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Michelangelo and Tommaso Cavalieri: The Dual Nature of Love and Desire

Isaak Loewen

In his disappointment following the fall of the Florentine Republic, Michelangelo abandoned his home and moved to Rome. At the age of fifty-seven, he built a new life and circle of friends. One such companion was Tommaso Cavalieri, an art collector and antiquarian. Then in his early twenties, the nobleman was Michelangelo's muse and recipient of his affection in the 1530s.¹ Michelangelo wrote a series of poems and produced five gift drawings for Cavalieri in this period, all following in the Petrarchan and Neoplatonic traditions.² Here Michelangelo expresses the dual nature of love as both uplifting and destructive, with repeated themes of the ascent to heaven and subsequent fall to hell, of wings (and the lack thereof), and of fire as both death and rebirth. Such paradoxes are common conceits for love—and its simultaneously debilitating and rejuvenating qualities—in Petrarchan poetry, a tradition in which the speaker pines for a forbidden love that is never to be realized, with the object of desire being more an abstraction than a real person.³ Likewise, Platonic love—in this context, purely intellectual and non-sexual love between men—is similarly socially acceptable.⁴ Because he expressed love in these conventional terms, the poetry and gift drawings cannot be read as strictly confessional, and yet the ambiguous nature of the language of love suggests that Michelangelo's affection transcended the acceptable Platonic love between men, extending into the realm of romantic and physical desire. Michelangelo's expression of the dual nature of love

reveals a conflict between erotic and Platonic desire during the Cavalieri period.

An understanding of Michelangelo and Tommaso's relationship, and of the context for acceptable Platonic love and forbidden sexual desire between men or boys, is essential for understanding these poems and drawings. The two men had an especially intimate relationship, which was widely recognized as such by their contemporaries. In his *Life of Michelangelo Buonarroti*, Giorgio Vasari states that Michelangelo loved the Roman nobleman "infinitely more" than his other friends.⁵ Their bond is also evinced in the first letter that Tommaso wrote to Michelangelo, in which the nobleman states:

I do believe, nay I am certain, that the cause of the affection you have for me is this: that since you are most virtuous—or better, an embodiment of *virtù* itself—you are compelled to love those who believe in it, and love it, including myself; and in this, depending on my powers, I do not yield to many people.⁶

Virtù is the culmination of qualities that make one a great leader, as articulated by Machiavelli.⁷ Tommaso's implication here is thus that he greatly admires Michelangelo from an intellectual and Platonic perspective. Additionally, he confides that he does not often submit to the affections he demonstrates for the artist. The poetry and drawings are thus not simply the result of Michelangelo's unreciprocated fixation on him. But, while they quite obviously cherished one another, it is unclear whether this was intellectual interest or romantic and physical love. If his affections were sexual, Michelangelo might have disguised such feelings as acceptable Platonic love because of the repressive culture around relationships between men in Italy during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

When the Medici returned to Florence and overthrew the Republic, Duke Cosimo I implemented severe penalties for blasphemy and sodomy, including imprisonment or even death.⁸ Policing morality was an effective means of establishing control, and, especially because of the power of the Catholic Church, punishment for blasphemous behavior garnered political influence and public support. During the Cavalieri period, Michelangelo was under great public scrutiny as a result of his fame, and he could anticipate that his poetry and gift drawings would be shared publicly. Given the social and legal repercussions for same-gender relations, it is unlikely that Michelangelo would incriminate himself in the poetry and drawings. This warrants caution when interpreting them as confessions of sexual or romantic love for the recipient.⁹ Despite the limitations on the expression of love and desire, however, studying the poetry and gift drawings through the lens of eroticism puts particular pressure on Michelangelo's classical and Christian

imagery, and the repeated theme of duality in the metaphors he employs to describe love: heaven and hell, wings, and fire.

