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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

## Giacomo Casanova

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### Keywords

Aristocracy

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### Abstract

Casanova's sociability was the result of his personality, and his life, most of which – at least the part recounted – was spent as a wanderer throughout Europe, an adventurer seeking fortune. Casanova made his living by such varied means as organizing a royal lottery, gambling, and at times acting as a confidence man. Even though it is difficult to draw some general conclusions about Casanova's sociability, it is evident that he straddled several, more or less legitimate networks, demonstrating their interconnectedness in eighteenth-century culture. His memoir shows his sociability in all its rich and messy reality, deployed in a continuous present yet rooted in the historicity of the multiple interconnected worlds that he frequented.

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In his novel *Icosameron* (1787), organized as a narrative deployed in twenty evenings in good company after dinner, Giacomo Casanova has one of his characters say: ‘l’homme ne peut jouir de ce qu’il sait qu’autant qu’il peut le communiquer à quelqu’un; la sociabilité est dans son instinct.’<sup>1</sup> On another occasion, he exclaims: ‘Dans ce monde, pour être heureux, il faut se faire aimer’.<sup>2</sup> These claims can be taken as an apt expression of Casanova’s own life, narrated in the autobiographical narrative that turned him into a myth.

But there is nothing mythical or fictional in the sociability and the various human (including sexual) connections that Casanova recounts in his *Histoire de ma vie*. Described by scholars as a ‘true encyclopedia of the eighteenth century’, the *History* boasts of an index which is over a hundred pages long, each carrying no less than thirty entries. As such, it is a testimony to the staggering number of persons he recollects having met, an extraordinary feat even in a genre reputed for focusing on sociability, such as personal memoirs.

Such sociability was the result of his personality, and his life, most of which – at least the part recounted – was spent as a wanderer throughout Europe, an adventurer seeking fortune. Casanova made his living by such varied means as organizing a royal lottery, gambling, and at times acting as a confidence man. A recent autobiographer introduces him as an ‘actor, lover, priest, and spy.’<sup>3</sup> Born in 1725 to a couple of actors in Venice, a city which heavily privileged ranks and aristocracy, Giacomo Casanova had no status and no resources to enjoy its beguiling pleasures. To ensure the life of adventure, freedom and luxury that he wanted to have, he needed to count on personal charm, and an active sociability. No wonder, therefore, that establishing connections in varied social networks was his principal activity and source of revenue, and the main subject of his writing.

Some such contacts were sought by Casanova, who made efforts to meet royalty, famous men of letters and reputed scholars. Others were serendipitous encounters, often on the road, such as in a shared carriage, an inn, or a shared table, and they represented a usual starting point for his sexual adventures. Early in his life, a chance encounter with a rich Venetian senator durably changed his life: after Casanova witnessed his stroke and helped nurse him back to life, the elderly patrician adopted him and financially supported him for the rest of his life. Several other such relationships with rich aristocrats were equally profitable. The Senator Malipiero introduced him to the Venetian good society and taught him noble manners; the French ambassador to Venice and later Louis XV’s Foreign Affairs Minister, abbé de Bernis, whom Casanova met as a fellow libertine, helped him set up a royal lottery in Paris that brought him prosperity for a time; the ultra-rich alchemy devotee, Mme d’Urfé, simply gave him millions for imaginary alchemical undertakings. Other sociable endeavors, however, did not bring him any financial or even symbolic benefit: [Voltaire](#), whom Casanova visited in his residence at Ferney, did not think much of him; Emperor Frederick II of Prussia noticed him, but only for his good looks; Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia conversed with him but did not entrust him with any assignment.

But Casanova’s connections were not based solely, or even mainly, on expectations of material profit. His interactions with others were genuine, enjoyable, and often based on

mutual pleasure and common interests. At times, they would evolve into a real friendship and a long-term epistolary connection: the playwright Crébillon the elder, the physicist and natural scientist Albrecht von Haller, the economist abbé Galiani, the art critic Winckelmann, the painter Mengs, the Prince de Ligne, and many others with whom he was close over time testify to his friendliness. Casanova regularly frequented literary circles and belonged to several learned Academies. He was also a member of a more secretive and tightly connected network, the Freemasons, who helped him access high society in cities such as London, Saint-Petersburg, Paris or Madrid. But his most natural companionship came from the world of theatre. Socializing with actresses, dancers and opera singers came naturally to him, and while he would often carry on an affair with one, he also simply enjoyed their company (he was also a close friend to several male dancers), hosted them lavishly at times, helped them financially when they needed it, and was in turn helped by them. In his many travels, Casanova would meet the touring *virtuosas* in one metropolis, carry on an affair, reconnect again upon meeting elsewhere, sometimes rekindling their tryst, at other times simply recollecting together their past adventures. Unfortunately, Casanova's openness also had its darker side, as European leisure resorts and spas were also the hunting ground of professional gamblers, adventurers and crooks who constituted an important facet of Casanova's social relations, and haunted him throughout his life.

