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«Non-conforming Pleasures»: Representations of Homosexuality in Casanova's *Histoire de Ma Vie*

TOMMASO SCARAMELLA

Università Ca' Foscari Venezia

Abstract. Giacomo Casanova's *Histoire de Ma Vie* offers an interesting perspective for exploring same-sex eroticism in the eighteenth century. Despite its reputation as a classic focused on heterosexual adventures, the *Memoirs* reveal references to sodomy and eroticism between same-sex individuals. This article aims to identify and place in the historical context traces of this theme within the literary source. It documents biases and captures shifts in sensibilities through Casanova's firsthand account, delving into male homoeroticism, lesbian encounters, and the evolution of Casanova's attitude towards male sodomy at a time when terms like «homosexuality» had yet to be defined. The challenge of anachronism is addressed by acknowledging that the absence of a specific terminology in earlier periods does not negate the existence of same-sex love and intimacy. Examining the representations of same-sex eroticism in Casanova's *Histoire* provides insights into the historical contextualization of male subjectivity, the understanding of emotions, and the physiological-moral discourse regarding the body-mind connection, during a pivotal turning point in the history of emotions and sexuality.

Keywords: Homosexuality, Sodomy, Homoeroticism, Sexual libertinism, Giacomo Casanova.

Love between same-sex individuals is perhaps one of the aspects of human life most susceptible to anachronism. This is well understood by those who study the history of homosexuality in a context where sexual orientation had not yet been defined. Terms like «homosexuality», «sexuality», and the concept of sexual orientation itself only emerged in Western culture from the latter half of the nineteenth century. The Hungarian writer Karl-Maria Kertbeny (1824-1882) was the first to introduce the term *Homosexualität* in an anonymous 1869 pamphlet, criticizing a Prussian law that penalized sexual acts between same-sex individuals¹. Together with Karl

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¹ K.-M. Kertbeny, *Schriften zur Homosexualitätsforschung*, hrsg. von M. Herzer, Verlag rosa Winkel, Berlin 2000.

H. Ulrichs (1825-1895), a German jurist pioneer of LGBT+ rights, Kertbeny is remembered among those who opposed the traditional condemnation of same-sex intercourse, paving the way for the recognition of homosexual identity. This recognition would later go through the process of medicalization of so-called «sexual inversions» and, more comprehensively, through the claims of the twentieth-century homosexual liberation movements. This process would mark a distance between the *Ancien Régime*'s focus on deeming sexual acts immoral and prohibited (sodomy), and the emergence of sexual differences in human experiences (homosexual orientation)². Nevertheless, the absence of a specific term to describe it does not conclusively suggest the absence of love and sex between individuals of the same sex in earlier contexts, as in the eighteenth century.

Literature often casts light on aspects of human lives from the past that might otherwise be overlooked if only normative discourses were considered. Homoeroticism is no exception³, and Giacomo Casanova's *Histoire de Ma Vie*, despite being regarded as a classic of heterosexual adventures (using another anachronistic term), to the point that his name has become synonymous with intense amorous activity⁴, provides insights into same-sex eroticism in the eighteenth century. The editorial vicissitudes of Giacomo Casanova's (1725-1798) autobiographical memoirs are well-known⁵. Written in French between 1789 and 1798 during his thirteen-year residence in Bohemia as librarian of Dux Castle, some extracts were published in 1822, and a first German translation appeared between 1822 and 1826. They were posthumously published in French between 1826 and 1838 in a redacted version by Jean Laforgue for the pub-

lisher Brockhaus⁶. Banned and included in the Index of Prohibited Books in 1834, it would be necessary to wait until 1960 to read the original manuscript, unadulterated by censorship or interpolations (although not yet entirely purged of Laforgue's interventions), particularly in passages considered morally sensitive, such as those concerning homosexuality⁷. What may be less familiar to the public is the presence of references to sodomy and eroticism between same-sex individuals in these memoirs. At times, Casanova merely alludes to them, initially emphasizing his own reluctance and perpetuating stereotypes, particularly those associated with male encounters (such as going «against nature», pederasty, and effeminacy). On other occasions, however, he provides more detailed descriptions, especially when involving lesbian intercourse, using such instances as focal points in the narrative. Ultimately, in a couple of instances, he recounts his personal involvement in eroticism with a male.

Since the mid-twentieth century, when the *Histoire de Ma Vie* was finally published in its entirety, the homosexual theme has captured scholars' attention⁸. However, while there has been extensive research into (heterosexual) libertinage, a comprehensive and integrated overview of the subject remains elusive. Studies have focused on specific incidents, such as the episode with Winckelmann⁹, or certain aspects, like androgyny¹⁰, female

² Regarding the dichotomy between «sodomy» and «homosexuality», see the seminal work by M. Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. I. *La volonté de savoir*, Gallimard, Paris 1976. For a concise overview of this passage, see F. Tamagne, *The Homosexual Age, 1870-1940*, in *Gay life and culture. A World History*, ed. by R. Aldrich, Thames & Hudson, London 2006, pp. 167-195. For methodological issues, see D.M. Halperin, *How to do the History of Homosexuality*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 2002.

³ See *The Cambridge History of Gay and Lesbian Literature*, ed. by E.L. McCallum and M. Tuhkanen, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge-New York 2014. For the Italian context, see: D. Coluzzi e F. Gnerre, *In disgrazia del cielo e della terra. L'amore omosessuale nella letteratura italiana*, Rogas Edizioni, Roma 2023; *Corrispondenza d'amorosi sensi. L'omosessualità nella letteratura medievale*, a cura di P. Odorico, N. Pasero e M.P. Bachmann, Edizioni dell'Orso, Alessandria 2008.

⁴ «Used allusively of a man whose amorous activities resemble those of Casanova»: Oxford English Dictionary, s.v.

⁵ See *Le memorie di Casanova. 200 anni di intrighi, censure, misteri*, a cura di G. Simeoni, A. Trampus e S. Volpato, Ranzani Editore, Dueville 2022. See also G. Simeoni, *Storia dell'«Histoire de ma vie»*, in B. Capaci e G. Simeoni, *Giacomo Casanova. Una biografia intellettuale e romanzesca*, Liguori, Napoli 2009, pp. 6-22.

