GANYMEDE IN THE RENAISSANCE

HOMOSEXUALITY IN ART AND SOCIETY

JAMES M. SASLOW

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To the memory of
Paul S. Ronder
1940–1977

I'll have no worse a name than Jove's own page;
And therefore look you call me Ganymede.

—*William Shakespeare*, As You Like It

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The classical myth of Ganymede, the beautiful Trojan boy who became cupbearer to the gods, figures as a subject in approximately two hundred works of visual art surviving or recorded from the Renaissance and early Baroque periods. His abduction by Jupiter and subsequent service to the king of the gods as wine-pourer and, in many accounts, beloved, are also mentioned or described in numerous literary works of the time, from theological or philosophical texts to plays and autobiographies. These appearances in a variety of media and contexts attest to the widespread popularity of the theme in Italy from the mid-fifteenth through the mid-seventeenth centuries. Although Ganymede did not figure so prominently in the arts of other western European cultures, the diffusion—and frequent alteration—of Italian artistic and philosophical influences can be traced in a number of illustrations of the myth in France, England, Germany, and the Low Countries.

Artists and authors of the Renaissance drew their visual and iconographic inspiration for Ganymede from a long and complex tradition in the cultures of Greece and Rome and, to a lesser extent, of the Middle Ages. The resurgence of interest in the antique Ganymede, prefigured by the fourteenth-century literary researches of Petrarch and Boccaccio, was but one aspect of the revival of classical art and thought, which popularized the characters and language of Olympian mythology. The frequency and importance of Ganymede's depictions in art closely paralleled this general trend, which may be broadly characterized as a bell curve. His trajectory, rising from the enthusiastic recovery and adaptation of antique models in the Quattrocento and early Cinquecento, reached its apogee between 1530 and 1550. This brief period, during and just after the zenith of the High Renaissance, produced the greatest number of Ganymede images and most

of the significant ones by major Italian artists. At that point a sweeping reevaluation of classical influences was prompted by the spiritual and intellectual crises of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. The decline of Ganymede, both in frequency of portrayal and in the level of idealization and dignity accorded him, began just as the Council of Trent (1545–63) curtailed the use of pagan themes and codified a program of artistic and social reform that stressed moral didacticism and condemned nudity and lasciviousness.[1]

The change in attitude toward Ganymede and what he represented is neatly illustrated by two examples that bracket the period covered in this study. In 1435 Alberti, the first Renaissance theoretician to discuss suitable visualizations of the myth, implied that Ganymede should be idealized, with a smooth brow and soft, beautiful thighs.[2] Exactly two centuries later, Rembrandt's painting of the *Rape of Ganymede* (fig. 5.9, 1635) reduced the exquisite ephebe of classical tradition to a crying, incontinent baby who appears vigorously to protest his abduction.

In iconographic terms, the abduction and heavenly service of the beautiful mortal youth represented the epitome of four interlinked emotions: the rapture of the pure human soul or intellect in the presence of divinity, the uplifting power of chaste earthly love, and both the delight and the disapproval associated with sexual passion, particularly in its homosexual form. Most previous studies of Ganymede have emphasized his more abstract spiritual connotations, which developed in the Neoplatonic philosophy of Marsilio Ficino, Andrea Alciati, and other authors. However, a persistent substratum of erotic associations adhered to the myth from classical times; the very word *ganymede* was used from medieval times well into the seventeenth century to mean an object of homosexual desire. This level of meaning has often been overlooked in various discussions of the subject. In addition to the discomfort of some scholars with sexual, especially homosexual, subject matter, this neglect is due to a tendency to view Renaissance art and society as more uniformly serious than was probably true and to the fact that many references to homosexuality are vague or occur in satirical or moralizing contexts, where it is tempting to dismiss them as mere exaggerations.[3]

This book supplements earlier interpretations of Ganymede as a spiritual metaphor with a more detailed investigation of the sexual, emotional, and social issues he also symbolized, from pederasty to misogyny to conventions of marriage and gender roles. Ganymede served more than has been previously understood as an artistic vehicle for explicitly erotic or sexual concerns; and changes in his popularity, form, and iconography can be

closely correlated with shifting attitudes toward eroticism, specifically homoeroticism.

