
H-France Review Vol. 22 (July 2022), No. 112

Malina Stefanovska, ed., *Casanova in the Enlightenment: From the Margins to the Centre*. UCLA Clark Memorial Library Series. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021. vii + 176 pp. Notes and index. \$63.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN: 9781487506643; \$63.00 U.S. (eb) 9781487534585.

Review by Caroline Warman, Jesus College Oxford.

This lively, readable, and wide-ranging set of studies on the iconic self-narrating Lothario suggests that he is best understood as a figure of the Enlightenment. Divided into three parts, it looks first at the theme of “Libertine Traces,” subsequently at “Emerging Sociabilities,” and finally at “Representational Shifts and Legacies.” In so doing, it reflects current approaches to Enlightenment studies more generally, although it remains the case that Casanova’s narrative continually overflows any neat discussion of Enlightenment themes. Editor Malina Stefanovska comes closest to resolving the difficulty when she states that “writing...is what brings him to the core of the Enlightenment and of his century” (p. 4). Yet the center of gravity in both the *Histoire de ma vie* and this volume remains the series of vividly related sexual encounters, and the “encyclopedic spirit” Stefanovska alludes to is of somewhat secondary importance. The tripartite structure works well nonetheless and meaningfully shifts emphasis between the different sections.

The first section, focusing on the libertine, opens with Raphaëlle Brin’s study of sexual violence and its representation, or rather, as she shows, its occultation. This is an important subject to address, not least if we want to work out how to include Casanova’s writings in our teaching; and Brin conducts a neat analysis of how Casanova repeatedly overlays nonconsent with assertions of laughter and pleasure. Even he, however, was unable to dress up the resistance of his London love object La Charpillon as anything other than rejection; enraged, he considers buying a mechanical chair that will lock her into place and ensure a successful rape. Shocked by his own drive to violence, he refrains from carrying out this shocking plan, and perhaps this restraint on his part restores him to a sense of his own moral virtue and to his self-presentation as a lover of women rather than their violator. As Brin points out, however, this lover and his reader often hover happily around “narrative complicity with sexual violence,” a complicity that will be dragged into the open “by Sade and his constant apology for violence, thereafter making any ‘pleasant’ reading impossible” (p. 33).

Strong and resistant voices are brought into the mix in Bruno Capaci’s study of the letters of three women to Casanova—his Parisian fiancée Manon Balletti; the correspondent of his final years, Cécile Roggendorff; and even that of the aforementioned Charpillon, who writes that she wishes to make him so gentle and patient that his bilious blood will turn into a clarified syrup (p.

47). Clarified syrup! Her wish clearly didn't come to pass, even if Casanova did manage to calm down enough not to rape her. How fascinating it is to hear these women speak, and to read Capaci's comparison of what they say with how Casanova presents them. It turns out that bile was one of his creative juices, which to some extent has been known for as long as people have been reading the *Histoire de ma vie*, given that, as he tells us, he undertook this writing project on the advice of the doctor at Dux as a way of treating his melancholy. But it is startling to see these women berate, encourage, and chivvy him in their real letters and then to see them minimized in the *Histoire de ma vie*, quite literally in the case of Manon: he reduced her age from her late teens to 15 years old (p. 47).

Mladen Kozul's study charts a strikingly different tack: instead of fraught relationships between male and female where the two exist in contestatory binaries, Kozul looks at the tendency of Casanovean bodies, whether male or female, to produce similar substances—blood or semen or milk—and hence to possess what he calls an “undifferentiated body.” This he sets in the context of humoralism. Casanova was intensely interested in medicine and met Albrecht von Haller and Théodore Tronchin; and his lengthy novel *Icosameron* (1788), which Stefanovska describes as “a voluminous work of utopian science fiction that narrated a journey to the centre of the earth which he published at his own expense in the hope of becoming famous” (p. 6), offers the clearest and most euphoric account of this “undifferentiated body”: siblings Edward and Elizabeth, shipwrecked, are nourished by the breastmilk of androgynous humanlike creatures Megamicres, who “defy gender differentiation. The proportions of their bodies equal human bodily proportions. They are androgynous and oviparous, eighteen inches tall, young and beautiful” (p. 57). Kissing and breastfeeding alternate, and the siblings only stop when the milk runs out and is replaced by blood. Kozul pursues his analysis through various sexual episodes of the *Histoire de ma vie* in which semen is replaced by blood or in which breastfeeding occurs to show that these are repeating motifs: his view is that despite the prevailing “vitalist conception of the body,” in the case of Casanova's writing, “humoral theory remains the key underlying model behind the processes of undifferentiation”; and further, that underlying the humoral model itself is Casanova's understanding of the exchange of pleasure, that is, in Kozul's words, his “seductive practices and representations of libidinal mechanisms” (p. 65).

