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Abstract:

This essay investigates a particularly polemical claim: that, throughout much of Western history, Italian masculinity and male sexuality have been represented in the literary and fine arts as “queer” in the specific sense of deconstructing the binaries masculine/feminine and homosexual/heterosexual. Briefly surveying some of the historical circumstances that have overdetermined Italian masculinity and male sexuality as queer, the essay then follows one theme—the status of Greek models of homoerotic relationships between men—through some of the extant historical and literary accounts, as well as recent scholarship. Taking as its starting point recent work on several of Caravaggio’s paintings, the essay then reads one particular artistic trope—the god Dionysus/Bacchus—in terms of the god’s sexuality and gender identity, arguing that, in today’s parlance, Dionysus/Bacchus is queer.

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Italian Masculinity as Queer: An Immoderate Proposal¹

JOHN CHAMPAGNE

After a slow start, a critical interest in Italian masculinities seems recently to have blossomed.² In this essay, I entertain a particularly polemical and provocative claim: masculinity as it is articulated in a good deal of Italian art is queer, deconstructing binaries of masculine and feminine, homosexual and heterosexual, adult and child, active and passive, seeing and being seen.³ This has been the case since Roman times, and this queerness has been deployed for contradictory political ends: both fascism and its critique, for example.⁴ Such a claim takes as its starting point several propositions from the often fractious debates around “queer unhistoricism”: 1) writing a queer history requires resisting the twin poles of difference and sameness, exploring instead “a proportionality, likeness, or similarity that is more an approximation than a substantialization”;⁵ 2) every history is necessarily a history of the present; 3) the relationship between semiosis and the lived is an open question; 4) how to write a history of sexuality and gender is not known in advance. This is not an alibi for shoddy scholarship but rather an attempt not simply to write *about* queers but to write *queerly*. Unfortunately, my proposal cannot dissociate itself from the long history of gay romance between non-Italian Euro-Americans and their Italian others. This romance often has racialized overtones; it risks re-inscribing the idea of Italy as “under-developed” and a place where time stands still. However, as Derrida might say, not all ways of giving in to this “orientalizing” of Italy are of an equal pertinence.⁶

Even in the spirit of polemic, however, I offer several caveats. Deconstruction argues that a particular habit of reading will reveal the way texts deconstruct themselves. It describes the effects of a studied transaction between reader and text. In calling some Italian masculinities “queer,” then, I am not referring to repressed homoeroticism, enervating effeminacy, sexual licentiousness, pastoral bisexuality, or unrestrained machismo—all clichés of which Italian masculinity has been historically accused, even by Italians themselves.⁷ Rather, I am suggesting that, while Italian masculinities are unstable and contradictory, they have not always been subject to a deconstructive reading, as the Fascists and their appropriation of classical imagery of the male body demonstrate—not to mention

¹ This essay has benefited immensely from an anonymous reader’s report provided by the editor; I thank both her and this reader.

² See for example, Sandro Bellassai, *La mascolinità contemporanea* (Rome: Carocci, 2004); Lorenzo Benadusi, *Il nemico dell’uomo nuovo: l’omosessualità nell’esperimento totalitario fascista* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2005); Gary P. Cestaro, ed., *Queer Italia: Same-Sex Desire in Italian Literature and Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); John Champagne, *Aesthetic Modernism and Masculinity in Fascist Italy* (London: Routledge, 2012); Derek Duncan, *Reading and Writing Italian Homosexuality: A Case of Possible Difference* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006); the special issue of *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 10, no. 3 (2005).

³ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Volume One, an Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 43. In terms of the adult child binary: two examples from contemporary Italian film, both of which are “queer” in the way they link this deconstruction to questions around masculinity and male sexuality: Aurelio Grimaldi’s 1992 film *La discesa di Aclà a Floristella* and Gianni Amelio’s 2004 *Le chiavi di casa*.

⁴ Champagne, *Aesthetic Modernism*.

⁵ Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon, “Queering History,” *PMLA* 120, no. 5 (2005): 1609-10. On the queer unhistoricism debates, see also Valerie Traub, “The New Unhistoricism in Queer Studies,” *PMLA* 128, no. 1 (2013): 21-39, 279.

⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” in *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, eds. Richard Macksey and Eugene Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), 247-65.

⁷ To cite just one example, via her reading of Francesco De Sanctis (1817-1883), Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg has argued that certain Italian male intellectuals have long lamented the “insincerity” of the Italian character, its “lack of interiority” that De Sanctis relates to “a feminized and feminizing sentimentality, to a rhetorical quality of Italians that severs their relationship to the word and catapults them into the melodramatic world of music and opera.” Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg, *The Pinocchio Effect, On Making Italians 1860-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 15.

the figure of Silvio Berlusconi (though even he, with his grotesque machismo on the one hand and liposuction and face-lifts on the other, is open to a critical queer reading).

Second, modern understandings of sex/gender are themselves contradictory and in their contradictions overdetermine any contemporary reading of Italian masculinity. The epistemologies of gender and sexuality that operated in ancient Rome do not operate today. For, as Kevin Floyd has argued, there is a determinate relationship between capitalism and “the reification of desire” that informs post-psychoanalytic conceptions of gender/sexuality.⁸ Yet because of the “radical and irreducible” incoherence of these understandings of sex/gender, in this modern dispensation, Italian masculinity often seems queer.⁹

In other words, desire is perceived as a universal attribute and yet one that has proper and improper objects, depending upon one’s gender (and, in Freud, at least, one’s “constitution” and its ability to submit to the cultural demands of the Oedipus Complex).¹⁰ Yet the assumption that one’s desire “ought” to line up, according to one’s gender, with a particular (heterosexual) object choice is itself the acknowledgement that it may not. Reading Eve Sedgwick, Floyd argues that while the reification of desire makes possible the construction of majority (heterosexual) and minority (homosexual) sexual subjectivities, a universalized sexual desire “presupposes a sexual desire irreducible to and disruptive of subjectivity as such.”¹¹ The persistent presence in Italy of a past in which, rather than modern notions of sexual “identity,” appetite (in the Greco-Roman world) and then sin (or lack thereof) determined what one ought to do and with whom, has rendered Italy a particularly queer place.

