Casanova: The World of a Seductive Genius

Laurence Bergreen
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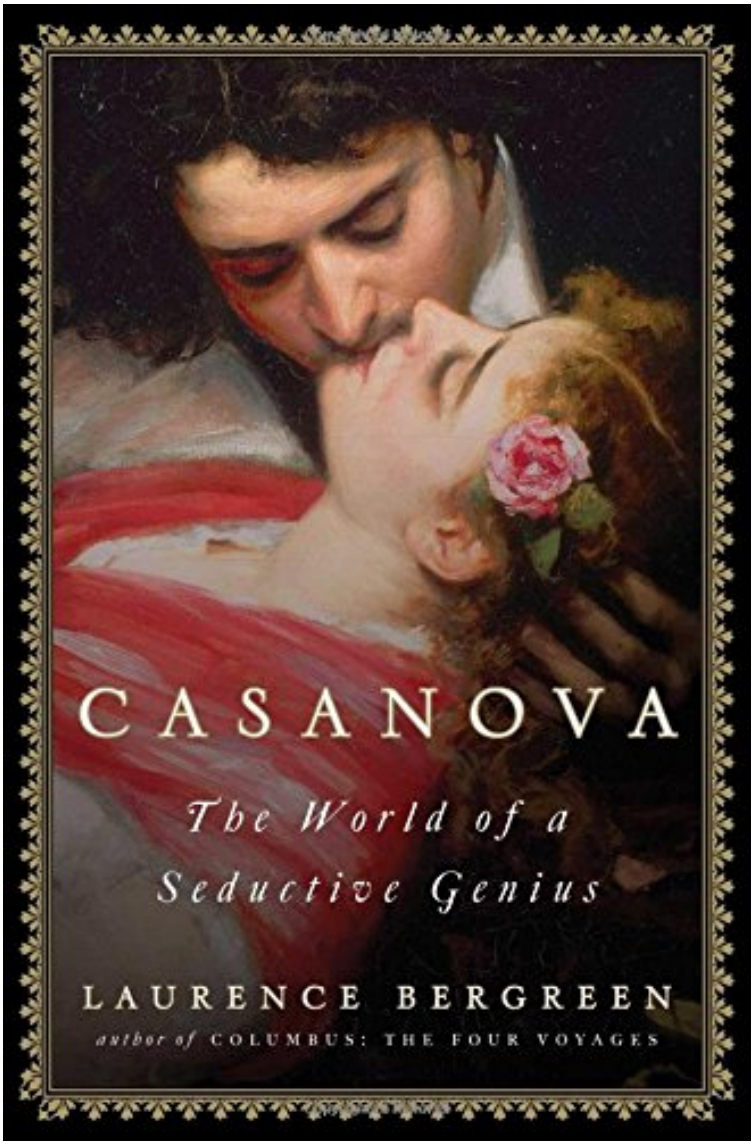

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Laurence Bergreen : Casanova: The World of a Seductive Genius before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Casanova: The World of a Seductive Genius:

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The definitive biography of the impoverished child, abandoned by his parents, who became the famous writer, notorious libertine, and self-invented genius whose name still resonates today: Giacomo Casanova.Today, Casanova is a synonym for great lover, yet the real story of this remarkable figure is little known. Giacomo Casanova was raised by his maternal grandmother, an illiterate peasant. His birthplace, Venice, was a republic in decline, reputedly the most debauched city in Europe. Casanova would add to the republics reputation. Over the course of his lifetime, he claimed to have seduced more than 100 women, among them married women, young women in convents, girls just barely in their teens, and in one notorious instance, his own illegitimate daughter. Casanova came of age in a Venice filled with spies and informers. Naturally brilliant, he was intellectually curious and read forbidden books, for which he was jailed. He staged a dramatic escape from Venices notorious prison, the only person known to have done so. He then fled to France, where he invented the national lottery that still exists to this day. But, intemperate by nature, he made enemies at the French court. He crisscrossed Europe, landing for a while in St. Petersburg, where he was admitted to the court of Catherine the Great. He corresponded with Voltaire and met Mozart and Lorenzo da Ponteassisting them as they composed the timeless opera Don Giovanni. And he wrote what many consider the greatest memoir of the era, the 12-volume Story of My Life. A figure straight out of a Henry Fielding novel: erotic, brilliant, impulsive, and desperate for recognition, Casanova was a self-destructive genius. This witty, roisterous biography exposes his astonishing life in rich, intimate detail. At the same time, it is a dazzling portrait of eighteenth-century Europe from serving girls to kings and courtiers. Esteemed biographer Laurence Bergreen brings a sensual world vividly alive in this irresistible book.

