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Manon Balletti:
A Teenage Dream of Love in Eighteenth-Century Europe

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Editorial Introduction

Giacomo Girolamo Casanova (1725-1798) was an Italian known for his amorous adventures in the eighteenth century. Born to a family of actors in Venice, he began a life of travel at seventeen. Over the course of his long life, Casanova traveled widely and met people from every walk of life. He was known to be uniquely handsome, and always appeared to be rich, making it easier to seduce women of any class or age, and he honed those skills to perfection. Casanova boasted that he had slept with several hundred women across the continent in his twelve-volume memoir, *History of My Life*, which provides rich details of the women he loved in his life. Many of the characters in the book have fictitious names or initials to hide their identity, but some are written about under their real names. One of these remarkable women is Manon Balletti, a young girl from France, whose letters Casanova kept long after they parted company. Forty-one of Manon's approximately 200 letters survive, dating from 1757 to 1759. In the essay below, the author vividly recovers one of the love stories of the most famous lover in history through a detailed examination of Manon's extant letters, thus providing the reader with a unique opportunity to learn about women and gender in the eighteenth century.

Maria Magdalena Balletti, called Manon by her family, was born in Paris in 1740 to the Italian actors Rosa Giovanna and Mario Balletti. Rosa and Mario were the married power couple on the Parisian stage, performing together for the Comédie Italienne since 1720. Rosa was known as “Silvia,” a reference to one of the female romantic leads she was famous for portraying. The Ballettis had already risen to great heights of popularity and climbed the social ladder in Paris when Manon was born, and she enjoyed a privileged childhood.¹

Manon first met Casanova in 1750 when she was nine years old. He arrived in Paris with her brother, Antonio, when he returned from university in Italy. She seems to have been fascinated by this handsome stranger who became inseparable from her family for the next two years. At this time, Casanova barely noticed Manon and was more interested in flirting with her glamorous and beautiful mother. Casanova seems to have felt right at home within this tight-knit family who was, in some ways, greatly similar to his own. Very little is written of Manon in his memoirs during this period as she was merely a child, and Casanova’s interest always lay with sophisticated and intelligent women.

After a lavish life of luxury and socializing, Casanova left Paris in 1752 and made his way back to Venice. In the meantime, Manon grew up. She was formally educated in an Ursuline convent in Paris, a path very unusual for an actress’s daughter. Actors and their families were often on the fringes of society or considered part of the underclass; typically their children would not have had access to formal education. Silvia was very careful not to encourage her daughter to

¹ The life of Manon in this essay is constructed based on Giacomo Casanova, *History of My Life*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967-1971) and Judith Summers, *Casanova’s Women: The Great Seducer and the Women He Loved* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2006).

follow her into the acting life, and the stigma associated with it, but rather cultivated her talents for singing and dancing alongside reading, writing, music lessons, and other things which would make her attractive and acceptable on the marriage market.

When Manon was at home, she was taught to play the guitar and harpsichord. Her music lessons were given by Charles François Clément, a composer and harpsichordist who asked for her hand in marriage in 1754. Her parents considered him a suitable match, “Although twenty years Manon’s senior, Clément was a...famous composer...Marriage to him would provide their daughter with a secure future...” and security was the ultimate goal for any eighteenth century woman.² At this time, marriage was not a personal choice, but a family decision. Making a good marriage led to a chance for real social advancement, but making a bad one would lose the whole family money and reputation. Things were changing in the eighteenth century though, and many were coming to believe that love and personal choice created stronger bonds than strategic marriages for money and social position. However, this was not the norm, and many aspects of the Balletti’s life were riding on the decision of marriage for their only daughter. At this time, Manon’s future looked secure, and Casanova had not reentered the picture.

