

## HONOR AND EROTIC ART

Saepe supercilii nudas matrona severi  
et veneris stantis ad genus omne videt.

—Ov. *Tr.* 2.309–310

### PORNOGRAPHY AS REPRESENTATION

To understand the Roman elite's sufferance for brothels in their midst, it is useful to consider the Romans' "tolerance" of erotic art in many venues even our secular culture might find problematic.<sup>1</sup> Explicit sexual scenes were on view in a number of settings and thus were easily accessible to upper-class women and children. They could be found in aristocrats' bedrooms, dining rooms, the reception areas known as *tablina*, peristyles, gardens, and so forth, as well as on household objects used by both sexes (and all social ranks), such as terra-cotta lamps, Arretine bowls, and (for the rich) silver cups, and objects thought primarily, or even exclusively, favored by women, such as mirrors.<sup>2</sup>

1. Brendel, "Erotic Art" (1970) 3–69, figs. 1–48 (at 6 [cf. 8]) lists Greece and Rome as one of only five "... places and periods in which, for a time at least, erotic situations were depicted directly and factually as well as with a degree of frequency, originality of variation, and on a level of quality sufficient to command attention . . . ." See also Myerowitz, "Domestication of Desire" (1992) 133, 135, 138, 146; Jacobelli, *Terme Suburbane* (1995) 83, 86, 89, 90, 92, 98; Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking* (1998) 12–13, 61–82, 91–118; Zanker, *Pompeii* (1998) 17; De Caro, *Gabinetto segreto* (2000) esp. 12, 30–34; Varone, *Erotismo a Pompei* (2000) 40–53; Jacobelli, "Pompeii" (2001).

2. See Brendel, "Erotic Art" (1970) 45, 47; Zevi, "Arte" (1991) 270; Myerowitz, "Domestication of Desire" (1992) 139, 142, 156 n. 9; Riggsby, "Cubiculum" (1997) 39; Cantarella, *Pompeii* (1998) 95; Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking* (1998) 61–82, 91–118; Kellum, "Spectacle" (1999) 291; Varone, *Erotismo a Pompei* (2000) 54–87; Jacobelli, "Pompeii" (2001).

Some matrons were not averse to having themselves represented as nude exemplars of Venus, a practice that seems to have resonated differently for the Romans than it might for us.<sup>3</sup>

The preceding paragraph reflects what has been the common opinion about Roman erotic art. Very recently, Pietro Guzzo and Vincenzo Scarano Ussani have raised an important qualification to this view, arguing that a distinction should be drawn between the location of paintings of actual persons (i.e., nonmythological) engaged in explicit lovemaking and that of allusive and/or mythological depictions of sex. The first type of representation, they assert, could be found in the brothel, or other public establishments where sex was sold, and the slave quarters of private houses, or at least at some remove from the master's quarters, while the second could be found almost anywhere else, including the master's living and reception rooms in private houses.<sup>4</sup>

There are, of course, exceptions found for example in bedrooms of the master's family, as the authors acknowledge.<sup>5</sup> A quibble also arises over whether the distinctions drawn among these rather complex categories are always as clear in fact as they are in theory.<sup>6</sup> A similar point holds for the classification of room types. Not all *cubicula*, for example, were created equal; one belonging to an emperor might be a fairly public place. So much is I think taken for granted by Suetonius when he writes of Tiberius's enthusiasm for a painting by Parrhasius depicting Atalanta fellating Meleager: ". . . not only did he display it, but he even enshrined it in his *cubiculum*" (" . . . non modo prae-tulit, sed et in cubiculo dedicavit").<sup>7</sup>

Particular difficulties arise when Guzzo and Scarano Ussani draw a direct connection between the erotic art found in the *apodyterium* of the Suburban

3. D'Ambra, "Calculus of Venus" (1996) 222, 225, 229, who (at 219–20) points out, citing Larissa Bonfante, that in these instances ". . . Venus's nudity is worn as a costume . . . that replaces rather than reveals the body of the deceased."

4. Guzzo and Scarano Ussani, *Veneris figurae* (2000) 25–35. A summary of their argument is found at Guzzo, "Quadretti erotici" (2000) 42–47.

5. Guzzo and Scarano Ussani, *Veneris figurae* (2000) 29. See also app. 2 of their book, in which Antonio Varone discusses the decorative program of a house recently excavated in *Insula 9.12*, where a single *cubiculum* shows three types of erotic painting—allegorical, mythographic, and explicit/nonmythological: see esp. 64–65.

6. The authors appear to recognize this difficulty: Guzzo and Scarano Ussani, *Veneris figurae* (2000) 48. Note Varone's division of erotic art into three types in n. 5. Cf. Clarke, *Looking at Love-making* (1998) who distinguishes between scenes of explicit lovemaking on one side and depictions of phalluses, mythological encounters, and dinner parties on the other (12–13), but does not omit from consideration, for example, representations of Priapus and Hermaphroditus (48–55; cf. 174–77).

7. Suet. *Tib.* 44.2. On this passage, see Riggsby, "Cubiculum" (1997) 39–40.

Baths at Pompeii and the sale of sex there.<sup>8</sup> It is highly debatable whether prostitution was practiced *in situ*, that is, in the changing room itself.<sup>9</sup> Another difficulty with their argument is the erotic art in question may have been intended to inspire mirth in its viewers, rather than serve a primarily pornographic function.<sup>10</sup> It has even been argued that the function of the various sexual acts depicted in these paintings, which we know were positioned above the rows of wooden boxes that held the bathers' clothing, boxes which were themselves represented on the wall, was mnemonic, that is, the paintings served to help the bather remember where to look after bathing.<sup>11</sup>

Another difficulty with the general argument of Guzzo and Scarano Ussani is with the explicit sexual representations found on objects, and not walls. It is very unlikely these were solely used outside the master's quarters in private houses and thus undermine to some extent arguments about wall decoration. Finally, there is a scene of the type the authors identify as allusive on the wall of the Purpose-Built Brothel (see fig. 10), which suggests, of course, that this type of representation—as well as the more explicit kind—was considered appropriate for the brothel.<sup>12</sup>

In fact, the paintings from the Purpose-Built Brothel nicely illustrate some of the problems and possibilities raised by the location and presumed purposes of Roman erotic art (for a sample of these, see figs. 7–11). The graffiti reveal that the clientele were lower-status males.<sup>13</sup> Aside from a representation of Priapus, there were seven erotic *tabellae* on the inside walls of the main passageway downstairs, six of which are still legible. Of these, four depict various

8. Guzzo and Scarano Ussani, *Veneris figurae* (2000) 17–25. See photographs 13–17.

9. See my discussion of this difficulty in app. 1. To be sure, there is a “more likely” candidate for a brothel among the upstairs apartments: see no. 32 in the catalog.

10. See the discussion in Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking* (1998) 212–40; also now Clarke, “Laughing” (2002).

