There are lots of ways of doing things and just as many ways of looking at things. Consider three pages torn from an eighteenth-century book of erotica. These drawings, based on Giulio Romano's I modi, a sixteenth-century picture book of sexual positions with 'explanations' penned by none other than Pietro Aretino, the controversial 'pornographer' of Renaissance Italy, set the stage for the chapters that follow. In the first drawing, female pairs, in a variety of poses, fill the shallow stage, the pulled-back curtain enabling an unhindered view of the performance (Figure I.1). The theatricality of the scene is obvious, as are the objects of the spectator's desire. Front and center, he assumes a position of his own; his may be the prime viewing position, but we, too, though forced to watch from the wings, get an eyeful. If this drawing leaves very little to the imagination, the next one will surely keep us guessing (Figure I.2). Set within a domestic interior, a private world is exposed. Or is it? Frustratingly, we are only privy to the scene unfolding at right. In this rather predictable and conventional scenario between man and woman, we can safely assume what will happen next. Much more titillating is what might be happening in the bedroom next door. Without the advantageous peep-hole, our perspective is altered and our vision compromised; our imaginations, subsequently, can only run wild as we try to understand what seems to be an endless set of permutations being played out among the neighboring couple. If the bodies to whom those intertwined legs belong remain out of sight, the next couple will turn tricks right in front of us (Figure I.3). This topsy-turvy pair underscores the performativity of these sexual 'acts,' entertaining us with over-the-top pose and prop. Moreover, they let it all hang out; with nothing to hide, this early modern couple forces us to re-direct our voyeuristic gaze back onto ourselves in order to confront the 'modern' narrative that has clouded so much of the erotic culture of Renaissance Italy.

Quite simply, this is a book about sex. It was clear from the start that this should be a book that reveals rather than conceals. Thus, we do not hold back. Instead of telling the story of Renaissance sexuality in polite terms,

(Photograph: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York)
1.2 ‘L’Aretin Français,’ after Giulio Romano’s *I modi*, from a collection of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century erotic books owned by author and art collector Roger Peyrefitte, auctioned and dispersed in 1981 (private collection)

(Photograph: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York)
I.3 ‘L’Aretin Français,’ after Giulio Romano’s I modi, from a collection of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century erotic books owned by author and art collector Roger Peyrefitte, auctioned and dispersed in 1981 (private collection)

(Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York)
we prefer full disclosure. Rather than offering the reader a set of studies that accept and repeat without criticism a socially prescribed model of sexuality, we emphasize the peculiar, the perverse, the clandestine and the scandalous. But exposing the unexpected also means confronting ambiguity and multiplicity. This is precisely the objective of the current collection – to tell a story about the practices of a particular culture in the simplest yet most suggestive of terms while celebrating confusion and complication. We have purposefully scaled back the length of the discussions, frequently foregrounding just one detail of a larger narrative, in order to enable a voyeuristic view onto a private world that previous scholarship has overlooked or has kept secret. The picture presented here nuances our understanding of Renaissance sexuality as well as our own.

Opening up a critical discourse on sexuality and visual culture in early modern Italy, the term ‘sex acts’ is interpreted broadly, from the acting out, or performing, of one’s (or another’s) sex to sexual activity, including what might be considered, now or then, alternative or peculiar practices and preferences and a variety of possibly scandalous scenarios. Moreover, this collection foregrounds the visual culture of early modern sexuality, from representations of sex and sexualized bodies to material objects associated with sexual activities. For instance, contributors consider not just painted representations of sexual activities and eroticized bodies, but also images from print media, drawing, sculpted objects and painted ceramic jars. In this way, the volume presents an entirely new picture of Renaissance sexuality, stripping away layers of misconceptions and manipulations and revealing an often-misunderstood world.

The book is divided into four thematic sections. The first, ‘Practice,’ considers prescriptions, proscriptions, positions and props. Catherine Hess opens the collection with ‘Pleasure, Shame and Healing: Erotic Imagery on Maiolica Drug Jars,’ a close-up look at sexual imagery – from women showing their genitals to winged phalli – displayed on ceramic drug jars. Such containers, used for pharmaceutical preparations, are among the largest groups of maiolica to survive from the Renaissance. Hess explores the relationship between disease and desire, suggesting that erotic imagery served to ensure the efficacy of the medicine by warding off evil.

