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## Michelangelo Buonarroti and Homophobia in the Renaissance

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## Michelangelo Buonarroti and Homophobia in the Renaissance

### Cover Page Footnote

Adler, Sara M. "Vittoria Colonna: Michelangelo's Perfect Muse". *Italica* 92, no. 1 (2015): 532. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43895220>. Coonin, Victor A. "Beyond the Binary: Michelangelo, Tommaso de' Cavalieri, and a Drawing at Windsor Castle." *Artibus et Historiae*, No. 78 (2018): 255-266. [Beyond\\_the\\_Binary\\_Michelangelo\\_Tommaso\\_d\(1\).pdf](#). Francese, Joseph. "On Homoerotic Tension in Michelangelo's Poetry". *MLN* 117, no. 1 (2002):17-47. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3251840>. Garrard, Mary. "Michelangelo in Love: Decoding the "Children's Bacchanal". *The Art Bulletin* 96, no. 1 (2014): 24-49. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43947705>. Liebert, Robert S. *Michelangelo: A Psychoanalytic Study of his Life and Images*. Boston: Yale University Press. (1983) Print. Maratsos, Jessica. "Michelangelo, Vittoria Colonna, and the Afterlife of Intimacy," *The Art Bulletin* 99, no. 4 (2017): 69-101. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44973217>. Rocke, Michael. *Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press. (1996) Print. Ruvoldt, Maria. "Tommaso Cavalieri, formerly Orsini: Michelangelo's Muse and Medici Cousin". *The Burlington Magazine* 157, no. 1349 (2015):530-532. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43858120>. ---. "Michelangelo's Dream". *The Art Bulletin* 85, no. 1 (2003): 86-113. [Michelangelos\\_Dream.pdf](#) ---. "Michelangelo's Mythologies". Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV. (2010) *Michelangelo's Mythologies* | Maria Ruvoldt - Academia.edu Stokstad, Marilyn and Michael W. Cothren. *Art History*, 6th Edition II. London: Laurence King Publishing Ltd. (2018) Print.

Tommaso de' Cavalieri was a young man with an aristocratic background when he first met famous artist Michelangelo Buonarroti in Rome. Tommaso was known to be an incomparable physical beauty, with intelligence and elegant manners, as well as being a member of one of the most illustrious families of Rome—the Orsini. Some have said this is what drew the artist to Cavalieri from the start.<sup>1</sup> Though not much is known about their encounter, it is confirmed that Cavalieri remained a close and loyal companion to Michelangelo for thirty-two years until the artist's death in 1564.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, throughout their years together as friends, there passed between them several letters and even a collection of drawings which contain scenes of suggested homoeroticism.<sup>3</sup> Some scholars have stated that Tommaso became the object of Michelangelo's affection, his muse, and the inspiration for the letters, drawings, and numerous poems. Given the artist's contested sexuality, the nature of these drawings and the men's relationship has been examined by numerous art historians. The drawings consisted of classical motifs and narratives which exhibit themes of ecstasy and punishment for partaking in something forbidden. In other words, the drawings present scenes which illustrate giving into something and a subsequent consequence. Additionally, given the homoerotic nature of the drawings, the conclusion would be that homosexuality is the "forbidden fruit" which Michelangelo refers to, and therefore would indicate Michelangelo subconsciously harbored internalized homophobia. This would further indicate a proposed or failed romantic attachment which could not be sustained with the artist's own internalized homophobia, produced by restrictive laws and a largely Christian society of sixteenth century Italy. Michelangelo Buonarroti gave Tommaso a multitude of drawings, including, *The Rape of Ganymede*, *The Punishment of Tityus*, *The Fall of Phaethon*, *The Children's Bacchanal* and *The Dream*, as well as letters and poetry to communicate certain messages to Tommaso, such as his affections for the young man in a society which had cultivated internalized homophobia for the artist.

