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From image to word: the making of Pietro Aretino's satire in *I sonetti lussoriosi* (c. 1527)

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Analysis of Pietro Aretino's response to censorship of the Romano *I modi* images in 1520s Rome demands a close reading of the relationship between image and word for the production of his satire. His production of an obscene sonnet, to 'voice' the figures represented in woodcut versions of Romano's original images, in fact reveals the gap that exists between the representations of positive sexual coupling, and the negative writing of a selfish and excessive sexuality. In this way, Aretino draws attention to censorship as a negatively interpretive act.

Aretino was a known public satirist of influential figures in Rome in the early decades of the sixteenth century, much of which was conducted in a part-visual, part-literary way. His early satirical method involved posting scurrilous satires presented as dialogues between statues at via Parione, particularly focussing on Pasquino (thus

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giving these writings the name of ‘pasquinades’). This visual ventriloquizing of Rome’s heroic past bathetically emphasised the corrupt nature of the present day indiscretions of the moral leaders of Renaissance Rome. From these earliest public writings, then, Aretino plays on the intersection of ancient myth with a degraded present to enact positions of attack on perceived wrongs committed by members of the Church, emphasising their hypocrisy as arbiters of morality. Indeed, it was as a result of one of these attacks that Aretino was eventually forced into exile in Venice, following an assassination attempt in 1525 ordered by a prominent cleric and the Pope’s secretary, Giberti. It was from Venice in 1527 that Aretino released his *sonetti lussoriosi*; a selection of poems allegedly giving voice to the set of *I modi* couplings, which had been subject to censorship shortly before his departure from Rome in 1525. These sonnets in fact transform rather than emulate those images, in order to effect a satiric attack on the hypocrisy of the censors. Aretino’s involvement with the *modi* gives us an important perspective on the reception of that censorship, and insight to Aretino’s own public writing career.

As a result of the censorship of the *modi*, and Aretino’s response with an exaggerated narrative to accompany a cruder woodcut edition, the text is too readily dismissed as simplistic pornography. However, we can see that the majority of Aretino’s earliest public writings are bound up with a harsh and often obscene satire. It was this image as satirist for which he was later renowned in Elizabethan England, for instance, offering writers such as Thomas Nashe legitimacy for their own ‘railing’ personae: “We want an Aretine here among us, that might strip these golden asses out of their gaie trappings, and after he had ridden them to death with rail-

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ing, leave them on the dunghill for carion” (*Works*, vol 1, 242). However, this satiric obscenity – which earned him the title “scourge of princes” by his contemporary Ariosto – comes to be misinterpreted as simplistic pornography by later commentators.¹ This misunderstands Aretino’s use of pornographic voice as a means to manipulate a space in language that demonstrates transgression, and through this, satire.

The term pornography, of course, does not come into use until the mid-nineteenth century. Our modern usage carries connotations of a visual and explicit representation of sexual activity and genitalia, stripped of the complexities of early modern ‘bawdy’ writing. Craik notes, for instance, that “pornography is best understood as a way of reading rather than a category of writing” (137). Some recent critics have therefore opted to engage with the Greek etymological basis of the term: for example, Turner’s discussion of ‘pornographia’, from Greek *pornē* signifying the prostitute, and *graphē*, the expressive mark or engraved sign, verbal as well as visual (1-7). While this focus on the engraved sign of prostitution may be seen as simply replicating the focus on physicality, already associated with modern day assumptions regarding pornography, the term usefully distances the reader from the idea of pornographic voice as fixing the female within the text. The idea of pornographia as “writing about, upon or by prostitutes” allows for the existence of a more complex, transgendered pornographic voice, used to effect satire within the texts. This at least suggests the nuances possible within these early works, as constructed around voices able to explore alternative discourses, and representative of the kind of transgressive spirit often linked more clearly with satire.

In addition to this, it is useful to consider Bette Tal-

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vacchia's description of the *modi*, identifying the link between a pornographic work and the cultural assumptions within which works of art are interpreted:

the creation of pornography, then, comes from targeting particular objects, images, and texts as offensive to morality and therefore unacceptable, so that a pornographic object cannot exist without the discourse that identifies it... This implies that the one who argues for such a classification wants to attach a pejorative stigma to the object in question, to obtain a consensus that will define the object as morally or socially unacceptable (103).

It is my contention that Aretino responds to the censorship of the *modi* images with an extreme example of 'pornographia' in his *sonetti*, not to replicate the supposed pornography of the images, but to satirise the censoring action which designates them thus. This can be seen through analysis of the interaction between word and image which makes up the combined edition, released in 1527.

