VENICESCAPES

Literary Companion

THE AGE OF DECADENCE

"Here we are immersed in the uproar of Carnival.

It is gratifying to see this people

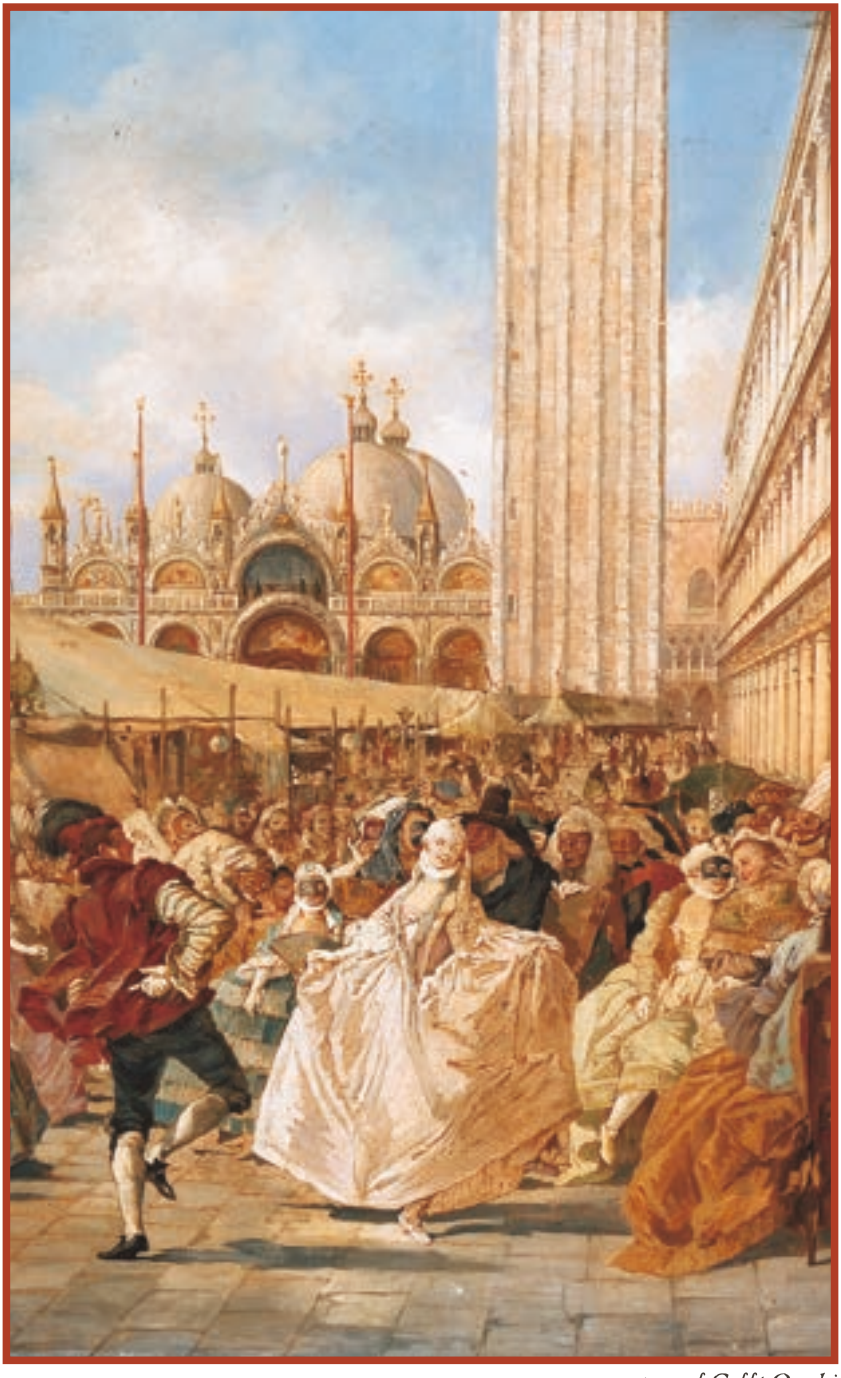
as if there were no misfortune

and everything went merrily

– the square, the streets, the theaters

all with the same throngs and murmuring."

Gasparo Lippomano
Venetian nobleman
Venice, Carnival 1796



courtesy of Caffé Quadri

VENICESCAPES

Literary Companion

The Age of Decadence

with introductory comments by
Jarrod Michael Broderick

Developed for
VENICESCAPES
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Cover
Lithograph by Luigi Crosio
"Goldoni Studiando dal Vero"
from the painting by
Enrico Gamba

Contents

SELECTED WRITINGS FROM THE GRAND TOUR

SELECTED SONNETS OF GIORGIO BAFFO

VENICE AND THE GRAND TOUR

Within the context of the Grand Tour, the encounter with Venice and its reality remained an experience as much desired as it was anomalous. Devoid of the classical ruins admired throughout the rest of the peninsula, the city nevertheless offered the classically inspired buildings of Andrea Palladio while the great works of its Renaissance masters were also obligatory visits. Yet more than its individual treasures, the city itself exerted an irresistible attraction with the pomp of its public ceremonies, its theaters, and brothels. For the members of northern Europe's ruling class, intent upon completing their education through a direct observation of the customs, manners, politics, and history of Italy, Venice was largely an interlude, a dazzling spectacle which simply had to be seen.

In general, the duration of the average sojourn was shorter than the more scholarly visits to Florence and Rome, and the pages dedicated to the city and its surroundings in diaries, journals, and letters were accordingly fewer. They demonstrate, however, the scant success that most visitors had in attempting to decipher the secrets of the insular community. Once the first moment of enchantment had worn off, each traveler recorded his or her impressions, favorable or critical as they may have been, but then perceived in an obscure way that it was impossible to go any further. Venice was simply too different to be understood, and parallels between the complex and fleeting Venetian reality and the cultural patrimony of the average visitor were too difficult to draw.

