



Taking Positions: On the Erotic in Renaissance Culture

Bette Talvacchia

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Taking Positions is an innovative exploration of the place of the erotic in Renaissance art and culture, focusing on a notorious set of images created by the young Italian master Giulio Romano. In the early 1520s, Giulio made sixteen drawings of couples in various sexual positions. Known as *I modi* ("the positions"), the drawings were modeled on classical sources and themselves became a model for erotica in early modern Europe. Bette Talvacchia presents the first comprehensive account of the origins, impact, and context of these drawings, discussing in highly original ways such issues as censorship, religious teachings about sex, and the influence of antique culture.

Talvacchia presents evidence that Giulio modeled *I modi* in part on coinlike ancient Roman medals known as *spintriae*, which portrayed diverse sexual positions. She reconstructs how the drawings were first circulated privately and then made into engravings that were distributed publicly. She considers what it reveals about Renaissance culture that authorities began to consider *I modi* obscene and threatening--they went so far as to jail the engraver--only when the images became available to the public. More broadly, Talvacchia explores how sixteenth-century discourse used the terms *onesto* and *disonesto*--roughly analogous to the terms *natural* and *unnatural* in Catholic teachings about sexual sin--to distinguish between the erotic and the obscene.

The book also traces the influence of Giulio's drawings throughout the sixteenth century. Talvacchia looks, in particular, at two related sets of prints: Jacopo Caraglio's *Loves of the Gods* and a manual of anatomy by the French doctor and printer Charles Estienne. In the former, she shows how explicit sexual representation was legitimized with a cover of ancient mythology. She then examines how Estienne transformed Caraglio's erotic images into strange anatomical figures of the female body and what this transformation shows about the place of women's sexuality in Renaissance medicine.

The book is generously illustrated and includes full translations of the infamous sonnets that Pietro Aretino wrote to accompany *I modi*. Provocative, rigorously researched, and carefully argued, *Taking Positions* is a major contribution to our understanding of the erotic in Renaissance culture.

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