

Botteghe da Caffè, Sociability and Gender in Eighteenth-Century Venice

Ce soir je me propose d'aller prendre un sorbetto, qui est de saison. On ne sait icy, pour passer le temps, qu'aller au café. Dans les maisons l'après-midi on nous présente du café, ensuite de la lemonade et on revient au café. On en prend toute l'après-midi.

Fougeroux de Bondaroy, 1765 (Brunelli 14)

As legend goes, the night Giacomo Casanova fled from the high security prison of *i Piombi* located behind Palazzo Ducale, just before jumping in a gondola and heading towards a twenty-year long exile from Venice, he entered Floriano's *bottega da caffè*, now Caffè Florian, for one last cup of coffee. Although probably merely an anecdote, this tale points to the addictive power of the coffeehouse as a locus of (Venetian) sociability.

One of the most controversial regulations set in place by the Inquisitori di Stato, the Venetian magistrate in charge of State security, was the 1767 prohibition of women's access to coffeehouses. The need for such a measure points to either a perceived or existing problem, namely women's increased aggregation and visibility in public spaces, and the corrupting influence this change in customs was deemed to exercise on Venetian morals and society. The study of "people's use of coffee" and of the various forms of aggregation around eighteenth-century Venetian coffeehouses thus promises to be a fruitful way to explore the social and cultural change of that society.

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* Jürgen Habermas offers his definition of the bourgeois public sphere as "the sphere of private people come together as a public," distinguished by the novel trait of "people's public use of their reason" (Habermas 27). He had recognized French salons and British coffeehouses as "institutions of the public sphere," but denied women any substantial contribution to them since seventeenth-century French salons' conversations were still strongly tied to conventions, and British coffeehouses were a male discursive space. Following a Habermasian interpretation of social change that views the new practices of sociability of the bourgeois

public sphere as reflecting social change, this essay will argue that Venetian coffeehouses in the eighteenth century became the physical and metaphorical sites of an alternative social practice which fostered communication of ideas, mingling of social classes, and engendered a new, more democratic social discourse. However, contrary to the British coffeehouse described by Habermas, this new social discourse in Venice was markedly gendered since women gained early access to the medium (coffee and coffeehouses) and, despite several attempts at banishing them from this space and discourse, they held tight to their cup of coffee, at least until the fall of the Republic (1797) when Venetian freedom, and the autonomy of women in particular, experienced a strong backlash.

In the attempt to paint a comprehensive understanding of the social significance of coffee consumption and its effects in mid eighteenth-century Venetian society, this essay develops along three intersecting frameworks. I will suggest that coffee, as a beverage that floods the new consumer society's market, was a "medium" whose very use could effect social change through mental alertness and the social pleasure often associated with its consumption; that the coffeehouse itself could foster social change by bringing together a socially and economically diverse group of people, women included; and, finally, that the democratic nature of the interactions which took place here had reverberations within the political sphere, eventually undermining support for the status quo forms of obligation. It will be apparent that coffee (the beverage), the coffeehouse (as the social space), and sociability (the interpersonal exchanges taking place in the coffeehouse, i.e. conversations), are not often clearly separable given the "fluidity" of the subject and the "open air salon" nature of Venice itself. After all, even today, when Italians say "Let's go have a cup of coffee" they perform a synecdoche in that they simultaneously imply coffee (as a stimulant drink), a *bar* (specific physical environment), and, probably most important, a social moment.

To give some idea of the extent to which women were involved in coffee-related forms of sociability in eighteenth-century Venice, I rely on both archival documents and literary sources. I pay particular attention to two of Goldoni's plays, underscoring the historical shift in forms of Venetian sociability from his intermezzo *Bottega da caffè*

(1736) to his later comedy *Bottega del caffè* (1750), but I also point at how women from simple purveyors and consumers of coffee came to interact with the coffeehouse as social space and took part in the social discourse. If according to Marshall McLuhan “The medium is the message,” that is the “effects” brought about by a new medium are its message, which manifests itself in the form of change in our culture or society, then I wish to suggest that this new medium (coffee and, by extension, the coffeehouse, since it is in the business of receiving, processing, exchanging, moving, and even making information) carries social change as its message, a cultural shift in history with strong political and gender implications. The rise of the Venetian coffeehouse marked the dawn of a new world, “il mondo nuovo,” as Gasparo Gozzi put it (in Crotti 56).¹

Origins

Originally from Ethiopia or Abyssinia, in the fifteenth century coffee was adopted as a Turkish custom. Venice became coffee’s gateway into Europe thanks to its geographical and political relationship with the Ottoman empire, and its tolerant attitude towards the “other” and the “different.” The first reports on coffee by Venetian ambassadors in Constantinople at the beginning of the sixteenth century stressed the connection between the drink’s consumption and the places and occasions in which it was enjoyed, highlighting its penchant for collective ritual: the Turks drank hot *Cauè* out of little porcelain cups whenever they met for conversation, entertainment and gambling, both in private and public occasions.² The Venetian observers equate Turkish coffeehouses, *qahveh khaneh*, to the Venetian *Ridotto*, and the government’s attempts to shut them down in Constantinople are reported to have failed due to popular upheaval, thus showing the widespread importance of this social custom among the population and, implicitly, its anti-establishment (and destabilizing) potential.

In seventeenth-century medical treatises the effects of the “acque negre” ranged from medicinal to causing impotence and sterility, and even instigating sexual deviance and engendering feminization. Tales narrating that the sultan loved conversation with women and accepted, even welcomed, their interference in

governmental affairs, supported this last belief, associated with the Turk in the popular imaginary. As Brian Cowan has pointed out in *The Social Life of Coffee*, a study mainly focused on British society, only in the eighteenth century did coffee manage to shed these negative connotations thanks also to a change in the idea of “civility” which came to favor social rituals dominated by alertness of mind as opposed to the stupor caused by wine. Coffee became fashionable and adopted at all levels of society: in Venice the first *bottega da caffè* opened under the colonnades of the *Procuratie Nuove* in 1683, and by 1759 the city hosted 206 coffeehouses, while the Venetian government (like the Turkish one before it) was going through great trouble to limit their number and regulate them (Plebani, “Acque” 8).

Coffee as Medium: Coffee, Coffeehouses and Creativity

At the beginning of June 1764, the leading journal of Italian Enlightenment was published in Milan. Its name was *Il Caffè*, in honor of the coffeehouse as a site of intellectual exchange (for a new generation), in opposition to the tired formulae of the business papers (*gazette*), erudite journals and stuffy academic discourse. In the first issue Pietro Verri, its founder and editor, indicated the content of this publication as “Cose varie, cose disparatissime, cose inedite, cose fatte da diversi autori, cose tutte dirette alla pubblica utilità” (11), somehow depicting the nature of conversations overheard in a coffeehouse. He also stated that this new paper had “il fine d’una aggradevole occupazione per noi, il fine di far quel bene che possiamo alla nostra patria, il fine di spargere delle utili cognizioni fra i nostri cittadini divertendoli, come già altrove fecero e Steele e Swift e Addison e Pope e altri” (11-12). Verri explicitly links his paper to the English tradition of the *Spectator* and *Tatler*, and carefully frames the literary and social context of his creation, a publication that he imagined reflected the conversations overheard in Demetrio’s *bottega da caffè*. The fictitious Demetrio, the *caffettiere*, is a Greek who came to Milan after much travel, an honest man that stands for the ideal of wisdom represented by his country and, as such, functions as the warrantor of this public space. The *bottega da caffè* is, in Demetrio’s words “una vera enciclopedia all’occasione, tanto è universalissima la

serie delle cose sulle quali accade di ragionare” (13). Thus *Il Caffè*, in accordance with the place it refers to, aims at reflecting and becoming a public forum where the most disparate subjects are bounced around and discussed, where dialogue is characterized by the immediacy of questions and the relatively uncensored topics which spring from a quick reaction to facts and the observation of life itself.

Fifteen years before the appearance of *Il Caffè*, in the letter titled “Del caffè” and dated August 28, 1749 (2: 205), from his *Lettere Scelte* (1751), the playwright and novelist Pietro Chiari launched into an apology for coffee and coffeehouses which bears a strong resemblance to Pietro Verri’s more famous description of Demetrio’s Milanese coffeehouse. The occasion for Chiari’s excursus on the subject is to thank the female addressee of the letter (Madama, the writer’s ideal interlocutor) for her gift of a great quantity of coffee. Chiari portrays to Madama his situation of temporary removal from the hustle and bustle of city life as isolation from civilization because of the absence of coffeehouses, hence of news and sociability: “In questa mia solitudine privo son di somigliante diletto; laonde, bevendo il Caffè da voi favoritomi, non posso far altro, che risvegliarmene in mente la piacevole idea” (2: 205). After a declaration of addiction to coffee and of immense appreciation for the gift, Chiari states, however, that “il caffè, per quanto buono egli sia, bevuto fuor delle botteghe comuni pare a me che non abbia il suo ordinario sapore” (2: 199). Coffee’s flavor is complex: sort of plain if drunk alone, but much tastier if sipped “ne’ luoghi pubblici,” because stepping into a famous coffeehouse entails encountering Europe, as represented by a slew of national types:

Quando io entro, Madama, in qualcuno de’ più rinomati caffè, parmi d’entrare in un Emporio d’Europa da tutte frequentato le più colte nazioni del Mondo... Io tutto ascolto con la mia chicchera di caffè bogliente alla mano, e ci trovo il maggior diletto del mondo. (2: 200)

From Chiari’s perspective, coffee acquires its added flavor from the human types, relations and conversations it is seasoned with in the public coffeehouse: “Ogni sorso del caffè, che vado bevendo,

inzuccherato da questi dialoghi, immagini chi può, quanto mi si confaccia allo stomaco” (2: 200). However, in these cosmopolitan places, not only news and opinions are hurled around, but also gossip and malignancies are spread. Chiari meditates on human follies and keeps sipping, slowly, his coffee, “zitto quanto una statua,” (2: 202) while listening and observing. He chooses to leave the place last, so that the other customers will not have the pleasure, when he is gone, “di tagliarmi un abitino in dosso a loro gusto” (2: 203), that is to slander him.

The *bottega da caffè*, according to Chiari’s *caffettiere*, also sells “cioccolate, acque di limoni, sorbetti, ciambelle, lettere, pippe e tabacco” (2: 205), commodities whose consumption promotes sociability, especially because, as the *caffettiere* complains, his customers keep the tab running. The common layout of a Venetian *bottega da caffè*, with its internal private rooms (*camerini*) for the gatherings of *compagnie di nobili*,³ and its tendency to open up directly on a street (*calle*) or into a square (*campiello*) with chairs and tables outside, mirrors the flow of its discourse: from the secretive to the public, and vice versa. Chiari states that like his tongue, the eye of the coffeehouse customer roams: the idle males meeting here are not so self-absorbed as to be insensitive to feminine lure. When a showy hawker goes by, everybody comments piquantly on her; if a working-class girl wrapped up in her *zendale* is spotted, someone always offers her the services of the whole coffeehouse, but if she were to accept, they would each yield the honor (Chiari 2: 208).

Venetian intellectuals and writers feel that they belong to this new locus of creativity; however, they tend to cast themselves as attentive observers (spectators) instead of as active participants. Impoverished Venetian nobles attempting to escape their cold *palazzi* and family problems used the coffeehouse as their personal office, writing their correspondence and even receiving mail there. Gasparo Gozzi mentions in his letters many of the *botteghe da caffè* where he used to meet other literati and even carry on his work. As further proof of the variety of discourse and social classes interacting in the coffeehouse, his *Accademia dei Granelleschi*, as well as the several *compagnie* he belonged to, used to hold its meetings in one of the internal *camerini* of a *bottega*.⁴ In his *foglio*, aptly named *L’osservatore*

Veneto, Gozzi suggests that the intellectual, who tends by nature to be bookish and not to possess an up-to-date vocabulary for daily conversation, should sit in a corner of a coffeehouse with a notepad and take note of the topics of conversation, since it is the real world speaking: “buontempo, cuffie, commedie, gioco, guerra, pioggia” (Gozzi 147). He should record under each heading the words he heard and learn them by heart since this “nuovo linguaggio” is much more useful than Greek or Latin (Gozzi 147). Coffeehouse conversation, then, also brings about the democratization of language.

Like Gozzi, Chiari derives the utmost pleasure in taking everything in while immersed in this steadfast flow of creative inspiration. Drinking coffee is in itself like drinking “deliziosi racconti” (Chiari 205) a source of learning, amusement and laughter. In the closing of his letter to Madama, Chiari explains that her gift of coffee is precious because, in his present isolation, it will revive pleasurable memories of past gatherings and spur his creativity. Once again, in a metaphor of bodily assimilation, coffee will wake up memories by sensorial association, stir novel ideas, and pour itself into ink form on the white page: “Dalle mie lettere conoscerete quindi in poi, se, pria di mettermi a scrivervi, io l’abbia bevuto, o no; perocchè, risvegliando in me stesso idee somiglianti, sarà quasi impossibile che non mi coli dalla penna un inchiostro della loro natura medesima” (205). Coffee is an instrument to awaken creativity with: through her gift, Madama, the invisible purveyor of coffee for the intellectual, plays a role akin to that of the Muse. However, coffee doesn’t merely precede writing: here it is writing, the very ink on the page. Moreover, we can infer that to write well is to drink coffee. The activities become identical.

Coffee is perceived as a medium of creativity not only in light of the effects of caffeine on mental alertness, but mostly because of the social ritual and interactions it connotes. The coffeehouse and its environment, an extension of coffee, is itself a medium. Venice, in the middle of the eighteenth century, bore witness to a dynamic new engine of social change—the coffeehouse—giving rise to an increasingly powerful bourgeois class and to women as traditional forms aristocratic authority lost ground.

Venice as Salon

Its political independence, mercantile character, geographical location, and physical layout made Venice a natural point for the convergence of news and gossip that got brewed first and foremost in the coffeehouses, but spilled over into the *ridotti*, the *casini* and other public places. In fact, especially in the second half of the eighteenth century, the whole city can be perceived, to borrow Tiziana Plebani's metaphor, as an open-air salon where sociability and conversation reigned, often overcoming class and gender boundaries (Plebani, "Socialità" 153).

In 1775 an informant of the Venetian State Inquisitors reported that, under everybody's eyes, "li caffettieri sotto le Procuratie nuove si fanno lecito servir donne di caffè ed acque o sedenti su banchetti che circondano le colonne o sedenti su careghe vicino le loro botteghe da caffè" (Plebani, "Socialità" 153). If the tone of this report is tinged of scandal it is because in 1767 women had been forbidden access to coffeehouses.⁵ Giacomo Casanova, for a brief period an informant himself, significantly began one of his *riferte* (reports) writing that people complained because of the occupation of a public street near Saint Mark's, where men and women used to sit on chairs, in groups, gossiping, clamoring and preventing the flow of traffic (Plebani, "Socialità" 154). Gasparo Gozzi (154-155) wrote that near San Polo, common women ("donnicciole") sat knitting on straw chairs, talking together ("in comune") from morning to night. These images of an open-air conversation, with women busying themselves with traditional female activities in public while chatting or leisurely hovering around the proscribed coffeehouse, challenge the idea of clean demarcations between female private and public spaces, bringing women, here explicitly working-class women, into the public discourse.

In the theaters, where access was granted even to the common people, in the *ridotti*, the market, the *casini* attended by noblemen and noblewomen, as well as in the numerous *botteghe da caffè* with their more or less private *camerini*, Venetian daily life unraveled under the collective gaze. Conversation ruled. And it was not just sheer gossip, or comments on the latest play or the shows of actors and singers, of whom many were women. On the contrary, internal politics were

discussed, international news spread, politicians and the government criticized. The *riferte* significantly collect a mixture of private and public information ranging from the family fight in the *calle* involving husband and wife, to the names of the people that attended a certain *casino*, from the disparate news overheard at the coffeehouse, to the criticism of noblemen towards the government and the movements of foreigners around town.⁶

Clearly, despite the freedom of conversation enjoyed, the coffeehouse remained also a very strictly controlled social institution, and, from the perspective of the Venetian police, a tool for the maintenance of the status quo.

Coffeehouse as Theater

In mid eighteenth-century Venice, when real power and influence were almost already memory, the city's theatrical features appear to be enhanced almost to signal a last carnival of form on the emptiness of content. The intellectual skirmishes over theater production involving Chiari, the brothers Gozzi, and Goldoni polarize public opinion, and the coffeehouse becomes the natural setting for these discussions. The interiors of the most elegant coffeehouses resemble those of a playhouse. The backdrops carefully crafted by excellent artists render them fictitious and exotic places where reality is distorted. They are communal spaces where people, to some extent, act a part, where they play their social persona:

Non ti par di veder bottega, ma piuttosto un delizioso spettacolo da teatro con molte belle vedute che ti si affacciano con tanta ricreazione del cuore, che non vorresti veder altro. In un luogo sono adoperati i migliori pittori che ti rappresentano giardini, uccellagioni, cadute di acqua; in un altro diligentissimi intagliatori in legno si sono affaticati in bellissimi fregi tutti dorati, nel mezzo dei quali vengono collocati lucidi specchi che, mentre tu stai a sedere, ti mostrano e fanno conoscere le genti che passano per via. (Gozzi 37-38)

The kaleidoscopic character of the coffeehouse underscored by the reflecting quality of the mirrors points to a fragmented rendition of the world but, as Ilaria Crotti notes (56), does not necessarily imply chaos. In fact, this new medium of social transformation has a coherence of its own that the keen eye of the artist can detect and his creative ability can make manifest. Goldoni seems to assert precisely this when, looking back at his life and literary production from the autobiographical pages of the *Mémoires*, he responds to the criticism of having violated the rule of the unity of action by choosing the coffeehouse as one of his comedies' namesake instead of a "story," a "passion," or a "character."⁷ He maintains that if he has been able to show "the essential relationship between the different objects" (different actions, different people) he has achieved his goal of artistic unity. By daringly using as title for his comedy the physical place of the coffeehouse, Goldoni embraces McLuhan's idea that the medium is the message: the coffeehouse stands for a "story," a "passion," a "character," in short, new social relationships.

