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# Casanova: A Case Study of Celebrity in 18th Century Europe

Nicola Vinovrški\*

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**Abstract:** »Casanova: Eine Fallstudie zu Berühmtheit im Europa des 18. Jahrhunderts«. Historical studies of celebrity, or particular instances of it, focus on figures who had fame which could be tied to a particular achievement or ascribed status; for example, writers, politicians, actors, artists, composers, musicians, and monarchs. These studies suggest that there were certain shifts which occurred during the 18th century which allowed celebrity to develop, that there were many theatrical and literary celebrities during this period and that the phenomenon really gained traction in the Romantic era. These studies put paid to the idea that celebrity is a very recent phenomenon, the product of technological developments (though many still do make the claim). What they have not done adequately is test the edges of the phenomenon of celebrity. Casanova's well-knownness has been given no critical attention by scholars of either Casanova or of historical celebrity. However, he was a celebrity and in such an archetypically modern way that he calls into question the currently perceived historical limits of celebrity. His case study demonstrates that there is much more to be done in relation to investigating historical celebrity and that plotting its origins in the Romantic era or even the mid-18th century may be to give it short shrift.

**Keywords:** Casanova, fame, celebrity, 18th century, historical celebrity.

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## 1. Introduction

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The exploration of historical celebrity was a welcome development in critical discourse which, for decades, mirrored popular discourse in treating celebrity as unique to the given commentator's historical context, or rather, as a newly emerged crisis, a negative cultural transformation which preceded the present moment and constituted an urgent problem.

Much work has been done to establish the 18th century as a critical moment in the history of celebrity. Mole argues that "we've had celebrities since the

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Many of the matters addressed in this article were first published in my doctoral thesis of the same name. All translations into English from the original French are my own.

late eighteenth century and a celebrity culture since the beginning of the 19th” (Mole 2007, 1). The contributors to *Romanticism and celebrity culture, 1750-1850* identify the early decades of the 19th century as the inauguration of mass-media celebrity (Mole 2009). Brock finds feminine literary celebrity in 1750 (Brock 2006). According to Inglis, the first celebrities lived in London in the mid-18th century and were either famous for their urban accomplishments or celebrities from the British stage (Inglis 2010, 8). He does not consider that Paris was significant to the history of celebrity until the mid-19th century and describes Paris during this period as “the first place to put sheer *appearance* – good looks, smart clothes, swank and show – at the centre of celebrity” (Inglis 2010, 10). Lilti argues that celebrity emerged in 1750 in Paris and London in the middle of the 18th century (Lilti 2014, 21) and that Rousseau, who came on the scene in 1751, was the first European celebrity (Lilti 2014, 22). The contributors to *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain 1660-2000* have found theatrical celebrity in Britain dates from at least 1660 (Luckhurst and Moody 2005). While ostensibly talking about fame, Braudy arguably traces the origins of celebrity to the rise of the Pharaoh in Egypt (Braudy 1986, 371). He has been criticised for not adequately recognising the specificity of celebrity and for consequently developing a theorisation of limited use (Lilti 2014, 10). Minois appears to suggest that celebrity dates from Classical society (Minois 2012) but, like Braudy, perhaps does not engage with the subject with the technical rigour of a celebrity theorist. In short, when seeking to theorise celebrity, one of the following approaches must be chosen: celebrity must be seen as a recent phenomenon resulting from the advent of mass media (the overwhelmingly prevalent and demonstrably incorrect view largely emanating from media studies); the origins of celebrity must be plotted in the expansion of the printed press in the 19th century (the view of literary historians who may have been the first to push the boundaries beyond the lines drawn by the former group); celebrity must be viewed through the lens of hugely famous historical figures who had a huge public impact in Europe from 1750 onwards as the first celebrities (notably espoused by Lilti); or celebrity must be regarded as such a generalised concept that it conclusively was always in existence in some form (my own view is that celebrity may have a very long history indeed but no satisfactorily reasoned chronology of it exists). Casanova confounds all of these theories.

Casanova is the historical celebrity *par excellence*. He was not, at any point, well known because of, or at least primarily because of, his occupation or ascribed status; he was not a famous person whose private life then became a matter of public interest. Nonetheless, skilfully deploying strategies which foreshadowed the tactics of modern public relations professionals, he created and cultivated his own celebrity. His pursuit of celebrity is arguably his defining characteristic. His voluminous memoirs have been described as a veritable

encyclopaedia of the 18th century (Casanova 2013 XI). More than anything, they are an encyclopaedia of celebrity in the 18th century.

Studies of historical celebrity, or particular instances of it in the 18th century or earlier, focus on figures whose fame can be tied to a particular achievement or ascribed status, for example writers, politicians, actors, artists, composers, musicians, and monarchs, and these people were, more often than not, hugely famous as well as being celebrities. Celebrity studies began in the 1960s in a similar way, looking at world famous film stars and politicians. Conversely, studies of contemporary celebrity have now broadened their scope and readily examine celebrities without careers or for whom being a celebrity might be said to be their career. For example, the “Kimposium” on all things Kardashian hosted by Brunel University in London in November 2015 and, more generally, the work of Rojek and Turner. This is no doubt due partly to the fact that contemporary celebrity has been the object of study since the 1960s whereas historical celebrity has only recently been given critical consideration. Contemporary celebrity is, as a field of study, decades ahead. It may also be, though this is yet to be investigated, that there are more of those types of celebrities in the 20th and 21st centuries than in earlier historical contexts. The study of Casanova’s celebrity could be the beginning of that conversation. To say, as Lilti does in his excellent study, that Rousseau, Voltaire, and Marie-Antoinette were celebrities, is, in my view, quite obvious. It needed to be said of course, but the suggestion that the most famous people of the 18th century were celebrities who attracted huge public interest in their private lives leads me to reply, “of course they were.” That is because I am familiar with Casanova’s writings and their vivid depiction of celebrity in his historical context.

The examples given in some of the studies mentioned above such as Alexander the Great, Napoleon Bonaparte, George Washington, David Garrick, and Sarah Siddons do put paid to the idea that celebrity is a very recent phenomenon (though many still make the claim). Such obvious, massively well-known celebrities usefully provide clear examples of pre 20th-century celebrity. What they are not useful for, as theorists of contemporary celebrity already know since they have moved on from studying figures like Douglas Fairbanks and Elvis, is for testing the edges of the phenomenon of celebrity. For example, some have argued for a religious reading of celebrity (Frow 1998 and Rojek 2001). While I do not agree with that analysis, it is almost understandable when applied to celebrities like Elvis but does not work for more minor celebrities. Focussing on hugely famous historical figures limits the account of celebrity we can give. World famous celebrities are, to my mind, clear examples of desires, discourses, social conventions, ideologies, and mechanisms which must have been well established already.

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## 2. Who was Casanova?

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Giacomo Casanova was born on 2 April, 1725 in Venice, the eldest of six children and the son of two actors. He travelled Europe extensively, supporting himself through ad hoc projects, temporary appointments, wealthy patrons, and charlatanism. Throughout his lifetime, he had audiences with royalty and two popes, he amassed and lost fortunes, he was imprisoned in and escaped from “the Leads” prison underneath the lead-plated roof of the Doge’s Palace in Venice, he had a much publicised duel with Count Franciszek Ksawery Branicki, he met some of the most famous figures of the 18th century, he was expelled from numerous cities, and was at times a lawyer, a soldier, a priest, a violinist, and a spy. The final years of Casanova’s life were spent at the Chateau of Count Waldstein in Dux, Bohemia, where he died on 4 June, 1798.

Casanova frequently told autobiographical stories in public, holding his audiences’ attention for hours at a time, and published a number of autobiographical works. His oral autobiographical storytelling was most successful when he had a dramatic and spectacular personal story to tell. It resulted in invitations to other events and caused him to be talked and written about across Europe. Casanova expertly exploited public space to sidestep the traditional pathways to celebrity through nobility, public service, the military, and the arts. In much the same way that self-publishing platforms have given rise to new pathways to celebrity today, these public spaces allowed a greater number of people to seek public recognition and for more trivial reasons than intellectual achievement or great deeds. Casanova’s do-it-yourself self-promotion and image management is in fact most similar to the most recent iterations of contemporary celebrity. Casanova was, in a lot of ways, a Kardashian.

There is not space in this article to list neither all the Casanova scholars who have not attempted to deal with the question of his celebrity, nor all the highly problematic statements by those who have. Suffice it to say that his well-knownness has not been given any critical attention. Nonetheless, he is a key figure in the history of celebrity. His duel with Branicki caused a sensation throughout Europe and, along with his subsequent expulsion from Poland, was reported in most of the European press, including the *London Public Advertiser* (Luna 1998, 382). His duel was reported in gazettes such as the 28 March, 1766 issue of *Sankt-Peterbourgskie vedomosti*, which described Casanova as “le fameux gentilhomme vénitien Casanova [the infamous Venetian gentleman, Casanova]” (Casanova 2002 v 3: note 4 on page 465). Further, in one of these reports, Casanova was described effectively as someone who was well known in the press. Lilti mentions Casanova only once and only to cite his memoirs when talking of a famous castrato (Lilti 2014, 53). In doing so, this thoughtful work overlooks one of the most fascinating 18th-century celebrities.

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### 3. Casanova's Conception of Well-Knownness

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Casanova published many essays, pamphlets, stories, poems, and even a novel during his lifetime. During his years in Dux, he commenced writing the story of his life but died before he had finished. A close reading of Casanova's writings demonstrates his obsession with celebrity. What he evinces more clearly than any other recognised historical celebrity is an almost single-minded quest for celebrity. A review of the relevant entries in Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*<sup>1</sup> to better understand the significance of Casanova's use of certain fame-related terms confirms how myriad and discursive well-knownness was in the 18th century. While he did not use the equivalent of celebrity in the modern technical sense, Casanova undoubtedly conceived of, and courted, that particular type of well-knownness which is independent of fame, is bestowed (and potentially lost) relatively rapidly, attaches to a personality (as opposed to deeds), and which implies intense public interest in one's personal life. One of the most interesting features of Casanova's writings is that they are concerned as much with, as Lilti describes, those whose "notoriety was often ephemeral and whose virtues were questionable" (Lilti 2014, 129) as with heroes and great men, in fact more so.

Casanova wrote about his own well-knownness and well-known people almost constantly. While his ambition for celebrity was constant throughout his life, the way he wanted to achieve it was not. He claimed that he wanted to be at various times a famous preacher (Casanova 2002 v1, 64), famous astrologist (Casanova 2002 v2, 484), famous conversationalist (Casanova 2002 v1, 297), famous writer, or famous in the arts (Casanova 2002 v1, 297). He saw no inherent contradiction in this and showed no circumspection about declaring his desire for celebrity, a career being only a secondary object. That he should write this expressly in the latter part of the 18th century suggests that the cultural and social significance of celebrity was far more prevalent than other studies suggest. That he should have these desires and act upon them in the first half of the 18th century suggests that we should question the idea that the story of celebrity began in 1750.

In his recent work, Lilti considers the *Encyclopédie* definition of "glory" (*gloire*) (Lilti 2014, 123-31). However, Casanova rarely used this term. The adjectives Casanova used most frequently to describe well known people were *célèbre* and *fameux* (both, famous in English). Most frequently, he used *la renommée* (renown) to indicate fame but also *célébrité* (fame). While Casanova did not use *célébrité* to identify a type of well-knownness distinct from fame, the fact that he uses it at all, when writing in the latter half of the 18th century,

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<sup>1</sup> *Encyclopédie* was published between 1751 and 1756 and was recognised as a hugely important work at the time and praised by Casanova (Casanova 2013, xlviii).

is consistent with Lilti's observation of the rise in popularity of this term at this time (Lilti 2014, 146-7). Further, he used several metaphors which give an insight into the nature of celebrity in his historical context.

For Casanova, being well known meant being talked about, and he frequently used the metaphor of creating noise (*faire du bruit*). With regard to Bonneval Pacha, whom Casanova met in 1745, he writes "a man all of Europe talked about, talks about and will talk about for a long time" (Casanova 2002 v1, 282) and when writing about a particular courtesan, he states "one spoke of nothing but..." (Casanova 2002 v1, 361). It is unsurprising that Casanova should understand being well known as being talked about because word of mouth was an important means by which news and gossip circulated in his historical context, whereas in the early 20th century, being well known was often described as having one's picture in the papers (see for example Schickel 1974). What is significant is that being talked about implies a type of well-knownness that was produced and consumed rapidly. As Brock notes, by the 1750s, the classical notion of posthumous reward was becoming increasingly open to question (Brock 2006, 5). Consistent with this, Casanova's conception of being well known focussed entirely on immediate public recognition. Lilti observed that, in 1750, a new type of well-knownness emerged, something beyond reputation but distinct from glory, namely celebrity (Lilti 2014, 143). Casanova's writings suggest that this type of well-knownness was prevalent throughout his lifetime, suggesting that it must have emerged in an earlier one and been well established by the beginning of the 18th century.

The *Encyclopédie* contains entries for numerous distinct fame-related terms. The definition of *fameux* suggests that it meant having a relatively widespread reputation, "whether this be based on good or bad actions" (Diderot and d'Alembert 1751 Tome 2, 800). It assumes that reputation was established by deeds of some sort, but that those deeds may be meritorious or otherwise, as demonstrated by the examples given of the famous captain and the famous thief. *Illustre*, or illustrious, was an exclusively positive and merit-based category of well-knownness (Diderot and d'Alembert 1751 Tome 2, 800) which applied to only the most well-known and celebrated people. The technical definition of *célèbre* was a specific category of well-knownness relating to literary exploits, though the underlying talent may be real or imagined (Diderot and d'Alembert 1751 Tome 2, 800). Given the particular status of writers in this period and that the *Encyclopédie* was itself a monumental work of some of the most notable writers of the time, it is perhaps unsurprising that well-knownness resulting from literary talent should be presented as a distinct category. This is consistent with Lilti's observation, à propos of Marmontel's article on glory also in the *Encyclopédie*, which, he says, establishes the man of letters as the dispenser of glory (Lilti 2014, 124).

Casanova described a wide range of people as famous. On the one hand, he described scholars such as Albrecht van Haller and, naturally, Voltaire as fa-

mous people who were well known by reason of meritorious achievements (Casanova 2002 v2; 380, 382, 385). On the other hand, he also used these terms to describe people who were well known primarily for reasons other than their occupation. For example, he writes of famous courtesans or noblewomen famous for their beauty, such as Fanny Murray (Casanova 2002 v2, 838), Kitty Fisher (Casanova 2002 v3, 248), and Elizabeth Chudleigh, duchess of Kingston (Casanovas 2002 v3, 335). I contend that the field of historical celebrity is skewed by its focus on the former group. While studies of theatrical celebrity in particular have considered the celebrity of beautiful actresses, some of whom enjoyed scandalous celebrity, they do not account for Casanova's celebrity during his lifetime as he was not a beautiful woman (though I will discuss later how his physical appearance was critical to his celebrity in a similar way). Actresses were a group among which it was very common for aristocrats to choose their mistresses (though he did have incongruous friendships with aristocrats in a similar way) and the theatre industry played a part in their presentation to the public. Similarities can be found in terms of claims to fame and precarious social position between Casanova and the 18th-century courtesan. However, there are key differences also arising, for example, from historical gender norms.

The entry for *renommée* is significant in that it assumes good and bad renown and goes on to say that the love of renown should not be discouraged because it can lead to noble and generous acts (Diderot and d'Alembert 1751 Tome 14, 111). This reflects the spirit of individual achievement which flourished in this historical period and which is embodied by Casanova's life and works. Born in the first part of the 18th century, Casanova firmly believed in his own worth and his own control over his destiny. His clear belief that he was an individual worthy of attention assumes a highly developed sense of self, a highly individualistic society, and a clear idea of who the public was.

That there existed so many fame-related words capable of such technical definition confirms the complex nature of well-knownness in Casanova's historical context. Lilti implies that Casanova's contemporaries were grappling with the "new forms of notoriety emerging before their eyes" (Lilti 2014, 131). However, as commentators on fame and celebrity, their writings fall within a recognisable discourse which distinguishes fame from celebrity and suggests the latter is inferior, new, and problematic. Since Boorstin seemed to be grappling with the new and problematic phenomenon of celebrity in the 1960's, even though this phenomenon has a much longer history, I suspect 18th-century writers were doing the same.

Foreshadowing the pejorative discourse almost always associated with celebrity in recent history, Casanova's contemporaries had clearly distinguished positive and negative categories of well-knownness. For example, in his memoirs, Cardinal de Bernis writes of the Cardinal de Tencin: "[He] had more fame than reputation; he had grand designs but used only small means" (Bernis



1980, 66). This distinction between fame and reputation is also made in the preface to Young's 1783 satire, *The Love of Fame*, which says:

A writer in polite letters should be content with reputation; the private amusement he finds in his compositions; the good influence they have on his severer studies; and the possible good effect they may have on the public; or else he should join to his politeness some lucrative qualification. (Young 1750, 5)

Both de Bernis and Young criticised fame as something disconnected from measurable achievement while contending that reputation was more authentic, bestowed as a result of worthy deeds. Casanova was recognised by his contemporaries as being undeservedly well known, a complaint frequently levelled at contemporary celebrities. Giustiniana Wynne wrote that she did not understand how he had gained such status in Parisian society (Di Robilant 2004, 169). In 1755, Pietro Chiari published a satirical portrait of Casanova in his *La commediante in fortuna*. Casanova recognised himself, as did his friends and enemies, in the character of Vanesio (Casanova 2002 v1, 821). In Chiari's scathing satire, he describes Casanova as

one of those phenomena in the civil atmosphere, whose brightness we cannot account for: I mean, one of those, who live – we know not how; and even live splendidly; though they have neither estate, nor office, nor talents to procure them that affluence; which, from their gaiety of dress, we may conjecture that they enjoy. (Chiari 1771, 125)

With texts such as this, how could one not be emphatic towards Casanova's historical celebrity status?

Lilt writes that *renommée* was rarely used in the 18th century and that it took on an archaic meaning similar to glory (Lilti 2014, 131). However, that does not accord with Casanova's use of this term. Using it to describe the well-knownness of fashionable courtesans and prominent aristocrats, Casanova's loose use of this term does demonstrate its inherent ambiguity, observed by Lilti in describing Marmontel's contemporaneous treatise on glory (Lilti 2014, 131). Casanova uses it in the same way Lilti observes Marmontel to use it, namely as a "generic notion" to describe any kind of well-knownness (Lilti 2014, 131). This contradicts his suggestion that the term was rarely used and had an archaic meaning.

Casanova relished his celebrity, wrote with fond longing of the periods where his celebrity peaked and sorely regretted periods of anonymity. While others at the time criticised the "new celebrity culture" (Lilti 2014, 151), Casanova was enthusiastically and deliberately caught up in it. Unlike the figures discussed by Lilti such as Rousseau, Chamfort, and Duclos, Casanova did not struggle to reconcile celebrity with his art or literary talent. As discussed below, his lack of a career or ascribed status is precisely why he is such a significant historical celebrity. Lilti describes the discourse of celebrity as a burden (Lilti 2014, 28). What he does not describe is the idea of celebrity as a fiercely

pursued reward, an idea described in the *Encyclopédie* and other 18th-century texts and one which Casanova exemplified. To reach the point where one's celebrity is a burden, one must be extremely well-known. As stated already, the examples of historical celebrity adduced by Lilti and others are of outliers, extraordinary individuals who were the most famous people of their time. The investigation of historical celebrity should begin, rather than end, with such figures. They demonstrate that celebrity is nothing new but I do not think they can show when it began, rather they are high points of systems and mechanisms which must have already been well established.

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#### 4. Casanovas Occupations

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What is remarkable about Casanova's "career," if one can call it that, is its inconsistency. Casanova was not famous as a result of any of his occupations or any ascribed status (e.g., royalty, aristocracy). That he was nonetheless well known is what makes him a necessary addition to the list of 18th-century celebrities. Unlike Rousseau, Marie-Antoinette, or George Washington, Casanova did not initially become well-known as a result of his career or status and then become a celebrity in a process whereby his notoriety became independent of the reasons which originally gave rise to it (to paraphrase Antoine Lilti in the interview earlier in this issue: 2019, 19-38). Rather, he worked very hard to establish and maintain his celebrity, using tools not dissimilar to those deployed by modern day career celebrities.

From 1737 to 1742, he attended the University of Padua where he studied law (Casanova 2013 LIX). His very brief ecclesiastical career ended when he delivered his second sermon drunk (Comisso and Leluc 1944, 44). It appears that he worked for a lawyer in Venice from 1742 to 1746 (Casanova 2013 LVIII - LXI; Casanova 2002 v 1, 266). Following one of his arrests, he was sentenced by a judge to undertake military service in 1760 but escaped shortly afterward (Casanova 2002 v 2, 284). Thus his attempts at some of the 18th century's most common occupations were very short lived and did not result in him becoming famous.

There is a tendency among Casanovist scholars, shared with Casanova himself, to depict Casanova as one of the foremost intellectuals of his age (Casanova di Seingalt, Pollio, and Vèze *Pages casanoviennes. vols 1-2*; Samaran 1914; Childs 1961). This would place him in the realm of Voltaire and Rousseau. However, in terms of financial gain and public recognition, he was a failure in this regard. Certainly he wrote on diverse topics such as religion, mathematics, philosophy, history, and politics. He was educated and read scholarly periodicals. However, few of his writings were praised by his peers. He died in obscurity in the cultural backwater of Dux. Some of his friends did write encouraging things to him about his intellectual abilities in private correspondence. Howev-

er, even setting aside questions of the sincerity of those assurances, none of them praised him as one of the foremost intellectuals of his time. In 1764, the Scottish lawyer, diarist, and author James Boswell described Casanova in his journal as “a blockhead” (Casanova 2013 LXXIV). The Prince de Ligne, one of Casanova’s friends during his retirement, wrote that, save for his autobiographical storytelling, his writing was prolix and outmoded (Ligne 2002, 85-6). Alongside the lack of acclaim, Casanova did not achieve material success as a man of letters.

After his escape from the Leads, he stayed in Paris from 1757 to 1759, during which time he was appointed receiver of the Military School Lottery (authorised to sell tickets and administer winnings) (International Casanova Society *Casanova Gleanings vols 1-13*. 33), one of his most significant occupations in many ways. During this period, he was very wealthy, welcome in fashionable circles, highly visible in public places, associated with other famous people (including the Marquise de Pompadour), and regularly visited aristocratic homes and attended events. In a letter to Andrea Memmo in 1757, Giustiniana Wynne, whom Casanova visited daily at this time, wrote of him:

He has a carriage and lackeys and is attired resplendently. He has two beautiful diamond rings, two tasteful pocket watches, snuffboxes set in gold, and always plenty of lace. He has gained admittance, I don’t know how, to the best Parisian society. He says he has a stake in a lottery in Paris and brags that this gives him a large income. (Di Robilant 2004, 169)

This seems to go against my argument that Casanova was not well known because of any of his occupations. However, it is not the case that Casanova became well known because he was receiver of the lottery, rather that he became receiver of the lottery because he was well known. In the process elucidated by van Krieken, the attention capital Casanova had then accumulated as a result of his escape from the Leads (and his subsequent tireless self-promotion described in the following section) was transformed into power, wealth, esteem, and status. Casanova did not become famous because of his occupation as receiver of the lottery, but rather he had the opportunity to get that role and succeed in it because of his celebrity, itself the result of a daring and exciting personal story which was widely repeated.

Later in his life, he made several attempts to make himself useful to the governments of various countries. There is no evidence to suggest that Casanova’s achievements in any of these various political appointments were notable and most of his attempts to gain permanent government employment were fruitless.

Casanova’s last employment was as librarian to Count Joseph Karl von Waldstein, a position he held from 1785 until his death. As for his role as receiver of the lottery, Casanova obtained the role as Waldstein’s librarian because he was, or at least had been, a celebrity. Waldstein met Casanova through friends in 1784. The Clary family were friends of the Waldsteins and met Cas-

anova on numerous occasions. The young Prince Clary kept a journal in which he recorded these encounters with Casanova. He wrote in 1795 that Count Waldstein “is proud to have in his household someone as famous and extraordinary as Casanova” (International Casanova Society vol XX, 23). Certainly, Waldstein’s guests would have recognised Casanova as the Venetian who escaped from the Leads and who had the famous duel with Count Branicki, Great Crown Podstoli and friend of King Stanislas, as these events were talked about and recorded in gazettes across Europe.

Thus, Casanova was not famous as a result of any occupation, status, or meritorious achievement. This distinguishes him from the objects of all of the historical figures who have been called celebrities to date. Without any claim to fame as a result of his occupation or hereditary status, how then did he impact upon the public consciousness?

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## 5. Casanova’s Use of Public Space

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Casanova used the new kinds of public space which emerged in the 18th century to cultivate his celebrity. His use of public space demonstrates the significance of physical space to the history of celebrity, not just audio-visual media (as media studies theorists often suggest) or the printed word (as literary historians often suggest). The patterns of visibility of Casanova and the group known as ‘good society’ can be interpreted in similar ways to those of present day celebrities. Further, Casanova utilised trans-European networks and key spaces of social exchange with a view to increasing his celebrity. These newly emerged public spaces and transnational group of consumers of culture comprised a recognisably modern public sphere.

Throughout his life, Casanova travelled across much of Europe, and within its cities, he returned to certain spaces over and over again. The cities of 18th-century Europe contained an abundance of usable and attractive public space such as public parks and promenades (Sennett 1986, 17). When Casanova was in London, he frequented such spaces as St James’s Park, Ranleigh House, Vauxhall, and Green Park. When writing of Paris, he mentions the Palais Royal, the Tuileries, the Bois de Boulogne, la Comédie Française, and l’Opéra most frequently. Further, by the 18th century, certain new spaces of social exchange were established, such as the cafe and the salon. Also during this period, theatres and opera houses became accessible to a wider public through the open sale of tickets rather than the older practice whereby aristocratic patrons distributed places (Sennett 1986, 17). These new types of public space made it easier for someone like Casanova to cultivate his well-knownness through arousing public interest in his personality.

Much of Casanova’s time was spent in aristocratic domestic spaces. What occurred at events in such spaces, a *bon mot* uttered or conversation overheard,

was spread predominantly by word of mouth. However, the explosion of the press at the time meant they were increasingly reported on in newspapers which printed anecdotes overheard at *soupers* or sent in by anonymous letter, described festivities hosted by the nobility, and gave accounts of balls held in aristocratic residences. Since social conditions were sufficiently changed in the 18th century, Casanova was able to physically occupy spaces previously reserved for the aristocracy while gazettes and daily newspapers increasingly reported about what happened in these spaces, thereby metaphorically opening them up further.

Historians and theorists have long written about the exchange of ideas facilitated by new public space and places of social exchange (See for example Boyd and Kvanne 2008; Habermas 1989; Crossley and Roberts, 2004; Kale 2004, and Stallybrass and White 1986). However, Casanova's writings suggest that significant emphasis was placed solely on appearance and that being seen, as opposed to exchanging ideas, was often the primary objective of appearing in public. Though dwindling in economic and political power, Venice was still a thriving city during his lifetime. Known throughout Europe for its carnival, associated with gaiety and pleasure, it was a city with numerous public spaces where revellers could see and be seen. According to Casanova, men and women who had spent the evening dining and gambling in *casini*, in *auberges*, or in gardens went strolling in l'Erberia (in Rialto) in the morning (Casanova 2002 v 1, 856) expressly for the purpose of being seen by others and signalling that they had been out all night. In the same way, Casanova's response to circulation of stories about him was usually conspicuous visual display. For example, of learning of a rumour that he was ordered to leave Padua, he dressed in his finery and went to the opera, commenting that everyone was astounded to see him (Casanova 2002 v 1, 698). After he had been arrested during his second stay in Paris, his patron, the Marquise d'Urfé, paid his debts, secured his release, and then advised him to show himself in Paris's key public spaces where he would be seen by good society, namely the Tuileries, the Palais-Royal, and the foyers of the two theatres (Casanova 2002 v 2, 212). Thus, he controlled stories circulating about him through visibility in key public spaces.

To that end, Casanova's travel patterns were often in furtherance of his pursuit of celebrity. He travelled from Venice to the major cities of Europe. Apart from Dux, Casanova's longest periods in one place were in Venice and Paris as well as in London, where he spent approximately a year. London and Paris, the biggest cities in the Western world, were obvious destinations for a fame-seeker like Casanova. Pietro Chiari's satirical portrait of Casanova, published in 1771, is telling:

he talked of nothing but London, and Paris; as if those two capitals comprehended the whole world. In fact, he had resided from time to time in each of

these places...London and Paris were always brought into his conversation: London and Paris were the models of his life, his dress, his studies; in a word – of his follies.<sup>2</sup> (Chiari 1771, 126)

This malicious caricature is actually consistent with what we can deduce of Casanova's conversation from his autobiographical writings and correspondence. Those seeking fame and fortune in the 17th century might have gravitated toward the courts, whereas in the 18th century, they gravitated toward the great capital cities and particularly to the newly emerged public spaces within them.

Casanova's occupation and description of public space further complicates the traditional Habermasian public sphere. Lilti and others have argued against Habermas's idealised conception of social exchange (see for example Emery 2013). Casanova's account of the use of these spaces for purely visual display takes matters a step further. It suggests that not only were verbal exchanges more trivial than Habermas would have us believe, sometimes they were not the objective of shared public space at all.

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## 6. Casanova's Autobiographical Storytelling

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Apart from making an appropriately dazzling appearance and deliberately occupying newly emerged public spaces in order to be visible to good society, Casanova was a serial autobiographical storyteller with a talent for captivating his audiences. He told autobiographical stories in public very frequently, published autobiographical stories, and also included autobiographical material in his ostensibly critical writings. Casanova used autobiographical storytelling to create a public self which was appealing and to keep himself in the public consciousness. I am not aware of another historical celebrity who used this strategy so consistently and successfully.

In the case of both Casanova's escape and duel, it became fashionable, a test of being informed to use Boorstin's language, to have heard the story from Casanova's own lips. Those who already knew the stories from gazettes or from other people still asked Casanova to repeat them and he was often invited to social occasions for the purpose of telling these stories. After he fled to Paris after escaping from the Leads, Casanova writes of waiting at the palais de Bourbon to see cardinal de Bernis: "While waiting, I found myself obliged to tell the story of my escape everywhere I went; it was a burden as it took two hours to tell it" (Casanova 2002 v 2, 16). A similar pattern occurred following Casanova's duel with Count Branicki in early 1766. In 1765, he had travelled to Poland where he managed to ingratiate himself with the local aristocracy. Like the story of his escape from the Leads had done in Paris, the story of his

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<sup>2</sup> Translation from Italian.

duel cemented Casanova's social success in Poland. After his duel, in which both Casanova and Branicki were injured, Casanova writes that, as he was tended to by a surgeon, he initially told the story to several Polish palatines and princes (Casanova 2002 v 3, 465). He told it repeatedly in the subsequent days (Casanova 2002 v 3, 474). In the case of both his escape and duel, the story itself, and word of Casanova's ability to tell it well, spread across Europe. What occurred on these occasions was more than the retelling of an event; Casanova was represented by a trans-European public as an interesting personality with whom direct interaction was desirable. As van Krieken writes of Rousseau, it was not only Rousseau's philosophy which attracted attention, but his celebrity and the fact that it had become fashionable to know about and talk about Rousseau (van Krieken 2012, 4). Casanova underwent this similar process of celebrification.

Apart from simply drawing the public's attention, he used autobiographical storytelling to manage the public's perception of him. Casanova adopted a fictitious noble moniker, meticulously styled his appearance after fashionable nobles, and wrote his own back-story. The current Casanova biography is based almost entirely on his own account of his life. The most measurable example of him constructing his biography during his lifetime is the story that he was the illegitimate son of a Venetian patrician. Casanova promulgated the story that he was the son of Michele Grimani in his memoirs and in his roman à clef *Né Amori, né Donne, ovvero La stalla*. Though there is no evidence of this beyond Casanova's own account, that Casanova was Grimani's biological son has been accepted without resistance into the Casanova biography (see for example the work of Luna 1998, 34 and Leeftang et al. 1994, 3). Not only is his desire for well-knownness a symptom of modern individualism, but the creative control he exercised over his public self is consistent with the changed social and cultural conditions of his historical context. Casanova did not regard himself as constrained by his biography in terms of what roles he could play in public. What then was the public's perception of him?

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## 7. Casanova's "Public Image"

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In light of the deliberateness with which he pursued celebrity, it is perhaps unsurprising that Casanova should be fixated on his public image. Unlike some other historical celebrities, Casanova's physical appearance was central to the public's perception of him. This confirms that being a well-known person in the 18th century was not wholly different to today, a case of learned writings and speeches, appreciated by a discerning public in a dim and distant past. During Casanova's lifetime there was a significant increase in the regularity, readership, and content diversity of print journalism. His writings give a particularly fascinating insight into a genre of journalism which gained traction dur-

ing his lifetime: the celebrity press. Significantly, he was once described as a recurring feature in that type of publication, something to which he took great offence.

Casanova was very deliberate about his clothing and physical appearance in public and being visible in key public spaces, both matters which he describes in overwhelming detail in his memoirs. Unlike present day celebrities for whom we have a huge archive of photographs, few pictorial representations of Casanova dating from his lifetime exist.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, the 18th-century public was very much interested in what he wore and what he looked like. This is demonstrated by the numerous textual and verbal accounts of his physical appearance created during his lifetime. A passport issued to him in 1758 suggests that he was 1.91m tall, so he was of an imposing stature (Casanova 2013, note 69 to page 1276). In Chiari's satire, Vanesio/Casanova is described as follows:

He was a well-made man; of a brown complexion; his manners were stiff, and affected, but, he was very presuming, and bold [...]. [We can deduce] from [his] gaiety of dress [that he is affluent] [...]. London and Paris were the models of his life, his dress [...] Always as trim as a Narcissus; always vain, and strutting, like a peacock.<sup>4</sup> (Chiari 1771, 125-7, 36)

Giustiniana Wynne provided a physical description of Casanova in her 1757 letter to Andrea Memmo, referred to above, which describes him as magnificently dressed and exhibiting the trappings of wealth. In a letter to the secretary of the Venetian government's Council of Ten on 12 October, 1772, he is described thus:

He comes and goes everywhere, candid face and head high, well dressed. He is a man of about 40 at most [at this time Casanova was almost 50], tall, of healthy and vigorous aspect, very tanned, with vivacious eyes. (Casanova di Seingalt, Pollio, and Vèze *Pages casanoviennes. vols 1-2*, 131)