Casanova is a brilliant account of the life, adventures and tribulations of this 18th-century Venetian adventurer and author. To all those who seem to think sex was invented in their lifetime, I suggest they take a look back in time and see if they cant learn a thing or two from a true master. (Dr. Ruth Westheimer, Author of The Doctor Is In: Dr. Ruth on Love, Life and Joie de Vivre)"Sexy, surprising, funny, insightful, and wildly entertaining." (The Huffington Post)Few readers of Laurence Bergreens new biography, Casanova: The World of a Seductive Genius, will emerge from it wholly disapproving of this remarkable man. . . . His saving graces included limitless curiosity, resilience and joie de vivre, as he bounced shamelessly from one misadventure to the next. (Anthony Gottlieb The New York Times Book)Laurence Bergreens lively new biography Casanovaleaves no detail unmentioned as he chronicles the life of the 18th-century erotic legend. (Seattle Times)Casanova's adventures include plenty of juicy details, and Bergreen weaves in just enough to prove his reputation. . . . Great fun for any history lover. (Kirkus s)[Bergreen] conveys much of his subjects charm in this retelling of many seductions. . . . Readers will enjoy the bold characterization and fascinating social history of eighteenth-century Europe. (Booklist)About the AuthorLaurence Bergreen is an award-winning biographer and historian. His books have been translated into twenty-five languages worldwide. Among his books are biographies of Christopher Columbus, Giacomo Casanova, Marco Polo, Ferdinand Magellan, Louis Armstrong, Al Capone, and Irving Berlin. He lives in New York City.Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.Casanova Chapter 1 Zanetta Of all the women in Giacomo Casanovas life, his flamboyant, elusive mother, Zanetta Farussi, came first. She was known to the public by her stage name, La Buranella, a tribute to her ancestral home in the Venetian lagoons cheerful miniature island of Burano, dotted with houses daubed with fuchsia, teal, yellow, green, lime, olive, and other whimsical hues. From her, Casanova imbibed a beguiling blend of artifice, whimsy, and deception. The daughter of a cobbler, Zanetta transformed herself into a fted actress and courtesan, the heroine of a fairy tale for adults. She came into the world on August 27, 1707, the illegitimate daughter of Girolamo Farussi and the widowed Marzia Baldissara, and was baptized on September 4 at the ancient Church of San Giacomo dellOrio, in the center of Venice. Within months, the little family settled in the Parish of San Simeone Grande, and on January 31, 1709, her father and mother married, and moved again, this time to the Calle delle Muneghe, a crowded, boisterous conduit in the Parish of San Samuele. That winter was reportedly the coldest in five hundred years. The Venetian lagoon became a block of ice. Livestock perished, combs of chickens froze and fell off, burst in the frigid air, and travelers perished. Famine was ubiquitous. Venetians endured, as always. Much of the stage-struck Venetian populace found employment as hairdressers, ticket takers, singing and acting coaches, stagehands, and lighting specialists. Their ranks swelled with the stage-door Johnnies, hangers-on, and would-be performers. Playwrights yearning for attention read their scripts to indifferent listeners, and secret admirers of actresses maneuvered to peek at their idols. Carlo Goldoni, a Venetian student studying for the priesthood, tried his hand at adapting Greek and Roman comedies for the stage, and he transformed the improvised knockabout comedy known as commedia dellarte. Audiences felt thoroughly at home with the genres stock figuresPantalone, Pulcinella, Columbinaand their madcap routines. Everyone knew what Harlequin would say before the words were out of his mouth, so Goldoni gave characters new words. Actors came to rely on his dialogue and stage directions. To feed the hunger for novelty, he cobbled together his scripts in a matter of days. Copyrights and royalties were unknown. When Goldoni delivered sixteen full-length plays to his manager in one

season, he collected no bonus for his effortsNot a penny over the years salary, nothing at all. He did receive plenty of praise, but, he observed, one needs more than glory to live on. Amid the ferment, a young actor named Gaetano Casanova became enamored of an actress known as La Fragolettaa diminutive of strawberry. In reality, this voluptuous creature was Giovanna Benozzi. In about 1713, Gaetano abandoned his native Parma to join her in Venice, where she managed two theaters, San Luca and San Samuele, on behalf of the powerful Grimani dynasty. Much later, Giacomo claimed that hed heard that Gaetano, his father, had begun his career as a dancer, and later turned to acting, becoming even more highly regarded for his probity than for his talenta tactful way of saying that he lacked aptitude. Something went awry with Gaetanos pursuit of La Fragoletta, and she fled to Paris with another theater troupe. Remaining behind in Venice, Gaetano became a fixture at the Theatre San Samuele, performing in farces and pantomimes and lodging at the Calle degli Orbi in a house owned by shoemakers who rented rooms to actors. In Giacomos telling, the little household included Girolamo Farussi, his wife, Marzia, and their sixteen-year-old daughter, Zanetta. Gaetano fell in love with Zanetta in 1723, and immediately met resistance. Being an actor, Giacomo explained in his memoirs, [Gaetano] could not hope to obtain her by gaining the consent of Marzia her mother, still less that of Girolamo her father, who thought an actor an abomination. When Girolamo died the following year, Marzia salvaged the right to live out her life in the Calle delle Muneghe in a house owned by a charity, and the chief obstacle to the union of Zanetta and Gaetano was removed. On February 27, 1724, they wed in the Church of San Samuele. In Casanovas heightened rendition, the lovers eloped, with Marzia protesting loudly, and her father dying of grief shortly after the marriage, not before. In less operatic reality, the newlyweds moved in with Marzia, Gaetanos widowed mother-in-law, who welcomed their companionship and honorable arrangement. For a time, life was as normal as could be for a couple of struggling young actors in Venice. Gaetano kept his job at the theater and Zanetta occasionally took on small roles, despite her vow to renounce the theater after her marriage. The lively young soubrette caught the eye of the theaters owner, Michele Grimani, who belonged to one of the ruling families of Venice, a tightly knit caste of about four hundred families. This was an august personage indeed. Gossip about their carrying on never ceased, especially when Zanetta became pregnantin all likelihood by Gaetano. Casanova writes that he was born of this marriage nine months later, on April 2, 1725, and was baptized three days later. So ran his official account of his origins. In his declining years, he revisited the subject of his paternity by writing and publishing a long satirical account, N amore, n donne, claiming that Michele Grimani, not the beleaguered Gaetano Casanova, was his true father. So much of Casanovas identity and legacy as the gallant, seductive, learned seducer, is bound up in the