In other works of scholarship, Michelangelo's sexuality, and the nature of his relationship with Tommaso has been often examined. It is known Michelangelo met Tommaso during a stay in Rome in 1532 CE, and that the pair endured as close friends, possibly lovers, for the remainder of their lives. In Joseph Francese's article, "Homoerotic Tension in Michelangelo's Poetry," Francese shows Michelangelo's fascination with the male form through his poetry

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<sup>1</sup> Maria Ruvoldt, (2015), "Tommaso Cavalieri, formerly Orsini: Michelangelo's Muse and Medici Cousin," *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 157, no. 1349, pp. 530.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43858120>.

<sup>2</sup> Sara M. Adler, (2015), "Vittoria Colonna: Michelangelo's Perfect Muse," *Italica*, vol. 92, no. 1, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43895220>, pp. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Adler, "Michelangelo's Perfect Muse," pp. 6.

and art. He also confirms the poet's infatuation with Cavalieri leads the author to feel great remorse for past homosexuality and expressed the feeling in later poems.<sup>4</sup> However, there has been some scholarship released which attempts to argue that Michelangelo was heterosexual, given his relationship with Vittoria Colonna. Sara Adler, in her article "Vittoria Colonna: Michelangelo's Perfect Muse," she argues the artist's feelings of desire for men were conflicted and ambivalent, and therefore, he preferred women. As with Tommaso, Michelangelo wrote numerous poems to and about Vittoria Colonna. As Adler also explains, Tommaso would later marry a woman and have two sons, and she argues this would indicate Tommaso did not return any possible feelings. However, what Adler does not consider is that Tommaso displays signs of affection towards Michelangelo as well. It is known they were in correspondence with one another and displayed clues of homoeroticism within letters, drawings, and poetry. It is also known that Tommaso treasured Michelangelo's remarkable gifts, and when he was forced to surrender the drawing of *Cleopatra* that Michelangelo gave to him, to Duke Cosimo de Medici, he declared its loss as like the loss of a child.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, according to Giorgio Vasari in his *Lives of the Artists*, Michelangelo drew a life-size portrait of his young friend, in which Tommaso was dressed in classical attire, holding a medal or portrait.<sup>6</sup> This is significant, as Vasari also mentioned that Michelangelo did not like to take from life "unless it presented the very perfection of beauty."<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the most important scholarship done on this subject is that of Robert Liebert. In Liebert's book *Michelangelo: A Psychoanalytic Study of His Life and Images*, he investigates Michelangelo's works, including the five drawings gifted to Tommaso, during which he concludes that while he does not believe the relationship was ever consummated, there is a display of sexual tension between the two men.

Though there has been research on Michelangelo's uncertain sexuality for many years, there has been an undercurrent of conservative bias within the scholarship. Many have claimed that the artist must have been heterosexual because of Vittoria and that it was never confirmed that Michelangelo consummated a relationship with a man. I maintain that line of thinking grossly minimizes the experience of LGBTQ+ people since the beginning of human history, as it is fact non-heterosexual people always existed but were never given proper representation or respect and were seriously criminalized and marginalized

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<sup>4</sup> Victor A. Coonin, (2018), "Beyond the Binary: Michelangelo, Tommaso de' Cavalieri, and a Drawing at Windsor Castle," *Artibus et Historiae*, No. 78, pp. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Coonin, "Beyond the Binary," 1.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Garrard, (2014), "Michelangelo in Love: Decoding the "Children's Bacchanal," *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 96 (no. 1), 24-49, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43947705>, pp. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

