H-France Review Vol. 23 (February 2023), No. 25

Leo Damrosch, *Adventurer: The Life and Times of Giacomo Casanova*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2022. vii + 422 pp. 34 color + 49 b-w illus. $35.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-300-24828-9.

Review by James H. Johnson, Boston University.

Giacomo Casanova was a consummate actor with a rare gift for playing to his audience, a talent that took him to the highest reaches of eighteenth-century society. To his contemporaries, he was known principally as a writer, translator, and playwright. Uncommonly curious about the world, he traveled roughly 40,000 miles during his life on foot, in carriages, and on ships. In one remarkable year, he visited some twenty-six cities. He met privately with Pope Clement XIII, Winckelmann, and Voltaire. Describing his conversation with Frederick the Great at Sans Souci, Casanova confided that he imitated Italian *commedia* players when asked about national tax policies. "I answered the proud King," he wrote in *History of My Life*, "assuming the financier's arrogance and adjusting my expression to match. I had to take my time, for I was making it up." [1]

Tall, olive-skinned, and agile, Casanova possessed an appeal that attracted both men and women. Giustiniana Wynne, daughter to the British ambassador in Casanova's native Venice, described him as vain, unbearable, and, once he began to speak, irresistible.[2] Among his set-pieces was a two-hour retelling of his escape from the "Leads," the boiling-hot prison just under the roof of the Ducal Palace. While some were convinced of his intellect—French officials, for instance, briefly put into place his idea of a national lottery to supplement the treasury—he was despised by others as a swindler, cardsharp, atheist, spy, and traitor.

For better or worse, Casanova's legacy has narrowed to consist primarily of his sexual exploits. The writer Barbey d'Aurevilly called him the life-force incarnate, a man with "the horn of plenty in his pants." [3] In a letter, D. H. Lawrence wrote: "I tried reading C. but he smells. One can be immoral if one likes, but one must not be a creeping, itching, fingering, inferior being, led on chiefly by a duty, a sniffing kind of curiosity, without pride or cleanness of soul…I will treat these battered volumes as gingerly as such *crotte* deserves." [4]

Long before the first unexpurgated edition of the memoirs was published in 1960, the work was considered scandalous. Earlier excerpts were put on the Index in 1830, banned in Italy in 1930, and seized by police in Detroit in 1934.

Casanova's *History of My Life* indeed contains many distressing scenes, most often conveyed with

relish. He has sex with a stranger who falls onto him when their carriage overturns in an accident. He pays an impoverished mother to have sex with her eleven-year-old and then continues with the girl's twelve-year-old sister. He has sex with his own daughter, fathered with a former mistress. He comments that he has never understood how a father could truly love his daughter "without having slept with her at least once." In Russia, he buys a thirteen-year-old serf for sex.

During Venetian carnival, he and six highborn friends spot an attractive woman in a wine-shop and take her to an inn, where they remove their masks, drink wine, and one-by-one pay their "amorous duty." It was a "prank," Casanova writes, and they were still laughing when they left her.[6] The complaint her husband filed with the authorities was especially hilarious, he adds: everyone knew the Tribunal would never punish a nobleman. By my reckoning, across the roughly 3,000 pages of his memoirs Casanova detailed his sexual encounters on average every thirty pages.

Leo Damrosch stays close to the events and often the tone of the memoirs in *Adventurer: The Life and Times of Giacomo Casanova*. His reasons for writing a new book on the man when so many have already been written owe in part to the Bibliothèque Nationale's acquisition of the original manuscript of the *History* in 2010, which contains legible excisions, alternate drafts of chapters, and pasted-in afterthoughts. Damrosch makes astute use of this resource without slowing the pace of his narrative. A recent discovery has also permitted him to be the first to publish a letter from Casanova to his nephew Carlo, an insulting blast that reveals the volcanic temper of this "most affectionate uncle, Giacomo" (p. 347). Damrosch will reach a wide readership with this lively, rich, and readable biography.