11. Jacobelli, *Terme Suburbane* (1995) 99. The fact that the painted versions of the clothing boxes were themselves numbered is no argument against this view. In many modern multilevel parking garages, the levels are not only numbered but color-coded as well. A variety of erotic representations presumably would serve at least as well as different colors as a mnemonic device.

12. As the authors acknowledge, the presumably erotic content of the panel at which the lovers gaze does not remove the anomaly of a non-explicit representation of lovers on the wall of a brothel. Guzzo and Scarano Ussani, *Veneris figurae* (2000) 43. According to Helbig, *Wandgemälde* (1868) 371, the panel, now no longer visible, showed an erotic coupling (“Symplegma”). One is tempted to adapt the authors' own explanation for the appearance in the brothel of a wall painting that is purely decorative or mythographic and nonsexual in nature, namely that it was aimed at encouraging clients to imagine the ambience as upper-class: 50–51. See also chaps. 7, 8, and 10.

13. See Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking* (1998) 199.

explicit acts of lovemaking in action, another a moment immediately preceding penetration, and the sixth a couple reclining on a bed, gazing at a *tabella* that was presumably erotic but is now illegible (fig. 10). Though much detail is lost, we can see that the beds in the paintings are richly furnished and at times accompanied by other elegant pieces of furniture, such as lampstands, that contrast dramatically with the austere trappings of the brothel itself. What was marketed to the lower-class clients of this establishment then was not simply sex, but a fantasy of sex that included companionship, comfort, and culture, an image of elite sexuality that might embrace an affair with a *hetaira*, an adulterous liaison, or at any rate the seduction of a higher-status woman.<sup>14</sup> In this way, the art of the brothel established a frame of reference that reached beyond the brothel and venal sex, which is an important reason why we should not be surprised to find such art in nonbrothel settings.

Similar considerations may have been at work with the so-called *spintriae*, the small bronze or brass tokens produced in the latter part of the reign of Tiberius (i.e., in the years A.D. 22–37) that depict explicit sexual scenes.<sup>15</sup> The erotic activity portrayed on these objects takes place within the context of lavish interior decorations that include expensive-looking furniture and generous amounts of drapery. The point is evidently to suggest a high degree of luxury and sexual pleasure.<sup>16</sup> Do these tokens depict a brothel? A fantasy of a brothel? An upper-class *domus*? Part of an upper-class *domus* converted into a private “sex club?”<sup>17</sup> The very indeterminacy of the locale supports the argument made here, namely that the erotic associations of the brothel were a moveable feast.

That may not exhaust the implications of brothel-art, however. It is likely that not all of the brothel’s clients reacted to these paintings in exactly the same way on every visit. Would it make a difference whether the customer was there for the first or the fiftieth time? Whether he was drunk or sober? Whether he was there on his own or in the company of his pals? It is obvious

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14. This idea is developed from the cogent analysis of Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking* (1998) 202.

15. Buttrey, “*Spintriae*” (1973) 52, points out that the term is modern. See Buttrey, 57, for the dates. The date and purpose of these tokens are controversial, but the better opinion is that they are Tiberian and were used as gaming pieces (rather than to pay for sex in a brothel: chap. 3); for different points of view see, besides Buttrey, Simonetta and Riva, *Tessere* (1981); Bateson, “*Spintriae*” (1991); Jacobelli, *Terme Suburbane* (1995) 70–74; Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking* (1998) 244–47; Jacobelli, *Spintriae* (2000).

16. See Buttrey, “*Spintriae*” (1973) 58.

17. See chap. 5.

that we lack the evidence to answer these questions directly. All the same, a caution against assuming a unique, unequivocal response to this art comes from an unlikely source, the same Purpose-Built Brothel in the *modern* setting of ancient Pompeii.

The site of the excavations at Pompeii is without doubt one of the most visited archaeological venues in Italy, Europe, and the planet. And it is no exaggeration to cite the Purpose-Built Brothel, the good old "*Lupanare*," as one of its most popular attractions. Almost every day of the year, hundreds of tourists of diverse nationalities troop in after their guides to gape slack jawed at the *cellae*, the paintings and, if they are especially observant, the remains of the graffiti, perhaps adding one or two specimens of their own before departing. Few will doubt that the place sees a lot more traffic as a museum of a brothel than it ever did in the days before Vesuvius, when it was still an actual brothel. If Pompeii were Disney World, the Purpose-Built Brothel would be its Space Mountain.

The modern tourist's typical reaction to the erotic art of the brothel is laughter and lots of it. This holds true, in my experience, across lines of gender, age (among adults), and nationality. This laughter stands in direct contrast to the solemn, or mock-solemn, intonations of the guides, who are often busy trying to convince the visitors that the paintings were used to overcome a language barrier between the local prostitutes and their clients from overseas, as if prostitutes confronting this difficulty ever are or have been compelled to rely upon such visual aids. The explanation invariably delights the tourists, many of whom have been struggling with a language barrier all day long. No one thinks to ask how the painting of the couple gazing at a *tabella* figures into the Specialties of the House.

My survey is hardly scientific, of course. Other possible responses, ranging from sexual excitement to tacit condemnation, cannot be ruled out simply because they go unnoticed. Some visitors may laugh to mask their discomfort. Most importantly, like all other evidence of a comparative nature, modern reactions cannot be probative, only suggestive, for ancient Rome. But they do suggest that sexually explicit art, when viewed in public by groups of people, can seem ridiculous. We do not have to resort to absurd theories of biological determinism to admit the possibility that some Roman visitors to the Purpose-Built Brothel may have reacted in much the same way. If this was the case, the most interesting result would be that the art of the Suburban Baths, for all its over-the-top quality, differs in degree rather than in kind from the art of the Purpose-Built Brothel, making a connection between the two places more likely, though still, I very much regret to say, elusive in terms of hard proof.

Two important points emerge from this discussion. The first is there are enough exceptions and qualifications to the thesis offered by Guzzo and Scarano Ussani to show that both “explicit” and “allusive” examples of erotic art may be found in a variety of locations. Thus the arguments both for the near-universality and broad definition of erotic art in a Roman context still retain their validity. All the same, Guzzo and Scarano Ussani have certainly succeeded in showing a tendency or preference for explicit sexual representation in the context of the brothel. They usefully encourage us to take seriously the pornographic content of erotic art or at least some of it. The distinction they make between art on the walls of the master’s own living and reception areas and art on the walls of slave quarters and the like has, despite the qualifications offered here, its attraction, because it builds on a foundation for an improved understanding of the articulation of space within the aristocratic house already laid down in the scholarship.<sup>18</sup> The validity of their conclusion that here too, within aristocratic houses, brothels operated is evaluated in chapter 5. For now, we might observe that the lower-class idea of elite sex on view in the Purpose-Built Brothel meets its mirror image in upper-class fantasies of the brothel that appeared in some of the grander Pompeian *domus*. What mediated between these class-differentiated settings were explicit, and even sometimes allusive, depictions of lovemaking.

