

*The Culture Wars of the
Late Renaissance*

SKEPTICS, LIBERTINES, AND OPERA



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Introduction

Let him who cannot amaze
work in the stables.

Giambattista Marino

The Culture Wars of the Late Renaissance represents an attempt to understand a moment in late-Renaissance history by reuniting what the modern disciplines of the history of science, philosophy, literature, religion, and music, with their varying concerns, have tended to keep separate. An eclectic range of cultural activities, from stargazing and philosophical commentaries to the writing of polemical satires and opera libretti, preoccupied late-Renaissance intellectuals. I have brought together these diverse interests by paying attention to a particular place, Venice and its satellite university city of Padua, during a specific period. The book begins with the Paduan student riots against the Jesuit college in 1591 and

ends with the demise of the Venetian Accademia degli Incogniti (Academy of the Unknowns) in about 1660.

During this period Venice became the center within the Catholic world of opposition to the extension of papal authority, and the home of a vibrant press that published books without significant interference from church or governmental censors. The culture wars raging around Venice pitted the defenders of Catholic orthodoxy, especially the Jesuit fathers and the Universal Roman Inquisition, against the skeptical philosophers at the University of Padua, the libertines of the Venetian academies, and the libertists of early opera. Given its power to evoke dramatic emotions, opera became the primary means for expressing and commenting on the cultural politics of the day—not just ecclesiastical politics but sexual politics, which had heated up because so few Venetian patrician men married and so many Venetian patrician women were forced into convents. The disjuncture between marriage and sexuality among the Venetian upper classes created a demographic crisis that added fuel to the culture wars. Traditional Christian culture provided little guidance for those who lived through and suffered from the collapse of marriage structures but did not have a religious vocation.

Despite their often mutual animosity, the men and women on the Venetian side of the culture wars constituted a true intellectual community, a small republic of letters, in which one generation had a formative influence on another and most of the members of each generation knew one another personally. Intimate ties of family, class, and personal knowl-

edge bound most of the principal members of the community. They denounced their opponents with a level of vitriol that matches that of the cultural wars of our own times. Literati were harsh with one another but harsher still with their perceived enemies—the Society of Jesus, the Spanish imperialists, the Roman Inquisition, and in the later years the Barberini papacy. What makes the culture wars of the late Renaissance significant is the wide range of ideas the skeptics, libertines, and libertists explored under the protection of Venice's relatively tolerant government, which allowed the airing of almost anything, as long as its own form of aristocratic republicanism was never questioned. In several respects this moment in the late Renaissance can be seen as a kind of proto-Enlightenment, a foreshadowing of the cultural concerns of the eighteenth century. The Venetians and their allies defended religious skepticism (even atheism), scientific experimentation, sexual liberty (even pederasty), women's rights to an education and freedom from parental tyranny, the presence of women on the stage, and the seductive power of the female voice in opera.

The culture wars in Padua and Venice were an episode in what the late William J. Bouwsma called the waning of the Renaissance. From about 1550 to 1640 the cultural world of Europe was "full of contradictions," its thinkers constituted a "community of ambivalence," and the creative freedom characteristic of the early Renaissance "was constantly shadowed by doubt and anxiety."¹ Bouwsma argued that the hidden source of cultural change is anxiety, which in the case

of the late Renaissance was produced by a surfeit of creative liberty that collapsed categories, blurred distinctions, and breached boundaries, the very bulwarks of cultural order that calm existential anxieties. By the late sixteenth century the creative freedom of the Renaissance had generated anxieties that had become unendurable for many. They sought to cope by erecting new forms of order. The culture wars resulted from the tension between the desire for liberation and the need for order, between those who explored the limits of cultural tolerance under the protection of Venice and those, mostly outside Venice, who abhorred the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual anarchy that resulted from such tolerance.