Casanova's encounters are not only striking for their sheer number, even though they constitute a prominent topic of his writing, especially with women. Spending time in good company, often around a meal seasoned by good story-telling, and witty exchanges, was a crucial and enjoyable aspect described in the *History*. He valued a table not only for his host's excellent cook, 'mais par l'attrait de la compagnie faite pour faire plaisir' rather than one where gaiety was hampered by etiquette (III, 214). On such suppers, he was able to hold forth for several hours, amusing the guests and making them laugh. He did it in Paris, at the home of the famous comedienne Silvia, by recounting his blunders as a newcomer to the city (I, 625) and on many other occasions. A long-time friend of his, the count de Clary described him as 'aimable, vif, content à merveille, intéressant, jamais ennuyeux'.<sup>4</sup> He was not just a superior entertainer, though, but a good listener, underlining his 'curiosité insatiable de connaître les hommes en les faisant parler' (III, 500). Such conversations, often wittily reproduced in his memoirs, were not only the core of his sociability, but also the kernel of his future writing. Already middle-aged, after a visit to a couple of old friends, he remarked that such encounters and reminiscences were his favorite moments and that he delighted as much in telling his adventures, as in listening to those of his interlocutor (III, 430). It is obvious that the story of his life was the object of a sustained oral practice and reworkings before it became a written autobiography.

Casanova's stay in London which lasted almost a year is an apt illustration of his usual strategy for creating social connections, as well as of its limits in a new country. Immediately upon arrival, equipped with substantial bills of exchange (*lettres de change*) and numerous letters of recommendation, he presented himself to all his bankers, who offered him their personal services: 'Le matin j'allais à la Bourse, ou je faisais des connaissances' (III, 16). One such, a broker of French origin, found him a good servant, a merchant who sold French wines, a cook who could speak French, and introduced him to several 'strange confraternities', clubs and masonic lodges. The same day, an Italian man of letters he met at a

coffee house showed him a house for rent and negotiated his lease. It is clear that in a foreign country, Casanova's first contacts were people who spoke French or Italian, and helped him with practical aspects of life. Martinelli, with whom he shared certain literary interests as well as a language, also introduced him to a reputed scholar, Dr. Matti, member of the Royal Society and librarian at the British Museum with whom he established a close permanent contact. While they did not bring any material profit, such contacts bolstered his aspirations to be part of the Republic of letters.

But Casanova had come to London hoping to establish a type of lottery that he had successfully launched in Paris and for that he needed to be introduced to the aristocracy and the Court. Thus, on his second day in London, dressed in a tailcoat (*habillé en frac*), he carried letters of introduction to the Venetian resident in London, and to the French ambassador, who officially introduced him at court. Another letter of introduction was handed to Lady Harrington, a famous socialite in whose salon he met scores of other ladies. There, he entertained the company for almost one hour with his first impressions of London (which the reader finds narrated in the *History*), but he also received a gentle reprimand when he used a silver pound instead of a banknote to pay a gambling debt : 'Chez nous, payer en monnaie sonnante est une petite grossièreté qu'on pardonne cependant facilement a un étranger, qui ne peut savoir les usages' (III, 23). Another amusing anecdote illustrates the importance of formal introductions in high society: one rainy evening as he was offered a ride in her carriage by a charming lady who happened to speak French, Casanova promptly turned it into a tryst in which he was able to 'provide her with the greatest evidence that I found her perfectly to my taste' (III, 31). A couple of weeks later, he ran into her in a salon and, noticing that she acted as if she didn't recognize him, reminded her of their encounter, to which she replied that such 'follies' do not represent an entitlement to a formal introduction. While these little 'lessons' provide amusing anecdotes, it is clear that Casanova had trouble with English aristocratic sociability, not least because of his linguistic limitations. In spite of a number of witty observations concerning his admiration or curiosity for their mores, he stated : 'L'île qu'on appelle l'Angleterre est une mer qui a des bancs de sable; ceux qui y naviguent doivent la parcourir avec des précautions' (III, 26). Later, he would add that in England, like in Spain, 'la qualité d'étranger est un défaut' (III, 579). Such a conclusion was no doubt reinforced by the fact that he was not able to realize any of his financial plans, and had to flee the country destitute and ill.

As mentioned, another world that Casanova generally cultivated was the theatre. Shortly after his arrival in London, he was sent air kisses from a balcony by a pretty woman. It was 'La Binetti', a dancer who had been his lover a long time ago and who happened to be touring England, and staying in his neighborhood. They were soon reunited and, even though they did not renew their romance, they spent hours telling each other about their adventures, and exchanging news about other theatre people. Like Martinelli who acquainted him with the English customs and the London demi-monde, she remained a precious informant about the intrigues of other divas, such as La Calori, whom Casanova got to frequent later. Both of these women reappear in Casanova's narrative: La Binetti, whom he knew from Venice, he saw again in Warsaw; with La Calori he met up in Vienna and 'spent six happy hours' telling each other their respective adventures since their last encounter (III, 372, note (a)). Such examples abound, demonstrating that in the peripatetic life led by Italian theatre companies as well as by Casanova, he was a welcome guest, cultivating many erotic or friendly ties. This

demi-monde, however, was the central node of a network that included cardsharps or pimps looking to gain access to wealthy aristocratic gamblers and libertines. Some virtuosas were even married to crooks as was La Calori about whose husband, Casanova recounts a funny anecdote: the man had come to London to claim any gains she had made, but instead, the savvy diva who was aware of the English marital law had him jailed on account of her debts.