Roman erotic art seems then to have been almost universal both in its placement and in its appeal. Public venues where respectable persons of both sexes might congregate, such as baths, offer some of the most lurid, or interesting, examples, depending on one’s point of view. Phallic lamps, made of terra-cotta and bronze, hung from the facades of shops, lighting the public streets. This practice seems practically to have been universal at Pompeii.<sup>19</sup> There was no difference in content, only, at times, quality, between representations in public places (including brothels) and in private houses, which seem to have derived their erotic material from the same sources.<sup>20</sup> The Romans evidently had no concern about keeping sex out of the home and recreational centers and in the brothels or art museums where we might think it belongs. I might also mention here the evidence for penis-shaped drinking vessels, as well as baked goods shaped like male and female genitalia, though I doubt that these particular items, especially given the literary context in

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18. Essential here is Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses and Society* (1994).

19. See Spano, “Illuminazione” (1920) 17–18, 25–27.

20. See above all Jacobelli, *Terme Suburbane* (1995) 83.

which they are mentioned, were as commonly distributed in homes as the other erotica discussed here.<sup>21</sup>

What did these representations mean to the Romans? The best answer is that more than one response was possible, not only for different persons, but also for the same viewer.<sup>22</sup> Romans found erotic art stimulating in more than just the obvious sense. This art possibly functioned as an aphrodisiac; a didactic paradigm; an expression of humor, above all sexual satire; a display of wealth and/or culture, especially Greek culture, which was highly prized by the elite; or merely as decoration.<sup>23</sup> So it is reductionist, for example, to view wall paintings in a brothel as a sort of pictorial menu of the specialties of the house.<sup>24</sup> It is equally simplistic to assume that erotic art in the changing room of a public bath solely functioned as a mnemonic device, an assumption that excludes other possible reactions.<sup>25</sup> Of course any reaction, not just one of a sexual nature, might well be attenuated by the length of time a painting remained on the wall.

This last point inspires a note of caution regarding the erotic wall paintings in the *apodyterium* of the Suburban Baths in Pompeii (figs. 13–17). We know that toward the end of the city's life these were painted over with nonerotic representations.<sup>26</sup> It is tempting to attribute this change to the arrival of a new owner with different tastes, an owner who was perhaps a bit of a prude or highly sensitive to the moralizing politics of the Flavian dynasty.<sup>27</sup> But perhaps the art was painted over because it had been visible long enough to lose its power to inspire mirth, to arouse, or to help an addled bather recover clothing left in the changing room. For this reason, we cannot assume the disappearance of the paintings meant the Suburban Baths no longer functioned as a brothel.

21. For penis-shaped drinking vessels, see Iuv. 2.95; *HA Pertinax* 8.5. For baked goods in the form of genitalia, see Petron. 60.4; Mart. 9.2.3, 14.70(69).

22. Jacobelli, *Terme Suburbane* (1995) 100. Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking* (1998) esp. 212–40, is admirably sensitive to the possibility that the gender of the viewer affected the response to the art. See now Clarke, “Laughing” (2002).

23. See Myerowitz, “Domestication of Desire” (1992) 135, 137, 138, 148, 149, 151; Jacobelli, *Terme Suburbane* (1995) 88–90, 99; Cantarella, *Pompeii* (1998) 95; Zanker, *Pompeii* (1998) 20, 23, 32, 35, 37, 139–40; De Caro, *Gabinetto segreto* (2000) 25–26, 34; cf. Brendel, “Erotic Art” (1970) 58, 64.

24. So Jacobelli, *Terme Suburbane* (1995) 100 n. 8, rightly emphasizes. For the view I criticize, see Dierichs, *Erotik* (1997) 74.

25. So Scarano Ussani, “*Lenocinium*” (2000) 260–61, rightly argues.

26. Jacobelli, *Terme Suburbane* (1995) 78–80. See, in particular, fig. 15.

27. See Jacobelli, *Terme Suburbane* (1995) 80–82; Scarano Ussani, “*Lenocinium*” (2000) 262; Clarke, “Laughing” (2002) 154.

Pornography is just one element, then, of erotic art. Given the multiple purposes we can trace for Roman art of this kind, we might more profitably view its role in terms of a spectrum, with its presence stronger or weaker in various contexts rather than always simply present or absent. We must keep in mind, however, that perceptions of this role may well be conditioned by the gender and status of the viewer, as well as by other factors. We cannot, by the same token, be certain of distinguishing pornography from art and literature overall.<sup>28</sup> Crucial for our purpose is the point that, where pornography is most in evidence, so is prostitution, or the idea of it.

#### THINGS SEEN AND HEARD

One might object that what I am talking about here is a matter of art and not of life.<sup>29</sup> We cannot simply assume that our notion of erotic art is identical to that of the Romans or that the impact of erotic representations was not informed, or even diminished, by packaging in a Greek cultural format.<sup>30</sup> But this is precisely my argument. Roman ideas about what is objectionable may differ radically from our own. There is a famous anecdote wherein Livia dismisses any possible injury to her sense of shame through an inadvertent glimpse of some naked men, who were evidently prisoners of war, because she regarded them as though they were statues.<sup>31</sup> The incident makes for a good point.<sup>32</sup> Prostitutes soliciting in the streets were not typically nude and/or engaged in sex.<sup>33</sup> In other words, the erotic art of the Romans tended to be

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28. See Sullivan, *Politics of Sex* (1997) 76, 79.

29. It is worth noting that live sex shows, often performed in private houses, may have helped bridge whatever gap existed between “art” and “life”: see Jacobelli, *Terme Suburbane* (1995) 100–101. Cf. Tiberius’s multimedia approach at Capri: Suet. *Tib.* 43.2. Kondoleon, “Timing Spectacles” (1999) usefully describes the importation of “public” themes into domestic contexts. More discussion of the erotic element in this regard would be welcome.

30. See the remarks of Jacobelli, *Terme Suburbane* (1995) 98–99; Clarke, *Looking at Love-making* (1998) 12–13, 19, 55; Varone, *Erotismo* (2000) 14–27.

31. Dio (in Xiph.) 58.2.4.

32. The Livia anecdote also implies the possibility of the opposite attitude. A respectable woman might be expected to display outrage at such a sight. Significantly, however, Livia does not react in this way. Livia, to be sure, was a model, ethical and otherwise, for Roman women: see Purcell, “Livia” (1986); Barrett *Livia* (2002) esp. 123–27, 143, 159. In this passage, she is praised for setting a standard others were meant to follow.