enigma of his paternity. If his father was indeed the humble, good-natured actor from Parma, the flamboyant persona his son fashioned for himself was one of the most successful and sustained acts of self-invention of the era, a lifelong performance that outdid anything either of his parents could have imagined. But if his father was the aristocratic Grimani, his parents could never wed. Venetian nobility frequently had children out of wedlock even as the rules of their society barred marriage to outsiders. If Giacomo Casanova was actually Grimanis illegitimate son, he joined a large but unacknowledged class of children, and Zanettas marriage served to cover her indiscretion. Either way, the child would always be an outcast, denied access to the rigid, privileged world of Venetian nobility. So long as he stayed in Venice, he would be reminded of his lack of status on a daily basis. Was he an illegitimate prince or a pauper? This identity crisis animated, teased, and tormented him throughout the years. He would spend his life trying to cajole and on occasion force his way into the circle from which he believed hed been excluded. Restless and ambitious, Zanetta brought herself to the attention of Goldoni, who modeled himself on the great French comic voice of the previous century, Molire. But this was Italy. In France, a theater director once advised him, you can try to please the public, but here in Italy it is the actors and actresses whom you must consult. That was as true in life as it was onstage; in Venice, personalities prevailed over customs, and among the most alluring whom Goldoni encountered was Zanetta. She struck him as beautiful and very talented, and won a singing part in his musical interludes, charming audiences with her taste, perfect ear, and execution. While on tour in London, Zanetta gave birth to her second child, Francesco, in 1727. Giacomo was the child she left behind in Venice; Francesco the infant she kept at her side in London. He became her favorite, the one most likely to succeed in life. And what of Giacomo? He slipped into the role of the forgotten, inconvenient offspring. Yet this least-loved, cast-off child became the most famous lover in modern times, as well as a mathematical and literary genius. And Francesco? He became an esteemed artist in his day; his fame far surpassed that of his scapegrace older brother. As he grew into adulthood, Giacomo became familiar with the outlines of his mothers theatrical career, and her attempt to forge her own identity; she bequeathed to her son the drive to create his own. Years later, he traveled to London and Dresden and Prague, the cities where she had lived and loved and performed, as if trying to capture her faded glory. Wherever he went, he sought his young mothers face, arms, lips, eyes, and scent in every lover he encountered. In his mind, they were all manifestations of Zanetta, so he seduced them into seducing him. The story of how this disadvantaged ugly duckling metamorphosed into the sleek Venetian swan known as Casanova is remarkable. As a child he never spoke, and was considered something of an imbecile, destined for anonymity. Giacomo, who eventually wrote twelve volumes of memoirs recalling people and events of his life in exquisite and engaging detail, maintained he had no memories of the first eight years of his life. In August 1733, everything changed as his organ of memory developed. And behold: I was standing in the corner of a room, leaning

against the wall, holding my head, and staring at the blood that was streaming to the floor from my nose. My grandmother Marzia, whose pet I was, came to me, washed my face with cold water, and, unknown to anyone in the house, boarded a gondola and took me to Murano. This is a densely populated island about half an hour from Venice. Leaving the gondola, we enter a hovel, where we find an old woman sitting on a pallet, with a black cat in her arms and five or six others around her. She was a witch. Marzia conversed with the witch in the Friulian dialect, incomprehensible to Giacomo, and gave her a silver ducat, whereupon she opened a chest, took me up in her arms, put me into it, shut it, and locked the lid on me, telling me not to be afraid. As he lay in the darkness, holding a handkerchief to his bloody nose, he listened to alternate laughter and weeping, cries, singing, and sundry thumps on the chest. The witch rescued him, and subjected him to numberless caresses. She then wrapped him in a sheet, recited incantations, released him, and finally gave him food, then resumed caressing him with a soothing unguent, and dressed him as she cautioned that his bleeding would diminish so long as he told no one about this treatment. Otherwise, he would bleed to death. Ultimately, a charming lady would visit him, and his happiness would depend upon her. He went home with his grandmother, and at that point, I saw, or thought I sawhe added carefullya dazzlingly beautiful woman come down by the chimney... with a crown on her head with a profusion of stones that seemed to be sparkling with fire. She sat on his bed, and opened several small boxes. After delivering a long discourse, of which I understood nothing, and kissing me, she left as she had entered. At the time Giacomo never spoke to anyone of this mystical incident. He kept it sealed in the most secret corner of my budding memory, to be opened years later, when he wrote his memoirs. It was his first and most powerful recollection, his origin myth, telling of the frail, suffering Giacomo brought back to health by a benign, ravishing woman. The remedies for the worst diseases are not always found in pharmacy, he advised; they might be found in the furthest reaches of the cosmos, or the heart. Despite this manifestation of a feminine sensuality that both saved his life and revived his hibernating intellect, he remained more of a skeptic than a mystic. There have never been wizards on this earth, he explained, only those able to cajole [others] into believing them as such. After the treatment Giacomo appeared as hopeless as before, very poor company, in his words. People felt sorry for me and left me alone; everyone supposed I would not live long. My mother and father never spoke to me. Nevertheless, he miraculously came to life. The bleeding subsided. His mind began to churn, and in less than a month I learned to read. With intellect came deception. Three months later, Giacomo remembered with a shudder, he and his younger brother Francesco were observing their father, having given up acting, at work in his opticians studio. On the table I noticed a large round crystal cut in facets. How enchanting to hold it to his eyes and behold everything multiplied. The next moment, seeing that no one was watching me, I seized the opportunity to slip it into my pocket. As his father searched for the valuable object, Francesco truthfully claimed he knew nothing about it, and Giacomo falsely claimed the same thing. Gaetano threatened to beat the culprit. Young Giacomo made a show of searching for the crystal before transferring it to the pocket of his unsuspecting brother. I was instantly sorry, he admitted, but the crime was already committed. My father, exasperated by our fruitless efforts, searches us, finds the crystal in my innocent brothers pocket, and inflicts the