The origins of the episode begin with Giulio Romano inheriting Raphael's studio in 1520. Shortly afterwards he releases the sixteen I modi nudes: a series of erotic couplings, unfettered by reference to mythology, and therefore purporting to present 'real' human sexual coupling. Talvacchia notes that the very name draws attention to their immediacy, contemporariness, and down to earth nature, simply referred to as a series of 'positions'. Viewers would have approached these through the context of contemporary church teachings that deal with the issue of sexual positions, seeking to control social relations through religious authority: "All of these forms and postures are hateful to God, so much so that Saint

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Jerome says: ‘He who shows himself to be too abundantly amorous of his wife, that husband is an adulterer and sins’” (Brantôme, *Les Dames galantes*, qtd. in Talvacchia 116).² The Romano ‘positions’ therefore present a challenge to such restrictions in their representation of multiple, various and above all joyous sexuality.

In fact, Romano’s images were not themselves subject to censorship: when Marcantonio Raimondi engraves these for wider circulation, however, the authorities descend. Raimondi is imprisoned, and the *modi* destroyed.³ Romano, however, does not appear to have been touched by the episode, and indeed by the time Raimondi is imprisoned he has taken up a position under the patronage of Gonzaga; Lawner notes that in Mantua, “Giulio felt free to paint cycles of lascivious scenes, outstanding among which are the frescos in the Room of Cupid and Psyche in the Palazzo del Tè” (10). This suggests something of the cultural legitimacy attached to working within the context of patronage, for the production of nudes and sexual scenes.

Meanwhile, Aretino had survived the attempted assassination ordered by Giberti for his satirical attack (1525), and had taken up residence in exile in Venice: a place more suited both to his temperament and desire for self-publication. Interestingly, one of his first activities in Venice in 1527 is the release of a second edition of the *modi* images, situating each in relation to an obscene sonnet that purports to bring each image to life.⁴ As a public figure very much concerned with the production of his self-image, it is not surprising to see Aretino’s ‘confession’ of his central role in the *I modi* affair; in a letter to Battista Zatti he even claims responsibility for ensuring the release of the wrongly imprisoned Raimondi:

When I obtained from Pope Clement the lib-

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erty of Marcantonio Bolognese, who was in prison for having engraved on copper plates the Sixteen Positions et cetera, I felt a desire to see the figures that were the cause of Giberti's complaints, who demanded that such a fine virtuoso should be crucified... and having seen them, I was touched by the spirit that moved Giulio Romano to design them. And because the ancient, as well as modern poets and sculptors, sometimes engaged in writing and sculpting lascivious works as a pastime for their genius – as attested by the marble satyr in the Chigi Palace who attempts to violate a young boy – I exhibit them above the Sonnets that stand below, whose lewd memory I dedicate to you, pace all hypocrites. I despair of the bad judgement and damnable habits that forbid the eyes what delights them most. (qtd. in Talvacchia 85-6).

By linking Giberti to the censorship of these prints, Aretino situates his own *sonetti* in opposition both to the man who forced him into exile and whose censorship led to the incarceration of a fellow artist. He thus links the erotic and satiric in the very fabric of his re-released edition. Critics have interpreted Aretino's sonnets as revelling in excessive sexuality to present his position of opposition to Giberti. Aretino's manipulation of erotic voice, however, is not to bring the image to life in order to represent 'excessive' sexuality, but to identify the gap that exists between such obscenity and the joyous sexuality of the original image; in the *sonetti* we see a reinterpretation and transformation, which emulates the destructive forces by which the images were designated as obscene.

Indeed, as we see in his letter to Zatti, Aretino's self-confessed satire aims against religious hypo-

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crites, claiming that repression of such artistic traditions ignores the fact that this is a God-given sexuality, both joyous and essential to life:

I despair of the thieving judgement and damnable habits that forbid the eyes what delights them most. What harm is there in seeing a man mount a woman? Well then, should beasts be freer than we? It would seem to me that such a thing, given to us by nature to preserve the species, should be worn around the neck as a pendant and as a brooch on berets, since it is the conduit from which gushes the stream of life and the nectar that the world drinks on feast days. It made you, who are among the greatest living doctors. It created me, and I am good as gold. It produced... the popes, emperors, and kings... (qtd. in Talvacchia 85).

His satire then responds to what he sees as the positive, human sexuality explored in the images, viewing these as taking a position of opposition to a seemingly oppressive church authority. In this way, he draws attention to the hypocrisy of those who seek to manage access to images, similar to those they commission and possess. In fact, Aretino's satire responds not to the alleged 'obscenity' of the pieces, but to the censorship itself, making comment on both the form and impact of that action.

