CHAPTER 1

Pornographia *and the markings of prostitution: an introduction*

> Mrs Ellen Gwyn being at the duke's playhouse was affronted by a person who came into the pitt and called her whore; whom Mr Herbert, the earl of Pembrokes brother, vindicating, there were many swords drawn, and a great hubbub in the house.
>
> (Narcissus Luttrell)[1]

> This is most brave
> That I, the son of a dear father murder'd
> Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
> Must (like a whore) unpack my heart with words
> And fall a-cursing like a very drab.
>
> (*Hamlet* II.ii.578–82)

What does it mean to call somebody a whore, or, more precisely, to *write* prostitution across a person or institution? The etymology of the modern word 'pornography' encapsulates these questions. Many of the discourses that we will study in this book – including bawdy tales, lawsuits protesting against sexual defamation, political satires, prosecutions for disorderly behaviour, and crusading journalism, as well as direct depictions of sexual practice – exploit the ambiguous relationship between two elements that would eventually combine: *pornē* (signifying the prostitute openly revealed and reviled) and *graphē* (the expressive mark or engraved sign, verbal as well as visual). Everything depends on who is making that mark and who controls its interpretation. Is it writing about, upon, or by the alleged prostitute? Does *pornē* refer narrowly to sex for hire, or to any sexual act that transgresses the marital norm or violates the taboo against direct depiction? with boys or women? active or passive? celebrating or abhorring the arousal it represents and elicits? These texts often pit a woman's autographism or self-representation against efforts by the narrator/defamer to pry open or cut into her respectable exterior, to reveal the expected story of sexual exposure and conquest – the 'pornographic' moment in the modern sense. Some anticipate the eighteenth-century

coinage of the would-be scientific term *pornographe*, part-way between the modern meaning and its etymological roots: ostensibly moralistic works such as John Garfield's *Wandring Whore* (analysed in chapter 4 below), like Restif de la Bretonne's *Pornographe*, offer a collective portrait of urban vice brought to light by a private citizen who blends into the murky demimonde and extracts its most salacious truths.

I begin, then, by conceiving pornography as an act of *designation* or *marking*, at once accusation, distinction, signage, and signature. At its crudest it means uttering and affixing the single word *whore*, as in the fight over Nell Gwyn cited in my first epigraph. This simple act had complex results, for even though Gwyn gave herself witty titles like 'Protestant Whore' her honour was immediately 'vindicated' by sword-wielding aristocrats when someone else dared to flourish the term. But that chivalrous sword, like its counterpart the pen, could also turn upon the woman it protects, engraving her with a stroke that would mark on the exterior the cryptic truth about female sexuality. The 'graphic' element in my imaginary term *pornographia* carried associations of punishment and publication, writing on the body and expository display of its achievements. Cruel as it seems to us, the connection between corporal punishment and artistic expression would have been familiar to anyone who read Plautus or Ben Jonson. When the clever slave in Plautus's *Pseudolus* invites his master to 'conscribe' his entire back with the whip, 'just as letters are written into a book with a calamus', he is punning on what an admirer has just called him – a real *graphicum*, a prize exhibit worthy to be posted or written up, 'graphic' in the most vivid sense. Jonson, himself threatened with facial mutilation for his seditious writing, frequently imagined satirical invectives as 'prints' or 'publike brands' stamped into the offender's face, 'cut' like a portrait engraving or 'told in red letters', while at the same time he identifies this desire for revenge as a 'feminine humour' or 'scolding rage'. The same 'graphic' mechanism, I will argue throughout this book, defines the sexually errant female. It runs the social gamut, from the abject spectacle of the whore attacked in the street to the polite compliment that the Earl of Rochester pays to the Court beauty, inviting her royal audience to 'See my Credentials written in my Face.'[2]