33. The nudity of prostitutes seems more characteristic of the brothel itself: see chap. 2. In a passage discussed in the text below, Ovid describes matrons as “often” (*saepe*) gazing upon “naked” (*nudas*) prostitutes in public: *Tr.* 2.309–10. *Nudus*, of course, can mean “scantily clad”: Fagan, *Bathing in Public* (1999) 25. The latter would seem to be the preferred translation, though my argument would be strengthened if the prostitutes were, in fact, nude.

much more explicit than their public sexual behavior.<sup>34</sup> More importantly, Livia's reaction suggests that the respectable Roman woman chose to see what she wished to see and no doubt taught her children to do the same.<sup>35</sup>

In an apologetic strain, Ovid relates how the Vestal's gaze was untrammelled by the appearance of prostitutes:

Ov. *Tr.* 2.309–12:

saepe supercilii nudas matrona severi  
 et veneris stantis ad genus omne videt.  
 corpora Vestales oculi meretricia cernunt,  
 nec domino poenae res ea causa fuit.

*Many a time a matron of stern brow catches sight of women clad scantily,  
 prepared for every sort of lust. The eyes of a Vestal behold the bodies of prostitutes,  
 nor has that fact been a reason to punish their owner.*

It is important to recognize that the poet is concerned here with defending himself against a charge of encouraging adultery in his *Ars Amatoria*, arguing first that the work was explicitly intended only for prostitutes, next (in implicit admission of the weakness of the prior argument?) that it is after all no offense (*facinus*) to read erotic verse, only to act on it.<sup>36</sup> Ovid clearly suggests here that the Vestal, as a model of probity, sets the standard with her demure reaction to the sight of prostitutes for everyone else with pretensions to respectability, including, Ovid hopes regarding his own case, the emperor Augustus himself.

We can certainly discern a tension here between the ideal of shielding Vestals from the sight of prostitutes and the practical impossibility of doing so.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, Ovid at the very least might be thought to allude to a failed policy of moral zoning in this passage. The ideal of shielding Vestals is well supported by evidence from Seneca the Elder regarding physical contact between priestesses and prostitutes though it does not mention Vestals explicitly.<sup>38</sup> In

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34. For another sign of Roman sensitivity about public sexual behavior, see the rule attributed to Romulus that men should not be seen naked by women: Plut. *Rom.* 20.3. See also Seneca's complaint about *matronae* in see-through clothing: *Ben.* 7.9.5. This evidence helps explain the controversy over mixed-gender bathing: see below in the text and chap. 2.

35. Argued from the Roman mother's role in the moral education of her children, see Dixon, *The Roman Mother* (1988) 109–11, 117, 121.

36. Ov. *Tr.* 2.303–8.

37. I owe this point to Wallace-Hadrill, p.c.

38. Sen. *Contr.* 1.2.1, 3–5.

my view, Ovid resolves the tension by showing that the moral contrast between pure Vestal and impure prostitute is actually enhanced by their (inevitable) physical proximity. It is worth noting that the matron precedes the Vestal in the comparison and that the matron, with her greater freedom of movement as well as her lesser, if still exalted, status, cannot have been held to the same ideal. There is thus no evidence of a policy in the passage, even of a failed one.<sup>39</sup> The Romans were of course fond of drawing the general moral contrast between respectable women and prostitutes, and this passage certainly belongs to that tradition.<sup>40</sup>

The point holds that prostitutes and brothels were invisible, at least ideally so, to members of the Roman elite, including women and children. What was not seen was also evidently not heard: we do not have evidence of complaints about the noise and violent behavior that must have been a feature of life in close proximity to brothels and even cribs, as we know a few stately Pompeian townhouses were. Even if we can correctly assume that brothels as a rule were sturdily constructed, that is, fairly soundproof, a great deal of the noise generated by clients who were singing, fighting, and so forth would have spilled out onto the street.<sup>41</sup> Complaints about noise, violence, and criminal behavior in and near brothels across historical periods are not at all rare.<sup>42</sup> Elite Romans did complain loudly and at length about the racket and disorder arising from other sources such as baths, which were much more respectable than brothels and therefore worthier of notice.<sup>43</sup>

Here is a sign that we are in a world foreign in important respects to our

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39. For more on this theme, see chap. 5.

40. See McGinn, *Prostitution, Sexuality, and the Law* (1998) esp. 147–71.

41. See the evidence discussed in chap. 3.

42. See, for example, Bernstein, *Sonia's Daughters* (1995) 32, 151, 178–80; Karras, *Common Women* (1996) 15; Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures* (1997) 200, 211, 292–93, 298. For an interesting analysis of why neighbors of brothels find them so annoying, see Decker, *Prostitution* (1979) 348–49, 463. In light of this evidence, the absence of Roman evidence might seem remarkable and even incredible, but we should keep in mind that objections to noise from brothels were not universal in past times: see Hill, *Their Sisters' Keepers* (1993) 173. See also Mackey, *Red Lights Out* (1987) 258.

43. See the complaints registered at Ramage, “Urban Problems” (1983) 81–83, 86; André, “Sénèque” (1994); Kardos, “Épigrammes” (2001) 210–11. For a catalog of urban noises, see Mart. 12.57 (cf. 9.68). On the racket generated at the baths, the lament by Sen. *Ep.* 56.1–2 is classic. See the remarks of Fagan, “Interpreting the Evidence” (1999) 29. The closest we get to an objection about noise from brothels is Juvenal’s complaint about sleepless nights in *meritoria* (which may not refer to brothels at all): 3.234, unless this is meant as a double entendre suggesting that sleeplessness in a brothel had nothing to do with noise (so also perhaps Juvenal’s *pervigiles popinae* at 8.158 and Propertius’s reference to the “wakeful Subura” at 4.7.15). For the lack of nuisance-abatement rules, see chap. 5.

own. The kinds of concerns that modern societies have with the location of brothels are familiar enough. These include falling property values, possible damage to the tax base of a locality, loss of business from tourists and conventions, and a perception that a town or neighborhood has become a haven for criminality of various kinds.<sup>44</sup> None of these concerns had much resonance for the Romans.<sup>45</sup>

Baths are also relevant to the issue of public sexual behavior.<sup>46</sup> Some Romans objected to the practice of men and women bathing together, encouraging some scholars to argue that mixed bathing occurred only in low establishments, that the only women who participated were prostitutes, that mixed bathing went in and out of fashion, and so forth. According to a recent study, attendance at such baths was, both at Rome and many other places, simply a matter of personal choice for women and for men.<sup>47</sup> A decision not to attend mixed baths was not necessarily a sign of prudishness.<sup>48</sup> Slaves attending their masters and mistresses at the baths did not have a choice of course, but their presence raises the question of whether attendants of the opposite gender violated prescriptions against mixed bathing where they existed, were barred for this reason (or were supposed to be barred), were simply deemed invisible, or at any rate unseeing.<sup>49</sup> This evidence seems too complex and discontinuous to argue for a policy of moral zoning.