What is presumably most startling about the Romano images, then, is that the protagonists in this visual drama are presented as free and able to express their humanity, unencumbered with reference to the legitimizing contexts of social or religious institutions. Talvacchia notes, for instance, that "Renaissance erotica took classical practice as a paradigm and as legitimization" (86). Indeed, without the mediating layer of mythology to give

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this gaze cultural legitimacy, the issue of a democratization of gaze and interpretation is realised. Land explains that “For Aretino, as for other Renaissance writers on art, criticism was understood as a response to a particular image. The work’s powerful illusion of nature engaged the critic’s imagination in such a way that he mistook the illusion for reality itself and it so stimulated his *fantasia* that he injected meaning into the subject and form of the painted image” (207). This places the viewer in a position of interpretative gaze, and more importantly, one in which physical response to the image determines meaning. Indeed, Jacobs notes Aretino’s recognition of this in his critical writings on art, although noting that “the importance of the sensations of touch to the visual experience implies an inversion of or at least a challenge to the established hierarchical order of the senses” (52). It is useful to consider how these principles can be seen to apply to Aretino’s response to the *modi*, then, in the gap between his apparent celebration of their wholesome eroticism in his letters, and the obscenity with which he ‘voices’ a marketable response.

The idea of transaction between viewer and image is then of a far more intimate nature when responding to pieces like *I modi*. Through the use of gaze, and the intimate atmosphere produced through arrangement of the figures within the picture plane, ‘viewing’ is presented as an experiential response relating to the physical position of the viewer, which ultimately prioritises the individual’s reception and interpretation of image. As a collection of images playing so firmly on representation of the ‘real’, then, the emphasis on a personal, experiential understanding of self in relation to society is encouraged through an unmediated presentation of the nude. This focus on opening up room for personal and

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individual interpretive strategies was clearly deeply disturbing to Roman religious authorities.

As already mentioned, however, Romano himself was not punished for his part in the episode, and in fact went on to use the skills and motifs again in later work. Romano, then, continues to operate within the usual contexts for artistic production and monetary exchange. It is when these images are taken outside the bounds of the patronage system, and into a lower-ranking marketplace, that an uneasy sense of sexual exchange for money is more clearly evoked. So Marcantonio rather than Romano is punished for the release of these images in a portable form. In the wider public arena, a pornographic exchange can be unnervingly enacted through the consumption of erotic images for money. The connotations thrown back onto patronage relationships, and more specifically the commission and consumption of nudes in the papal palaces at Rome, are disturbing.

As we have seen, the censoring actions seek to reinterpret and destroy the original, positive significance of the works. This negativity is established by positioning these images as obscene, underlining the legitimacy of censorship as an action taken on behalf of the public good through suppression of damaging images. Here we can see that an understanding of our modern evolution of 'pornography' as sexually explicit and eliciting physical response (to view, to handle, to carry), is a useful interpretive framework for the playing out of this episode. Aretino highlights the gap between the image and his words, in order to satirise the re-interpretive act of censorship. His satire is motivated by an anger at legislation which attempts to control and limit individuals' sexual activities, even as stories abound of corruption and vice within the church. As a result, Aret-

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ino identifies 'obscene' and damaging action as laying, not with the images, but with the church authorities themselves. Through close analysis of the transformative function of Aretino's poetic response to the images we can better understand this satire.

In Aretino's sonnets we see recognition of the relevance of reading external gaze, which we also see in the original works of Romano himself. This is important for interpreting the idea of hypocritical external censorship when it comes to reading Aretino's 'voicing' of the image. In relation to *modi* 1, for instance, this plays on the concept of the gap between the external and internal, which is evident within the original image. This then engages with the process of reception and reinterpretation that takes place as the image is viewed, and can be demonstrated by looking at the relationship that is drawn between the Romano image and Aretino's sonnets. The key concepts to bear in mind here are, firstly, how the gap between external and internal worlds is considered, and, secondly, what part gaze plays in relation to both the art and poetry.

In Romano's first image, the concept of external and internal is incorporated in the very representation of sexual coupling. The basic component of this piece is the opposition constructed between the human figures and the structural bodies of the physical environment in which they are based. Talvacchia notes the use of entwined limbs, mirrored in the knots, giving the internal scene a sense of union and security (24). The drapes produce lines that frame the scene, and draw the eye in to the central couple. The proximity of the couple to the picture plane creates a real sense of intimacy, where other works might present a broader sweep and context for the act. The female is shown in conventionally passive terms,

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facing away from and with her back to us, and depicted as placed physically below the male in the scene, if only slightly. Each figure's gaze is absolutely focussed on their partner, and indeed, throughout the series, the idea of the viewer as intruding upon a truly intimate scene is one way in which the erotica functions.

