called for, one that would acknowledge that Renaissance language is multifaceted and ambiguous. As Foucault observed, the sixteenth-century system of discourse was based on an epistemology of poetic resemblances; in consequence, everything in Renaissance philosophy is overdetermined, and their thought patterns cannot be conceived as rigidly excluding any level of associative meaning.

The fourth factor suggesting the presence of some protomodern consciousness of homosexuality at this time is that, however much Michelangelo himself praised and idealized his male infatuations, he was acutely aware of some discrepancy between his desires and the moral and legal constraints of his society. He acted out and wrote about the limitations these imposed on his ability to speak frankly and fully about his intimate relationships. His lifelong fearful expectation of hurt from other people, while often justified, suggests a pervasive sense of persecution:

Often, in the pleasure of tremendous kindness,  
Some attack on my life and dignity  
is masked and hidden. . . .

(No. 251; trans. Gilbert, no. 249)

Such feelings imply some rudimentary sense of a gap between himself and the surrounding society—what we today would term "alienation," another significant factor in defining modern gay consciousness.

Michelangelo's strategy for coping with this awareness was to try to prevent, by discretion or ambiguity, even his "chaste wish" and "honest love"23 from becom-
ing too well known to a public likely to see them in a less elevated light. Vasari observed this tendency toward prudent indirection, writing that Michelangelo "was very masked and ambiguous in his speech, his words having almost two meanings." For example, in a letter to Cavaliere accompanying his gifts of the deeply confessional Ganymede and Tityos drawings, he avoided identifying their classical erotic subjects. His drafts for this letter strongly imply that he was conscious of something in the drawings that was best left unstated. He wrote: "It would be permissible to name to the one receiving them the things that a man gives, but out of nicety it will not be done here." Whether he meant merely the titles of the drawings or the emotions they symbolized, in the final version Michelangelo omitted even this enigmatic apology. Cardinal Ippolito de' Medici was so taken with the series of presentation drawings that he insisted on borrowing them to be copied; Cavaliere's account notes that "I tried hard to save the Ganymede," as if he too was wary of its public dissemination.

There are scattered examples among Michelangelo's contemporaries of other homosexually oriented men who knew both that their feelings deviated from the norm and that those feelings made their relationship to society problematic. He would have known that his important Florentine artist friends Leonardo da Vinci, Sandro Botticelli, and Benvenuto Cellini were all arrested for sodomy between 1476 and 1552, and that Giovanni Bazzi was publicly ridiculed. Commenting on a painting of Christ as an ideal androgynous youth, Leonardo alluded bitterly to his earlier legal difficulties: "When I painted our Lord as a boy, you put me in jail; if I were now to paint him as a grown man, you would do worse to me." And when Bazzi's horse won the annual Palio race in Siena, he defiantly threw back in the faces of his fellow citizens the mocking nickname they had given him, insisting on being announced to the crowd as "Il Sodoma," the sodomite—arguably the first public "coming-out" statement in European history.

Two qualifications about this sporadic awareness must be acknowledged. First, none of these artists saw himself as a member of a group defined by their common sexuality but perceived his predicament only in individual terms. Michelangelo's stated objection to being accused of sodomy is not that any such condemnation is unjust, but only that in his case it is untrue. Hence, he doubtless felt no commonality with an outspoken nonconformist like his acquaintance Sodoma. It follows that his sense of struggle against the limitations of nonconformity was not consciously articulated as a political or aesthetic theory: Michelangelo could no more speak in modern terms about the gender-crossing implications of his own work than did Lomazzo.

All the same, the final element of his life that suggests to our eyes an emerging new consciousness is the hints in his poetry of a search for an alternative vocabulary to characterize previously inexpressible feelings. Although he could not free himself entirely from the gender assumptions of his own time, he struggled to bend or extend their application to specific persons through self-conscious wordplay.