THE ASCENSION TO HEAVEN, FALL TO EARTH, AND PUNISHMENT IN HELL

The first two gifting drawings that Michelangelo presented to Cavalieri, *The Rape of Ganymede* (Figure 1) and *The Punishment of Tityos* (Figure 2), present a recurring theme in the drawings and poems: heavenly and pure passion, together with hellish punishment and pain. *The Rape of Ganymede* is a myth about a young man chosen by Jupiter to be the cupbearer for the gods, and who was therefore granted immortality.¹⁰ The narrative was used both in antiquity and the Renaissance to symbolize and justify sexual relations between older men and younger men or adolescents,¹¹ and it was adopted (and metaphorized) by Christians, who read Ganymede's ascension to the heavens as the soul being reunited with God after death.¹² As an educated man, Michelangelo was almost certainly familiar with both interpretations of the myth.¹³ The homoerotic connotations of the myth and the visual similarities in the *Ganymede* and *Tityos* drawings relate them as the positive aspects of his affection for Tommaso, while also suggesting his fear that such desires would result in punishment.

The Rape of Ganymede depicts the abduction of a nude young man by Jupiter in the form of an eagle. The eagle's head is wrapped around the youth's body, curving into his chest, talons tightly gripping and spreading his legs.¹⁴ Their positions, as well as Ganymede's blissful and peaceful expression, evoke sensuality and eroticism. The placement of the eagle also has the effect of making the boy look as though he himself has wings. The eagle is lifting Ganymede to the heavens, and because of the association of the myth with sexual relationships between men, their ascension can be seen as a positive portrayal of such affection. At the same time, in light of the passivity and placement of the wings, Michelangelo may be expressing the Christian idea of the ascension as the soul's reunion with God, a divine and unadulterated experience. According to this interpretation, Jupiter, as the dominant figure in the composition, seems to be a surrogate for the Christian God, who is granting divinity to Ganymede, the surrogate for the human soul and the passive object of love. Michelangelo subverts the association of homoeroticism with sexual love by comparing the object of Jupiter's desire, Ganymede, to an angel. He thereby assigns divinity to a depiction of eroticism, and he emphasizes the duality of love as uplifting and divine, as well as sexual. Michelangelo's decision to give Tommaso a drawing of Ganymede therefore expresses the socially acceptable form of affection that Vasari confirms in the *Life of Michelangelo*, at the same time as it potentially insinuates forbidden physical passion and desire.



Figure 1: Michelangelo, *The Rape of Ganymede*, c. 1532. Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge.

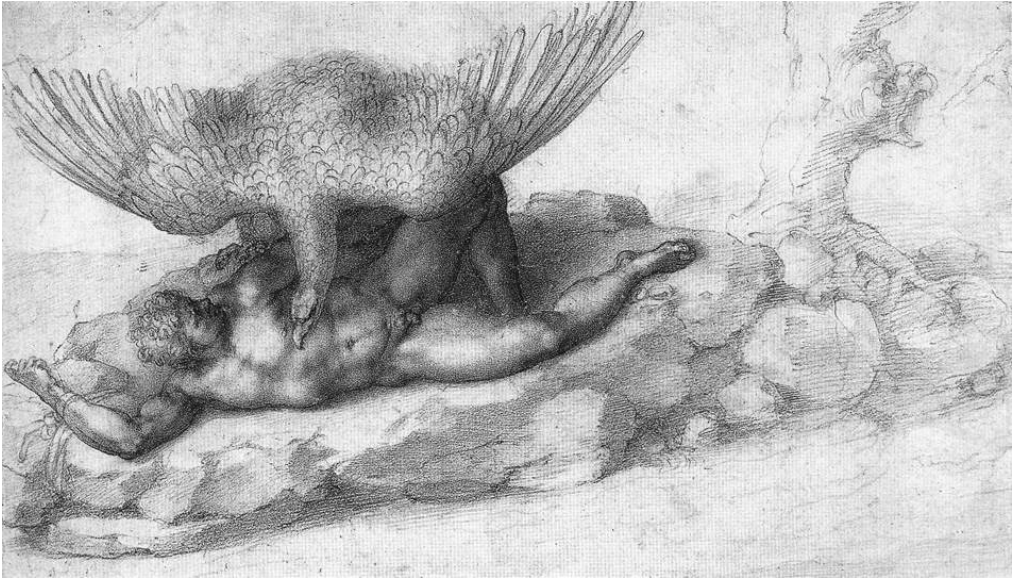


Figure 2: Michelangelo, *The Punishment of Tityos* (detail), c. 1532. Royal Library, Windsor.

