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Knowing and Seeing: Roman Pornography and Violence Against Women

The word "pornography" was first used in English to refer to the sexually explicit Roman wall paintings found in Pompeii which themselves form the major focus of this paper. In the original Greek terminology, "pornography" refers to images or words about cheap prostitutes. Prudish 19th century art historians extended this label to the art in private Roman homes, conjoining painted eroticism with actual female promiscuity.

In the late 20th century, authors such as Susanne Kappeler, Amy Richlin, and Catherine McKinnon have reinterpreted pornography as an explicit act of violence against women, one which not only encourages assault and rape of women by men but is itself a symbolic assault on women. Radical feminist theory argues that it is impossible for female representation to escape the sexist hierarchies of Western culture.

Perhaps, then, it is time to return to the original pornography, the Pompeian wall paintings themselves, and their social and physical contexts. Relatively few of these erotic paintings were found in brothels, where the likely subjects might have been real prostitutes. Rather, we find erotic art both in public areas and inside both the public and private rooms of elite villas. We must seek the response of contemporary Roman women to these images, to the extent possible, through an examination of domestic objects such as mirrors, which are most likely to have been possessed by women.

A startling distinction in sexual imagery between the representations in public, male-dominated spaces of the Pompeian household and those found in the more private, intimate rooms of the house suggests a potential gender divide in artistic taste. Generally, sexual images in the public spaces are more likely to feature violence towards either gender and explicitly establish power hierarchies, whereas the pictures in private rooms tend to depict consensual lovemaking between a couple. This paper further explores the dichotomy between public violence and private pleasure within the Roman house.

As Molly Myerowitz notes, in most scenes of Roman male-female lovemaking both parties are equally objectified by the viewer and equally invite the viewer's gaze. Indeed, several images show a couple in bed both looking at an erotic picture on the wall; pornography for Romans here appears to be a collaborative, non-gendered activity. We stare at the man and woman staring at the man and woman in the interior image: who then is victimized?

On the other hand, we must not imagine the Roman world as a giant bath of idyllic sexual hedonism without problematic power dynamics. This paper does not mean to suggest that Roman women were treated as equals to men, sexually or otherwise. Perhaps, in the end, modern theorists have themselves committed an act of violence upon these paintings by forcing them all into a mold of first prostitution and then rape, against the original intentions of artist or patron. The ancient interpretation of these scenes may have been both more simple, and more complex. While the more public domestic scenes aggressively establish power hierarchies, sometimes with women in the superior

positions, the more private images suggest a celebration of marriage as an institution for mutual pleasure and perhaps even love.