

CASANOVA MEETS GOETHE

An excerpt from the novel *Casanova in Bohemia*

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These were his thoughts as he arrived in the resplendent, ten-thousand-cupola'd, miniature fairy-tale principality of Weimar. Though he felt as if he was going to perish from the intense grippe, he felt also a surge of pride that he had come as last to the very lair of his nemesis. He put up at an inn not far from Councillor Goethe's house, and opened the windows wide.

He was not surprised to see a large crowd milling in the street below and even less surprised to hear that they were all waiting to see the famous writer, a wait that sometimes lasted six weeks.

Many of those waiting were also staying at the inn. Among them were women of all ages who had traveled from distant countries to offer themselves to the disconsolate romantic, sure that their love would cure whatever ailed him. There were also functionaries of various governments, anxious to make his acquaintance, ostensibly for literary reasons, but really because they had heard that Goethe was on his way to a remarkable political career. There were also literary pilgrims, from pale young poets to princes consumed by poetic ambitions. The politicians and the princes had priority.

Casanova sent the Hungarian across the street with a letter and watched as he dropped it in a large urn outside the great man's door. The urn was filled to the brim with letters that were scooped up each evening at precisely nine o'clock with a long gold ladle by an unseen person within. After watching this ritual for three consecutive evenings and feeling his fever disappear completely, Casanova decided to make the acquaintance of some of the other supplicants.

He met a tall, lily-white girl, dressed in white to resemble a lily, who gave off the scent of lilies even as she clung limply to the arm of a sturdy black-clad frau. Casanova bowed to her and inquired if she was there to present the beauty of her verse or simply her beauty to the great poet.

"Both, my dear man," answered Countess Lotte von Herder, annoyed but not displeased by the attention. It was the first time any man had spoken to her since she had left the devastated city of Mainz.

"In that case," proposed the Chevalier, "I would be honored to have

your company and that of your governess for supper this evening, so that we might discuss poetry.”

Countess Lotte blushed violently, ruining momentarily the lily effect, and explained that the woman in black, who was indeed her governess, was known as Miss Mulgrave. She was English. Supper with the gentleman was another matter, one that she could not imagine deciding upon without the aid of her Tarot cards.

“The Tarot!” exclaimed Casanova, “My dear Countess! Your luck is indeed extraordinary. I am to the Tarot and to the Kabbalah what Goethe is to German verse. I am the only worthy competitor of Comte de St. Germain in occult studies! I would be delighted not only to read your cards, but also to consult my cabbalistic pyramid on your behalf!”

That evening, in his sparkling room, which had been decorated with candles and flowers and laden with the best Weimar had to offer in food and wine – on credit, of course – Casanova received the two women. He was pleased to see that the sturdy Miss Mulgrave had changed into evening dress and that the only really large thing about her was her enormous bosom. As for Lotte, she looked more like a lily than ever, but transformed into a rose as the second glass of wine had its effect. The Hungarian served at the table and, Casanova noticed, lingered long attending to Miss Mulgrave.

Casanova displayed his knowledge of the Tarot splendidly and revealed to Miss Lotte things that not even her mother or father could have known, such as the fact that although she was technically a virgin, she had experienced deep kisses on her temple of Venus from her best girlfriend, Augusta, whose temple she had kissed from frieze to cornice to altar. When he drew the cabbalistic pyramid with its black Hebrew letters, Lotte nearly fainted with pleasure. She leaned close to the Chevalier, blowing the gentlest breeze of her quickened breath on his old, powdered cheek, and resting her hand like a scared dove on his thigh. It was not long after that an inexplicable wind blew out all the candles and Casanova found himself defending the poor child from the darkness by peeling away her outer layers and pressing her warm, damp skin and scared small breasts against his bony body. A great deal of shuffling and excited breathing could be heard on the other side of the room as the Hungarian defended the English governess in a similar manner

Countess Lotte von Herder liked to talk. Next day she praised Chevalier de Seingalt’s Tarot skills so highly that by noon several young ladies, some accompanied by their governesses, some alone, came to beseech him

to read their futures. These readings, in their turn, were so successful, that the Chevalier's enterprise became the favorite pastime of all those waiting to see the great poet. Some of them had been in Weimar for over a month and had been dying of boredom, particularly the virgins who were not even sure if the Chevalier would receive them.

Such success is not without dangers. The great poet soon heard of the doings across the street and noted a decided drop in the level of enthusiasm of his young supplicants, particularly the virgins. Casanova was abruptly summoned to appear before the poet.

The leader was seated in a weighty, dignified, but fully present manner in a large armchair, his brilliant eyes burning in a powdered face whose cheeks had been described variously as "cherubic" and "stately." Assorted admirers, some of them permanent, others temporary, stood or lounged about in the ornate salon furnished with couches and chairs upholstered in rose-colored tapestry depicting fleshly angels.

"Chevalier de Seingalt," the poet addressed him in French, "I believe that I have heard the name. My good friend Frederick of Prussia mentioned a civil engineer..."

"My dear poet," Casanova responded in Italian, "I believe that you have indeed heard of me. I am Casanova."

A smile that began in the tiniest corner of Goethe's mouth began to spread suddenly across his face and spread and spread until it almost overtook most of it.

"Casanova, dio mio!" exclaimed the poet in accentuated Italian, "You are a famous man!"

"You know my translation of the *Iliad* into Italian?" Casanova asked hopefully.

Goethe's smile turned into helpless laughter and his "cherubic" or "stately" jowls began to shake helplessly. "The *Iliad*? No. We know you for the man who drove more women mad than Louis XV..." Goethe made an obscene gesture by thrusting a finger in and out of the top of his fist. The company burst out laughing.

The blood ran out of Casanova's already pale face. Goethe hastened to correct his rudeness.

"Dear Chevalier, please do not feel insulted. You are among friends. You have heard similar things about me, I am sure."

The company laughed out loud again, only a great deal more respectfully.

“In all honesty,” Casanova said coldly, “your rudeness does not bother me. I have traveled all this way because I believe that you and I are two models for the future. If the world chooses you, I pity poor humanity. I represent a hope for happiness.”

The salon fell silent. Goethe contemplated Casanova for a long time before speaking. “I don’t know what folly brought you here. As for the future ... the future will have use for genius, but not much use, I fear, for refinement.”

“Thank you,” Casanova said sincerely. “What will inspire genius in these future battles? Not love, certainly, which is both refined and inexplicable. What then?”

“Forces,” answered Goethe, suddenly furious, “forces of mythology, images from the folk wisdom of nations, gods who have been abandoned and who are now ready to rise again.”

“Are these gods present in the German language?”

They had been speaking in French.

“Yes,” Goethe replied in German, “the gods are manifest in the language.”

“I asked you about the German language.”

“The genius of myth once resided in Greek. Tomorrow it will live in our German.”

Casanova bowed nearly to the ground, as his dancing master Marcel had taught him in Paris many decades before, and took his leave without another word...

Excerpted via generous permission of Andrei Codrescu from his novel *Casanova in Bohemia* (New York: The Free Press), 2002.