While *Ganymede* presents the ascension to heaven and ecstasy, the second of the earliest gift drawings, *The Punishment of Tityos*, offers the subsequent fall to hell and punishment for sexual desire. Indeed, the visual similarities between the two drawings suggest that the ascension to heaven as a result of passion and love inevitably results in punishment and the fall from grace. Tityos was a giant who was punished for trying to seduce Latona, the mother of Apollo and Diana, and who is therefore chained to a rock in Tartarus where a vulture eternally devours his liver.¹⁵ In Michelangelo's drawing, the giant is lying on the ground with what seems to be the same eagle from the *Ganymede* perched behind him and enveloping his body, replacing the vulture in the myth.¹⁶ In this way, Michelangelo suggests that one and the same being can lift someone to ecstasy and also torment them. Because Ganymede is commonly a metaphor for sex between men, Michelangelo's choice to replace the vulture with the eagle suggests that pain and punishment are the end result of forbidden desires. And while Ganymede's connotations are ambiguous—insofar, that is, as it represents both acceptable divine love between God and humans, on the one hand, and, on the other, erotic love—the myth of Tityos is explicitly about punishment for carnal desire.

A fall necessarily (if implicitly) comes between the ascension to heaven and punishment in hell, and it is precisely this transitional state that is presented in another gift drawing, *The Fall of Phaethon* (Figure 3). Here Michelangelo



Figure 3: Michelangelo, *The Fall of Phaethon*, c. 1533. Royal Library, Windsor.

recreates the myth of Phaethon, the son of Apollo, who attempts to ride his father's chariot, which draws the sun across the sky. Jupiter punishes Phaethon for his hubris by shooting him out of the sky with a lightning bolt.¹⁷ In Michelangelo's drawing, Jupiter sits on an eagle at the top of the composition, while Phaethon is in the middle, captured in the process of falling to earth.¹⁸ *Phaethon* thus presents a moment between *Ganymede* and *Tityos*, when love first strikes one down after the initial ascension, but before the punishment for sexuality. It is also visually associated with the other drawings, since the same eagle appears yet again, and Phaethon's pose (though rotated) echoes that of *Tityos*.

The duality of love in the ascension to heaven and fall to hell is similarly present in several of Michelangelo's sonnets for Tommaso. Like *Ganymede*, one of Michelangelo's sonnets compares intimacy to flying with another's wings. In Sonnet 89, he writes:¹⁹

I fly, though lacking feathers, with your wings;
with your mind I'm constantly impelled toward heaven. (5–6)

Here the Petrarchan speaker expresses his belief that (Platonic?) love allows him to transcend humanity and ascend to heaven. Of course, as noted above, poetry written in this tradition commonly presents the object of the speaker's affections as an abstraction or ideal rather than a person, so these lines need not be read as an admission of Michelangelo's love for Tommaso.²⁰ Still, the repetition of this motif in his sonnets indicates that Michelangelo especially associated the motif of heavenly ascent with the nobleman. In the gift drawing, *Ganymede* is at the mercy of Jupiter, who grips him tightly in an intimate and erotic embrace—all of which mirrors what Michelangelo writes later in the same sonnet:

Within your will alone is my desire,
my thoughts are created in your heart. (9–10)

The poet submits to his desire, and in that submission he achieves an ideal, pure love.

Likewise, Sonnet 98 presents the theme of torture and descent to hell as the consequence for a love that, it seems, transcends the Platonic and becomes sexual, carnal passion. He writes:

If, to be happy, I must be conquered and chained,
it is no wonder that, naked and alone,
an armed cavalier's prisoner I remain. (12–14)

As in the myth of *Tityos*, chained to a rock and punished for his carnal sexuality, Michelangelo writes that the bliss of submitting to desire is worth the

punishment. (The phrase “cavalier’s prisoner” is also perhaps a play on Tommaso’s surname, Cavalieri.²¹) The dual nature of love’s pain and pleasure are at war in Michelangelo’s poetry, but his conclusion to this conundrum in the poem is to claim that punishment brings him happiness because the bliss of love outweighs its pain. This is a fairly straightforward solution, but the conflict only becomes more muddled and violent in the subsequent gift drawings and related poems.