We cannot assume, however, that the courtesan remained the passive object of these male (re)marks. *Pornographia* equally implies the manipulation of signs *by* the prostitute or mistress, fashioning herself a higher status, defining herself as a refined libertine above mercenary considerations, above the rough subculture of the brothel and the street. In Italian literature, where most 'pornographic' motifs originate, this active, self-crafting

capacity is most fully elaborated in Ferrante Pallavicino's *La retorica delle puttane* ('The Whores' Rhetoric'); as its title implies, this mock-didactic satire instructs the common 'whore' in the expressive arts of high culture – rhetoric, gesture, decor, music, architecture – to create a façade both literal and figurative. In contrast to the brutally colloquial *puttana*, the term 'courtesan' or *cortegiana* could denote this higher cultural aspiration, especially when combined with *honesta* – which meant honourable, respect-worthy, acceptable to the élite, rather than 'honest' in the modern sense. The etymological affinity with *cortegiano* or 'courtier' could be invoked with various degrees of irony, as in *The Whores Rhetorick* (1683), a loose English adaptation of Pallavicino by an author styling himself 'Philo-Puttanus': 'acting *alla Cortegiana*' means precisely 'cringing, fawning, supplanting, and undermining'; 'the wise *Italians* by *Cortegiano* and *Cortegiana* . . . intimate that a Whore ought to be furnished with all the Courtly qualities' (33). This chapter will therefore introduce the crux that runs through virtually all representations of sexuality outside the sanction of marriage: the abject associations of the common prostitute constantly conflict with the glamour and prestige of the *cortegiana honesta* or the royal mistress.

Given this inversionary affinity of high and low, the courtesan becomes a perfect vehicle for political commentary, a funhouse mirror of social corruption or cataclysm, at once trivializing and perpetuating its trauma. Hence my preoccupation with the 'porno-political' throughout this book. Just as the Sack of Rome shows up relentlessly in the most violent episodes of proto-pornography like Pietro Aretino's *Ragionamenti*, so the English Civil War is belittled, reenacted, and diagnosed in contemporary prostitute-narratives and obscene lampoons: a life of reckless copulation becomes 'Nature's Good Old Cause'; when two lovers 'tilt and thrust' simultaneously in Phillis's '*Cunt* and *Arse*', the mock-heroic narrator announces that we must 'Now for Civil *Wars* prepare, / Rais'd by fierce intestine bustle.' The body-word 'intestine', already applied to civil conflict, is now reliteralized 'in the *Bowels* of the fair'.[3]

England did not develop in isolation, and though future chapters concentrate on London I will here, if only briefly, cite parallels from Continental Renaissance sources that anticipated or influenced Stuart culture. 'Pornographic' texts (in both the modern sense and the historically restricted sense that I am proposing here) circulated widely in England, especially the two notorious dialogues that Pepys mentions in his diary, the French *Escole des filles* and the Italian work attributed to Aretino, *La puttana errante* – the 'Wandering' or 'Errant Whore'. Alongside these

bawdy narratives and their English equivalents I will read legal cases from England, France, and Italy so similar that they suggest a plebeian sexual culture common to otherwise very different countries. Since my goal is to show 'cultural operation' I find it essential to go beyond mere textuality, studying actions and actionable words, rituals of abuse or celebration, episodes of disorderly conduct and obscene libel that ended up in court. Sexual practices are notoriously difficult to reconstruct, of course, and most purported descriptions of reality come mediated through scandalous texts with their own sensational or judicial agenda. Nevertheless, narratives that lead to successful prosecutions should be given special weight, as representations endorsed by social power, texts with 'consequence' in every sense.