One of the singular achievements of the early Renaissance had been to promote a new source of cultural unity throughout Europe in the form of humanism. All sides of the culture wars shared in the heritage of Renaissance humanism, particularly its emphasis on the historical appreciation of sources, a critical understanding of the thought of the ancients, the problems of imitating nature in science and the arts, the evocative capacity of language to persuade, and its fallible capacity to represent. Catholics and Protestants, Italian and northern European intellectuals struggled with the anxieties provoked by the Renaissance heritage, and despite the new Babel of vernacular publishing, European elites remained culturally unified enough to follow Italian, which remained, like Latin, a lingua franca. In the dominion of the European Republic of Letters, Venice held a singular position because what happened in this cosmopolitan, commer-

cial city, the center of Italian publishing, soon became widely known. (Probably half of all the books printed in Italy in the sixteenth century came from Venice.) In Venice enterprising bookmen (the ancestors of modern journalists) gathered and disseminated the news of Europe and the Middle East. The very idea that novelties, or "the news," might be of widespread interest and value was a creation of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century publishers, mostly Venetian, who were eager for sales. Venice's only real competitor as the cultural and journalistic capital of Europe was Paris. Rome was too identified with papal politics and Spanish influence to compete with Venice in this respect. Venice's official university at Padua remained until the 1620s the most prestigious in Europe. English and German Protestants, Polish, Jewish, and other "nations" in the student body also made Padua a pan-European, not just a local Venetian, university. Even the famous Venetian Accademia degli Incogniti, the home of libertine thought and the principal patron of opera, was an international organization in which Venetians were a distinct minority, even though every important Venetian intellectual of the era was a member.

One of the most disturbing sources of late-Renaissance anxiety was the collapse of the traditional hierarchic notion of the human self. Ancient and medieval thought depicted reason as governing the lower faculties of the will, the passions, and the body. Renaissance thought did not so much promote "individualism" as it cut away the intellectual props that presented humanity as the embodiment of a single di-

vine idea, thereby forcing a desperate search for identity in many. John Martin has argued that during the Renaissance, individuals formed their sense of selfhood through a difficult negotiation between inner promptings and outer social roles. Individuals during the Renaissance looked both inward for emotional sustenance and outward for social assurance, and the friction between the inner and outer selves could sharpen anxieties.² The fragmentation of the self seems to have been especially acute in Venice, where the collapse of aristocratic marriage structures led to the formation of what Virginia Cox has called the single self, most clearly manifest in the works of several women writers who argued for the moral and intellectual equality of women with men.³ As a consequence of the fragmented understanding of the self, such thinkers as Montaigne became obsessed with what was then the new concept of human psychology, a term in fact coined in this period.⁴ A crucial problem in the new psychology was to define the relation between the body and the soul, in particular to determine whether the soul died with the body or was immortal. With its tradition of Averroïst readings of Aristotle, some members of the philosophy faculty at the University of Padua recurrently questioned the Christian doctrine of the immortality of the soul as unsound philosophically. Other hierarchies of the human self came into question. Once reason was dethroned, the passions were given a higher value, so that the heart could be understood as a greater force than the mind in determining human conduct. When the body itself slipped out of its long-despised

position, the sexual drives of the lower body were liberated and thinkers were allowed to consider sex, independent of its role in reproduction, a worthy manifestation of nature. The Paduan philosopher Cesare Cremonini's personal motto, "Intus ut libet, foris ut moris est," does not quite translate to "If it feels good, do it," but it comes very close. The collapse of the hierarchies of human psychology even altered the understanding of the human senses. The sense of sight lost its primacy as the superior faculty, the source of "enlightenment"; the Venetian theorists of opera gave that place in the hierarchy to the sense of hearing, the faculty that most directly channeled sensory impressions to the heart and passions.

The skepticism bred by the contradictions of late-Renaissance culture and the terrible experiences of the religious wars left medieval epistemology and textual authority without an anchor. No longer did the Bible or Aristotle or any other ancient text or author seem to provide universal truths applicable to all ages. For many late-Renaissance thinkers the only useful guidance was to be found in the particularities and contingencies of history. Skepticism, especially about the capacity of philosophy and theology to uncover truth, fostered historical consciousness. By the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries Padua and Venice, the homes of Francesco Patrizi and Paolo Sarpi, respectively, ranked among the most prominent centers of skeptical historiography, in whose explanations God and Fortune were banished as agents of human events. Paduan and Venetian historians

understood history as a process that could be explained in purely human terms. People created history and were to blame for the folly of events. As a result, historiography replaced philosophy and theology as the appropriate medium for examining ethics, and irony permeated the rhetoric of history. The pervasive skepticism of the time finally led to doubts about the very capacity of language to mirror reality, to represent things. Writers concentrated on creating marvels rather than on reflecting nature and as a result often favored superficial verbal effects for their own sake.