WINGS AND ANGELS

In Neoplatonic philosophy, wings are typically a metaphor for achieving Platonic love, while the interference of eroticism and vice removes those wings. The origin of this association is the *Phaedrus*, where Plato writes:

If now the better elements of the mind, which lead to a well-ordered life and to philosophy, prevail ... and when this life is ended they are light and winged ... neither human wisdom nor divine inspiration can confer upon man any greater blessing than this.²²

This theme is present in Michelangelo’s *The Dream* (Figure 4), which depicts a man awoken by a trumpeting angel who descends from the heavens, surrounded by an arc of undefined figures committing the seven deadly sins.²³ An angel awakening a human from sin and the “dream of human life” was a common theme in Renaissance art, and it represents the threat of sin and need to transcend vice to achieve pure love.²⁴ As the man wakes up, the personifications of vice are (visually) becoming hazy and fading into the background, and they are also, by implication, fading from the man’s mind. The most relevant sinners in the arc are the personifications of lust: a man and woman kissing, and a disembodied phallus being gripped by a muscular, likely male hand.²⁵ The kissing figures are grotesque, with the woman pushing away the man, who is clumsily kneeling her in the chest. The hand gripping the phallus is positioned adjacent to representation of sex between men and women, suggesting that sex between men is similarly unsavory, and that Michelangelo condemns them both.²⁶ The man in the center, however, turns away from the vice toward the winged angel, attempting to distance himself from carnal passion in favor of Platonic love.

In this drawing, then, Michelangelo appears to choose Platonic over erotic love, a departure from the conclusion in *Ganymede*, *Tityos*, and the corresponding sonnets. Instead of submitting to punishment and vice in exchange for sexuality and passion, the man in the drawing is choosing pure love. Michelangelo confirms this decision in Sonnet 61, in which he writes:



Figure 4: Michelangelo, *The Dream*, c. 1533. Courtauld Institute Gallery, London.

But why complain any more, now that I see
 in the eyes of this unique and joyous angel
 my peace, my repose, and my salvation?
 ... In flight with him,
 he gives me equal wings to follow his power. (9–11, 13–14)

This poem presents the object of love as a winged angel and the speaker's salvation. Michelangelo's invocation of angels here develops the theme of love-as-divine present in the poetry related to the *Ganymede* and *Tityos* drawings. If interpreted as a literal confession to Tommaso, then, Michelangelo labels their relationship as free of vice.

But Michelangelo's internal conflict is still escalating. While we have so far seen the two sides of the battle portrayed in separate drawings, they collide in yet another, more chaotic composition, *Children's Bacchanal* (Figure 5). Here Michelangelo reveals the dual nature of wings, and especially the lack thereof as signifying vice and sexuality. *Children's Bacchanal* is the final gift drawing that Michelangelo gave to Tommaso, and it presents the violent climax of the war between carnal passion and Platonic love. It is also the only gift drawing without wings or angels, and therefore perhaps conveys the consequences for defiling Platonic love. Again in his *Phaedrus*, Plato describes the consequences of sex between men as the loss of wings:

If however they live a life less noble, and without philosophy, but yet ruled by the love of honor, probably, when they have been drinking, or in some other moment of carelessness ... they are not winged, to be sure, but their wings have begun to grow, so that the madness of love brings them no small reward.²⁷

Plato's description mirrors the largest figure in the composition, a sleeping or intoxicated man in the bottom right corner. This man presents the opposite of the mental condition depicted in *The Dream*.²⁸ While in *The Dream* the man has turned away from vice toward an angel and salvation, in *Children's Bacchanal* the man has submitted to vice and sin. *Children's Bacchanal* depicts the consequences of not being awoken from sin and the "dream of human life." The man is surrounded by *putti* and Bacchic imagery, which in the period commonly represented giving in to erotic desire, depravity, and excess.²⁹ The *putti* are fully realized, unlike the undefined figures in *The Dream*, and *Children's Bacchanal* therefore depicts the results of submitting to erotic desires. The imagery in this final composition is thus the conclusion of the various attempts, expressed in the drawings, to choose virtue over vice. As it is the only one of the gift drawings to contain no winged figures, the absence of wings when combined with Bacchic imagery symbolizes yielding to erotic lust.