Third, the degree to which Italian masculinity is queer is of course relative to other epistemologies that both construct male and female (and homosexuality and heterosexuality) as binary opposites and posit a relationship (or relationships) between gender and sexual desire. The question of when the late nineteenth century European model of sexuality makes its discursive/institutional premier in Italy (and yet coexists with earlier models) is still to be explored in more detail. Italy had no Wilde trials, but it had a Marinetti willing to criticize them.¹² Italy also had both a sexology movement and even sexological journals.¹³ But so impossible was the idea of homosexuality that the Rocco laws cannot even name it to outlaw it—and not simply because homosex’s interdiction was taken for granted. Rather, this silence was preceded by an admittedly contained “discursive explosion,”¹⁴ a debate whose purpose was precisely to deny the extent to which Italy’s historical reputation was colored by rumors of this “*vizio*.”¹⁵

⁸ Kevin Floyd, *The Reification of Desire, Towards a Queer Marxism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009). See in particular 62-66.

⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 85.

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (Eastford, CT: Martino Fine, 2011).

¹¹ Kevin Floyd, *Reification*, 62.

¹² F. T. Marinetti, “Discorso futurista agli inglesi,” in L. De Maria, ed., *Teoria e invenzione futurista* (Milan: Mondadori, 1983), 282-83.

¹³ On this movement, see, for example, Chiara Beccalossi, “The Origin of Italian Sexological Studies: Female Sexual Inversion, ca. 1870-1900,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 18, no. 1 (2009): 103-20. Italy’s first sexological journal was *Archivio delle psicopatie sessuali*, edited by Pasquale Penta, in 1896. See Giovanni Dall’Orto, “Pasquale Penta,” accessed January 21, 2014, http://www.wikipink.org/index.php?title=Pasquale_Penta and *Archivio delle psicopatie sessuali*, accessed January 21, 2014, http://www.wikipink.org/index.php?title=Archivio_delle_psicopatie_sessuali. During the fascist period, Aldo Mieli (1879-1950), who was Jewish, edited *Rassegna di studi sessuali* before fleeing the fascists. On Mieli, see Giovanni Dall’Orto, “Aldo Mieli (1879- 1950): un pioniere gay dimenticato,” accessed January 21, 2014, <http://www.giovannidallorto.com/biografie/aldomieli/aldomieli.html>.

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *History, Volume One*.

¹⁵ On homosexuality and the Rocco code, see Gianni Dall’Orto, “La ‘Tolleranza Repressiva’ dell’omosessualità,” accessed March 13, 2014, <http://www.giovannidallorto.com/saggistoria/tollera/tolle2d.html>; on fascism and homosexuality, see also Benadusi, *Il nemico*; Dario Petrosino, “Traditori della stirpe: il razzismo contro gli omosessuali

Again, this queerness is not a matter of volition; it emerges out of the contradictions of Italy's history. During the fascist period, for example, it provided on the one hand the conditions of possibility of a bellicose, violent and belligerent masculinity and the sending of men perceived as effeminate into confinement. On the other, in this same environment, artists such as Corrado Cagli, Filippo de Pisis, Guglielmo Janni, and Sandro Penna were able to employ a variety of tropes from Italy's artistic past—classical imagery, imagery from the Hebrew and Christian bibles, the image of *la divina fanciulla*—to figure a homoerotic masculinity both virile and effeminate to varying degrees.¹⁶

Berlusconi's infamous declaration that “è meglio essere appassionato di belle ragazze che gay” would seem to stand as evidence that Italian masculinity is far from queer.¹⁷ But one of the foundational concepts of queer studies is what Eve Sedgwick termed the homosocial, a phenomenon that contains elements of both homoeroticism and homophobia. Berlusconi's remark, made, not coincidentally at Milan's *Fiera del Motociclo*, finds its historical conditions of possibility in the homosocial. Although Sedgwick's original definition was largely circumscribed to the 19th century, the homosocial has come to refer to the bonds between men that patriarchal, phallogocentric, heteronormative societies depend upon.¹⁸ At least since Freud, such bonds are assumed to carry an inescapable erotic charge, as they are a sublimation of both male homoeroticism and aggression.

To name some of those historical circumstances that have overdetermined this contradictory Italian masculinity: Platonism and its requirement that the philosopher desire the boy sexually but attempt to resist consummating that desire; Rome's devotion to all things Greek, emblemized in Horace's *Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit*; the Roman system of political clientelism and the homosocial bonds on which it depended; widely circulated reports that Julius Caesar had a sexual dalliance, as a young man, with Nicomedes IV of Bithynia, *prostratae regi pudicitiae*;¹⁹ Hadrian's

nella stampa del Fascismo,” in *Studi sul razzismo italiano*, eds. Luciano Casali and Alberto Burgio (Bologna: CLUEB, 1996), 89-107.

¹⁶ Floyd, *Reification*, 64. As Floyd notes, “This reification of desire compels a reconstitution of the very gender epistemology that mediates it,” for psychoanalysis itself notes that, on the one hand, what is presumed to be normal as a desire is fueled by gender difference; but at the same time, psychoanalysis notes that desire can also be fueled by gender sameness. This contradiction played itself out both in early sexological discourse (for example, in the *figures* of the effete Wilde and the man's man Whitman, or the Uranians, who believed themselves to be women trapped in men's bodies, and the various sexologists, discussed by Andrew Hewitt, who subscribed to what he calls a “philosophy of masculinism,”) and Freud's own inability to settle the relationship between sexual “inversion” and gender identification. See Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays*; Andrew Hewitt, *Political Inversions: Homosexuality, Fascism, and the Modernist Imaginary* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

¹⁷ See, for example, “Meglio le belle ragazze che essere gay,” *Corriere della Sera*, accessed March 12, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1i4QODb>. See also “Berlusconi sul caso Ruby: ‘Meglio appassionati di belle donne che gay,’” *La Stampa*, February 2, 2010, accessed March 12, 2014, <http://www1.lastampa.it/redazione/cmsSezioni/politica/201011articoli/60084girata.asp>. For a chronicle of Berlusconi's homophobic remarks, see Wil Nonleggerlo, “Gay, la faccia tosta di B,” *L'Espresso*, January 8, 2013, accessed March 12, 2014, <http://espresso.repubblica.it/googlenews/2013/01/08/news/gay-la-faccia-tosta-di-b-1.49420>. For the response of LGBTQ Italian rights group Arcigay, see “Berlusconi e il caso Ruby: ‘Meglio che essere gay.’ È bufera,” November 2, 2010, http://tg24.sky.it/tg24/politica/2010/11/02/silvio_berlusconi_fiera_motociclo_milano.html. For a summary of international response to Berlusconi's remarks, see “‘Meglio le belle ragazze che essere gay’: la battuta di Berlusconi fa il giro del mondo,” accessed March 12, 2014, http://tg24.sky.it/tg24/mondo/photogallery/2010/11/02/berlusconi_caso_ruby_battuta_gay_stampa_estera.html#4.

¹⁸ Eve Sedgwick, *Between Men, English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985). For a related account of relations between men, see Luce Irigaray, “Commodities Among Themselves,” *This Sex Which is Not One* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 192-7.

¹⁹ Suetonius, cited in Josiah Osgood, “Caesar and Nicomedes,” *The Classical Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (2008): 687. Whether or not this rumor was true, it was reported as early as Suetonius' biography of Caesar, 119-122 AD. On the dating of the biographies, see Tristan J. Power, “Pliny, Letters 5.10 and the Literary Career of Suetonius,” *The Journal of Roman Studies*

relationship with and subsequent deification of Antinous;²⁰ the writings of Paul of Tarsus and their contradictory attitudes toward the sex act;²¹ the historical memory of the Roman empire and the physical presence in Italy of its ruins; Christianity's tortuous attempts to appropriate pagan learning (Augustine of Hippo being the most relevant example from late antiquity); the hundreds of years of the papacy; the Renaissance and its self-conscious aping of the ancient world, including (Neo)platonism; twentieth century Italian neoclassicism, which animated both Mussoliniana kitsch and many versions of Italian painterly modernism.²² My suggestion is that the idea of ancient Rome historically dominated the artistic and philosophical landscape of much of the area that came to be Italy, and with this domination came the historical detritus of ways of imaging sexuality and gender that complicate the modern understandings of gender, sexual desire, and the relationship between the two.

To pursue one theme, culled from the ruins of several centuries of history, in my apparently idiosyncratic list: the attempt to reconcile Greco-Roman learning and culture with Christianity—a project that, given the papacy's long lasting influence on Italy, continues at least into the twentieth century, if not beyond.²³ This attempt included the elaboration of the erotics of relationships between men. The Hellenization of Rome brought with it not only the model of the relationship of the *erastes* and *eromenous*—the sexual contours of which are, in the texts of Plato, contradictory—but also a certain concern around how to exercise moderation in such relationships.²⁴

100 (2010): 140-162. On Roman Homosexuality, see Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Williams argues that “independently of Greek influence, Roman moral traditions always allowed for sexual practices between males in certain configurations and contexts.” Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 14. Pollini summarizes Williams's larger argument, stating, “Although ambisexuality was the norm for the Roman male, it was a qualified norm because...a Roman male citizen was expected to be the penetrator (*fututor paedicator, or irrumator*).” John Pollini, “The Warren Cup: Homoerotic Love and Symposial Rhetoric in Silver,” *The Art Bulletin* 81, no. 1 (1999): 24. As for knowledge of Suetonis' biographies of the Cesars during the Renaissance and beyond, in 1470, two editions appeared in Rome within months of each other. John C. Rolfe, “Suetonius and his Biographies,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 52, no. 209 (1913): 206.

²⁰ Williams argues that, because Antinous was not a freeborn Roman, none of Hadrian's contemporaries were scandalized by his relationship. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 64. As a result, plenty of evidence of their liaison survived antiquity.

²¹ See, for example, Romans 1, for his linking of homosexual acts to idol worship and pantheism; and 1 Corinthians 7:8-10 for ambivalence about marriage. See also Matthew 19:12, wherein Jesus speaks of self-castration for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.

²² Numerous modernist painters from this period, including those associated with both the *Novecento* and the *Scuola Romana*, looked to both Paolo Uccello and Piero della Francesca for inspiration, including Giuseppe Capogrossi, Guglielmo Janni, Carlo Carrà, and Onofrio Martinelli.

²³ Given the papacy's opposition to its very existence, young Italy engaged in an extended struggle to replace “Catholic” values with secular ones. Such a struggle suggests the continuing influence of the church, even after unification. For example, the new state attempted to oversee and manage the sexual morality of its citizens by substituting a late 19th century discourse of “health” for the traditional religious obsession with “purity.” Bruno P. F. Wanrooij, *Storia del pudore: la questione sessuale in Italia, 1860-1940* (Venice: Marsilio, 1990).

²⁴ See, for example, both *The Phaedrus* and *The Symposium*, each of which on the one hand argue for chastity between the lover and his beloved and on the other deconstruct, in their different ways, the hierarchy heavenly/earthly love—so much so that Renaissance painters could not often decide which of the two ought to be clothed and which naked. Compare, for example, Titian's c. 1514 *Sacred and Profane Love*, at Rome's Galleria Borghese, in which Sacred Love is portrayed as a nearly naked woman, and Giovanni Baglione's 1602 painting on the same subject, today in the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica at Rome's Palazzo Barberini, wherein a nearly naked Profane Love is virtually trampled by his clothed Other. Foucault's argument is presented in Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume Two, The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 185-286. Eva Cantarella provides a detailed analysis of what she terms bisexuality in the ancient world, noting, for example, the way Roman society had its own mores around homosexuality that were then augmented in the late republican period by Greek practices. Eva Cantarella, *Secondo Natura. La bisessualità nel mondo antico* (Roma: Riuniti, 1988). Apparently, Roman homosexual practices were as syncretic as

It is this lack of moderation that in the early Christian years drives Athenagoras (ca. 133-190 CE) to distraction, as he rails against “infamous resorts of the young for every kind of vile pleasure, who do not abstain even with males, males with males committing shocking abominations, outraging all the noblest and most beautiful bodies in all sorts of ways.”²⁵ Yet his prose here confesses what it seeks to contain, for a pleasure that is vile is a pleasure nonetheless, and he cannot help but notice those beautiful bodies engaged in its pursuit. Similarly, Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-c. 215 CE) on the one hand chastises the Emperor Hadrian for having deified Antinous and yet admits both that Antinous’s beauty “was extremely rare” and that lust for such a body “is not easy to restrain, being devoid of fear, as it is now.”²⁶ Note that neither of these Christian apologists denies either the beauty of boys or its attractions.