To return to Ovid, we would not, naturally, expect such apologetics from the poet in his pre-exile career. Elegy in particular seems an ill-suited genre for raising this sort of issue. It is all the more surprising therefore to find that another elegist, Propertius, expresses a concern with the threat to morality posed by *obscenae tabulae*:

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44. See Reynolds, *Economics of Prostitution* (1986) 52 (cf. 44).

45. Cf. the objections posed by neighbors to medieval German brothels, some of which resemble, some of which differ from, modern complaints: Schuster, *Freien Frauen* (1995) 305–7.

46. This paragraph is entirely indebted to Fagan, *Bathing in Public* (1999) 24–29. For more extensive discussion of this topic, see chap. 2.

47. Fagan, *Bathing in Public* (1999) 27, 29.

48. I understand Martial's coy warning about poetry full of naked men at the baths to be a joke meant to tease respectable women about their true proclivities: 3.68.1–4. The joke seems to apply equally to women who attended mixed baths and those who did not. For Martial and his female readers see the section below "Women and Children First."

49. On slaves at the baths, see the evidence collected by Fagan, "Interpreting the Evidence" (1999); Fagan, *Bathing in Public* (1999) 199–206.

Prop. 2.6.27–36:

Quae manus obscenas depinxit prima tabellas  
 et posuit casta turpia visa domo,  
 illa puellarum ingenuos corrumpit ocellos  
 nequitiaeque suae noluit esse rudis.  
 ah gemat in tenebris, ista qui protulit arte  
 orgia sub tacita condita laetitia!  
 non istis olim variabant tecta figuris:  
 tum paries nullo crimine pictus erat.  
 sed nunc immeritum velavit aranea fanum  
 et mala desertos occupat herba deos.

*The artist who first painted erotic panels and placed obscene pictures in chaste homes was the one to corrupt the eyes of innocent/well-born girls and insist on acquainting them with his own depravity. Let him suffer in blindness, who with that skill of his rendered public sexual couplings that were hidden behind silent pleasure! The houses of our ancestors were not made elegant by those sorts of designs—in those days the walls were not painted with matter for moral criticism. But now spiderwebs veil the undeserving temple and weeds overgrow the abandoned statues of our gods.*

The text provides confirmation, if needed, that some Romans found erotic art sexually stimulating.<sup>50</sup> The poet may well be referring strictly to representations of adultery and not to erotic art in general as discussed here.<sup>51</sup> In any case, the fundamental difficulty in accepting this criticism at face value lies in taking the protestations of the self-professed expert seducer seriously—is he concerned about competition, for example? We might reasonably conclude that when we must rely upon an elegist to assert old-fashioned morality, the game is up.

Whatever the value of Propertius's evidence, we should focus our attention less on general moral sensitivities about erotic art and more on concerns about the art's impact on women and children.<sup>52</sup> We might begin by asking the following questions: Was there a moral code of any kind in regard to these groups, and how well was this code enforced?

50. See also Ter. *Eun.* 583–90.

51. So Goold, *Propertius* (1999) 121 n. 17.

52. By *puellae*, Propertius is almost certainly referring to the love object(s) he constructs in his poems and not to children: see for example Wyke, *Roman Mistress* (2002) 46–77.

## WOMEN AND CHILDREN FIRST

When we examine evidence suggesting that women and children should be shielded from obscene language, an interesting ambiguity arises. For children, some of our best evidence comes from Martial, a fact that should inspire caution, given that author's proclivity for flouting convention or at least for appearing to do so.<sup>53</sup> In one epigram the poet defends his verses against the charge that they are *parum severi*, unfit for a schoolmaster to recite to a class.<sup>54</sup> At most this suggests a certain decorum ideally prevailed in the schoolroom. He also cites, as an absurdity parallel to that of cleaning up his poetry, the project of dressing prostitutes at the Floralia, where they danced in the nude, or otherwise assigning them the *stola*, the garb of the respectable Roman matron.<sup>55</sup> We might argue that this shows he viewed prostitutes as "obscene." If so, the epigram helps establish the Romans' casual acceptance of "obscenity" in public venues.<sup>56</sup>

The reference to the Floralia hearkens back to the dedication in Martial's first book, where the epigrammatist rejects as a reader the person who is "ostentatiously prudish" ("ambitiose tristis").<sup>57</sup> His ideal readership, Martial states, are the spectators at the Floralia, which would include everyone, except the "ostentatiously prudish" Cato. "Let Cato stay out of my theater or, if he does come, let him watch."<sup>58</sup> In the event that Cato was converted, there would be no one left to object or to exclude.

In another poem Martial praises Cosconius for writing epigrams suitable for good boys and girls (*pueri virginesque*), and remarks that his own ideal audience consists of bad boys and girls (*nequam iuvenes facilesque puellae*), plus the occasional older man (*senior*) who is tormented by an *amica*.

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53. See Richlin, *Garden of Priapus* (1992) esp. 57–80; O'Connor, "Martial the Moral Jester" (1998).

54. Mart. 1.35.

55. Mart. 1.35.8–9.

56. Though I put the word *obscenity* in quotation marks, it is clear that the Romans did have a concept of obscenity, however subject to disagreement and change (in different directions) over time. See, for example, Cic. *Fam.* 9.22, Off. 1.126–28; and Meyer-Zwiffelhofer, *Phallus* (1995) 24–48.

57. Mart. 1 *praef.* 14.

58. Mart. 1 *praef.* 16–18; see also the questions put to Cato at the very end: "Why did you come to the theater, harsh Cato? Did you only come in order to leave?" For a more sympathetic account of Cato's exit from the Floralia, which also makes clear that the Cato here was Cato the Younger, see Val. Max. 2.10.8.

Mart. 3.69.5–8:

Haec igitur nequam iuvenes facilesque puellae,  
     haec senior, sed quem torquet amica, legat.  
 at tua, Cosconi, venerandaque sanctaque verba  
     a pueris debent virginibusque legi.

*So let the boys gone bad and chicks who are easy read this stuff, plus the occasional older guy, if he's got a girlfriend doing him wrong . . . whereas your words, Cosconius, holy and to be hallowed as they are, ought to be read by the good boys, and the good girls.*

The terminology (*pueri*, etc.) denotes not strictly age, but moral character, though its reference to age is admittedly elastic.<sup>59</sup> The sarcasm is evident—Cosconius, ergo, does not really write Epigram at all—as is the debt to Ovid.

