The Scholar's Erotica

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Table of Contents

Introduction

I did not set out to write an erotica. I set out to mend a life frayed by certainty. Years of scholarship taught me to interrogate sources, to distrust the tidy conclusion, to admire a footnote’s quiet rebellion against the main text. Then the archive surprised me—with fragments that refused to be purely historical and with whispers that felt, even in their dust, disarmingly alive. What follows is the record of a recovery: a recovering scholar relearning tenderness through the very tools that once kept feeling at arm’s length—citations, commentary, the patient study of margins.

This book is framed as an annotated monograph, but its heart is fiction. The documents I “cite” are reconstructed from scraps of rumor, travelogues, court records, and the irresistibly unreliable memoirs of vanished cities. Their authors are imagined, their ink speculative; yet the emotions they carry—curiosity, longing, shame, courage—are true enough to stain the page. I invite you to read the main text for its scenes and the implied footnotes for their arguments, allowing scholarship and story to court one another without either claiming the last word.

My method is simple: to treat intimacy as a language with dialects, grammars, and idioms. Across eras, desire leaves traces not only in beds and boudoirs but in treaties, tailors’ ledgers, pilgrimage maps, and the choreography of greetings. Where other historians turn away at the veil, I catalog the veil itself—its weave, its social permissions, the ingenuity with which people have looked through gauze without tearing it. To read for touch is not to pry; it is to notice permissions and refusals, the choreography of consent, the way a society teaches its members to ask and to answer.

You will find scenes here—glimpses of ceremonies and private agreements, of coded fans and suggestive proverbs—but they are presented with discretion. I aim for evocation, not inventory. Where the archive records harm, coercion, or inequity, I do not reenact; I reckon. The guiding ethic of this study is clear: the pleasures we linger over are those of consenting adults, narrated with care and without prurience. The past is not absolved by distance, and neither is the reader flattered by complicity; instead, we are invited to witness and to learn.

Because the sources are unstable, the apparatus is visible. You will catch me in the margins doubting a translation, flagging a gap, confessing the seductions of a theory that fits too well. I prefer seams to seamlessness. If the book sometimes stutters between story and note, it is because that is how memory moves—advancing and retreating, daring and revising. The scholar in me footnotes; the person in me remembers. Between them, a third voice emerges, one that hopes to be humane.

If there is a thesis, it is modest: that cultures teach their people how to be near. Nearness is a craft—learned, practiced, revised—and like any craft it has tools, rituals, and ethics. To study these is not to reduce feeling to formula; it is to offer those who seek warmth a vocabulary for asking and for answering. In an age noisy with instruction and thin on attentiveness, perhaps the old lexicons of approach have something to teach us still.

Finally, a note on hope. The manuscripts in these pages are inventions that aspire to truth, not authority. Let them be read as an atlas of possibilities: paths others have walked, missteps worth avoiding, courtesies that remain radical. If the book succeeds, you will close it not with certainty but with a heightened sense of attention—to language, to boundaries, to the delicate treaties by which two adults decide, together, what they will share. Where scholarship once kept me safe from feeling, it now helps me feel safely. That is the recovery I offer you, footnoted by care.

CHAPTER ONE: Margins of Desire: On Glosses and Emendations

The most compelling stories of historic intimacy rarely reside in the main body of a text. Official histories, court chronicles, and theological treatises are designed to uphold order, to legislate public life, and to enforce propriety. Desire, being anarchic and personal, is seldom afforded the dignity of the central column. Instead, we must look to the periphery: to the marginalia, the glosses, the hurried corrections and whispered additions that cling to the edges of sanctioned discourse. These 'margins of desire' are not mere annotations; they are the true archives of human approach, where the body’s grammar contradicted the state’s syntax.

My initial research centered on the recovery of the *Lexicon Eroticum Veneti,* a supposed sixteenth-century compendium of Venetian romantic slang. While the Lexicon itself proved elusive—likely an invention of later antiquarians—the search led me to its rumored source: a collection of personal letters and business receipts bound together in a codex now residing in the private holdings of the Contarini family. The scholar, trained to value the primary source, usually discards the binding material. I, however, found the binding itself to be the subject.

The edges of these Venetian records, especially the blank spaces surrounding trade agreements and legal documents, were filled with tiny, illustrative sketches and coded remarks—a kind of semi-private commentary on the lives of the transcribing clerks. These were the true marginalia of desire. One particular section, detailing the shipment of costly Syrian silks, was bordered by a delicate, almost invisible hand drawing of two intertwined fingers, labelled simply: *Propinquitas.* Proximity.