⁶ See G. Simeoni, *Storia editoriale di una vita. Bibliografia delle edizioni dell'«Histoire de ma vie» di Giacomo Casanova (1822-2019)*, Oltrepagina Edizioni, Verona 2021.

⁷ See, for example, D. Reynaud, *Éclipses au clair de lune : l'obscur travail de la censure sur un épisode des «Mémoires» de Casanova*, «Metamorfosi dei Lumi», 7, 2014 (*Il corpo, l'ombra, l'eco*, a cura di C. Leri), pp. 133-143. See also F. Marceau, *Une insolente liberté. Les aventures de Casanova*, Gallimard, Paris 1983, pp. 83-84.

⁸ A pioneering but dated investigation of the homosexual theme is found in M.-A. Reffalovich, *Casanova. Hétérosexualité congénitale malgré des actes unisexuels commis après la puberté*, in Id., *Uranisme et unisexualité. Étude sur différentes manifestations de l'instinct sexuel*, Storck & Masson, Lyon-Paris 1896, pp. 64-68. For recent studies, see T. Emery, *Queer Casanova. Subversive Sexuality and the (Dis)embodied Subject in «History of My Life»*, «Italian Culture», 24, 2007, 1, pp. 23-44; F. Gassner, *Giacomo Casanova und die sexuelle Geographie Europas*, «Lessing Yearbook / Jahrbuch», 44, 2017, pp. 167-185.

⁹ See L. Ruprecht, *Winckelmann and Casanova in Rome: a case study of Religion and Sexual politics in Eighteenth-century Rome*, «The journal of religious ethics», 38, 2010, pp. 297-320; W. von Wangenheim, *Casanova trifft Winckelmann, oder die Kunst des Begehrens*, «Merkur: Deutsche Zeitschrift für Europäisches Denken», 39, 1985, pp. 106-120; T. Pelzel, *Winckelmann, Mengs and Casanova: a reappraisal of a famous Eighteenth-century forgery*, «Art bulletin», 54, 1972, pp. 301-315.

¹⁰ See S. Bordignon, *Elementi di sessuologia casanoviana: l'intrigo androgino*, in *Le Memorie di Casanova*, cit., pp. 71-98. See also C.C. Craig, *Utopia and the Body. Gender and Androgyny in Casanova's «Icosameron»*, in *Gendered Contexts. New Perspectives in Italian Cultural Studies*, ed. by L. Benedetti, J.L. Hairston and S.M. Ross, Lang, New York 1996, pp. 121-132.

homosexuality¹¹, and the role of *castrati*¹². Upon examining these episodes, researchers have ventured to explore whether Casanova could be considered an «early form» of the modern homosexual or simply a libertine at heart. In his work *Casanova* (1969), John Masters characterized the adventurer's sexuality as «bipolar», portraying him as «a difficult, complex and constantly varying figure»¹³. The scholar was inclined towards the view that Casanova was not exclusively homosexual, but rather a bisexual individual who could not express himself openly. Contrarily, J. Rives Childs (1988) argued that «his rare acts of pederasty were provoked less by inclination than the curiosity that was one of his impelling characteristics»¹⁴. Childs interpreted Casanova's narrative of homosexual intercourses as a narrative strategy aligned with the character's libertine lifestyle. Additionally, Michel Delon (2000) observed that Casanova, being a libertine, did not abstain from indulging in similar pleasures: «il ne s'interdit pas quelques plaisirs du même ordre»¹⁵. More recently, in her analysis of Casanova's romantic and erotic escapades with women, Judith Summers (2016) has questioned the figure and the conduct of the seducer. Casanova allows himself amorous freedom, but at what cost? The focus has now shifted to the fact that, if he were operating today, Casanova «might well be in prison for breach of promise, incest, fraud, paedophilia, grievous bodily harm, and rape»¹⁶. Finally, Leo Damrosch (2022) has embraced these observations, re-examining his biography and exploring the sexual encounters narrated in the *Histoire*, including those of a same-sex nature.¹⁷

¹¹ See C. Thomas, *The Role of Female Homosexuality in Casanova's Memoirs*, «Yale French Studies», 94, 1998 (*Libertinage and Modernity*, ed. by C. Cusset), pp. 179-183 (also in French: *Le rôle de l'homosexualité féminine dans les «Mémoires» de Casanova*, in *Femmes et libertinage au XVIIIe siècle*, éd. par A. Richardot, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, Rennes 2004, pp. 39-43).

¹² See S. Feroci e F. Luccichenti, *En travestie: Bellino-Teresa*, Edizioni Fiesolane, Fiesole 2018; V. Anzani, *Castrato per amore: Casanova, Salimbeni, Farinelli e il misterioso Bellino (Bologna 1740)*, in *Il Farinelli ritrovato*, Atti del convegno (Bologna, 29 maggio 2012), a cura di L. Verdi, LIM, Lucca 2014, pp. 75-100; V. Palumbo, *Bellino, Casanova e i finti cavalieri. Ovvero il paradosso delle cantatrici*, in *Spazi, poteri, diritti delle donne a Venezia in età moderna*, a cura di A. Bellavitis, N.M. Filippini e T. Plebani, QuiEdit, Verona 2012, pp. 337-350.

¹³ J. Masters, *Casanova*, Bernard Geis Associates, New York 1969, p. 226.

¹⁴ J. Rives Childs, *Casanova. A New Perspective*, Constable, London 1988, p. 7.

¹⁵ M. Delon, *Le savoir-vivre libertin*, Hachette, Paris 2000, pp. 276-277.

¹⁶ J. Summers, *Casanova's Women: the Great Seducer and the Women he Loved*, Bloomsbury, London 2006, pp. 21-22. Regarding sexual abuses, see L. Wolff, *Paolina's Innocence. Child Abuse in Casanova's Venice*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2012; Id., *Depraved Inclinations. Libertines and Children in Casanova's Venice*, «Eighteenth-Century Studies», 38, 3, 2005, pp. 417-440.

¹⁷ L. Damrosch, *Adventurer. The life and times of Giacomo Casanova*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2022.

