

# RECIPE FOR A PORNOGRAPHICAL HISTORY



## DISSIDENT

As a boy growing up in the late fifteenth century Pietro Aretino witnessed a riot in his home town which erupted upon the visit of a Florentine tax collector. The little town of Arezzo was thrown into turmoil as the burghers proceeded to plunder the houses of the rich, mainly supporters of Florentine policy. Houses were burnt to the ground, a priest was dragged onto the street from where he was cowering and butchered,

***“other pro-Florentines were hanged from the balconies or tortured as “sodomites” by having a lighted torch thrust between their naked buttocks... finally, the castle, the symbol of Florentine rule, was destroyed.”***

The symbolism of such violent unrest was not lost upon the Florentines, who sent in the army, sacked the town and carried off thirty important citizens as hostages.

## DEBAUCH AND SCANDAL

For whatever reason, Pietro Aretino left his home town and moved to the nearby Perugia where he was apprenticed to a book-binder. While there he became close friends with Agnolo Firenzuola, who later became an abbot. Although accounts of Aretino's early life are spiced up – he was a prodigious liar – there are scandalous stories of the two friends' debaucherous and drunken antics. Once, the two lads presented themselves in their window naked to the outrage (and presumably pleasure) of the local women. Aretino also undertook his own artistic renovation upon a statue of Mary Magdalene, which he vandalized by painting a lute in her hands (and presumably other more explicit additions that have not remained on record) thereby transforming her back into the prostitute she was before conversion. After this artistic intervention, it was discreetly explained to him by the powerful citizens of the town that unless he made himself scarce, the Inquisition would come to play a potentially crucial part in his life. Aretino legged it to Rome.

## RELIGION

Meanwhile, in Rome, the artist Giulio Romano was working as apprentice to Raphael, with whom he contributed to the paintings in the Vatican. Romano is responsible for some preliminary sketches of a series of tapestries based on the *Acts of the Apostles*, he designed a series of some 50 scenes from the Old Testament. He worked on Raphael's later religious art, such as *The Ascent to Calvary* (Prado), *The Holy Family of Francis I* (Louvre), *The Stoning of St Stephen* (Church of S. Stefano, Genoa). Although the subject matter of his paintings under the tutelage of Raphael was largely religious, he also completed some of his master's works with pagan and historical themes, such as the frescoes of the *Battle of Ostia* and the *Story of Psyche* on the ceiling of the Villa Farnesina. Upon Raphael's death, Romano took over the completion of his master's works, notably Raphael's *Coronation of the Virgin* and *The Transfiguration* in the Vatican.

## COUNTERFEIT

About this time another artist, Marcantonio Raimondi, having received his training as an engraver in the workshop of 'Francia' (Francesco Raibolini, the famous goldsmith and painter of Bologna), had begun to make copies of Albrecht Dürer's woodcut series *The Life of the Virgin*. The woodcut was still a fairly new innovation in the late fifteenth century in Europe and there was no doubt a high demand for this new and easily reproducible art form. Although most woodcuts were relatively crude, those of Dürer were exceptional both in skill and theme. It is unsurprising, then, that Raimondi chose Dürer's works to copy and sell for a good profit. As these were the years before copyright laws, when it came to copying the work, Raimondi also included Dürer's famous AD monogram. Dürer, in response, made a complaint to the Venetian Government, which gave him legal protection for his monogram, but not his compositions. Raimondi continued copying and selling Dürer's works, without the monogram.

## MUSCULAR NUDES

Around 1510, Marcantonio Raimondi also moved to Rome, to become part of the circle of artists that surrounded Raphael. With a dexterous reproduction of Raphael's *Lucretia*, Raimondi so impressed Raphael that he undertook to train the aspiring engraver personally. Other works of Raphael that Raimondi reproduced as woodcuts were *The Judgement of Paris* and *The Massacre of the Innocents*. It could be said that Raimondi's favourite themes were taken from Pagan mythology, though that doesn't mean that he neglected the rich imagery

of the Old and New testaments. His works reveal a predisposition toward full-bodied, muscular nudes, such as *The Climbers* which reproduced part of Michelangelo's *Soldiers surprised bathing*. Under the tutelage of Raphael, Raimondi opened and became master of a school that taught the art of engraving, largely but not exclusively copying and disseminating the works of Raphael. This art of engraving would be to art what lithography had been for literature. Henceforth, both word and image were reproducible and available to a public beyond the wealthy privilege of the elite.