In Venice, Casanova had been followed and investigated by the Venetian government and was arrested on July 25, 1755 and imprisoned. Fifteen months later, he made his escape and now, being a criminal and a refugee from his native country, he made his way to Paris arriving there in January 1757. This is how Casanova magically reappeared in Manon’s life, and their interactions this time were quite different. Casanova was now thirty-two years old, an accomplished swindler, free-loading, world-wizened womanizer. Recognizing that he was an exile without friends or resources in Paris, Casanova determined to use this opportunity to “make the acquaintance of the

² Summers, 201; Margaret R. Hunt, *Women in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (UK: Pearson Education Limited, 2010), 49.

great and the powerful, [and] exercise strict self-control...”³ He decided to use any new contacts to his full advantage. This, like so many others, is another promise that Casanova makes to himself in all earnestness, but can never keep. He did remember his friends the Ballettis and quickly made his way to their house seeking their hospitality. As soon as he arrived, Casanova noted, “...I embraced father and mother, whom I found treating me just as they had done when I left in 1752. But what struck me was Mademoiselle Balletti...”⁴ In typical fashion, Casanova cannot fail (or resist) to notice the pretty young girl in the room, who, by some accounts, was even prettier than her mother. He spends the first few chapters of volume five of his memoirs referring to Manon intermittently, as well as to the money he made and the life he began to build. During his acquaintance with a lady referred to as Mademoiselle de la M—re, Casanova admits that, rather than truly being in love with her, he was beginning to fall for Manon instead.

This realization is indicative of the course of many of Casanova’s relationships, so of course, his affections were not limited exclusively to Manon by any means. By his own admission, he still enjoyed “the mercenary beauties who brightened the haunts of pleasure...”⁵ Nevertheless, and despite his reservations in pursuing Manon because of his friendship with her family, Casanova wrote that “Silvia’s daughter loved me, and she knew that I loved her even though I had never made her a declaration...” and before the end of the page, Casanova concluded that Clément was truly in love with Manon, and thus “She knew that [I knew and], once I was certain of it, I should be led to make a declaration, and she was not mistaken.”⁶ Manon immediately broke her engagement with Clément and invested all her love and hope in a relationship with Casanova.

³ Casanova, 5:19.

⁴ Ibid., 5:16.

⁵ Ibid., 5:99.

⁶ Casanova, 5:72; Summers, 213.

One of Manon's earliest letters that have survived was written sometime at the end of May 1757. Casanova was feeling extremely nervous flirting with Manon and insecure in the new step their relationship had taken. She had been a safe amusement as long as she was engaged to another man and unavailable. Manon was by now head over heels in love, totally devoted to Casanova, and was seeking a way to marry him. However, their attachment was still a secret, and in her letter, Manon confesses some anxiety about her mother continuing to try to find her a finacé to replace Clément. She quickly dismisses this fear because the man engaged to help find the suitable match is "an old bachelor" who disapproves of marriage for a girl of "seventeen years who only thinks of trifling things."⁷ She feels she has time to consider different candidates and delay her parents because she is still young. At seventeen, Manon had reached the end of her education and was ready to begin the next part of her life as a wife and mother, something her parents did not want to leave for too long.

It becomes obvious from her first letter that Manon has a dream about marriage. She does not want to be given "to someone that neither she [Silvia] nor I know..." decidedly stating that if a stranger was found and came to ask her to marry him, she would "make him feel to the best of my abilities that I have no taste for the marriage, that I find myself very happy, and that if it were absolutely necessary that I take a husband, I would want...to know him enough to love him."⁸ Arranged marriages were not something to be entered into lightly, and many women even displayed hostility towards marriage of any kind. Marriage was structured to benefit only the husband, with him controlling his wife's money, property, their children, and even her body. If things were going badly, a woman had very few resources to help her, and abuse was hardly ever

⁷ Manon Balletti to Jacques Casanova, Paris, end of May 1757, in *Lettres de Femmes à Jacques Casanova: Recueillies et annotées par Aldo Ravà*, 26.

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.31175018308042;view=1up;seq=9>.