In late antiquity, Augustine’s account, in the *Confessions*, of the death of a dear friend (*amicum...nimis charum*),²⁷ a friend too sweet (*dulcis erat nimis*, *Confessiones* 7), provides one of the most moving attempts to rewrite Platonic friendship via Christianity, Augustine’s narrative queer in terms of the unbridled passion with which it describes his loss: “*Expetebant eum undique oculi mei / My eyes sought him everywhere*” (*Confessiones* 9)—perhaps an echo of the *Song of Songs*, 3:1-2. He compares their relationship to that of Pylades and Orestes (*Confessiones* 11)—who are portrayed in Lucian’s (c. 120-80 CE) *Amores* as (obviously) lovers²⁸—and offers the analogy of one soul in two bodies (“*animam in duobus corporibus*”).²⁹

The Renaissance’s enthusiasm for the Greeks finds perhaps one of its queerest expressions in Pico della Mirandola’s question, “Who does not wish to have breathed into him the Socratic frenzies sung by Plato in the *Phaedrus*?”³⁰ According to one scholar, Marsilio Ficino’s writings helped facilitate the process whereby the lover/beloved relationship described in the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* comes to be figured in the Renaissance via the Zeus/Ganymede trope, Ganymede representing “an emblem of Christian rapture.”³¹ The attitudes of the Neoplatonists to sex between males is still a point of contention.³² And then there is the continuing scandal of Antonio Beccadelli’s

Roman religion and art. On the other hand, in late antiquity, both pagan and Christian attitudes toward same sex relations shifted toward interdiction. On Greek and Roman sexualities, see also Beert C. Verstraete and Vernon Provencal, eds., *Same-Sex Desire and Love in Greco-Roman Antiquity and in the Classical Tradition of the West*, *Journal of Homosexuality* 49, no. 3-4 (2005).

²⁵ Cited in Elaine Pagels, “Christian Apologists and ‘The Fall of the Angels’: An Attack on Roman Imperial Power?”, *The Harvard Theological Review* 78, no. 3-4 (1985): 311.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 318.

²⁷ St. Augustine, *Liber Quartus*, in *Confessiones*, eds. M. Dubois and Edward Bouverie Pusey, accessed March 12, 2014, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/33849/33849-h/33849-h.htm>, 7. Numbers refer to sections. My translation.

²⁸ Lucian, “The History of Orestes and Pylades,” from *Amores*, trans. W. J. Bayles, accessed March 12, 2014, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/pwh/lucian-orest.asp>. Interestingly, Lucian suggests that their relationship complicates the characteristic lover/beloved pairing. For another translation, see also Pseudo-Lucian, *Affairs of the Heart*, trans. A. M. Harmon (Loeb Edition), 47-48, accessed March 12, 2014, <http://www.well.com/user/aquarius/lucian-amores.htm>. See in particular: “For, when the honourable love inbred in us from childhood matures to the manly age that is now capable of reason, the object of our longstanding affection gives love in return and it’s difficult to detect which is the lover of which, since the image of the lover’s tenderness has been reflected from the loved one as though from a mirror” (48). This is obviously a riff on Plato’s *Phaedrus*.

²⁹ An intertextual reference to Ovid’s *Tristia* and its “*qui duo corporibus mentibus unus erant*.” Ovid, *Tristia* IV, accessed March 12, 2014, http://archive.org/stream/ovidtristiaexpon011949mbp/ovidtristiaexpon011949mbp_djvu.txt. This information appears in n. 74 to St. Augustine, *Confessiones*. Having read both Plato and the Hebrew Bible prior to the *Confessions*, my students, quite “naturally,” assume that Augustine is writing of the death of a male lover. My translation.

³⁰ Charles H. Carman, “Michelangelo’s ‘Bacchus’ and Divine Frenzy,” *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 2, no. 4 (1983): 7.

³¹ John Goodman, “Paris with Ganymede: A Critical Supplement to Damisch’s ‘Judgment,’” *Oxford Art Journal* 28, no. 2 (2005): 232.

³² See, for example, Giovanni Dall’Orto, “‘Socratic love’ as a Disguise for Same-Sex Love in the Italian Renaissance,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 16, no. 1-2 (1989): 33-66.

Hermaphroditus, a book of ambisexual eroticism dedicated to Cosimo de' Medici.

As for the Catholic response to the Reformation, regardless of the actual sexual exploits of Cardinal Francesco Maria del Monte, for hundreds of years, his alleged preference for boys has produced a variety of queer speculations.³³ And at the end of his career, 1640-44, the fervently religious and reputedly sexually tortured Guido Reni produces an *Anima Beata*, now at Rome's Capitoline museums. In this canvas, God, in the form of rays of light, has apparently become the lover, and a nearly naked boy-angel, the beloved; the boy's arms outstretched, hips cocked in an exaggerated *contrapposto*, and a rose colored fluttering loincloth discreetly covering and at the same time drawing attention to his genitals.³⁴ Following the Baroque, the next three centuries saw first Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768), then Walter Pater (1839-1894), and then Wilhelm von Gloeden (1856-1931) homo-seduced by Italy and ancient pederasty.³⁵ Finally, recent work in art history has insisted upon "the tenacity in the Mediterranean basin of the *erastes/eromenos* model and its attendant fantasy structures, within which the (adult) male desire for anal penetration is simultaneously shamed and marked with transgressive allure."³⁶

Obviously, in an essay of this length, I cannot read, for signs of queer masculinity, the entire history of the geographical territory that constitutes the present-day nation-state of Italy. But following this very brief survey of the pederastic relationship, I use the remainder of this essay to continue to experiment with the idea of Italy as historically queer. In a more circumscribed manner, I investigate a relatively recent attempt to "de-queer" a figure that is simultaneously being marketed by Italy to potential gay tourists: the painter Michaelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610)—a painter whose influence links Lombardy with Venice, Naples, and Sicily.³⁷

In the concluding chapters of what is often a superior study of the patronage of Caravaggio, Creighton E. Gilbert sets out first to disprove "the thesis that Caravaggio was a homosexual."³⁸ Note that this thesis is itself nonsensical, given that the operative categories whereby sexual proclivities were understood in Caravaggio's day were not identity—but behavior-based. That is, many critics who argue that Caravaggio was "queer" would in fact not characterize him a homosexual. But Gilbert goes even further, stating, "The proposed indications of homosexuality on the part of Caravaggio, [his patron] Cardinal Del Monte, and the god Bacchus thus seem to lack any basis in the reports of their lives."³⁹ Gilbert then sets out to prove that it is inappropriate to propose a "homosexual reading" of any of Caravaggio's canvases.