## REPRODUCIBILITY

In the 1520's Giulio Romano, having devoted himself day by day to the painting of Raphael's works in the Vatican, obviously suffered a bout of artistic enthusiasm, of spiritual revolt, of inspired genius. Chances are he left the vatican, the site of his holy workplace, abandoning for an afternoon his work of holy reproduction, sat down at the local taverna, or better, in the pleasant not-too-solitary solitude of his bedroom and dashed off some sixteen sexy sketches. Sometime later, in 1524, Marcantonio Raimondi had completed the woodcuts of the same images and had successfully published them as a set in an illustrated pamphlet called *I Modi*, 'Postures'. Although the originals have not survived, there is a later 18<sup>th</sup> century version of the work which suggests the same idea- sixteen different sexual positions, ranging from missionary to wheelbarrow. What makes this work so special is not that it is an artistic reproduction of the various contortions of the body of a prostitute available to the paying customer as advertised on the walls of brothels in Ancient Rome, or the various positions a wife can take with her husband, as illustrated in the Kama

Sutra and other ancient erotic texts which were individually produced by the skilled hand of painters. What was significant about the pamphlet as it was produced by Raimondi, was that it was the first edition of an illustrated text that was reproducible, making it available to a public beyond the wealthy elite. For a small fee anyone could have access to it, take it home, gape over it in the local taverna, take it to bed in solitary pleasure or enjoy it in a crowd, and all this without the immediate prospect of sex with a prostitute. That is to say that if this work is an advertisement, it is an advertisement for the pleasures of sex alone, made for the sole purpose of getting off on. No strings attached.

It was this, the accessibility of the work that made it dangerous. It was the first work, as far as we know, that depicted such erotic scenes in a medium that was easily reproducible. A single woodcut could make one thousand copies before it began to suffer a loss of quality, while the



copper engraving technique could make even more. Previously, works of erotic art were available only to the wealthy, to those who could afford it, or to those who were privileged to have a friend dextrous enough to sketch a simple outline on the back of the toilet door. But this pamphlet was much more easily consumable and it was publicly available. No doubt it sold like hot-cakes. That is, until Pope Clement VII ordered all the copies destroyed and imprisoned Raimondi. Interestingly enough, Romano, who was the original artist and whose sketches were identical, was not imprisoned, on the logic that it was Raimondi and his art of engraving that had made the images publicly available. It was the reproducibility of the work that had the papacy quivering in its boots and shaking its spear. (Oh and by the way, Romano is the only artist of the renaissance to be mentioned in a work by William Shakespeare, though he is mentioned in his capacity as a sculptor - which he was not - in *A Winter's Tale* where the Queen Hermione has a statue made of her by 'that rare Italian master, Julio Romano,' Act V, Scene II.)

## RISK

At such a moment of crisis - the man with the wood in bonds, the erotic images sequestered by the church - a hero of sorts is required, or, at the very least, a man with the power to reverse the classical positions of power, of turning religion on its head, or giving the odd monk or two a spicy spanking. Pietro Aretino was just such a man. He had already earned himself the name 'scourge of princes' with his bitter parodies of people in positions of power and caused quite a stir by publishing a document titled *The Last Will and Testament of the Elephant Hanno*. The circulation of this document followed promptly upon the Pope Leo X's commissioning



**A** Pri le cofortaccio ch'io uoglio a bene  
 Il tuo bel culo e la tua porta in uscio,  
 Culo da compir un part in paradiso,  
 Porta, ch' i cori s'illa per le vene;  
 Mentre, ch'io uagheggio, egli mi viene  
 Capriccio di bastonarsi a l'improvviso,  
 E mi par esser poi bel che Naroso  
 Nel specchio, che'l mio cazzo allegrottiene;  
**A**hi ribaldo, ahiribaldo, in terra, e in letto  
 Io ti uoglio puttanare e l'apparecchia  
 Ch'io ti rompa due coltelle del petto;  
**I**o te'n'incaro franco l'ata uocebia,  
 Che per questo poter plusquam perfetto  
 Entrarei in un pozzo senza secchia,  
 E non si treua peccchia  
**G**iottad' i fior com'io d'un nobil cazzo,  
 E no' provo ancho, e per mirarlo s'guzzo!

