

Casanova

Until last Thursday, I vaguely understood the name “Casanova” as referring to a man who was a womanizer or, perhaps, a man whose whole being was focused on romantic matters.

But, on Thursday, I accompanied a priest friend to the MFA in Boston to see an exhibit simultaneously dedicated to the 18th century adventurer, Giacomo Casanova and the #METOO movement. There and then I was introduced to the man behind the name with all of those romantic connotations.

Casanova was from Venice, Italy. And, the mid-18th century was the heyday for Venice: It was an extremely wealthy trading port and a key connection between the East and the West.

It was in this cosmopolitan, wealthy city that Casanova got his start as a combination adventurer/charlatan/womanizer. The strict class-system of the city practically required people to wear masks in public so that they could interact with one another without having to worry about violating the class-code or being subject to harsh judgement or civil penalties. This wearing of masks to hide one’s identity enabled tricksters like Casanova to insinuate himself into high society parties and gatherings. And once his technique was honed, he took the show on the road all over Europe.

Casanova befriended kings, princes, popes and wealthy businessmen, and this despite the fact that he was a low-born, unimportant person by the standards of the day. But, his Father was a professional actor and, in all likelihood, he learned something of that trade to aid in his career. Thus, he was able to pull off the great feat of convincing the super-important people of Europe that he was one of them. And from the many experiences he had, he composed an autobiography which is considered the best representation of 18th century, European life in existence.

The dark side of this seemingly delightful and clever man is that he was a terrible manipulator and abuser of young women. And this is why the museum chose to associate the #METOO movement with the exhibit. Casanova was not alone in his deplorable treatment of women: The exhibit was full of examples of what would have been considered “pornography” and the exploitation of women during that time in all the big cities of Europe. What was happening all too regularly with women in those days would be considered criminal in our day and age.

Alongside this abusive treatment of women, there seemed to be a growing cynicism about religion and the Church. Nunneries were depicted as brothels where men would meet young, female boarders and consort with them. The nuns, themselves, were depicted as sex objects in some of the artworks. And a sense of moral corruption seems to pervade the whole of society in that moment. It is a time when the term “libertinism” is coined: A libertine is a person who is devoid of most moral or sexual restraints, which are seen as unnecessary or undesirable, especially one who ignores or even spurns accepted morals and forms of behavior in the larger society. Libertinism is described as an extreme form of hedonism.

To the extent that some Church institutions and people were caught up in the “wink, wink, nudge, nudge” of sexual intrigue and other forms of corruption is a terrible disappointment and scandal, (even this many years later). My friend and I could only sigh and acknowledge the ongoing challenges we face when discipline breaks down.



More broadly speaking, the exhibit included incredible paintings which depicted the ordinary, everyday lives of people at that time in history, (around-about the time of our Revolution). The paintings depicted men working the docks, women hanging out the laundry, dogs frolicking with children, and a sense that, for as many hundreds of years have passed, life remains much the same.

To call a guy a “real Casanova” is no complement. The man routinely objectified, manipulated and abused women throughout his adult life. He seemingly had little room for the value of love in his heart. That he left such a valuable, historical document does not adequately outshine the darkness of his deeds.