My second epigraph raises a further question: what does it mean to *identify* with the whore? Suddenly self-conscious of his fervent curses against Claudius, Hamlet in a single convulsive moment repudiates *and recognizes* his own whorishness. And the flash of identity passes through the tongue rather than the genitals; the Prince defines the whore by a quality of language, a kind of *pornoglossia*, coarse and unbridled but yielding direct access to the heart (hence analogous to the art of the soliloquy itself). When the Renaissance courtesan published her own poems this association of active sexuality and intensified language migrated upwards into literary history, and it flourishes in the age of frank and worldly writers like Aphra Behn. Sometimes facetiously and sometimes in earnest, the Logos is conceived as a material product of Eros, corrupted and yet stimulated by whoring. 'Wit' derives from 'Cunt', ribald talk resembles cunnilingus, literary inspiration becomes a sexually transmitted disease. We must explore not just the representation of the whore (and her equally scandalous male companions), but the prostitution of representation.

1. *CORTEGIANA HONESTA* OR *PUTTANA ERRANTE*?

Nobody in early modern England used the term *pornographia* – the word appears only once in ancient Greek, and its modern cognates do not emerge until the late eighteenth century – but everybody participated in it. Thousands of working women took their neighbours to court for it, defending the honour of their person and their household against the graphic designation 'whore'. As I define it, *pornographia* is an act as well as a text, a performative gesture of such resonance that a single word, uttered against the king's mistress Nell Gwyn in the highly charged space of the playhouse pit, triggered a furious swordfight among the earls. The

elements of my new-old term would have been recognized by the literate, moreover. Aretino's *Ragionamenti*, the quintessential Renaissance account of the whore's life and opinions, circulated under the title *Pornodidascalus*, and the English translator of an important treatise on sexual medicine defines his learned sources as '*Pornodidascalians*'.[4] The concept of *graphē* as punitive 'writing' boils up in dramatizations of sexual rage from Shakespeare's Othello (who sees Desdemona as a 'fair paper to write Whore upon') to Pinchwife in Wycherley's *Country-Wife*, who promises Margery that he will 'write Whore with this Penknife in your Face' (chapter 6, section 1 below). The notion of the prostitute as the *subject* or *agent* of sexual writing could be derived from the vivid portrait of the wicked seductress in the Biblical book of Proverbs; when John Dunton confronts an American woman who came to his bookshop for *L'Escole des filles*, he sneers that ''tis not with her Eyes only she draws in Customers, but with her feet also, for she writes Characters of wantonness as she walks'.[5]

Whore is a fighting word, a cutting remark. But what does it cut through? Firstly, of course, it breaks down the exterior shell of honour and good fame that every citizen needed to maintain her social standing. As defamation trials show, the accusation 'whore' served as a universal indicator of guilt, the clearest possible evidence that no 'credit', in court or in the shops, should be extended to this person.[6] Ascribing sexual infamy thus broke down the categorical distinction between kinds of crime. More important still, 'whore' also cuts through the entire process of classifying women, assigning social status according to their sexuality. It brings into conflict two incompatible modes of categorizing, which we can call the *binary* and the *graduated*.

The binary system notoriously allows only two categories of woman, polarized and exclusive: the chaste and the whore. *Any* sexual act outside marriage put her instantly and irrevocably into the abject category, which also constitutes a call to action: the woman of honour must be 'vindicated' against the accuser, by lawsuits, fist-fights, shaming rituals, or aristocratic swordplay; the 'whore' must be 'kicked out of doors' (as Rochester put it), pelted with filth, 'pointed at for something monstrous' (in Aphra Behn's words), whipped and paraded in a cart. On the other hand, society in practice recognized an infinite series of steps, overlappings, and distinctions within the realm of sexual possibility. The ruler's mistress, whose bastards were often acknowledged with noble titles and state pensions, occupied a vastly different position from the rambling street prostitute, who in turn differed from the wealthy citizen's kept 'Miss' (in some cases later married) or the pleasure-seeking wife who scorned any suggestion

of financial reward. Even within the brothels, historians recognize large material differences between 'those who rented themselves out as private mistresses forming long-term liaisons, . . . those whose earnings were tied to the volume of clients they handled, and the more casual prostitutes at the lower end of the market' (as Ian Archer concludes from an exhaustive study of London Bridewell records).[7] This archival finding is confirmed by texts as divergent as the 1535 *Tariffa delle puttane di Venegia* (where prices vary a hundredfold) and the comedies of Thomas Killigrew or Aphra Behn, where the great courtesan Angellica Bianca openly advertises her colossal monthly fee, announcing both her availability and her cultural capital by displaying her portrait commissioned from Van Dyck.