Part two, “Emerging Sociabilities,” contains four studies, of which the first two, by Clorinda Donato and Malina Stefanovska, look at different sorts of networks or connections, and the second two, by Pierre Saint-Amand and Chantal Thomas, explore Casanova's relationship to Paris. Clorinda Donato gives us a Casanova who is an “erudite, socially flexible, and highly informed member of Europe's itinerant republic of letters” (p. 71). This is the study that most concertedly thinks about Casanova in relation to the Enlightenment or as a typical phenomenon thereof, and it does so very helpfully. Casanova became a freemason in 1750, and it seems as if this not only gave him a sort of entrée to every place he thereafter visited, along with ready-made connections, but it also provided or required a sort of “erudite cosmopolitan traveller” identity (p. 72) that Casanova successfully cultivated and that developed into the conversational style of the *Histoire de ma vie*. Quoting Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire, Donato explains the task of the “Casanova type”: “the foreign adventurer must stage his difference, ‘his exoticism’ without raising in the mind of his host the fear of the ‘alien’” (p. 76). She explores how he did this in various cities including Bern, providing a sketch of the Swiss city's sudden appearance on the European cultural scene in the late 1750s thanks to Haller (not only anatomist but poet, who returned there in 1757) and also because of Haller's admirer, the aristocratic historian and writer Vincenz Bernhard von Tschärner. Haller recruited Neapolitan translator and physicist Fortunato

Bartolomeo de Felice to set up Bernese periodicals, one in Latin and the other in Italian, which were published in Milan with the help of Pietro Verri and Cesare Beccaria, thereby influencing the famous journal they would later set up, *Il Caffè* (p. 79). This was the milieu that Casanova became part of when he arrived in Bern, and Donato tracks evidence of his knowledge of recent debates (albeit about the anatomy and propensities of the clitoris).

If Donato's piece is the most Enlightenment-focused in the volume, Malina Stefanovska's is the most inventive. Mercury is the guiding theme, firstly as a medicine that features in a number of his con tricks and that he himself took "at least eight times in his life" (p. 91) to cure his recurring bouts of syphilis; secondly, in its guise as quicksilver serving to characterize his quality as elusive, rapid, and witty--this is the man who escaped from prison in Venice and turned the anecdote into a *passé-partout*, the man who can insinuate himself into any space. Thirdly, Stefanovska looks at the deity Mercury. He is the god (as Wikipedia tells us when we check) of financial gain, commerce, eloquence, messages, communication, travelers, boundaries, luck, trickery, and thieves, and he looks like Casanova's tutelary spirit. Stefanovska looks at the multiple ways in which Casanova fits this profile--as a salesman and a conman, continuously moving between currencies and different forms of exchange, as a literary broker and translator (from Greek and French, from tragedy to parody or comedy), as an actual messenger, an interpreter, and an opportunist. It's a perfect fit and provides, moreover, a clever way of giving shape and sense to Casanova's endless "and then" narrative.

Pierre Saint-Amand and Chantal Thomas both conduct comparative studies of Casanova in Paris--Saint-Amand comparing Casanova's account with Rousseau's novelistic hero Saint-Preux, the latter inevitably coming across as rather dreary; and Thomas looking at Casanova's three main Parisian sojourns--"Paris in Three Movements"--to see how they differ. This is a deft piece of biography, capturing the ebullient confidence of Casanova's youth and its inexorable ebb; and after Saint-Amand's suggestive comparison with Rousseau, here we hear Thomas on the Sade-Casanova palimpsest: both invariably record the age of their libertines and how much money they have; but while Casanova is always in love, Sadean libertines avoid the L-word like the plague and will slaughter anyone infected with it.

The third and final section, "Representational Shifts and Legacies," contains Jean-Christophe Igalens's genetic analysis of the shift between the two versions of the *Histoire de ma vie*, Michel Delon's discussion of the way in which literature has engaged with Casanova's story, and Christopher B. White's study of Fellini's *Casanova*. Igalens coedited (with Erik Leborgne) the new 2013 Laffont edition of the *Histoire de ma vie*, based on the original manuscript, which was acquired by the BnF in 2010. We learn intriguingly that Casanova organized the *Histoire de ma vie* into chapters and differentiated fragments, an organization that was suppressed in previous editions. It seems from Igalens's analysis of two fragments, one from 1789-90 and the second from 1795-96, that Casanova used the fragment form, if we could call it that, to give particular emphasis to a given section. The first version contains more sketches of great men, as well as an extended critique of Louis XVI. "The most spectacular modification" (p. 130) involves the disappearance of this five-page critique from the second version, while the people now feature as "assassins" (p. 131). But there is another subtler change, "a more frequently dark tone" (p. 135). Igalens compares Casanova's account of the Venetian ambassador Mocenigo's suicide in the two versions--the first is brief, controlled, and sober, while the second describes as hapless and hilarious the way in which Mocenigo went about killing himself (p. 138). Such is the dark humor of Casanova's melancholy years.