He described the gender-variant intellect and valor of his spiritual friend Vittoria Colonna as "a man within a woman" and referred to her as amico, using the masculine form of the word for "friend." Conversely, he described himself as a bride in

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relation to God—the customary locution for nuns—and as an archetypally feminine "mold" waiting passively to be filled by Colonna’s seminal beauty. More importantly, his habit of drafting verses to a female and then changing the gender of the addressee suggests his strikingly proto-modern awareness of the arbitrariness of gender constructs and can be read as a pioneering attempt to subvert the heterosexual conventions of Petrarchan courtly love poetry to the exaltation of a male beloved. Something of the same self-conscious transposition can be seen slightly later in the letters of England’s James I to his beloved favorite, the duke of Buckingham, in which he calls Buckingham his “wife” and characterizes himself as a prospective widow.30

In sum, I think that what is known about Michelangelo’s search for sexual and gender identity supports the hypothesis that, during his lifetime, many important elements of the modern conception of homosexuality—as a distinct psychological construct and social status, requiring its own expressive vocabulary even if it sometimes had to be concealed—were beginning to emerge. He may not have thought of himself as “a homosexual,” but he was aware that there were such people, that many of his passionate declarations were taken as indication that he was one of them, that the objects of his affection required a language that violated gender norms, and that it was both safer and less guilt-inducing to forgo action and conceal emotion.

It may still be argued that all the above evidence bespeaks an inner reality far removed from modern constructs. But there are too many ambiguities in the record, too-frequent hints of his interconnected passion, ambivalence, confusion, guilt, and touchiness to be accounted for by the purely practical caution of someone secure in his “nonhomosexual” identity. In sexual terms, as in much else, the Renaissance and Michelangelo as one of its foremost creators represent a transitional phase rather than one wholly different from modernity. If his time was not yet ripe, it produced at least the first buds of a consciousness that would only flower and bear fruit under much different social conditions.

I am well aware of the risk of historical anachronism here, but one senses in Michelangelo’s emotional drama many of the dynamics commonly experienced by modern gay individuals in adolescence: stirrings of both intense physical desire and romantic infatuation, the gender of whose object is sometimes unclear, though tending mostly toward male fantasies, and a sense of cognitive dissonance with the antisexual values of the surrounding culture (in his case, strongly internalized from an increasingly Counter-Reformatory Catholicism).31

While it is difficult to carry this kind of psychobiographical speculation further, I would suggest that Michelangelo accommodated to this conflict as many adults do today by willfully suppressing his own feelings where they were at variance with received social constructs. While one or two of his contemporaries ventured a bit further into adolescent “acting out” (Leonardo, Sodoma), he took refuge in, and came to believe, his own rationalizations and sublimations. And the pains taken to correct public perception by a man nominally so contemptuous of worldly opinion may easily read as protesting too much, out of the chronic anxiety engendered by self-denial.
If all these layers of repression, denial, and self-concealment forced on Michelangelo complicate our reconstruction of his biography and psychology, they also took their toll on him during his own lifetime. Infatuated with a heterosexual (Cavalieri) who apparently needed reassurance that his intentions were honorable, always alert for another attack on the morality of his acts and his art, and energetically sublimating through his work, Michelangelo wrote often of his frustrated longing and of the inextricability of joy and pain in love. As he put it in lamenting his inability to feel the intense love of God (or Cavalieri) that he yearned for, "A veil of ice hides between my heart and the fire [of love]."

The "ice" that ultimately stunted and froze his full expression of more earthly love was crystallized by both internal and external constraints on his deepest emotions. Perhaps the ultimate reason we cannot fully know him is that he could never fully come to know himself.

NOTES

1. A preliminary version of this essay was presented at a conference on "The New Gender Studies" at the University of Southern California in January 1987. I am grateful to panel chair Professor Joanne Glasgow for her support and interest and to Columbia University for enabling me to attend the conference.


4. Several drawings for Cavalieri are based on Ovid's Metamorphoses, which is replete with classical homosexual myths, notably the rape of Ganymede by Jupiter. The reference to Socrates and Alcibiades from the Symposium is made in Condovi's biography of Michelangelo, generally held to have been dictated by the artist himself: Ascanio Condovi, Vita di Michelangiolo (1553; Florence: Rinascimento del Libro, 1927), pp. 98–99; Life of Michelangelo, trans. Alice Sedgwick Wohl, ed. Hellmut Wohl (Baton Rouge: University of Louisiana Press, 1976), p. 105. All poems are cited herein following the numbering in the standard Italian edition: Enzo Noê Girardi, ed., Michelangelo Buonarroti: Rime (Bari: Laterza, 1960). For accusations against Michelangelo, see below, esp. n. 8.