Although neither art nor literature accurately mirrors historical practices, theater sometimes tends to reproduce society and the world, and so does the microcosm of the coffeehouse: the fashionable, energizing drink gathers the most disparate people and fosters exchange of news, opinions and gossip. In the comedy *La bottega del caffè* Goldoni interprets this public space as an institution of amicable albeit superficial social renewal, thanks to the "democratic" nature of this very affordable drink itself, sought after both by the nobleman Don Marzio and by people "Che si alza di buon mattino" (4), working class people. However Trappola, the *uomo da caffè* (waiter), declares "È veramente una cosa che fa crepar di ridere vedere anche i facchini venire a bere il loro caffè," to which his master, Ridolfo the *caffettiere*, replies: "Tutti cercan di fare quello che fanno gli altri. Una volta correva l'acquavite, adesso è in voga il caffè" (2). Trappola retorts that even if they don't have the means for bare necessities people still want their coffee: every morning he brings coffee to a woman who cannot buy wood to heat up her room, but will not give up her cup of coffee. A comment on consumers' demand that subscribes to the theories of social emulation, this opening exchange of the play points to the universalizing feature of the fashion of drinking coffee.⁸ Along

the same line, Goldoni, in the introductory “Note of the Author to the Reader,” claims that the comedy stages such universal characters that everywhere it was represented people believed it had been inspired by known originals. Coffee and the people around the coffeehouse thus appear to transcend geographical and social boundaries and, as Pietro Verri claimed in the presentation of his *foglio*, this place functions as a social and intellectual leveler of sorts, and renders everybody “tutti presso a poco europei” (11).

This notion seems to support Habermas’ claim that the coffeehouse was one of the crucial institutions for the evolution of the public sphere in eighteenth-century Europe, fostering a spirit of open, democratic, and critical discussion. Although this claim is at least partially debatable (if only because Habermas did not discuss female participation in the public sphere), it appears to hold true for Venice, where it is plausible to add the gender factor.

Coffeehouse in the Theater. Goldoni: From the Intermezzo to the Commedia

In spite of its comic conventions and stock characters, Goldoni’s 1736 intermezzo *La bottega da caffè* offers some useful elements for interpreting the early eighteenth-century Venetian coffeehouse environment. The *caffettiere*, Narciso, is here portrayed as a sly businessman who does not hesitate either to water down his merchandise (to add cheap beans to coffee beans, flour to sugar) nor to “pimp” the Roman *venturiera* (adventurer) Dorilla (whom he falls for and in the end marries) to enhance his business at the expense of Zanetto, the stupid son of a rich merchant and a regular customer. In the first scene, while addressing his waiters, Narciso declares that the quality necessary to thrive in his business is *galanteria* (flirting), because given all the expenses one incurs in “fitto de casa e de bottega, / mobile, capital, garzoni e lumi, / xe una spesa bestial” (3), and there are also expenses in acquiring the small, inevitable luxuries to keep up with the new trends. A *caffettiere* would not survive were it not for “la protezion de certe paronzine che in bottega ne fa conversazion” (4). Narciso embodies a stereotype: a member of the rising lower class working relentlessly and on the edge of legality/morality to

make his peculiar business thrive. He is fully aware of the economic potential of exploiting women's charms for his trade, suggested in the comprehensive term *conversazione*, and represents a new type of consumer, the potential buyer of minor luxury goods (Martin).

Dorilla's entrance in his *bottega* is welcomed as a means to fill cups ("impenir i scuelotti") and trap simpletons ("trapolar merlotti"): Narciso, hence the *caffettiere* in general, is depicted as a connoisseur of characters. He can tell from her first sentence that she is a foreigner and, despite her wearing a mask, he immediately presumes that she is a *venturiera* looking for business, because, as he proudly states, "In ste botteghe / certe persone se cognosse a naso" (5). In the three acts of the intermezzo we see Narciso orchestrating the "trapping" and "plucking" of Zanetto to Dorilla's and his own benefit. However, since he fell for her and offered to marry her from the start, he also is the warrantor of her honor. He introduces her to Zanetto as a foreign improvisator ("*improvvisatrice*") thus endowing her with an artistic career that somewhat legitimizes her presence in the coffeehouse, given the public role and the required travel. The implications of a masked female's presence in this space are clear from the outset, but are rendered even more explicit by Narciso's assertion that Dorilla, while still unknown ("forestiera") and protected by the mask, can make some "honest" money off coffeehouse customers to scrape together a dowry.

Conversation and *galanteria* are pillars of the coffeehouse business but in Zanetto they become caricature. His salient trait, however, is his ridiculous pretension to high culture and worldly experience.⁹ His gullibility and obtuseness are highlighted by his failure to learn from one of the outstanding cultural experiences that the coffeehouse offers, the reading of newspapers.¹⁰ The very representative of that same mercantile class who thrives on the business news reported in the *gazette* is incapable of utilizing this tool and unwilling to learn how to use it: "Tiò i to foggetti" ("Keep your sheets"; 8), he tells Narciso, getting up in a frenzy when Dorilla finally enters: we can construct that "tiò" as the action of hurling them at him. By refusing the best merchandise the coffeehouse has to offer, the news he cannot understand, Zanetto sets himself up as a plausible, if not necessary, victim of the more worldly couple.

In 1776 the *Consiglio dei Dieci* once again reinforced the obligation for women of wearing the mask and the black dress when at the theater because, they claimed, the effects of women's licentious lifestyle, the main cause of the Republic's past and present decadence, were widespread. To prove their argument they pointed to a crisis in family mores and values, a central topic in many of Goldoni's comedies. Comparing the intermezzo of 1736 and the comedy of 1750 one detects a shift towards a more moralizing stance where the dynamics of private and public, and of gender interaction in relation to space, change. If in the intermezzo the focus is limited to the interior of the coffeehouse with its shady dealings, in the comedy the coffeehouse space interacts with the outside and is portrayed as an "open," transparent space with the *caffettiere* as warrantor of its morality. In Narciso's *bottega da caffè* tables are set for card players, the *caffettiere* and waiters are on the look-out for the police in order to cover the cheat of whose earnings they get a cut, and the *camerini/stanzini* are ready for customers' private banquets or romantic *rendezvous*. The commedia, on the other hand, clearly distinguishes the coffeehouse from the gaming house and its questionable *camerini/stanzini*. The scene stages a Venetian square, a fairly spacious street with three businesses: the *bottega da caffè* is in the middle, flanked on the right by a barber shop, and on the left by the gambling place, the *biscazza*. On top of the three buildings are the *stanzini*, the private rooms belonging to the gambling house. On the barber's side, with a street in between, stands the house of a ballerina.

