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DYING IN DEFENCE OF OUR HOMELAND AND LIVING
FOR HER LOVE”: NAPLES IN 1799 THROUGH
THE PAST OF REVOLUTIONARY WOMEN

On January 22 1799, French troops forced their way into the city of Naples. In doing so they confirmed the authority of the Neapolitan Republic, which had been proclaimed one and indivisible the day before by a group of patriots who had taken control of the Sant’Elmo Castle, the fortress on the hill immediately above the centre of the city. Thus, it turned out to be the last of the revolutions and has been regarded as the offspring of the great French revolution. Like its predecessors in northern Italy and elsewhere it depended on French military intervention. In fact, during the previous weeks before January 22, patriots were unable to control the city, popular violence and disorder expanded everywhere¹. As Michelle Vovelle has emphasized, Naples was subjected to a revolution involving large sectors of the population, and which led to dramatic clashes. But this revolution came later and it was an ephemeral blaze of five months which cannot be said to have been suppressed by the troops of the coalition because it was already underway during its arrival². So, the French intervention only served to ensure the success of a Republic that, despite their presence and the pressure of internal and external counter-revolution, would attempt to live its short experience which tragically closed in the reconquest carried out by Sanfedists of Cardinal Ruffo and which culminated in a general massacre³.

Consequently, the Neapolitan Republic of 1799 was not simply a figurehead of the French military occupation⁴. It was the effect of a violent revolution caused not by the French but

¹ Davis (1999: 350-358)

² See in this connection Mascilli Migliorini (2003: 397-398); Rao (2002: 855-860); Vovelle (1999: 358-369).

³ Panarese (2011).

⁴ Persico (2006).

by the actions at the same time of the immature and feeble rulership of King, Ferdinand IV of Bourbon and his wife, and by the passionate desire of the intellectual enlightened class to be released from a tyrannical dynasty.

The paradox pointed out by several historians consists in the urban setting⁵. What was the revolution of the masses without the masses? We could affirm that the Naples revolt was characterized by the weakness of the revolutionary movement. As Vincenzo Cuoco believed, the revolution failed because it was a passive revolution, in which a small group of republicans had tried to force French ideas on a people mostly ignorant of their meaning and unprepared to receive them. The republican infatuation with the French Revolution with its grand ideas and conspiratorial clubs meant that they neglected to involve '*il popolo*' in their programme and thus failed to make the revolution active⁶. So, Naples which before 1799 was the third most important city after London and Paris, for its demographic dimension and for being an enlightened cultural artistic landmark⁷ after the tragedy of 1799 became one of the capitals of counter revolution⁸.

The enlightened *élite* was not sufficient to defeat the enlightened despotism of the Bourbons that came back triumphing and claiming a bitter vengeance.

No one wrote of that period with the impartiality that the dignity of history requires. Among the first papers we find "A Historical Essay about the Naples Revolution of 1799" written by the already cited Vincenzo Cuoco⁹. He was one of the leading lights of the Neapolitan Enlightenment and he wrote the first large work with a historical patriotic character of one of the most important accounts of political revolution written in the nineteenth century, showing a great ability of self-criticism:

⁵ Vovelle, Davis (2006: 104-106).

⁶ Cuoco (2014: XVI-XVII).

⁷ See in this regards the studies of Astarita (2013); Calaresu-Hills (2013).

⁸ On Naples in 1799 and its revolutions, see among others: Rao (2017); De Francesco (2004); De Lorenzo (2003); Di Giovine (1998); Rao (2002); Placanica - Pellizzari (2002); Battaglini (1988); Rao (1997), Chiosi (1986), Croce (1912); De Nicola, (1963); Serrao De Gregory (1934).

⁹ De Francesco (1997); (2004).

Ma una catastrofe fisica è il più delle volte più esattamente osservata e più veracemente descritta di una catastrofe politica. Narro le vicende della mia patria; racconto avvenimenti che io stesso ho veduto, e de' quali sono stato io stesso un giorno non ultima parte: scrivo pei miei concittadini che non debbo, che non posso, che non voglio ingannare¹⁰

Another remarkable work is Francesco Lomonaco's "Report to Citizen Carnot"¹¹, an essay reporting the repression started by Ferdinand IV and inviting patriots to remove the King from the political scene. Lomonaco took part in the Neapolitan Republic, succeeding in escaping from the Bourbon repression and later took refuge in France¹².

Beyond all the historical documents handed down in which the exploits of heroes and martyrs are always highlighted, I thought I would highlight three distinctive female experiences of revolution. Women who for their courage, temperament, will and desire can be compared with dignity to men. In my analysis, I briefly touch on three distinctive revolutionary women who lived through a revolution and I will focus on the ways these women perceived the images of revolution through their thoughts and memories written at that time to transmit political and cultural messages.

So, these three distinctive women were active protagonists of a historical revolution and had in common an irrepressible vocation to pass down their love for liberty even at the cost of their own lives. Two of them, Eleonora Fonseca Pimentel and Maria Luisa Sanfelice lived through the Neapolitan revolutionary period and they both lost their lives, being remembered among the martyrs of 1799. Eleonora Fonseca Pimentel was the director of the newspaper *Monitore Napoletano*, her verdict of guilty was requested by Queen Maria Carolina of Naples, Ferdinand IV's wife because of her papers against the Monarchs; Luisa Sanfelice was described by several historians as one of

¹⁰ Cuoco (2014: 6).

¹¹ The original title of Lomonaco's work is: *Rapporto fatto da Francesco Lomonaco patriota napoletano al cittadino Carnot ministro della guerra sulle segrete cagioni e sui principali avvenimenti della catastrofe napoletana, sul carattere e sulla condotta del re, della regina di Sicilia e del famoso Acton*.

¹² On the life-story of Francesco Lomonaco, see: Lomonaco (1976); Campagna (1989); Russo (1993); De Francesco (2000), Marchianò, (2011: 80-92).

the Neapolitan revolution heroes who gave up their lives for freedom.

But it has been very curious to compare these two life-stories of women with another woman, who has not been greatly examined by historians¹³, but she was considered revolutionary for that age: not for being involved in revolution but for her innovative way of writing and speaking about the French Revolution. Helen Maria Williams did not participate actively in the Neapolitan revolution, but during her French revolutionary experience, the Naples revolt influenced and impressed her so much that she wrote several letters regarding this tragic period.