³³ For an engaging "queer" reading of the historical context and cultural milieu in which del Monte lived, see Genevieve Warwick, "Allegories of Eros: Caravaggio's Masque," in *Caravaggio: Realism, Rebellion, Reception*, ed. Genevieve Warwick (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007), 82-90.

³⁴ It should be noted that the painting also suggests a Christian reworking of Danae penetrated by Zeus in the form of a shower of gold coins.

³⁵ On Gloeden and his photographs of boys, see Robert Aldrich, *The Seduction of the Mediterranean: Writing, Art, and Homosexual Fantasy* (London: Routledge, 1993). On Pater and his teacher Benjamin Jowett, see Daniel Orrells, *Classical Culture and Modern Masculinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 97-145. On Winckelmann's ideas about pederasty, see Whitney Davis, *Queer Beauty: Sexuality and Aesthetics from Winckelmann to Freud and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

³⁶ Goodman, "Paris," 232.

³⁷ Ross Belford, "The Mysterious Death of Caravaggio," *Sud Est Welcome Magazine* 5 (2013): 38. A recent promotional article confides breathlessly that, fleeing Malta, Caravaggio arrived in Siracusa "distracted, restless, penniless and in fear of his life, seeking refuge at the house of his former student, model—and lover—Mario Minniti." Several cities on the Mediterranean—Naples, Valletta, Syracuse, Messina—house Caravaggios. A Minniti crucifixion can also be seen today at Messina's Museo Regionale. It should further be noted that Caravaggio came from Lombardy, but traveled early in his career through Venice, to then work in Rome and beyond.

³⁸ Creighton E. Gilbert, *Caravaggio and his Two Cardinals* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 191.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 215.

The inclusion of the god Bacchus is required because Gilbert is responding to a claim by another art historian: according to Gilbert, “[Donald] Posner identified as a homosexual a third person who has a role in Caravaggio’s early art, the god Bacchus.”⁴⁰ As for effeminacy and its imputed relationship to homosexuality, Gilbert argues—in a decidedly, if unintentionally, queer gesture—that “just as today, with the sexual revolutions, the credibility of this equation of effeminate and homosexual has greatly diminished, so it seems not to have arisen at all in Caravaggio’s time.”⁴¹ In fact, in disproving Caravaggio’s homosexuality, Gilbert instead proposes a Renaissance far queerer than contemporary times—one in which men felt no taboo in expressing a feeling of love for other men at all, and in which no one felt compelled to disguise his indulgence in sodomy.⁴²

Gilbert relies on a pre-Freudian understanding of sexuality; he argues that it is precisely Freudian notions projected back into the past that have led to the misreading of Caravaggio as homosexual and some of his painted figures as effeminately so.⁴³ That his own understanding of both sexuality and gender is pre-Freudian is made clear when Gilbert tries to convince readers that there is nothing necessarily homoerotic about two men playfully wrestling on a bed, that “group male nudity survives today among swimmers—entirely without homosexual overtones, one may need to specify,” that the sharing between men of accounts of their “sexual triumphs” has no homoerotic charge, and that fraternity initiations that involve literally touching the genitals of another male should not be subject to a homosexual reading.⁴⁴ He also suggests that “nudity was certainly more frequent and less charged with overtones of sex in Caravaggio’s culture than today.”⁴⁵ That an art historian would momentarily “forget,” for example, the Counter-reformation’s frantic adding of fig leaves to classical sculpture is odd, to say the least.⁴⁶

In Gilbert’s account, eroticism seems largely a matter of conscious intention, and what is missing from this discussion of “sexual overtones” is precisely the homosocial, for the implication is that one simply is or is not homosexual. On the other hand, Gilbert’s reading of the history of sexuality and gender deconstructs itself, for to name the young men in many of Caravaggio’s canvases “the pretty boy figure,” and to recognize the figure as effeminate and heterosexual, is to acknowledge its queerness.⁴⁷

Interestingly, Gilbert’s heteronormative framework only allows him to consider the homoeroticism of Caravaggio’s “effeminate” boys. As a result, he does not discuss the numerous sexy male torsos in Caravaggio’s canvases and the way the painter’s characteristic chiaroscuro reflects off of and caresses their muscles, whether those muscles be naked (as in the *Martyrdom of St. Matthew*, the *Flagellation of Christ*, and the adolescent St. Johns in Kansas City and Rome’s Palazzo Corsini) or in tights (as in the *Calling of St. Matthew*, the *Beheading of St. John*, and the *Taking of Christ*). He concedes that it is the “unique sensory realism of Caravaggio’s paint surfaces and lighting” that

⁴⁰ Ibid., 207.

⁴¹ Ibid., 219.

⁴² Ibid., 209, 223, 240. Gilbert bases his conclusions on the relatively few men actually executed for the crime, insisting that “the literature consistently exaggerates the effective punishments for homosexuality in this period.” There is an implicit teleological assumption that, if in 1542 Cellini got away with his life, then, by Caravaggio’s time, sodomy must have been no big deal. For a different reading of why relatively few men were actually executed for sodomy, see Maurice Lever, *Les Bûchers de Sodome* (Paris: Fayard, 1985) and Michael Rocke, *Forbidden Friendship, Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁴³ Ibid., 221.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 209, 241, 243–44.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 237.