During the culture wars nothing stirred up intellectual anxiety more than the cosmological theories of Copernicus that Galileo embraced. Many thinkers, especially Jesuits, found Copernicanism compatible with Catholic doctrine, and Galileo was at first received with honor in Rome after publishing his new discoveries with the telescope; yet Galileo and Copernicanism soon came under suspicion. Galileo had in fact been under observation for alleged heresies years before he became a noted advocate of Copernicanism. The problem was that Galileo was known as a doubter, as someone who restlessly questioned received truths, even before he definitively removed the earth and therefore humanity from the center of the universe and questioned whether the Bible was the best guide to the cosmos. Reintroducing doubt as the grounding for rational thought was the most significant achievement of seventeenth-century philosophy, but the virtue of doubt was not just a technical tool for someone like Descartes but a condition of the times. For those with eyes

to see and the will to understand, the cosmos could no longer be understood as human-centered and circumscribed by biblical description, a fact that left many people disoriented and untethered intellectually, spiritually, emotionally.

Bouwmsa argued that late-Renaissance culture was "generally ambivalent," that the early modern period was for many both the best of times and the worst of times. He explained this ambivalence as an outgrowth of the very freedoms Renaissance culture had promoted; for this reason, someone like Galileo could both espouse the new science and dread its consequences.⁵ The distress and anxiety generated by the erosion of traditional forms of order were especially manifest in discussions of gender roles, an issue that preoccupied the librettines and the librettists of early opera. Few of them enjoyed the benefits of marriage, with its traditional gender roles. Gender bending was especially common on the stage, where boys played female roles, or in opera with its castrati and cross-dressing female singers. During the seventeenth century comic, tragic, and musical theater (that is, opera) became the most popular art form, the principal window onto the anxieties and stresses of the age. Once skepticism had compromised the capacity of the arts to imitate nature, theatrical artists, set loose from traditional conventions, sought to innovate, to create something that had never been experienced before. The conditions that fostered Shakespeare and Cervantes also gave rise to the first operas. The very popularity of theater created an anti-theatrical reaction, perhaps most famously in England, where the Puritans closed the the-

aters. In Italy Catholic bishops denounced comic theater; indeed in Venice the Jesuits succeeded in closing down the comic theaters, which reopened only after expulsion of the Society of Jesus in 1606. The Jesuits themselves put on sacred theatricals in their schools, but they also became the most systematic critics of secular theater, including bawdy *media dell'arte* and serious opera.

It would be too simple to depict the culture wars of the late Renaissance as a straightforward struggle between freedom and order, innovation and tradition. For their part, the skeptics, libertines, and liberttists were often a confused lot, debaters addicted to debate for its own sake, and writers who hid behind the mask of anonymity, who pretended to be blind, or who obscured their own meaning with circumlocutions and allegories that might not be worth the effort to unravel. Their opponents, particularly the Jesuits, were just as committed to learning and to understanding the implications of Aristotle for theology, of the new science for biblical authority, and of humanism for education. Their theaters and their schools rivaled those of the Venetians. And the Jesuits were serious thinkers, serious men committed to serious issues, something that cannot always be said of the libertines and the liberttists, whose commitment to playfulness and *exotica* has limited their significance. It would be a mistake to see one side as more "modern," more forward-looking than the other. The two sides reveal parallel tendencies in Western culture that have reappeared time and again since. The culture wars of our own times are not peculiar to us. They have

a distinguished past. What some today depict as rash innovations, ideas that go against the traditions of Western civilization, are in fact deep-rooted. The virtues and perils of doubt, the place of homosexuals and women in society, the consequences of the breakdown of marriage structures, and the power of the arts to stir sometimes disturbing emotions preoccupied the thinkers in the culture wars of the late Renaissance much as the same ideas still engage our attention today.