1. *Elenora Fonseca Pimentel an eye witnesses of the Neapolitan Revolution*

Eleonora de Fonseca Pimentel, poetess, scholar of jurisprudence, natural and mathematical sciences, at first, was an enthusiastic supporter of Ferdinand IV of Bourbon's enlightened political reforms. After the French Revolution and the radical change of the Neapolitan government policy, much more illiberal and repressive, she was an active protagonist of the 1799 Revolution and was a co-founder of the Neapolitan Republic. Editor of the newspaper *Monitore napoletano*, she was a free, courageous journalist, committed to changing the "Neapolitan plebs" into "civil people". At the fall of the Republic, she was fearless in meeting death by hanging .

The image of Eleonora Fonseca Pimentel is built through the cultural model of the republican martyr according to the characters of the ancient Roman *virtus*: the real values would then be recounted in almost all the nineteenth-century biographies¹⁴. The chroniclers, in fact, present her on the gallows platform as a woman without a moment of weakness:

¹³ The figure of Helen Mara Williams has been analysed much more from a literary perspective than an historical one. See in this regard: Duckling, (2010: 74-92); Jones (2000); Joy (2011: 145-171); Keane (2013); Looser (2000).

¹⁴ Eleonora Fonseca Pimentel see: Schiattarella (1973); Buttafuoco (1977: 51-72); Forgione (1999); Gurgo, (1935); Macciocchi (1993); Battaglini (1997); Cassani (1997: 595-600); Ugnani, (1998); Santos (2001); Rao (2006); Pellizzari (2008); D'Episcopo (2008); Croce (1998: 25-104).

the same fearless attitudes in the face of death in mythography reserved to male protagonists of the 1799 Neapolitan events.

Within her writings we can capture clear messages in which she expressed her desire to build a more honest and free society through the education of the people. But before considering this aspect, it is interesting to begin to examine the most significant aspects of her biography, then return to the symbolic value of her revolutionary values.

Eleonora de Fonseca Pimentel was born in Rome on January 13, 1752. She came from a noble family. From her adolescence, Eleonora revealed various talents and a passion for studies; she loved in fact not only classical literature and poetry, but also scientific studies¹⁵. At the age of sixteen, she recited verses in the literary salons. Her Abbot uncle was her first preceptor and encouraged her to attend the most prominent literary salons where she was admired for her perfect knowledge of Greek and Latin, to which she added Portuguese and French¹⁶. Her education proceeded on a precise path that took her out from the traditional mould of gender towards certain social models not so common to the female experience but which, however, had begun to open a window to women on the world of knowledge and of “public affairs”.

She was also admitted to the most famous academies, entering in 1768 that of the Philaletheans and in the same period that of Arcadia. In the world of the academies and salons there arose innovative ferments which tended to the implementation of a human and social emancipation process in the context of a liberal and enlightened monarchy, namely that of Ferdinand IV and Maria Carolina¹⁷. Eleonora joined with enthusiasm the climate of confidence in the Bourbon Reforms. The education path of the Arcadian poet is significant: as an intellectual, she proceeded as any other philosopher and man

¹⁵ Archivio di Stato di Napoli, *Atti del Proc. di separazione coniugale Fonseca. Tria*, deposizione di Filippo Maria Guidi, ff. 90-94.

¹⁶ Archivio di Stato di Napoli, *Atti del Proc. di separazione coniugale Fonseca. Tria*, deposizione di D. Giuseppe de Souza, ff. 94-98.

¹⁷ On the Kingdom of Ferdinand IV and Maria Carolina and the strong influence of the Queen in the Neapolitan Court, Ajello (2017); Chiosi (2017); Musi (2016); Recca, (2016), Sodano- Brevetti (2016); Galasso (2007); Astuto (2007:27-51); Ajello (1991).

of letters of her time and in Naples was impressed during the “heroic period” of the Bourbon dynasty, and later gave her adherence to revolutionary ideals beyond the Alps¹⁸.

The Eighties were still the years when in Naples the peaceful romance between intellectuals and rulers continued, in 1786 Eleonora was charged with the management of the private library of Queen Maria Carolina. Meanwhile she continued to write verses of sincere admiration for government policy, such as those dedicated in 1785 to the journey of the Royal couple, around North Italy¹⁹. In 1789 her verses were devoted to the creation of the San Leucio colony, a royal factory that was inspired by egalitarian principles, which caused great excitement among the Neapolitan reformers²⁰.

The domino effect of the French Revolution had even brought about the overthrow of King Ferdinand IV and Maria Carolina, the latter, after twenty years of an ostensibly reformist government, had turned her back on the classes considered the vehicle of the revolution. Consequently, she broke ties with the same reformist forces who had sustained and supported her in her attempts to modernize the state structure of the Kingdom. After the French Revolution, there was a clear fracture between the throne and the most intellectually and politically advanced classes, now considered by the sovereign and her court as enemies²¹. During the early '90s there was a process of accession, which was underway, by the intellectual reformist class, to the principles of revolutionary action²². So, at that time the Neapolitan sovereign espoused a series of restrictive police style measures: abandoning the reform programme, to switch to the edicts banning the Freemasons, to the agreements with the Holy See, to defensive and offensive

¹⁸ Cfr. Urganani (1998), Croce (1999: 25-43)

¹⁹ On August 16 1785, Eleonora composed the sonnet entitled *Il vero omaggio* dedicated to the long trip of the Royal couple during which they visited Milan, Genoa, Turin, Florence and Pisa. In 1789 she wrote *Componimenti poetici, per le leggi date alla nuova popolazione di Santo Leucio da Ferdinando IV re delle Sicilie*.

²⁰ Rao (2006:182).

²¹ See among others the political thought expressed by Vincenzo Cuoco, Vincenzo Russo, Mario Pagano.

²² Passetti (2013).

alliances with the sole purpose of preparing the war against France.

The years 1794-1795 were for Eleonora crucial for an intellectual and political crisis that culminated, emotionally, in the death sentence for the young authors of the Jacobin conspiracy. As Benedetto Croce pointed out, she belonged to those idealists who saw the government moving away from the programme which had been followed and cheered, and at the same time she discovered in France the programme that was in the hands of the revolutionary people²³. Therefore, moving away from the old hopes and the old methods of collaboration with the government, the Neapolitan intellectuals acquired faith in the new methods, in a process that transformed them, from royalist to revolutionary. For Eleonora, there began a period when she was suspected of having links with the environment of the patriots, a period that culminated with the suspension of royal aid in 1797, and with the arrest of October 5, 1798.

Probably she was released from prison in early January 1799, and it is almost certain that she immediately attended meetings of the Committee of the patriots who advocated the establishment of a democratic republic. Eleonora took possession of Sant' Elmo Castle with the other patriots, becoming a protagonist to the events of the Neapolitan Republic and opening the way for the French in Naples.

The poet of the past, after having known life in prison, having seen fighting and dying around her, now entered into a personal struggle, and exposed herself by affirming freedom and defeating those now identified in the image of the tyrants, the Bourbons of Naples. In the *Monitore Napoletano* she revealed her strong personality, expressing her independence in the face of any pressure and the measures of the Government²⁴. The first issue was dated February 2, 1799 but was forced to cease its activity shortly after the thirty-fifth due to Cardinal Fabrizio Ruffo's troops entering Naples. The terror that marked the end of the republic, forced the holders to destroy almost all the copies of the periodical, which was a witness to the participation in the revolutionary experience.

²³ Croce (1998:44); Cfr. Manganaro (2012: 83-97).

²⁴ Conti Odorisio - Taricone (2008); Pisano (2004).

Divided into several sections, *Monitore* published official news about Naples, the Republic and also news from the provinces and news from abroad. From the articles there emerges a democratic and egalitarian position, characterized by an idea of a united Italy, which takes the form of a commitment to defend Republican ideals and a great patriotic love. And the first seed of Italian Unity is sown in Naples with its revolution:

*Imita o generosa Gioventù Napoletana, il Greco valore. [...] Va pugna e vinci ed allor riconduttrice de' be' giorni dell'Attica [...] gitterai le fondamenta della GRANDE ITALICA UNIONE, e mostrandoti potente braccio d'Italia, farai di te e de' tuoi Concittadini quello che il gran Padre della storia disse degli Ateniesi*²⁵.

With this newspaper, Eleonora Pimentel hoped to involve the people in the defence of the Republic and try to educate them for the new democratic ideals: her goal was to make Naples a protagonist, to raise awareness among her people. However, despite articles in her newspaper, the people continued to remember with affection King Ferdinand and continued to expel the French and the Jacobins from Naples.

So to the first purpose in the newborn Republic was to instruct the mass of people in the new concept of society:

*La plebe diffida dei patrioti perché non gl'intende. Il nostro governo sollecita l'istruzione de' popoli. Un popolo il quale passa in un tratto dalla schiavitù alla libertà, non possa dirsi completamente rinato ad uno stato così felice se istruzioni uniformi di dura morale, e di vero patriottismo non formano ugualmente in tutti gli individui lo spirito, el'costume pubblico, vero sostegno delle buone leggi [...] Formare nel più breve termine un Catechismo di morale all'intelligenza del popolo*²⁶.

Not only was Eleonora never uncritically pro-government, but even the fate of the weak Neapolitan Republic depended on the presence of French arms, she did not hesitate, in various circumstances, to openly criticize their occupying army. Therefore, she started to have the idea that any form of imposition of ideas could not be taken as legitimate especially

²⁵ *Monitore Napoletano*, n. 31, 25 maggio 1799.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, n.3, 9 febbraio 1799.

for a people like the Neapolitans who had been oppressed for centuries.

Il movimento retrogrado delle armate Francesi, l'esagerazione delle loro perdite, i mali intenzionati, il Ministro di Polizia, che dopo aver allarmato il popolo con un proclama ignorante e intempestivo si diede ad una fuga vile, ed alcuni membri di questo corpo Legislativo, che improvvisamente svanirono, tutto ciò servì ad accrescere i timori²⁷.

Her life in the months of the republic probably coincided with the whole direction of the newspaper: she lived for the *Monitore* whose editorial staff was firmly established in her own house. She wrote by herself most of the articles, publishing information, as well as collecting it directly, participating in the meetings of the government as well as the events and ceremonies of the Republic²⁸.

Il voto più ardente, ed il più dolce da formarsi dal governo provvisorio, è quello di riunire prontamente tutte le parti della Repubblica Napoletana a' beneficj della rivoluzione senza alcuna scossa, e conciliandosi, per quanto sia possibile, tutti gli spiriti, e tutt' i cuori, per prevenire le tempeste, le azioni, e le reazioni rivoluzionarie, le fazioni, le dissenzioni, e le vendette.

Rendere la rivoluzione amabile, per farla amare; renderla utile al popolo, ed alla classe abbattuta e sventurata de' Cittadini, per far godere questa classe rispettabile delle dolcezze di un governo libero; ecco lo scopo degli sforzi costanti de' Repubblicani.

The life of the Republic appeared difficult from the beginning, and though the Republicans were the major personalities they were far from the real needs of the people and never managed to build a real army; this led only to limited successes of democratization of the provinces, and a huge repression of opponents was added to this²⁹.

Up to the end, despite all the alarming rumours that came from the houses of the Neapolitan outskirts such as Casoria and Torre Annunziata, Eleonora continued to write with the

²⁷ *Ibidem*, n.28, 14 maggio 1799.

²⁸ Cfr. Rao (2006:179-191).

²⁹ Mascilli Migliorini (2003: 397-399); Rao (1997: 36-399).

intent to always leave open public confidence in a republican victory. She criticized a law, which envisaged the confiscation of the property of rebels half of which was destined to be given to the republican soldiers³⁰.

She would not stop inciting the people to have courage and to take up arms for freedom and independence:

*L'Italia resterà una nazione guerriera, combatterà del suo, non dell'altrui ferro cinta; si comprenderà la gran verità che un popolo non si difende mai che da se stesso , e che l'Italia indipendente è utile alleata ... perché la libertà non può amarsi per metà, e non produce i suoi miracoli che presso i popoli tutti affatto liberi*³¹.

So, Eleonora exhorted the people to fight, to abandon all their possessions, because everyone must have one faith, "believing all in salvation, and only through freedom were they saved".

While the events went on dramatically and quickly, in the latest issues of the newspaper she published only official news and in the last issue dated June 8 she still reported chronicles of Republican victories³².

Her dream ended with the end of the Republic and with it ended her life. On August 17 she received death the sentence by hanging in front of the plebs. The same "plebs" for whom she died while - following the great project of education of the plebs - she dreamed of turning them into the "people" through education for freedom and a common sense of civil and high egalitarianism.

2. The story of an unforgotten and misinterpreted leading lady of the revolution

During the Neapolitan Revolution of 1799 beside the intellectual and politically engaged Eleonora Fonseca Pimentel, another woman who distinguished herself for her revolutionary

³⁰ *Monitore Napoletano* n. 33, 1° giugno, 1799.

³¹ *Ibidem.*, n. 28, 14 maggio 1799.

³² *Ibidem.*, n.35, 8 giugno 1799.

spirit was Luisa de Molina Sanfelice, who, marked by the fame of "Lost Girl", was later mis-represented by historians. Nevertheless, her personality and her tragic end made her an heroine of the Neapolitan eighteenth century: beautiful and passionate, victim of a wayward husband, Luisa was involved in the conspiracy of the counter-revolutionary Baccher brothers. She was punished in fact not because of her revolutionary activities, in which she was involved without her knowledge due to her active Republican lover, but because her husband Andrea Sanfelice, belonging to a noble family, wanted avenge the various betrayals that his wife inflicted upon him. But the sources, as Benedetto Croce stated, are uncertain and lacking in evidence: both marital betrayals of Luisa Sanfelice and her political choice are merely unproven suppositions, perhaps made to better understand the events that led her to die on the scaffold³³.

Her real name was Luisa Fortunata de Molina, she was the daughter of Don Pedro de Molina, a Bourbon general of Spanish origin and Camilla Salinero. She became Lady Sanfelice at 17 years after having married her cousin, a Neapolitan noble, Andrea Sanfelice. Andrea and Luisa being cousins, had often seen each other since their childhood, sharing games and leisure time. During the adolescent age, the two children lived an intense infatuation that led them to marry at the possible youngest age in 1781 in the Church of Saint Anna³⁴. The dwelling house of the young spouses became famous for the receptions that were often organized. The young Luisa became one of the most elegant ladies of the Neapolitan court, her image was always embellished with precious jewels.

The young couple did not have a clever administration of their patrimony and even though they had three children, Gennaro, Giuseppa, and Emanuela, they squandered it unscrupulously and faced expenses that their annuity could not afford. So, after six years, the marriage was in crisis. In fact, in 1787, following financial disruption and high debts, Luisa was forced to apply for a loan to Don Giuseppe Petrucci,

³³ Croce (1998:140-152). On Croce's thought regarding the life of Luisa Sanfelice, see the interesting study of Manganaro (2012:98-102).

³⁴ Croce (1998:134-135).

the Queen's chaplain and old family friend. The chaplain confessed everything to the girl's mother, who sent to King Ferdinand IV a plea in which she invoked his intervention to safeguard the good name of Molina and Sanfelice. The two noble families had always shown loyalty and attachment to the Crown, and now ran the risk of being dishonored because of their irresponsible behaviour, especially that of Andrea.

King Ferdinand IV of Bourbon commissioned Marquis de Rosa, a tutor to administer the two spouses' goods by providing a plan to settle creditor claims³⁵. The young couple was removed from the life and splendor of the Neapolitan court, and they moved to Agropoli. But the exclusion from the city did not stop the mania of grandeur of Andrea, who continued to be indebted. In 1789, Duke Michele Sanfelice, half brother of Andrea, was willing to pay the debts with the commitment of the two spouses to separate. So Luisa was confined in the Conservatory of Montecorvino Rovella and Andrea was interned in a convent of Nocera the children were put into Bagnara Cavallo.

Later, however, Luisa was readmitted to the Court although she was not appreciated by the Bourbon couple. She frequented indifferently monarchist and republican circles, probably fascinated by the social grace of the salons and parties. At that time Sanfelice was disputed between the young Baccher, a Bourbon leader who was planning to conspire against the Neapolitan Republic of 1799, and the Republican Ferdinando Ferri whom she had met in the salon of Eleonora Fonseca Pimentel. Also among the supporters of the return of the King there were those who were burning with love for her. These included Gerardo Baccher, the son of a wealthy banker, who together with other brothers financed the opposition and plots to bring the new republic down. After the instauration of the Neapolitan Republic she enjoyed the glory of the republicans.

The most common theory regarding the conspiracy, expounded by Croce, says that Gerardo Baccher informed Luisa of an upcoming "pro monarchy" revolt and gave her a pass card

³⁵ In an entry of the diary of Queen Maria Carolina dated October 22nd 1782, Luisa Sanfelice was one of her audience of that day. See, Recca (2016:143).

to be shown in case of danger. But she feared for Ferri's life and preferred to deliver him the note. Ferri reported the conspiracy to Vincenzo Cuoco who in turn decided to warn the government. Gerardo Baccher and other conspirators, including his father and two brothers were arrested³⁶. So Luisa accidentally became "Saviouress of the Republic and Mother of the Nation"³⁷. Eleonora Pimentel Fonseca, in the number of April 13, 1799 of the *Monitore Napoletano*, reported the discovery of the conspiracy "of Baccher" and with these words she acclaimed Luisa Sanfelice praising the noble deed:

Una nostra egregia Cittadina Luisa Molina Sanfelice svelò venerdì sera al Governo la cospirazione di pochi non più scellerati che mentecatti, i quali fidando alla presenza della squadra Inglese, o di concerto con essa intendevano nel sabato massacrare il Governo, i buoni patrioti, e tentare indi un controrivoluzione. Capo del folle iniquo progetto era un tal Baccher tedesco di origine, addetto al commercio presso il Mercante Abbenanti, e che fu quella stessa notte arrestato, e condotto la mattina seguente, strascinando sotto il braccio le bandiere Regie, che furon trovate presso di lui. Vi si trovaron similmente varie carte di sicurezza, le quali dovevan dispensarsi, o simili alle quali erano state dispensate a chi si voleva salvare, destinando i rivoltosi tutto il resto (in fantasia) all'eccidio. Son, a quel che diocesi, tali carte segnate dell'arme di Ferdinando, e del leone inglese alle spese dei baroni³⁸

A copy of the *Monitore* arrived in Palermo, the Bourbon couple read the news reported by Pimentel and soon prepared the tragic revenge. King Ferdinand did not forgive the fact that Luisa worked with republicans and once back in power he commanded her arrest and said, "Voglio che sia arrestata una certa Luisa Molines Sanfelice ed un tal Vincenzo Cuoco che scoprirono la rivoluzione de' realisti, alla testa della quale erano i Baccher padre e figlio"³⁹.

In September 1799 the trial against Luisa was one of the main events of that year. From the investigations carried out by the State Council, a special tribunal was instituted for the

³⁶ Croce (1998: 140-151).

³⁷ Colletta (1975:350).

³⁸ *Monitore Napoletano*, n. 19, 13 aprile 1799.

³⁹ Croce (1998:158).

occasion by the Bourbon King. On that occasion there also emerged the names of Ferdinando Ferri and Vincenzo Cuoco who were involved in the conspiracy. But Luisa claimed their absolute extraneousness and she assumed all responsibility, claiming that the sole cause of her actions was the intention to avoid a massacre of Neapolitan citizens. Therefore, the woman was sentenced to decapitation, while Ferri and Cuoco were exiled and their goods were confiscated⁴⁰.