5. Giorgio Vasari, Le vite de’ più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architetti . . . (1568), ed. Gaetano Milanesi, 9 vols. (Florence, 1865–79), vol. 6, pp. 379–86 (hereafter Vasari/Milanesi). For a typical tendency to argue from silence, see Arno Karlen, Sexuality and Homosexuality: A New View (New York: Norton, 1971), p. 109. The urge to declare an ambiguous artist heterosexual has been particularly


12. The first modern editor to print the original texts was Cesare Guasti, ed., Le rime di Michelangelo Buonarroti (Florence, 1863), but he appended paraphrases that obscured or allegorized the more obvious male references. For a thorough denunciation of past alterations or bowdlerizations, see John Addington Symonds, The Life of Michelangelo Buonarroti, 2 vols. (London and New York, 1899), appendix 5, vol. 2, pp. 381–85, and text, vol. 2, pp. 132–40, 166, n. 1; and further in Saslow, Ganymede, pp. 13–15.


15. Evidence for premodern urban subcultures has been advanced by Boswell, Christianity, Social
Tolerance, and Homosexuality, for the Middle Ages, and Guido Ruggiero, The Boundaries of Eros: Sex Crime and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), for the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Bray cites evidence suggesting an active London subculture by the late sixteenth century, though he does not claim it as such.

16. The Shepherd's Calendar, January, lines 56–59, and initialed commentary (included in original published text), possibly by Edward Kirke. This reference was brought to my attention in an unpublished lecture by Professor Stephen Orgel.

17. I have discussed the terminology used for homosexual acts and individuals in this period more extensively in my Ganymede in the Renaissance, chaps. 2 and 3 (with further bibliography).

18. Equicola, Libro di natura d'Amore (Venice, 1525), 112; Ruggiero, The Boundaries of Eros, pp. 115–16. Bacon's life and thought are discussed by Bray, p. 49; on friendship literature see generally Bullough, chap. 15.


23. Girardi, nos. 58, 59, 72, 83; trans. Gilbert, 56, 57, 70, 81.


25. Carteggi, vol. 4, nos. DCCCXCIX, CM, CMXXIII (from Cavalieri); trans. Gilbert, p. 253, no. 49 (for a variant translation, see Ramsden, vol. 1, no. 191); Saslow, Ganymede, pp. 47–51. This strong sense of persecution is an important theme throughout Liebert, Michelangelo: A Psychoanalytic Study.

26. For these various accusations and trial records, see Jacques Mesnil, Botticelli (Paris, 1938), pp. 98, 204; Luca Beltrami, Documenti e memorie riguardanti . . . Leonardo da Vinci (Milan, 1919); Luigi Greci, Benvenuto Cellini nei delitti e nei processi fiorentini . . . (Turin, 1930); Vasari/Milanesi, vol. 6, pp. 379–86; and the discussion of the artists in Saslow, Ganymede, passim.


28. Vasari/Milanesi, vol. 6, pp. 379–86. Somewhat later, a Mr. Plaine of New Haven colony, executed for sodomy in 1646, outraged the authorities because "to some who questioned the lawfulness of such filthy practice, he did insinuate seeds of atheism, questioning whether there was a God"; Jonathan Kalz, Gay American History (New York: Avon, 1976), pp. 34–35. It remains an open question whether the perceived links between homosexuality, heresy, and treason dating back to the Middle Ages (see Boswell) reflect a consciously anti-authoritarian stance among the participants or merely the fears of outside observers.

29. Girardi, nos. 87 (suggesting that the "bride" text might refer to Cavalieri), 152, 153, 235; Carteggi, no. MCLXVII; Letters, trans. Ramsden, p. 120, no. 347; Cambon, pp. 67, 76–84.
30. For specific examples of shifts in addressee, see most recently Cambon, pp. 137, 150–52, passim (though he does not explore the issue of gender ambiguity as such). Letters of King James VI and I, ed. G. P. Akrigg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), e.g., no. 218.

31. Symonds, Life of Michelangelo, vol. 2, p. 385, was the first to suggest the possibility that "the tragic accent discernible throughout Michelangelo's love poetry may be due to his sense of discrepancy between his own deepest emotions and the customs of Christian society."

32. Ed. Girardi, no. 87; Gilbert, no. 85. On the possible reference to Cavalleri, see above, n. 29.