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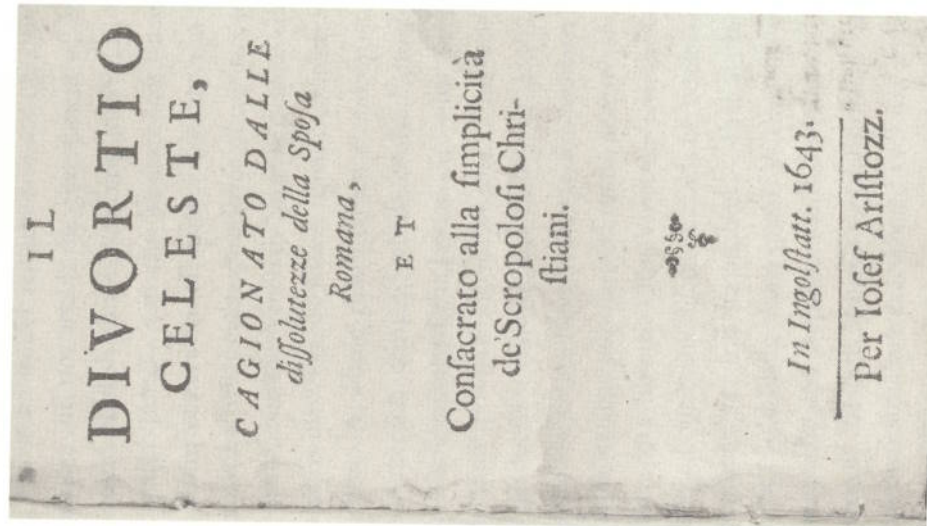
The Libertines

THE CELESTIAL
DIVORCE

IN 1642 Maffeo Barberini (aka Pope Urban VIII) provoked the War of Castro against the Farnese duke of Parma. During this grubby little war, scandalous for the opportunism of the Barberini, even by the scandalous standards of the seventeenth century, one of the most popular and controversial authors of the day, Ferrante Pallavicino, completed the first volume of a proposed trilogy, *The Celestial Divorce (Il Divortio celeste)*. A biting satirist and unrelenting critic of the Barberini papacy, Pallavicino was already more an enemy of Pope Urban than Galileo had been (he had died the previous January, still under house arrest). *The Celestial Divorce* depicted Jesus Christ seeking out the Eternal Father to announce his wish to divorce his bride, the Roman Church, who had committed intolerable adulteries and lived in a cesspool of vice. In order

to inform himself about the state of things, God the Father, presumably because he could not trust St. Peter, sent St. Paul down to earth to visit Rome. Paul returned so scandalized that he recommended that the Father grant Christ's request. The first volume ended at this point, but the other volumes, if they had been completed, were to continue with an account of how Luther, Calvin, and Mark of Ephesus (the fifteenth-century Greek theologian who had opposed the unification of the Greek and Roman churches) offered their own churches as the new bride of Christ. After considering their suitability for matrimony, Christ was to have demurred, stating that he did not intend to wed any of the existing churches.¹

By the time Pallavicino satirized the Roman Church in *The Celestial Divorce*, the Venice-centered culture wars of the late Renaissance, which had begun in the 1590s with the conflict between the Society of Jesus and the faculty of the University of Padua, had become thoroughly embedded in actual wars, not just the local War of Castro but the much more violent conflict between the Habsburgs and the Bourbons, between Catholic and Protestant powers, now known as the Thirty Years' War. The culture wars had already turned nasty in Venice. An ardent defender of the liberty of the Venetian republic, Galileo's old friend Paolo Sarpi, had been stabbed and gravely wounded on a Venetian bridge in 1607, allegedly by papal agents. Even after the end of the papal interdict against Venice, the Society of Jesus remained banished from the Venetian republic, which until the 1650s was the font of



Title page to Ferrante Pallavicino, *Il Divortio celeste* (Ingolstadt, 1643).

antipapal, and some would say atheistic, thought in Italy. As long as authors did not attack the government of Venice itself, they could publish almost anything in Venice, and they did. The papal nuncio and the Roman inquisitors maintained an extensive network of spies in the city and filled the archives in Rome with correspondence about the antipapal press in Venice, but the Venetian Senate, despite serious internal divisions on religious issues, usually protected controversial authors. A whole new literary economy arose during the seventeenth century, which evolved most fully in Venice but also connected the lagoon city with international intellectual and political developments. The new literary economy produced a tremendous variety of printed works, including broadsheets—the prototype for modern newspapers—pamphlets that popularized many new trends, *novellas*, poems, and opera libretti. One Venetian printer, Girolamo Albrizzi, turned out many different kinds of books—tourists' yearbooks, almanacs, and broadsheets—that is, he printed anything that could bring him a profit. Within this new literary economy, religious skepticism and libertine views found a ready market.² Despite Venice's reputation as a safe haven, the international situation exacerbated cultural and religious tensions, especially after the beginning of the Thirty Years' War, and many authors besides Pallavicino resorted to pseudonyms, anonymity, and publication in Protestant countries.

Ferrante Pallavicino, born in Parma in 1615, was among the youngest of the prolific authors who dominated the Venetian scene during the 1630s and '40s. In Milan he took the white

habit of the Lateranensi canons, from whom he received the typical training for religious novices in a curriculum heavily influenced by the Jesuit model. While still a teenager he obtained leave from his superior to visit the Lateranensi in France, but instead of going abroad, he left for Venice, where he found a girlfriend, lived incognito, and wrote exuberant letters back to his superior and fellow canons describing the trip to France he never took. He then went to Padua, where he apparently enrolled in some courses at the university. The University of Padua was still in the thrall of the philosophical skepticism of Cesare Cremonini, who had died in 1631. While there, Pallavicino published his first book, *Il Sole ne' pianeti, cioè le grandezze della Serenissima Repubblica di Venetia* (The Sun in the planets, that is, the greatness of the Most Serene Republic of Venice), a panegyric that brought him the protection of the Venetian Senate.³ In 1635 he returned to Venice for reasons of love, according to a contemporary biographer; he found there a hospitable environment for attacking what he imagined were his personal adversaries: the Society of Jesus, the Spanish monarchy, and the court of Rome. Despite his lively intellectual rebellion against the three pillars of Catholic orthodoxy, he did not renounce his vows but continued to live in Venice at the Lateranensi monastery of the Carità, now the museum of the Accademia di Belle Arti. At the monastery he spent two or three hours every morning writing in bed. He published his first drafts without correction, and in less than eight highly productive years he had produced twenty-six books and *novellas*. His evenings he

spent frolicking with prostitutes, for whom he developed a powerful fascination that revealed a deep ambivalence about sexuality, also displayed in many of his writings.