The travelers, unable to penetrate the enigma, relied largely upon the writings, often outdated or inaccurate, of their predecessors and for the most part limited themselves to repeating and commenting upon the observations already recorded and published. They consequently experienced the Venetians and their city on the basis of preconceived notions and rarely formulated completely independent opinions. Yet the Venetians themselves maintained a discouraging barrier. While the

travelers were almost universally impressed by the cordiality and pleasantries of the inhabitants, the encounter between city and visitor took place in the public sphere and on a contrived stage without any true relationship or, even less, intimate knowledge and understanding.

Many foreigners consequently left having found the lagoon society too closed. Still others left with a sense of complete repulsion. While many underlined the relative good government, the respect and almost affection that the people nurtured for the aristocracy, and the sound administration of justice, others, having probed further and uncovered unpleasant aspects and inconvenient facts, denounced the despotism of the State Inquisition, the presence of spies and informants throughout the city, and the corruption of the electoral process. Similarly, the impropriety and libertinism that reigned were condemned by some as excesses of the complete freedom that others extolled.

The attention of the foreigners, however, was not limited to the city's artistic patrimony nor to its political environment; it extended to music, theater, religious and daily life. Of particular interest were the Venetian women whether noble dames, nuns, or courtesans. Considered of great beauty, they fascinated the foreigners for their manners, fashion, and social and sexual liberties, and more than any other single aspect of the city, they were observed and described at length. Yet once again, the comments tended to exaggerate the superficial and rarely went beyond mere appearances even though there were occasionally realistic and pertinent notations that gave a glimpse into the inner world of the increasingly emancipated Venetian women.

But in the end, Venice remained above all else a visual and sensorial experience, and the average visitor was content to have finally seen and savored the city. As many wrote, it was impossible to have an idea of Venice without having experienced it. Its splendor exceeded all expectations and surpassed whatever the human imagination could have conceived.

Excerpts
from
Remarks on Several Parts of Italy
in the Years 1701, 1702, 1703

by the Right Honorable Joseph Addison, Esq.

"The City stands very convenient for Commerce. It has several Navigable Rivers that run into the Body of Italy, by which they most supply a great many Countries with Fish and other Commodities; not to mention their Opportunities for the Levant, and each side of the Adriatic. But notwithstanding these Conveniences, their Trade is far from being in flourishing Condition for many Reasons. The Duties are great that are laid on Merchandizes. Their Nobles think it below their Quality to engage in Traffick. Their Merchants who are grown Rich, and able to manage great Dealings, buy their Nobility, and generally give over Trade. Their Manufacturers of Cloth, Glass, and Silk, formerly the best in *Europe*, are now excelled by those of other Countries. They are tenacious of old Laws and Customs to their great Prejudice, whereas a Trading Nation must be still for new Changes and Expedients, as different Junctures and Emergencies arise. The State is at present very sensible to this Decay in their Trade, and as a Noble *Venetian*, who is still a Merchant, told me, they will speedily find out some Method to redress it; possibly by making a Free Port, for they look with an evil Eye upon *Leghorne*, which draws to it most of the Vessels bound for *Italy*."

"The particular Palaces, Churches, and Pictures of Venice, are enumerated in several little Books that may be bought on the Place, and have been faithfully Transcribed by many Voyage-Writers. When I was in

Excerpts
from
A Voyage in Italy

by Charles de Brosses
Count of Tournai and of Montealcon
First President of the Parlament of Dijon

"To tell the truth, the encounter with this city did not surprise me as much as I had expected. The effect that it made upon me was no different from that of any other city along the seashore, and the entry along the Grand Canal seemed to me like the entry of Lyon or Paris along the river. But once you are inside and you see the water around all sides of the palaces, of the churches, of the streets, and of all the cities, for it is not that there is a sole city; when you cannot take a single step without putting your foot in the sea; it is so surprising that I am even less used to it today than I was on the first day; just as I have not become accustomed to seeing this city open on all sides, without gates, without fortifications and without a single soldier garrisoned, and yet impregnable from the sea and land, for even the warships cannot draw near due to the lagoons which are too shallow to allow them to float. In a word, the city is so singular for the way in which it is laid out, for its customs, for its daily habits, which seem ridiculous, for the freedom that reigns here and for the tranquility that is enjoyed, that I don't hesitate to consider it the second city of Europe and doubt that Rome will change my mind."

"With regards to customs... a foreigner who passes an entire month in a city cannot know it and he would almost always speak of it in error. However...no other place exists in the world where liberty and

Excerpts

from

Letters from Italy

describing the Manners, Customs, Antiquities, Paintings & c.
of the Country
in the Years MDCCLXX and MDCCLXXI
to a friend residing in France by an English woman

by Anne Miller

"Drawing nearer to Venice when the sun was risen, we perceived the sides of the canals [on the mainland] to be prettily embellished with small pleasure-houses, gardens, and coffee houses: about eight o'clock the people of one of these latter stepping onto our boat brought us coffee, upon which we breakfasted, continuing our voyage at the same time.

Two o'clock. We are now within two miles of Venice; but the wind is risen, and being rather against us, are obliged to take the assistance of another boat, come out to us for that purpose, being no longer towed by horses....

Venice has now appeared before us for the last three miles past. but now, on our nearer approach, I believe the world cannot produce a more surprising, or more beautiful view; a city rising out of the bosom of the waves, crowned with glittering spires. This sea we are now upon is called the *Lagunes* because of its calm property, being in a manner like a lake of sea-water; it is shallow, and not subject to agitation by storms. Adieu for the present, having just gained the great canal of Venice."

"Although it is carnival almost the year round at Venice, it is not so just now, which I cannot in the least regret; for though I think a masqued ball a very elegant amusement in France and Italy, yet to be

obliged to go about every where in masquerade, must be extremely disagreeable, and subject to many inconveniences, which is the case here in carnival time....

There is no conveyance in this town but by water; out of the door of your lodging, you step into your gondola instead of your coach; the motion of them is extremely agreeable: two gondoliers manage it so dexterously, that they will whip round a sharp corner of these watery streets with more agility than the best coachman in London can take a short turn there. He that governs the helm, stands in the most graceful attitude imaginable. The first orders we gave to our gondoliers were to conduct us to the *Place St. Mark*, which is the only spot one can call *terra firma* in this city. We were soon there and found it answer all its descriptions. This is the center of Venetian amusement; here you see every body; hear all the news of the day, and every point discussed: here are the senators, nobles, merchants, fine ladies, and the meanest of the people, Jews, Turks, puppets, Greeks, mountebanks, all sorts of jugglers and sights. Although such a heterogeneous mixture of people throng this place during the day, and often pass great part of the night here, yet there is no riot or disturbance: the Venetians are so accustomed to see strangers, as not to be the least surprised at their being dressed in a fashion different from themselves; nor inclined to esteem them objects of ridicule, on account of their not speaking the Venetian language: in short, from the moment you enter the *Place St. Mark*, the advantage free government has over a despotic is obvious in the easy and liberal manners of the people; the same air extends to their faces, and it is rare to meet anyone in Venice with a dark suspicious countenance. Here are arcades, or *piazzas*, extremely convenient for shelter from the sun, wind, or rain; under some of them are coffee-houses and shops: in the former, the women enter as freely as the men, make their parties, are served with all kinds of refreshments, and converse with as much ease as if they were in their own houses....

There is a universal politeness here in every rank; the people expect a civil deportment from their nobles toward them, and they return it with much respect and veneration; but should a noble assume an insolent

Excerpts
from
Italy

by William Beckford, Esq.

"As soon as we had doubled the cape of this diminutive island, an expanse of sea opened to our view, the domes and towers of Venice rising from its bosom. Now we began to distinguish Murano, St. Michele, St Giorgio in Alga, and several other islands, detached from the grand cluster, which I hailed as old acquaintances; innumerable prints and drawings having long since made their shapes familiar. Still gliding forward, we every moment distinguished some new church or palace in the city, suffused with the rays of the setting sun, and reflected with all of their glow of colouring from the surface of the waters.... We were drawing very near the city, and a confused hum began to interrupt the evening stillness; gondolas were continually passing and repassing, and the entrance of the Canal Reggio, with all of its stir and bustle, lay before us. Our gondoliers turned with much address through a crowd of boats and barges that blocked up the way, and rowed smoothly by the side of a broad pavement, covered with people in all dresses and of all nations.... As night approached, innumerable tapers glimmed through the awnings before the windows. Every boat had its lantern, and the gondolas moving rapidly along were followed by tracks of light, which gleamed and played on the waters. I was gazing at these dancing fires when the sounds of music were wafted along the canals, and as they grew louder and louder, an illuminated barge, filled with musicians, issued from the Rialto, and stopping under one of the palaces, began a serenade, which stilled every clamour and suspended all conversation in the galleries and porticoes; till, rowing slowly away, it was heard no more. The gondoliers catching the air, imitated its cadences, and were answered by others at a distance, whose

voices echoed by the arch of the bridge, acquired a plaintive and interesting tone. I tired to rest, full of the sound; and long after I was asleep, the melody seemed to vibrate in my ear.

It was not five o'clock before I was aroused by a loud din of voices and splashing of water under my balcony. Looking out, I beheld the grand canal so entirely covered with fruits and vegetables, on rafts and barges, that I could scarcely distinguish a wave. Loads of grapes and melons arrived, and disappeared in an instant, for every vessel was in motion; and the crowds of purchasers hurrying from boat to boat, formed a lively picture. Amongst the multitudes, I remarked a good many whose dress and carriage announced something above the common ranks; and upon enquiry, I found they were noble Venetians, just come from their casinos, and met to refresh themselves with fruit, before they retired to sleep for the day."

"... I passed the gates of the palace into the great square, which received a faint gleam from its casinos and palaces, just beginning to be lighted up, and to become the resort of pleasure and dissipation. Numbers were walking in parties along the pavement; some sought the convenient gloom of the porticoes with their favourites; others were earnestly engaged in conversation, and filled the gay illuminated apartments, where they resorted to drink coffee and sorbet, with laughter and merriment. A thoughtless giddy transport prevailed; for, at this hour, anything like restraint seems perfectly out of the question; and however solemn a magistrate or senator may appear in the day, at night he lays up wig and robe and gravity to sleep together, runs intriguing about in his gondola, takes the reigning sultana under his arm, and so rambles half over the town, which grows gayer and gayer as the day declines.

Many of the noble Venetians have a little suite of apartments in some out-of-the-way corner, near the grand square, of which their families are totally ignorant. To these they skulk at dusk, and revel undisturbed with the companions of their pleasure. Jealousy itself cannot

Excerpts
from
Italian Journey

by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

"So much has been said and written about Venice already that I do not want to describe it too minutely. I shall only give my immediate impression. What struck me most is again the people in their sheer mass and instinctive existence....

This race did not seek refuge in these islands for fun, nor were those who joined later moved by chance; necessity taught them to find safety in the most unfavorable location.... In consequence, the Venetian was bound to develop into a new kind of creature, and that is why, too, Venice can only be compared to itself.... Everything around me is a worthy, stupendous monument, not to one ruler, but to a whole people. Their lagoons may be gradually silting up and unhealthy miasmas hovering over their marshes, their trade may be declining, their political power dwindling, but this republic will never become a whit less venerable in the eyes of one observer. Venice, like everything else which has a phenomenal existence, is subject to Time."

"At the Teatro San Luca yesterday I saw an improvised comedy, played in masks with great bravura. The actors were, of course, unequal. Pantalone, very good; one woman, without being an outstanding actress, had an excellent delivery and stage presence. The subject was a fantastic one, similar to that which is played in our country under the title *Der Verschlag*.

We were entertained for more than three hours with one

"POESIA BARONE"

Indecent, foul, obscene, lewd, ill-famed — the poetic work of the Venetian nobleman and judge Giorgio Baffo could not but evoke such reprobation among the Venetians of sound moral principles. But the opposition was not universal. Denounced by the spies of the State Inquisition for speaking the greatest of blasphemies and freely mixing God into his dirty and sordid compositions, Baffo was instead venerated by those radical reformers imbued with the ideas of the Enlightenment who considered themselves superior to prejudice and ignorance and rejected the imposition of a religiously motivated morality. For these latter, the sonnets reflected the growing materialistic conception of the natural world and of mankind which saw in self-interest, defined as the search for pleasure, the only motivation for human activity.

Yet despite its affinity with the extreme positions of the French materialists Holbach and Helvétius, the moral freedom invoked in the sonnets was not an end unto itself. For Baffo, libertinage and eroticism possessed a political value. They pleased the inferior classes and distracted them from the realities of the Republic's desperate economic conditions. To grant the people unlimited freedom in all spheres that were not offensive to the State was consequently the health of Venice. It ensured the consensus of the people for their aristocratic government and reconfirmed the traditional wisdom and benevolence of the nobility. From such a conviction, Baffo derived his opposition to the myopic censorship of the government in questions of morals and sexuality and his call for the intervention of the State in those matters considered truly detrimental to the survival of the Republic.

As a judge, he occupied a paid position normally reserved for the members of those aristocratic families, the *quarantisti*, no longer in possession of the financial resources necessary to support the higher-ranking offices for which there was no remuneration and whose costs had to frequently be borne by the incumbent. Many sonnets consequently

expressed the dissatisfaction of these *quarantisti*, condemning a political system based on wealth and bewailing the ineptitude and stagnancy of the government that resulted.

To restore equality within the aristocracy, the more radical elements called for the forced redistribution of wealth between the nobles. Baffo instead attacked the clergy and, specifically, the bequests made to the Church which often deprived legitimate heirs of sustaining means. For Baffo, such legacies were the primary cause of the financial decline of many of Venice's noble families. His fierce attacks on the dissolute lifestyle and wiliness of the clergy were consequently voiced to demonstrate the unworthiness of the clergy and resolve the financial difficulty of the noble families and were independent of the Enlightenment's deistic conception of the world.

For the most part, Baffo spontaneously composed the sonnets in the city's coffee-houses and casinos for the entertainment of friends and colleagues, typically members of other *quarantisti* families. They were consequently experienced as a humorously indecent form of evasion and transgression by those free spirits within the aristocracy who were emarginated and subordinated by the inferiority of their economic standing. For these nobles, mortified by the grim monotony of their political and social role and of their judicial routines and duties, the sonnets were a form of freedom representing the truest spirit of Venice: base, natural, good, and bawdy.

But for all of their subversive potential, the sonnets were an unwavering defense of the traditional rights and privileges of the aristocracy. Accordingly, the government tolerated the oral transmission and the occasional circulation of manuscript copies with a degree of indulgence accorded to Baffo as a member of the governing body. But, the publication in 1771 in London of a collection of the more sordid sonnets made it necessary to redress the matter, and they were ultimately subjected to government censorship in 1778.

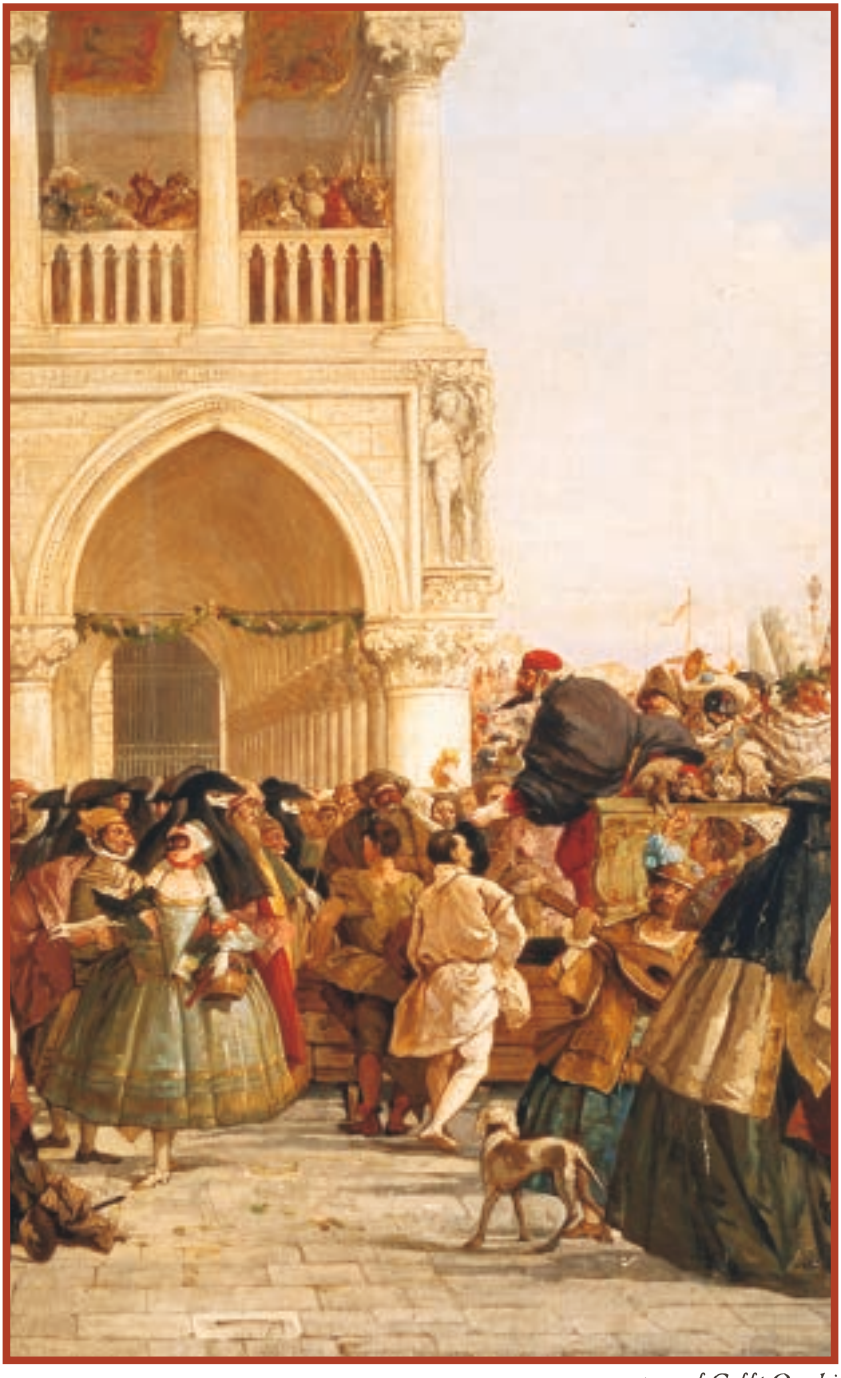
Many wealthy men are dying out

Many wealthy men are dying out,
and poverty continues to grow.
The great minds fall by the wayside,
and nothing is left here
but the jackasses.

If something remains
of the great political men,
the idiots are in such great number
that they exceed those few who are good.

No one thinks but of idleness, luxury, and gambling,
and the only books that are read in the evening
are either the deck of cards
or the cook's.

All of a sudden, there are no men in arms,
and if there are some, they have never fired.
How can it continue in this way?



courtesy of Caffé Quadri

THEATRICAL REFORM

In the mid-Eighteenth Century, under the prevailing influence of French fashion, popular taste in Venice began to veer towards a new style of drama – *Comédie Larmoyante* or pathetic comedy. An effect of the construction of the city's first public theaters which offered affordable tickets to a broader segment of the population, this form of melodramatic composition appealed to middle-class sentimentalities by introducing a popular tone into theatrical productions and avoiding the aristocratic themes of religious devotion, chivalry, and allegiance. In consequence, French plays, translated and adapted by local scribes, increasingly filled the Venetian stages in response to the public's ever greater demand for novelty.

Yet the traditional form of Italian improvised theater known as the *Commedia dell'Arte* had already begun to decline independently of the preference for the new French representations. A reaction against the dominance of humanistic culture during the final years of the Renaissance, the *Commedia dell'Arte* originally incarnated the vitality and realism of peasant and artisan life. Stock characters drawn from everyday existence emerged as masked figures, immediately recognizable, whose basic disposition was known to the audience: the avaricious father, the cunning courtesan, the astute serving man, the pedant, the reckless adventurer among others. In time, however, the freshness and wit of improvisation yielded to repetitiveness and predictability; the masks became stereotyped and insipid; farce and satire became meaningless buffooneries and vulgarity. What had been a mirthful caricature of life became its scurrilous travesty, a world full of indecent harlequinades, dirty and scandalous intrigue, foul jests, and immodest loves.

In his reform of the Venetian theater, the playwright Carlo Goldoni rejected both the excessive sentimentalism of the *Comédie Larmoyante* and the burlesque exaggeration of the *Commedia dell'Arte*. Dialogue

was written and controlled and the extemporization of the actors increasingly limited. More significantly, the masks inherited from the *Commedia dell'Arte* were slowly adapted to represent various economic and social categories present in contemporary Venetian life and given the salient traits of their members. The spectacles consequently became the occasion for Goldoni to delight the Venetian public with characters and situations reflecting their own world and reveal their shortcomings, contradictions, and absurdities with lighthearted sarcasm.

The son of a doctor, and himself formed in the legal profession, Goldoni was particularly sensitive to the material interests and social aspirations of the bourgeoisie. For him, the model citizen was no longer the indolent and unproductive noble who still exercised exclusive political power in eighteenth-century Venice but the middle-class merchant who contributed concretely to the collective well-being. The comedies consequently extolled the value of the middle-class work ethic, and not birthright, as a means of acquiring wealth and social status and invoked the sound bourgeois principles of diligence, parsimony, and temperance.

Yet despite this adherence to the ideas of the Enlightenment concerning the right of the new middle class to improve its economic and social conditions, the practical application of other principles such as equality, sociability, the entitlement of women to a liberal education, and the just claim of the younger generations to self-determination regarding their future, were generally esteemed only in those bourgeois comedies set in foreign lands. Instead, whenever the domestic circle of a good Venetian family was represented, such principles were tactfully avoided or only marginally treated in favor of a more traditional defense of paternal responsibility and filial obedience as the basis of family cohesion and social harmony. Aware of his conservative environment, Goldoni similarly placed his emancipated female characters outside the physical confines of Venice, and while he openly solicited greater collaboration between the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy in the public interest, intermarriage between classes was rarely proposed in the comedies.