Raphael to paint a life-sized portrait of an Elephant inspired by a reference to an elephant loved by the Pope in the letters of the German humanist Ulrich Von Hutten. Aretino's *Last Will and Testament* was a parody that ridiculed the most powerful cardinals of Rome. It was an act intended to provoke, and yet it must have been very well researched, as rather than having the obvious side effect, i.e. a stake through the heart and happily roasting flames licking his ankles, Pope Leo X actually took to the impertinent little twerp Aretino, and adopted him into his service. Apparently Leo X sympathised with the Florentine-born Aretino, was disgruntled by his power-hungry cardinals and was quite satisfied to see them taken down a peg or two. In any case Aretino found himself in the Pope's favour and on a longer leash than ever before, not only wealthy but also powerful.

So, when he heard of Raimondi's arrest, Aretino intervened and had the man released. Then he wrote a poem to accompany each image and had it republished in the year 1527, this time as a work of poetry and art. But, once again the papacy destroyed every copy it could find. And the censorship was so strict that no complete editions of the original printings have ever been found. The text and images that we have today are merely a copy of a copy, discovered 400 years later. But at least this second time Raimondi escaped prison.

This publication is considered to be the first appearance on the market of a literary-artistic coupling in a work of pornography. It is this that makes *I Modi* famous as the first piece of pornography. The poems present a dialogue between a woman (presumably a prostitute, but not necessarily) and a man, where they prompt each other with a raunchy vocabulary towards penetration. Some of the characters are even attributed with the names of political men, or those in positions of power (unrelated to the artistic depiction). These are poems of foreplay - they induce the act, and advertise or remind its readers of the wonderful breadth of positions they could adopt. Its intent is arousal, though it wasn't commissioned by a house of ill-repute, rather it could be used by anyone anywhere. And yet it was also political, or the poems were, and with their accompaniment the images became so too. They were crude and were supposed to make fun of men in power.

They did this quite successfully, and one of those men, the Pope's Datary, Giovanmatteo Giberti saw his own representation arrive in a parcel on his desk and found himself in a compromising (though

no doubt exceptionally pleasant) position. He ordered Aretino's arrest. However Aretino had already got wind and fled Rome.



## MONEY

'Pornography' means, literally, the writing (γραφή) of prostitutes (πόρνες). Some sources suggest that this word harks back to a time when prostitutes would advertise their skills with the images of possible positions and activities they were willing and able to undertake. The word first appears in Athenaeus of Naucratis' *The Deipnosophists*, where it is used twice in the same context, the word appears once again in a fragment of Polemon which is a direct quote of Athenaeus. Athenaeus' 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD work tells us that certain painters of antiquity, Aristeides, Pausanias and Nikophanes were also quite successful pornographers (πορνογράφοι). It is assumed that such painters took it upon themselves to decorate the inner walls of brothels with various licentious scenes that were designed to prompt even the most frigid customer to spend an obol or two on the more animate examples of house specialities. As is the case with so much about the ancient world, the meaning of this word, and the assumption that

it came into being on account of these images, is assumed on the basis of this single literary reference of Athenaeus. It's a circular argument. But this self-justifying logic where we can't help but come back to where we began, joined with a certain capitalist spirit (money for head and so forth) and a bit of tail-chasing, should alert us to an impregnable, but by no means impenetrable logic in the word 'pornography', especially if it began as an advertisement. Even the word *porne*, 'prostitute' has an etymology linking it back to the Indo-European root \*per- 'to traffic in, to sell', (but note sanskrit cognate, *aprata* 'without recompense, gratuitously'). A *porne*, a prostitute, was simply the woman subject to being bought and sold in the most explicit sense (the others were bought and sold non-explicitly, i.e. you were also buying progeny, you had to pay more, wait more, or risk your life in battle or in the salon of the in-laws).