His profligate ways made it necessary to have a patron, and he found one in the person of Giovanni Francesco Loredan (1607–1661), a member of one of Venice's most prominent patrician families and the founder of the famous Accademia degli Incogniti. For a time Pallavicino served as Loredan's private secretary, and over the years Loredan, who was eight years older than Pallavicino, provided for his financial and publishing needs. Loredan worked his way up the cursus honorum of Venetian offices; by the 1650s he had held such influential posts as state inquisitor and membership in the Council of Ten and the Minor Council, offices that placed him within the inner circle of Venetian politicians. Through his political influence Loredan protected the fashionable Incogniti, meanwhile using the academy and his own literary works, such as his *novella Diana* (Venice, 1635), to further his anti-Habsburg program. The interpretive key to *Diana* was an anagram composed of the names of the protagonists of the Thirty Years' War, including Wallenstein, Gustavus Adolphus, and Maria Habsburg, who was cast as Diana herself. Along with a number of other Incognito publications that touched upon the Thirty Years' War, *Diana* was republished numerous times in the fifty years following the first edition. The book, in presenting Gustavus Adolphus as the hero of the war, marks the first time any Italian writer had openly praised a Protestant prince. Even Sarpi had never

spoken favorably in public about a Protestant, but it was typical of the Incogniti to challenge the accepted norms by redefining the issue. What attracted them to the great Swede was not his Protestantism but his "natural" virtue.⁴

The Accademia degli Incogniti was active from about 1630 to 1660. Its members included nearly every important Venetian intellectual of the mid-seventeenth century and many prominent foreigners. In fact, foreign members outnumbered Venetians, a measure of the academy's international character. At the heart of Venetian cultural life, the Incogniti and the other fashionable academies created an intellectual style that depended on "conversation." The most important conversational activity was the oral presentation followed by debate. They created an "academic" style that placed enormous emphasis on the virtuosity of word selection and the power of language, not just for self-expression, but as an instrument for perception and deeper cognition. This was a trait borrowed from the Socratic methods of Cremonini, with whom so many of the Incogniti had studied. Their word play, their sense of the indeterminacy of meaning, and their understanding of language as a dynamic process rather than a fixed text betray a sensibility akin to that found in Montaigne's *Essays*. Loredan's *Spirit of Ferrante Pallavicino* borrowed from Montaigne the phrase *se promener* to explain the work of the Incogniti, as always in transition, a body of work in which meaning slid past any straightforward denotation. Other such borrowings from French included *rapsodie*, *fricassée*, *pot-pourri*, *mosaïque*.⁵

The Incogniti transformed their private academic debates involving speaking and listening into the more public forms of theatrical production and publishing. Musical theater was one of their favored genres. The Incogniti supported the most successful opera theater of the 1640s, the Novissimo. Besides writing opera libretti, they published moral and religious tracts, philosophical essays, and especially *novellas* that have come to be labeled libertine.⁶ Their wide-ranging and eclectic works betrayed certain preoccupations, including an interest in kabbalistic magic, eroticism tinged with overt homosexuality, parodies of the Christian virtues, blasphemy, and religious speculations that were certainly heterodox and skeptical.

The Incogniti often hid their ideas and identities behind metaphorical language and pseudonyms. Loredan, for example, used the comical anglicized pseudonym Henrico Giblet. The overt justification for their secrecy was the poetic commonplace that the truth must remain hidden from the prying eyes of the vulgar, and their explicit models were Cremonini, who advocated a calculated dissimulation, and Montaigne, who had placed the truth "at the back of the shop" (*à l'arrière-boutique*). The motto of the Incogniti was *Ex ignoto notus* ("The known from the unknown"), which appeared in their books on an emblem that depicted the Nile, an allusion to the river's unknown origins.⁷ Despite their propensity for playful secrets, they displayed a converse and apparently irresistible fascination for publicity, exemplified by Girolamo Brusoni's 1647 panegyric of the Incogniti. *The*

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Glories of the Incogniti supplied pocket biographies and a list of the publications of 104 members, who came from all over Italy and as far away as Copenhagen and the Greek island of Chios. According to the incomplete list in *The Glories*, the membership of the Incogniti included more Bolognese (thirteen) than Venetians (eleven), and significant contingents of Genoese (nine) and Milanese (six). The Accademia degli Incogniti was hardly an exclusively Venetian institution; rather, it was a cosmopolitan Italian academy that took advantage of the relatively free political and intellectual environment of the Venetian republic; what unified most of the membership was not Venetian citizenship but the shared experience of study at Padua.⁸

Cesare Cremonini exercised the most powerful influence on the Incogniti. In his forty-year teaching career he was said to have had more students than any other professor at the university. In 1600 both Cremonini and Galileo were elected to the Accademia dei Ricoverati, upon which the Incogniti were partially modeled. Despite the fact that he defended the Aristotelian dictum that philosophy must be founded on sensory experiences, Cremonini embedded himself in a bookish rather than an experimental culture, and that tendency persisted among his students, few of whom seem to have been engaged in Galileo's new science.⁹

Cremonini's theory of the mortality of the soul bound up bodily sensations with the operations of the soul, which meant that sexual and other physical drives should be not suppressed but expressed. Skeptical of the Christian doc-



Ex ignoto notus ("The known from the unknown"), motto and emblem of the Incogniti. The engraving depicts the Nile River flowing from its then unknown source to its well-known delta. From Girolamo Brusoni, Jacopo Gaddi, or Giovanni Francesco Loredan (?), *Le Glorie degli Incogniti* (Venice, 1647), facing page 1.