The comedy revolves around the morally sound *caffettiere* Ridolfo and his right hand, Trappola, the *uomo da caffè*. Trappola's job entails the delivery of freshly brewed coffee to private houses which provide him access to a wealth of information that he eagerly shares with his customers. Through him, the private life of the home is let into the public of coffeehouse discourse. Ridolfo, on the other hand, tries not to meddle with gossip, especially if fueled by the Neapolitan nobleman Don Marzio who sits all day long in front of the *bottega*, observing everything and causing trouble with his malicious gossip since if he does not possess enough information to complete a story, he makes it up. Two couples unravel their private affairs around the coffeehouse. The first is composed by Eugenio, a young

businessman who is losing everything in the *biscazza*, and his wife Vittoria. The second couple is made up by Flaminio, a Piedmontese known in Venice as Count Leandro, and his wife, Placida, whom he had abandoned. Flaminio has set his eyes on the ballerina but Placida, travelling in pilgrim's disguise, has hunted him down to this Venetian square.¹¹

Male characters dominate the public space: from the privileged central position of the *bottega da caffè*, with its sitting space outside, large rooms inside and multiple *stanzini* (that never lock Ridolfo assures us) male eyes survey the movements in the piazza, peer into the other businesses, and what the eyes cannot reach, the ears and imagination fill in. The male gaze, however, is not allowed to penetrate the house of the ballerina. Don Marzio and Eugenio assume, given her profession, that she is a public woman and try to gain access into her house, but she is firm in her resolve of guarding her honor (she is in love with Count Leandro). She does not accept their offers of coffee and chocolate, thus preventing Trappola's insinuation into her private space. From the height of her balcony, a place of transition between private and public, she interacts with the male characters and keeps an eye on the other women that mill around the coffeehouse.¹² Don Marzio, facing the denial of information and action, spreads rumors of a back door from which she lets her lovers in (and he ultimately turns out to be right). Placida arrives at the *bottega da caffè* dressed as a pilgrim (about the only legitimate way for an unaccompanied female to travel at the time), and asks for protection to avoid being harassed. Eugenio obliges but the lies Don Marzio has already spread on her account taint her credibility. Don Marzio suggests that since it is Carnival time, she should go around town masked—in the Venetian tradition—to improve her chances of finding her husband. Venice's famous black cloak and mask that made all citizens equal and unrecognizable allowed for the mixing of classes and sexes, something that foreign visitors promptly noticed. This, however, was in itself an extended transgression of the rules that called for the differentiation of the nobility through clothing.

The gender dynamics associated with the presence of a masked female in a public space are exemplified by Vittoria's appearance on the coffeehouse scene. She is looking for Eugenio to inform him she

wants a divorce since he is squandering her dowry, but in their first interaction he does not recognize her and gallantly offers her coffee.¹³ As soon as she reveals her identity, astonished he reproaches her: “Che novità è questa? A quest’ora in maschera? Andate subito a casa vostra! Se aveste riputazione non verreste a cimentare vostro marito in una bottega da caffè” (18-19). Reputation is a constant preoccupation for women in public places, especially when treading on markedly male associative space.¹⁴

The coffeehouse, however, thrived also thanks to female labor, as documents show. In 1776, after the rules regulating women’s presence in public had become more severe and it was prohibited to serve them in coffeehouses, the *caffettieri* Girolamo Cheberle and Dario il Salvadego asked the Inquisitori di Stato, in separate pleas, for the permission of having their wives work in their coffeehouses, claiming that the business was not much and the wives worked as if they were men (Inquisitori 755). It could even happen that women were in charge of a coffeehouse, like the widow of Pietro Valsacchi, who had to support a large family on her *bottega*’s income and showed entrepreneurial spirit by pleading to be allowed to use a room as *camerino* for the gatherings of noblemen. Women were also, in the words of Pietro Zaganà *caffettiere* “gl’individui a cui nelle povere famiglie restano appoggiate le provvisioni minute fuori di casa” (Inquisitori 755). His coffeehouse had been selling, for more than fifty years, pure alcohol and *grappa*, often used as medicines. Being prevented from serving those ladies hurt his business tremendously; hence he wished to be granted permission to override the prohibition, swearing to keep the ladies standing at the counter and not to provide them with the use of chairs or *camerini*.¹⁵ A testament to the role of women in lower class households, this plea confirms that even after 1776 women did access the coffeehouse for shopping purposes, although they were officially discouraged from using it as an associative space.

Sociability, Women and Coffee

Most historians agree that, as Lawrence Klein puts it (100), in the eighteenth century and even more in the nineteenth century “a private and public sphere were constructed ideologically and

endowed with gender and class meaning.” However, from the image of Venetian sociability sketched so far, it appears difficult to draw a sharp distinction between the private and public sphere as associated with the female and male realms respectively. In this particular case, I especially see the merit of Klein’s observation that “a more precise account of gender in relation to publicity and privacy can be achieved by closer examination of both space and language” (100). If, as he argues, the movements of men and women can be mapped to show the gendering of space and its relationship to publicity and privacy, it is also true that we need first to figure out what “public” and “private” meant in eighteenth-century Venice when it comes to women.