In the large and prosperous city of London, such crooks abounded and Casanova's narrative provides a prime example of their underground networks in which assumed identities and swift geographical mobility were the rule. Like the opera singers and dancers, adventurers who came from the continent spoke French or Italian, and thus easily became Casanova's company, and his nemesis. One such shady character was Castel-Bajac with whose wife the libertine lord Pembroke, an aristocrat friendly with Casanova, was carrying on an affair. Even though Casanova recognized in Castel-Bajac the scoundrel who had falsely testified against him, six years earlier in Paris, he accepted the invitation to engage in gambling with him and his friend, a count Schwerin. When Casanova refused their request to gamble on their word of honor, the two men gave him counterfeited banknotes. He denounced them to the authorities and Castel-Bajac promptly fled to France, but Schwerin was jailed, and escaped the gallows only by begging Casanova to desist from his accusation, which the Venetian finally did, out of pity. He met again both men, this time in Leipzig, and even carried on a brief affair with the alleged Mme Castel-Bajac, who had since changed her name twice.

The self-styled 'chevalier' Goudar, was another such character who straddled the Republic of Letters and the underground and whom Casanova met through Lord Pembroke. A low level yet prolific author, Goudar authored epistolary novels modelled after Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, such as *L'Aventurier francais*, *L'Histoire des Grecs, ou de ceux qui corrigent la fortune au jeu*, and *Lettres d'un espion chinois*, to which Casanova actually contributed. Another work was *L'Espion François à Londres: ou, Observations critiques sur l'Angleterre et sur les Anglois*, which might have inspired Casanova's own account. Goudar, like Castel-Bajac, is a repeated presence in Casanova's memoirs, as he ran into the man again years later in Naples, where he hosted a gambling den and acted as a procurer for his own wife. In London, though, Goudar introduced Casanova to a young courtesan who became his most accursed passion: La Charpillon. Another node in the network that connects aristocratic sociability with that of the libertine demi-monde, La Charpillon was also a recurring presence as she reminded Casanova of their first encounter, in Paris, when she was thirteen. Now seventeen, this young sought-after beauty proceeded to seduce and ruin the aging Casanova and bring him to the verge of suicide. After almost a year in England, and a resounding failure as a lover, Casanova was financially and emotionally bankrupt. It was at that point that one last gambling crook put an end to his stay in England by passing him a counterfeited letter of change that Casanova cashed and could not reimburse. As the counterfeiter fled the country before he could confront him, Casanova had to follow immediately, even though he was destitute and very sick with syphilis. To settle his accounts, he mentioned that the man was hanged for the same deed a few months later in Lisbon.

Even though it is difficult to draw some general conclusions about Casanova's sociability, it is evident that he straddled several, more or less legitimate networks, demonstrating their interconnectedness in eighteenth-century culture: scholarly and literary circles, aristocracy and the court, libertines and the demi-monde of theatre and opera. In all these groups, Casanova formed lasting relationships. He was happy to run into them repeatedly, and he kept

extensive correspondences with some. Even in a new city, Casanova drew on his past relationships to increase his circle, as men of letters, adventurers and theatre troupes were by and large cosmopolitan. The sheer number of individuals listed in his collection, often with a short notice of their previous meeting, or the indication that they will reappear in his narrative, is stunning and testifies to extensive notes that he must have taken about his social circles. Those were recorded with the same meticulousness as his love affairs, money transactions, foods he ate, carriages, and inns he used, and they represent obviously a significant aspect of his life. Running into old acquaintances was for him a great source of pleasure, and he was able to spend hours in conversation, recapitulating their respective adventures. This gave a sense of continuity to their peripatetic lives, but it also served him as a kind of rehearsal for the autobiography that was to come. For his readers, such diachrony, even though it often has to be trailed through editors' notes, carries the depth of a real life. Unlike a novel, which demands a narrative arc such as no human life can ever provide, Casanova's memoir shows his sociability in all its rich and messy reality, deployed in a continuous present yet rooted in the historicity of the multiple interconnected worlds that he frequented.

1. Giacomo Casanova, *Icosameron ou Histoire d'Edouard et d'Elisabeth qui passèrent quatre-vingt-un ans chez les Mégamires, habitants aborigènes du protocosme dans l'intérieur de notre globe* (Paris: Éditions François Bourin, 1988), p. 83.
  2. Giacomo Casanova, *Histoire de ma vie*, vol. I-III (Paris: Gallimard, bibl. de la Pleiade, 2014-15). *History of My Life*, trans. by Willard Trask (Harcourt: Brace and World, 1966), reprinted in 6 books (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). Further designated as *Histoire*. Quotes are in the text, vol. and p. of the French edition.
  3. Ian Kelly, *Casanova. Actor, Lover, Priest, Spy* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2011).
  4. Comte de Clary, *Journal*, 30 juin, 1795, quoted in *Histoire* (III, 951).
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[Casanova in London \(1763\)](#)