trines of salvation, Cremonini preached the value of physical pleasure over conventional Christian morality, a message that certainly struck a chord with the young students.¹⁰ Cremonini's teachings about the mortality of the soul and his naturalistic philosophy constituted the grounding for the subversion of Christian moral values, especially sexual ethics.¹¹

Having sat at the feet of Cremonini, the Incogniti kept alive in their academy his playful intellectual sensibility if not his rigid Aristotelianism. They loved to debate issues from as many points of view as they could imagine, creating an atmosphere in which witty, provocative conversation was valued, but which was morally equivocal or ambivalent. Typical of their work was Loredan's *Academic Novelities* (*Bizzarrie accademice*, 1654), which included discourses on whether blushing was a sign of virtue or vice, whether morality applied to card games, why old people sleep less than young people, why physicians have long beards, what the perils of sacrilegious love were, and why Pythagorus prohibited the use of fava beans. Many of Loredan's discourses are obscene commentaries, all dressed up with learned citations, on the effects of sexual desire on lovers.¹²

One of the mottos of the academy referred to the *Ignoto Deo*, the unknown God, an allusion to the academicians' fondness for preserving anonymity, operating behind the scenes, and writing in a secret code. The frontispiece of Loredan's *novella Amorous Doubts* (*Dubbi amorosi*) shows the author kneeling reverently before a figure that is entirely veiled and labeled *Ignoto Deo*. As Bernard Aikema has demonstrated, the

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engraving is overtly blasphemous. The phrase "the unknown god" alluded to St. Paul's sermon informing the Athenians that the inscription "To an unknown god" in one of their temples actually referred to the Christian God of the creation (Acts 17:23). The Loredan frontispiece, however, introduces a book about erotic love, and a cupid figure presents the author to his beloved, whom Loredan worships as if she were God.¹³ Thus, a well-known passage of Scripture was deployed as the image of an idolatrous sexual obsession.

Gino Benzoni, the most prominent scholar of seventeenth-century Venetian intellectual life, evokes the sensibility of the seventeenth-century academicians, who with "the excitations of the pen" produced "waves of ink" in their effort to become authors.

But authors of what? Above all of myriad little dissertations, through which passed into print the exploding sparkle of the changeable effervescences and fancies of academic conversation produced as "capricci" of the occasion, of spontaneous "abortions," of "jokes" more or less "genial," of "oddities" more or less eccentric, of gossipy "lapses." These were a pretext for the argument in favor of an affected improvisation in which futility is feigned, while the argument is serious and grave, even if in fact the consequence is really futile. Garrulous cicadas gathered in the academies. There they recited, with great precision, their blatherings. And then they published them.¹⁴

These publications contained frequent whiffs of heterodoxy. Loredan wrote essays on "nothing," and, in fact, the In-



This engraving of the Glories of the Incogniti depicts an obscure allegory, typical of the Incogniti, who sought to hide their meanings. Hercules, complete with club and lion's skin, sits pensively. Beneath his left arm is the emblem of the Incogniti, showing the Nile River flowing from its source to its delta, an illustration of the motto "The known from the unknown." Above Hercules the goddess Diana is about to spear a winged demon that perhaps with ironic intent bears a banner inscribed with the title of the book. Initial engraving in Girolamo Brusoni, Jacopo Gaddi, or Giovanni Francesco Loredan (?), *Le Glorie degli Incogniti* (Venice, 1647).

cogniti had a certain fascination with nothing that permitted them to present "arguments from nothing" and "concepts of nothing." As Benzoni put it, "one can say that about nothing one is saying nothing. And he who does not say anything is not culpable of anything."¹⁵ Although many of the Incogniti discourses on nothingness now seem quite silly, Benzoni's dismissal of them misses what was innovative and powerful in them. Rooted in the Greek Sophists' discussions about nothingness, the Renaissance debate about the "paradoxes on nothing" reappeared among several Incogniti writers in the 1630s.¹⁶ For the Incognito Luigi Manzini, author of *Nothing* (*Il Niente*, 1634), celebrating the nobility of nothingness opened a door onto aesthetic and semiotic theory. Examining nothingness was a device for exploring the impossibility of representation in language, which led to a distrust of verbal language and to the cultivation of stylistic extremes for their shock value or, to put it in seventeenth-century terms, for the capacity of poetry to achieve novelty and produce the marvelous. One of the most influential poets in the history of Italian literature, Giovanbattista Marino (1569-1625), was a favorite of the Incogniti and the subject of a biography by Loredan. Marino is known as the author of the motto "The aim of the poet is to marvel," an objective that especially influenced the Incogniti authors.¹⁷

Any simple label that attempts to define these "excitations of the pen" does not do full justice to their diversity and rhetorical playfulness. The enemies of the Incogniti coined the most common label, "libertine," but one recent critic would

prefer the description "proto-Enlightenment" and, as I hope to show, there is much to recommend this view.¹⁸ The French Jesuit Father Garasse wrote a diatribe, *The Curious Doctrine of the Free Spirits* (1623), in which he defined the libertine as someone who identified God with nature, who denied transcendence, the reality of miracles, the immortality of the soul, and the otherworldly destiny of mankind. The libertine replaced free will and individual moral responsibility with a naturalistic determinism. The libertine considered all religious as political opportunists, and priests as impostors. The libertine embraced an instinctual ethic. As Father Garasse wrote, "there are a few free spirits in the world, and . . . they are not capable of believing in our doctrine. They do not speak openly but in secret and among other free spirits, confidants, and cabalists." He proposed a central proposition from which their doctrines derived: "The libertines are free spirits, strange persons, who attempt to enter into the secret of natural causes."¹⁹ That definition would make even Galileo a libertine.

The libertinism of the Incogniti could get out of bounds. Through Loredan's personal intervention, the *novella* *The Schoolboy Alcibiades* (*Alcibiade fanciullo a scuola*) was published in Venice in 1650. This tale of pederastic seduction has been attributed to the Incognito Antonio Rocco—a student of theology and philosophy at the Collegio Romano and later of Cremonini at Padua. A Benedictine, he eventually taught philosophy in the convent attached to Andrea Palladio's magnificent San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice and turned down

offers of university chairs at Padua and Pisa in order to stay in Venice as the public lecturer in moral philosophy. He refused to say Mass and was reputed to be an atheist.²⁰ The book centers on a dialogue between the Greek tutor Filotomo and his pupil Alcibiades in which the older man convinces his young pupil to yield to his sexual advances. An underground book during the seventeenth century, *Alcibiade* certainly had readers, and it directly influenced both Pietro della Vecchia's painting *Socrates and His Two Pupils* (also called *Know Thyself*) and the libretto for the Venetian opera *Alcibiade* (1680) by Aurelio Aureli. The preface to the libretto echoes the *novella* in its defense of the subject matter: "You will enjoy a few lascivious though restrained actions, composed by me with the sole aim that you learn to shun them, and not to imitate them." Sure, Rocco had defended himself through a surfeit of paradoxes. In "On Ugliness" he equates the ugly with hell and the beautiful with heaven and then reverses them, making hell the desired place and heaven the worse place. Loredan calls this display of moral gymnastics "most excellent," but it reads like sophistry now.²¹

Rocco's inquisition file is even more revealing than his published sophistries. Among the several denunciations of him is one filed in 1648 by Enrico Palladio, a physician from Udine, who fell deathly ill. To clear his conscience, he called to his bed the inquisitors of Udine, to report conversations he had had in Venice with Rocco. For about two and a half years, Palladio had tagged along with some friends who went to play cards in Rocco's lodgings at San Moisè.

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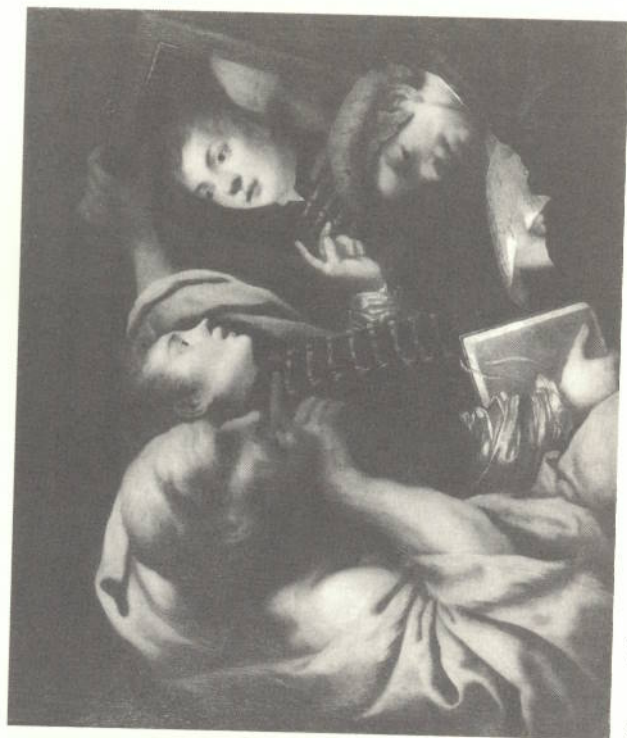
Every time I wanted to, I could go into the bedroom of Signor Rocco, where he was always ill, and talk with him. He spoke languidly because of the infirmity of his soul and said, "Oh, my soul, I know that you have to go and I know where you will go; it will be over soon." Moreover, many times he offered me his book *On the Mortality of the Soul* (*De mortalitate animae*), and he wanted to make me give it to his students, but I neglected to look at it, and once he asked if I had read it, and I told him yes, even though I had not read it. . . .

Likewise the said Signor Rocco once told me that one finds in the Holy Scriptures many contradictions and things that do not coincide with the proper time period, and things that cannot be so, in particular the Ark of Noah, which could not be capable of carrying so many animals. . . .

Also Signor Rocco asked us how much time since we had been used carnally, either naturally or against nature, and we told him all about it; and he added, "You have done well because that instrument was made by nature because we have our tastes and delights."²²

What interested the inquisitors, however, was less Rocco's sodomies than his heresies, especially his rejection of the immortality of the soul after the fashion of Cremonini.

For all their free-spirited ideas, the Incogniti were hardly revolutionaries. No matter how much they rebelled against the dogmas of the Church, they failed to imagine an alternative society or to embrace an ideology of progress, as would the Enlightenment thinkers whom the Incogniti anticipated in other respects. In fact, they remained, as Giorgio Spini put it, "fixed in a fundamentally conservative attitude," insensible



Pietro della Vecchia's painting *Socrates and His Two Pupils*, also known as *Know Thyself*, was one of a series of oil paintings Vecchia produced showing an elderly teacher paying what may be seen as erotic attention to his young students. Antonio Rocco's book advocating pedophilia influenced della Vecchia. Prado Museum, Madrid.

to the sources for social renewal in their own time. Spini traced the attitude of the Venetian libertines to the influence of Cremonini, who had oriented them toward a backward-looking philosophical and historical method and who seems to have imparted to a chosen few intimates the rudiments of his crypto-libertinism.²³ Thus, in politics they uncritically promulgated the conservative, traditional myth about the virtues of the Venetian republic.