'Whore' and its equivalents signify *both* the Universal Unchaste *and* the lowest rung in this status-graduation, lacking cultural accomplishment, the protection of a powerful client, or the possibility of financial security. This 'low' vocabulary strikes up two semantic oppositions at once – defining itself versus the respectable matron on one side and the higher-status courtesan on the other. The *pornē*, a common prostitute or someone who lived and thought like one, was counter-distinguished from the *hetaira*, who formed an educated and relatively liberated class, an exception to the general Greek contempt for women. The protagonists of explicitly sexual discourse evolve, during the period studied in this book, from the raunchy *puttane* of Aretino and *The Wandring Whore* to the aristocratic married women of Nicolas Chorier's neo-Latin *Aloisiae Sigeae Satyra Sotadica*, the most 'pornographic' text of the seventeenth century according to the modern use of the term. Chorier's 'erudite' libertines could be called 'hetaira' but not 'pornē', and when a young acolyte calls the private villas of their orgies 'honorable brothels' (*honestae lupanares*) she is haughtily rebuked.[8] Since the etymology of 'pornography' links it to class degradation, these high-libertine texts are more accurately characterized as 'Dialogues of the Hetaira' (the title of a well-known work by Lucian). In Italy, the distinctions between cultivated *cortegiana*, plain *meretrice*, and vulgar *puttana* roughly correspond to the estates of society, and further gradations could be obtained by tonal inflection and by oxymoronic combinations like *cortegiana honesta* or *puttana errante*.

Do these qualifications mitigate the infamy or deepen it? As *cortegiana* dropped down the social scale, losing its connection with courtliness, *honesta* could be added to mark out a privileged exception, but the term could equally convey bitter satire against unwarranted respectability. A *Catalogo* published in Venice in 1575 might list its subjects as *le principale e più honorate cortigiane di Venezia*, but it clearly degrades them by publishing

their address, bawd's name, and price (including Veronica Franco at a derisory 2 scudi). When Claude Le Petit, the most virulent of the French *libertins* in the mid seventeenth century, addresses an obscene sonnet to the 'Courtisanes d'honneur' inviting them to use his manuscript as a dildo, he means to expose the secret desires of the upper-class *précieuses* who dominated salon culture.[9] *La puttana errante*, the title given first to a mock-chivalric poem and then to a highly influential pseudo-Aretine prose dialogue, identifies the prostitute simultaneously as a picaresque or 'wandering' vagabond – the lowest kind of '*arrant* whore', detached from any fixed location or property – and as a female knight-*errant*, whose sexual exploits match the martial prowess of Ariosto's Bradamante or Spenser's Britomart.

All these fine distinctions were in any case fragile and unstable, since at any moment the graduated model could be replaced by the binary, according to which every sexually active woman is a mere whore and the great courtesan all the more culpable because she pretends to rise above that criminal, abject status. Verbal, legal, and physical attacks could be sprung without warning, and the *cortegiana honesta* was particularly vulnerable; she represented the anomalous middle term that binary thinking cannot tolerate, the unchaste-but-still-honourable woman whose avowed 'free' sexuality has not (yet) plunged her into the gutter.