and are still under threat. During Michelangelo's time, there was certainly still a threat. In 1502, laws were passed in Florence that were designed to limit the practice of homosexuality. The laws were later made more severe and included penalties ranging from a fine to the loss of a hand. There were also laws against fathers who allowed their sons to engage in homosexual activity. The law provided that the house in which homosexuality was practiced could be destroyed.<sup>8</sup> In 1530, penalties for sodomy underwent revisions, and all active participants in the act, plus passive participants up to the age of twenty, were to be fined 100 scudi and sentenced to forced labor for life. The one exception was for a man aged twenty-five or above who let someone sodomize him; however, if found guilty a second time, the adult was to be burned publicly as a wicked and infamous man.<sup>9</sup> For all others, death was mandated for a third offense. For the first time in the city's history, this law displayed a horrible hatred against men who violated the cultural taboo on male sexual passivity, which was argued by the lawmakers to compromise their own and their society's masculinity.<sup>10</sup> Some homosexual men chose to hide their identity by entering in heterosexual relationships. Furthermore, Michelangelo never married anyone or had children. In fact, it seems to me that his relationship with Vittoria was primarily a platonic one, disguised as romantic, and vice versa for Tommaso. Therefore, in my paper, I maintain that because of the conservative and suffocating society of Michelangelo's time, the artist denied himself from acting his feelings and instead remained an abstinent homosexual man. I will use the drawings, letters, and poetry to prove first the attraction was present and to show how Michelangelo tried to communicate with Tommaso that while he was interested in a sexual relationship, it could never occur. Therefore, this would further prove that Michelangelo was indeed homosexual, if not bisexual, and that his own homophobia and of course the city's punishments given to homosexuals would therefore stop anything from occurring between them. This paper will argue further that we can infer these things directly from the drawings and letters given to Tommaso from Michelangelo.

In December of 1532, Michelangelo presented Tommaso with *Rape of Ganymede* (Figure 1) and *Punishment of Tityus* (Figure 2). As a pair, these first two drawings presented to Tommaso reveal Michelangelo's passion for him, as well as the artist's guilt and attempt at renunciation.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, the original

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Rocke, (1996), *Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence*, New York, and Oxford: Oxford University Press, Print, 21.

<sup>9</sup> Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 234.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Robert S. Liebert, (1983), *Michelangelo: A Psychoanalytic Study of his Life and Images*, Boston: Yale University Press, Print, pp. 285.

*Ganymede* is lost, but a reliable copy exists at the Windsor Library.<sup>12</sup> In the myth, Ganymede was the son of the King of Troy and was the most beautiful of male youths. Zeus, who desired Ganymede for his bed companion and cup bearer, swooped down disguised as an eagle and abducted the boy. Zeus assured the distraught father that his son would have immortality in the role of service to the most powerful of the gods. The Zeus and Ganymede myth gained immense popularity in Greece and Rome because it afforded religious justification for a grown man's passionate love of a boy. Over time, it was reinterpreted in keeping with Christian morality and was therefore paralleled from the ascension of Ganymede to that of St. John the Evangelist to heaven. According to Cristoforno Landino in 1529, Ganymede represents the spirit of the Christian soul and its ecstasy of leaving behind earthly elements, but this idea was not widely indoctrinated until centuries later. Therefore, still in Michelangelo's day, the Ganymede myth's original and homosexual message was common and popular, and over the course of many centuries, it was translated into a spiritual abstraction.<sup>13</sup> The contemporary version gave Michelangelo authorization to use the myth to communicate his fantasies to Tommaso. In the drawing, *The Rape of Ganymede*, the figure of Ganymede is shown with his eyes closed and his right arm limply draped over the eagle's wing. He is enraptured as the eagle spreads his legs. "It is a masterful rendering of an athletic youth feeling ecstasy by yielding to anal eroticism in the embrace of a more powerful being," as described by Robert Liebert.<sup>14</sup> Robert Liebert, in his psychoanalytic study of Michelangelo, says the following, "the fundamental element in Michelangelo's choice is, I believe, the rewards given to this mortal youth for his sexual surrendering to Zeus—immortality and eternal youth."<sup>15</sup> Would this therefore conclude that Michelangelo is communicating his desire to "abduct" Tommaso or communicating his desire to be abducted by Tommaso? It is generally accepted this drawing alludes metaphorically but openly to the artist's passion for the handsome young patrician. However, to fully understand his complete message, it is necessary to examine this drawing's counterpart, *The Punishment of Tityus*. The giant named Tityus, a mortal son of Zeus, attempted to rape Leto, the mother of Apollo and Artemis, who both killed him with arrows. He was then further tortured in the afterlife. His body was stretched out over nine acres in Hades, and his arms and legs were pegged to the ground while two vultures perpetually ate his liver—the seat of carnal desire.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the drawing symbolized the

<sup>12</sup> Jessica Maratsos, (2017), "Michelangelo, Vittoria Colonna, and the Afterlife of Intimacy," *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 99, no. 4, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44973217>, pp. 76.