The clerk, whom I tentatively name Alviso based on his initials scrawled elsewhere, was using the academic tradition of the gloss—the brief explanation or interpretation of a difficult word—to interpret life itself. He wasn't clarifying the silk trade; he was clarifying what the silk trade enabled. The costly fabric meant money, money meant leisure, and leisure, it seems, meant the possibility of *Propinquitas*. This subtle shift from material wealth to emotional availability is the constant refrain of the margins.

Consider the practice of *emendation*. In textual criticism, an emendation is a correction made to a text, usually to improve its accuracy or clarity. In the margins of desire, the correction is applied to the official narrative of the self. Alviso’s notes often featured corrections to his own entries. Where a business letter noted a planned voyage taking three weeks, his margin nervously corrected it to "four weeks, praying." The voyage, of course, was never the point; the absence was.

It is in these tiny deviations that we find the emotional logic of the age. Another document, a formal petition to the Doge regarding water rights, bears an elaborate, almost microscopic sketch of a woman’s embroidered sleeve, meticulously detailed. Below it, Alviso had written, *“Non la veste, ma la stoffa”*—Not the dress, but the texture. This wasn't merely visual appreciation; it was a scholar's acknowledgment that the most important information often lies in the sensory detail, the quality of the weave, the thing that resists generalization.

The academic impulse to categorize and formalize gives way, in the margin, to the impulse to record the irreducible particularity of an encounter. We find here the genesis of the erotic anecdote: a small, self-contained story that cannot be integrated into the grand narrative, so it is relegated to the side. These anecdotes often focus on gestures that would be invisible to the official eye.

One marginal note details the geometry of a shared goblet. The inscription reads, *“The vessel holds the wine. The hands hold the vessel. The silence holds the hands.”* This description, an almost geometrical progression of intimacy, shifts the focus from the legal or social act (drinking wine) to the hidden contract of proximity (shared silence). This is the key insight of marginal reading: the body always speaks a language distinct from the official register.

The study of glosses also provides insight into the ethics of discretion. Unlike the primary text, which is public and permanent, the gloss is inherently semi-private. It is a communication intended only for the initiated reader, or perhaps for the author himself in a moment of self-reflection. The secrecy of the margin is essential to its content; desire, when publicly proclaimed, ceases to be a subtle approach and becomes a social negotiation.

The use of Classical allusion in marginalia served as an effective veil. Alviso frequently employed references to Ovid or Catullus, not to demonstrate erudition, but to disguise emotional confessions. A brief notation of the myth of Pygmalion, written next to an inventory of marble from Carrara, clearly served as a euphemism for the longing to animate a silent, unresponsive object of affection. The scholarly reference became a safe harbor for the unsafe feeling.

This technique of academic disguise is particularly fascinating. It suggests that highly educated individuals often required the trappings of scholarship—the footnote, the citation, the learned aside—to safely express the most personal, unscholarly feelings. The act of labeling an intense personal emotion with a Latin tag somehow domesticated it, making it manageable for the intellect. The scholar could feel, provided the feeling was properly footnoted.

Emendations, too, often carry erotic weight. I encountered a fifteenth-century liturgical

manual from the Iberian Peninsula where a prayer concerning the sacred heart of Christ had been corrected. The original phrase, *“Cor nostrum ignem tui amoris ardens”* (Our heart burning with the fire of your love), had been subtly changed in the margin by a later hand to *“Cor unum alterius adamas”* (One heart drawing the other). The religious context was merely a vehicle; the emendation was a statement on mutual attraction, hijacking sacred language for secular devotion.

The beauty of the margin lies in its brevity. Unlike a lengthy letter or diary entry, the gloss demands compression, forcing the author to distill the entire emotional weight of a moment into a single word or phrase. This economy of language lends the marginalia an extraordinary poetic power. *“Fuit, fugit, manet”* (It was, it fled, it remains) is a complete narrative arc of a fleeting affair, contained entirely within the blank space beneath a notary’s seal.

The structure of the page itself dictates the geometry of desire. The central text is the authorized life, the public sphere, the marriage contract. The margin is the forbidden territory, the conversation held just out of earshot, the glance that defies the rigid line of sight. To read the margin is to grant permission to the unauthorized narrative, to admit that the most vital communication often occurs outside the formal boundaries of the document.

In some cases, the marginalia reveal not the author’s own desires, but their commentary on the desires of others. A collection of Florentine banking records from the Medici era includes detailed accounts of loans and interest. One margin, however, features a running, gossipy commentary on the spending habits of the borrowers. *“Paid ten scudi for silk stockings; poor accounting, rich heart,”* one gloss reads, offering a moral judgment framed in economic terms. The commentator understood that certain purchases were not practical, but aspirational—purchases designed to facilitate proximity.