Martial dedicates his fifth book, after Domitian himself, to *matronae puerique virginesque*.<sup>60</sup> Here, in contrast to the first four books, is material the emperor can read without blushing. The compliment to Domitian's modesty should not mislead us.<sup>61</sup> If there was in fact a rule that children should not be exposed to obscenity, it most often, at least in the period from which derive our literary sources, was observed in the breach. In his Menippeans, Varro evidently has a speaker claim that the ancestors (*maiores*) removed *virgines* from wedding banquets to shield them from obscenity (*veneria vocabula*).<sup>62</sup> Whatever the truth of the claim about the usage of the *maiores*, the clear implication is that in Varro's day children were not so shielded. This helps explain the premise behind Seneca's argument that children cannot be guilty of *contumelia* ("insult," "outrage"), even when they use rather obscene language (*verba obsceniora*).<sup>63</sup> They were hardly capable of speaking what they had never heard spoken. Confirmation comes from Quintilian, who complains of the impact on children of the obscene sights and sounds at dinner parties.<sup>64</sup>

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59. On the chronological imprecision of Roman age-terminology and its moral aspect, see Eyben, *Restless Youth* (1993) esp. 5–41. On the sociology of Martial's postulated audience, see Cavallo, "Segni e voci" (2000) 264, with literature.

60. Mart. 5.2.

61. It is worth mentioning here Dio of Prusa's idealistic and unusual recommendation that the good emperor ban from Rome indecent dancing and singing as well as corrupting forms of music and even obscene language: *Or.* 2.55–56.

62. Varro *Men.* 9 Cèbe, with Cèbe, *Varron* 1 (1972) 56–57.

63. Sen. *Const.* 11.2.

64. Quint. *IO* 1.2.8.

Finally, there is the hilarious confusion of the grammarian Festus over the meaning of *sermo praetextatus*. Some of his authorities believe that the term refers to the idea that obscene speech (*obscenum verbum*) is inappropriate for the young (*praetextati*), while others connect it to the practice wherein boys (*pueri*), after laying aside their *togae praetextae*, launched obscenities (*obscena*) at wedding parties.<sup>65</sup> The evidence suggests that the second alternative is correct, and thus *praetextatus* can mean “obscene.”<sup>66</sup> The ritual role played by boys at weddings was matched by that of girls, who chanted obscenities at the festival of Anna Perenna on 15 March.<sup>67</sup> This nexus of ritual, youth, and obscenity was peculiarly Roman.<sup>68</sup> What emerges from the evidence is that, if the ideal was that Roman children should be spared obscene language, this ideal was not shared by everyone and was rarely if ever respected in actual fact.

With adult women, the sense is even stronger that the ideal, if it existed at all, was often breached or even held up to ridicule.<sup>69</sup> Again, Martial is a chief witness. In his third book, we encounter two poems, the first of which warns the *matrona* against reading further in the book, and then undercuts the seriousness of the warning by predicting that the warning itself will provoke her to read with greater attention. The second poem goes on to scold the *matrona* for having acted in accordance with this prediction.<sup>70</sup> Between these two poems he berates Saufeia for being a willing sexual partner but refusing to bathe with him while she is nude or at any rate scantily clad.<sup>71</sup> Of course he is constructing here not—or not only—his ideal bed and bath partner, but his ideal reader.

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65. Festus 282–84L.

66. See Catull. 61, 62; Varro *Men.* 10 Cèbe, *Iuv.* 2.170; Suet. *Vesp.* 22; Gell. 9.10.4, with *OLD* s.h.v 3.

67. Ov. *Fasti* 3.675–76. For both boys and girls, see Adams, *Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (1982) 4–6.

68. See the remarks of Kleijwegt, “*Iuvenes*” (1994) 88–90. He cites Serv. *ad Georg.* 2.387 on the necessity for the role of the playful and obscene in the performance of the sacred.

69. For a statement of this convention, see the rule attributed to Romulus that nothing “shameful” (“*aischron*”) be uttered in the presence of Roman women: Plut. *Rom.* 20.3. For what is possibly the earliest example preserved of the puncturing of this convention, see the fragment of Plautus’s *Dyscolus* (fr. 68), which reads “*Virgo sum: nondum didici nupta verba dicere*”: “I’m an unmarried girl: I haven’t yet learned the discourse of a married woman [i.e., to talk dirty].” This interpretation must remain insecure because we lack the context of the remark, but the adjective *nuptus* does appear to correspond to *praetextatus* in the meaning of “obscene.” If so, it implies that married women, like boys, were at home with obscene speech.

70. Mart. 3.68, 86, with Adams, *Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (1982) 217. For another view of the first poem, see Kardos, “*Vrbs*” (2001) 411. It is important not to be too earnest in reading Martial.

71. Mart. 3.72. On the problem of nude bathing, see above in the text and chap. 2.

Elsewhere Martial claims that upright readers of either gender will find his work sexually stimulating. Lucretia blushes at his poems in the presence of Brutus and puts them aside, but reads them in Brutus's absence.<sup>72</sup> "[Martial] writes with the attitude of one deliberately flouting conventional attitudes."<sup>73</sup> He does this in order to define his poetry and its audience as sophisticated, or even edgy. Of course the readership Martial constructs for his work need not have coincided with its actual one, though Ovid's experience with the vogue his poetry enjoyed among women of respectable status discourages great pessimism on this score.

It is difficult to find a text that convincingly demonstrates respect for the convention that women should be shielded from obscenity, however. In a satire extolling modest dinner arrangements, Juvenal seems to attack the staging of erotic dances in front of wives reclining with their husbands, a spectacle, he suggests, that a person would be ashamed even to narrate in their presence.<sup>74</sup> Unfortunately, the crucial lines are "certainly spurious."<sup>75</sup>

Augustine's criticism of the pagans for using obscene rituals to worship Cybele relies on the assumption that the actors would be ashamed to rehearse at home in the presence of their mothers what they recited publicly in the presence of a multitude of both sexes.<sup>76</sup> Though the notion is somewhat at odds with the author's purpose, we are not far from Martial's intimation of ideal schoolroom decorum here. More importantly, the *public* manifestation of obscenity is guaranteed in the text. In a similar way, Augustine's choice of Scipio Nasica as a model of filial piety reaches far back into the past, as does Mar-

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72. Mart. 11.16. See also 5.2 (above), 10.64 (Polla is asked to discount the sexual content of Martial's poems and read them anyway), 11.15 (is nicely ambiguous about whether Martial's poetry—or some of it at any rate—would be to the taste of Cato's wife and the *horribiles Sabinæ*).

73. Adams, *Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (1982) 217, though I disagree with his point that Martial is a special case. See Meyer-Zwiffelhofer, *Phallus* (1995) 60–61.

74. Iuv. 11.162–68.

75. Courtney, *Commentary on Juvenal* (1980) 510, on Iuv. 11.165–66. Ovid complains that respectable adults and children of both sexes attend the mimes, whose content is sexual and whose language is obscene: Ov. Tr. 2.497–516, with Adams, *Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (1982) 219. Ovid is at bottom concerned with his perception of Augustus's unfair treatment of him, however, and not with the corruption of morals. Cf. Anth. Lat. 683.19–20R, which assumes the attendance of women at mime performances.