Examining these and other references in their entirety allows for a historical perspective on the persistence of same-sex practices and the array of thoughts associated with them during a crucial turning point in the history of emotions and sexuality¹⁸. While not claiming exhaustive coverage, this analysis aims to document biases and capture shifts in sensibilities through the first-hand account of an Enlightenment man renowned for his freedom and uninhibited nature¹⁹, at a time when any non-reproductive act was generally still suppressed and condemned by social norms²⁰. The initial discussion briefly explores the different ways of addressing male homoeroticism and that between women. Regarding the latter, we will emphasize certain instances of lesbian encounters and their significance in Casanova's work. Subsequently, there will be an overview of male intercourses, starting with Casanova's experiences in the seminary during his youth and his encounter with the *castrato* Bellino. A further examination of the two episodes personally experienced by Casanova will reveal the evolution in his attitude towards male sodomy. Such episodes depict Casanova, in his youth, involved in Constantinople with the minister Effendi Ismail and, as an adult, in St. Petersburg with Lieutenant Lunin. Initially distancing himself from its practice as a necessary defence of personal honour, sodomy undergoes a transformation into being the epitome of individual freedom – an emblematic manifestation of a lifestyle defined by the pursuit of pleasure and emancipation from social norms and conventions. These situations will provide an opportunity to historically contextualize Casanova's perspective on sodomy, particularly focusing on male subjectivity, the understanding of emotions, and the physiological-moral discourse regarding the body-mind connection.

FEMALE HOMOEROTICISM THROUGH THE EYES OF A MALE SPECTATOR

A fundamental distinction in Casanova's *Histoire de Ma Vie* concerning same-sex practices and eroticism

¹⁸ For an updated overview, with bibliographic references of the history of emotions, see A. Arcangeli, *Emozioni*, in *Lessico della storia culturale*, a cura di A.M. Banti, V. Fiorino e C. Sorba, Editori Laterza, Roma-Bari 2023, pp. 76-92; on the history of sexuality, see E. Betta, *Sessualità*, *ivi*, pp. 246-260.

¹⁹ See *Casanova in the Enlightenment: From the Margins to the Center*, ed. by M. Stefanovska, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2020.

²⁰ Regarding the repression of sodomy in *Ancien Régime* societies, see *Sodomy in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by T. Betteridge, Manchester University Press, Manchester-New York 2002; *The Pursuit of Sodomy. Male Homosexuality in Renaissance and Enlightenment Europe*, ed. by K. Gerard and G. Hekma, Harrington Park Press, New York-London, 1989. See also U. Grassi, *Sodoma. Persecuzioni, affetti, pratiche sociali (secoli V-XVIII)*, Carocci Editore, Roma 2019.

centers on the differing treatment of males and females. While homoeroticism between women is clearly delineated, such practices among men carry a wide range of judgments and interpretations. Male sexuality appears caught between adhering to traditional norms and the allure of illicit transgression. This transgression, especially in the context of sodomy, not only challenges moral and legal norms, but also questions the definition of masculinity and the normative active role of the male. In contrast, episodes of lesbianism, such as those involving Angela and the two sisters Nanette and Marton, or C.C. and the nun M.M., and the story of Marcoline, seem to convey nothing more than the pleasure of being watched. Chantal Thomas emphasized the significance of lesbian love in the Casanovian universe, noting that the fascination is so pronounced that «we are rarely able to distinguish the actor from the spectator»²¹. Unlike the moralistic judgments associated with male sodomy, lesbianism appears seamlessly enmeshed in the narrative. Kisses and sapphic intercourses depict Casanova as a spectator, seemingly intended solely to stimulate the (heterosexual) imagination of the seducer, who eagerly seeks involvement in a *ménage à trois*, thereby capturing the imagination of (male) readers.

The story of Angela and the two sisters Nanette and Marton serves as an illustration of Casanova's approach to eroticism among women. When the sixteen-year-old Casanova encounters them in Venice, in 1741, he becomes infatuated with Angela, the niece of the parish priest of San Samuele. Although initially rebuffing his advances, Angela later seems to express interest. However, when Angela plans a meeting with Casanova, she fails to appear, and Casanova finds only the two sisters instead, with whom Casanova establishes a form of companionship. In the following nights, they reveal to the young man that Angela is involved in an erotic relationship with Marton. «Quand Angéla couche avec nous», Marton confides, «elle m'appelle, me couvrant de baisers, son cher abbé»²². Casanova, immediately intrigued, explores the sexual roles played by the young women and uncovers a sort of three-way relationship, sparking his desire. He characterizes Angela's erotic passion as the result of a «fausse imagination monstrueuse», driving her to fulfill her «désirs brutaux» with Marton, who «veut bien lui servir de mari» (I, 120). In response to Casanova's curiosity, the young women reveal that Marton also

assumes the «role of husband» to Nanette, exposing a sexual dynamic between them grounded in the adaptation of traditional gender roles.

In the following episode involving C.C. and the nun M.M., Casanova finally takes part in a *ménage à trois*. Casanova is in Venice between 1753 and 1755. Initially in a relationship with C.C., the adventurer's connection with her is disrupted when her father decides to commit her to monastic life. In the convent, C.C. forms a romantic relationship with the nun M.M. However, M.M. is also the clandestine lover of Ambassador de Bernis (1715-1794), a French diplomat later elevated to the rank of Roman cardinal. One evening, the nun decides to organize a dinner at the ambassador's Venetian *casino*, inviting herself, C.C., Casanova, and de Bernis. However, de Bernis encounters an unexpected issue and fails to attend. Nonetheless, the three decide to dine together, transforming the meeting into a libertine night «dans laquelle la volupté avait mis, comme toujours, sous pieds la raison» (I, 1101). The description provided by Casanova is explicit. He recounts that M.M. and C.C. began to exchange caresses «qui peu à peu attirent mon attention», declaring himself ready to be aroused and to revel in the unfolding spectacle. Drawing inspiration from Jean de Meurs's prints (1613-1653), «où il y avait les beaux combats amoureux entre femmes» (I, 1099), the two women positioned themselves on the bed, mimicking sapphic poses, in plain sight of Casanova. The work was mistakenly attributed to the Dutch archaeologist and was instead a translation of the sapphic dialogue *L'Academie des dames* attributed to the French lawyer Nicolas Chorier (1612-1692). Before long, the adventurer joined the two in the bedchamber, fulfilling his erotic dream.