⁴⁶ In this context, it should also be noted that Daniele da Volterra’s infamous veiling of Michelangelo’s figures in the Sistine Chapel’s *Last Judgment* occurred in 1564.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 233.

have led to the reading of some of Caravaggio's male figures as carrying an erotic charge.⁴⁸ As soon as he opens this door, however, he shuts it again, for his framework does not allow him to recognize that in fact all of Caravaggio's male bodies, saints and sinners, have this quality. In other words, he doesn't recognize that "even" those paintings that have not been assigned what he calls a "homosexual intent"—as his example, he mentions Saint Matthew—present eroticized male bodies. Why Caravaggio should choose, for example, to emphasize the muscular buttocks of one of the guards in the *Taking of Christ*, for example—placing him in the immediate foreground of the painting; having him turned so as to give us a nearly three quarter view of his rear-end; dressing that rear-end in red and some kind of jock-strap-like gold garment that emphasizes its shape; lighting it dramatically; contrasting the fabric in which it is draped with the surface of the soldier's armor—is not entertained.

To return to Gilbert's thesis: is there anything in Bacchus' life to suggest he was queer? Bacchus was a cross-dresser. Even Gilbert acknowledges this, but he concludes, queerly, that Euripides posited a causal relationship between the god's dressing like a woman and his seduction of women—the implication being that women are turned on by effeminate men. Or so some guys, like Pentheus, often complain. Gilbert is suggesting here that Euripides is employing a comic trope, "the bellicose man who is baffled when he finds women prefer another, one whose costume he had supposed was effeminate."⁴⁹ But even if this is so, it still suggests (and Gilbert's argument that Caravaggio's *Bacchuses* are not homosexual in fact depends upon this) that some women may be turned on by girly guys.⁵⁰

Euripides suggests that the god's effeminacy is so alluring that, providing a queer contrast to Pentheus, both Cadmus and Tiresias are eager to join the party. Cadmus asks, "Where must I go and dance? Where do I get/to move my feet and shake my old gray head?"⁵¹ Tiresias councils Pentheus to "celebrate/these Bacchic rites with garlands on your head."⁵² Pentheus, however, disparages the god's "sweet-smelling hair in golden ringlets" and calls him "this effeminate stranger."⁵³

In works of sculpture from antiquity, Bacchus' hairstyle is often portrayed in ways that art historians have argued are either effeminate or even that of a woman. As one scholar contends, the *Bacchus* from Hadrian's Villa is characterized as sporting "a cascade of hair braided into a ponytail of decidedly female form," and a marble statue of the god at Rome's Palazzo Massimo identifies the figure as *Bacchus with the hairstyle of a woman*.⁵⁴ What is particularly startling in many images of the god is the fact that, while he sports a feminine (if not female) hairdo, he is also depicted naked.⁵⁵

Several other moments from Euripides' original are queer enough to be worth citing here. At

⁴⁸ Ibid., 214.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 213.

⁵⁰ It should be noted that Caravaggio painted several figures subsequently associated with the god.

⁵¹ Euripides, *The Bacchae*, trans. Ian Johnson, accessed January 20, 2014, <https://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/euripides/euripides.htm>, 232-33. Reference to line.

⁵² Ibid., 397-98.

⁵³ Ibid., 293, 449. It should be noted that Pentheus brings up his hair again in line 299.

⁵⁴ Elizabeth Bartman, "Eros's Flame: Images of Sexy Boys in Roman Ideal Sculpture," *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome, Supplementary Volumes*, Vol. 1, *The Ancient Art of Emulation: Studies in Artistic Originality and Tradition from the Present to Classical Antiquity* (2002): 257.

⁵⁵ Alastair J. L. Blanshard, *Sex, Vice and Love from Antiquity to Modernity* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). Alastair Blanshard provides a compelling analysis of why, from its beginning in the art of antiquity, Greco-Roman nakedness could signify simultaneously as "ideal" and "quotidian." He is particularly attentive to the contradictory ideologies that informed representations of the naked body and argues that these contradictory constructions still inform our readings of the nude today. See, for example, the so-called *Richelieu Dionysus* in the Louvre, or the bronze version in Rome's Palazzo Massimo (Inv. No. 1060) or the marble version at the Palazzo Altemps.

one point, quoting Zeus and speaking to Dionysus, the chorus sings, “Enter my male womb.”⁵⁶ And the play culminates in the dressing of Pentheus as a woman.⁵⁷ But when initially confronted with Cadmus and Tiresias, Pentheus says to the two men, “go to these Bacchic rituals of yours. / But don’t infect me with your madness.”⁵⁸ What is queer about the *Bacchae* then, is its tampering with boundaries of gender and its reflection on the disease such tampering can bring.

Ovid borrows from Euripides the idea that Pentheus sees Bacchus as effeminate, though the reference is oblique, as he is imploring his fellow Thebeans “vos pellite molles,” “drive away these effeminates.”⁵⁹ As for his hair, he describes it as “madidus murra crinis mollesque coronae,” “Myrrh soaked hair soft crown.”⁶⁰ Concerning Renaissance images of the god, given that they are often modeled on classical antecedents, they, too, appear effeminate.

Euripides’ *Bacchae* is a pretty queer play, then, regardless of whether or not it speaks of homosexuality. It is certainly true that the play begins with the god celebrating his effects on women.⁶¹ And later, Pentheus specifically references the way these women “creep off one by one to lonely spots / to have sex with men.”⁶²

But there are also intimations that Dionysus might be sexually arousing to both men and women, Pentheus himself “cruising” the god to see what the fuss is all about:

Well, stranger, I see this body of yours
is not unsuitable for women’s pleasure—
that’s why you’ve come to Thebes. As for your hair,
it’s long, which suggests that you’re no wrestler.
It flows across your cheeks. That’s most seductive.
You’ve a white skin, too. You’ve looked after it,
avoiding the sun’s rays by staying in the shade,
while with your beauty you chase Aphrodite.⁶³

The passage suggests the artificiality of any modern attempt to disentangle sexuality from gender, for part of the god’s appeal to both men and women is his effeminate appearance. In other words, to posit, as Gilbert does, that Dionysus is effeminate and sexually appealing to women—but not to men—is to mask the contradictions of the modern sex/gender system that Sedgwick so carefully reveals. In the ancient world, there is no necessary expectation that Dionysus is homosexual—but no expectation that he is heterosexual, either.