The herm is important to a reading of this image, in terms of its social and political manifestations, as traditionally placed at 'boundary lines'. Symbolically, then, they are representative here of the external world, and cultural understandings of the nude figure in art. Interestingly, as Talvacchia notes, in the Romano image the herm is represented as limbless and lacking phallus, but conspicuously retains the testicles. The herms are thus placed in relation to the internal, individual, humanised world of interaction which the human coupling represents— they are limbless, as opposed to the imagined couple where the limbs are emphasised—, they are stationary, where the couple's activity is emphasised (24). Giving us this symbol of a boundary line, Romano emphasises the distance between the world of the couple, in their beauty and freedom, and the stern face of authority. But, more importantly, he emphasises the impotency of the herm's position here. Thus from the first scene in Romano's series of images a telling opposition is constructed between an impotent external world of rigidity and limitation, and the liberated and intensely sexual internal world of the coupling.

This emphasis on nudity as symbolic of a rejection of social and cultural norms is a helpful context in which to interpret Aretino's response to the *modi*. Gaylard presents Aretino's discussion in his letters of a rejection of clothing as a symbol of gift-giving and indenture bound up with patronage relationships. Instead,

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she shows his taking up of the ‘emblem’ of the phallus, representing freedom of speech, which can thus “glorify the uncovering and display of raw creative energy – associated with *vertù* and *ingegno* – in contrast with the effeminacy of imitating others, characteristic of the courtly patronage system” (199). So too this early satire in the sonnets, provoked by outrage around the designation of nudity as legitimate or illegitimate as linked to patronage, is an early example of Aretino’s self-construction as a ‘teller of truths’ who is able to work outside of the bounds of usual artistic practice. His artistic practice in the *sonetti*, then, is not one of imitation but of transformation for satirical ends.

Most important, however, is the sense of gaze for interpretation of the image. The herms as external bodies may guard the boundaries between the internal sexual world of the couple, and the external social and political world of regulated action, but they do more than simply represent the dissecting line: their gaze is firmly fixed on the couple. Romano’s images therefore incorporate the concept of external gaze and reception, and even seem to anticipate the censure this series elicits. This could support Lawner’s suggestion that Romano was working on the Sala di Constantino in the Vatican, but drew the *modi* on the walls in “a moment of anger at Clement VII for a tardy payment” (10). Indeed, Baxandall reminds us that “a painting is a deposit of a social relationship”, and the *modi* can therefore be viewed as significant in relation to the complex relationships it comes to signify as part of the construction, transmission and consumption of images (1).

It should not be forgotten, however, that Aretino, from his earliest public appearance and writings, demonstrated a hearty dose of cynicism for the upper ech-

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elons of society, and yet showed awareness of the need to court such people to ensure his rise to pre-eminence. Talvacchia notes that the timing and nature of Aretino's composition of the sonnets, based on correspondence with Gonzaga during time away from court in 1526, suggests Aretino had been inspired to base some erotic sonnets on the *modi* images before he settled in Venice. Gonzaga writes: "The three sonnets that you sent to me pleased me enormously, and with great delectation I read them and reread them and savoured them, as I am used to doing with your other eruditely written things" (84). The language used here to describe the consumption of Aretino's writings draws an interesting link between reception of a literary text and a sense of physical, sexual response to image, which in large part constitutes critical discussion of the pornographic. The urgency of "read and re-read" hints at the compulsive spirit attached to the collection and consumption of illicit materials, which Aretino identifies for mockery in relation to the *modi* episode. In this way he makes a joke on the desirability of the illicit, and the transformative nature of the context in which they are received. Indeed, irony is bound up with the *sonetti* from these earliest moments, with Gonzaga thanking Aretino in advance for another "bel sonetto" to accompany "the delightful things" already received. The gap between the beautiful images, and the obscene sonnets, is thus highlighted as part of the very fabric of the project.