The explicit «sapphic spectacle» is not the only instance in *Histoire de Ma Vie*. Another scene that strongly echoes this episode takes place during a performance arranged by two maids to amuse Casanova in Switzerland, in 1760, while accompanied by his local governess, Madame Dubois. Casanova recounts: «Les deux servants, qui s'étaient déjà trouvées plusieurs fois dans des parties pareilles, se mirent en position de nous divertir avec un spectacle qui m'était très bien connu. [...] J'en étais aussi un peu étonné, malgré les fureurs que M.M. et C.C. avaient offertes à mes yeux six ans avant ce temps-là, et dont il était impossible de s'imaginer quelque chose de plus beau» (II, 443-444). The theme of lesbian love reaches its peak in Genoa a couple of years later, when the adventurer encounters Marcolina, the young Venetian supposed to marry the youngest of Casanova's brothers, the «abbé» Gaetano Alvise (II, 1112). Deceived by the man's false promises,

²¹ Thomas, *The role of Female Homosexuality*, cit., p. 179.

²² G. Casanova, *Histoire de Ma Vie*, édition établie par J.-C. Igalens et É. Leborgne, Robert Laffont, Paris 2013, vol. I, p. 119. Subsequent citations will be made from this edition directly in the text, with the volume indicated in Roman numerals and the cited page in Arabic numerals, enclosed in parentheses.

the adventurer offers to take her back with him to Venice. The journey with Casanova becomes an opportunity to explore Marcolina's sexual preferences. Indeed, Marcolina becomes fascinated by all of Casanova's female conquests, resulting in exchanges of caresses and romantic expressions with them. Casanova judges the girl as having a «furieux tempérament». In response, Marcolina objects, stating, «Ce n'est pas tempérament, car je ne suis tentée de faire cela qu'avec la personne que j'aime: si c'est une femme, je m'en moque: je ris tout de même». Casanova makes inquiries as to the origin of her lesbian inclination, and Marcolina replies that it stemmed from «nature»: «J'ai commencé à l'âge de sept ans. Dans dix ans j'ai certainement eu plus de trois ou quatre cents amies» (II, 1202). The girl recalls that at the age of eleven, her Venetian confessor at the church of Santi Giovanni e Paolo had chastised her for similar behavior. He declared that her actions with a girl of her own sex constituted a crime and a sin «très grand», emphasizing that activities between girls were deemed more serious than those between a girl and a man.

The representation of instances of lesbianism in Casanova's narrative reflects the sexual morality prevailing during the *Ancien Régime*. Casanova operates within the cultural norms of his time, where same-sex acts were deemed sinful, and consequently, criminalized, repressed, and condemned by religious and political authorities. These acts were not considered indicative of a distinct subjectivity or sexual orientation; rather, they were viewed as vicious habits formed through the repetition of morally condemned actions. Sodomy was the specific vice in question, a broad category encompassing non-reproductive sexual acts that occurred outside the generative coupling between husband and wife. While «sodomy» formally referred to the sodomitical act, possible between two males or between a male and a female, it also included female intercourse, albeit with comparatively less moral concern. In this context, Casanova observes, «Les casuists ne sont pas tant rigoureux sur la pédérastie féminine, comme ils le sont sur la masculine. La féminine passe même pour ridicule» (I, 697). The act between women was also labeled as «tribadism». Although Casanova never uses the term «tribade», its meaning is evident to him. For instance, when discussing the body of the *castrato* Bellino, he attempts to determine whether Bellino possesses a male penis or a «monstrous clitoris» (I, 312). The notion of bodily malformation stemmed from the ancient belief that women engaging in same-sex relationships, known as tribades, were attracted to other women due to possessing a disproportionate clitoris. As elucidated in Ludovico Maria Sinistrari's work (1622-1701), *De delictis et poenis*, these

women were thought to fulfill their sexual desires with other women, using their clitorises in a manner akin to the male genital organ²³.

If the term «tribade» is not explicitly used by Casanova, even though he indirectly refers to its meaning, the same cannot be said for «lesbianism». The French term «lesbienne» appears four times in the *Histoire*: twice it is used to describe the sexual scene that Casanova finds himself watching, and the remaining two times specifically attributed to a context of female homosexuality. In the initial instances, Casanova describes the sexual encounter, which he himself witnesses in 1772, between a young man and Lia, the daughter of an Anconetan Jew. He notes how Lia behaves like a «vrai Lesbienne» while participating in one of the positions illustrated in Aretino's *I Modi*, specifically the «arbre droit» (III, 1063). Furthermore, he deems Lia a «true lesbian» for the act of having performed *fellatio* on the young man, probably alluding to the manner of giving pleasure between women. We should bear in mind that engaging in interfaith sexual relationships, especially with a young Jewish woman in this case, was commonly considered, in and of itself, a form of transgression. In the other two occurrences, «lesbienne» is mentioned firstly in reference to Marcoline, emphasizing her proximity to same-sex attraction («Elle devint tout d'un coup Lesbienne»: II, 1154). And secondly, it recurs in the account of an orgy that Casanova witnesses in Rome in 1761 involving priests, prostitutes, *castrati*. During this orgy, sodomy and «le secret des lesbiennes» are practiced (II, 788). The editors of the Bouquins edition of the *Histoire* point out that the French term «lesbienne», derived from the Latin «lesbis», was absent from dictionaries of that time. It appears in Restif de la Bretonne's work, *La Paysanne perversie* (1784), but here it appears more like an adaptation from the expression «amours femelles», used by Casanova in another circumstance (II, 1184).

MALE SODOMY BETWEEN STEREOTYPES AND NATURAL PLEASURE

Upon initial examination, the representation of male sodomy in the *Histoire de Ma Vie* appears linguistically simpler when compared to female homoeroticism. It seems universally linked to the sin of Sodom, as narrated in *Genesis* 19. Casanova refers to the episode of the destruction of the city of Pentapolis, where vice attracted the «le feu du ciel» (III, 842). However, the situation becomes immediately complex due to nuanced distinc-

²³ L.M. Sinistrari d'Ameno, *De delictis et poenis*, Venetiis 1700, tit. IV, *De delictis contra castitatem*, § II, *Sodomia*, pp. 254-268.

tions that emerge based on variations in age and the assigned sexual roles within the act of sodomy. Analyzing lexical choices regarding male homoeroticism, Casanova utilizes the term «sodomie» once (I, 904), declined in the adjectival form «sodomite» (I, 206), and the verb «sodomizer» (II, 787, 798). More frequently, he employs the term «pédérastie» (I, 697, 1203; II, 793; III, 552) and the adjective «pédéraste» (II, 737; II, 792). In comparison to the term sodomy, the use of pederasty suggests a context characterized by differences in both age disparity among involved individuals and distinctions in their roles. The pederastic paradigm has its origins in Antiquity, where an adult male (*erastes*) was permitted to engage in a provisional sexual relationship with someone of the same sex (*eromenos*) without his losing honor. This arrangement was governed by a pact that entailed maintaining the active penetrative role towards a passive partner who had not yet reached adulthood, from the age of twelve and above (fourteen, in the Roman culture)²⁴.