There is also written evidence of Dionysian cults being associated with male homoeroticism from as early as 186 BCE when the Roman senate considered banning the god’s worship.⁶⁴ According to Livy, “More uncleanness was wrought by men with men than with women.”⁶⁵ And Gilbert is simply wrong that there is no evidence of Bacchus’ erotic interest in males, as we see in

⁵⁶ Euripides, *The Bacchae*, 658.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 437-38.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ P. Ovidi, *Nasonis Metamorphoseon Liber Tertius, The Latin Library*, accessed January 20, 2014, <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/ovid/ovid.met3.shtml>, 547. Reference to line. My translation.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 555. My translation.

⁶¹ Euripides, *The Bacchae*, 41-6.

⁶² Ibid., 278-9.

⁶³ Ibid., 564-71.

⁶⁴ Blanshard, *Sex*, 59.

⁶⁵ Titus Livius, *The History of Rome*, Vol. 6, ed. Ernest Rhys, trans. Rev. Canon Roberts (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1905), <http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/txt/ah/livy/livy39.html>, 39.13. References are to book and section number. It should be further noted that Livy’s works were much studied by Renaissance humanists.

Ovid's *Fasti*: "It's said that hairy Ampelus, son of a nymph and satyr / Was loved by Bacchus, among the Ismarian hills."⁶⁶ Even more damningly, after he was deified, Hadrian's lover Antinous was represented in a number of different guises, including those of Bacchus/Dionysus, Apollo and Hermes, but at least one critic has argued that his identification with Bacchus has been the most frequent.⁶⁷ Antinous was the last new god added to the Roman pantheon and, as he was first a human being, following Antinous' apotheosis, Dionysus begins to look more like him, rather than vice versa.⁶⁸

As for Gilbert's insistence that the image of the pretty boy was heterosexual, another scholar argues of this Imperial period iconography that, "emulative of Greek statuary in their form, theme, and setting, these [what the writer terms "sexy boy"] works in their youthful eroticism recall aspects of a specifically Greek homosexual culture."⁶⁹ In other words, regardless of whether or not the figure represented is one whose image is, according to mythology, heterosexual—Gilbert's favored example is Paris, though another common one is Adonis—the connotations of the image were homoerotic. Or to put this another way, and as we saw with Bacchus, just because Paris and Adonis had passionate sexual relationships with women does not mean that their images connoted heterosexuality.⁷⁰ Dionysus's queer gender and sexuality are perhaps best embodied in his son Priapus, a startling statue of which is housed in the Vatican's Pio Clementino Museum.⁷¹ Tucked away in a wall niche, but in the same octagonal court as the *Laocoön*, the god appears as a bearded man with fruit on his head. He wears a (woman's) *stola*, which he lifts with one hand to reveal his naked thighs, testicles, and his large erection, which is itself surrounded by fruits, foliage, and

⁶⁶ Ovid, "Book III: March 5," in *Fasti*, trans. A. S. Kline, accessed January 20, 2014, http://poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/OvidFastiBkThree.htm#_Toc69367767, 407-408. Reference to line.

⁶⁷ François Lenormant, "L'Antinoüs D'Éleusis," *Revue Archéologique*, Nouvelle Série 28 (1874): 218.

⁶⁸ Luna Freedman, "Michelangelo's Reflections on Bacchus," *Artibus et Historiae* 24, no. 47 (2003): 128. In other words, the recognizable features of Antinous appear on statues with attributes of Dionysus such as a crown of ivy; as Freedman proposes, "Ancient authors singled out the ivy wreath as the god's quintessential attribute." See, for example, the bust of Antinous at Rome's Capitoline Museum, from the Hadrian period (No. MC294) or the *Braschi Antinous* in the Vatican. While the Roman name for Dionysus is Bacchus, Hadrian was a philhellene, and this seems to have influenced Antinous's identification with the name Dionysus. On Hadrian's Hellenism, see Anthony R. Birley, *Hadrian: The Restless Emperor* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1993). This is not, however, to suggest that other versions of the god disappeared; the Galleria Borghese in Rome has a marble *Dionysus* it labels as "of the Madrid Richelieu type" Praxiteles and from the Hadrianic period. For a description of this type of bronze statue see Callistratus "8. On the Statue of Dionysus," in *Elder Philostratus, Younger Philostratus, Callistratus*, trans. Arthur Fairbanks (London: William Heinemann, 1931), accessed March 15, 2014, <http://www.theoi.com/Text/Callistratus.html>. It is defined by its hair style, which consisted of "curly locks which fell in profusion from his forehead"; its clothing—the god wears a fawn pelt; its pose—he stands but rests his left hand on a thyrsus.

⁶⁹ Bartman, "Eros's Flame," 265. Bartman defines this type as follows: "youthful males characterized by a soft, just-pubescent physique and a relaxed, soignée pose...Mythic in subject and ideal in form, the figures recall Greek statues from the classical past. In their Roman context, however, they possessed meanings that were not only aesthetic or historical but also social and sexual. Charged erotically but at odds with traditional ideals of Roman masculinity, these statues challenge the virile ideal that has long dominated our conceptions of male sexual identity and behavior in the Roman world," 249.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 259. Reading their body postures in particular, Bartman suggests that ancient sculptural representations of figures like Paris and Adonis are "feminized" by their "passionate attachments," which "reduced them to a state of physical torpor like that of a woman." Pertinent in this context is the fact that Adrian was criticized not for his sexual relationship with Antinous but rather the way his grief led him to "womanly" behavior such as open weeping. See Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 64.

⁷¹ For a discussion of how Priapus is sometimes identified as the son of Dionysus and Venus see Emily Gowers, ed. *Horace: Satires, Book One* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 268. Gowers makes the claim that the god possesses "preposterous machismo." Clearly, she has not seen the Vatican statue to which I refer. Gowers is presumably following Alexander Ross, *Mystagogus Poeticus or the Muses Interpreter* (London: Thomas Whitaker, 1648), 365.

flowers.