One thing is certain if we accept this archaic etymology, pornography was always connected with money, exchange (intercourse notwithstanding) and with an artistry of advertising and publicising. This is a significant fact to keep in mind, given that today such images of ancient sexual activities are said to be 'erotica' whereas those that appear in the little windows of your web-page are 'pornographic'. The difference, in this case, is negligible, with or without the presence of negligee. We should not forget this aspect of art as publicisation and advertisement in the following, regardless of how much we get off on it.

## PARODY

After its antique and momentary appearance in Athenaeus, the word then recedes into the dark alleyways of history and, as far as I can discover,



only reveals itself again in the middle of the nineteenth century. One Charles Anthon, in his *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities* (New York, 1843) lists it among his references:

***“Pornography, or obscene painting, which in the time of the Romans was practiced with the grossest license, prevailed especially at no particular period in Greece, but was apparently tolerated to a considerable extent at all times. Parrhasius, Aristides, Pausanias, Nicophanes, Chaerephanes, Arellius, and a few other [pornographoi] are mentioned as having made themselves notorious for this species of license.”***

I don't know where he gets the other names from, but presumably they were known as painters of the explicit, without the particular title 'pornographers' being applied to

them. Obviously, Anthon is relying upon the same source as us. His great achievement, however, was to put the word into circulation. Henceforth the word gathers in popularity to describe pretty much any image or writing of sexual obscenity. That's the history of the word, yes. But it doesn't mean that the object itself, that is, any work of art or literature depicting the activities of prostitutes (and thence, dare I say it, the rest of us) was scarce in the ancient world, in abundance today and absent in between times.

The 1960's may well stand today as a time when art and literature took a sexual (today we would say 'erotic') turn with indiscreet political intent. However, the 18<sup>th</sup> century also witnessed a flurry of sexual (today we would say 'pornographic') iconography directed against the powers that be and the monarchy (think De Sade, and all those images of Marie Antoinette with dildos). If we go back even further, we could say that the trend of pairing political invective with descriptions of erotic extravagance was at its acme during the late Roman Empire (Horace, Petronius, Seneca the Younger). And then, from the period of the renaissance, the papacy, the monks and nuns all become the butt of the joke. Literally.

However, erotica as political satire is very different from erotica for personal pleasure. Or is it? No doubt there is a certain sadism involved when it comes to seeing your enemy fucked, fucked over, fucked up, especially if it's personal. And then you can experience it for yourself, even at the same time, first-hand so to speak, if only metaphorically, or voyeuristically. The pleasure of seeing another suffer is still pleasure,

just as there can be a certain pleasure in suffering or a pain in being pleased...

In the sixteenth century, when the first 'pornographic' images were published there is no doubt that, despite the absence of well-known political or religious figures, the work appeared as a challenge to the status quo. The problem is that it was exactly the *means* that challenged the status quo, the same *means* that give pornography its dubious meaning, such that what it means to us today, or at least so many, is the mechanisation and objectification of the human body and its most basic pleasures.

#### TECHNOLOGY

The rise of pornography follows swiftly upon that of information technology. They could be said to come together. The printing press meant that literature, the sordid as much as the sacred, was more readily available to a wider public, given that they could read, or someone nearby could. The woodblock and later engraving methods made art available to a wider audience, and subsequently meant that a piece of literature could be accompanied by an image. The combination was perfect for the distribution of what might be the most sought after material for humanity's spiritual well-being: porn (the Bible has always been a big seller I admit, but it too has got some pretty hot stuff in there- Noah with his beasts in the ark for how many years?, Mary riding the donkey, Lot with his daughters, Judah and his daughter-in-Law, David raping Bathsheba, without saying a word about M.M and her hair...). However, this correlation between technology and pornography continues (photography, film, video, internet, web cams, skype) making

pornography more and more widely available and simultaneously more and more the subject of discussions about social responsibility and so on and so forth on the one hand, and on the other pretty serious censorship laws that just can't seem to keep up with technology and hackers' abilities and the audience's desire to bypass them.