Additional classical references to homosexuality surface in Casanova's autobiography. Firstly, there is the mention of «Giton» (I, 301; II, 711), a reference to Petronius's *Satyricon*, where it signifies the boy loved by the protagonist Encolpius. Over time, the term evolved to denote a young man kept by a wealthy individual in exchange for sexual favors. Another term used for these young men is «mignon» (II, 251; III, 552, 847). This is exemplified in the case of Niccolò Manuzzi, the «mignon» frequently seen by Casanova accompanying the Venetian ambassador Sebastiano Mocenigo through the streets of Madrid (III, 552). Another instance involves the «garçons charmants de quinze, seize et dix-sept ans», all deemed «mignon» by Prince de Francavilla Michele Imperiali (III, 847). Secondly, there is a reference to «Alexis», the youth loved by Corydon in Virgil's *Bucolics* (III, 551). Thirdly, there is the mention of «Antinous», the beautiful youth beloved by Hadrian (III, 909). Finally, «hermaphrodites» alludes to classical ancient culture (III, 552). Casanova employs it to express a «double amorous passion», oriented towards both males and females, resembling a concept of sexual orientation before the term was coined.

The allusion to male homoeroticism as a reversal of traditional gender roles is a recurring theme in Casanova's narrative. From one perspective, this approach aims to captivate and astonish the readers. Conversely, it appears to reflect Casanova's fascination with the «non-conforming» and the forbidden. This is evident, for example, in the expression: being «de la manchette» (II, 711, 792; III, 552). This expression, prevalent in the eighteenth century, referred to members of the «Order

of the Cuff» – individuals associated with notions of incomplete masculinity, characterized as effeminate, and demonstrating an erotic attraction towards other men. This association might be an allusion to the Chevalier de la Manche from *Don Quixote*²⁵. The Cervantes character appears on at least a couple of other occasions in the *Memoirs* (I, 113; II, 510). Casanova frequently references the inversion of roles, using it as a subject of ridicule for men who forsake their traditional active male role (as a «husband») to assume an «unnatural» passive female role (as a «wife»). The inversion of roles may seem degrading, but it also serves as an expression of a specific and characteristic disposition. The men who possess it express a particular «goût antiphysique» (I, 221; III, 848). The term «antiphysique» (II, 612; III, 551, 662) morally implies a negative perspective of being «against nature», evident even in its variations, such as the collective identifier «école antiphysique» (III, 842) or the phrase: being in love «antiphysiquement» with someone (I, 994).

This perspective on male homoeroticism, viewed as a well-defined aspect of their disposition, appears to challenge interpretations that aim to separate the sodomitic act from conscious and self-aware subjectivity. This subjectivity is characterized by stereotyped traits, as exemplified by Ambassador Mocenigo, described as a cultured man with a «âme voluptueuse» who «detestait les femmes en ce qui regarde le plaisir de l'amour», a lover of music and «amitié à la grecque». Casanova notes that in Venice there was a considerable number of men of such a «espèce», specifically labeled as «antiphysiques», attributed to them a passive disposition rather than an active one (III, 662)²⁶. These characteristics seem to uniquely belong to these individuals, aiding in their identification and distinction from others, much like the modern concept of sexual orientation operates. Another term, «non-conforming», is employed by Casanova to describe their disposition. An example of this is seen in the case of Monsieur Dolci's son, whom Casanova encounters in Avignon in 1760. Casanova observes that he «pliait un peu au non-conformisme», suggesting that he amused himself «innocemment avec des amis de son âge» (II, 611).

However, the identification of male homoeroticism as an expression of a «non-conforming» sexual disposition with respect to social, moral, and legal norms is not the sole recurring approach in the *Histoire de Ma Vie*. The analysis of two episodes linked to Casanova's child-

²⁴ See E. Cantarella, *Secondo natura. La bisessualità nel mondo antico*, Rizzoli, Milano 1995.

²⁵ See G. Dall'Orto, *Tutta un'altra storia. L'omosessualità dall'antichità al secondo dopoguerra*, il Saggiatore, Milano 2015, p. 383.

²⁶ Regarding the figure and events that involved the Ambassador and the prospective Doge, Alvise V Sebastiano Mocenigo, see T. Scaramella, *Un doge infame. Sodomia e nonconformismo sessuale a Venezia nel Settecento*, Marsilio Editori, Venezia 2021.

hood – one during his time in the seminary and the other involving the encounter with the *castrato* Bellino – helps illuminate the interpretation of such dispositions on the ethical-moral plane. These dispositions are seen as expressions of human behaviors (sexual acts) within the realm of human passions, operating in the interplay between the body and the mind. A preliminary reference to male sodomy emerges in the adventurer's youth. Orphaned of his father, Casanova's actress mother had left him in the care of his maternal grandmother. When she passed away in 1742, the seventeen-year-old was sent to the seminary in San Cipriano of Murano, with the expectation of a clerical career for him. In the dormitory of that seminary, one night an unexpected event occurred, as Casanova recounts:

Ce fut dans le huitième ou neuvième jour de mon séjour dans le séminaire que j'ai senti quelqu'un venir se coucher près de moi. [...] Je ne pouvais pas le voir car la lanterne était éteinte. C'était l'abbé mon ami qui ayant vu le dortoir obscur eut la lubie de me faire une visite. Après en avoir ri, je l'ai prié de s'en aller, car le préfet se réveillant, et voyant le dortoir obscur, se lèverait pour rallumer la lampe, et nous serions tous les deux accusés d'avoir consommé le plus ancien de tous les crimes, à ce que plusieurs prétendent. Dans le moment que je lui donnais ce bon conseil, nous entendons marcher ; et l'abbé s'échappe ; mais un moment après j'entends un grand coup suivi de la voix rauque du préfet qui dit "scélérat, à demain, à demain". Après avoir rallumé la lanterne il retourne à son lit (I, 150).