76. Augustin. Civ. Dei 2.4–5 CCSL 47.37–38. Respectable women were also present at the Floralia's erotic stage show: Tert. Spect. 17 CCSL 1.242–43 (cf. Iuv. 6.249–50, which to my mind does not prove the point). As Tertullian describes it, the prostitutes on stage not only performed sexually but also solicited customers from the audience. On the festival, see Wiseman, "Games of Flora" (1999) whose informed speculation about the contents of the stage shows does not exclude the possibility of more explicit fare. Wiseman's description (at 196) of the "erotically charged flagellation spectacle" of the *Lupercalia* supports the general point made here.

tial's choice of Cato's wife and the Sabine women.<sup>77</sup> Both authors imply through their selections of exemplary behavior that popular usage has not lived up to this standard for some time. A *Priapeum* has a warning to *matronae* to stay away, a warning that is ignored in much the same spirit as is Martial's warning reported above.<sup>78</sup> The reluctance of Terence's Chremes to utter the word *scortum* in the presence of a woman must also be a joke, since the word is frequently used in Comedy and prostitutes are often both seen and heard in this very public genre.<sup>79</sup> Despite Ovid's self-interested and rather desperate-sounding protestations concerning his own work,<sup>80</sup> it should surprise no one to learn that Roman women, and not just prostitutes, were avid consumers of pornography.<sup>81</sup>

The idea of shielding women and children from erotic representation is difficult to find even in works where we might expect to encounter it. The work of Pliny the Elder is an excellent example. He was an enthusiastic moralist who wrote extensively on Roman art.<sup>82</sup> One of the most charming and—for the social historian at least—useful aspects of his *Natural History* is his moralizing tirades. These tirades are launched against everything and everyone from the size of contemporary slave households to the first person to cut marble and are evidently designed to look like spontaneous rants. When it comes

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77. Mart. 11.15.

78. *Priap.* 8, with Mart. 11.15, 16. For other poems in the collection that advertise their transgression regarding obscenity, see *Priap.* 2, 29, 49.

79. Ter. *Heauton* 1041–42. The popularity of representations of prostitutes in Comedy might itself help refute the theory of zoning, unless one wishes to insist on a tidy distinction between art and life. Comedy is also not at all shy in alluding to bodily functions: see the list given by Krenkel, "Skopophilie" (1977) 623. Afranius's plays were supposed to be particularly explicit: Auson. *Epigr.* 79.4; cf. Cic. *Fam.* 9.22.1.

80. See Ov. *Tr.* 2.303–8, which I have discussed above in the text. It will be obvious that I do not mean to imply here that Ovid's work qualifies as pornography in any strict sense, though the difference ideally postulated, as well as the practical difficulty in distinguishing, between porn and serious literature may explain in large part its controversial nature. The *Ars Amatoria* presents itself, and was certainly regarded, as an erotic manual: see Cestius *apud* Sen. *Contr.* 3.7. As with viewers of erotic art, some readers of Ovid perhaps saw pornography where others saw a parody of porn.

81. On this subject, see the comments of De Martino, "Storia" (1996) 306–7, 311, 316–18. Illustrations were included in at least some manuals: De Martino, 318, 322. On the general availability of pornography and obscenity in Roman culture, see Horsfall, *Culture* (2003) 79–80.

82. Pliny devoted five books to art in his *Naturalis Historia*: 33 (metalwork: gold and silver), 34 (metalwork: copper and bronze), 35 (painting and pottery), 36 (marble), 37 (gems). On his moralism, see Wallace-Hadrill, "Pliny the Elder" (1990); Citroni Marchetti, *Plinio* (1991); Isager, *Pliny* (1991).

to condemnations of erotic art, however, the naturalist is a severe disappointment.

Pliny passes over most nude, or scantily clad, representations of males or females, especially depictions of Venus, without comment.<sup>83</sup> In a couple of cases, he even lavishly praises a statue of this goddess shown without clothing.<sup>84</sup> One of his very rare attacks on erotic art occurs in the context of a denunciation of greed and gold:

Plin. *NH* 33.4–5:

Accessit ars picturae, et aurum argentumque caelando carius fecimus. didicit homo naturam provocare. auxere et artem vitiorum irritamenta; in poculis libidines caelare iuvat ac per obscenitates bibere. abiecta deinde sunt haec ac sordere coepere, ut auri argentique nimium fuit.

*Added to this was the art of painting, and we raised the value of gold and silver through engraving. Mankind learned to challenge nature. Stimulants to misbehavior also enhanced the art. It has been popular to engrave erotic subjects on drinking-cups and drink right through scenes of explicit sex. Afterwards these were tossed away and considered to be of little value, when there was a surplus of gold and silver.*

Sexually explicit scenes on drinking cups raised their value, already high because of the materials, gold and silver, used in their manufacture.<sup>85</sup> Pliny assumes that at least some people found the art on these cups to be sexually stimulating (“vitiorum irritamenta”), but not, evidently, indefinitely so. When the value of the materials dropped through oversupply, the value added by the erotic decoration vanished entirely. Pliny seems to imply here that familiarity with such artistic representation bred tedium.

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83. Plin. *NH* 34.60, 35.58, 35.64, 35.91, 36.16.

84. Pliny praises, for instance, the famous Cnidian Aphrodite by Praxiteles: Plin. *NH* 36.20–21. He notes (at 21) “it is equally praiseworthy from every viewpoint” (“nec minor ex quacumque parte admiratio est”). But later he asserts that the statue of this goddess by Scopas is superior: 36.26.

85. Perhaps the most famous example of the kind of drinking cup Pliny talks about is the Warren Cup. For a discussion, with other pertinent examples, see Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking* (1998) 61–72. Elagabalus is said to have extended the principle broadly: *HA Elag.* 19.3. Compare the penis-shaped drinking vessels mentioned previously in this chapter, which are not precisely relevant here because they are made of glass.