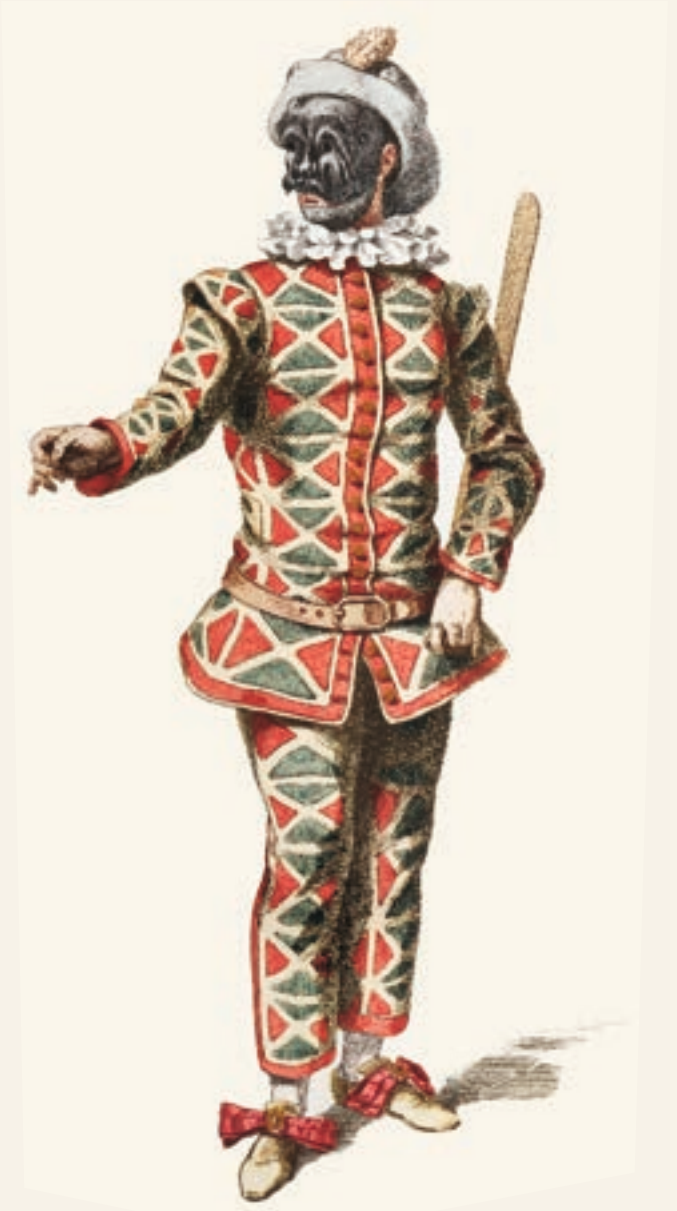
ARLECCHINO

Of the many masks inherited from the *"Comedia dell'Arte"*, none has enjoyed such enduring popularity as Arlecchino. His uncontrolled vitality, comic antics, and pranks have endeared him to generations since the thirteenth century when he was first mentioned in theatrical literature. His origins in French territory, however, reach back to even more remote times when an underworld spirit covered with leaves and arrayed with multi-colored flowers took part in the May celebrations for the arrival of spring. His devilish black mask, with its rough eyebrows and bumps, recalls this earlier, infernal birth.

As a comic character, Arlecchin Batocio was born in the valleys around the city of Bergamo which had come under the control of the Venetian Republic in 1427. Although in *"I due gemelli veneziani"* he proclaims his eternal longing for his native land: *"Savì cossa v'ho da dir? Che vogio tornar alle vallade de Bergamo..."* ("You know what I have to say? That I want to return to the valleys of Bergamo...") and he substantiates this longing: *"...perchè l'aria di città fa deventar matti."* ("...because city air makes you crazy."), he often betrays a deeper desire to idle in the city: *"Che podis viver senza lavorà a vores a Vinisia sempre stà."* ("If I could only live without working, I would forever want to stay in Venice.")

Arlecchino, in fact, personifies the boorish peasant driven by misery and hunger to the city. He carries a *batocio*, or stick, always ready to stir the corn-based *polenta* typical of the poor diet of the Venetian countryside, and he constantly proclaims his eternal hunger: *"Ho una fame che no posso più." – L'uomo di mondo* ("I am so hungry that I can't bear it any longer.") *"Mi no so de ore. Me regolo col reloio dei appetito." – La donna di garbo* ("I can't tell time. I regulate myself by the clock of my appetite.")

His other physical need, love, is an extension of his stomach: *"Per dirvela, ho la panza piena, e quei bei occhietti i è giusto a proposito per farme*



digerir." – *Il servitore di due padroni* ("To tell you the truth, my stomach's full, and those sweet eyes of yours are just right to help my digestion.") What he seeks, however, is a licentious, carnal union which does not entail commitment: *"Sentì. So che el padron ve vol ben anca lu, ma mi no m'importa; no sè una donna tanto piccola. Za del vostro ben ghe ne pol esser per tutti do."* – *La donna vendicativa* ("Listen. I know that the master likes you too, but it doesn't matter to me; you're not a small girl. Really, there's enough of your good for both of us.")

In this contraposition between the natural world governed by its base instincts and the civilized society of the city, Arlecchino's comic value springs from man's primary needs when contrasted with his superior pleasures. In *"La castalda"*, the highbred Ottaviano comments: *"Io son qui per la conversazione"* ("I am here for the conversation") to which Arlecchino responds: *"Io son qui per la conservazione"* ("I am here for my conservation.")

As with other impoverished refugees from the Venetian mainland, he is viewed in the city as a parasite, come to consume the already strained resources of the capital, and as such, he ultimately accepts employment as a domestic servant, performing menial tasks or running errands for his master. At times, he may even perform what he considers to be an inordinate amount of work: *"Son camerier, staffier, cogo, lacchè. Tutto fora che cocchier, perchè el patron no gh'ha carrozza."* – *La cameriera brillante* ("I'm waiter, footman, cook, lackey. Everything but coachman only because the master doesn't have a carriage."), but more often he is beaten with his own *batocio* for his insolence and idleness.

On his part, Arlecchino reasons that his newfound role as servant places him in a position of superiority with respect to his masters even though they may give him orders and belabor him. With his simplicity and foolishness, he mocks them, revealing the shortcomings of the upper classes while evoking the social issues of the day. Not for this, however, is he a revolutionary character. Like many in the eighteenth-century city, he lives only for his present needs with no thought for the future.

"La buona moglie"

by Carlo Goldoni

Act II Scene 4

Arlecchino has found licentious company for himself and Pantalone's son, Pasqualino. With two bawds, they are eating, drinking, and making merry when Pantalone arrives. Pasqualino, fearing his father's reprobation, hides under the table.

Pant. *...Tiolè, questa xe una lirazza, ma feme un servizio, diseme se qua ghe giera Pasqualin mio fio.*
(...Here, take it. This is a coin, but do me a service and tell me if my son Pasqualin was here.)

Arl. *Se el ghe giera, no vol miga dir se el ghe xe?*
(If he was here doesn't necessarily mean that he is here?)

Pant. *Ma no certo.*
(Of course not.)

Arl. *Donca nol ghe giera.*
(Then he wasn't here.)

Pant. *Quel tabaro di chi xelo?*
(Whose cloak is that?)

Arl. *El me par el tabaro de sior Pasqualin.*
(It looks to me like Master Pasqualin's cloak.)

Pant. *Donca Pasqualin giera qua.*
(So Pasqualin was here.)

Arl. *El qua va ben; ma l'è quel giera che no va ben.*
(The here is fine; but it's that was that doesn't set quite right.)

Pant. *Ma cossa ogio da dir?*
(But what should I say?)

Arl. *Disè quel che volè, che no m'importa gnente.*
(You can say whatever you want. It doesn't matter to me.)

CARLO GOZZI

With the decline of Venice's commerce and the recession of its industries, the once great wealth of the city was increasingly concentrated into fewer and fewer hands, and many noble families fell into difficult economic circumstances. These impoverished nobles, or *Barnaboti*, were effectively excluded from the government. They lived by expedients, sought fortune in the city's gambling houses, and actively sold their votes in the Great Council to a close oligarchy of wealthy nobles who effectively controlled the Republic. Ironically, however, they were the most conservative elements of the aristocracy, opposing any constitutional reforms which would have deprived them of their remaining political rights or altered their noble status. Many Venetians saw them as social parasites while the aristocratic airs that they continued to affect brought popular disdain upon them.

The playwright Carlo Gozzi was born into a poverty-stricken family of this minor aristocracy. He consequently shared its conservative positions and opposed the philosophical, political, and moral innovations of the Enlightenment. For Gozzi, the humanitarian utopias imagined by the French *philosophes* and the new theories of government based on Rousseau's "*Du contrat social*" threatened the traditional foundations of Venice. Likewise, the deism propagated by Voltaire in his writings contrasted with Gozzi's ideal world wherein political submission was a religious virtue. Specifically, Gozzi saw the alteration of the natural hierarchy as an abomination to God as were the perversion of traditional sexual roles and the license that characterized the mores and manners of eighteenth-century Venice.

In his *"Fiabe"*, written for the Venetian stage between 1761 and 1765, Gozzi made use of fairy-tale worlds populated with queens, magicians, and good and evil spirits to expose the disastrous political and social consequences of the Enlightenment and convey moral lessons to the

Venetian public under the form of allegory. In them, the happiness and stability of a fictional kingdom are endangered when the natural order is perverted — a king is usurped, a woman becomes insubordinate, an underling rises above his station. This principle of hierarchy was fundamental to Gozzi's vision of society. In *Ziem, King of the Genies*, the slave girl Dugmè enounces the playwright's political creed: *"He* [a mysterious old man] *told me that sacred, inscrutable Providence had planned everything, and that the position of great men was a wonder of God. He said it was a heavenly sight to see all of the people, rank by rank down to the most humble peasants, subordinated to their betters. Oh, he said, don't be led astray by those malicious sophists who claim that there is liberty outside this beautiful order which Heaven has given us. They only sow confusion and disturb the peace...."*

In this allegorical world, however, disorder is in the end suppressed, good triumphs, innocence is rewarded, and crime is punished. Yet not surprisingly it is in Gozzi's noble characters that heroism and generosity invariably reside while the adherents to the "modern" philosophy are portrayed as sex fiends, cuckolds, and bankrupts.

Despite such an overt conservative ideology and the political and social attitudes of Gozzi and his class that underlie the *"Fiabe"*, they were immensely popular with the whole of Venetian society. In the final decades of the Republic, they offered spectators an escape from the disquieting sense of political uncertainty and cultural instability, creating an imaginary world wherein the threat of impending change was dispelled and a reassuring sense of security restored.

In reality, however, Gozzi could only observe society and deplore its transformations. In his *"Useless Memoirs"*, he criticized the foibles of his day with sarcastic wit and biting humor, exposing the hypocrisy, vanity, greed, corruption, and license of contemporary Venetian life. This autobiographical work recorded, as a result, a penetrating and vivid image of Venice during the decadence of the Republic.

Excerpts
from
Useless Memoirs

by Carlo Gozzi

"In our century, people are easily captivated and pleased by an unqualified vision of opulence, of gain, and of physical comforts ignoring what is beneficial to keep our spirits and hearts within the limits of temperance, moderation, truth, and obedience to duty. It is a simple constatation that, without a moral education, opulence and wealth are seen by the indigent with envy, with rancor, and with the heart of a pirate; and that the wealthy see not that they possess them nor would they ever believe that they do, and they make a shameful abuse of them.... The sages of the present day will see my reflections on education, customs, and morals as ridiculous trifles. Instead of seeing an obstacle to their self-interested ambitions in moral conduct, they find ways to prove that bad morals and manners are good. Their proofs are nothing but sophisms, albeit convenient, with which they easily persuade others, and my objections are nothing but silliness unworthy of the minds of great men...."

"The modern innovators shall easily accuse me of seeking to give weight to frivolities. That shall be of little harm to me. It is of much greater harm for others to allow themselves to be seduced into believing that the works of these same innovators contain things other than frivolities — strange frivolities, ill-thought, unnatural, and written in a most monstrous manner.

Who could have imagined that a single word, reduced to a

MORALISTIC JOURNALISM

In the Eighteenth Century, no other Italian city could boast such an extensive circulation of foreign periodicals and pamphlets as Venice nor an experience as lively and varied as that of the Venetian press. Although the city's international prestige had greatly diminished following the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 and the Treaty of Passorowitz in 1718, it remained a vibrant European center, the vital point of contact between the new emerging powers of the West and the decaying Ottoman Empire in the East. Also, the city's secular exposure to a variety of cultures made it particularly open and responsive to the demands for knowledge and information that resulted from the compilation of the *Encyclopédie* in France. But the broader socio-political issues of the Enlightenment were tempered in Venice by a suspicious and conservative government contrary to any debate that could have resulted in polemics or altered the Venetian reality. In consequence, even those editors partial to the new ideas avoided public treatment or commentary that would have invoked government censorship.

