The cultural norms of Renaissance Italy demanded that hierarchy was ever present and that equality was abhorred. According to Michael Rocke, Forbidden Friendships. Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence (New York/Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1996; pp. x+371. 35 [pounds sterling]), this behavioural prescription extended to male homosexual sex. Rocke's study of sodomy in Renaissance Florence, a model of measured prose and good historical practice, illustrates that sex was not something that took place between equals even when both participants were male. Most of the younger, 'passive' partners were between fourteen and eighteen; the vast majority of the older, 'active' partners were between twenty and forty. Sex was an indicator of power relations, and in the absence of submissive and hierarchically inferior females, boys who (as the saying went) 'let themselves be sodomised' were...
The men of Renaissance Florence were so renowned for sodomy that "Florenzer" in German meant "sodomite." Indeed, in the late fifteenth century, as many as one in two Florentine men had come to the attention of the authorities for sodomy by the time they were thirty. In the seventy years from 1432 to 1502, some 17,000 men—in a city of only 40,000—were investigated for sodomy; 3,000 were convicted and thousands more confessed to gain amnesty. Michael Rocke vividly depicts this vibrant sexual culture in a world where these same-sex acts were not the deviant transgressions of