The episode also marked the conclusion of Casanova's clerical career and his stay at the seminary, as he was expelled when the prefect discovered him sleeping with another seminarian. Nothing more transpired between the two beyond the breach of the rule against sharing a bed, yet Casanova's comments on the «plus ancien de tous les crimes» – sodomy – hold considerable significance. He narrates how it was deemed of utmost importance to avoid improper contact between young seminarians, as «on ne supposait jamais cette visite innocente». Straying from this rule was considered a serious offense, given that a seminarian's bed was exclusively designated for rest. Casanova explains that merely breaching this norm stained the reputation of those involved, as it was presumed that the motivation behind such actions was invariably illicit.

After briefly alluding to sodomy, the narrative shifts its focus to the practice of masturbation, which had become a topic of significant debate during the second half of eighteenth century. Casanova notices that when the prohibition extended to interactions with their fellow seminarians, equivalent scrutiny was not applied to sexual actions undertaken in solitude. In such circum-

stances, seminarians possessed the latitude to engage in «tout ce qu'ils veulent» (I, 149). The subject of masturbation gained prominence in that period thanks to the success of a dissertation on the topic by the Swiss physician Auguste Tissot (1728-1797). Originally written in Latin in 1758, the work was later translated into French with the eloquent title *De l'onanisme* (1760), and subsequently reprinted and translated into five languages. In his work, Tissot argued that excessive indulgence in autoeroticism was harmful. Since Antiquity, the emission of semen was generally considered a cause of debilitation of intellectual faculties and physical strength, posing a danger to be avoided. From this perspective, a negative judgment had been associated with the sexual act, stemming from a morally culpable lack of necessary self-control of the mind over the body.

Tissot's positions highlighted the enduring interconnection between morality and scientific knowledge when it came to defining and evaluating sexual behavior in the eighteenth century. His considerations had a profound impact across the Europe of the time, influencing the organization of educational institutions. During the same period, Rousseau addressed this topic in his renowned work *Émile ou De l'éducation* (1762). The Genevan philosopher advised parents and educators in general with arguments similar to those presented by Casanova. Such a resemblance is intriguing, as there were instances when Casanova made a point to set himself apart from Rousseau, beginning with his approach to autobiographical practice and deviating from the concept of confessions²⁷. To parents, Rousseau recommended never leaving young men alone, neither during the day nor at night, and avoiding the opportunity for them to sleep in the same room. This precaution aimed to prevent the possibility «qu'il apprit à votre élève à donner le change à ses sens et à suppléer aux occasions de les satisfaire : s'il connaît une fois ce dangereux supplément, il est perdu»²⁸. In this manner, Rousseau reiterated the belief that once abandoned to their passions, young men would develop a sorrowful habit from which they would no longer be able to free themselves. This situation would produce serious and dire consequences for both their physical and spiritual well-being.

The fervor against masturbation reached its peak with the attention given to educational measures aimed at preventing this practice from becoming a deleterious habit among young males. Casanova criticizes the dissemination of these measures inside male colleges, «où

²⁷ Casanova/Rousseau. *Lectures croisées*, éd. par J.-C. Igalens et E. Leborgne, Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris 2019.

²⁸ J.-J. Rousseau, *Émile, ou De l'éducation*, in *Collection complète des oeuvres de J.-J. Rousseau*, Genève 1782, tome IV, p. 151.

les directeurs se donnent des soins pour empêcher les *manustuprations*». He believes that this prohibition, in reality, fueled the autoerotic practice, because

la défense l'excite. Malheureuse la république dont le législateur ne fut pas philosophe. Ce que dit Tissot n'est en partie vrai que lorsque le jeune homme se masturpe sans que la nature l'appelle ; mais cela n'arrivera jamais à un écolier à moins qu'on ne s'avise de lui défendre la chose, car dans ce cas il l'exécute pour avoir le plaisir de désobéir, plaisir naturel à tous les hommes depuis Ève, et Adam, et qu'on embrasse toutes les fois que l'occasion se présente (I, 149).

The correlation between the practice of masturbation and male sodomy is not distant but intricately linked to the cultural context of the time. Similar to masturbation, sodomy was viewed as a deviation from the procreative purpose associated with sexual acts, capable of evolving into an equally harmful and vicious pattern known as the «vice of sodomy». This possibility endangered both the individual sinner and, more broadly, the social structure, beginning with the orderly transmission of inheritance. The vice of lust, encompassing sodomy, symbolized the dominance of the body and flesh over sound reason, leading to a state of moral disorder for the individual. To avoid succumbing to the chaos of material passions that could destabilize the body, robust self-control was deemed necessary. This self-control was wielded by the mind through the discernment of good and evil.

This perspective sinks its roots in the natural philosophy of Antiquity, particularly drawing from Aristotle's foundational principles. These principles were both embraced and refined within the framework of Christian morality by figures such as Thomas Aquinas²⁹. Human behavior, including sexual activity, is perceived as a complex interplay between spiritual dimensions (soul and mind) and the physical realm (body). In this conceptual framework, human behavior emerges from sensorial experiences, where sensory organs serve as conduits for perceiving desired objects and transmitting corresponding sensations throughout the body, thereby arousing appetite. The subsequent mental visualization of the desired object engages the rational faculty, which is crucial for discerning whether to act on the stimulated appetite or exercise restraint. Consequently, the involvement of the mind in this discernment process imparts a moral dimension to subsequent actions, including those of a sexual nature. The process leading to semen emission was seen as a mechanistic and energetically demanding

activity, with the potential to disrupt the ideal balance of bodily humors. Therefore, occasions for engaging in such acts were expected to be restricted to their main purpose, which was recognized as procreation.

In addressing the prohibition associated with autoerotic practices, Casanova lends a voice to those who criticized the universality of the norm. By critiquing Tissot and redirecting the discourse toward the natural realm, Casanova shifts the focus to the interrelationships between nature, morality, and positive laws governing sexual conduct. He unveils the human origin, and the artificial status, of moral judgments concerning this aspect of human behavior. Describing sexual acts as a physiological need, whose allure is «natural» and «pleasurable», Casanova liberates them from moral prohibitions. He exposes the partial nature of norms and the potential to overcome them. Additionally, he illustrates a «libertine» space where one can engage in such acts despite prohibitions – a space that separates norms from practice, the ideal model of behavior from the actual experiences of individual lives.

