

## **Men, Women and Casanovas**

Casanova: the eponym for a sexually successful man.

That's the definition given in Cassell's Dictionary of Slang. And the term for a sexually successful woman? Littered as it is with tragic whores, femme fatales and absurd nymphomaniacs, our cultural history just doesn't seem to provide an adequate female equivalent. No term, and certainly no eponym, that conveys the notion of success without shame and hints at the flamboyance of a life lived in the unashamed pursuit of pleasure. And I think it's 'shamelessness' in both its senses that's important here.

The theories and arguments, demonstrated and expounded as to why this might be, as to what oppressions this perpetrates, as to how this should or should not be addressed, are many. And they'll remain in constant revision and circulation as long as gender remains an 'issue.' But perhaps Casanova can be made useful both sides of the biological divide by looking a little more closely at what our mythic hero was really all about.

It may be worth adding a few details (but by no means facts) to the somewhat sketchy figure who once went by the name of Giacomo Casanova. By all accounts (which are, on the whole, his accounts) a man of letters, an entrepreneur, a spy, a soldier, and, of course, a prolific and accomplished lover, who cut a dash through the beau monde of eighteenth century Europe, he might also be described as a thief, a liar, a petty swindler, a cheat, a jailbird, and, by today's standards, an incestuous paedophile. Sensual, clever, and dashing he may have been, however, we also might reasonably think of him as having been vain, self-important, delusional, covetous, humourless (specifically where he himself was concerned), ridiculous, sexually incontinent, and utterly, almost animally, amoral.

But this is all by the by. Because mis-remembered as the arch-seducer, the legend of Casanova, in all his manliness, still sashays about the piano bar of our collective imagination working his way into and out of the arms of poor foolish woman after poor foolish woman: their romantic hopes raised only to be dashed because their dreamy desires will never match those of the rampant Casanova. But what is it that (these) women want? It appears a moot question at the moment if only banally posed by the American film industry. But is it even worth asking? The Viennese gentleman who first wondered, worried, and then wondered some more to unwittingly produce a whole century of sexual inadequates posed his question perhaps because, in the game of comparing his and hers, he realised that her desire didn't stand to attention and salute quite like his did.

Sexual difference has become sexual anxiety since Casanova but it never was so for him nor the women who enjoyed his company. Stefan Zweig, in an often

scathing assessment of Casanova's life and work, grants him genius precisely because he was not a seducer. He didn't trick, manipulate or coerce women into having sex with him; the only thing he insisted on was that they gave themselves freely. 'What do women want?' was a spurious question for Giacomo because they wanted exactly as he did, and he wanted for them exactly what he wanted for himself: pleasure for pleasure's sake. He was, Zweig writes, 'an altruist in love.' If there must be victims, Casanova should occasionally be classed amongst them, as he was, in turns, nothing more than a prostitute, a lap dog, a dancing bear, subject to the whims of those he served.

His genius was then his absolute abandonment to, his courageous commitment to the adventure of sexual pleasure: for men, and women both. And, be honest, you can't get much fairer than that, can you? If we think of Casanova less as a prowling sex pest and more as the embodiment of honest-to-goodness bare-faced pleasure then we might, however momentarily, set aside the issue of gender just long enough for a little unashamed enjoyment.

But one thing continues to bother me, and I should maybe consider it my problem and no-one else's, and it's that I still can't happily answer the question I have often asked myself during the process of this production: why, in 2001, can't I imagine a female Casanova on stage without getting anxious?

Pamela Carter

**Some Casanova reading:**

L'Histoire de ma Vie, Giacomo Casanova

Casanova: A study in self-portraiture, Stefan Zweig

Casanova: Or the art of happiness, Lydia Flem