

Nicole G. ALBERT (2011) *La Castiglione, Vies et métamorphoses*. Paris: Perrin.

When we bring to mind the French Second Empire, little remains in our collective imagination other than the rather kitsch and pastel vision of Winterhalter paintings or of swirling crinolines in Offenbach's operettas. But beyond these clichés, as for any period of history, there slumber many personalities who are today more or less forgotten or little known. Nicole G. Albert has exhumed from the limbo of the "Gay Empire" the fascinating figure of the comtesse de Castiglione in a book which combines aspects of both biography and essay, so inseparable is the life of her subject from the artistic opus she created around it.

Born Virginia Oldoini on the 22nd March 1837 in La Spezia, the future countess was very early in her life famous for her alluring beauty. Those about her called her "la Madonna viva". But far from following the pious example of the Virgin, the young woman took delight only in balls and frivolous flirtation. In 1854 she married the dull Count Francesco Verasis di Castiglione, from whom she would become quite rapidly detached. But it would be wrong to consider this queen of society as lacking intelligence: she spoke several languages, and also liked to claim a sharp head for politics. The cousin of Cavour, the leading voice of the Risorgimento, she found herself charged with a diplomatic mission by king Victor-Emmanuel II, who wished to obtain the support of Napoleon III for the liberation of Italy from Austrian domination and for ensuring thereby the unity of the peninsula.

As a precursor to Mata Hari, this ambassadress of charm emerged into Parisian society in 1856, the year of the publication of *Madame Bovary*, a character who had much in common with her. She whom Jules Bois labelled "la Trop Belle" very quickly became a familiar of the "petits lundis" of the Empress Eugénie and the most visible woman at the court. With her stubborn persistence, she succeeded in attaining her goal: Napoleon III fell under her spell and, most important, he signed a secret agreement with Cavour during the conference at Plombières. By the terms of this treaty, France would provide military assistance to the kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia in the event of a conflict between the latter and Austria; in return, France would obtain the county of Nice and the duchy of Savoy, an agreement which would cause the boastful countess to declare: "I have made Italy and saved the papacy"!

La Castiglione was then at the height of her prestige. She appeared at every fashionable occasion and demonstrated a marked taste for extravagance: she made immoderate use of powders, creams and hair-dyes and not infrequently would change costume and coiffure several times during a single soirée. A veritable work of art, each of her entries was an apparition, a word which makes the link both with spiritualism as with the marvels of the great illusionist Robert-Houdin, both of which were very much in vogue at that time. Above all, she discovered photography through the intermediary of the Imperial photographer Pierre-Louis Pierson. This Mephistophelian partnership was to produce more than 450 photographic portraits! Those were the years that witnessed the rise to prominence of this new medium, with the creation in 1854 of the *Société française de photographie*. However, being a smart woman as well as an authentic aesthete, the countess had no intention of restricting herself to the simple role of society client and became by turns script-writer, stage manager, costume director and set designer. Before the camera lens she appeared as Ann Boleyn, Judith and Madame du Barry, among other historic figures, but also in deliberately vulgar poses, setting herself apart from both the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. Like an Irina Ionesco, relatively speaking, she also had her only son Georges photographed in more than 110 portraits. In some images the boy appears as a little girl with flowers inserted in his hair, calling to mind Lewis Carroll and his notorious photographs of young girls.

Although fallen into disrepute, she continued her diplomatic missions for Victor-Emmanuel II during the 1860s. The “Queen of the Beauties” also established genuine friendships with the famous doctor Blanche and with Adolphe Thiers, with whom she maintained a disguised correspondence that showed her to be an astute political analyst. The future President of the Third Republic would besides entrust her with certain negotiations with Bismarck. Taking refuge in Italy, she was not on hand to witness the collapse of the Second Empire, and did not return to Paris until 1872. Six months later she took up residence at n° 26, place Vendôme, in an apartment worthy of the imagination of a Maurice Leblanc: furniture and walls draped in black, shutters closed both by day and by night, veiled mirrors... and with no fewer than three metal-sheathed doors to protect the countess! A double entry allowed complete discretion for comings and goings. In her own words, she transformed herself into a “recluse of beauty”, in perpetual mourning, languidly immured in her tomb-like dwelling. Just like Garbo, whose sobriquet “the Divine” she was also given by Robert de Montesquiou, who devoted a biography to la Castiglione in 1913, she carefully maintained an air of mystery about her person. She received a few rare visits from friends and former lovers. From time to time she escaped from her seclusion to lead a bohemian lifestyle, exploring the cabarets and nightlife of Paris. A shadow among other shadows, she emerged only at nightfall, veiled and hooded to preserve her anonymity. At the same time she fell back on the love of her dogs, who came to be photographed as well, and then were stuffed when they died! As can be seen, la Castiglione was transforming herself at that time into the perfect decadent, resembling a character straight from a Jean Lorrain or Rachilde novel. With regard to this, Nicole Albert observes that the extravagant life of the countess, so inextricably involved with her creative projection of herself, could well constitute an anthology of the literary movements of the 19th century. Among other examples it may be recalled that Zola’s Clorinde Balbi, in his novel *Son Excellence Eugène Rougon* (1876) was a pure copy of the illustrious Castiglione.