In 1744, a couple of years after his seminary experience, a significant encounter with a *castrato* takes place. At the age of nineteen, Casanova was in Rimini when he happened to hear Bellino's sweet and magnetic voice. The entire episode revolves around the genuine biological sexual identity of the *castrato*, a mystery that the adventurer is eager to unravel. Casanova's curiosity about Bellino's identity is sparked by the fact that, upon seeing him, he experiences an (unexpected?) erotic excitement: «Bien loin de tenir les yeux fermés, j'admiraux ceux de Bellino, qui noirs comme des escarboucles jetaient un feu qui me brûlait l'âme» (I, 300). Consumed by an unexpected passion that made his soul «burn», Casanova became convinced that beneath the *castrato*'s attire lay a young female, not a male. «Son visage me paraissait féminin. Son habit d'homme n'empêchait pas qu'on ne vît le relief de sa gorge, ce qui fit que, malgré l'annonce, je me suis mis dans la tête que ce devait être une fille» (I, 300).

Casanova's insight proved accurate; hidden beneath the exterior of the *castrato* Bellino was Teresa. Subsequently, Teresa herself recounts her story to him, a narrative common among girls in the early modern period. Her vocal talent had been discovered by the distinguished *castrato* Felice Salimbeni (1712-1751). Orphaned of her father, Salimbeni, deeply moved, had taken Teresa to heart and placed her under the care of a music master who had recently lost a *castrato* named Bellino. In this guise, Teresa/Bellino worked to subvert the prohibition prevalent in the Papal State, where, unlike Venice, women were forbidden to perform on stage. The ban

²⁹ For an overview, see M.E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Christianity and Sexuality in the Early Modern World. Regulating Desire, Reforming Practice*, 3rd edition, Routledge, London 2020.

had been imposed by Pope Sixtus V in 1589, prohibiting actresses and singers, thereby fostering the rise of *castrati* – a phenomenon where orphans and impoverished children could maintain a soprano voice for an extended period of their lives, attracting the curiosity of many enthusiastic spectators³⁰. To maintain the illusion, Teresa/Bellino resorted to wearing a contraption on her pubis that simulated the appearance of male genitalia.

It is interesting to note Casanova's stance regarding his «non-conforming» attraction to the *castrato* Bellino. On the one hand, he openly acknowledges being personally drawn to his beauty, to the extent of even dreaming about erotic intercourse with him. On the other, his obsessive need to understand and reveal Bellino's biological sex as being female serves as a mechanism to justify his attraction as «normal», redirecting it towards the socially accepted domains of heterosexuality and masculine standards. The explicit admiration for Bellino's beauty can be connected to Casanova's philosophical exploration of the theme, as reflected in his manuscripts. In his *Thoughts on Beauty*, penned roughly during the same period as this incident, he reflects on the notion that beauty first captivates the eyes and subsequently engages the other senses³¹. Casanova wants to succeed in uncovering the true gender of the *castrato*, convinced that his own instinct cannot have deceived him about the individual's sex. He also concludes that if he had discovered that Bellino was male, he would not have been able to have a sexual relationship with him: «C'est une abomination pour laquelle, Dieu soit loué, je ne me sens aucun gout» (I, 313). This could suggest a certain initial reluctance on Casanova's part towards male sodomy, referring to it as an «abomination», something foreign to his preferences. In addition to moral concerns, this hesitation must be attributed to the risk of being reported to civil authorities and having to face the corresponding legal sanctions prescribed for the crime of sodomy. Bellino seems to fully embody the position of moral norm. In response to Casanova's persistent advances, he consistently refuses, explicitly rejecting any sexual relationship and stating that «La religion me le defend» (I, 303). Considering him a male, Bellino adds that

mon devoir est de n'avoir pour ce que vous voulez la moindre complaisance, car votre passion, qui n'est maintenant que naturelle, deviendrait tout d'un coup mons-

trueuse. Votre nature ardente deviendrait l'ennemie de votre raison, et votre raison même deviendrait facilement complaisante au point que devenant complice de votre égarement elle se mettrait de moitié avec votre nature. Cet éclaircissement incendiaire que vous souhaitez, que vous ne craignez pas, et que vous me demandez, ne vous laisserait plus maître de vous-même (I, 315).

In narrating male homoeroticism, Casanova navigates a discourse between the regulatory framework, marked by an anti-reproductive prohibition, and the libertine dimension that challenges and questions it. While he acknowledges his attraction to the *castrato* Bellino, enticed by the illicit nature of such pleasure, he concurrently confronts the norms and social conventions. Sodomitic pleasure is characterized as «monstrous», much like lesbianism («brutal desires», «monstrous imagination»), depicting it as a satisfaction arising from the subjugation of reason to carnal desires. Devoid of reason – the very trait distinguishing humans from beasts – same-sex male encounters take on a «bestial», «monstrous» nature. In responding to Bellino's morally grounded refusals, Casanova labels the sin/crime of sodomy as a «risky game with no lasting consequences». This risk forces indulgence in such pleasure to be concealed, kept in silence and hidden to evade condemnation from political and religious authorities. Paradoxically, this clandestine nature seems to add an extra layer of allure for a libertine such as Casanova, making the pursuit of such pleasure even more alluring.

SODOMY AND SEXUAL AMBIGUITY AS LIBERTINE PRACTICES

The dual dimension characterizing sexual behaviors and their judgment between public, private, and socially accepted spheres is described through a conversation that Casanova engages in with a Roman *monsignor* in Florence, in 1760. Discussing *castrati*, Casanova argues that the Pope should prohibit the practice of castration, allowing women to perform on the stage. Their substitution, indeed, does not work according to Casanova: women have been removed to prevent them from exciting the senses of the spectators, but the result is that *castrati* still manage to arouse the senses of the audience. However, the *monsignor* opposes, suggesting that the existence of *castrati* serves as a convenient compromise for those who desire to engage in same-sex pleasures:

On ne pourrait pas sans scandale donner à souper à une belle chanteuse tête-à-tête ; et on peut donner à souper à un castrato. Il est vrai qu'après on va se coucher avec lui

³⁰ See M. Barbagli, *Cantori*, in Id., *Uomini senza. Storia degli eunuchi e del declino della violenza*, il Mulino, Bologna 2023, pp. 243-278; G. Sole, *Castrati e cicisbei. Ideologia e moda nel Settecento italiano*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 2008; P. Barbier, *Histoire des castrats*, Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle, Paris 1989.