In a similar way, evidence of the first, authorized edition of the full collection is given in a letter to Cesare Fregoso dated 9 Nov 1527, in which Aretino gifts his "book of sonnets" in exchange for the gift of beret, brooches and a medallion already received. Talvacchia concludes the book of sonnets is gifted because it is

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considered of comparable material value as those items already sent to Aretino by this “powerful gentleman”. However, again, the language of this letter suggests the heavy irony with which Aretino conducted this production: “I wanted to supply myself with a turnout like the one you gave; and wanting to send for it, voila!, there was your servant placing it before me. Whereupon I rejoiced, both for its beauty and because I so desired it; as perhaps Your Most Illustrious Lordship (to whose grace I commend myself) desires the book of sonnets and of the lascivious figures that I send to you in exchange” (95). The fact that Aretino need only think of that which he desires, and “voila!” the powerful gentlemen supplies it, on one level speaks of the existence of a self-identifying group of like-minded men (necessary for the development of close patronage relations), but also constructs an ironic summary of the way in which he, as an artist, must construct and conduct his relationships, pre-empting his friend’s desires, and supplying that which they desire (drawing links to prostitution here, of course). The tone is jokingly intimate, but undercut with a typically Aretinean irony and bathos to hint at the ‘real’ nature of the gift he bestows (and also perhaps the ‘real’ nature of the powerful men to which such gifts are being sent). Indeed, the point about value is key to interpreting Aretino’s release of the sonetti. His ironic description of the edition in this letter, linked as comparable in aesthetic and monetary value to instances of beautiful artworks, actually serves to highlight the base, obscene re-interpretation of that art in his sonnets. The humour of this letter, and similar correspondence relating to the *sonetti*, is the gap Aretino highlights between positive and negative representations of human sexuality in art, playing on the fact that pleasure is gained from study of both the

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beautiful and the obscene, and that the interpretation of these depends in large part on context.

The concept of dialogue, then, is an integral part both for the conduct of relationships by which artistic production operates at that time, and as part of a long literary tradition in which dialogue is used for political and satirical debate. *Dialoghi* also significantly links the worlds of pornography and satire, and so is particularly important for Aretino's poetic response, as he voices the relationships implied through use of gaze in the images. As mentioned earlier, Aretino was a key figure in Rome in the 1520s for his satire, and popularised the practice of the pasquinades. This not only gave his satire a sense of classical authority, by literally putting his speeches into the mouths of the great figures of antiquity, but also gave the process of satire its sense of public censure, appearing to speak in and for public voice by bringing corrupt and hypocritical figures of authority low.

Part of the development of Aretino's porno-satire in the *sonetti*, then, is the adoption of dialogue. This makes use of the two-part formation of the Italian sonnet (octave and sestet), and plays on the tension between high and low registers. Aretino's approach suggests that the sonnet dramatises the Romano-Raimondi image by giving the man and woman a voice within a dialogue. In these, however, Aretino self-consciously takes on the concept of 'pornographia' by exaggeratedly emphasising an obscene layer of sexual excess, which the image itself does not necessarily imply. Indeed, in the original Romano image there is no clear assumption that this is a prostitute and client relationship. Aretino's *sonetto* therefore emphasises the gap that exists between the original images and his clearly pornographic, i.e. prostitute-led, poetic voices. This mimics

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in written form the process by which the censorship has 'made filthy' the original images by seeking to suppress 'real' human emotion and expression.

Analysis of the sonnet accompanying this first *I modi* reveals an example of this destructive process, bearing in mind our previous analysis of the image as one in which joyous union and skill are shown. The language Aretino uses is predominantly vernacular, slang-based, and dialectic, (see, for example, his use of *core* for *cuore* at line 12). Aretino's use of offensive language violates tradition through its positioning within the sonnet form, and this obscenity presents a self-consciously anti-poetic language and content. Much in the same way as Romano's works are considered to transgress accepted artistic form, by refusing to work within mythology, Aretino takes this concept further by emphasising the tension between the sonnet form and pornographic voice. The extreme crudeness of the language, then, is in itself part of the process of destabilisation that highlights a gap between image and text. This too comments on the position of the reader/viewer as responsible for transferring interpretation of the image to the pornography of the text.

The spoken male stanzas (one and two) form the octave of the traditional Italian sonnet form. The octave's lines are end-stopped to form spoken, regulated sentences, and are framed by a regular rhyme-scheme. The internal pattern within each quatrain places the endings *-esto* and *-amo* in an ABBA formation. "Love" (*amo*) then is literally central to these quatrains. This reflects positive, romantic sentiments as expressed in the lines spoken by the male, framed as they are within a sense of an enduring love relationship that extends beyond the sexual act itself. The female (or 'pornographic') voice, however, is introduced at line nine and is seen in opposition to the relatively

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romantic nature of the male's opening octave. Following the turn, we see a refusal by the female to enter into the romanticised version of interaction suggested initially by the male, in favour of immediate, personally-directed and individually-satisfying physical action. The introduction of the female here, as speaking explicitly pornographic lines throughout the sestet, is disruptive to the poem's relatively romantic opening, and is representative of the crude and negative voice of sexuality as obscene. Again, this is in direct opposition to the original image: Romano's female nude in *modi* 1 is presented as conventionally passive, and in a non-aggressive sexual position, but Aretino entirely subverts this in his sonnet.