Loredan himself depicted the academies as a microcosm of that republic. In his *Academic Novelities*, he presented a discourse on "that thing which is most prejudicial to the survival of the academies." He defines the academy as "none other than a union of the Virtuous to cheat time, and to investigate Virtue and happiness." Quoting Plato, Loredan defines the republic in the same way, as a union of citizens for the purpose of pursuing happiness. The first obligation of academicians is to flee error, and of the citizen to avoid blame. The function of the academy is to teach, and the interests of the academy and the republic are virtually identical. He then examines those things prejudicial to both republics and academies. His list is a peculiar amalgam of republican theory with a certain Incognito twist. The prejudicial conditions he catalogs include: when rewards and punishments are determined by emotions rather than justice, when merit is not rewarded, when citizens are unequal, and when those who govern are ignorant. This is standard republican theory. But he slips in between numbers three and five—the position rhetorical theory designated as the least conspicuous on his

list—the statement “Old age is a grave detriment to the interests of the Republic.”²⁴ Is this an example of the Incogniti’s questioning the gerontocracy of *savi* who governed them, without bringing the republican system itself into question?²⁵

The Incogniti supported the most ardent of the free spirits, Ferrante Pallavicino, and provided an appreciative audience for him. The books he wrote during his most productive period, between 1635 and 1640, were so popular that booksellers and printers bought them from him at a premium. During the same half decade, he worked on publishing projects with the Incogniti and another prominent academy, the Unisoni. He also published accounts of his travels to Genoa and to Germany as the chaplain to the duke of Amalfi. After the German trip he returned to Venice in the summer of 1541 with his face disfigured by a skin disease and a new book ready for publication. *Il Corriero svaligiato*, which might be translated as “The Post-Boy Robbed of His Bag,” became, according to his contemporary biographer and colleague in the Incogniti, Girolamo Brusoni, the “sole cause of all his misfortunes.”²⁶ In the *novella* four courtiers read and comment on letters that their prince has ordered stolen from a courier. The letters included some political ones written by the Spanish governor of Milan. The conceit of the *novella* allowed Pallavicino to express multiple points of view and to offer a small encyclopedia of contemporary ideologies critical of the “Grandi,” described as ravenous wolves and greedy harpies; the court of Urban VIII Barberini, “the barber who cut the beard of Christ”; the Jesuits who attempted to mo-



This frontispiece engraving is typical of the Venetian tradition of female personifications of the Republic of Venice, presiding over the sea empire symbolized by the ship on the left and the land empire depicted as a tower on a hill. From Giovanni Francesco Loredan, *Discorsi academici de' Signori incogniti* (Venice, 1635).

nopolize all education and intellectual life; the Inquisition, which ruined the business of publishers through prosecution of those who sold prohibited books; and most of all of the Spanish, who dominated Italy politically and militarily. The only powers to escape condemnation in the letters were the valiant republics, Genoa, Lucca, and especially Venice, which had managed to maintain political independence.²⁷

The reaction against *Il Corriero svaligiato* was immediate. The apostolic nuncio to Venice, Francesco Vitelli, demanded Pallavicino's arrest; Pallavicino spent six months in Venetian prisons but was never brought to trial.²⁸ In March 1642 the supporters of the Holy See in the Senate proposed legislation to banish Pallavicino and prohibit the sale of *Il Corriero*. The proposal came to a vote four times and failed to pass, for each time more senators abstained than voted for the provision. With the support of Loredan and the Incogniti, Pallavicino mustered strong backing from many members of the upper levels of the Venetian patriciate, even if most were unwilling to commit themselves to a "no" vote.²⁹ Nevertheless, after his release from prison he lived insecurely in Venice, tenaciously persecuted by Vitelli and the nephew of the pope, Francesco Barberini. Twice Pallavicino was forced to leave his monastery and take refuge with Loredan, and during the summer of 1642 he escaped Venice, traveling home to Parma, to Friuli, and back to Parma, only to return to Venice in August to see a woman.

Even while he was in prison and later on the run from the nuncio, Pallavicino had not backed off from his attacks on

the pope. He published clandestinely and anonymously, but the sellers of his books were severely punished, and a professional spy identified Pallavicino to the nuncio as the offending author. During the eighteen months after the publication of *Il Corriero svaligiato* he wrote four books, including a trilogy of anti-Barberini works that blamed Pope Urban for the War of Castro and for machinations aimed at achieving domination of Italy (the *Baccinata*, *Dialogo molto curioso*, and *Il Divortio celeste*), and the scandalous anti-Jesuit work *The Rhetoric of Whores* (*La Retorica delle puttane*), which was “dedicated to the guild of the most celebrated courtesans.”³⁰

More than any of his other books, *The Rhetoric of Whores* demonstrates why Pallavicino was the only Italian author of his epoch capable of a coherent vision that integrated satire, skepticism, and naturalistic morality.³¹ The book is a didactic lecture on the relation between rhetoric and philosophy, in which an old prostitute instructs a naive apprentice. The old woman is in bad health, poor, and miserable, all because she “did not know to stop at rhetoric, wanting to go on to learn philosophy”; in other words, she did not understand that her profession relies on deception, and she made the mistake of falling in love. By “rhetoric,” she means the arts of simulation and dissimulation, which would have brought her pleasure and riches, without danger, while philosophy, with its pretension to discovering truth, has brought her the ruin of emotional authenticity. In many respects, however, the book is a paradox: on the one hand a manual on the arts of deception shared by prostitutes and rhetoricians, and on the other

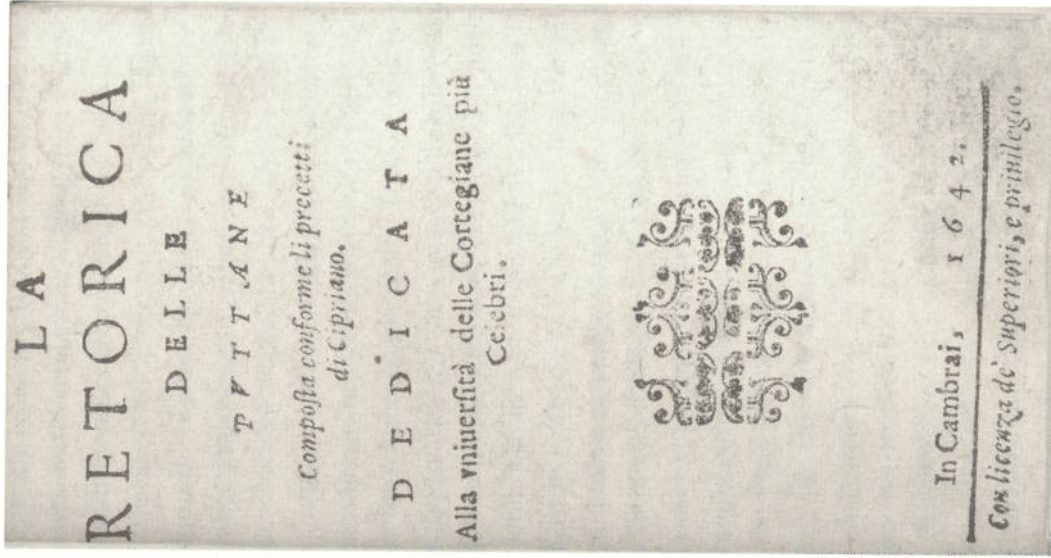


Portrait of Ferrante Pallavicino from an engraving in Girolamo Brusoni, Jacopo Gaddi, or Giovanni Francesco Loredan (?), *Le Glorie degli Incogniti* (Venice, 1647), p. 136.