Figure 5: Michelangelo, *Children's Bacchanal*, c. 1533. Royal Library, Windsor.

However, in this climactic resolution to the series of gift drawings, Michelangelo does not simply convey a final submission to lust. Indeed, in his poetry the struggle between pure and carnal love is presented as an ongoing project. In Sonnet 80, for example, he writes:

Then I recognized my mistake and error:
for one who, lacking wings, would pursue an angel
flings seed on stones, and words into the wind,
and the intellect at God, all in vain. (5–8)

Here the speaker laments his inadequacy compared to the angel he desires, bemoaning that his attempt to pursue the angel was “all in vain.” He seems to claim that he has given in to eroticism, almost inevitably, as a consequence of exceeding the limits of Platonic love—“fling[ing] ... words into the wind / and the intellect at God”—and the possibility that this failure has included non-procreative sex (“fling[ing] seed on stones”) suggests specifically same-sex eroticism. The refusal of temptation in *The Dream*, and the subsequent submission to sin and erotic desire in *Children's Bacchanal*, convey the failure

to achieve pure, non-sexual love. And, if wings represent the type of love that Michelangelo desired but appears to have difficulty obtaining, then the conflict between the two sides of love reaffirms the concept of the duality of wings and winged figures.

FIRE AS DEATH AND REBIRTH

In addition to the double nature of wings, *Children's Bacchanal* also presents fire—included in the drawing in the sacrifice of the deer—as both a destructive and purifying force. The *putti* tend and provide kindling to a fire boiling a pot of water, while the deer is extremely distressed and flailing in an attempt to free itself from their grasp, seemingly aware that the fire will cause its death. The deer's inability to free itself from the *putti* highlights not only its fear of sacrifice and death, but also that the deer is immobilized by the chaos.³⁰ If the sacrifice is a metaphor for the consequences of sin, then the immobilization expresses the idea of love-caused paralysis. The scene also contains eroticism, insofar as one of the *putti* is positioned near the deer's groin, perhaps even grabbing its penis.³¹ All of this once again demonstrates the dangers of sexuality.

Like wings, however, fire has a double significance. Sacrifice by fire results in death, but, in both classical and Christian traditions, it also signals spiritual rebirth and purification. In the Bacchic mythos, a young goat was boiled and sacrificed each year to ensure the regrowth of grape vines, and the goat was said to reunite with its mother in the afterlife.³² The obvious parallel to Christianity is the resurrection of Christ, where the sins of humanity gave way to divine forgiveness and salvation.³³ The dual nature of fire is also present in many of the poems that Michelangelo wrote for Tommaso. In no. 92, for example, a madrigal rather than a sonnet, he writes:

Now it's too late for you to remove my woes;
for a heart that's burning and has burned for many years
will turn into, even if reason finally damps it,
no longer a heart, but ashes and charred wood. (14–17)

Fire is a metaphor for the speaker's love, communicating that he has loved the object of his affection for so long that, even if he were to overcome his feelings, his heart is irreparably damaged. This is in line with images of love's destructive force, but the metaphor of fire also has positive connotations. In Sonnet 62, he thus writes:

Only with fire can the smith shape iron
from his conception into fine, dear work;
neither, without fire, can any artist

refine and bring gold to its highest state,
 nor can the unique phoenix be revived
 unless first burned. And so, if I die burning,
 I hope to rise again brighter among those
 whom death augments and time no longer hurts. (1–8)

Iron, goldsmithery, and the phoenix all tie fire to creation and rebirth. Further, this poem mirrors those associated with *Ganymede* and *The Dream*, all containing the concept of rising to a higher state of being. In Sonnets 89 and 61 the ascent was to heaven, while here Michelangelo writes that being burned would cause the speaker to “rise again brighter” like a phoenix or the products of metallurgy. The concept of the duality of fire is a common Petrarchan metaphor, and Michelangelo’s choice to invoke it regularly in the Cavalieri period suggests that he valued its complex multivalence, allowing him to express his conflicted ideas of love. While eroticism, like fire, brought chaos and destruction in *Children’s Bacchanal* and the *Tityos*, the poetry suggests it was ultimately beneficial in both cases, not least because it purifies the dangerous, sexual love to give way to pure, Platonic love.