In several Italian city-states legislation tried to level the distinction between *cortegiane* and *meretrice*, using the words as if they were interchangeable synonyms and imposing the same penalties on both – barring them from church, forbidding aristocratic clients to save them from prosecution, forcing them to wear the yellow veil. (In London, a similar levelling-effect was procured by empowering Bridewell to punish 'vagabondes, strumpets, or single women gotten with childe'.) Even courtesans with the highest cultural credentials, like the poets Tullia d'Aragona and Veronica Franco, found themselves subject to legal persecution, though Tullia escaped the veil when Cosimo de Medici personally endorsed her appeal 'pardon her because she is a poetess'. Satirical *pornographia* pursues the same legislative goals: Veronica Franco, who elevated her own sexual skills by representing them as 'opere amorose' or works of art, is attacked as 'Ver unica puttana'; Tullia d'Aragona's poetic ambition is brutally mocked in the Venetian *Tariffa delle puttane*, where (despite her massive price) she 'washes chitterlings' in the 'Helicon' of her own urine. (In contrast, the 'little people' who charge only a few pence and merely 'earn their bread with their rear ends' are treated more

mildly.) In a dialogue ascribed to Aretino the dour Zoppino, invited by a friend to speak freely and to use the vulgar words 'puttane, cazzo, potta, culo, fottere', retorts that '*puttane*, or *cortegiane* as you like to call them, are a terrible thing' – levelling the all-important verbal distinction just as the law was trying to do.[10]

The same author, in fact, could uphold and demolish the special status of the 'honest whore'. Aretino himself sometimes endorses the courtesan's claim to have created a refined art of pleasure, sometimes drags this ambition down by emphasizing, in the grossest street language, the violence of the sex-act and the cunning avarice of the *arte puttanesca*. He commends Angela La Zaffetta for her ability to 'put the mask of *onestà* over the lascivious', but encourages a disciple to write a hideous poem about her gang-rape by thirty-one men. Tullia d'Aragona's successful performance in a philosophical dialogue inspires a dizzy rapture of paradox, simultaneously lifting her above the most respectable women and marking her with the brand of *impudicizia*: 'after receiving such an honour her shamelessness can properly be envied by the most modest and the most fortunate women'.[11] (The author of that dialogue himself went on to write a vicious diatribe proving that '*Cortegiana* means nothing but *meretrice*.') The ambiguous 'splendour and misery' ascribed to the courtesan no doubt reflects the male author's ambivalence about sexuality itself, which in Montaigne's great essay 'On Some Verses of Virgil' seems at one moment a kind of excretion, shameful and ridiculous, and the next moment the supreme goal of life, a transcendent pleasure which must be preserved and extended by turning it into an elaborate art (*Essais* III.v). Jacobean drama ensured that this fascinating ambiguity flourished in England: Dekker's *The Honest Whore* eulogizes the strumpet's freedom (Part II, IV.i); Marston's *The Dutch Courtezan* translates directly from Montaigne's praise of sex-as-art, calling the courtesan the 'Ambrosia of Delight' (V.i).

The simple designation *whore*, then, cuts through this aura of paradoxical qualification and nails the errant woman in the coffin of abjection. In lower-class *pornographia* – the lampoon pinned on the door, the oral defamation taken down in court – we can see this disambiguation at work. Stripping away accretions like 'honest' and euphemisms like 'courtesan', the bald word is doubled with synonyms like 'buttock' that associate prostitution with gross materiality, and multiplied into Rabelaisian strings of epithets that reinforce the link to other kinds of transgression, presumed to be interchangeable with sexual adventure

once it has reached the lowest stratum: 'thou art a whore and an arrant whore and a common carted whore and thou art my husbands whore' . . . 'thow hackney queane thou hackney jade comon ridden jade codpeece whore codpeece quean thow monster thow, putt off thy long pettycote put on a pair of britches!' Venetian and English assailants alike enact the monstrosity of the enemy or rival by creating verbal monsters of their own, as it were turning mere assertion into *de-monstration*. In both cultures, too, the creature is further alienated-and-contained by tying her to the most shameful locations in town, the addresses most notorious for poverty as well as cheap prostitution: Veronica Franco is accused of living in the worst slum of Venice; the London neighbour is told that 'Turnbull Streete is more fitt for her to live in than amongst honest people.'[12]