an unmasking of rhetoric, a warning about its "artificial words and mendacious pretexts," which require vigilance. Nevertheless, when it comes to exploring the arts of "carnal pleasure," Pallavicino drops his ironic tone and straightforwardly declares that sexual satisfaction is completely legitimate and natural, on a level with urinating.³² In the "Author's Confession" at the end, Pallavicino reverts to the Aristotelian philosophy of his generation's mentor, Cesare Cremonini, stating that all sexual desire is "natural," not because reproduction is natural but because retention of semen leads to death by poisoning. Thus, the implications of Cremonini's naturalistic philosophy are pushed to their most extreme ends, ones echoed in Rocco's defense of pederasty. But Pallavicino entered what may have been even more dangerous shoals than Rocco.

Pallavicino put into the mouth of the old whore lessons paraphrased from Cipriano Suarez's *De arte rhetorica*, the manual read in the Jesuit schools. In fifteen lessons for young future prostitutes, *The Rhetoric of Whores* is structured according to the subdivisions of Suarez's textbook for young future Jesuits. Although Pallavicino claims in his introduction to be writing a morality tale about the false lures of commercial sex, he fooled no one, least of all the Inquisitors of the Holy Office. It is obvious that the "artificial lies," "deceptions" (*inganni*), and "wickednesses" (*ribalderie*) of the courtesan were also the principal ingredients in a Jesuit education. The old whore was teaching the beautiful young girl the trade by taking the teachings of the Society of Jesus as a model for

the arts of seduction. Pallavicino's work had precedents—especially in the connection Aretino drew between rhetorical expertise and erotic perversion—but *The Rhetoric of Whores* is a “strange achievement” without precedent. In the words of James Grantham Turner, “All satirical applications of the ‘University’ curriculum to advanced sexual practice generate a shadowy endorsement of the conceit they intend to render unthinkable—the idea of bringing sexuality from the mute realm of ‘Nature’ into the domain of discursive construction, under female supervision.”³³ By systematically pursuing the parallels between rhetorical persuasion and erotic seduction, Pallavicino demonstrates how the high art of rhetoric has the same instrumental character as the lowly deceptions of the prostitute. In the end Pallavicino's offensive against the Society of Jesus, the Spanish ambassadors in Italy, and the Barberini pope meant that even Venice was no longer a safe haven for him. In the autumn of 1642, Pallavicino escaped to Bergamo, where he completed the first volume of *The Celestial Divorce*, which came to be known, in the words of a contemporary, as “superior to all others in impiety and blasphemies against the Roman Church.”³⁴ In Bergamo Pallavicino was awaiting the arrival of an acquaintance, Charles de Brèche, a French knight known in Italy under the pseudonym Carlo di Morfi, who had recently befriended Pallavicino while the two were traveling on a *traghetto* from Padua to Venice and had “accidentally” bumped into him numerous times in book shops in Venice. The affable and flattering Morfi told the ambitious young author that none other than Cardinal



Title page of Ferrante Pallavicino, *La Retorica delle puttane* (Cambrai, 1642).

Richelieu greatly admired his books and showed Pallavicino forged letters and commissions offering him a large stipend as the cardinal's official historian if he were to come to France. Pallavicino took the bait, and after Morfi arrived in Bergamo, the two set off for Paris around the middle of November, Pallavicino traveling under the false name of Raimondi. Cardinal Richelieu died on December 4, but Morfi somehow convinced Pallavicino to continue along a route that was not, in fact, leading toward Paris. As the two rode their horses across one of the famous bridges of Avignon, celebrated in verse and song, Pallavicino spotted the papal insignia and sensed a trap. He turned his horse to flee but was soon overtaken by a squad of beadles who had been put on alert. In Pallavicino's black leather bag, the police discovered a number of compromising manuscripts and threw him into the dreaded Tower of the Latrines.

The home of the papacy between 1309 and 1377, Avignon had been an Apostolic legation since 1433, which made it a part of the Papal States. The cardinal legate had sovereign powers over the territory, including supreme judicial authority in civil, criminal, and canon law cases. At the moment Pallavicino was arrested, the cardinal legate was the pope's nephew, Antonio Barberini, and the vice legate was a candidate for a red hat and client of the Barberini, Federico Sforza. Pallavicino had fallen into the hands of his most determined enemies. He continued to insist that he was really named Raimondi, but since he had published his most controversial books under pseudonyms and some were in his

possession, it did not really matter what his name was. Early in 1643, while he was still imprisoned, *The Celestial Divorce* was published, based on a manuscript Pallavicino had turned over to a press in Geneva on his way to France. The book was an immediate sensation, and not only in Italy, where bookshops sold it under the counter. It was plagiarized in Protestant countries, and soon editions appeared in German, Swedish, French, Dutch, and English.

Proceedings against him did not begin until the following August. On the basis of evidence transmitted by the papal legate in Venice, Pallavicino was forced to admit his true identity and acknowledge his authorship of several recent anonymous books satirizing the Barberini and the Jesuits. A sentence of death for *lèse majesté* was a foregone conclusion. On March 5, 1644, the twenty-eight-year-old Pallavicino was executed in Avignon by decapitation. Five months later the flagrant nepotist Urban VIII was himself dead. By the end of 1646, Charles de Brèche, Pallavicino's false friend Morfi, died by an assassin's knife, whether or not in revenge for Pallavicino's death is unknown.