⁸ Manon to Casanova, end of May, 1757, 26.

grounds for divorce or separation. On the brighter side, there was always the chance that two people would fall in love later, and enjoy a happy relationship, but whether this was possible or not was a gamble. Manon is concerned that if she marries someone she does not know, she has no idea what she will be walking into, and once she is married, there will be no getting out of it as her husband will legally own her.

Manon continues the letter saying that she is concerned that Casanova's love for her is fading already, but that "...the tender friendship that I have for you is not diminished in any fashion, I find that I am to be pitied for having made you know it, and I even fear that that admission only served to drive you further from me..."⁹ In this realization, Manon shows that she is actually very perceptive as to the nature of Casanova's love for her. Perhaps without realizing it, Manon has touched upon the cause for his sudden emotional distance. He had recently made his declaration of love for her, but this made Casanova very uncomfortable and so he backed away from his flirtations and found other women. Unfortunately, instead of attributing this change to his fickle nature, she attributes it to her "...thousands of faults...and the more one knows me, the more one will discover..."¹⁰ Manon will repeatedly transfer all blame on herself for things that go wrong in their relationship, and it seems Casanova did not discourage her from this. He "knew women well enough to be able to tell that his friend's sister hero-worshiped him" and Casanova was the same as a man in any age. He was flattered that a girl fifteen years his junior was in love with him, and he readily let his vanity take control. Believing in Casanova's sincerity, a belief which led her in turn to believe in his infallibility, is merely the first misperception of many on Manon's part.

Casanova's treatment of their relationship continued to worsen. He fell in love with yet another woman, and readily admitted that the "attachment to Silvia's daughter was a kind which

⁹ Ibid., 27.

¹⁰ Ibid., 27.

did not prevent me from falling in love...”¹¹ At this point in his life, women barely hold his attention and they blend together in an endless stream of pretty faces and ephemeral liaisons. “Silvia’s daughter,” as he routinely refers to Manon in the *Memoirs*, became part of this milieu and Casanova realized coldly that “Unless it receives a certain amount of food, a libertine’s love very quickly becomes cold, and women know this when they have a little experience. The Balletti girl was a complete novice.”¹² Casanova’s choice when writing the *Memoirs* to refer to Manon very rarely by her own name signals that he was not engaged in this relationship and even disgusted by it. This is conveyed clearly, even though it was nearly forty years after his affair with Manon that Casanova began writing. Manon’s inexperience and youth proved unacceptable to him and would lead to the breaking point in their relationship.

Casanova continued his whirlwind life in Paris, climbing to ever greater heights of social popularity while Manon continued to experience more anxiety and strain at home. Silvia’s health had been deteriorating for some time, and this had put an additional strain on her relationship with Casanova. Things continued to spiral through the spring and summer of 1758. Manon wrote in April that “I could not respond...to all the hard things that you told me” and “it took great force to hide from you the tears that your reproaches caused me.”¹³ In reality, Casanova had wanted their relationship to end after only two months, which would have been in mid-summer 1757. Soon after that point, Casanova truly began to feel trapped and he dealt with this by becoming “increasingly fractious and inconsistent towards Manon...” and she in turn “reacted by abasing herself more and more.”¹⁴ Now Casanova “fed Manon just enough affection to keep her hopes

¹¹ Casanova, 5:177.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Manon to Casanova, Paris, c. beginning of April, 1758, 46.

¹⁴ Summers, 213-214.

alive.”¹⁵ Casanova spent most of his time preoccupied with socializing, and “enjoying himself in the arms of other women...He was too busy to see her. He no longer told her that he loved her.”¹⁶ This neglect only served to make Manon more jealous, clingy, moody, and insecure. She displayed all the typical behavior of a teenager “experiencing the pangs of first love.”¹⁷ Unfortunately for Manon, Casanova was no longer young, and this was not his first love. Her immaturity and inability to handle the situation only served to alienate him further.