The Prince de Ligne who knew Casanova during his retirement describes him as tall, built like Hercules, dark, with vivacious eyes (Ligne 2002, 85-7). From the available evidence, we can conclude that Casanova was a tall, dark, and impressive looking man. He had the outward appearance of an extraordinary

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<sup>3</sup> The confirmed contemporaneous visual representations of him are: a pencil sketch by his brother, Francesco, dating from the early 1750s (Casanova); a miniature made when Casanova was 30 and attributed to Pierre Antoine Baudouin (International Casanova Society *Casanova Gleanings vols 1 - 13. vol 1: 4*) – the original has been lost; the engraving which illustrates *Histoire de ma fuite des prisons de la République de Venise*, published in 1787, which depicts him scaling the roof of the Doge's palace ("Casanova fuyant les Plombs de Venise"); Giacomo Casanova aged 62 by Jan Berka, published as the frontispiece of *Icosameron*, published in Prague in 1788 – (Berka); and a miniature of Casanova at the age of 71 by his brother, Francesco (Prévost and Thomas 71).

<sup>4</sup> Translation from Italian.



individual, as he was often represented to be, most notably by himself. It is quite clear that his appearance was an important driver of his well-knownness.

The images and discourses associated with him were often related to criminality. His duel with Branicki caused a sensation throughout Europe. It and his subsequent expulsion from Poland were reported in most of the European press (Luna 1998, 382). His duel was reported in gazettes such as the 28 March, 1766 issue of *Sankt-Peterbourgskie vedomosti* which described Casanova as “the famous Venetian gentleman” (Casanova 2002 v 3, 465). The descriptions of Casanova in these documents are instances of the system of celebrification, or, to use Turner’s formulation, celebrity as a genre of representation. He was represented by the press and his peers as notorious (*fameux*). One publication went so far as to call him known in the press (*assez connu dans les feuilles*). When he was in Dresden in 1766, a short item in the *Gazette de Cologne* dated 30 July from Warsaw stated: “Msr de Casa-Nuova [*sic*], rather well known in the press, having appeared here recently, was ordered by the Court to leave forthwith” (La Gazette de Cologne 1766, “Pologne”, emphasis added). The description confirms that Casanova did appear with some frequency in the periodicals of the day. The description “*assez connu dans les Feuilles*” and the assertion that he was expelled from Warsaw were highly insulting to Casanova who was extremely proud of his conduct vis a vis Branicki. He writes in his memoirs that he went to visit the author of this article and kicked him in the stomach (Casanova *HDMV* 3, 535). Though perhaps not a particularly effective means of countering the impact of the story on his public image, it does confirm that Casanova was extremely concerned by it.

Similarly, in 1790, a French journal described Casanova as a “famous adventurer.” His friend, Count Lamberg, writes: “the epithet famous, which the editor of the Journal de Paris accorded to him, gives to the word adventurer a consideration of which many could be jealous” (Roth 1980, 14). Casanova was repeatedly represented as noteworthy or exceptional; he was also attributed notorious status in the public sphere. Casanova was the subject of a genre of representation which reinforced his well-knownness, emphasised his notoriety and invited public interest in his scandalous behaviour. These are the hallmarks of today’s celebrity press.

Throughout the 18th century, the press began to increasingly report about social events, the romantic relationships of well-known people, and fashion. Casanova’s writings confirm Lilti’s observation that historians have overlooked the numerous periodicals which emerged during the 18th century that reported on such matters. Instead, these historians have directed their attention towards the literary newspapers and political gazettes (Lilti 2017, 51). Of the 18th-century English papers, Casanova wrote: “This is why the English papers are so charming: they chatter about everything going on in London and they make the gossip interesting” (Casanova 2002 v 3, 162). Both Casanova’s English papers and the modern celebrity press aim to amuse their readers, rather than

inform them about events of great social and political importance. The lightness of the former preceded the brash informality of the latter.

Alongside the emerging celebrity press, gossip disseminated by word of mouth or private correspondence remained one of the key means by which discourse about Casanova circulated. It is clear from Casanova's memoirs that he was interested in gossip about other people and also aware of gossip about himself. For example, he writes of the usefulness of wig-dressers to foreigners throughout Europe, saying they are valuable sources of local gossip (Casanova 2002 v 3, 149). His memoirs contain innumerable accounts of gossip about himself and other people. Casanova was implicated in the disappearance of Giustiniana Wynne, who fell pregnant while she was unmarried and turned to Casanova for assistance. The Wynne affair continued to be a topic of gossip in Paris throughout the spring of 1759. For example, see the extract below from an anonymous letter to Andrea Memmo (Wynne's lover) dated 10 July, 1759:

You would not believe, sir, the noise this affair has made here [...] she still remains the news of the day in a country that usually thrives on novelty. If poor Miss Wynne had wanted people to know she was in town, I can assure you she would have been very satisfied for I can't remember anyone being talked about so much.<sup>5</sup> (Di Robilant 2004, 195)

The reference to noise recalls the expression *faire du bruit* mentioned earlier. Casanova's connection with this scandal would have certainly increased his notoriety. After giving birth, Miss Wynne went to Brussels. According to Casanova, this was because honour did not permit her to show herself in Paris where everyone knew her story (Casanova 2002 v 2, 198).