promised punishment. Giacomo couldnt hold his tongue: Three or four years later I was stupid enough to boast to my brother that I had played this trick on him. He has never forgiven me and has taken every opportunity to avenge himself. Francesco would be the first of many men to take Giacomo to task. Six weeks later, a far greater disaster occurred. In Giacomos telling, My father was attacked by an abscess inside his head at the level of the ear, which brought him to the grave in a week. The remedies applied by a physician only made matters worse. Two days before he died, Gaetano summoned his family and closest friends; their ranks included Signor Grimani, the Venetian nobleman reported to be Zanettas lover. Gaetano made them vow to protect his children, and as tears flowed, asked for more. He made our mother, who dissolved in tears, swear that she would bring none of his children up for the stage, on which he would never have appeared if he had not been driven to it by an unfortunate passion.... She took the oath. Zanetta, who needed the income from her stage career to feed her children, was six months pregnant. She never remarriedbeautiful and young as she was, she refused her hand to all who sued for it. As for Giacomo, I was extremely weak, had no appetite, was unable to apply myself to anything, and looked like an idiot. He was still losing copious amounts of blood, more, it seemed to his family, than his small body could produce. Doctors arrived, grim-faced; one advised him to breathe with an open mouth to keep his lungs full. A friend of his father, a poet and aristocrat by the name of Signor Baffo, determined that the boy should be sent to Padua for treatment and to whom, in consequence, I owe my life. A priest known to the family located a boardinghouse in Padua for the boy. On April 2, 1734, the day on which I completed my ninth year, I was taken to Padua in a burchiello, which, he explained, may be considered a small floating house. It has a saloon with a cabin at either end, and quarters for servants at the bow and stern. They served as floating parties, and inspired an outpouring of literary appreciation. Goldoni, Byron, Goethe, Montaigne, and eventually Casanova all wrote in praise of the vessels. The journey over water lasted through the night. At dawn, his mother opened a window that was across from the bed, so that the rays of the rising sun falling on my face made me open my eyes. And when he did, he glimpsed a parade of trees slowly moving past. Oh! My dear mother! I cried, what does this mean? The trees are walking. As bystanders laughed at the poor child, she explained, It is the boat that is moving, and not the trees. Get dressed. Venetian post barge, or burchiello, by Giandomenico TiepoloBeginning to exercise his reason, he decided that it was possible the sun does not

move, and that it is we who turn from West to East. Zanetta, impatient, cries out at such stupidity, Signor Grimani pities my lack of intelligence, and I am completely taken aback and on the verge of tears. In contrast, Signor Baffo assures him, You are right my child. The sun does not move, take courage, always reason logically, and let people laugh. Deeply suspicious of such radical advice, Zanetta asked the aristocrat if he was out of his mind, to which he replied with a theory adapted to my simple, unspoiled reason. The affirmation of the power of reason meant a great deal to the afflicted child: This was the first real pleasure I enjoyed in my life. At last they came to Padua, less than thirty miles from Venice. Padua maintained close ties to Venice but at the same time, it was a world away. Those who desired to escape the confines and perpetual penumbra of Venice sought the sun-splashed open spaces of Padua. Venice was a stronghold of commerce, combat, and mysticism; Padua a center of faith and learning. Its massive Basilica Pontificia di SantAntonio di Padova drew pilgrims from across Europe who came to worship at the burial site of Anthony of Padua, il Santo, venerated as a teacher, and canonized just a year after his death in 1231, at the age of thirty-five. Founded in 1222 as a school of law, the University of Padua had enjoyed a reputation as one of the most influential and largest institutions of its kind in Europe. Any Venetian seeking an education went there because Venice itself, for all its palaces, churches, theaters, and workshops, had no university. Over time, the universitys school of law expanded, and a school of medicine opened. The anatomical theater attracted both physicians and artists to study dissections. The universitys botanical garden claimed to be the oldest academic facility of its kind. Nicolaus Copernicus studied medicine at the university. Galileo Galilei held the chair of mathematics from 1592 until 1610. The place hummed with students, their debates, intellectual ferment, and protests. Slowly, young Giacomo began to flourish. After his mother left, he stayed briefly at the home of a family friend named Ottaviani, whose wife gave me many caresses. The five or six Ottaviani children promised to end his years of isolation. Regrettably, his stay there was brief. He was soon assigned to the home of an old Slavonian woman who lived fifty paces away and viewed her young lodger as a convenient source of income. The pain of that moment still fresh in his mind seven decades later, he recalled his arrival at her boardinghouse: My little trunk was opened in her presence and she was given an inventory of all that it contained. She demanded and received payment in advance for six months. For just six zecchini she was to feed me, keep me clean and neat, and send me to school. She protested that the amount wasnt enough to care for him, but none of his relatives heeded her. I was kissed, told always to obey her in everything, and left standing where I was. So they got rid of me. The Slavonian landlady escorted him to his assigned bed in the attic, the last in a row with four others, three of which belonged to boys of my own age, who were then at school, and the fourth to the maidservant, who was charged with making us say our prayers and keeping an eye on us to prevent us from indulging in the mischief and lewdness usual among schoolboys. Amid these stark new surroundings, the innocent boy felt numb, neither happy nor unhappy; I said nothing; I experienced neither hope nor despair nor even curiosity. His landlady repelled him. Her masculine features unnerved me every time I raised my eyes to her face to listen to what she was saying to me. Her black hair, sallow complexion, bushy eyebrows turned his heart to ice; he could not avert his gaze from the horrid little hairs springing from her chin. Her breasts were hideous, half-exposed and hung, with a great cleft between them, halfway down her tall body. At the midday meal, I sat down at the table and, seeing a wooden spoon before me, I push it away and demand my silver service, which I cherished as a present from grandmother, but it was denied him. He had to conform to the other boys while under the landladys roof. Equality was her watchword, so he ate his soup as the others did, straight from the tureen, as if they were scarcely better than hogs at a feeding trough. The revolting soup was replaced by tough dried cod and an applenothing more. It was the season of