Laden with debt, she left the place Vendôme for a modest two-room apartment on the rue Saint-Honoré in January 1894. Her paranoia grew even more acute and she hardly ever came out any more from her run-down abode. Nevertheless she started having sessions with Pierson again. But the photos, it has to be admitted, were now little different from those of Charcot’s pathological obsessives. The countess’s adventure with photography would end a year later. Thereafter, she intended to provide herself with a posthumous triumph by organising her own funeral ceremony. The last wishes that she penned reflected her image: she wanted to be laid in a crystal coffin, like Snow White, and even drew up plans for it. She also desired to exhibit her photographs at the upcoming Paris Universal Exposition of 1900. But she died on the 28th November 1899. Reduced to a spectre during the final years of her existence, her death made her into a myth.

This life of such romanticism has found in Nicole Albert its faithful witness, as she unravels the sometimes complicated threads that the countess had spun around the real and the imaginary, seduction and politics. More than a remarkable biographical study, composed in a style as delicate as that of her subject, the author brings great subtlety to her analysis of the way la Castiglione set out to project an artistic image of herself, and, far from confining her to the simple status of an eccentric or a narcissist, boxes into which women artists are too often cast, Albert provides us with the keys to this preoccupation. Indeed, how can one best explain the fascination aroused by such a visual life-story? The legendary beauty of “the prettiest woman in Europe” is, in our modern eyes, a quite relative assessment. No, the fixation comes no doubt from the effacement of the real life behind the image (it is curious to note that, in later years, the countess denied her diplomatic missions and her Imperial liaison). Her contemporaries were already noting her near-muteness in society, and she herself, in her final notes, depicted herself as a “statue of silence”: the syntax of the body stood in for the spoken word, and the darkroom could thus register her

multiple personae. The creative opus of la Castiglione thereby also presents analogies with an intimate journal in her obsession to freeze time and outlive herself, a modern expression of the Horatian *non omnis moriar*.

This undertaking, as original as it was fundamental, prefigured that of several modern-day artists: Orlan's series *Le Drapé-le Baroque* (1979–1986) recalls the series of photographs in which the countess presents herself as the Hermit of Passy; her very famous portrait *Scherzo di follia*, where her face is partly obscured by a cut-out card, clearly inspired Cindy Sherman for her *History Portraits/Old Masters* (1989); the various realisations of Sophie Calle recall the countess's biopictura, while certain images of the latter as on her death-bed anticipate the work of Robert Mapplethorpe on the *post mortem*. Underpinning her exposition with many other examples, Nicole Albert highlights the astonishingly up-to-date character of the Castiglione photographic opus. A veritable dramatist of the camera obscura, the passionate countess succeeded in capturing the ephemeral in all its melancholy grace. The novelist Gyp was not wrong when she acerbically wrote about the countess in a letter: “red turns black in photography”.

Nicolas Berger
Paris, France

Translated from the French by Colin Anderson

Micheline GALLEY (2010) *La Sibylle de l'Antiquité à nos jours*. Preface by André Miquel. Paris: Geuthner. 205 p. ill.

Addressing such a perennial and mysterious theme as that of the Sibyl is a fine and substantial task for historians. On this occasion, it is an ethnologist who is treating the subject, bringing to it the rigorous site-based observational methodology of her discipline, reinforced by a great erudition around the written and iconographic sources that she has assembled over ten years of investigations in France, Italy, Spain and Flanders.

Following the trail of Germaine Tillion and Fernand Braudel, Micheline Galley has devoted her research life to the cultures of North Africa and the Mediterranean basin. But it is in particular to the oral traditions in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt and Malta that she has directed her major attention, as witnessed by her work on the Bani Hilal epic, the tales of the Magic Figtree, and the life story of Maria Calleja of Gozo.

The starting point for this adventurous enterprise has been a simple file-card on the Sibyl kept after a lecture by the sociologist Maxime Rodinson, leading to the discovery in Malta of three cycles of legends: *The Sibyl and Solomon*, *The Sibyl and the Books of Wisdom*, *The Sibyl and the Young Virgin Mary*. With these, her interest was stirred. Then finally, one Christmas Eve in Majorca, the experience of hearing the “*Cant de la Sibilla*” in the contemporary Christian liturgy, followed by another moving occasion in Alghero in Sardinia hearing the chant's choral refrain: “*On Judgement Day we will behold those who have served well*”, led to an intensification of Galley's research. This chant, originally in Greek, is a proclamation of the Nativity, sung in the Mediterranean Christian world first in Latin and then in the neo-Latin vernacular languages of Catalan, Castilian and Provençal. This whole florilegium is taken into consideration by the researcher, leading to numerous years of travelling and observation, of seeking evidence and collecting texts and iconography that was always displayed to be seen.