But the death sentence was temporarily suspended due to the work of defence attorneys, who demanded nullity of verdict for two main reasons: they argued that no law condemns to death one who discovers conspiracies against the government of which he or she is a part, and for this reason that Luisa was not hurt by *lèse majesté* or rebellion against the King. The Government adopted the Sicilian Constitution which allowed its abolition in the case of unanimity, since Antonio Rosa voted for life; and being a royal dispatch it needed to be approved by the King⁴¹. During the waiting for royal response, Luisa was locked in a chapel, in the so-called "antechamber of death". It was at this last moment that Luisa, probably on her mother's advice, thought to plead pregnant to prevent the beheading. In fact an ancient law envisaged the suspension of the death sentence for pregnant women⁴². On hearing this news King Ferdinand, astonished, decided to send her to Palermo to have her checked by his medical officers who immediately belied the supposed pregnancy. Prior to the execution of the sentence, Camilla Salinero sent a plea to the daughter-in-law of the king, who having given birth to a male, asked for the life of the miserable Luisa as a grace, but she received a refusal and fell into disgrace⁴³.

The fear that other impediments or delays due to religious assistance that would be able to hinder the decapitation of the prisoner, prompted King Ferdinand to send a message to the

⁴⁰ «*Gettati su terra straniera, lasciavano a Napoli, dentro un carcere, con la condanna a morte sospesa sul capo, quella donna che l'opera e il consiglio loro avevano fatalmente condotto ai piedi del patibolo*». See: Croce (1998:156).

⁴¹ Ibid, 60-65.

⁴² Croce (1998:156-158).

⁴³ Colletta (1970: 235-236).

viceroys of Naples, Prince Cassaro Statella. The message stated the number of hours that would have to be between Luisa's arrival and execution, that the detainee was already in a state of grace, and that if the order was not executed, the Prince would in turn be sentenced to death⁴⁴.

The news of the imminent decapitation spread immediately in the city, creating anxiety and indignation among the people for yet another spectacle of death that crowned the victory of the Bourbons on the "Mother of the Homeland", now adored by all as a martyr, with her pale face and sweet and tearful eyes⁴⁵.

On September 11th 1800, Luisa was beheaded amidst the indignant cries of the people, while her last thought was addressed to her beloved children, and to all those friends who paid with their lives for the dream of a Republic.

As time passes, the story of Luisa Sanfelice, described with simple feelings of pity, became the object of admiration on the part of many contemporary writers. Besides the historical works of Pietro Colletta who describes the events of her life by highlighting that tragic destiny for which she gained fame, and Benedetto Croce, we must remember among others Alexandre Dumas father who wrote a novel providing a detailed account of the life of this woman and the Neapolitan revolution⁴⁶.

Nel romanzo sulla Sanfelice... Ho voluto che si riconoscesse Luisa Molina ma come si riconoscevano nell'Antichità, le dee che apparivano ai mortali, vale a dire attraverso una nuvola. Questa nuvola doveva togliere all'apparizione tutto quello che avrebbe potuto avere di materiale... Volevo fare di Luisa una creatura a parte che riunisse tutte le perfezioni, e volevo gettare su di lei dei raggi poetici, conservando l'aureola vaporosa della passione e della lealtà e della disgrazia...Io volevo fare di lei non solo un'eroina ma una martire e ancora più una santa⁴⁷.

Later an American journalist, Vincent Sheean, during the turbulent thirties of the twentieth century devoted a historical

⁴⁴ Giustino (1884: 52-53).

⁴⁵ Macciocchi (1998:250- 255).

⁴⁶ Dumas (1864).

⁴⁷ This is reference to the letter dated September 27, 1864 written by Alexandre Dumas published in the newspaper «*Indipendente*», regarding the novel *Luigia Sanfelice*, V, n. 215, Napoli 1864.

novel to the Neapolitan heroine⁴⁸. Even in modern painting Luisa Sanfelice has been a source of inspiration: in this regard we can remember the canvas of Neapolitan painter Gioacchino Toma⁴⁹, Modesto Faustini⁵⁰. On the other hand, other intellectuals have criticized the immoral behaviour of the woman, as she was dragged away by the obsession for the well-being and the prosperity that derives from relationships with the rich lords of the time.

She was a character who has often been romanticized and defined as "the lover of the revolution" because of her attractiveness and irrepressible passion. This section of my paper intends to go beyond these judgments and to prove that her entire life was a unique witness of unfair martyrdom that happened in Naples in 1799. Luisa Sanfelice, in fact being overwhelmed by the various political events of 1799, started to be seen as a heroine by revolutionaries and an dangerous enemy by the Royal Bourbon couple. So, when her private life came into contact with the convulsive reality surrounding her, she started her ordeal: imprisonment, the gallows, death. Her story is stereotyped by the weakness and tenderness towards the man she loved. And what strikes us are the abandonment, the indifference and the cynicism of those lovers who had adored her and then abandoned her to a bitter destiny.

Revolution and counterrevolution are embodied in the figures of Pimentel and Maria Luisa Sanfelice. Two emblematic heroines but also symbolic ones of Italian history, Pimentel was a political heroine who became a character able to express her ideas and to transmit them in a society where women were not recognized as citizens. Pimentel started to be seen as a rational being, a bearer of liberal ideas through the circulation of *Monitore Napoletano* while Luisa Sanfelice was a gorgeous woman humiliated by her body, she was not an amazon, nor

⁴⁸ Sheean (1936).

⁴⁹ Gioacchino Toma painted "*Luisa Sanfelice in carcere*," on January 1st 1874. He portrayed Luisa Sanfelice, in a squalid prison with big and rough walls, filled with grayish light, poorly dressed, with hands that seem animated by grief, and sewed the garments of that child, that being born he would change her life.

⁵⁰ Picture of the painter Modesto Faustini: *L'arresto di Luisa Sanfelice*, 1871.

was she a lost girl but a woman guided by passion and courage that made her an unintentional heroine.

3. *Helen Maria Williams (1761-1827): citizen of the Enlightened and revolutionary world 1789-1792*

The figure of Fonseca Pimentel and the Neapolitan revolution greatly impressed an English novelist called Helen Maria Williams who far from Naples, in her sketches on the French Republic, wrote six letters regarding the Court of Naples and its revolution of 1799.

Helen Maria Williams was an English poet, novelist and chronicler of the French Revolution and here vividly recounted her experience in France during the Terror⁵¹. She was born in London on June 17, 1761, she was the daughter of a Welsh army officer, Charles Williams and her mother, Helen Hay, was from a distinguished Scottish family. In 1769, after the death of her father, the family moved near the Scottish border, where Williams was educated at home by her mother. She returned to London in the early 1780s with the assistance of the dissenting minister Andrew Kippis, who also helped her to publish her first poem. Following her success Williams was joined in the city by her mother and her older sister Cecilia. Kippis introduced the family to a wide circle of acquaintances that included Frances Burney, Anna Seward, and Benjamin Franklin. Following the example of Williams' sponsor, Elizabeth Montagu, who presided over a famous London literary salon, the Williams family opened their own home to a variety of distinguished intellectuals and dissenters.