Lent, they were reminded, and that meant they were denied even cups. Everyone drank from the same clay jug containing grappa, the residue of boiled grape stemsnot even the grapes themselves. And then it was time to meet his teacher, a priest by the name of Antonio Maria Gozzi, destined to spend the entirety of his career in posts near Padua. Giacomos landlady paid the priest a pittance to instruct the new arrival. Dr. Gozzi was all of twenty-six, in Giacomos estimation, plump, modest, and ceremoniously polite. At nine, Giacomo appeared decidedly slow, so Dr. Gozzi placed him with five-year-olds learning to write. The children at once fell to jeering me. Supper proved even more disgusting and meager than the midday meal, and then it was time for bed, and fresh horrors: Three notorious insects would not let me shut my eyes. Rats scampered across the floor and jumped onto his bed, filling me with fear that froze my blood. From his suffering, Giacomo drew a moral: Thus did I begin to learn what it is to be unhappy and to bear misfortune patiently. Meanwhile, the insects that were devouring me lessened the terror that the rats inspired, and my terror in turn made me less conscious of the insect bites. My soul profited from the competition between my afflictions. When a few rays of morning sunshine pierced the gloom of the attic, Giacomo rose from his nest of vermin. The maid appeared, the boy complained of his agonies, and requested a fresh shirt, since the one I wore was hideous with the stains from the lice. There would be no fresh linen for him, not this morning, only on Sundays. He threatened to protest to the slovenly, callous landlady, and the maid responded with peals of laughter at his predicament. I heard my companions mocking me. They were in the same state I was; but they were accustomed to it. Giacomo dozed during the morning lessons until Dr. Gozzi took it upon himself to see what was wrong. In private, the boy told him of his miseries, and examined the angry welts on his young flesh. With that he marched the boy to the boardinghouse, confronted the landlady, who blamed the maid, who in turned blamed the infestation on the landlady. Gozzi discovered that the beds were all just as

vile. The landlady responded by slapping the maid; then the maid slapped the landlady and stormed off, as the priest sternly lectured the Slavonian landlady that Giacomo could not return to class until she saw to it that he was as clean as the other pupils. When the priest departed, Giacomo received a violent scolding. If he ever made a fuss over nothing again, she warned, she would throw him out of the boardinghouse. I felt completely bewildered, he said. But he got a fresh shirtflung in his faceand shortly after that the maida new onechanged his grimy sheets. His living situation settled for the moment, Giacomo applied himself to his studies. A congenial instructor, Dr. Gozzi had me sit at his own table, where, to convince him that I deserved the distinction, I applied myself to studying with all my power. By months end, I was writing so well that he set me to grammar. He rapidly matured physically no less than intellectually, and began to thrive. The new life I was leading, the hunger I was forced to endure, and above all, the air of Padua brought me such health as I had never conceived of before. No longer sickly, he embarked on a growth spurt. His rude health was accompanied by a new torment: I was as ravenous as a dog. When he finally ate, he sleptnine hours of the deepest sleep untroubled by any dreamsexcept for one, in which he was satisfying my cruel appetite. To supplement the food he received at the lodging house, Giacomo resolved to steal and swallow anything edible I could lay my hands on when I was sure I was not being observed. He devoured fifty smoked herring; quantities of raw sausage; freshly laid eggs, still warmall exquisite food. He even stole from Dr. Gozzis pantry. Nevertheless, he remained as thin as a skeleton, mere skin and bones. He made rapid intellectual progress, filling his mind no less than his belly. Within six months, Dr. Gozzi appointed him as proctor, or monitor, of the other students. He tried to be strict, but, he admitted, his charges learned to win his favor and soften his judgment with little bribes of roast chickens and cutlets and often gave me money, all of which had the effect of turning him, in his own description, into a tyrant who withheld approval unless he received the appropriate inducement. The students whom he had extorted banded together to denounce him to the very same Dr. Gozzi who had recently come to his rescue. The priest relieved Giacomo of his duties as proctor, but, continuing to see the possibility of good in him, proposed a scheme to free the lad from the horrid Slavonian landlady and board instead with him. All he had to do was write to Signor Baffo and his mother to petition them to make the change. But his mercurial mother was busy pursuing her acting and love life, and so he substituted his good grandmother. He described all my sufferings for her, and prophesied my death if I were not rescued from the clutches of the Slavonian woman and put to board with my schoolmaster, who was willing to take me but who asked two zecchini a month. Grimani rebuffed the boy, but his beloved, illiterate grandmother, hearing about the contents of the letter, tracked him down in his wretched Slavonian lair. As soon as I saw her I flung myself on her neck, unable to hold back my tears, which she instantly joined. He showed her his paltry meal and detestable bed. He had suffered here for six months! The Slavonian landlady bluntly informed Marzia that, given the small amount of money his family paid, this was the best she could do. It was true, Casanova recalled, but who obliged her to keep a boardinghouse and so become the murderess of boys whom avarice put in her care? Giacomos grandmother instructed the boy to pack his things because they were going away. He brought his silver service with him as evidence of his neglected worth. She took him to an inn, where he amazed her with his ravenous appetite. Dr. Gozzi materialized, and they entered brief negotiations concerning the boys future. Terms: twenty-four zecchini for a years lodging, for which she received a receipt. She wasnt done with her grandson just yet. She spent the next three days obtaining clothes for him to wear as an abate, or priest, in training. Abates generally wore black, they were forbidden dancing and dueling, but otherwise they lived as everyone else. She had his hair, hopelessly matted and fouled, shorn, and outfitted him with a wig. Strange as the familys choice of career for the boy seemed, he faced limited options. The child of two actors, he had no place in society. There would be no fortune to inherit, no estate to manage, no heiress to wed. Venetian law and custom forbade his marrying an aristocrat. He could become a tradesman, a cobbler, for instance, like his grandfather. As a priest, in contrast, he would avoid penury, and, if he became intellectually accomplished, he might make a name for himself. There would be honor in the familys giving a child to the church. Zanetta wrote from Warsaw to encourage the plan: Can you imagine my comfort if twenty or thirty years from now I know you will be a bishop? In preparation for