

**Synopsis for the paper presented at the Freie Universität Berlin on Tuesday 10 November**

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This paper examines the ways in which erotic subjects were represented in sixteenth-century Venetian moralising engravings. The works under consideration constituted a new genre of print that emerged in the second half of the Cinquecento, during a period of increasing censorship on the printed image. The argument centres on demonstrating how such engravings consisted of moralising depictions of love and approved sexual behaviour alongside concealed representations of illicit eroticised themes. One of the earliest and most influential examples of the type was the *Proverbii*, designed by Nicolo Nelli, a prominent, albeit too little studied, Venetian engraver and publisher. The *Proverbii* is employed here as a gateway to understanding moralising prints at large, in order to establish the genre's assumed audiences, and how these audiences would likely have understood its erotic messages. The stylistic and thematic history, design, and meaning of the individual vignettes of Nelli's sheet are assessed, and the work is placed within its Venetian context, to propose, on the one hand, its intended, and at times contradictory, readings, in accordance with the education and cultural sophistication of the viewer, as much as its ostensible content. On the other hand, how such potential for the flexibility of interpretation played a defining role in ensuring the *Proverbii*'s enduring local and international popularity.