The 'whore' confronted (and constituted) by these ritualized insults anticipates the 'abject' as conceived by Kristeva, at once definitively *low* and fluidly unclassifiable, disturbing 'identity, system, order' and flowing over 'borders, positions, rules' (Preface, above). The 'whore' is incontinent, leaky in every sense, unruly because outside the marital or parental control of one man, ribald, coarse, lacking the restraints required by the increasingly self-conscious Civilizing Process, loose-mouthed as well as open-flapped. Hamlet feels shame, my second epigraph reminds us, because he 'must like a whore unpack my heart with words'. Attempts to discipline the 'scold' often blur the distinction between the termagant and the whore, however different they might seem in their surface appeal.[13] And the common prostitute is further tainted – if rendered more fungible – by her association with money. Centuries before Marxism, the whore stood for the human face of the Commodity, and vice versa.

The exchange of sex for coins, literally thrown into the vagina in *The Wandring Whore* (chapter 4 below), defines her as a wage labourer, neither 'liberal' nor 'free' even though she is free with her favours. Within the hierarchy of sex work, the fee-for-service women who owned no share in the business performed what was often described as 'drudgery' or 'slavery', while the strolling 'buttock', who solicited in the open street, found herself associated with other kinds of mobile and full-throated vendor – the oyster-wench, the Billingsgate fish-seller, or the Parisian *poissarde*. (The more odorous and perishable the food the more it analogizes depraved sexuality, the 'Salt Commodity' that can be bought as easily as an oyster.) In pornography associated with Bartholomew Fair, the closest thing London had to a carnival, the whores call on customers to try 'the best buttock-beef in England', so that the same word serves for the woman,

the part she offers, and the meal she resembles.[14] Pursuing the cycle of consumption still further into the urban lower stratum, prostitutes are identified with the 'common shore' or sewer and with the cinder-women who recycled fuel from the ashheaps. Rochester could airily refer to lower-class sexual opportunities with the generic 'oyster-cinder-beggar-common-whore', and the same conflation occurs in political *pornographia*: the women petitioners to Parliament in Civil War England are belittled as 'Whores, Bawdes, Oyster-women, [and] Irish women' (chapter 3 below), and in a later crisis Nell Gwyn's contaminating power over the king is exaggerated by calling her a cinder-woman, a herring-crier, or a 'wench of orange and oyster'.[15]

Public fascination with these public women turned them into urban entertainments, heroines of abjection, ironically romanticized with names like Fuckadilla (one of the royal mistresses in the burlesque drama *Sodom*) or her better-known cognate Cinderella. The whore and the fish-wife both elicited a kind of celebrity, finding themselves (in)famous as local characters, hawked in public in the form of popular prints (fig. 1). The best-known prostitute-cum-procuress of the Restoration, Mrs Cresswell, appears in an astonishing array of texts from *The Wandring Whore*, *The Poor Whores Petition*, *The English Rogue*, and *The Whores Rhetorick* to *Venice Preserved* and *Absalom and Achitophel* (chapters 4–7 below), eventually receiving the honour of a (facetious) funeral sermon and an entry in the *DNB*. Small wonder then that she can be assimilated into the 'Cries of London' and transformed into a specimen of the engraver's porno-graphic art, her commodified image paired with the 'London Courtezan' she cries up (figs. 2a–b).

2. RULING-CLASS COURTESANS: THE REIGN OF STATUS-CONFUSION

Pornographia aims to drive a wedge between sexuality and honour, between the infamy of prostitution and the material benefits of high status: political power through alliance with patrons and courtiers, economic power to display wealth and taste in design, didactic power to train or 'form' élite youth, expressive power in music, poetry, and 'rhetoric'. But if the intention is to demolish this anomalous high–low hybrid, the result is often to realize her ambiguity more graphically. The 'honourable courtesan' and her descendents fluctuate across many conceptual thresholds. She operates below the level of civil society and above it. For the misogynist she typifies all women, and yet – as Aretino proposed and