this new stage in his life, Giacomo joined Dr. Gozzis little family: his mother, ugly, old, and ill-tempered; his father, who worked all day and never spoke to anyone except for his occasional outings to a tavern from which he invariably returned wild and drunk; and the priests younger sister, Bettina, thirteen, pretty, lighthearted, and a reader of romances. She became Giacomos first love: It was she who little by little kindled in my heart the first sparks of a feeling which later became my ruling passion. For the moment, Giacomo admired Bettina from a distance as he studied under Dr. Gozzi, whose other pupils drifted off. They all left because I was the sole object of his attentions. To make up for the lost income, the priest decided to start a small boarding school, but it would take two years to put that plan into action. During those two years he taught me all that he knew, which, to tell the truth, was very little, wrote his student, but enough to initiate me into all branches of learning. At the same time, the good priest instructed the lad in the intricacies of the violin, another facility that would prove intermittently valuable. Casanova had little love or aptitude for music, strangely enough, but in Venice, a flair for music making counted as a survival skill no less than a weapon. The two engaged in philosophical debates spurred by their lessons. When the priest attempted to drill into Giacomos thick head the idea that God had created the universe out of nothing, the boy claimed he proved that the notion was absurd. Dr. Gozzi retorted that the boy was a fool, and the debate resumed. Through all

the quarreling, the boy retained his personal regard for his tutor, noting that the priest laughed at the stupidity of people who spent time over newspapers, which, according to him, never told the truth and always said the same thing. On Sundays he gave sermons, bloated with Latin and Greek passages asserting that the sin of the flesh was the greatest of all sins, filled the pews of his church with women. The sight impressed Giacomo, who was awakening to feminine allure. He took issue with his texts, asserting that the sin of the flesh was the least of all sins, infuriating his mentor. Early in 1736, as Giacomo was about to turn eleven, his mother, impulsive as always, invited Dr. Gozzi to bring her son to Venice, to which she had returned for a brief time from a theatrical engagement in St. Petersburg. Dr. Gozzi, a simple priest from Padua, had never seen Venice nor good society, and he did not want to appear a novice in any respect. Soon he and Giacomo boarded a stylish burchiello bound for Venice. Zanetta, practiced in the art of appearances, received her son and Dr. Gozzi with perfect good breeding, but the priest found himself in the uncomfortable situation of having to converse with her, yet not daring to look her in the face. She in turn couldnt resist flirting with him. After two years absence, the awkward, slow-witted child had become a self-possessed boy in a blond wig, which, as he recalled, stood out against my dark complexion and made the most crying contrast to my eyebrows and my back eyes. Zanetta placed Bettina, of whom Giacomo was so fond, in charge of the boys appearance, and ordered a new, more stylish wig to match his dark complexion. He took the measure of his siblings: Francesco and his drawings, which I pretended to consider passable; and Giovanni, who struck Giacomo as stupid. The others were too young to matter. At dinner that evening, Dr. Gozzi thoroughly embarrassed himself when an Englishman eating with the family addressed him in Latin, expecting that the priest would reply in kind, and he awkwardly replied that he didnt understand English. Moving along, the Englishman proposed to test precocious Giacomos mettle with a bawdy Latin riddle: why was the Latin word for vaginacunnusmasculine and the Latin word for penismentulafeminine? Where was the logic in that? Giacomo claimed to have replied, in Latin pentameter, Because the slave takes his name from his master. (Disce quod a domino nomina servus habet.) Pleased with himself, and what he called his first literary exploit, the seeds of my desire for the fame which comes from literature were sown in my soul. And so the most celebrated lover in history took his first steps toward immortality, at least in his own mind. The astonished Englishman, after remarking that no boy of eleven had ever done as much, first embraced me several times and then made me a present of his watch. Delighted with her precocious son, Zanetta produced another watch, this one meant for Dr. Gozzi, whose inability to express the extremity of his gratitude to her turned the scene into high comedy. Zanetta kissed the priest on both cheeks, and then offered hers in return for his kisses, but the poor man was so embarrassed that he would rather have died than give them to her. Four days later, when the visit ended, My mother gave me a present for Bettina, and the Abate Grimani gave me four zecchini to buy books. A week after that, my mother left for Petersburg. At Padua once more, Dr. Gozzi, smitten with the coquettish Zanetta, spent the next four months talking of her. Bettina grew still fonder of Giacomo when she opened her present, a generous length of silky fabric and a dozen pairs of gloves. She groomed the lad with increasing intimacy: She took care of my hair so well that in less than six months I was able to leave off wearing my wig. She came to comb my hair every day, and when I was still in bed, saying that she did not have time to wait for me to dress. She washed my face and neck and chest, and gave me childish caresses which, since I was bound to consider them innocent, made me chide myself for letting them trouble me, but trouble him they did. Still, she was older, and she could not love me with any evil intent, and this made me angry at the evil that I felt in myself. When she grasped his flesh to show that he was putting on weight, she roused the most intense emotions in me. And when she told me that I had a soft skin, the tickling made me draw away, and I was put out with myself for not daring to do as much to her. When she washed him, she covered him with the sweetest kisses and called him her dear child, but still he restrained himself as she taunted him for his timidity. When she finally left, apparently unruffled by their encounters, he plunged into despair over not having followed my natural inclination. To make matters worse, a fifteen-year-old by the name of Candiani appeared, and there was no mistaking Bettinas attraction to him. Giacomo claims he felt neither jealousy nor indignation for this new rival, for as the coarse, ignorant, stupid, ill-mannered son of a farmer, Candiani couldnt compete with Giacomo, except that the older boy had reached puberty. Bettina accused Giacomo of envy, the perfect provocation. Soon after, she came to his bed to give him a present of white stockings she had knitted for him. She dressed his hair, and instructed him to try them on for her, so she could see how they looked. (Dr. Gozzi was out of the house, at mass, and so, presumably, was the boorish Candiani.) She sat on his bed, and as she put the stockings on him, she told Giacomo his thighs were dirty and at once began washing them without asking my leaveas if he would have withheld it! He succumbed to a voluptuous feeling that she aroused until it finally ran its course, much to his chagrin. He apologized to her, as he had committed a crime, but Bettina told him the fault was entirely hers. She would make sure it never happened again, and so left him in a thoroughly befuddled state. He would atone for his sin by marrying Bettina, if she would have him, but he never got the chance to ask her. Day after day passed without her visiting his bed, and he was plunged into the blackest melancholy. Her calculating behavior could only mean that she loved him. He called on his pen to rise to his defense. I thought my letter a masterpiece, and more than enough to make her adore me and give me preference over Candiani, whom I considered a brute beast. In reply, she said she would come to his bed, but she stayed away. I was furious, Giacomo noted. At dinner she asked Giacomo if he would like her to dress him as a girl and go with her to a ball given