The next chapter, ‘Body Language: Sex-Manual Literature from Pietro Aretino’s Sixteen Positions to Antonio Rocco’s Invitation to Sodomy,’ is also concerned with ‘prescriptions’ but foregrounds the spoken, the textual and the verbal over the figurative, the iconic and the visual. Paolo Fasoli focuses on Antonio Rocco’s Alcibiade fanciullo a scola, the infamous ‘invitation’ to sodomy written around 1630. Set in classical Athens, a dialogue unfolds between Filotimo, a scholar, and his adolescent pupil, Alcibiades. Filotimo persuades his student that being sodomized by his master would be not only enormously pleasurable but also intellectually beneficial. Fasoli studies Alcibiade in the context of other sex-manual literature, exploring the connection between rhetoric and pornography.
Ann Rosalind Jones explores social proscription and position among sexed Venetians in her provocative discussion, ‘Prostitution in Cinquecento Venice: Prevention and Protest.’ Cesare Vecellio famously included four woodcuts of Venetian prostitutes in his Degli Habiti antichi et moderni di diversi parte del mondo (Venice, 1590), commenting that many of them dressed exactly like noblewomen of the city and so deluded foreigners into thinking they have had sex with women of the elite. Less judgmentally, women of his city, especially Moderata Fonte (Modesta Pozze), defended such women as the victims of unjust family and economic arrangements and blamed their male relatives and clients for their fall into sex work. Including state edicts, foreigners’ accounts, and Vecellio’s images, Jones suggests what a complex social story the lives of Venetian prostitutes tell.

‘The Woman in the Window: Licit and Illicit Sexual Desire in Renaissance Italy,’ by Diane Wolfthal, sheds new light on sexualized spaces and viewing positions. Italian Renaissance prescriptive literature repeatedly advocated the spatial separation of men and women as a means of controlling lust. Yet if women wanted to attract the male gaze, they needed to display themselves at the liminal spaces between the home and the street: at windows, doorways or balconies. Wolfthal’s chapter concentrates on representations of sexual activity at the borders, from proper courtships to illicit transactions, viewing these images against changing ideas about privacy, property, propriety and the culture of display in early modern Italy.

Patricia Simons shifts the focus from positions to props. In ‘The Cultural History of “Seigneur Dildoe,”’ she takes a critical stance on phallic ‘instruments’ used by women. References to these devices appear in diverse literature, from penitentials, moral tracts or medical manuals, to satires, carnival songs and erotica. Following an overview of various strands and genres, Simons suggests that the Italian history of the dildo is more about the cultural imagination than about actual practice. On the other hand, some European women did fashion their own devices. The author argues that we need to distinguish between these performative uses of a dildo and a range of different attitudes regarding how much the device is inherently exclusively masculine in symbolic and somatic terms.

Part Two, ‘Performance,’ revolves around protagonists, pretenders and purveyors. In ‘Prohibited Discourse and Prohibitive Relations: Pietro Fortini’s Novella of Christian–Jewish Love,’ Karina Feliciano Attar examines a tale of inter-religious sexual relations and conversions set in Bologna. Studied within the culture of erotic openness that developed in Italy during the second quarter of the sixteenth century and within the context of the Counter-Reformation, Fortini’s text is understood as graphically exposing and subverting contemporary social fears of sexual pollution. Attar reads the slippery and capacious plot as a metaphor for the act of novellare, or storytelling that combines fiction, gossip and an exaggeration of the erotic.
Chriscinda Henry also analyzes complex sexual semiotics in her contribution, “Whorish Civility” and Other Tricks of Seduction in Venetian Courtesan Representation, an account of Giovanni Cariani’s remarkable group portrait, the so-called Sette Ritratti Albani (Seven Albani Portraits), painted in Bergamo in 1519. Henry suggests that the painting shows not a portrait of the noble Albani family, as the traditional eighteenth-century title claims, but four ‘honest’ or honorable courtesans attended by two aristocratic clients and a servant. As Henry posits, Cariani’s composition reveals a coded game in which the courtesans engage in an elaborate performance of seduction, and what Pietro Aretino would later call ‘civiltà puttanesca’ (whorish civility).

‘Traffic in Mistresses: Sexualized Bodies and Systems of Exchange in the Early Modern Court,’ by Timothy McCall, takes a close look at representations of the sexualized bodies of mistresses to theorize the ways that power and political networks were filtered through chivalric, extramarital images. More the rule than the exception in Italian courts, mistresses served as instruments in the economy of favors and in political strategies and were celebrated in poetry and portraits. As McCall argues, the ‘traffic in mistresses’ afforded opportunities for financial gain for both the mistress and her patrilineal and marital families.