<sup>13</sup> Liebert, *Michelangelo: A Psychoanalytic Study*, 278.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Adler, "Michelangelo's Perfect Muse," 8.

agony that sexual “overindulgence” was thought to deserve. Robert Liebert describes these drawings as a message that the artist found Tommaso sexually appealing but wanted to reassure the young man that his fantasies would stay inside his mind, and he would not act on them. However, what is interesting about the drawing of Tityus is that he does not appear to be in pain physically. His facial expression is ambiguous, and there is no scar from the bird’s pecking on his abdomen. Additionally, the spread of Tityus’ legs and the frontal presentation of the genitals parallel with Ganymede. Therefore, is it possible there is another underlying fantasy of sexual yielding to a disguised form of Zeus as two vultures instead of an eagle?<sup>17</sup>

*The Fall of Phaethon* (Figure 3) was then given to Cavalieri later in 1533. It was redrawn at least two times, but it is not clear why. The myth involves Phaethon, the mortal son of sun god Phoebus. Every morning, Phoebus rode his sun chariot through the skies from east to west to provide the light of day for the world. In the *Ovid*, Phaethon doubts the identity of his father, so he travels to Phoebus’s palace and Phoebus confirms his paternity and offers to grant a single wish. Phaeton boldly asks to drive the sun chariot in the sky. Despite Phoebus’ attempts to dissuade Phaeton, he persists. Once he embarks on this awesome journey, he cannot control the stallions of the chariot as they soar downward, charring the earth, killing people, and drying up the waters. Jove, or Zeus, immediately sends a lightning bolt which kills Phaeton. Phaeton’s cousin, Cygnus, the young king of Liguria, abandons his kingdom to lament his lost kinsman.<sup>18</sup> He is turned into a swan and remains on the water, forever distrusting the skies from which Zeus unjustly hurled his thunderbolt.<sup>19</sup> Liebert concludes here that by implication Cygnus is Phaethon’s lover, or at least his admirer, and the erotic interpretation of the myth was not only implicit in Michelangelo’s drawing but explicit in other contemporary works of the time as well.<sup>20</sup> By Michelangelo’s final version of the drawing, Phaethon has assumed a pose which relates him to both Ganymede and Tityus. His legs are parted, and his crotch is emphasized by the flexion of one knee. This drawing is another indication of homosexual tension within the friendship of Michelangelo and Tommaso as Francese states in his article, Phaeton drew too close to the sun, or to the object of his love and desire.<sup>21</sup>

The next drawing presented to Tommaso is known as *The Children’s*

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Liebert, *Michelangelo: A Psychoanalytic Study*, 278.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Francese, (2002), “On Homoerotic Tension in Michelangelo’s Poetry,” *MLN*, vol. 117, no. 1, pp. 17-47, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3251840>, pp. 31.