by a neighbor, Dr. Olivo. The entire table applauded the idea, and I consented. But the ball never took place; instead, a veritable tragicomedy ensued. Hearing that Dr. Gozzi would be away, Giacomo informed Bettina that he would leave his door open in expectation of a late-night visit from her. He retreated to his room, snuffed the candle, and waited. By midnight she had not appeared, and snow was falling. Finally at dawn, having waited for her in vain for the entire night, he tiptoed downstairs and approached the room where he thought Bettina was sleeping, but the door was locked. When the door eventually opened, Giacomo beheld Candiani, who gives me such a kick in the belly that I find myself stretched out, half buried in the snow. Regaining his footing, Giacomo threatened to strangle Bettina, but she had hidden herself behind another locked door. He gave it a mighty kick, and a dog, startled, began to bark. Humiliated, Casanova ran to his room, threw himself on his bed, and tried to recover from his humiliation. Hed get his revenge... hed poison the two of them... hed tell the Doctor about Bettinas misdeeds. But he was much too young for such heroic plans of vengeance. The next thing he knew, Bettinas mother was wailing that her daughter was dying. Aggrieved that she should die before I killed her, I rise, go downstairs, and find her in her fathers bed in frightful convulsions. The sight was terrifying. She twisted, she writhed, hitting out at random with fists and feet, and escaping by violent jerks from family members trying to hold her still. Dr. Olivo, a physician, arrived on the scene, as did a midwife, only to discover that Bettina wasnt in labor, she was having seizures. Giacomo, looking on in astonishment, marveled that she could possess so much strength and blamed her wild paroxysms on her tryst with Candiani. After rifling through the pockets of her clothing, and discovering a letter from Candiani planning their latest romp, Giacomo realized with a painful laugh he had been made a perfect dupe, and, as a result, I believed I was cured of my love. He would scorn Bettina and forgive Candianiuntil Giacomo remembered the nasty kick the older boy had given him. Bettinas convulsions returned the next day and lasted through the night. In the morning, the girls mother declared that her familys elderly servant was actually a witch, and responsible for the girls affliction. As proof, Bettinas mother said the servant made a habit of barricading the door to her room with crossed broomsticks. She demanded to know where the servant had been the previous Thursday evening, and accused her of attending a witches Sabbath, for you are a witch, and you have bewitched my daughter. She spat in the servants face, and raised her cane to thrash the old woman, who fled the house. Dr. Gozzi chased after the maid and gave her a few coins to hold her tongue. He returned to the house, knowing what he must do: Bettina was possessed by the devil, and he would have to perform an exorcism. A hush fell over the Gozzi family, and the rite began. Giacomo remained skeptical of the whole business. I thought all these people either insane or idiots, he declared in his memoir. I could not picture devils in Bettinas body without laughing. It wasnt that Giacomo lacked faithon the contrary, he remained devout throughout his lifebut this behavior in the name of religion struck him as folly. The priest and Dr. Gozzi mumbled between themselves about faith, and Giacomo, believing himself unobserved, bent over and whispered in her ear: Take courage, get well, and count on my silence. The day passed quietly; perhaps the exorcism had worked; perhaps his own reassuring words had cured her. Yet the following day she became delirious, babbling in Latin and Greek. It was time for stronger measures. Bettinas mother sought the most celebrated exorcist in Padua, who happened to be an extremely ugly Capuchin monk named Fra Prospero da Bovolenta. (Capuchins belong to a branch of the austere Franciscan order; they generally wear beards and take their name from the hood, or cappuccio, of their habit.) Catching sight of the monk, Bettina laughed, calling him an ignorant, stinking impostor, among other insults. The Capuchin fell to hitting Bettina with a great crucifix, saying that he was beating the devil, as Giacomo watched in atonishment. The monk withdrew only when he saw her ready to throw a chamber pot at his head. The Capuchin demanded to speak with the devil, and Bettina replied that if he cut off his beard, the devil, speaking through Bettina, would depart. Giacomo laughed so hard that the Capuchin ordered the boy out of the room. At the door, he caught sight of Bettina spitting on the exorcists hand when he instructed her to kiss it. Here was this incredibly talented girl, confounding the Capuchin, yet no one was surprised because all her words were ascribed to the devil! Later, she flung some sort of foul black liquid in his face, splattering Candiani in the process, much to Casanovas delight. At last, the Capuchin gave up in frustration, telling Dr. Gozzi to find himself another exorcist. The Gozzi household resumed its peaceful ways. Bettina slept contentedly and appeared at the dinner table to join her family. As if nothing had happened, she talked animatedly of attending the ball the following day, and she expected Giacomo to keep his word and go with her dressed as a girl; she was planning to dress his hair in the morning, ignoring his advice to rest and remain calm after the ordeal she had endured. Alone in his room that night, he found the following note concealed in his nightcap: Either come to the ball with me dressed as a girl, or I will show you something that will make you cry. But he replied that he would not attend. In the morning, she resumed her demonic ranting, and Dr. Gozzi prepared to consult another exorcist, the eminent Father Mancia, who made a striking impression, tall and majestic, his age about thirty years, with blond hair and blue eyes. They spent hours together, praying and meditating, and by the end she appeared to be cured. Even better, she wrote Giacomo a note claiming that she stopped speaking to Candiani since the fatal night that made me wretched, and It is to you alone that I owe my life and honor. Giacomo detected unparalleled effrontery in an effort to bind me in her chains again. Where had she learned her wiles? In the pages of the romances she read, he supposed. Later, when she came to his bed, where he was recovering from painful chilblains brought on by the incessant cold, he calmly rebuffed her: she had stifled the seed of a beautiful passion in an instant, meaning the humiliating, infuriating kick hed received from Candiani. Since then hed