³¹ See *Pensieri sopra la bellezza*, in *Giacomo Casanova. Tra Venezia e l'Europa*, a cura di G. Pizzamiglio, Olschki, Firenze 2001, pp. 321-330.

; mais tout le monde doit l'ignorer ; et si on le sait, on ne peut pas jurer qu'il y ait eu du mal, car au bout du compte c'est un homme, tandis qu'on ne peut coucher avec une femme que pour jouir d'elle (II, 793).

Sexual ambiguity for Casanova becomes a catalyst for freedom, permitting actions that societal norms prohibit. This chimes with the premise that eighteenth-century society tolerated libertines but condemned the overt expression of same-sex attraction. This shift in perspective marks a significant change in Casanova's attitude towards male homoeroticism, evident even in his personal experiences. He evolves from a predominantly negative stance to a more permissive one. This change is exemplified during the transition between two journeys: in 1743 in Naples and in 1760 in Florence. Initially, Casanova openly embraces common stereotypes about the Neapolitan city, revealing that he chose to sleep in his trousers during the trip, driven by both the fear of theft and a «precaution» in a country where «le goût antiphysique est commun» (I, 221). Conversely, in Florence, while rejecting the advances of a man, he adopts a more lenient stance on sodomy, devoid of moral and normative judgments. He confines this acceptance within the bounds of close friendship, suggesting that for him, the significance lies not solely in the act itself but in the understanding shared with the individual: «Dans ma nature le manège de la manchette n'aurait jamais su être que la suite d'une ivresse excite par une grande amitié» (II, 711).

The change in attitude towards male sodomy reaches its peak in the two episodes where he was involved personally: in his youth, in Constantinople with the minister of foreign affairs Effendi Ismail (in 1744), and as an adult, in St. Petersburg with the Lieutenant Lunin (in 1765). It is not insignificant that Casanova geographically situates these two episodes on the borders of what was considered the «civilized world» at the times: two political, cultural, and social elsewhere, namely the Ottoman Empire and the Russian Empire, which even the Enlightenment thinkers observed with interest. In those foreign countries, where the norms of the old European continent might not have arrived, also sexual transgression becomes possible³². In the case of Ismail, the relationship occurs almost out of necessity. Casanova had been visiting the house of the Turkish minister for several weeks, during which they had the opportunity to have lunch together and engage in discussions on religion, philosophy, and whether spiritual pleasures were to be preferred over carnal ones. On one of these occasions, following a lunch and after already rejecting Ismail's advances once,

the two find themselves together in a pavilion in the garden. Unseen from behind a window, they observe two or three girls bathing naked in the surrounding pond. The sight of this lascivious spectacle arouses Casanova's sexual appetite, and he confesses that, out of necessity, he was compelled to vent his excitement «dans l'objet que j'avais à mon côté», i.e. Ismail (I, 388).

As observed by T. Emery, Casanova does not exhibit any attraction towards Ismail himself. His excitement stems from the Turkish concubines, and when «forced to choose between a homosexual act and an act of ingratitude toward his host, it is the latter that the traveler finds unnatural»³³. Moreover, it is crucial to consider that the youthful narratives in the *Memoirs* are steeped in philosophical speculations, suggesting the potential that the events described therein might have been fabricated or romanticized. In the following case of Lieutenant Lunin, however, Casanova delves into more explicit involvement. The younger of two brothers, he is described as blond and «joli comme une fille». Intelligent and adept at winning favor, Lunin was a «professional lover» of some influential men. Believing Casanova to be sodomite, Lunin makes advances during a meal in the presence of Zaira, the girl accompanying the adventurer at the time. Much like the situation involving the *castrato* Bellino, Casanova initially assumes Lunin to be a girl, but the lieutenant dispels this notion by displaying his male genitalia. Subsequently, the two engage in action as Lunin realizes he pleases Casanova, positioning himself «en position de faire son bonheur et le mien», eliciting jealousy from Zaira. Casanova concludes by recalling that between the young Russian and himself, they exchanged «des marques de la plus tendre amitié et nous nous jurâmes éternelle» (III, 338).

Understanding the mindset of an individual from the eighteenth century poses a formidable challenge, just as navigating the complexities of events shaped by literary practices proves intricate. Nevertheless, transcending the perils of anachronism and grappling with concerns surrounding source objectivity, *Histoire de Ma Vie* furnishes valuable and captivating insights into what contemporary discourse now designates as homosexuality. The narrative undeniably encapsulates precise references to both same-sex practices and the accompanying sentiments. Some precautions always need to be considered. For instance, it is crucial to verify the events recounted in the *Memoirs* by means of alternative sources whenever possible. This is because the text underwent numerous revisions, frequently undertaken to safeguard the dignity of the individuals mentioned, in line with a typically

³² See Gassner, *Giacomo Casanova und die sexuelle Geographie Europas*, cit.

³³ See Emery, *Queer Casanova*, cit., p. 29.

eighteenth-century conception of honor. However, even within Casanova's preparatory notes housed at the State Archive in Prague, instances alluding to homoeroticism have been unearthed. Noteworthy among these are three episodes that, albeit omitted from the *Histoire*, bear unequivocal titles: «Mon amour pour le giton du duc d'Elboeuf», «Pédérastie avec * à Dunkerque», and «Pédérastie avec Bazin et ses sœurs»³⁴. Additionally, a dispatch from the guard who apprehended Casanova in Venice in 1755, preserved at the State Archive of Venice, reveals that among the items seized during his arrest was a concise composition spanning three sheets addressing «the use of coitus in straight and indirect ways»³⁵. When contextualized within the cultural milieu of the period – an age marked by repression, which forced silence and dissimulation – these traces offer profound insights into how both male and female homoeroticism were alluded to, even in the absence of a specific and modern word «with which to express it».

³⁴ M.-F. Luna, *Casanova mémorialiste*, Honoré Champion, Paris 1998, p. 70.

³⁵ Archivio di Stato di Venezia, *Inquisitori di Stato*, 612, Report by G.B. Manuzzi, July 12, 1755.