Talvacchia's assumption that Aretino's sonnets were written and received as exact translations in word of the image misreads the degrees of eroticism between the two works, and the essentially ironic ventriloquizing of an excessively sexual voice. Bearing in mind the cultural context in which religious institutions categorized licit/illicit sexual positions as above, "The production of visual pleasure that stems from a figuration of sexual pleasure can thus be understood as a salient factor of *I modi's* obscenity: they are liable to cause as well as represent a state of sin. The *Sonetti Lussoriosi* are complicit and amplify the transgression through their raucous, detailed description of uninhibited sexual union" (118). It is wrong, however, to assume the sonetti are complicit with the *modi* in this; instead they respond to the suppression and censorship of the *modi*, and so satirise the reception of the images as 'pornographic'. The *sonetti* amplify, indeed construct, obscenity where once there was eroticism, as a challenge to the position of moral outrage occasioned by images which, in other contexts, would be displayed and consumed as instances of great artistry.

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Aretino here, then, employs an exaggerated version of 'writing by prostitutes' to emphasise the movement that is made between positive and negative expressions of sexuality. By suggesting that expressions of normal, human sexuality are necessarily sinful and bestial, Aretino invites us to challenge this reading. This contrast highlights the negative transformation of sentiment through the intentional misinterpretation of these as pornographic. The way in which dialogue within the poem purports to represent physicality and gaze from the image conceptually opens up the space between image and word as a process of interpretation, but also potential misrepresentation or negation. Aretino's poetry thus acknowledges the crucial role the reader/viewer plays in this process. Indeed, throughout the series the poetry pays specific attention to the importance of external gaze and the impact this has on the production of meaning.

For instance, Romano's image in *modi* 11 plays on the concept of gaze for titillation, with the inclusion of a *lena* figure in the scene. This traditional character appears throughout erotic elegy, harking back to Dipsas in the *Amores* of Ovid, where the 'counselling' voice of the *lena* figure interrupts a seemingly positive relationship built up in earlier verses, ultimately corrupting the male protagonist's previously romanticised view of the female lover and her involvement in their relationship. (*Amores* 1.8). In Romano's *modi* 11 the appearance of the external viewer, mimicking our own position as viewer, appears in a light-hearted even humorous light, highlighting the ungainliness of the acrobatic sexual position in which the couple find themselves. Part censoring, part curious, their inclusion in the scene highlights the negative impact of this intrusion on a relationship otherwise figured as expressing a human

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and joyous expression of physical love.

It perhaps comes as a shock, then, to find the extent to which Aretino's sonnet takes the opportunity to attack rather than to amuse using this figure. Whilst using obscene language, the passion and positivity of the sexual episode nevertheless comes through in the male protagonist's words in the octave:

“Open your thighs so that I can clearly see your beautiful behind, with your snatch in sight. An ass that leads to paradise; a pussy that makes one throb with passion
As I gaze longingly, I suddenly get the desire to kiss you;
and it seems to me that I am more beautiful than Narcissus,
in the mirror that keeps my cock upbeat.”
(Sonetti 11, ll. 1-8)⁵

However, the old woman – who cranes her head to gaze intentionally upon this intimate scene – transforms the image from jovial, passionate sexuality into a corrupt and corrupting force:

“Oh indecent woman! Oh depraved man! On the ground and in bed! I see you, slut, so look out, for I will break your bones.”
(Sonetti 11, ll. 9-11)⁶

The term *puttana* (prostitute) interjects in the centre of this phrasing in an ugly and vicious sense, and her final vow that she will break the female lover's bones clearly stands-out as an excessive and unwarranted violent act upon the woman. In this instance the external voice is used to viciously attack and rip apart the positive potential for the representation of private, sexual coupling.

The female character's response is characteristi-

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cally excessive, showing a general rejection of this external criticism:

“Crap on you, poxed old woman, since for this pluperfect pleasure I would jump in a well without a bucket.”