Thus we find Manon at midnight in April 1758 asking by letter “...have you forgotten, my dear Casanova, that you loved me (because I dare not flatter myself that you still love me)...”¹⁸ Manon’s insecurities about being loved, and the state of his love, abound in this letter, which refers to a conversation with Casanova in which he apparently told her all the things he found wrong with her, perhaps wishing that she would see he was ready to be done and end the relationship herself. Instead of taking the strong hints, Manon begs to see him “to prove to you that I love you and that the mistakes that I make come only from the soul. I am sorry...”¹⁹ Manon’s desperation is clear both in her word choice and in her sentence structure. The letter consists of multiple run-on sentences, frantically dashing from bewilderment at Casanova’s demeanor towards her to apologies punctuated with exclamation points and then plans to greatly improve herself to please him. She frequently begs to justify her actions, earn his tenderness again, and prove her love. Manon ends her letter with loving good nights and the pertinent question which occupies her mind, “Ah! could you no longer love me?”²⁰

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 215-216.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 215.

¹⁸ Manon to Casanova, c. beginning of April, 1758, 46.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

It was soon after this letter was written that Silvia's health began to fail. As she declined, the strain on Manon and Casanova's relationship continued to increase. They had a bigger argument in the summer of 1758, after which Manon finally confessed to her mother that she was in love with the family's dashing friend. Silvia responded with joy. She knew she was dying, and perhaps she saw this as a real chance to see her daughter secure a future before she died.²¹ In making her will, Silvia left a large financial portion to Manon saying that "she had spent more on her sons' education than on her daughter's" but probably her main concern was "who would look out for the girl's interests when she was no longer around to do so?"²²

Silvia died on September 16, 1758 of consumption, known now as tuberculosis, as Casanova relates, "...in her [Manon's] arms and mine. Ten minutes before she expired she commended her daughter to my care. I promised from my soul that I would make her my wife..." but as with so many promises, Casanova had no intention of following through.²³ Indeed, on the same page, Casanova wrote that, "Manon Balletti made me miserable with her jealousy and her justified reproaches."²⁴ Casanova stayed with the family for three days after Silvia's death, and then left for Amsterdam on government business. He wrote that he left "...Manon in tears, but I was sure I should make her happy when I returned to Paris."²⁵

Without her mother, Manon's situation was becoming desperate. Pressured by her family to return to the convent where she had been educated until her future was decided for her, she desperately tried to remain in the family home where she hoped she could continue to see Casanova. The family underwent stressful legal formalities after Silvia's death, and it became

²¹ Summers, 217.

²² Ibid.

²³ Casanova, 5:244.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 5:263.

abundantly apparent that Manon needed to be taken care of. Women in the eighteenth century were sometimes considered a burden to their families because they cost money instead of bringing in money. Many aristocratic or even moderately wealthy families all over Europe were not allowing their daughters to marry at all because the dowry would cost too much. In Catholic countries like France or the Italian states, women were often pressured or forced by their families into convents so that the Church could pay their living expenses. Life in the convent might be comparatively easy compared with the lives of single women outside. Married women and widows had the most prestige in society and often received better food, care, and social perks, such as the best seats at church and a place on juries to decide on reproductive and sexual issues in their communities. Single women always had fewer resources, and if they had no family or relatives to take them in, often got lower wages and became impoverished. Many turned to prostitution, which led to disease, starvation, and early death. With Mario determined to secure Manon's future wealth and status to protect her from these difficulties, the family's wealthy patroness was now investing personal interest in Manon's marriage and future and negotiated a wealthy match hoping to end the matter quickly, which would also ensure new and desirable social contacts for herself.²⁶ With her refusal of this and several other suitors, Manon was now forsaken as a willful and impossible girl. Society turned its back on her, and this meant she was now entirely on her own.