The larger aim of the book, as with his earlier treatments of Rousseau, Tocqueville, Swift, and Samuel Johnson's circle, is to enhance a vivid retelling of the life and context with contemporary scholarly opinion. In many ways, Damrosch's Casanova was in the vanguard of the Enlightenment. He was a deist, opponent of "superstition," and sensualist who aligned pleasure with morality. Damrosch is right, too, to point to his underlying social and political conservatism. While a freethinker in private matters, Casanova was not anticlerical. He expressed deep reservations as well about the French Revolution.

How to write a biography of Casanova after the #MeToo movement? Damrosch acknowledges that Casanova's career was "often disturbing and sometimes very dark," and he often comments harshly on his subject's actions. He calls out Casanova's selfishness, brutishness, and violence, and observes that he seldom considered what sexual encounters meant to the other person. It was "unquestionably a gang rape," Damrosch writes of the carnival assault. He periodically questions the term most associated with Casanova. "Most of his seductions were indeed conquests," he concludes near the end of the book (p. 345). Yet in this context, "conquest" suggests a success. Rather than a seducer, Casanova was most often a predator.

Damrosch regularly describes Casanova's encounters with women as the natural expression of a man living wholly in the moment. "All his life," Damrosch writes, "he would seek not just sex, but this intoxicating fullness of being" (p. 70). Elsewhere he comments that "Casanova saw sex at its best as transcendent, virtually a religious experience" (p. 166). Casanova may well have explained his encounters to himself in these terms, but it's worth asking how much self-justification in the writing or remembering was also involved. In his memoirs, for instance, Casanova claimed to have loved every woman he bedded. He also described his leave-taking as

the effect of larger forces. "It seemed to me that I must let her go," he wrote after a typical encounter, "in order to make room for others whom heaven had determined for me." [7]

The necessary sympathy good biographers have for their subject occasionally leads Damrosch into questionable claims. "Women would always be moved by how much he truly wanted them" (p. 79). "Women were always enchanted by Casanova's unfeigned admiration" (p. 100). Casanova's repeated claims of mutual satisfaction were "not just self-serving in an obvious way; they reflect a considered philosophy in which pleasure was an end in itself and permanent relationships were a trap" (p. 55). Not all readers will find the applications of this philosophy defensible.

By sticking close to the memoirs, Damrosch has produced a compelling and colorful narrative. A wider scope would include the less familiar aspects of his life and bring readers closer to how Casanova's contemporaries knew him. He was the author of more than forty books, including works on canon and civil law, a tragedy, and comedies that were performed in Dresden and London. He wrote on calendar reform and canal construction. He recast Racine's tragedy *La Thébaïde* as a farce with *commedia dell'arte* characters, and wrote a quasi-philosophical play about slander and deception called *The Polemoscope*. Among his polemics was a work denouncing adventurers.

Casanova's life plays to Damrosch's strengths as a biographer. Contrasting him with Rousseau, who dropped out of society, Damrosch describes his particular kind of freedom, which came from exploiting society from within. Unlike Jean-Jacques, he observes, Casanova had no interest in confessing. Casanova lived "like a parasite," he writes, "or like a virus against which [society] had no adequate immune system." (p. 10) This book amply portrays the unending opportunities this adventurer devised. It reminds us as well of the costs of such unapologetic freedom.

NOTES

[1] Giacomo Casanova, *History of My Life*, trans. Willard R. Trask, 12 vols (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1966), 10:69.

[2] See J. Rives Childs, *Casanoviana: An Annotated World Bibliography of Jacques Casanova de Seingalt and of Works Concerning Him* (Vienna: C. M. Nebehay, 1956), 368.

[3] Quoted in Joseph Pollio, "Introduction," Jacques Casanova, *La Messager de Thalie* (Paris: Jean Fort, 1925), 33.

[4] Quoted in Childs, *Casanoviana*, 297.

[5] Casanova, *History of My Life*, 7:229.

[6] Ibid., 2:188-190.

[7] Ibid., 9:121.

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ISSN 1553 - 9172