(Sonetti 11, ll. 12-14)⁷

The phrase ‘pluperfect pleasure’ not only suggests ‘more than’ perfect, but its grammatical meaning, as ‘a verb tense used to express action completed before a specified or implied past time’, emphasises the heritage of this sexual ‘pleasure’ as something that extends beyond the negative terms in which this is interpreted here. Aretino thus ironically mimics the destructive nature of external censorship by re-interpreting the scene through excessively negative terms, and underlining the universality of sexual pleasure as divorced from historically situated understandings of morality. In this sense, again, we can see Aretino’s response to image through word as one of transformation, in order to mimic the censor’s voice. This then satirises the destructive processes by which the church authorities claim to offer protection by controlling circulation and interpretation of images.

Indeed, at a time when access to both word and image was opening up in a religious context, questions as to who controls the production and interpretation of cultural products hold particular valence. In this sense we might see in the *modi* episode anxieties as to a cultural democratization of image and word. Certainly Aretino was a figure interested in self-promotion and publication, and so would have found himself in opposition to apparently restrictive legislation for individual self expression; Lawner speaks of Aretino as “the first journalist and publicist of the modern world, as well as an entrepreneur art dealer and critic” (12),

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who would therefore rely on an ability to speak his personal views publically, and unimpeded.

Indeed, Gaylard, in her analysis of gift-giving in Aretino's letters, speaks of a "tension in the collection" that notes "a moment of transition from a system of patronage – by which a poet was maintained at a court that he was obligated to glorify – to a supply-and-demand economy, in which writers and artists depended on sales for their livelihood" (183). But at the same time Aretino purports to consider publication as a low form of prostitution: in a letter to the printer Marcolini, Aretino claims he "would rather suffer hardship than degrade his *vertù* by profiting, like a pimp, from selling books" (qtd. in Gaylard 183). So, with the production of his obscene sonnets, perverting the content of the images they purport to translate, and made almost immediately available in an easily accessed and reproducible woodcut form, the *sonetti-modi* composite can be seen to rely upon the relationship between its visual and tactile elements for the production of his satire. This emphasises the tensions and oppositions within the combined text, to highlight the negatively transformative censorship action enacted on the earlier engravings. Thus Aretino presents his opposition to those church authorities who had actioned the censorship and imprisonment of the engraver Raimondi, and threatened his own life as a result of expressing public voice to reveal corruption. So while Aretino presents his opposition through the form and content of his words, he also recognises the potential for reinterpretation and dissemination that publication offers, and makes good use of that for his satire.

In this way, then, Aretino's *sonetti* can be viewed as extensions of and additions to his earlier *pasquinade* approach to satire, though now produced at a distance, and

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taking advantage of the newly realised Venetian skills for publication. Just as his earlier dialogue satires appeared next to crumbling images of Rome's ancient heroes, in order to highlight the positions of degradation and corruption in the current church bodies, Aretino's *sonetti* sit below and emulate the hypocritical degradation of Rome's present through reinterpretation of Romano's images. Indeed, the final epilogue of Aretino's collection demonstrates this process of disintegration and degradation through a reading of image that seeks to anatomise and dissect human sexuality to a series of body parts:

*Almenportastelancealvoltoaicazzi
Ove ascondesti in culi, e ne le potte,
Poeti fatti a culi, a cazzi, a potte,*

*Che se'l favor vi manca, o novi cazzi
Retornarete ad esser lica potte
Com' il più de le volte sono i cazzi.*

*Qui finirò, il soggetto de le potte,
Per non esser nel numer di voi cazzi
Elasciarovvi i cazzi in culio in potte.*

“At least you could thrust lances in the face of the pricks or hide yourselves in asses and in pussies, poets made of asses, cocks, and pussies. So if you lose favor, oh neophyte pricks, return to being pussy-whipped, as most cocks usually are. Here ends the story of the pussies, because they are not as numerous as you pricks; and I will leave you pricks in asses and in pussies.” (Epilogue, ll. 22-30)

The earlier sonnet form, as reflected in the first part of the epilogue (unifying this with the sequence as a whole), has been further corrupted in this second part of the epilogue, to the point where it becomes unrecognisable. Although the

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traditional sonnet form rhyme scheme of

ABBA ABBA CDC DCD is still recognisable in the

ABBA ABB ABA BAB of the second part,

the breaks across stanzas complicate our reading of this. Perhaps more importantly, the form completely breaks down as the final rhyme is missing from the octave-sestet structure. Standing at thirteen lines only, this final section misses the final *cazzi* (penis) that would complete the conventional 14 line form. There is therefore a literal emasculation performed through the removal of, or even refusal to supply, this final *cazzi* to the poem. This complies with the final line of the final stanza in its sentiment that “I will leave you pricks in asses and pussies”, as the poem is literally left in that state upon completion.