Imagery and Classical Sources

Ganymede appeared in art from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries in several different roles drawn primarily from classical myth and literature, in part as extended (and altered) by medieval commentators. These sometimes conflicting accounts vary in emphasis and detail, but taken together they outline three successive principal episodes in the myth. These gave rise to three corresponding artistic personae of the Phrygian youth along with several minor ones and a few iconographically unique treatments. At first a mortal boy abducted by Jupiter, he next became the honored and desired attendant of the Olympian ruler, who after Ganymede's death granted him immortality and transformed him into the constellation Aquarius.

The first and most important of these three narrative episodes is the rape of the youth, sometimes illustrated as an isolated event, at other times as one in a series recounting loves of the gods or loves of Jupiter. In this personification, reaching back to Homer, Ganymede is the archetype of ideal, youthful male beauty: a handsome shepherd or hunter, son of the king and queen of Troy, whom Jupiter, captivated by his appearance, elevated from earthly life to the heavenly realm.[4]

The account of the rape and its aftermath that was most familiar and influential during the Renaissance is Ovid's (*Metamorphoses* 10:155–61): "The king of the gods once burned with love for Phrygian Ganymede, and something was found which Jove would rather be than what he was. Still he did not deign to take the form of any bird save that which could bear his thunderbolts [the eagle]. Without delay he cleft the air on his lying wings and stole away the Trojan boy, who even now, though against the will of Juno, mingles the nectar and attends the cups of Jove."[5] The rape was described in more detail by Virgil (*Aeneid* 5:250–57) in an *ekphrasis* of an embroidered cloak: "Interwoven thereon the royal boy, with javelin and speedy foot, on leafy Ida tires fleet stags, eager, and like to one who pants; him Jove's swift armour-bearer has caught up aloft from Ida in his talons; his aged guardians in vain stretch their hands to the stars, and the savage barking of the dogs rises skyward."[6] This version, rich in such dramatic details as the yelping dogs and dismayed tutors, provided Renaissance artists with a fuller scenario than Ovid's; it was followed closely by

Statius's *Thebaid* (1:548–51), which further described the city of Troy and the nearby hills dramatically receding from the youth's sight as he was swept aloft. In contrast to Ovid and other writers who maintained that Jupiter transformed himself into an eagle in order to carry out the abduction personally, Virgil implies that the bird was merely an agent of the god.

Next in importance to depictions of the boy's ascent are his appearances as the attendant of Jupiter, showing the two figures either by themselves or as principal actors in the eternal banquet of the gods. In some accounts, such as Homer's, Ganymede is limited to a purely ceremonial function and represents a secondary attribute of Olympus or of its divine ruler. As early as Theognis, however, numerous other writers interpreted Ganymede's service to Jupiter more broadly, reading some degree of sexual interest into the god's infatuation with the youth's beauty: "The love of boys [παιδοφιλειν] has been a pleasant thing ever since Ganymede was loved by the son of Kronos who brought him to Olympus."[7] Later depictions of Jupiter and Ganymede on Greek vases show Ganymede holding a cockerel, a gift commonly bestowed by older Greek men on youths whose sexual favors they were seeking.[8] On occasion this intimately physical aspect of the relationship served Renaissance artists as a pretext for a more personalized and erotic treatment.

Out of this early ambiguity arose two conflicting interpretations of the myth. Xenophon (*Symposium* 8:28–30) viewed Ganymede's elevation to heaven as a spiritual allegory representing the ascent of the pure, questing soul toward knowledge of the divine. Plato acknowledged the same elevated interpretation (*Phaedrus* 255), but elsewhere he wrote disparagingly that the myth had been invented by the Cretans to justify their predilection for pederasty (*Laws* 1:636D). In several plays by Euripides, Ganymede is frankly identified as the bedfellow or plaything of Jupiter, usually in a ribald or satirical context; such references continued in the often bawdy Latin epigrams of Martial.[9] Eventually Ganymede became virtually eponymous with male homosexuality, particularly the love of an older man for a youth: the Latin term *catamitus* (English *catamite*), meaning a boy kept for sexual pleasure, was a corruption of the name Ganymede.[10]

A subsidiary episode of Ganymede's service as cupbearer, occasionally illustrated in the Renaissance, is his displacement of the previous holder of that office, the goddess Hebe, daughter of Juno. As Ovid wrote, this substitution was "against the will of Juno," who had two reasons to resent it: the slight to her daughter's dignity and the threat to herself of a rival lover. Jupiter's consort also despised Ganymede's compatriot, Paris, because of the judgment he had delivered against her beauty; her anger at both Tro-