It's pretty much indisputable that pornography has ceased to be politically challenging. But it would appear that the origin of pornography, namely 'the writing of prostitutes', where it begins as a form of advertising, and leads to the objectification of the body, the mechanisation of our basic instincts and so on *for profit* (and not so much to the profit of the prostitutes individually anymore than that of industry- besides no prostitute ever made a profit for the simple reason that what she gives is priceless), has overwhelmed the possibilities that were only later suggested by the radical nature of mass distribution. And yet, who can say? Maybe we're





all getting it on better because there's a bit more information around, positions in the air, conversations on the radio, signs, advertisements on buses, television. The distribution of pornographic information is massive and largely horrendously reifying, conservative, objectifying. But if you can still get it on, despite and in spite of all this flurry perhaps there's hope yet. There is without doubt, if not a revolutionary, certainly the potential for revolt (sic!!!) in sex. Because who wants to go work for the man when you've got the most exquisite example of manhood/womanhood/whatever-floats-your-boat lying on your bed/sofa/kitchen floor?

#### POWER

By 1525 Aretino had made it to Mantua, where at 2am out of the morning frost a man attacked him and stabbed him twice, once in the chest, once encountering his right hand raised in defence. But Aretino didn't die. And after some days, when Aretino was still too weak to move, and could barely speak, a man approached his bedside and confessed

wholeheartedly for the crime. Aretino knew the man, he was Della Volta. Both he and Aretino had been lovers of Lucrezia, one of the maids of Giberti, the same Datuary who had been ridiculed in the *I Modi*, the same man who had ordered his arrest. Della Volta showed Aretino a letter:

***“Did you write this?” he asked. It was a sonnet addressed to or about the pretty Lucrezia. “Of course,” Aretino replied “Could anyone but I have written so excellently?” “It’s certainly a decent enough piece of work,” the boy admitted, rather sourly. “But you couldn’t expect me to ignore it, could you?” “Oh, I don’t know,” groaned the wounded man “I don’t keep your conscience, do I? Go see your confessor.” “I have done so,” Della Volta retorted sullenly. “He sent me to you.” “To me?” “To you, to beg your forgiveness for stabbing you that night.”***

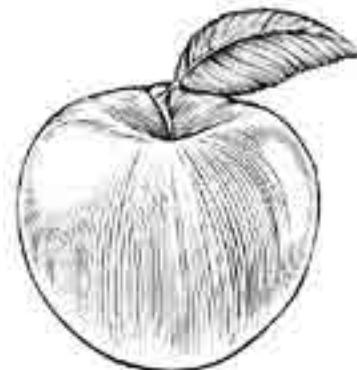
Della Volta's confessor was none other than Giberti. Although it appeared that the three men of power, in this case, the Pope, Giberti his Datuary and Aretino the satirist were at a stalemate, Aretino decided that even Mantua was not safe and relocated to the Republic of Venice where everything was permitted and what wasn't allowed was also permitted if you did it quietly.

In Venice Aretino proceeded to perfect the art of pornography, writing *The School of Whoredom* and other dialogues that are basically educational treatises about how a simple prostitute could fuck over a rich man, both literally and metaphorically. Explicitly, this particular dialogue presents the various means available to a prostitute, but also a courtesan to get by in a world dominated by men. There is a logic here: it reminds women that the world may well be dominated by men, but men are dominated by their desires, and since women have in some cases the exclusive role of satisfying certain of these desires, certain women have the power to dominate men.

Against a pretty brutal reality (at this time the punishment for a disobedient prostitute was the 'thirty-one', named after the number of men who were to rape her vaginally and anally), Aretino posed the prostitute as a woman who could not only survive, but also manipulate the powerful. Although his poetry was not radical, it did have an effect upon the influence and public standing of powerful men. If we take Aretino's works as an example of pornography - which we can do, but he certainly never used the word to refer to his own writings - then suddenly pornography becomes an essential part of the power game.

Pornography, here, is a manual for the repressed, the down-at-heel; it reveals the power of manipulation, influence, pandering and petting until you're the one who comes out on top.

***'Flattery and deceit are the darlings of great men,' says Aretino's character Nanna, 'and so with these men spread the butter on thick, if you want to get something out of them, otherwise you'll come home to me with a full belly and an empty purse.'***



-Thea

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