Pliny does offer much better evidence than Propertius for genuine moral sensitivity over the impact of erotic art on the viewer. In any case, there is not a word here about women and children and whether their morals in particular might be affected by art of this kind. In fact, it is rather curious how the emphasis of his criticism falls on the use to which the object is put. One wonders whether the cups would have elicited any comment at all if they had been simply admired for their subject matter and not used for consuming (we may assume) wine. A similar point holds for another passage where Pliny criticizes representations of adultery on drinking cups in the context of a denunciation of the ill-effects of inebriation.<sup>86</sup> Beyond this, Pliny stresses the irony in the fact that the erotica enhanced the value of the cups when the price of gold and silver was high but could not do so when the price fell. This observation is clearly tied to the author's discourse on the proper use of nature's resources versus waste and extravagance. The two passages I have just mentioned each provided an opening for a rhetorical rant on the ill-effects of sexual subject matter on consumers of art, but Pliny chose not to proceed in that direction.<sup>87</sup>

Pliny records Nero's devotion to a small statuette of an Amazon,<sup>88</sup> and Tiberius's passion for the Apoxyomenos of Lysippos, which was so great that he moved it from its post in front of the Baths of Agrippa to his bedroom, causing a public outcry that compelled him to return it.<sup>89</sup> He also mentions Caligula's unsuccessful attempt, motivated by lust, to remove nude paintings of Atalanta and Helen from the wall of a collapsed temple at Lanuvium.<sup>90</sup> These examples further show Pliny was aware that some examples of erotic art could prove sexually stimulating to some viewers, an observation that mostly passes without comment, aside from a couple of very mild indications that for Pliny having sex with a statue was *not* an appropriate aesthetic response to fine art.<sup>91</sup>

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86. Plin. *NH* 14.140: ". . . quae vasa adulteriis caelata, tamquam per se parum doceat libidines temulentia!" (" . . . the vessels engraved with representations of adultery, as though drunkenness by itself were not enough to teach lustful behavior!"). Again, Pliny focuses on the connection between erotica and the consumption of alcohol. Adultery was a form of sexual behavior many Romans found objectionable and was illegal in Pliny's day (unless the word "adulteriis" is meant more generally in this passage). Here, too, there is no mention of women and children as objects of particular concern.

87. At *NH* 33.150 Pliny criticizes Gaius Marius for drinking out of Dionysiac tankards, but the point here is to contrast the general's humble beginnings with his divine, or quasi divine, aspirations.

88. Plin. *NH* 34.82.

89. Plin. *NH* 34.62.

90. Plin. *NH* 35.18.

91. See Plin. *NH* 36.21 (on the Aphrodite of Cnidos by Praxiteles), 36.22 (on a naked Cupid at Parium, again by Praxiteles).

Beyond this, there are instances where Pliny seems to criticize the creators of erotic art. After recording the achievements of the great Greek painter Parrhasius, he notes that “he also painted erotic subjects on miniature panels, finding recreation in this sort of immodest amusement.”<sup>92</sup> The sense here is that Parrhasius’s interest in this genre was incommensurate with his talents. “Immodest” (*petulans*) is a moral reproof, though it is not any stronger, nor any more relevant to our concerns, than Pliny’s criticism of erotic art on drinking cups. Here the writing is so breezy it almost amounts to mere description, as opposed to severe moral condemnation.<sup>93</sup>

Finally there is the case of the well-known, late-Republican painter Arellius, who was notorious for having prejudiced his work by repeatedly representing his mistress of the moment in it.<sup>94</sup> Ostensibly he was rendering the images of goddesses, but in actual fact he was painting the portraits of his girlfriends. Therefore his painting contains a number of, as Pliny puts it, “sluts” (*scorta*).<sup>95</sup> Pliny’s criticism of Arellius is severe in that he strongly implies Arellius prostituted his art by acting as a mediator for his girlfriends precisely in the way a pimp does for his prostitutes (“*lenocinans*” has a marvelous double sense here)<sup>96</sup>—but also by representing them in a way that was at odds with their moral status. Erotic art is not even in question here, and one has the sense that Pliny uses a relatively high standard to judge Arellius, given that he lightly criticizes Greek artists who relied on mistresses and/or actual prostitutes as models for their work, if he criticizes them at all.<sup>97</sup>

Pliny seems to have taken erotic art by and large for granted. He may be drawing a distinction between nude representations of the human form, which might rise to the level of great art, and scenes of explicit lovemaking, which were unworthy of great artists, or portraits of promiscuous women, which were unworthy of great *Roman* artists. He also objects to sexual content on objects like drinking cups. But we should not view that distinction as too significant, since Pliny accepted that both types of erotic art might summon forth a sexual response in the viewer. In regard to the impact of this subject matter on women and children, Pliny utters not a word.

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92. Plin. *NH* 35.72: “Pinxit et minoribus tabellis libidines, eo genere petulantis ioci se faciens.”

93. See also Plin. *NH* 35.110, where he describes a painting by Nicomachus of three Sileni engaged in a *comissatio* as *lascivia*.

94. Plin. *NH* 35.119.

95. “*Scorta*” need not refer to professional prostitutes, but simply to women deemed promiscuous: Adams, “Words” (1983) 321–24.

96. *Lenocinor* is more commonly used in its transferred sense of “serve the interests of” *vel sim.*: see *L & S*, *OLD* s.h.v.

97. See Plin. *NH* 34.70, 72, 35.86; cf. 35.64.

Pliny's concerns seem to lie elsewhere. When he has occasion to complain of painting in Roman bedrooms, he speaks of representations of mountains supplemented by paint applied to marble.<sup>98</sup> His silence on the subject of sexual representation is most striking in light of the copious numbers of erotic paintings brought to light at Pompeii. Pliny the Elder would have been writing his *Natural History* just as all but the very last of the last erotic paintings were going up on the walls of Pompeii.<sup>99</sup>

The practice of flouting conventional attitudes implies that such attitudes exist, but it is very difficult in light of the evidence to grasp exactly what these were, how strongly they were held, and by whom. We are left to speculate that some Romans felt that exposing children and even adult women to obscene and/or pornographic language and other forms of representation was a breach of decorum—without the graver implications even this much might perhaps have in a Christianized society permeated by the concept of sin—and complained that this convention was rarely if ever observed in their own day. They might have gone on to contrast the usage of the *maiores* with conditions perceived to prevail in their own day, as any Roman moralist—or someone lampooning a Roman moralist—would do almost reflexively. Other Romans were presumably indifferent at best to such appeals, and yet others, we may imagine, were utter hypocrites about such matters.

If persuasive, such speculation may help reveal what a complex society Rome was in the early Principate; it hardly reflected the monolithic, linear-evolutionary model that many historians—encouraged in no small measure by the Romans themselves—have favored. As we shall see in chapter 5, there were no laws that repressed offenses against public decency per se. Hence, it is difficult to see how the impetus to zone prostitution might have developed out of such a set of social values and practices as discussed in this chapter.

Finally, there is an important theoretical distinction to draw between the location of erotic art in the Roman city and that of prostitution. The motivation behind the latter was, as I argue, largely economic, while the former was presumably dictated overall by moral and aesthetic considerations. The current state of the question regarding erotic art, however, suggests the truth of this last point in the positive sense that there are few perceptible limits on its location. This does not mean that the placement of erotic art was random, any

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98. Plin. *NH* 35.2–3.

99. The dedication of the work to Titus the son of Vespasian dates to A.D. 77: see Plin. *NH Praef.* 3.

more than the placement of brothels was. The location of some erotic art, to be sure, was economically motivated, in the sense that it was meant to attract and please the patrons of baths, bars, and brothels. For the same reason, prostitutes worked in many of these same venues. This fact makes the connection recently established by Guzzo and Scarano Ussani between explicit representation of sex and places where it was sold all the more attractive.