As well as visual display and autobiographical storytelling, he published an allegorical work in which he was one of the main characters to craft his public image. In May 1782 in Venice, Casanova regarded himself as humiliated at the hands of Count Francesco Carletti with the acquiescence of Zuan Carlo Grimani. He took exception at the method of withheld payment disclosed by Carletti for a service which Casanova had rendered him (in securing written acknowledgment of a lost wager by Marquis Carlo Spinola) and for which he was expecting some reward. In front of Grimani, Carletti struck Casanova who felt that, as a guest, he could not retaliate. The account of the affair that spread around Venice humiliated Casanova. The incident gave rise to one of Casanova's most rapidly produced and ill-advised writings, the satirical fable *Né Amori, né Donne, ovvero la stallia ripulita* (1782), printed by Modesto Fenzo in Venice. The scandal occurred in May and the book was out in August (Leefflang et al. 1). It adapts elements of the myth of Hercules to recount the infamy of Carletti and Grimani in a satirical allegory, in which Casanova plays the role of Econeone. There was a key which linked the Greek characters with

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<sup>5</sup> Translation from Italian.

the names of the real people and, even without it, a reader apprised of the scandal could work it out. The publication caused such a scandal that Casanova left Venice, fearing another arrest. He writes that Econeone (Casanova) was begotten by Amphitryon and Jocasta (Zanetta Casanova and Michele Grimani). As already mentioned, Casanova actively spread the rumour that he was Zanetta's illegitimate child by Michele Grimani and, as such, a noble bastard. He did so again by the publication of this text which suggested that he should have been the Grimani heir instead of Zuan Carlo. Like a 20th-century film star in the studio system, his backstory was invented to be most appealing to the public.

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## 8. Conclusion

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Celebrity studies as a field does not take adequate account of figures like Casanova and what his writings and life tell us about 18th-century society. The story of celebrity began in the 18th century, if not earlier, and it has constantly developed such that the celebrity culture in the present day is most properly regarded as the most recent iteration of a long-ongoing cultural and social trend. The question of how celebrity has changed over the centuries is a fascinating one and bears consideration by both historians and scholars of celebrity studies. To date, the overarching trend in both fields has been to isolate one celebrity text or particular historical period, and indeed this case study has also adopted this approach. This has resulted in a selective and patchy chronology of celebrity.

The 'useful waypoints' which Lilti identifies in his history of celebrity are Rousseau in France in 1750 and Liztmania in Paris and Berlin in 1844 (Lilti 2014, 22). Thus, while perhaps one of the most reasoned and deliberate investigations into historical celebrity, his work does not materially change the stakes from others that came before it. Lilti talks of an emerging culture of celebrity around 1740 (Lilti 2014, 19) but Casanova's memoirs describe a thriving, widespread, and sophisticated celebrity culture at this time. Lilti's hugely important *Figures publiques* should be the beginning of a conversation and not the definitive fixing of the origins of celebrity. Casanova, so unlike other historical celebrities studied, expands the catalogue of 18th-century celebrities to include a new type of celebrity. Further, his writings demonstrate just how developed and sophisticated the market for celebrity was in this historical period.

Given the long shadows cast by figures like Rousseau and Voltaire, it is to be expected that the system for the production of literary celebrity should have received the most attention. However, there were other celebrities and other systems in operation which now warrant attention. Demonstrating that high culture figures, monarchs, and politicians could also be celebrities is useful. However, it does nothing to debunk the theory which is still expounded that,

until very recently, famous men and great men were “pretty nearly the same group” and famous men only came into a nation’s consciousness slowly (Boorstin 1967, Minois 2012, Rojek 2012, Schickel 2000). Voltaire, Rousseau, and Bonaparte were celebrities, but they were also great men. More work needs to be done in relation to historical celebrities who were tabloid fodder and, as Casanova demonstrates, they can be found.

Drawing facile comparisons between contemporary celebrities and famous figures from the past runs the risk of producing an overly simplistic theory of celebrity which is of such general application as to be of limited use. Nonetheless, even Lilti, who criticised this approach (Lilti 2014, 10), opens his own book by drawing comparisons between Lady Di and Marie-Antoinette. Critical commentators are, rightly, wary of clichés. However, the fact that we can find hackneyed complaints about celebrities who do not deserve to be famous in 18th-century texts should tell us something. No one would say that Rousseau or Voltaire were ‘famous for being famous,’ or that their celebrity outstripped their meritorious achievements (save for Casanova himself who expressed this view of Voltaire). This negative discourse is a recurring theme surrounding contemporary celebrity. Casanova’s writings about celebrity, descriptions of him by his peers, his single-minded quest for celebrity, and the strategies he used to create and cultivate his celebrity so closely recall contemporary celebrity that the similarities should not be ignored. Casanova’s lack of an occupation, lack of noble status, constant self-promotion, and precarious position in society distinguish him from the objects of other studies of historical celebrity. These facts render his well-knownness even more strikingly similar to the most recent permutations of celebrity. Casanova may be an outlier but I suspect not. There is more work to be done in relation to historical celebrities who were “quite well known in the press.”

Lilti asserts that the study of celebrity should be approached first and foremost with a view to answering this fascinating question: What is the nature of our interest in certain of our peers which we have never met? (Lilti 2014, 15) Tracing public curiosity is one approach. Tracing the pejorative discourse associated with those who are apparently well known for spurious or unidentifiable reasons is another. A highly developed sense of individualism is assumed by both approaches. Casanova’s strong belief in his own uniqueness, in his ability to make an impact upon the wider world, his entitlement to public acclaim, material success, and social esteem suggest that he took this individualism for granted. Turner talks about the early 20th century as the point at which picture personalities came to have a personal and professional interest in promoting themselves through the media, not only the latest product in which they played a role (Turner 2004, 13). Casanova did not have that sort of direct commercial motivation since he was not awarded contracts to promote products or to sell tickets to his latest film. Nonetheless, he tirelessly self-promoted. This may have been because he expected material gain to flow from this, or that he

craved public recognition independent of commercial considerations. Regardless, that shift occurred much earlier. That individualism could be better historicised. Therein, in my view, lies the key to tracing the origins of celebrity which I think has a very long history indeed.

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# Historical Social Research

## Historische Sozialforschung

### All articles published in HSR Supplement 32 (2019): Celebrity's Histories: Case Studies & Critical Perspectives

Nicola Vinovrški & Robert van Krieken

New Directions in the History of Celebrity: Case Studies and Critical Perspectives.

doi: [10.12759/hsr.suppl.32.2019.7-16](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.suppl.32.2019.7-16)

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