Michel Delon examines the Casanova myth as reworked by Apollinaire, Arthur Schnitzler, and Marina Tsvetaeva in astonishing simultaneity, all at the end of the First World War (1918-19), and again by Hungarian writer Sándor Márai in 1940. He suggests that the juxtaposition of war with reinventions of the Casanova myth tells us about the loss of individual freedom amid the agonies of an ageing Europe in fearful meltdown (pp. 143-44). The last chapter in the volume, Christopher B. White's study of Fellini's *Casanova* (1976), analyses the great director's intensely hostile portrayal of the libertine writer as a desperate and humiliated man, the nightmarish depiction not so much of someone who never managed to grow up as of someone who never even managed to be born. White tells the story of the film's creation, and it emerges that Fellini only read the *Histoire de ma vie* after signing the contract, and then found he hated it so much he couldn't bear to finish it, claiming it was "more tedious and depressing than a phone book" (p. 152). He produced a dark and somber film, with "muted colours, heavy shadow, and bitter symbolic environments consisting of dark water, ice, and wind" (p. 152), that repeated elements from elsewhere in his *œuvre*, notably his rendering of fascists as stunted adolescents in *Amarcord*, while multiplying the grotesque or absurd aspects present in Casanova's work. On this sober, even sinister note, the volume ends.

Casanova in the Enlightenment: From the Margins to the Centre is a slim volume, only 176 pages; and yet, like a magic paper flower, it unfurls and extends in surprising ways. I learned a great deal from it. One of the things I learned was that there are various characters and episodes that are staples of Casanova discussion. The French woman Henriette, who was masquerading as a soldier when Casanova met her; La Charpillon, she of the clarified syrup and the rape chair; and Crébillon *père*, who told him he could only get so far by charming everyone with his Italianate French and proceeded to give him French lessons for a year--these are the three who recur most frequently across the different essays, along with the two nuns known as M.M. and the second M.M. coming next. The embarrassing moment when Casanova describes a woman as "une grosse cochonne" to her husband also features more than once. I wondered why these particular anecdotes, in among so many thousands of pages, should repeatedly draw these scholars' attention. Perhaps it is as simple as that they are the most characterful episodes, that they rapidly became famous, and that given the amount of writing on Casanova that does address them, it is impossible not to mention them, in the same way that work on Rousseau's *Confessions* almost always refers to the ribbon-stealing episode?

But if we're going to say that these episodes are the most characterful or vivid, it would be interesting to read a discussion of what "characterful" or "vivid" means in this context. This brings me to my final point. On opening this volume, I wondered whether it would serve as a good introductory set of essays for students wishing to embark on reading Casanova. I think my final answer is that it wouldn't. It would sit very well alongside introductions, and serve to expand various aspects; but it doesn't introduce Casanova and his works to the neophyte. At the most basic level, it lacks a bibliography. Each chapter has endnotes but there are no chapter bibliographies or any collective one at the end, as one might have expected. This makes it a bit harder to navigate let alone use as a springboard. While I'm on the hunt for flaws, I might perhaps mention that not all the essays read as naturally in English as they might. However, it is churlish to dwell on such features, and the truth is that this is a volume of strong and accessible essays that does what its editor sets out to achieve, that is, to rectify the fact that anglophone scholarship has not yet really caught up with the renewed understanding of Casanova and his writings that the new editions with Laffont and Gallimard Pléiade offer us. Here it catches up, and it opens many doors.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Malina Stefanovska, "Introduction"

Raphaëlle Brin, "'Triompher par la force': Sexual Violence and Its Representation in Casanova's *History of My Life*"

Bruno Capaci, "The Writer of Dux: Casanova's Dialogue with His Ladies from Autobiography to Correspondence"

Mladen Kozul, "Casanova and the Undifferentiated Body"

Clorinda Donato, "Negotiating Sociabilities in Casanova's *History of My Life*"

Malina Stefanovska, "Casanova, Mercury, Mercurio"

Pierre Saint-Amand, "Casanova, the Love of Paris"

Chantal Thomas, "Paris in Three Movements"

Jean-Christophe Igalens, "Rewriting, Revolution, Melancholy: Two Versions of the First Stay in Paris"

Michel Delon, "Casanova: From Man to Myth"

Christopher B. White, "*Fellini's Casanova: The Story of a Man Who Was Never Born*"

Caroline Warman

Jesus College Oxford

Caroline.Warman@Jesus.ox.ac.uk

Copyright © 2022 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172