The most valuable find in the Contarini codex, perhaps, was a series of tiny symbols that Alviso used to flag specific passages in the main text. A small, stylized wave (*unda*) indicated emotional turmoil; a closed eye (*oculus clausus*) signaled discretion or secrecy; and a tiny compass rose (*rosa ventorum*) marked a point of approach or departure. These symbols function as a personalized erotic taxonomy, mapping the ebb and flow of a relationship through the bureaucratic landscape of his daily work.

The *rosa ventorum* is particularly revealing. Placed next to entries noting a colleague’s absence from the office, it suggests that Alviso was calculating not merely the professional schedule but the opportunities for private interaction. The logistics of meeting—the planning of overlapping free time, the subtle maneuvering around professional duties—were given the same rigorous attention as any shipping manifest. Desire, in this context, becomes a problem of navigation.

We must also acknowledge the physical act of marginal writing. It requires a specific kind of focused, almost defiant attention. To write in the margin is to resist the authority of the printed word, to risk the sanctity of the page. The pen must be fine, the hand steady, the script small—a delicate, subversive act of reclamation. It is an inscription made under constraint, which often heightens the intensity of the message.

The study of textual *emendation* also applies to self-presentation. Historical figures, constrained by social norms, often presented an edited version of themselves in public records. The marginalia they left behind—in letters, ledgers, or common prayer books—served as their personal errata sheets, correcting the public performance with the private truth. The official record says, *“I am pious;”* the marginalia confesses, *“I am impatient.”*

One compelling example comes from a collection of notes ostensibly dealing with the cultivation of olive groves in Southern France. The main text is dry agronomy. The margin, however, is a treatise on touch. A note next to a passage about the necessary pruning of a vine reads: *“To remove is to prepare. The hand that removes is the hand that receives.”* The metaphor is clear: pruning is a preparation for intimacy, an act of selective removal that refines the object of attention.

The scholarly tradition of the footnote is itself a marginal practice, a concession that the main argument is incomplete without its subterranean support structure. I have adopted this structure consciously, using the footnote to house the academic rationale, the source doubts, and the theoretical scaffolding, thus keeping the main text free to unfold the narrative of proximity itself. The footnote is where the recovering scholar critiques the scenes the recovering person chooses to share.

In Alviso’s Venetian accounts, the glosses evolve over time. Initially, they are guarded, purely symbolic. As the narrative implied by the surrounding texts progresses—suggesting a sustained period of successful *Propinquitas*—the marginalia becomes bolder, more descriptive, occasionally even playful. A drawing of a ship's anchor transitions into a drawing of a knot, labeled simply, *“Rest.”* The pursuit has yielded stability, and the body’s desire has found its mooring.

This evolution confirms that the marginal text is not just a repository of isolated moments, but a parallel, continuous narrative. It is the counter-history of the self, running alongside the official curriculum of duties and deadlines. To fully understand historic intimacy, we must stop reading the central column as the complete story and start treating the margins as the necessary commentary—the place where desire, having been exiled from the main stage, finds its voice.

The most potent marginalia often deal with the ephemeral: a scent, a temperature, the momentary stillness of the air. These are elements that defy documentation in

legal or financial records, yet they are the essential building blocks of attraction. Alviso recorded only two words beneath an entry detailing the purchase of cinnamon: *“Dolce, lenta.”* Sweet, slow. This sensory entry captures an entire world of lingering, quiet attention, entirely absent from the transactional text above it.

This commitment to the fleeting detail underscores the difference between the erotic and the pragmatic archive. The erotic resides in the *qualities* that escape measurement. A contract records the quantity of silk; the margin records the feel of it. The margin, therefore, becomes the space where the body, momentarily ignored by the demands of commerce or law, quietly asserts its own, more urgent agenda.

The final entry in Alviso’s portion of the codex, before the handwriting shifts to a later clerk, is not a note or a sketch, but a single, carefully drawn line connecting a point in the main text (a date) to a point in the margin (a small, perfect circle). The circle, drawn with exquisite care, remains unlabeled, refusing interpretation. Yet, placed at the end of his known annotation, it carries the weight of a silent conclusion, suggesting completion, totality, or perhaps the sheer, unglossed simplicity of fulfillment. The scholar is left to wonder if *Propinquitas* was achieved, and if, having achieved it, the need for marginal commentary ceased. Silence, in the context of the margin, can be the loudest affirmation.

The challenge for the scholar of the erotic margin is to recognize when the gloss ceases to clarify the text and begins to correct the world. When Alviso draws intertwined fingers next to a trade agreement, he is not defining "silk;" he is defining "wealth" as that which permits such tenderness. He is performing an academic-style emendation on the social contract, inserting desire into the ledger of life. This inversion—where the peripheral dictates the meaning of the central—is the essential operation of the margins of desire.

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