Pallavicino's death, needless to say, dealt a heavy blow to his colleagues in the Accademia degli Incogniti. The shock silenced the usually garrulous group. When they returned to speaking and writing, they masked their true meaning in even more obscure linguistic codes and clouds of metaphor and became very cautious about saying or writing anything that might be hateful to the ears of the powerful. Loredan's comments about the "martyr of truth" are revealing. He con-

cluded that it is "imprudent to write and comment on the actions of living princes." He recommended that those who wrote about princes should only praise them—should exercise "prudence of the pen." The Incogniti had felt the bitter consequences of their claim that truth and satire were one and the same. And they began to distance themselves from Pallavicino's legacy, referring to him as an "unquiet spirit with a fleeting mind and confused thoughts." He had not understood that it was "a crime to speak the truth."³⁵

Besides the arbiters of Catholic orthodoxy, one of Pallavicino's most common targets was women. Pallavicino's misogyny was hardly without parallel, but as was also true of his attacks on the Barberini papacy, it had an especially vitriolic character. What makes his misanthropy worth paying attention to today is the rhetorical drubbing he received from Suor Arcangela Tarabotti. The fifth letter in Pallavicino's *Il Corriero svaligiato* is addressed to an "Ungrateful Woman" and is an essay on the tropes of misogyny.

If you are looking for sphinxes, panthers, tigers, and other wild beasts or monsters, *cherchez la femme!* A single woman, and you will find all the most savage animals and brutish natures together in one entity. As a rule, one does not find in your sex any rational capacity other than the will, so submerged by the passions that it has become an irrefutable axiom to say that woman is without judgment. Whether her lust is boundless or her rages out of control, she knows no moderation, a quality from which one is led to draw the conclusion that a person is human. So when she would have us

believe that she has plundered some human traits—gentle appearances, tender charms, and courteous behavior—let it also be said that she has stolen seduction from the siren, cunning tricks from another monster, and that she dresses in disguise to accomplish treachery. Like an octopus camouflaged on the reef to capture its prey, she transforms herself with a show of male qualities to facilitate her lies.³⁶

Tarabotti defended women through her counterassault on men: "Oh, you wicked hypocrites, you devils incarnate, not unlike your master in your feigned expressions, your calculated betrayals, your false promises and all the rest, as only you know better! Not for nothing is the word 'demon' (*demon*) of the masculine gender, as if the female sex does not deserve to have attributed to it any of the names of Hell's infernal monsters."³⁷ Tarabotti could not resist turning Pallavicino's own misfortunes against him.

And there is also another modern author, whose name I shall pass over in silence. He too invents shameful insults against our sex with his satirical viper's tongue in a loathsome work. What a liar, and malicious to boot, especially in letter 5—just as well he was put to death before the book's publication! Little wonder if he defaces woman's sacred features; he is guilty of sacrilege against the entire Catholic Church. He respects neither pope nor cardinals nor the Roman Curia; and he uses strident vituperation to lash out against all Christendom.³⁸

She systematically dismantled the arguments in letter 5, down to the point of turning Pallavicino's metaphors upside down

to work for the benefit of women rather than to their detriment. "This detractor has also blabbered on about woman being like the vine, forgetting that the simile may also be turned to woman's advantage: from the vine, after all, nourishment of human life is pressed, that precious liquid that increases our bodily heat and therefore our vital fluids and life itself."³⁹

Tarabotti was herself among the most celebrated and controversial authors of her day with her books on *Convent Life as Paradise* (1643), *Against Female Luxury, Menippean Satire, Antisatire* (1644), *Familiar Letters* (1650), *Women Are No Less Rational Than Men* (1651), *Paternal Tyranny*, which was retitled *Innocence Betrayed* before publication (1654), and the scandalous tract that was widely circulated in manuscript but unpublished in her lifetime, *Convent Life as Hell*. Perhaps what is most intriguing is that Tarabotti relied on the same patronage network as Pallavicino, the Accademia degli Incogniti, and especially its founder Giovanni Francesco Loredan. She was the only woman writer to have earned Loredan's support, which may have come through the intervention of her brother-in-law, Giacomo Pighetti, who was himself a member. Her relationship with the Incogniti, however, was even more complicated than the paradox inherent in the reliance of a Benedictine nun on the notoriously anti-Catholic and libertine academy might suggest. The complexity of the relationship is an indicator of how intellectually open-minded the Incogniti really were. A letter from Loredan praising Tarabotti's "trees of learning" introduces her *Convent Life as Paradise*, and

she dedicated her own published correspondence to him. He acted as her editor, helped get her books published, and introduced her to his circle of friends and visiting intellectuals. He published some of his letters to her and dedicated to her part of his *novella Abraham*. But they also could be highly critical of each other. Her *Antisatire* was a response to a satire delivered before the Incogniti, and Loredan took her critique as a personal affront and accused her of ingratitude. Another Incognito wrote a sustained attack on her and even accused her of being incapable of having written a book as fine as *Convent Life as Paradise*. After her own brother-in-law criticized her work, she responded caustically that "knowing very well that virtue is broken and bungled in women," she would no longer seek male approval. And yet the *Antisatire* was put out by the press known as the publisher for the Incogniti. The publisher stated that he had stolen the manuscript from Tarabotti, who did not want her polemic in print, a claim we should take with a grain of salt. Her *Paternal Tyranny* takes on not just Pallavicino's misogynous letter but Loredan's *novella The Life of Adam*.⁴⁰ It is obvious that nothing about the Incogniti was straightforward and there was always more to their doings than meets the eye. Perhaps it is best to think about the academy, its debates, and its relations with the lame nun with the acerbic pen as a kind of theater. It is not always clear whether someone is playing a role, or if so what part is being played.