*Bacchanal* (Figure 4). It is thought by scholars that this drawing is more deeply coded but shares a specific relevance to the Buonarroti-Cavalieri relationship. It is thought the *Bacchanal* may refer to the relation between the artist's passion for Tommaso and his own artistic creativity. It is generally thought that Cavalieri's physical beauty awakened in Michelangelo not only desire but a newly inspired creativity.<sup>22</sup> *The Children's Bacchanal* includes five groups of figures, mostly nude putti. Putti were common representations of naked children, especially a cherub or a cupid. They are drawn equally in extravagant detail and sculptural modeling, depicted as feverishly engaged in five different activities and distributed across three tiers of a rocky setting. In the left foreground, two of them nurse at the withered breasts of an old female satyr. In the right foreground, four putti laugh and dance around a young man in a drunken slumber. In the center, seven putti cart away the dead carcass of a deer, and one of them tugs at the deer's penis. The last two groups include nine putti tending to a large cauldron, and eight putti working a grape press. There is a granular texture to the piece as well, which makes the scene appear as though it was seen through a fine mist. Many scholars have criticized the piece, as no known narrative theme could explain an ensemble of thirty muscular children, a sleeping man, a nursing satyress, an upturned deer, a boiling pot, and wine vat with children playing inside it. The imagery does not radiate either pagan exuberance or sensual pleasure. However, in Mary Garrard's article "Michelangelo in Love: Decoding the Children's Bacchanal," Garrard describes this as the realm of creative liberation, newly attained and exuberantly at play. In these images of putti enjoying their newfound freedom, there exists also the presence of same-sex eroticism.<sup>23</sup> This can be seen in the images of laughing boys playing in the wine vat, at which one urinates into a bowl held by another or into a companion's mouth. In these scenes of boys in intimate play, the transfer of bodily fluids and the proximity of mouths and genitalia suggest homoeroticism. Michelangelo has created a childhood world of self-sufficiency and satisfaction. Interpreted in this way, the scene becomes a realm of children at play where nothing is forbidden and the uncensored indulgence of instinct is celebrated.<sup>24</sup> The connection between the *Bacchanal* and Michelangelo's feelings toward Tommaso is far less evident than in the previous three drawings.<sup>25</sup> It could be considered a fictional realm where Michelangelo longed to exist so he could indulge in any sexual fantasies without punishment, revulsion, or judgement. If that were the case, it would follow the thinking that he gave it to Tommaso to communicate his desires once again, almost as if to say that had they been in a

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Mary Garrard, (2014), "Michelangelo in Love: Decoding the "Children's Bacchanal," *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 96 (no. 1), 24-49, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43947705>. 41.

<sup>24</sup> Mary Garrard, "Michelangelo in Love," 42.

<sup>25</sup> Liebert, *Michelangelo: A Psychoanalytic Study*, 289-290.



realm such as the *Bacchanal*, where nothing was forbidden, and indulgence was celebrated, then nothing could stop them. This idea is also supported by Robert Liebert, who says this regarding the drawing's meaning—"one finds oneself on highly speculative ground. My impression is that it expresses Michelangelo's wish that he could retreat with Tommaso into this all-male world."<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, there is another reading to this scene wherein the adult male and female figures act as a metaphorical representation of Michelangelo's own parental figures and the neglect he felt as a child. The drunken, slumbering man would therefore be the paternal figure and is mocked while being covered by four putti.<sup>27</sup> The other half of the foreground includes a maternal figure with sagging, dried-up breasts. The nursing child must grasp her breast himself, as the old woman is either unaware or disinterested in the child.<sup>28</sup> This reflects Michelangelo's childhood experiences of deprivation by wet-nurse and failure of his father as an admirable or emotionally available model. Therefore, he became self-sufficient with his extraordinary artistic talent, as the putti become independent within *The Children's Bacchanal*.

*Il sogno*, or *The Dream* (Figure 5), is generally dated to 1533 CE and was believed to have been given to Tommaso shortly after. Traditionally, it has been presented as an allegory of virtue and vice. At the center, a male nude perches precariously on an open box filled with masks.<sup>29</sup> His upper torso twists to his left as he leans on a sphere for support. He turns his head in the opposite direction, looking upward and over his shoulder to watch a winged creature descend from above. The heavenly visitor floats down headfirst toward the nude man. He extends a trumpet to the man's forehead and inflates his cheeks to sound it. There are a group of sketchy figures which encircle the nude-- though they are not worked heavily, they remain legible. Among these figures we see people doing a variety of activities including kissing, battling, drinking, or sleeping. At first glance, this complex imagery seems daunting; however, it has been understood as an allegory of the human soul awakened to virtue from vice since the seventeenth century. The male nude was generally thought to be a representation of the human soul. However, Maria Ruvoldt in her article, "Michelangelo's Dream," argues that recognizable attributes and the pose of the figure imply a precise identity. The youth leans on a large sphere bisected by a line, a detail which suggests it represents the Earth. Some copies depict the sphere as a globe, complete with continents. Additionally, the dependence of the nude on the globe strongly suggests the figure is melancholic. Furthermore, the right arm, cast across the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Liebert, *Michelangelo : A Psychoanalytic Study*, 290-291.