Roughly following a classical definition, we can think of public as pertaining to the state and, consequently, of private as everything that is not related to it. If women are generally excluded from the official direction of the Venetian state, the *dogaresse* (usually the wives of the *doge*) exercised political power by virtue of their being married to powerful men (Caterina Dolfin Tron, for example, had her own office and received visitors in the Palazzo Ducale). In the civic public sphere, noble and intellectual Venetian women could have a social and cultural representative function. They represented Venice alongside their family men (Giustina Renier-Michiel) or by virtue of their art and intellect (the portrait artist Rosalba Carriera). The economic public sphere thrived on the work of women, from the public market to the making of clothes, glass bead jewelry, and crochet (*merletti*), or the renting out of private rooms and even managing coffeehouses and inns, (as represented, for instance, in Goldoni’s *La locandiera* and testified by archival sources).¹⁶ In private, moreover, women were in charge of the household. Finally, the “associative public sphere, a sphere of discursive and cultural production” (Klein 101) relied on women’s salon gatherings, meetings in the *casini*, theaters and *ridotti*, even saw their active participation as theater managers and producers (such was the case for the poet and translator Luisa Bergalli Gozzi who directed the Sant’Angelo theater for the 1747-1748 season). These tentative definitions of public and private in relation to a gendered concept of space transcend the “home/not home dichotomy” (Klein 203) and also confound the Habermasian view of the eighteenth-century public realm as being off-limits to women: in

Venice, gambling in the *Ridotto* wearing a mask, or taking a gondola ride down the Canal Grande could afford a woman more privacy than her own abode.

The blurring of private and public was at the core of the Venetian State which was founded and governed, from the beginning, as a union of families. The patrician family, with its strict rules and matrimonial politics, directed the government of the State. However, from the second half of the eighteenth century, fingers were pointed at the family as the reason of the demise of the State itself. The politicization of private life and the growing individualism contributed to the increasing disobedience of young male patricians and to an unprecedented liberty for women. Young noblemen were more and more inclined to refuse family duties (which were also political duties) and paternal authority to embrace personal and sentimental freedom. On the other hand, the widespread opinion that Venetian women's public presence was corrupting the hierarchies of authority and the structures of the State was not simply the partisan observation of foreigners, but a real concern of Venetian magistrates who repeatedly focused on this issue and attempted to restrict female access to public places.

Women, however, had a vital role in the civic public sphere, especially when it encompassed the private of the household in the form of the "conversazione" or "salon." Writing in 1739 during his trip to Italy, Charles de Brosses wryly comments upon what he perceives as the lack of generous hospitality in Venetian households:

The Venetians, with all their show and palaver, do not understand the first rudiments of hospitality. I have looked in sometimes at the *conversazione* of the Marchesa Foscarini, who lives in a superb palace; she is a most gracious dame, but for refreshments we were offered at three o'clock (that is to say at eleven o'clock pm our time), by twenty valets, a large pumpkin, cut into quarters, on a silver dish, which they call here a water-melon, a most loathsome vegetable. This is followed by piles of silver plates; everyone seizes a portion, takes therewith a little cup of coffee, and returns home with an empty stomach to have supper at midnight. (23)

BOTTEGHE DA CAFFÈ

Is that small cup of coffee a symbol of fashionable entertainment or, as he suggests, of Venetian stinginess in contrast to the grandeur of French conviviality? If the primary purpose of the occasion is *conversazione*, coffee may have been chosen as the most apt stimulant of ideas (aided by the sugar rush of watermelon). In effect, the lady of the house might have aimed to emulate the lively intellectual exchange of the best coffeehouses within the private quarters of her home.

By the mid 1750s, women were at the center of Venetian sociability, both as protagonists and as topics of conversation. When Caterina Dolfin is enjoying the *villeggiatura* in the Venetian countryside, she sends her letters for Gasparo Gozzi at the Caffè alla Mora where he reads them publicly to the members of her intellectual circle, continuing there the conversation they would have in her salon (Gozzi 497). Gasparo Gozzi, in a letter to an unidentified correspondent, offers one of the first descriptions of modern gendered “public opinion.” In this letter he discusses the appropriateness of publishing a volume he is translating for a wedding accompanied by the original Greek text: “ho timore che cotesto Greco, non sia graziosamente ricevuto in una funzione pubblica, alla quale è grande il concorso delle Dame, che trovandosi un libro in mano di tal qualità, metterebbero senza dubbio la cosa in giuoco, e se ne farebbe scena” (486). He then reports *verbatim* Senator Angelo Querini’s opinion on the issue: “*Io credo bene, dice S.E. Querini, che la Città de’ Professori possa applaudire a così fatta stampa, ma qui so come vanno le cose, e so, che la Città dominatrice pensa diversamente assai*” (486). The *Città dominatrice* is the prevalent Venetian public opinion which, we can assume in light of Gozzi’s comment, has a very active female component.

A specifically female reading public began to get acknowledged, as the memory of the now lost (and short-lived) women’s magazine (“*foglio per le donne*”) edited by Gioseffa Cornoldi Caminer and published at the beginning of the 1760s by the small Venetian editor Domenico Deregni, testifies. Women were conspicuous on the Venetian scene: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu noted in her letters to her daughter that noble Venetian women did not live secluded following the French style, instead they paid visits and received illustrious foreigners at all times of day. The *villeggiatura* in

the beautiful neo-Palladian style country villas along the river Brenta was spiced up by the evening gatherings in the villas' *casini* and by the social gatherings at the local coffeehouse, where everybody would meet to hear the latest news from Venice and to gossip. In 1755, a young Giustiniana Wynne, betrothed to the old British Consul Joseph Smith, uses the local *bottega da caffè* to secretly dispatch love letters to Andrea Memmo and to retrieve his missives. Later in her life, living in Venice as Count Rosenberg's widow and with a small *salon* of her own, she would spend her summer *villeggiatura* near Padova, at Altichiero, the now lost property of Senator Angelo Querini, of which she left a beautiful description correlated by illustrations. A very special site of this enlightened residence, a meeting place for intellectuals and artists, was the coffeehouse, a testament to the fact that this hot social medium, which started out by appropriating a public space, by the 1770s had worked its ways into the conception of private architecture and had gained a prominent role even in private rituals.¹⁷ The fact that Wynne, writing in French, designates this space using the English term "Coffee-House" prompts us to interpret this newly conceived architectural site in the context of an intellectual vision not deprived of political implications, although the pagan scenes painted on the walls and the election of Horace as the *genius loci* appear to underline more a philosophical view of life than an explicit political agenda.