Finally, then, Aretino’s sonnet sequence ends in a monstrous litter of body parts and sexual organs with no meaning and little value. The contrast this presents to the sense of series and unity characterising the original set of Romano *modi* images is clear. Fittingly enough, this is ultimately where Romano’s *modi* images end up, as a result of censoring actions: a series of dissected body parts, collected together in library cabinets (Talvacchia, 24-6). This process, whereby gaps in interpretation are opened up through the attempts of authorities to conceal images, can be seen to actually manufacture obscenity through their destructive reinterpretation of the sexual act as a focussing in on body parts.

Aretino’s response to the image in word is therefore a complex repositioning of meaning in order to enact positions of challenge and opposition to church authorities in Rome. In this we should recognise the complexities of terms such as ‘pornography’ for understanding how word

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and image interact to produce multiple significances for the relationship between texts, and in particular the satiric spirit that moved Aretino to adopt positions of obscenity in his work. The episode of the Romano *modi* images gives us an important insight to contemporary anxieties about control of image and interpretation, which perhaps microcosmically emulate wider concerns as to the right of the individual to interpret and express mind, body and belief in early sixteenth-century Rome.

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Notes

¹Many modern works discuss Aretino as a pornographer, based on a false biography contained in Francesco De Sanctis's 1871 article 'Pietro Aretino' (1968): cf. Cronin, 1969; Epstein, 1973; and Bull, 1976. Indeed, many of the works listed by Saad Al-Gabalawy (1974) as 'Allusions to Aretino's Pornography' can better be described in relation to their satiric content. On the other hand, writers since the nineteenth century have sought to balance discussion of the erotic and satiric elements in Aretino's *Dialoghi*, and later religious works (cf. Waddington, 2006; Rosenthal, 1972; and Plumb, 1978). Ralph Roeder (1934), for instance, draws our attention to the sonnet that accompanies Titian's portrait of Aretino, the self-confessed "censor of the proud world/ And nuncio and prophet of truth".

²Indeed, the concept of multiple positions is considered an indication of excess, designated as sinful through its alleged threat to conception: "[Church doctors stipulate:] 'there is excess in copulation when the man takes his wife while standing, whether in front or behind; while she is lying on her side; and when the woman is on top of the man.'... Others say that when they assume diverse positions, it impedes conception. All the same there are women who say that it is easier to conceive when in monstrous, unnatural, and strange positions rather than natural and common ones, since from this they take more pleasure..." (Talvacchia 116).

³Although there is some disagreement over the dating of these events, I follow Bette Talvacchia in her reading of the historical details of the episode. This text also contains an appendix with images from Aretino's *sonetti lussoriosi* (known as the *Toscannini* edition, now held in a private collection). For reprinted im-

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ages of the Walbeck edition, see Lawner.

⁴Evidence of the nature of this edition is found in the Miscellany collection purchased by Walter Toscanini in 1928, designated the '1527 edition' by Lawner in her analysis of the text. The edition containing Aretino's sonetti is octavo, with a flexible parchment cover bound by green ribbon. Other works in the edition appear on watermarked paper, designating these as produced in Venice. The modi woodcuts appear on paper that is not watermarked, and "the type-face is common corsivo italico". Comparing these to an earlier set of engravings by De Waldeck it is clear the cruder woodcuts, while containing errors in type and image, are "an attempt to imitate even minute details" of the engravings, and therefore is "certainly an edition published very soon after the first edition of combined prints/poems, perhaps even in the same year" (Lawner 20). This suggests the intimate relationship between Aretino's re-released version and the marketplace of publication. Given the content of the sonetti in relation to the images, and Aretino's comparison elsewhere of print to pimping, we might speculate as to the importance of this medium for the development of meaning in this work.

*⁵Aprile coscie, accio ch'io veggia bene
Il tuo bel culo, e la tua potta in viso,
Culo da compire un pare un paradise,
Potta, ch'I cori stilla per le rene
Mentre, ch'io vagheggio, egli mi viene
Capriccio di basciarvi a l'improviso,
E mi par esser piu bel, che Narciso
Nel specchio, che 'l mio cazzo allegro tiene'.
⁶Ahi ribalda, ahì ribaldo, in terra et in letto
Io ti veggio puttana, e t'apparecchia
Ch'io ti rompa due costole del petto'.*

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*7Io te n'incaco franciosata vecchia,
Che per questo piacer plusquamperfetto
Entrarei in un pozzo senza secchia'.*

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