‘Currency and Conquest, or Love for Sale, in Titian’s Danaë Paintings’ continues the theme of sexual economics. In her suggestive discussion, Erin Griffey focuses on Titian’s suite of Danaë paintings, the mythological story popular among Renaissance artists and patrons in which Jupiter seduces Danaë in the form of a shower of gold, impregnating her with his ‘golden’ semen. Griffey cleverly unpacks the relationship between material currency and visual conquest, or between material conquest and visual currency. She productively blurs the lines between matter, macchia (stain) and manipulation.

The third part of the book, ‘Perversions,’ explores provocative pairings and problematic partners. Will Fisher, in ‘Peaches and Figs: Bisexual Eroticism in the Paintings and Burlesque Poetry of Bronzino,’ examines Bronzino’s Venus and Cupid and a Satyr, as well as The Allegory of Venus and Cupid, suggesting that these paintings explicitly offer both Venus and Cupid as objects of desire to the viewer. As such, they are part of a long cultural tradition of debating the relative erotic merits of women and boys. Read in and against the artist’s poetry, Fisher considers what all of these images and texts tell us about Italian Renaissance eroticism.

Jutta Sperling’s analysis, “Divenni madre e figlia di mio padre”: Queer Lactations in Renaissance and Baroque Art, focuses on Pero and Cimone, an unconventional pair that demands critical attention. According to this first-century story, Pero is upheld as an example of ‘filial piety’ for breastfeeding her imprisoned father, who has been condemned to death by starvation. With Caravaggio’s 1606 rendering of the unsettling subject, the story, which would become known as ‘Roman charity,’ became increasingly
popular throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Sperling reads these representations of father–daughter lactation in and against representations of mother–daughter lactation, shedding new light on contemporary tensions over the construction and organization of kinship bonds.

‘Incest and Inflection in Della Porta’s La Sorella,’ by Rachel E. Poulsen, also examines the incest taboo. Giambattista Della Porta’s tragicomedy, La Sorella, published in 1604, stretched the limits of Italian commedia erudita, challenging philosophies of dramatic genre as well as what could be represented on the stage. Its story of two siblings who unwittingly marry – and then, once they learn the truth, are unable to quell their lust for one another – is disturbingly dark, even for audiences accustomed to frank sexual language and action. Poulsen explores the ways in which the powerful Italian stage treatment of incest shaped attitudes about ‘deviant’ sexuality across early modern time and place.

The fourth and final part of the book, ‘Punishment,’ is necessarily concerned with pleasure and pain. Robert Mills, in ‘Acts, Orientations and the Sodomites of San Gimignano,’ takes as his focus a scene from Taddeo di Bartolo’s fresco in the Collegiata, San Gimignano (1393–1413), which depicts a male couple being chastised for sodomy. Mills asks how sex acts are connected to sexual orientations and how sexual imagery might be understood in pre-modern and modern contexts. In an extremely thoughtful chapter, Mills explores the diverse and contradictory frameworks through which same-sex relations can be experienced and seen.

How and why are certain sexual preferences practiced, performed and punished? Allie Terry provides additional insight with ‘The Craft of Torture: Bronze Sculptures and the Punishment of Sexual Offence,’ an analysis in which she examines the objects used to punish sexual ‘deviants,’ or practitioners of sodomy. Focusing on the form and function of these little-studied but highly decorative torture instruments, Terry questions the conflation of art and punishment in fifteenth-century Italy.

‘Controlling Courtesans: Lorenzo Venier’s Trentuno della Zaffetta and Venetian Sexual Politics,’ by Daniella Rossi, explores the growing status of the courtesan in sixteenth-century Venice through an examination of Lorenzo Venier’s 1531 poem, Il Trentuno della Zaffetta. Though characterized by overly graphic imagery and blatantly outlandish language, the Trentuno stands more as a parody of the practice of group rape as a social cleansing of wayward women than as a commentary on the moral state of Venice. According to Rossi, by singling out Angela Zaffetta in such a ridiculously violent mode of suppression, Venier not only satirizes the system but also focuses on the growing importance of such women to the public setting.

The final chapter, Sergius Kodera’s ‘A Cock Burning in the Darkness: Giordano Bruno’s “Story of the Bed-Trick,”’ looks at a sequence of scenes in Giordano Bruno’s comedy, the Candlebearer. Disguised as a courtesan, a gorgeous young wife receives her husband in the darkened room of a brothel;
by maltreating his penis, she physically punishes the man for his adulterous intentions. Kodera looks at the story’s relationship to Bruno’s philosophy and especially to his theories of cognition. In a typically mannerist way of representation, the mistreated penis here becomes associated with light, and, by extension, with the process of gaining individual knowledge.

This explicitly interdisciplinary collection seeks to present a variety of viewpoints and perspectives, drawing back the curtain and inviting the reader/viewer to peer into a seldom-seen world.