



VARCHI, BENEDETTO (1503–1565)

Florentine writer and historian. Born in Monteverchi, he is known today above all for his *Storia di Firenze* (a history of Florence in the period 1527–38). Contemporaries appreciated his poetic and philosophical works; thus the court lady and author Tullia d'Aragona (1508–1556) made him the interlocutor in her *Dialogo dell'infinità dell'amore* (1547). Today his Petrarchan and neo-Platonic poetry wears through repetition of the same images, aggravated by a certain overproduction which led to his writing hundreds of sonnets. Varchi also wrote plays, such as *La suocera* (The Mother in Law, ca. 1557–60), literary commentaries, and works on the Italian language, such as *Ercolano* (ca. 1560–65).

Varchi's activity is notable for his outspoken defense, which continued until the last years of his life when he encountered much opposition, of the neo-Platonic idea of Socratic (that is homoerotic) love, as it had been set forth theoretically by Marsilio Ficino.

Varchi's defense of homosexual love was particularly explicit, and he took little trouble to disguise his same-sex raptures. His sonnets of Socratic love are replete with open declarations of love, while his Latin compositions amount to real-confessions, to the point that his poetic work was denounced as "scandalous" by Scipione Ammirato (1531–1601) in his *Opuscoli* (published in 1637).

Varchi witnessed the last phase of the descending trajectory of the vogue of Socratic love. His contemporaries were wary of sonnets "inspired by chaste affection," such as those he wrote for the young

Giulio della Stufa. From one letter written by this adolescent we know that his father expressly forbade him to see Varchi. Also several poets, among them Antonio Francesco Grazzini (1503–1584) and Alfonso de' Pazzi (1509–1555), filled Florence with sonnets that took aim at their rival's homosexual tastes.

Benedetto Varchi is probably the most significant figure in a generation of Renaissance homosexuals who knew how to devise an instrument of affirmation and defense from neo-Platonic sources. It was in reaction to this boldness that contemporary society found it necessary to heterosexualize the very concept of "Platonic love," purging it of the homoerotic features that Ficino had preserved.

Particularly audacious, if read with Renaissance eyes, is the conclusion of "Sopra la pittura e la scultura" (On Painting and Sculpture; 1546), in which Varchi provides an extensive commentary on two love sonnets of Michelangelo addressed to Tommaso de' Cavalieri. Varchi praises at length "all his aspects which are full of Socratic love and Platonic concepts," that is to say the compositions of love for boys. It is significant that Michelangelo appreciated the text, which had been sent to him, and thanked the author.

Varchi's "bad reputation" stems in part from an obscure sexual scandal of which we still know little or nothing (it is discussed by Manacorda). As the sonnets targeting him show, however, the main problem arose from his excessive advocacy of a very audacious concept of Socratic love. When society reached the point of identifying this love with sodomy pure and simple, the situation of Varchi as its advocate became indefensible. It was proba-

bly as a result of this development that in the last years of his life he decided to seek protection in the church, becoming a priest.

Nonetheless, as late as 1564, in pronouncing the oration at the funeral of Michelangelo, the impenitent writer could not bring himself to omit (however brief and prudent the mention) of the bonds that linked the great sculptor to Gherardo Perini and Tommaso de' Cavalieri.

One year later Varchi followed Michelangelo. His death ended a cycle of homosexual intellectuals that had started with Marsilio Ficino and closed with the imposition of the new rigid climate of the Counterreformation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY. Giovanni Dall'Orto, "Socratic Love as a Disguise for Same-sex Love," *Journal of Homosexuality*, 16 (1988), 33-64; Guido Manacorda, "Benedetto Varchi: l'uomo, il poeta, il critico," *Annali della R. Scuola normale di Pisa*, 17:2 (1903); Luigi Tonelli, *L'amore nella poesia e nel pensiero del Rinascimento*, Florence: Sansoni, 1933.
Giovanni Dall'Orto

VARIANT

This term, used both as adjective and as noun, enjoyed a limited currency in the 1940s and 1950s as a synonym of **homophile**. It probably owed its origin to the wish to avoid the unfortunate connotations which such terms as **pervert** and **deviate** had acquired by contamination from the older moralizing vocabulary, so that the latter designations were completely unacceptable to the gay community and its sympathizers. Two works that featured the word in their titles were George William Henry's *Sex Variants* (New York, 1941), a collection of risqué sexual biographies of homosexual men and women assembled by his collaborator Alfred A. Gross, and Jeannette Foster's classic study *Sex Variant Women in Literature* (New York, 1956).

While the term could have been applied to the whole range of departures from conventional sex expression, in prac-

tice it was limited to the homosexual, the underlying notion being that homosexuality is a part of the spectrum of normal sexual activity, not some willful or depraved aberration. Hence the usage was an effort to locate homosexual expression in the domain of the biological rather than of the pathological—to guard against the "medicalization" of the subject. In her **biographies** Barbara Grier drew a distinction between overt lesbianism and "variant" behavior in which the homosexual expression is latent or even denied. Perhaps because of its blandness and ambiguity, the term largely faded from the literature of the 1960s and later as a positive "gay consciousness" emerged.

Warren Johansson

VARIETY, REVUE, AND CABARET ENTERTAINMENT

Forthright presentation of homosexuality in popular entertainment was not uncommon so long as the deviant was depicted as an outrageous freak: a mincing effeminate in the case of men, a tough bull-dyke in the case of women.

Earlier History. At the beginning of the twentieth century French topical revues teemed with such caricatures; one presented a tableau of an ephebe crowning Count Adelswärd Fersen with roses. In *La Revue de Cluny* and *Je veux du nu, na!* (both 1908), Prussian officers were boldly lampooned as "queers" in the wake of the Eulenburg scandal. In the 1920s, the American vaudevillian Elsie Janis was startled to find that the Parisian revue in which she starred contained a lesbian sketch and a tableau of Henri III tatting with his minions. After World War I, the comedian O'dett brought homosexual gags into the French music hall and the clown Rhum played a "fairy" in his circus routine *La Cabine miraculeuse*. But a sharp dividing line between life and art had always been maintained. At the Chat Noir cabaret, Maurice Donnay's shadowplay