In the 1780s Williams had presented herself as a Romantic novelist and poet, and published a number of poems, most of them devoted to reform causes. She used her pen to analyse such contemporary issues as the suffering caused by war and the slave trade as well as to promote the success of the American Revolution, especially its establishment of democratic government. Thus in 1790 she produced her only novel, a rewrite

⁵¹ On the life-story of Helen Maria Williams, see among the others: Kennedy (2002); Leblanc (1997: 26-44); Keane (2013); Fay (2015: 73-87); Lasanta (2016: 199-212).

of Rousseau's "Julie; ou la nouvelle Héloïse", where she introduced a poem, *The Bastille*, that praised the ideals of the French Revolution.

When the French Revolution began, Williams went on to embark on her most ambitious work, *Letters from France*, a work of a mixed genre, in the form of travel literature and family letters. Along with her mother and sister, Cecilia, she travelled to Paris in 1790 to participate in the "glorious spectacle" and celebratory atmosphere of the Revolution⁵². They arrived in the city just in time for the *Fête de la Fédération*, honouring the first anniversary of the storming of the Bastille, and Williams was caught up in the spirit and promise of the early days of the Revolution.

You will not suspect that I was an indifferent witness of such a scene. Oh, no! this was not a time in which the distinctions of country were remembered. It was the triumph of human kind; it was man asserting the noblest privilege of his nature ; and it required but the common feelings of humanity to become in that moment a citizen of the world. For myself, I acknowledge that my heart 'caught with enthusiasm the general sympathy; my eyes were filled with tears : and I shall never forget the sensations of that day. (Williams, 1790:13-14)

During these years she familiarized with Augustin François Thomas, the eldest son of Baron du Fossés, who had taken a fancy to Monique Coquerel, a lady from a different social level. This condition caused the refusal of the union by Baron du Fossé father who strongly impeded it until his death. After the Baron's death and the success of the revolution, the young couple was rejoined in France and invited Williams and her sister to visit them in Paris. The du Fossé family love story became a part of *Letters Written in France in the Summer of 1790*⁵³, the first of eight volumes of letters which chronicled Williams' observations of the events in revolutionary France from 1790 through 1796. These volumes were later edited and are now

⁵² Williams (1790:3-4).

⁵³ Williams devoted almost one volume of her Letters to the description of the tormented love story of Augustin François Thomas. The controversial figure of the Baron du Fossé and the failed love for his son are the cornerstone of the story. Cfr. Kennedy (2002: 69-71).

known as *Letters from France*, in which she described many of the key celebrations and political transformations in revolutionary France and addressed Edmund Burke's negative assessment of the Revolution. Williams regards herself as a woman and not a politician, and justifies her seemingly unpatriotic interest in the Revolution:

I also hope that the National Assembly of France will answer the objections of its adversaries in the manner most becoming its own dignity, by forming such a constitution as will render the French nation virtuous, flourishing, and happy. (Williams, 1790:223)

Williams had to show her readers that the heart-felt responses that had made her poems of sensitivity acceptable would also enable her to write about the Revolution without sacrificing her femininity⁵⁴. Williams' own experience as a woman engaged in political discourse emerges when she wrote: "my political creed is entirely an affair of the heart; for I have not been so absurd as to consult my head upon matters of which it is incapable of judging" and "anyone with common sensibility would respond the same way"⁵⁵. Clearly, Williams was aware that women faced distinct challenges as political actors and used a strategy to justify her own involvement that equated liberty with passion and privileged feminine sensitivity in revolutionary France.

By the middle of the 1790s, Williams attained an unprecedented position for a woman writer of her day by becoming a well-known authority on an international event of immeasurable historical importance. She was introduced to prominent intellectuals and literary figures, who were frequent guests at the literary salon presided over by Madame Roland, the wife of an official in the Girondin government⁵⁶.

In the years 1791-1792 she returned to London briefly although English friends of Williams tried to convince her not to go back to France because of the unstable political situation, in August 1792 she determined to move to France for two years

⁵⁴ See Kennedy (2002:63).

⁵⁵ Williams (1794: 94).

⁵⁶ Cfr. Lasanta (2016: 210-11); Borodàcovà (2014:28).

never return to her homeland. In Paris, as in London, she was known to host large and successful salons of up to 60 or 70 guests in an evening, hosting a wide variety of international liberals and radicals, among whom there was her native Mary Wollstonecraft and also Thomas Paine, Charlotte Corday, Georges-Jacques Danton. Williams' salon, like Madame Roland's, became a meeting place for prominent Girondins, but as the Jacobins gained power, many of her friends, including Madame Roland, were arrested and eventually executed

During her early years in France Williams became involved with John Hurford Stone, a married English businessman. Stone divorced in 1794, and while it is unclear whether Williams and Stone ever married, their long-standing relationship caused a scandal in England and resulted in many personal attacks against Williams in the British press⁵⁷.

By 1792, with the September massacres and the execution of Louis in January 1793, Williams became critical of the Revolution: she discovered new rhetorical strategies in order to write about experiences beyond the scope of the joyful or pathetic scenes recorded in her first two volumes: namely, regicide, political factions, intrigues, and moral failure. So she moved towards establishing herself as a serious political commentator. She forged ahead, like a wartime journalist outlining the massacres and the atrocities⁵⁸.

In the autumn of 1793, Williams, her mother, and her sister, were themselves arrested and imprisoned for a brief period. She recorded with passion and sorrow the degeneration of the French revolution into chaos and murder⁵⁹. Like Eleonora Pimentel and Luisa Sanfelice, she became a testimony of the most horrid barbarities.

⁵⁷ Kennedy (2002:126-1227).

⁵⁸ Williams (1796:1-2): "In the sketch I have sent you of revolutionary government in France, too long have I been compelled to wound your feelings by the tale of successive calamities; too long have I been forced to dwell on images of dismay. Yet, in describing those scenes of desolation, how often have I experienced that my pen was unfaithful to my purpose! [...] But let me now attempt to communicate at least a portion of that exulting gladness with which I turn from the crimes of tyrants, to recount the triumphs of liberty".

⁵⁹ Williams (1796).

Over the next quarter of a century, Williams continued to provide her countrymen with eyewitness accounts of the events, which were taking place in France. The most famous of which were *Letters from France containing Many New Anecdotes Relative to the French Revolution, and the Present State of French Manners* (1792), and *Letters containing a Sketch of the Politics of France from the Thirty-first of May 1793 till the Twenty-eighth of July 1794* (1795), in which she continued to support the Revolution to the dismay of her friends in England. Later volumes of the *Letters* cover the reign of Napoleon and the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy.