During the Renaissance, Bacchus is read by Christian Neoplatonists as a figure of divine madness and “a stimulus to higher knowledge.”⁷² According to Pico, Bacchus’ role was to reveal, via nature, the divine. Two other names of obvious relevance are that inventor of the phrase “Platonic love,” Marsilio Ficino and Michelangelo himself, who sculpted a *Bacchus* often assumed in its effeminacy to express the artist’s homosexuality.⁷³ Freud perhaps most famously argued the same of Leonardo’s *Bacchus*.⁷⁴

Several critics have suggested that Caravaggio was familiar with classical images of Antinous, Bacchus, and perhaps even Antinous as Bacchus. According to Avigdor Posèq, Caravaggio may have drawn inspiration for his painted Uffizi *Bacchus* from a statue known as the Belvedere Antinous or else a large statuary group of a satyr and a youth that in the sixteenth century belonged to the Cesi family.⁷⁵ The latter portrays a slender, naked youth with an elaborate hairdo in the embrace of a satyr, the two of them seated on a rock. Posèq suggests that “more sophisticated sixteenth-century humanists perceived the Satyr’s embrace as love-making.”⁷⁶ Beyond the Renaissance, the figure of Bacchus continued to be subject to homoerotic interpretations, from von Gloeden’s photo “Bacco” to Richard Schechner’s The Performance Group’s filmed (by a young Brian De Palma) *Dionysus in ‘69*.

Conclusion

To fast forward to the contemporary, I will end with one recent film that contains queer representations of Italian masculinity and even versions of the “sexy boy” Bacchus type—Matteo Garrone’s 2008 *Gomorrah*. *Gomorrah* recounts the interweaving stories of several men, from very young adolescents to men on their deathbeds, who work in, for, or with money provided by the Camorra. They include Totò, a young boy who delivers groceries for his mother’s store but is eager to work for one of the Camorra gangs, and Ciro (nicknamed Sweet Pea) and Marco, two teenagers who quote from the film *Scarface* and think they can outmaneuver the Camorra by “working” as criminals outside of its orbit.

The film emphasizes the ways in which a highly commodified contemporary Italian masculine style influences the males in the film, particularly in regard to their own self-presentation. The film opens from literally inside a tanning booth as the first sequence portrays a gangland slaying in which several men of different ages are assassinated as they tan or receive a manicure. Dressed in little other than heavy gold chains around their necks and bikini briefs, they smooth their skin with lotion in the moments before they are killed. Wearing stud earrings, bracelets, rings, a silver necklace and a pendant, the young Totò plucks his eyebrows in front of a mirror. Later, we see him touching the bruise left on his chest by his initiation into the Camorra, in which he was required to take a bullet through a bulletproof vest. Upon finishing his first job, he is offered a new shirt. Sweet Pea and Marco dress in bright print shirts that are reminiscent of De Palma’s remake of *Scarface*. That is, part of the appeal of the Camorra is that it provides a way for men to fashion themselves as men, supplying them with a version of *la bella figura*.

⁷² Carman, “Michelangelo’s ‘Bacchus,’” 11.

⁷³ Ibid, 8-9. See also Norman O’ Brown, *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 2-4. For an analysis of Bacchus’s effeminacy as an expression of the artist’s homosexuality see Emmanuel Cooper, *The Sexual Perspective, Homosexuality and Art in the Last Hundred Years in the West* (London: Routledge, 2013), 9.

⁷⁴ Sigmund Freud, “Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood,” *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 471.

⁷⁵ Avigdor W. G. Posèq, “Caravaggio and the Antique,” *Artibus et Historiae* 11, no. 21 (1990): 147-67.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 151.

Early in the film, we see a startling portrayal of male corporeality: practicing with the automatic weapons they have stolen from one of the Camorra gangs, Sweet Pea and Marco walk along the shores of a marsh. This one-and-a-half-minute scene provides a brilliantly condensed commentary on the homosocial/homoerotic continuum, steering clear, however, of a representation of homophobia. Dressed in their bikini briefs and tennis shoes—perhaps an ironic intertextual reference to Donatello’s famously disturbing nude statue of David—they demonstrate to one another how well they can shoot (Sweet Pea’s slender physique in particular calls up the man/boy David).⁷⁷ The scene ends in a kind of simultaneous orgasm, the two of them shouting and cheering as the camera moves back and forth several times between them. In a homosocial reversal of the face-off, rather than a public confrontation in which one man challenges the virility of another in order to assert his own masculinity, the two young men proudly and lovingly display their virility to one another—a “sublimated” version of the “circle jerk,” “pissing contest,” or initiation rituals described by Gilbert.⁷⁸ Through a series of long takes and a moving camera, we are positioned as voyeurs to this homoerotic spectacle, and through their bikini briefs we catch glimpses of their genitals and buttocks. But the film also suggests that there is something stunted in these two young men who seem easily swayed by promises of money, motorcycles, and the chance to shoot.

Queering Italian masculinity remains a difficult but urgent task. Queer knowledges—the rumor, for example, that Cesare Pavese’s suicide was linked to his sexuality—are not always easy to track, and, if the rumor is true, my argument deconstructs itself, suggesting both that one of Italy’s most important twentieth century literary figures was queer and that it literally destroyed him. Pavese’s embodiment of (im)possible desires, then, suggests something of what is at stake in reading Italian masculinities queerly. To end by taking us back to the future, the suicides of three Roman teenagers last year stand as a stark reminder of what remains to be done.⁷⁹

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⁷⁷ See, for example, H. W. Janson, *The Sculpture of Donatello* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963) and Laurie Schneider, “Donatello’s Bronze David,” *Art Bulletin* 55 (1973): 213-16. Sweet Pea shares with Donatello’s statue a slender physique, as this body type has long troubled commentators on the *David*, who see in it an effeminate or homosexual masculinity.

⁷⁸ The “circle jerk” is a contest in which young men masturbate, standing in a circle. The winner of the contest is the boy who reaches orgasm first. The “pissing contest” is a competition to see who can urinate the furthest distance.

⁷⁹ On these suicides, see “Roma, si lancia nel vuoto: ‘Sono gay Italia paese libero ma esiste omofobia,’” *La Repubblica Roma.it*, October 27, 2013, http://roma.repubblica.it/cronaca/2013/10/27/news/giovane_si_suicida_nella_lettera_sono_gay_e_si_lancia_dal_com_prensorio_pantarella-69577428/?ref=search. These deaths remind us that the queer as the figure of no future can be lethal, as queerness is more than simply an ethics, but also a form of embodiment. For the text that inaugurated the “no future” debate see Lee Edelman, *No Future, Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

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