CHAPTER ONE

PRIME NOZZE: GENERATION

Ego ex ore Altissimi prodivi primogenita ante omnem creaturam

Michelangelo returned to Florence in the spring of 1501 in time to witness the inauguration of a new constitution for the republic on 4 August, followed on 1 November by the election of Piero Soderini as Gonfaloniere for life. On 16 August the young sculptor was commissioned by the Opera del Duomo to carve a colossal marble David for one of the buttresses of the cathedral (Fig. 5).1 Close to its completion the sculpture was taken over by the Signoria and on 8 June 1504 erected on the ringhiera or speakers’ platform before the Palazzo della Signoria, displacing Donatello’s bronze Judith (Fig. 6). Completed with a base, the David was finally unveiled on 8 September, the feast of the Birth of the Virgin. Strong of hand like the biblical shepherd, muscled like the classical hero, Michelangelo’s David-Hercules marked a republican reclamation of the virile civic imagery of the trecento republic, when a Hercules appeared on the Florentine seal of state.

During the public debate conducted on 25 January 1504 concerning the siting of the colossus, Messer Francesco di Lorenzo Filarete, first herald of the Signoria, argued for the removal of Donatello’s work to the cortile of the Palazzo della Signoria on the grounds that

the Judith is a death-bringing sign [segni mortifero] unsuited to us whose insignia are the cross and the lily; nor is it fitting that a woman kill a man; and most of all, the Judith was erected under an evil constellation [on 24 December 1495], because from then until now you have been going from bad to worse, and after [the placement] you lost Pisa.2

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1 See Tolnay, The Youth of Michelangelo, 93-98, 150-156; Hibbard, 51-61.
2 Transcribed by Caglioti, Donatello e i Medici: storia del David e della Giuditta, 305: “La Iudicta è segnio mortifero, e non sta bene, havendo noi la † per insegnia et el giglio, non sta bene che la donna uccida l’ homo, et maxime essendo stata posta chon chattiva chonstellatione, perché da poi in qua siate iti di male in peggio, et perdessi poi Pisa.” See Janson, The Sculpture of Donatello, 198-205; 198; Rosenauer, Donatello, 249-255; 283-286. For the 24 December 1495 dating see Caglioti, 310 (the 21 December 1495 date given in the Diario of Luca Landucci disagrees with all
Fig. 5. Michelangelo, *David*, Florence, Accademia; photo: Archivio Fotografico, Soprintendenza Speciale per il Polo Museale Fiorentino, su concessione del Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali