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Medical Practice in the 18th Century According to Giacomo Casanova (1725–1798), Manqué Physician

Forget the stereotype! Giacomo Casanova's reputation as libertine has often eclipsed his talents as scholar, writer, linguist, mathematician and manqué doctor. As a young man he wanted to study medicine in Padua but was not allowed to by his mother and his guardian, abbé Grimani. However, his interest in medicine continued throughout his life. He took many opportunities to discourse with physicians who were up-to-date and there is evidence that he was familiar with the medical works of Professor Boerhaave of Leiden (1668—1738) one of the most respected physicians and medical teachers in early eighteenth century Europe. He was clearly impressed because he often referred with approval to physicians who had been pupils of the famous professor.

Fortunately for us, during his declining years, his physician advised he write his memoirs to combat melancholy, which he was by then prone to experiencing. At the time, he was librarian to Count Waldstein who appointed him in 1785 to look after his library at Dux. Thus, he wrote his memoirs, which are in French and consist of 3800 folio pages, organised into twelve bundles. Apart from being an impressive source of cultural and political history they contain a huge amount of information on medical matters. Casanova's descriptions of symptoms and treatments suggest that he was an informed observer of his own health and that of others. His comments reveal an understanding of ancient Greek medical theory and some limited familiarity with newer medical paradigms. A range of conditions are described that include the Pox to piles, gastritis to gout, scabies to smallpox. These descriptions provide another perspective on the lived experience of disease in the 18th century amongst people from all strata of society. They give us insights into the relationships between physicians and their patients, medical etiquette as well as prevailing medical theories and practices. These stories, alternately grim and amusing, bring alive the subject of 18th century medicine.