<sup>28</sup> Mary Garrard, "Michelangelo in Love," 42.

<sup>29</sup> Maria Ruvoldt, (2003), "Michelangelo's Dream," *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 85 (no.1). 86-113. Michelangelos\_Dream.pdf

chest, signals the original pose: body turned to the left, head and arms resting on the sphere. This original posture suggests sleep, a common pastime for the melancholic.<sup>30</sup> But, with the arrival of his visitor, the nude male stirs and looks up in the common pose of religious “divine inspiration.”<sup>31</sup> Ruvoldt makes the argument that Michelangelo is showing a character, much like him, that is plagued by melancholic disposition and yet blessed by divine inspiration in his art. This is a very appropriate subject when combined with the earlier four drawings given to Tommaso. As mentioned earlier, Michelangelo believed Tommaso gave him creative inspiration. The angelic trumpeter depicts the mechanisms of inspiration with a precision and echoing ancient descriptions such as in the *Aenid*, which is full of imagery of breath and wind connected to divine inspiration. Furthermore, Michelangelo depicts the primary figure with the same pose as the earlier four drawings, with the genitals on display and one knee flexed. All scholars generally agree that the dreamer is surrounded by groups of figures which represent six of the seven deadly sins.<sup>32</sup> Lust, however, is the main theme of the drawing. Lust is portrayed in several details—on the left side, a man with an erect penis climbs onto a passive reclining woman; there is a hand holding an erect penis; a free-floating erect penis and scrotum; and a clothed woman pressing kisses upon an awkwardly smaller nude man.<sup>33</sup> The official meaning of this work is stated by Ripa in 1593, “The trumpeter of fame awakes the mind of the virtuous, rouses them from a slumber of laziness, and makes them stay awake in permanent vigil.”<sup>34</sup> However, Robert Liebert makes a case that Michelangelo drew this as a metaphor for divine insemination, just as with the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary, which was often depicted in art as a ray of light onto the head of Mary in her chamber.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, when Michelangelo used this iconography of the trumpet and the sleeping youth, he was also expressing the fantasy of a passive, slumbering state and then being inseminated by the agent of some greater power. Therefore, Liebert concludes this drawing is a companion piece to the earlier drawings. Is it possible the angel figure represents Tommaso in some way, shown as an object of inspiration for the older artist? I believe this may be the case, as in one of Michelangelo’s sonnets to Tommaso, the artist says the following, “in the eyes of this single happy angel, that I shall be at peace, rested and safe.”<sup>36</sup> It seems that Tommaso awakened in him a newly refreshed creativity, as well as an intense passion. Therefore, in combination with letters and poetry

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<sup>30</sup> Maria Ruvoldt, “Michelangelo’s Dream,” 88.

<sup>31</sup> Maria Ruvoldt, “Michelangelo’s Dream,” 89.

<sup>32</sup> Liebert, *Michelangelo: A Psychoanalytic Study*, 309.

<sup>33</sup> Liebert, *Michelangelo: A Psychoanalytic Study*, 310.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

passed between the two men, there is more context to Michelangelo's true meaning behind these drawings.

Several letters and poems passed between the two. More than a few still exist from Tommaso to the artist, and two from the artist as well. Though Michelangelo's first letter is lost, it is clear to see from Tommaso's reply that it was accompanied by two drawings, more than likely the *Rape of Ganymede* and *the Punishment of Tityus*. It is also clear from his response that Michelangelo showered him with compliments. Tommaso replied and wrote these qualities were "insufficient to cause a man of such excellence, let alone a peer on earth, but to write to a youth—a mere babe and therefore as ignorant as can be. I promise you truly that the love I bear you in exchange is equal or perhaps greater than I ever bore any man, neither have I desired any friendship more than I do yours."<sup>37</sup> In Michelangelo's reply, he ends with this, "though it is usual for the donor to specify what is being given to the recipient, for obvious reasons it is not being done in this instance."<sup>38</sup> Scholar Ramsden in 1963 concludes from this that Michelangelo was referring to passions that cannot be named in writing, not about the drawings. Regardless of the meaning, there are sonnets which also clearly reveal Michelangelo's thoughts and struggles over his attraction to Tommaso. A few examples include this example of a sonnet written shortly after meeting Tommaso:

Therefore, alas, how will the chaste wish, / that burns my inward heart  
ever be heard, / by those who always see themselves in others, / in fact the  
unbelievers are the liars.<sup>39</sup>

In other examples, Michelangelo writes about his desire to dissolve boundaries between the two of them:

If a chaste love, / if an excelling kindness, / if sharing by two lovers of one  
fortune, / hard lot for one the other one's concern, / two hearts led by one  
spirit and one wish.<sup>40</sup>  
And if two bodies have one soul, grown deathless, / that with like wings  
lifts both to heaven and separate the vitals of two breasts. /  
Neither loving himself, but each one, / one each with one delight and taste,  
/ such sympathy that both would wish to have a single end.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Liebert, *Michelangelo: A Psychoanalytic Study*, 270.

<sup>38</sup> Liebert, *Michelangelo: A Psychoanalytic Study*, 271.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

These lines express the basic fantasy Michelangelo harbored for Tommaso, especially in conjunction with the *Rape of Ganymede* drawing, which mirrors the lines of “like wings lifts both of them to heaven.” Michelangelo shows he yearned to merge with Tommaso’s youth and beauty and thereby conquer aging and death, such as with the Ganymede myth, where he was immortalized for eternity. This idea is once again paralleled in Michelangelo’s poetry, shown in the line “if two bodies have one soul, grown deathless.” Tommaso was married several years later; however, letters between the two from 1561 exhibit clear language that their bond was just as strong. Giorgio Vasari later wrote about Michelangelo in his *Lives of the Artists*, where Vasari described Michelangelo’s love for Tommaso in one simple sentence-- “more than all the rest did he love Master Tommaso de’ Cavalieri.” Liebert concludes his section on Tommaso de’ Cavalieri with the simple conclusion that Michelangelo desired the young aristocrat sexually, and it is possible to have been requited, but it was never consummated.

Michelangelo displays a certain level of homophobia, despite his not well-hidden, attraction to younger men. Though, for Michelangelo’s defense, it is important to take in the serious threat to homosexual men of the time, as no fewer than two offenses could cause him to be burned at the stake. However, apart from the repression of sexual fantasies, shown through his never acting on his desires with Tommaso, Michelangelo showed himself as someone who believed, or was at least made to believe, that homosexuality was deserving of punishment of some kind through his drawings and poems. Even within Michelangelo’s first letter and the first two drawings, there is an obvious connection from sexual act to a punishment worse than death, the eternal torture of birds devouring your organs again and again. He also often uses words in his poetry which seem to also coincide with this idea that punishment was deserved for his attraction to Tommaso at all, as he uses phrases such as “torture” for having these feelings at all and repeatedly uses themes of “fire” and “punishment.” Therefore, it is permissible to draw the conclusion that Michelangelo believed homosexuality was a sin, and therefore exhibited signs of homophobia in his relationships with other men.

## Illustrations



(Figure 1) Michelangelo, *Rape of Ganymede*, 1533, Rome Italy, Chalk on paper



(Figure 2) *Punishment of Tityus*, Michelangelo, 1533, Rome, Italy, chalk on paper



(Figure 3) *The Fall of Phaethon*, Michelangelo, 1533, Rome, Italy, ink on paper



(Figure 4) *The Children's Bacchanal*, Michelangelo, 1530-1533, The Metropolitan Museum of New York, red chalk on paper





(Figure 5) *Il Sogno (The Dream)*, Michelangelo, 1530s, The Metropolitan Museum of New York, chalk on paper

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