Nothing improved when Casanova returned. While he was away, he had filled Manon's mind with hopes that he would make a fortune in Holland and fulfill his promise to marry her upon his return. Now a wealthy man, with multi-millions of dollars by today's standards, he "did not keep his promise to marry her, he did not act wisely to secure their future and he did not even visit her often."²⁷ As his womanizing increased, Manon continued to write to him and hold out hope

²⁶ Summers, 218-219.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 219.

that the future would be brighter. She was “too young to have any perspective on the unpleasant situation...she was still fixated by the idea that her only chance of a happy future lay with him.”²⁸ Amazingly, Manon continued to hold on, through the death of her mother and Casanova’s abandonment of her, she clung to him, perhaps because she did not know what else to do and knew she was out of options. People in the eighteenth century had hopes and dreams for their futures to be different from the expected, despite traditions of arranged marriage and tight social constraints, and with her dreams still in mind, naturally Manon was feeling lost and her life was completely out of her control, a situation which obviously terrified her. Her dream of fulfillment and love was rapidly disintegrating.

Manon’s letter of December 16, 1759 has a very different tone from the one of 1758. She profusely apologized for a previous letter she had written in “a furious fit of melancholy.”²⁹ By this time, all of Paris was talking about Casanova’s wild life and his connection with Manon, thus further ruining her reputation by being associated with the infamous and lustful libertine. At this time, there was an increase in the sexual double standard, favoring the extramarital affairs of men, as well as greater stigmatization of women going to bed out of wedlock. Manon’s reputation, if not actual virginity, were of the utmost importance in finding a good husband. This was an additional factor that mattered immensely if Manon stood a chance of financial and social security. It turns out that even in this respect, despite his immeasurable wealth, Casanova would make a poor choice.

With more extra income than he knew what to do with in 1759, Casanova opened a factory early in the year to produce painted fabric and hired “twenty girls, all between the ages of eighteen

²⁸ Ibid., 222.

²⁹ Manon to Casanova, Paris, 16 December, 1759, 85.

and twenty-five...” despite Manon’s protestations.³⁰ Casanova disregarded her jealousy and continued to do just as he pleased. He had soon seduced every one of those girls and was spending money to support them all in their own lodgings, expenditure which he could not support for long. Soon the business was failing as the market dropped on the eve of the Seven Years’ War and all Casanova’s creditors called in their loans. He was imprisoned for debts in August, and upon his release, which Manon had a small part in assisting with, he left for Holland again, promising to be back before December.

As revealed by this letter from mid-December, Manon clung even stronger to Casanova’s sinking ship, not knowing what else to do. Writing to him in Holland, where he still was, Manon reassured him that he must not “...suspect your Nena could lack tenderness” but rather to think to himself ““My wife was sad when she wrote me.””³¹ Manon’s word choice is dramatically different, often referring to Casanova as “my tender husband” and to herself as his “wife.”³² It is clear she pins her entire future on this relationship, and wishes to remind him of his promise to marry her. Manon writes, “I expect the moment to be united to you with an impatience which cannot be matched even by my love.”³³ This letter shows a near euphoria of exclamations, promising that her life will begin with their nuptials and she can be truly happy when they have faith in and love for each other. Manon’s words convey her almost religious belief in the wonders of Casanova and the happiness of the life they will lead together. She tells him, “You are my first true passion; I have loved you a long time...your image is so well etched in my heart...that my efforts would be useless to tear you from me” revealing her desperate and clinging belief that if she tells him she

³⁰ Casanova, 5:233.

³¹ Manon to Casanova, 16 December, 1759, 85.

³² Ibid.