If coffee, an exotic "Turkish" drink, had initially infiltrated Venetian society carrying the overtones of a debate on the dangerous cultural influence of the oriental "other," it soon becomes domesticated and appropriated in a move that is typical of Venetian imperial strategy. Gasparo Gozzi, describing to a friend the festivities for the election of Francesco II Lorenzo Morosini as *procuratore* of San Marco (1755), offers a vivid image of this Venetian ability:

Si presentarono alla porta del palazzo ventiquattro turchi del fondaco per entrare, condotti da due de' loro più puliti che parlavano bene italiano... Vennero accettati, condotti per tutto; e finalmente la padrona e il padrone gli fecero entrare tutti in una stanza, dove con molti complimenti gli trattarono di caffè, cioccolatte e sorbetti; e perchè si prendevano i dolci con parsimonia, la padrona

BOTTEGHE DA CAFFÈ

volle che si votassero non so quanti bacili. Prima che partissero, furono divisi sulle finestre della facciata, provveduti di sei ceste di pane, ch'essi medesimi gittarono con gran piacere al popolo che faceva gran allegrezza dalla sua parte. Si licenziarono finalmente, e la padrona gli ringraziò del favore. (Gozzi 365-366)

The long-time enemy of the Republic is welcomed in the Morosini's private palazzo, heart of the *Serenissima* and female dominion, where (after glimpsing at the spoils brought back from Morea by Doge Francesco Morosini, the *Notatori* inform us), they are treated to their own drink, the American drink, and the Italian *sorbetto*. The lady of the house is in charge of the civilities: she coaxes the guests to eat more sweets and, we are tempted to assume, devises their display on the palazzo's windows for launching bread to the crowd. This shining show of Morosini's power is brought forth by the female art of sociability. In the act of offering the "conquered other" his own drink, we can read the social and political message that coffee has brought about: the effects of a cultural transformation. It is a transformation visible in the widespread Venetian consumption of coffee and its status as a social ritual organized around the diffusion of news; in the political implications for Venice of the weakened Turkish empire; and in the relevant symbolic and political role occupied by the feminine both in the private and public sphere.

As we have seen, Venetian women were social consumers of coffee. Even after the 1776 prohibition to serve women in the coffeehouse, masked or unmasked, they had access to the adjacent or nearby *casini* of the *compagnie* where the *caffettiere* would bring coffee. Their partaking in these social gatherings also meant, to a certain extent, their inclusion in the democratic discursive practices stemming from coffeehouse sociability. In private, coffee came to embody an indispensable household staple for personal consumption but also for entertaining. As Fougereux de Bondaroy states in the opening quote of this essay, coffee is the fashionable drink both in public and in private, where women serve this stimulant in their *conversazioni*, as if wishing to recreate coffeehouse sociability. Immediately recognized as a medium of social change, a powerful transformative agent, coffee

(and the coffeehouse space) was subjected to control and censorship. In the Venetian *bottega da caffè* the public and private mingle. It is the place where important, vital news for a mercantile community are delivered, where deals are sanctioned, politics are debated and literature discussed, together with scandalous love affairs. In Venice, private family business is brought around town not only by gambling and libertine husbands, but also by women wearing masks who are granted added mobility and access to public space. Moreover, the *uomo da caffè*, carrying the tray with the smoking hot energizing drink into alcoves and apartments, penetrates into private family life, the heart of the city, and brings it back to the coffeehouse where, being best when served hot, it becomes gossip and news.

Was then Giacomo Casanova, that fatal night, when he is said to have stepped one last time into Floriano's coffeehouse, just having a coffee? No, for him that was a last sip of Venice. And, maybe, a last glimpse at one of his lovers. Coffee, however, was much more than just a symbol for Venice, and certainly more than a *locus amoenus*. It was the medium of important socio-cultural transformations, especially with regards to women, if only because it allowed them a stronger presence in the public realm.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Giandomenico Tiepolo had painted in 1757, at Villa Valmarana in Vicenza, a work entitled *Mondo nuovo* representing a Venetian carnival scene with a crowd of masks eagerly waiting in line to peek through the little window of the "New world," a device in which a magic lantern projects exotic scenes explained by a charlatan. A later painting on the same subject (1791) reflects the changes in the artist's now disillusioned perception of reality and in society itself. See Peroni (225-229). Gasparo Gozzi compares the decorations in the best *botteghe da caffè* to a theatrical backdrop, a window onto an exotic world. On this subject, and more in general on the characters of Goldoni's production, see Crotti.

² According to Plebani ("Acque" 4), it was Senator Costantino Garzoni who, in 1573, first mentioned coffee in one of his reports to the Venetian Senate from the Embassy in Constantinople. He described coffee as a sort of black water, made with opium, which rendered drinkers happy and carefree: however, if one were to try to get off the

BOTTEGHE DA CAFFÈ

addiction, he would immediately die.

³ *Compagnie di nobili* were groups of nobles (men, women, or mixed groups) who would rent a room (*stanzino o camerino*) in a *bottega* for private meetings and parties.

⁴ Founded in 1747 by Carlo and Gasparo Gozzi, the *Accademia dei Granelleschi* was strongly opposed to Goldoni and Chiari's realism in theater and proposed a notion of theater based on fantastic invention and imagination. Some of the Granelleschi, the *compagnia dantesca*, were also dedicated to the study of Dante.

⁵ As the thick folder of *caffettieri*'s pleas from this period preserved in the Archivio di Stato di Venezia attest, many of them were granted permission to serve coffee to women in rooms separate from the coffeehouse (*casini*) where they could be with their husbands and friends, or to provide them with chairs outside. The common argument was that women were a sizable portion of the *bottega*'s customers and the business would have been greatly damaged without them.

⁶ The *caffettieri* themselves were often the ones to report information of political content to the authorities, as it was the case for Valentin Francesconi, called Florian, the owner of the homonymous coffeehouse in St. Mark's Square which was the favorite gathering place of foreign diplomats. To protect his own business, Florian informed the Inquisitori di Stato on the card games foreigners played in his establishment, on their discussions, and on the verbal insults that could result in skirmishes to defend personal or patriotic honor. These pleas are preserved in the Archivio Storico Veneziano. Inquisitori di Stato. *Suppliche dei caffettieri*. Venezia: Archivio Storico Veneziano, 1776. Envelope 755.