In 1794 to escape the threat of Robespierre, Williams and Stone took refuge in Switzerland for six months. During that period she published *A Tour of Switzerland* (1798) more letters, sketches, some short fiction, and translations. In the last thirty years of her life Williams kept on working, in spite of having antagonized Napoleon Bonaparte because she was critical of his ostentation. She published a number of sketches and narratives of manners and life in France, and translated works by Alexander von Humboldt. Although she attempted to reopen her salon in 1816, she was unable to keep it going because of financial reversals, including the loss of Stone's fortune. After living briefly with her nephew in Amsterdam, Williams returned to France, where she died on December 14, 1827.

4. An eighteenth century woman of letters with an unflagging love for liberty

It is crucial to point out Williams' identification of change in revolutionary political thought with the idea of a particularly feminine sensitivity in the struggle for human rights. Williams seeks to universalize this sensitivity across gender boundaries, opposing the Burkean notion of 'manly morals' by establishing the human hearts of both men and women as the 'natural terrain of politics'.

I am aware of the censure which has been thrown on writers of the female sex who have sometimes employed their pens on political subjects; nor am I ignorant that my name has been mentioned with abuse

by journalists, calling themselves Anti-Jacobins. But however malignant may be the aim, these Anti-Jacobin darts fly harmless; those who have lived amidst the scenes of a French Revolution, have learnt to parry or despise more formidable to weapons. (Williams, 1801:6)

In her first work Williams defined revolution as a series of sublime and pure events and she seemed to refuse to include any violence. She used nature, as did the revolutionaries themselves, as a means of legitimising the Revolution. Nature affirms the rightness of the Revolutionary ideals: the aristocracy is figured as a distorted and twisted tree, while the tree of patriotism is tall and straight. For Williams, the Revolution and its principles lived on despite the Terror, “like vigorous seeds committed to the fertile earth...they will remain alive, and ready to spring up at the first favourable moment”. The 1790 volume imagines the entire Revolution as “a sublime spectacle carrying forth the spirit of [this] Federation, appealing to the noblest of human sentiments, and establishing aesthetic and moral harmony across differences of sex, race and condition”⁶⁰.

The success of her letters and criticism provided her with the unique opportunity to transform her work from indirect to direct social and political commentary and become “in effect a foreign correspondent, interpreting French history in England and around the continent for thirty years”⁶¹. In her first fifteen letters, Williams travelled from Paris to Rouen, visiting the symbolic origins of the revolutionary transformation from tyranny to freedom. This journey encompassed both the public and the private transformation of tyrannical authority in France. The Bastille symbolized the potential for the despotic power of both the King and fathers, who had both, under the *ancien régime*, used the dreaded *lettres de cachet* that allowed the King to imprison anyone, and fathers to imprison their children without a hearing. Thus, the overthrow of the Bastille represented the Enlightenment of the French and the courage of the men and women who had achieved this historic feat:

After having visited the Bastille, Williams wrote:

⁶⁰ Williams (1790).

⁶¹ Cfr. Borodacová (2014:24-26).

We may indeed be surprised, that a nation so enlightened as the French, submitted so long to the oppressions of their government; but we must cease to wonder that their indignant spirits at length shook off that yoke (Williams, 1790:74)

So, the visit to the National Assembly, whose goal was the restoration of French liberty, provided a stark contrast to the despair that Williams imagined for the chained prisoners of the Bastille. Although the new political order limited the ranks of future deputies through stringent economic requirements, the Assembly opened its tribunes and its podium to all. Williams marvelled at the lottery system that allowed ordinary citizens, including women, the opportunity to attend the debates and voice their opinions in an atmosphere that Williams described as simultaneously chaotic and exalting:

Those men now before my eyes are the men who engross the attention, the astonishment of Europe; for the issue of whose decrees surrounding nations wait in suspense, and whose fame has already extended through every civilized region of the globe. My mind with a sensation of elevated pleasure...anticipated the increasing renown of these legislators, and the period when, all the nations of Europe following the liberal system which France has adopted, the little crooked policy of the present times shall give place to the reign of reason, virtue, and science⁶².

This historical moment created for Williams a vision of a new path, she sought not only to describe the new political institutions in revolutionary France but also to create an investment for her readers in the success of the new government that held promise for the enlightened transformation of all of Europe. In her *Sketches of the State Manners and Opinions in the French Republic towards the close of eighteenth century in a series of Letters, London, 1801* translated also into French and German, it is interesting to focus on the six chapters written as letters regarding the Neapolitan revolt of 1799⁶³. Having fervid testimonies by Neapolitan patriots, Williams was able to write a detailed and precise history of the Naples of that time. She ana-

⁶² *Ibidem*, 82.

⁶³ Williams (1801:121-223).

lysed the causes that led to the revolution and its counter-revolution from the escape of the Royal couple, to the consequent state of anarchy and disorder in Naples. Secondly, she made a parallel with the French Terror.

At the beginning of Letter XII of her *Sketches*, she officially expressed her acknowledgements of the precious information received by “an historian which held a distinguished post in the republic”, and “other testimony” (Williams, 1801:123). Between 1800 and 1801, Williams had met and received in her salon several Italian and Neapolitan exiles, among others there were also Amodio Ricciardi and Forges Davanzati⁶⁴. These were capitulated Neapolitan patriots who had miraculously escaped from the royal vengeance to France, and they “have certified to Williams the truth of the original, which I here * literally transcribe” (Williams, 1801:179)

In the first lines of the letters devoted to the history of the Neapolitan revolution and counter-revolution, she clearly expressed the motivation of the reference:

The authenticated history of jacobinical terror in France, or of royal terror at Naples has traits enough to darken the deepest tragedy, and make us shudder at the reflection of their real existence. The sketch I shall send you, is a plain and unadorned narrative of the leading events which brought about the revolution and counter revolution of Naples. (Williams 1801:123)

Williams depicted the Court of Naples as the most decided enemy of the French revolution, and of the principles by which it was accomplished. She judged the Neapolitan revolution by «the consciousness of its feebleness in the struggle»⁶⁵. Here again we can see that the feebleness was one of the key elements of the failure of the Neapolitan revolution and of the Republic. Williams wrote that the primary cause of the lost Re-

⁶⁴ For more details, regarding the Neapolitan exile in Paris see in particular: Maresca (1888:36-94), Rao (1992:447-449).