³³ Manon to Casanova, 16 December, 1759, 86.

loves him enough times, all will be well again.³⁴ This letter, one of the last that have survived, makes a desperate effort to remind him of his place in her heart. She writes all this to her “dear Casanova, my dear Casanova, lover, husband, friend...believe therefore once and for all that I love you with all my soul, that you are all my goodness, that I want to live only for you...”³⁵

Manon never saw Casanova again. In February 1760, he wrote to her from Holland that his business dealings there were unsuccessful and he would be leaving for Germany.³⁶ After three years of holding out hope and waiting for him to keep all his promises, Manon appears to have finally given up. Just before Casanova left Holland, a package arrived for him from Paris. Manon’s enclosed letter entreated him to “Be reasonable and receive the news I send you calmly. This package contains all your letters...if you still have my letters burn them...Think of me no more. On my side I will do all that lies in my power to forget you. Tomorrow at this hour I shall be the wife of Monsieur BlondelYou will greatly oblige me if, when you return to Paris, you will pretend not to know me wherever you may meet with me.”³⁷ With this last letter, Manon fades from the *Memoirs* entirely and their relationship meets its abrupt end. On July 29, 1760, she married François-Jacques Blondel, the influential court architect. Despite being fifty-five years old, and Manon only twenty, he was a very desirable match with status, influence, and income, a guarantee for a better future.

Casanova’s heading for chapter one of volume six of the *Memoirs* says, hidden among other items, “Manon Balletti is unfaithful to me; her letter announcing her marriage; my despair.”³⁸ In some strange way, despite all his terrible behavior, Casanova is still affected by the news that

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Summers, 226.

³⁷ Casanova, 6:30.

³⁸ Ibid., 6:3.

Manon will marry someone else. Perhaps it was just the knowledge of having her always attached to him, believing him, and on his side which kept Casanova in the relationship for so long. It certainly was not sex, as Manon apparently successfully withheld that from him. The news of her impending marriage soon made Casanova angry and he clearly indicates in the *Memoirs* that he despises her for jilting him.

Manon and Blondel's marriage seems to have been successful, despite the rumors about her reputation and their difference in ages. It is unclear how they originally met, but perhaps through a mutual friend, Louis Lambert, who was a signatory on their marriage license as a witness for the groom. Manon finally found herself secure and provided for by a man who was settled and had made a successful career. Their first son was born on November 19, 1761, but died the next day. Another, named Jean-Baptiste, was born on December 24, 1764 and would become a famous architect like his father. The couple moved to an apartment in the Louvre in 1767, at the invitation of Louis XV, where Blondel continued to write about architecture until his death in 1774. Manon was left a widow at thirty-three with a nine-year-old to care for. She moved out of the Louvre and lived on a modest pension in a small house, surrounded by artists, architects, and actors. She died in Paris in December 1776, at just thirty-six years old.

Casanova's brief and unsatisfactory account of his relationship with Manon Balletti in the *Memoirs* may be a product of his frustration and bitter feelings, left over all those years later. The fact that he does not attempt to disguise her name is a significant component to this theory. Manon was so unlike the older already married women Casanova was accustomed to having affairs with. They possessed a great deal more knowledge about the nature of romantic relationships than Manon could have possibly understood as a teenager. Manon's youth and obsessive clinginess convinced Casanova that she was not the sort of woman he wanted, but

breaking off with her was complicated by the presence of his close friendship with her family. Manon also made the fatal, but all too common, error of assuming that Casanova would want to settle down with her. Her continued faith in him seems to have been a comfortable state of affairs for Casanova, and he kept her hanging on till the very end. Fortunately, Manon's eventual marriage to Blondel provided her with the kind of life Silvia and Mario had always wanted for her, among the social elite. Though her life ended so suddenly after a brief time, Manon's letters live on and give a small window into the world of a woman who loved Casanova, the most famous lover in history. Her's is a story not swathed in Casanova's rhetoric and penchant for making himself the center of attention, but written in her own hand and allowing us into the private world of an teenager girl of the eighteenth century, a world which is remarkably like our own.

About the author

Megan Richardson is recent graduate of Saint Martin's University in Lacey, Washington with a BA (Hons) in Interdisciplinary Studies with concentrations in English and History. Her scholarly interests include social and cultural European history, women's history, and childbirth.