Pornography's Virtual Character

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I propose to use the Bloomington Workshop 2023 as an opportunity to think about how some of the insights I've gleaned from eighteenth-century pornographic texts bear relevance to how we think about bodies, gender, and autonomy in the present. In my recent book *What Pornography Knows: Sex and Social Protest since the Eighteenth Century*, I disentangle from blatantly pornographic and quasi-pornographic texts in the eighteenth century an insistent and ongoing commentary on the particular ways women experience sex: sometimes as pleasure, sometimes as violence, sometimes as voluntary, but always as a profound change in their social identity—from virgin to non-virgin, from chaste to corrupt, from marriageable to contaminated, from resistor to rape victim. Part of what pornography does that's so unique is emphasize the distance between genitals—the things sex gets done to—and the persons trying to exert direction and intention over their bodies. The discrepancy between intention and action is famously, voluminously detailed in Richardson's *Clarissa*, but it's everywhere in pornography, too. Even the most slapdash, nearly forgotten texts treat the experience of sex with complexity, acknowledging the frequent overriding of bodily autonomy that happens under heterosexuality and inventing ways (in imaginative fiction) to convert the violence of this overriding into some other narrative— pleasure, marriage, sapphism, transgendering. Because it treats these topics with honesty, consistency, and criticism, I consider pornography as definitively and inclusively feminist.

Moving on from my book project, I want to think about how these insights about the feminism baked into eighteenth-century pornography might be compelling or politically important to an audience beyond scholars. How can knowing a history of pornography make us smarter about how we talk about it in the present? This question arises from my dismay about how quickly and blithely we generalize about "porn" without ever accounting for what it *is*. My case study for this paper involves recent developments in AI-generated pornography (also called deepfakes) that create and deploy virtual figures (always, it seems, women) in digital pornographic content. Recent media coverage registers a few forms of panic about this "new" "fictional" type of character: one, that it potentially deceives a user who believes he is watching embodied women; two, it heightens misogyny by dehumanizing women more than they already were in pornography; and three, it violates the consent of women—usually celebrities or public figures—by featuring their likeness in pornographic content. Jettisoning this third concern (to me, the most legitimate objection), my paper points out that the first two dilemmas posed by AI pornography are not at all new, and that our concerns over them are either misplaced or belated in light of a historical approach to pornography. The artificial, virtual character of pornographic figures was known and embraced by eighteenth-century users of pornography, whose capacity to distinguish between pornography and reality was heightened by reading; and the apparent indifference to women's well-being so bemoaned by feminist critics today in fact allowed, in the eighteenth-century context, readers to develop knowledge about bodies and sex without becoming attached to the psychological states of particularized characters. Drawing on both realist descriptions of bodies and typified (rather than "round") characters, eighteenth-century pornographic writing openly exploited virtual character for its capacity to generate interest in sex while dispensing with emotional attachment to individual figures. Drawing on theories of character developed by Stephanie Insley Hershinow and Lisa Freeman, I demonstrate this non-

absorptive facet of the genre in a reading of the 1713 *Treatise of Hermaphrodites*, which purports to condemn non-binary gender and intersex bodies, but which uses fictional narrative (by my reading) to describe and rationalize sexual pleasures of non-penetrative, non-reproductive, non-heterosexual kinds. It achieves this exposition by cultivating readers' detachment from characters and the violence done to them.