⁷ All translations from the French are my own.

J'aurois l'honneur de répondre à ceux qui tiendroient de pareils propos, que je ne présente pas dans le titre de dette Piece une histoire, une passion, un caractere; mais un Café, où plusieurs actions se passent à la fois, où plusieurs personnes sont amenées par différens intérêts; et si j'ai eu le bonheur d'établir un rapport essentiel entre ces différens objets, et de les rendre nécessaires l'un à l'autre, je crois avoir rempli mon devoir, en surmontant encore plus de difficultés. (Goldoni, 271)

I will have the honor to answer those who say such things, that I don't present in the title of this comedy a story, a passion, a character, but instead a coffeehouse, where multiple actions are taking place at the same time, where different characters are led by various interests; and if I've had the good fortune of establishing an essential relationship among these objects, and to render one necessary to the other, I believe I've done my duty, overcoming even bigger obstacles.

⁸ For a discussion on social emulation theories in the specific context of coffee consumption see Cowan.

⁹ Zanetto is hilarious in his flourished pseudo-literary attempts at complimenting Dorilla: "Incantato restai, qual ostrica nel fango io mi impiantai"; pathetic in his proud declarations of having travelled everywhere "Ho camminato il mondo. Son stato a Chiozza, a Padoa e a Vicenza"; foolishly vain in his claim of possessing a vast culture which is but a mumbo-jumbo of names (7-9).

¹⁰ In a key scene, Narciso offers Zanetto the most recent *gazzetta* (*foggetti*) from

Milan to read. He is enthralled to hear that the *foggetti* come from so far away, and he is eager to peruse them. However, he clearly does not know how to read a *gazzetta* since he is not familiar with the news layout. The format, presenting the name of the city followed by the news regarding it, baffles him, and he fails to recognize city names. Moreover, he is immediately confounded both by the geographical scope of the news and by the language of the newspaper. He construes London and Madrid not as European cities but as husband and wife; he is shocked to learn that Genoa is a city and that ships can reach it because there is some other sea outside of Venice; his main problem, however, is his inability to lay abstract meanings on words, an impediment strengthened by his poor grasp of the Italian language and his need to translate into Venetian: “*Venezia. Due bastimenti inglesi han preso porto... prender vuol dir chiappar... oh che faloppa! Do bastimenti soli averà chiappà un porto?*” (14).

¹¹ For a comparison between Goldoni’s representation of the people around the coffeehouse and archival documents that bring forth the voices of such people, see Wolff’s beautiful essay.

¹² For an analysis of the use of space in relation to gender in Goldoni’s comedies, see Günsberg.

¹³ Such a type of interaction is recorded in a now lost painting by Pietro Longhi, surviving through prints’ reproductions, and titled “Il caffè,” representing a coffeehouse customer pinching the butt of a masked woman. See Sohm.

¹⁴ In 1770, the rector of the church of S. Maria Formosa testified to the morality of the nearby coffeehouse patrons and pleaded for the *caffettiere* to be allowed to serve customers of both sexes:

Attesto con mio giuramento io D. Pierantonio pievano nella chiesa Lavochè, collegata e matrice di S. Maria Formosa, come nella bottega di caffè appresso la nostra chiesa non si è mai veduto alcun scandalo, ne’ avuto alcun motivo di dolersi, del contegno e condotta del padrone, e giovine della suddetta bottega essendo questi di buona fama, e d’ottimi costume quali frequentano li santissimi sacramenti. Questi viene per nome chiamato Giacomo Antonio Bravis... il quale implora il permesso di poter somministrare ad oneste persone di qualunque sesso, ogni genere concernente alla propria professione. (Inquisitori di Stato 755)

¹⁵ “Imploro che mi sia caritatevolmente concesso di servir donne nella sola bottega, o sia al banco stando esse in piedi, e senz’accordarle servizio di sedie e camerini” (Inquisitori di Stato 755).

¹⁶ For a detailed reconstruction of Venetian women’s presence in the workforce during this period see Trivellato.

¹⁷ En rodent toujours autour de la maison, on rencontre une autre allée qui en fort, & qui se termine dans un Coffée-House. Cette allée s’élève aussi haut que la maison, & les branches touffues des charmilles s’entreleçant dans le fommet forment une galerie verte voûtée, d’une épaisseur suffisante pour intercepter les rayons du soleil en plein midi, & même pour garantir des premières attaques d’une pluïe imprévue. Sur la longueur de deux cent pas, on voit à droite & à gauche des beauxbustes en marbre, représentant des différens personnages de l’antiquité: au bout est le Coffée-House, petite sale voûtée & percée de trios arcades: dans le mur de perspective on a peint à fresque le Dieu des jardins, qui d’un air respectable & décent écoute les priers d’une jeune fille, & reçoit remercimens d’une jeune

BOTTEGHE DA CAFFÈ

épouse. Au-dessous il y-a cette inscription: HORTORUM CUSTODI VIGILI/ CONSERVATORI PROPAGINIS/VILLICORUM. Horace, le chantre de ce Dieux & le Poète favori du maître de la maison, paroît dans un médaillon placé sur le fronton, & on y lit au-dessous les beaux vers, par lesquels il donne lui-même le tableau de sa maison de campagne qui faisoit le charme de sa vie... (Wynne 14)

And still prowling around the house, one encounters another alley, which comes out of it and ends into a coffeehouse. This alley is as high as the house and the leafy branches of the hornbeams interlace themselves on the top forming a vaulted green gallery, of a sufficient density to intercept the rays of the midday sun, and to protect from the first attacks of unexpected rain. For two hundred feet one can see on the right and on the left some beautiful marble busts representing different characters from antiquity: at the end there is the coffeehouse, small vaulted room broached by three arcades: on the prospective wall they painted a fresco representing the god of gardens who with a respectable and decent countenance listens to the prayers of a young girl and receives the thanks of a young spouse. On top there is this inscription: HORTORUM CUSTODI VIGILI/ CONSERVATORI PROPAGINIS/VILLICORUM. Horace, the bard of this god and the favorite poet of the master of the house, appears in a medallion placed on the fronton, and on top of it one reads the beautiful verses with which he himself offers the image of his country house which was the delight of his life.

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