Tarabotti, for all her determined ambition as a writer, was disappointed by life and overflowing with a sense of griev-

ance, which in retrospect seems legitimate. Lame, like her father, she was placed in a convent at the age of eleven and took her first vows at sixteen. Like Pallavicino, she was an involuntary member of a religious order, in her case a victim of monachization by force. Letizia Panizza describes *Paternal Tyranny* as "predominantly an invective against the oppressions of patriarchy; but it is also a treatise on the evils of forcing young girls into a life they are not suited for, a psychological autobiography on the torments of childhood and adolescence in the Venetian family of her day, a confession to God of a soul's suffering, a literary critique of major texts of contemporary misogyny, a feminist commentary on the Bible, and finally, the first manifesto about women's inalienable rights to liberty, equality, and universal education."⁴¹ If the Incogniti can be considered to have thought, a hundred years early, like the philosophes, Tarabotti thought like a feminist two hundred years avant la lettre. She was the avenging angel of oppressed young women whose lives were made unhappy by paternal whim. Although she respected her vows, she rebelled by refusing to cut her hair or wear the habit of her order, and she transformed her personal fury into a polemical indictment of the dirty deal between miserly fathers who wanted to save money on a dowry and the readiness of the Church to accept the vows of young nuns who lacked a vocation. "For these depraved fathers who sail the seas of the world blown by passions inimical to salvation, convents take the place of a ship's bilge, where they cast all their filthy refuse and then boast of having offered up a sacrifice—even to

the point of adorning the brows of illegitimate daughters, often born of adulterous liaisons, with holy veils." Besides bastards, these fathers offered Christ "the most repulsive and deformed: lame, hunchbacked, crippled, or simple-minded. They are blamed for whatever natural defect they are born with and condemned to lifelong prison."⁴²

Tarabotti even trespassed where no member of the Incogniti dared or wanted to go, by directly criticizing the Venetian government and the social system that sustained it. She recognized that her personal situation and that of other young women forced into convents in Venice were the consequence not just of paternal tyranny but of a deeper form of social oppression that masked itself as liberty. She noted how throughout the world no city had had a higher reputation for granting unconditional liberty to all its inhabitants, including even Jews. From its very beginning, however, the noble lords of Venice had embraced the "infernal monster of Paternal Tyranny."

This [book] *Paternal Tyranny* is a gift that well suits a Republic that practices the abuse of forcing more young girls to take the veil than anywhere else in the world. . . . It is fair . . . to dedicate my book to your great senate and its senators, who, by imprisoning their young maidens so they chant the Psalter, pray, and do penance in their stead, hope to make you eternal, most beautiful virgin Republic, Queen of the Adriatic. . . . I shall not wheedle you into finding excuses for me, nor inveigle you into believing my sincerity. In any case,

once you have lost liberty, there remains nothing else to lose.⁴³

The title and the scathing introduction to *Paternal Tyranny* made it impossible for Tarabotti to publish the book. She was forced to change the title and write a new introduction addressed to God and the Reader, rather than to Venice. As Letizia Panizza notes, the change of title from *Paternal Tyranny* to *Innocence Betrayed* shifted attention from a critique of patriarchy to an exploration of "women as innocent victims whose destiny it is to suffer." More precisely than anyone else at the time, Tarabotti unmasked the irony of Venetian propaganda about republican liberty and identified the core contradiction in Venetian society itself, the practice of restricted marriage that led families to allow only one son per generation to marry and to keep their daughters off the marriage market, most by removal to a nunnery. Tarabotti knew exactly what she was doing: "I realize that the subject matter is scandalous because it goes against our political as well as against our Catholic way of life." As open-minded as he was in other respects and as supportive of the authorial ambitions of the combative nun, Loredan remained an archconservative when it came to the practice of restricted marriage, no matter how painful the consequences for young women. He had two sisters confined to convents and refused to support a young relative who wanted to marry rather than enter a convent. He advised her, "You have been born noble, of a

distinguished family, but since you do not have a dowry to match your birth, you must either marry beneath you, or hazard the inconvenience of poverty. You will encounter universal contempt if you stain nobility with inferior alliances. . . . Those marriages are always unhappy where the partners are unequal by birth but equal in poverty."⁴⁴ Panizza suggests that Loredan had a role in suppressing the publication of *Paternal Tyranny* and *Convent Life as Hell*, and he certainly had the influence to have done so.

The libertine inclinations of the Incogniti, many of whom were, like Rocco and Pallavicino, renegade religious, built upon the skeptical reading of Aristotle that flourished in Padua while Cesare Cremonini was the dominant figure there. Unlike Cremonini, however, the Incogniti generation became obsessed with sexuality and gender roles. The Benedictine philosopher Antonio Rocco's defense of pederasty, the Lateranensi canon Ferrante Pallavicino's demented fascination with prostitutes, whom he reviled but whose wiles he could not escape, and the Benedictine nun Arcangela Tarabotti's anger over the lot of unwilling inmates of convents were all expressed in *novellas* and essays that were openly published in the relatively free environment of Venice or, in the case of the most controversial, were printed clandestinely or circulated privately in manuscript. The authors sometimes employed pen names; they publicly remained among the Unknowns, but everyone seemed to know who the authors really were. The singular literary obsession with sexuality, which appeared at a particular historical moment, the 1630s, '40s,

and '50s, was a symptom of the disintegration of the Venetian aristocratic marriage and family life. By the 1640s a large part of the Venetian aristocracy had committed demographic suicide by failing to reproduce itself.

"Divorce" is an apt metaphor for this strange historical moment when the social foundations of the aristocracy fell apart. Not only did Christ seek to divorce the Roman Church, as in Pallavicino's allegory, but marriage itself became divorced from normal social practice and monogamous morality from the possibilities of life in Catholic Italy.

One day during the 1640s a gentleman masked for Carnival arrived in Sister Tarabotti's convent to pay homage to the literary star. He was none other than the most accomplished librettist in Venice, Giovanni Francesco Busenello. He was the author of *L'Incoronazione di Poppea*, an opera in which the emperor Nero arranged for the death of the Stoic philosopher Seneca. At the end of the opera, Nero crowns his adulterous lover empress of Rome. In Busenello's masterpiece, set to music by Claudio Monteverdi, the despised loose woman of Pallavicino's satire realizes the ultimate fantasy of love and acceptance. The collapse of Venetian aristocratic marriage meant that in the opera boxes numerous courtesans must have been able to identify with the fantasy of Poppea's good fortune. In the opera house the libertine impulses of the Incogniti created the most thorough commentary on the Venetian divorce between marriage and sexuality.