Of keen interest instead were the scientific and agricultural discoveries discussed in the English political and literary magazines which were readily available in Venice as French translations owing to the scarce knowledge of the English language that most Venetians had in the early part of the century. Through the translations of popular periodicals such as the "*Gentlemen's Magazine*", the "*London Magazine*", and the "*Ladies' Magazine*", the Venetians were simultaneously introduced to English history, culture, and literature and developed a consequent desire to study English and read the works of Shakespeare, Milton, Swift, and Pope in their original versions.

Extraordinary popularity was reserved, however, for the "*Spectator*". Published in response to the desire of the emerging English bourgeoisie to affirm itself socially and refine its tastes in art and literature, the

newspaper had the declared intent of simultaneously moulding the new middle class into an upright and responsible society and of intervening in questions of customs and public morals by recounting stories and events of everyday life and offering witty philosophical and moralistic reflections to its readers.

In Venice, the notoriety of the *"Spectator"*, combined with the Venetians' desire for information of a local character, led to the founding of the *"Gazzetta veneta"*. To the pleasant stories and anecdotes of its English precedent, however, the editor, Gasparo Gozzi, introduced theatrical billings, exchange rates, rental and real estate notices, employment and commercial advertisement, making an important contribution to the development of the modern newspaper.

But like its counterpart in England, the *"Gazzetta veneta"* sought above all to reform the customs and morality of the frivolous and indolent Venetian public. Its curious stories about thefts, lovers' quarrels, and brawls taken from daily life were interwoven with moralizing allegories and narrated with a pleasant, colloquial tone and a sense of muffled irony that appealed to large segments of the population and animated conversations in the city's coffeehouses where they were eagerly read.

Of the *"Gazzetta veneta"*, however, the Venetians appreciated the diversion and the entertainment. While the *"Spectator"* incarnated the confidence of an economically emerging bourgeoisie and the aspirations of a nation in rapid expansion, the *"Gazzetta veneta"* chronicled instead the daily existence of a feckless and immobile people who sought not the lessons of morality but the lively wit of the newspaper and the brevity and variety of its articles. To this public, Gozzi felt increasingly extraneous. Conscious of its inability to react and closed himself to the new social and political expectations of the Enlightenment, he looked to the past with a sense of melancholy and to the future with a pessimism that came to characterize the final editions of the newspaper.

Gazzetta veneta

by Gasparo Gozzi

Saturday 16 February 1760 — Issue IV

"Although the celebrations in the square for Fat Thursday were the usual ones, they warrant a line or two for having had a few particularities that made them more remarkable than in the years past. There were four flights * by people along the cable from the bell tower of Saint Mark's. One rode a figure that represented a satyr; another rode in a small boat with an oar and pretended to row in mid air; the third went with two small cannons, one bound to his arm, the other to his foot; but the fourth was by far the most wonderful. He is the brother of the unfortunate Nane Bailo who died when he fell and was impaled on the stone lion. It is said that all of the members of this family lose their lives in this feat. This individual, of his own accord, went down the cable hand over fist as if he were going easily down a ladder; not satisfied with this, he held on with both hands and let his whole body swing freely; another time, he crossed his legs around the cable and let himself dangle upside down; he tipped his hat, put it back on, clapped his hands, and then continued to descend to the wonderment of all.

In *The Strength of Hercules* **, the second top man of the *Nicolotti* tottered once and unbalanced everyone else; and in repeating the game they all fell so thunderously as to be in grave danger; with some

* *The most popular show on Fat Thursday was the flight which consisted in descending along a tight rope strung from the bell tower of Saint Mark's to a stage erected in the underlying square where the Doge sat.*

** *The Tower of Hercules was a demonstration of agility, balance, and strength in which the participants constructed a human tower on a platform that was placed either on barrels, in the event that the competition took place on land, or on two boats, in the event that it took place on the water.*

of them numb and others hurt in the fall, they gave up trying to build the tower, and neither did they dance the *Moresca* ***.

The fireworks were beautiful and much admired. Many masked participants, however, did not praise them at all since the sparks burned some of their cloaks; one lady's dress of golden cloth caught fire, and she was scorched and smoked in a few areas. The stand was in three tiers so that the fireworks were at different heights. It was illuminated from one tier to the next in a most ingenious manner. Two orchestras sat on the tiers and played for hours even after the celebrations had ended. In that sea of people, there were a few scuffles of minor importance: one person was wounded, and a cloak was torn in half.

These celebrations recalled to my mind a certain ancient festival which was once held and which I have seen mentioned in various Venetian journals, above all the diary of the nobleman Sanudo. An imposing wooden castle was built with artificial walls around it, a gate, and a draw bridge. The most dainty and beautiful damsels, richly dressed, closed themselves inside. Many young lads from the surrounding towns attacked the tower, and the winners were those for whom the damsels voluntarily lowered the draw bridge and opened the gate. The weapons that were used in the assault were of a new invention. The girls stood at the windows, and one faction came forward, dancing and playing sweet music on their instruments. Another faction of young men came forward singing love ballads all together; another faction attempted the assault with roasted chickens, cakes, and all kinds of food. But all of them seemed crude. Then the Venetians attempted. They danced and threw cinnamon, cloves, and every type of spice along with shiny gold and silver pieces through the windows. These weapons proved better than all of the others, and the damsels opened the castle whereupon there was much contention with the others the account of which I shall leave to the historians.

Some will say that if I want to write such things, I should publish

*** *The Moresca was a sort of war-dance performed with blunted weapons.*