One person’s smut is another person’s sensuality. Similarly, distinguishing between erotica and pornography has been a topic of great debate among historians of sexuality. Problems with defining the material, to a large extent, result from attempts to fit the material into a cultural and sociological pigeonhole which did not exist when it was written. Erotica has been seen to be written as ‘a matter of intent in that the authors and publishers had in mind to provide the reader of their wares with sexual stimulations of one sort or another’. Pornography has been described as that which is prohibited, ‘the written or visual representation in a realistic form of any general or sexual behaviour with a deliberate violation of existing and widely accepted moral and social taboos’; ‘the explicit depiction of sexual organs and sexual practices with the aim of arousing sexual feeling’. The terms for erotica and pornography have even been used interchangeably, which denies the differentiation between graphic descriptions of sexual acts and suggestive innuendo or sexual parodies. This corpus of work has also been described as ‘sexual fiction’. Yet not all pornographic descriptions can be described as fiction, as we can see by trial reports.

Definitions of erotica and pornography within this body of writing have proved problematic, and many of the arguments are not always helpful. They confuse the issues which are important by continually querying characterisation. Certainly, the eighteenth-century reader did not use the same categorising faculty that we use today. No boundary was made between pornographic, erotic, libertine, gallant or licentious images, or differentiation from other forms, such as philosophical, political or moral genres. Writings of a sexual nature have been labelled somewhat indiscriminately as pornography, erotica, smut, obscenity, clandestine or forbidden texts, sexual fiction and libertine literature – different terms often applied to the same works. To add to the confusion, many of the arguments have been applied within the conceptual framework of the twentieth century, which blurs the real issues that were important in the erotic writings of the eighteenth century. Furthermore, French and English erotic writings have frequently been lumped together, ignoring the important distinctions which need to be made between the two sets of material. An artificial delineation between mainstream literature and erotica has been made in today’s world which
simply did not exist at the time it was published and first being read. This ‘low-
life literature’ therefore needs to be fitted into a broader, wider cultural context. Our notion of pornography existing as a separate entity is fairly specific to the last 150 years.

If the word ‘pornography’ did not exist, should we use it to describe material in the eighteenth century? Assertions have been made that ‘pornography’ cannot be used on the grounds that it would be anachronistic, the term being first mentioned in the *Oxford English Dictionary* only in 1857. It has also been argued that the use of *érotique* in the context of ‘sexual’ rather than ‘amorous’ emerged in France only in 1825, so, if we reject ‘pornography’ as a term, we would be obliged to reject ‘erotica’ for the same reasons. Furthermore, similar terminology was circulating in ancient Greece, so it would be erroneous to dismiss the terms on the basis of anachronism. Plato’s *The Symposium* refers to ‘erotic’ in the sense of both love and sex. Eighteenth-century writers frequently alluded to Greek and Roman references and often used the same connotations, writing about love and sex as synonymous, and they frequently equate sex, lust and love with being ‘amorous’. In *Deipnosophistae*, Athenaeus mentions πορνηγράφος (pornography), referring to one who writes about harlots. Therefore, since Grub Street writers also wrote about prostitutes, why not call their work pornography? But the term ‘pornography’ no longer alludes only to writings of or about harlots. More recently it has been imbued with political meaning, certainly not the intention in this book. We do need, however, some sort of definition of the material to assist the modern reader.

A set of works called ‘pornography’ can be traced as a specific chronological and geographical development from sixteenth-century Italy and seventeenth-century France. Certainly, we can trace a definite development of English material in the eighteenth century which includes graphic descriptions of sexual activities – what we could call ‘pornography’ in the modern sense of the word. For clarity, my definition of ‘pornography’ is material that contains graphic description of sexual organs and/or action (for example, detailed descriptions of masturbation, or anal, oral and penetrative sex) written with the prime intention of sexually exciting the reader. Pornography is not merely a series of repetitive scenarios, but a particular way of writing to fulfil a particular function, to create the desired effect of physical pleasure. But it was specifically seventeenth-century France which first developed a more graphic style, English ‘pornographic’ work becoming ‘an aim in itself’ (for the main purpose of sexual excitement) only from the middle of the eighteenth century. There was a traceable crucial period in the development of more pornographic English-grown material (as opposed to translations of foreign work) which would take off from the 1770s onwards (with the notable exception of *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, 1749). Stylistically improved in order to render a sexual reaction from its readership, the fictional scenarios became more imaginative. New narratives emerged combining the techniques of the novel with explicit sexual scenarios to form an authentic pornographic voice. Although elements of this were evident in earlier works, they would fuse only in the late eighteenth century.