The gift drawings and poems are often chaotic, conflicted, and difficult to understand, with highly contested interpretations. Nevertheless, we have seen that a narrative can be constructed to account for the development of the first drawings—*The Rape of Ganymede* and *The Punishment of Tityos*—to the middle drawings—*The Fall of Phaethon* and *The Dream*—and extending to the final drawing, *Children’s Bacchanal*. In the beginning of the Cavalieri period, Michelangelo’s Platonic love and carnal desire are at odds. With *Ganymede*, *Phaethon*, and *Tityos*, he illustrates how intellectual and pure love can progress to erotic love, resulting in falling from heaven. The corresponding poems suggest that, despite his admiration for Platonic love, Michelangelo’s preference for it over passion is not definitive. Then, in *The Dream*, the two sides of this internal conflict begin to collide. The personifications of vice are adjacent to virtue and the winged angel, but they are fading into the background and not directly interacting with the man. And finally, *Children’s Bacchanal* presents little virtue but, still, a positive view of love.

The chaotic climax and resolution to the drawings suggest that as the Cavalieri period progressed, Michelangelo became more anxious and conflicted about love. It is, of course, ultimately impossible to determine whether Michelangelo and Tommaso took part in a romantic and sexual relationship, or whether their love was purely Platonic. But careful analysis of these works has revealed Michelangelo’s ongoing, developing, and intensely felt reflection on this intimate companionship. And such an analysis contextualizes the chaos in

Michelangelo's life from the fall of the Florentine Republic and the start of his new life in Rome, with Tommaso.

Isaak Loewen in a junior majoring in History. He prepared this essay as part of Professor Laura Agoston's seminar on the Age of Leonardo (ARTH 3442) in Spring 2019.

NOTES

- 1 Marcella Marongiu, "Tommaso de' Cavalieri," in *Michelangelo: Divine Draughtsman and Designer*, ed. Carmen Bambach (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018), 287–89, at 287.
- 2 Mary Garrard, "Michelangelo in Love: Decoding the Children's Bacchanal," *Art Bulletin* 96 (2014): 24–49, at 24.
- 3 See the introductory discussion in *The Poetry of Michelangelo*, trans. James M. Saslow (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 26–27. See too Garrard, "Michelangelo in Love," 24.
- 4 Michael Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 197–98.
- 5 Giorgio Vasari, "Life of Michelangelo Buonarroti: Florentine Painter, Sculptor, and Architect, 1475–1564," in *Lives of the Artists: Volume I*, trans. George Bull (London: Penguin, 1987), 325–442, at 420.
- 6 Quoted in Marongiu, "Tommaso de' Cavalieri," 287.
- 7 Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Tim Parks (New York: Penguin, 2009), 21.
- 8 Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 231–33.
- 9 Joseph Francese, "On Homoerotic Tension in Michelangelo's Poetry," *Modern Language Notes* 117 (2002): 17–47, at 26.
- 10 James Saslow, *Ganymede in the Renaissance: Homosexuality in Art and Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 1.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Ibid.*, 21.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 20.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 34.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 35.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 36.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 37.
- 19 All quotations are taken from Saslow's translation, *op. cit.*, cited parenthetically by line number.
- 20 Garrard, "Michelangelo in Love," 24.
- 21 Noted by Saslow, *The Poetry of Michelangelo*, 227.
- 22 Quoted in Arkin Moshe, "I Fly, Though Lacking Feathers, with Your Wings': Why are Michelangelo's Angels Wingless?" *PsyArt* 20 (2016): 24–48, at 40.
- 23 Maria Ruvoldt, "Michelangelo's Dream," *Art Bulletin* 85 (2003): 86–113, at 87.

- 24 Ruvoldt, "Michelangelo's Dream," 99.
25 *Ibid.*, 106.
26 *Ibid.*
27 Quoted in Moshe, "Lacking Feathers," 40–41.
28 As observed by Garrard, "Michelangelo in Love," 25.
29 *Ibid.*, 26.
30 *Ibid.*, 38.
31 *Ibid.*, 33.
32 *Ibid.*, 38.
33 *Ibid.*