despised her. Finally, he forgave her, and even gained an appreciation of her intelligence. I was its dupe, but no matter: it exists, it is amazing, divine, I admire it, I love it. He requested that she treat him the same way, with respect and friendship, for I can love only if I am sure of being loved without a rival. Bettina insisted shed never loved Candiani, and convulsed with tears. What she had just told me was plausible, Giacomo decided, and flattering: but I had seen too much. The specter of Candiani still hung over them both. Bettina wove an elaborate tale of half truths about how she planned to set matters right with Candiani and her family. They say that I am bewitched and that demons have taken control of me. I know nothing about such things; but if it is true, I am the most wretched girl alive. Or the most deceitful, Giacomo thought. And he was troubled by the handsome Father Mancia. I will tell you that the way your devils prefer the handsome monks exorcisms to those of the ugly Capuchin do you no honor, he warned. Her ordeal resumed. She suffered delirium and fevers, and spotssmallpoxappeared on her skin. Poor Bettina was so covered with the pestilential spots that by the sixth day it was impossible to see her skin anywhere on her body. Her eyes closed and all her hair had to be cut off. Worse, her mouth and throat were found to be so full of spots that nothing but a few drops of honey could be introduced into her esophagus. Her head swelled until it was bigger by a third. Her nose disappeared into her face, and it was feared that she would go blind. And then there was her stinking sweat that he forced himself to endure. After eleven days, Bettina hovered near death. Her pustules had turned black and were discharging with a stench that made the air unbreathable. On the thirteenth day, she flailed around in her bed, suffering from intolerable itching, which no medicine could have soothed more than the potent words I repeated to her: Remember, Bettina, that you are going to get well; but if you dare to scratch yourself, you will be so ugly that no one will ever love you again. As the weeks dragged on, an abscess in her neck confined her to bed, and she infected him with eight or ten pustules, which left an indelible mark on my face. His wounds endeared him to Bettina, who now realized that only I deserved her affection. She recovered slowly, those angry red spots marring her skin for a full year. This once beautiful girl married a humble shoemaker, Pigozzo, a base scoundrel who brought her to poverty and misery. Giacomo met her again forty years later, in 1776. I found Bettina old, ill, and dying, he wrote, and she perished the following day, remembered mostly by Casanova, who had loved her, and scorned her. So began his education in love and women. They were his shadow self, his ruling passion. He would dedicate his life to trying to understand everything about women. He would become a libertine. He would give free rein to his senses, suspend moral judgment, and indulge his appetites. To be a libertine was to stand apart from society, to refuse to accept definitions and restrictions. The child of two actors, two outcasts, he would spend his life as a performer on the worlds stage, trying on an endlessly changing array of roles and costumes, playing all the parts, villain and hero. His imagination would attempt to vanquish them all. Giacomo resumed his life to find that his mother, the mercurial Zanetta, had unexpectedly arrived in Padua. Six months later, Giacomo visited his mother again, this time in Venice, just before she departed for Dresden, where she had accepted an appointment in the service of the Elector of Saxony August III, King of Poland, just right for an actress in her declining years. Zanetta did not bring Giacomo with her to Dresden; he remained in Padua to complete his studies, but she did take his young sister Maria Maddalena and his brother Giovanni, then eight years old. Giacomo remarked that the boy wept desperately when they left, which led me to suspect that he was not especially intelligent, for there was nothing tragic about the departure. After Zanettas departure, Giacomo rarely saw her again. She remained in Dresden for the rest of her days, except for a sojourn in Prague. She had abandoned him, and so with every woman Giacomo Casanova pursued as an adult, he sought to re-create the intimacy he had once experienced with his mother until she had left to pursue her career and various lovershow very Casanova-like of her. Indeed, she was the original. Giacomo enrolled as a student at the University of Padua on November 28, 1737, at the age of twelve, to pursue a curriculum combining secondary and university courses. (His name doesnt appear on law exam lists, so we must rely on his word for this phase of his academic career. And there are certificates of attendance for him for the following year, 1739.) The Padovan educational system was well known. The principle of the Venetian governmentwhich administered Paduawas to pay very high stipends to professors of great renown and to let those who came to hear their lectures live in the utmost freedom. The students were responsible only to a head of the student body, the Syndic, who acted as a go-between between them and the powers that be. His means of discipline ranged from nonexistent to mild, but his presence was enough to keep the local law enforcement officers at bay. The ordinary sbirrior officerswould never have dared to arrest a student, Giacomo noted. Amid the merriment he endured a clash between the sbirri and students, which left two scholars dead. Armed with pistols and a carbine I went out with my fellow students every day, searching for the enemy, but they failed to encounter a single sbirro. He wrote to his grandmother for help, and she responded by coming to Padua and plucking him out of Dr. Gozzis home. The two of them reached Venice on October 1, 1739, and Giacomo returned to the same apartment where he had lived on the Calle degli Orbi, still leased by his absent mother. No longer a withdrawn, sickly child, Giacomo was now tall and self-possessed. He has just come from Padua, where he has been studying at the University, was the phrase used to introduce me everywhere, he boasted. He received the compliments of fathers, and the caresses of old women, including some who were not really old but were willing to pass as such so that they could embrace me without impropriety. And those caresses were forbidden because he was training for the priesthood. He was assigned to the parish church, San Samuele, and applied himself to advanced classes in the Italian language and in

poetry taught by the Abate (or Abbot) Schiavo. On February 14, 1740, as he approached his fifteenth birthday, he was tonsured by the Patriarch of Venice, Antonio Francesco Correr, as a sign of humility. His new way would be better and purer, but how long would it last?