⁶⁵ As this treaty on the part of the Court of Naples had been dictated by the consciousness of its feebleness in the struggle, instead of being the result of pacific sentiment, or moderation, it was not difficult to foresee, that its duration would be of short continuance. Williams (1801:125).

public was “the pleasure of the French Directory, who willed not a Neapolitan Republic”.

Describing the Neapolitan struggle and the Borbonic reaction she was able to express the most determined condemnation of Jacobinism and terror as a general and abstract bloody rage⁶⁶. Comparing French Terror with the Neapolitan one⁶⁷: “The scenes of royal-terror at Naples had, in general, a remarkable affinity with those of Jacobinism at Paris; the causes, motives, means, and instruments were nearly the same; the same execrable despotism in the command, the same barbarous servility in the execution”. (Williams, 1801:197)

Letter XVII is the last one devoted to the Neapolitan history, in which Williams could not but pay attention to Eleonora Fonseca Pimentel’s figure as a prominent testimony and woman writer of Naples in 1799:

Eleonora Fonseca, a woman highly esteemed for her literary acquirements, and who had excited, at a very early period of her life, the particular notice of Voltaire [...] Banishment was not a sufficient expiation of Madame Fonseca's crime; the female vengeance could not be appeased with so slight a punishment. Madame Fonseca was guilty of having loved the cause of liberty, and of having written in its favour. The judges passed by the compact they had twice signed, under authority of the royal rescript; the mistake they had twice made was rectified, and Madame Fonseca was hanged (Williams, 1801:215-219).

Williams probably identified herself with the figure of Eleonora and her political vocation. She concluded her Neapolitan history of 1799 invoking and paying a tribute to those patriots and martyrs who lost their lives. In one of her conclusive passages she wished:

⁶⁶ Cfr. Rao (1992:453).

⁶⁷ *Letter XVI* in Williams (1801: 197-198): «At Paris we had revolutionary commissaries, revolutionary committees, revolutionary judges, decimvir, and women known by the name of *tricoteuses* of the guillotine; but what overwhelmed the Neapolitan patriots with the most astonishment, what perplexed and confounded all their ideas, what even at this distance of time keeps firmest possessions of their minds, was the sight of British officers employed in the execution of barbarous orders »

The day will come when your fellow-citizens will erect a monument to your fame, where all who can feel the worth of the names Country and Liberty. And surely 'till this event and this wish be verified, every lover of freedom throughout the globe will deem it a sacred duty to erect an altar to your remembrance in his heart! (Williams, 1801: 223)

The life-stories of these three women who were directly or indirectly involved in the tragic events in Naples of 1799 are a testimony that at the end of the eighteenth century women's roles were without doubt changing, and were no longer limited to reproduction. There were many social transformations that took place during the course of the Eighteenth century which tried to trace in particular the changes that attributed importance to women, and the depth of the Enlightenment commitment to them⁶⁸. And it is necessary to recall literary, political, economic resources and educational theories, in addition to increasing "confidence" with which women writers write for themselves about the their position in society⁶⁹.

There were many writers of the eighteenth century who came to believe that the state and level of education of women in a society were important indicators of the degree of historical progress and some of them argued that the low level of education of women of their time constituted an impediment to the development of the society itself. However, this should not make us believe that there were still present the conditions for a spread of what later was called feminism (understood as a demand for equal civil and political rights for women). The philosophical and historical inquiries of the Enlightenment created both the presuppositions and the language to understand the gender structures of society, and laid the foundations of the feminism of the nineteenth century⁷⁰.

⁶⁸ See in this regards, Conti Odorisio- Taricone (2008); *O'Brien (2009:7)*.

⁶⁹ Cfr. Formica (2012: 191-192).

⁷⁰ The origins of the feminist movement in Europe are to be traced back to the end of the Eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In the European landscape we have the participation in politics and social questions, the vindication of women's rights on the part of several eminent women such as Mary Wollestonecraft, Catherine Macauley, Olympe de Gouges, Sophie de Grouchy. See on this regard the very recent study of women edited by Broad and Detlefsen (2017).

The discovery that women had a history that, through their social position, had penetrated the peculiar European past encouraged an unprecedented number of women to write history: not only women's lives but also the European history of art and good manners.

Women were defining their roles in a wider way, becoming envoys and bearers of a civilised state⁷¹. It is necessary to highlight the growing confidence with which women writers look to their position within society, as organisers, facilitators and in some cases inspirers of male literary culture. Their intellectual figures were a challenge, they were in close contact with other intellectual male figures of the time who improved their public careers⁷². The salon played a key role in their enhancement.

In conclusion, Fonseca Pimentel, Sanfelice and Williams through their intellectual knowledge and friendship created salons in which they acquired the power to control the membership and to transmit cultural values. They, like other European women of that age are proof that a female political culture started to circulate but their place in public life was rendered problematic. Women's contributions to this political change during the XVIII century were crucial if often unacknowledged. Pimentel, Sanfelice and Williams, like many others, devoted their lives to the revolution and to the dream of liberty. They strove to show the Revolution as an embodiment, restoration, or redefinition of the natural condition⁷³. A revolution, which was also a woman's revolution in its sparkling nature. Those women faced distinct challenges as political actors and used strategies to justify their own involvement that equated liberty with passion and privileged feminine sensitivity in the revolutionary period. For many decades in history they had been presented as lost girls, lonely women, but they were virtuous, noble and intellectual women who were treated cruelly becoming not more than heroines for a day.

⁷¹ Referring to the Neapolitan case study during early modern age, see the studies of Novi Chavarria (2014) and (2009).

⁷² Reistano – Cavarero (1999).

⁷³ Rao (2003: 708-739).

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Abstract

DYING IN DEFENCE OF OUR HOMELAND AND LIVING FOR HER LOVE”: NAPLES IN 1799 THROUGH THE PAST OF REVOLUTIONARY WOMEN

Keywords: Neapolitan Revolution, Eighteenth Century, Women’s writing, Eleonora Fonseca Pimentel, Luisa Sanfelice, Helena Maria Williams

The essay analyses an inside female view of the Neapolitan revolution and counter revolution of 1799 and it situates three women’s ideas and lives within multiple historical contexts. Naples, during 1799, was marked by social and political clashes collapsed, and thus preparing the way for the revolution. The myth of the Naples revolution marked a great part of the nineteenth and twentieth century culture.

Referring to the peculiar conditions that distinguished the city as well as the population, the paper aims to examine the way in which historical interpretations of this catastrophic struggle were recorded by three distinctive ‘revolutionary’ women who lived through the revolution: Eleonora Fonseca Pimentel and Luisa Sanfelice, revolution martyrs who gave up their lives for freedom, and a British revolutionary novelist, Helen Maria Williams who far from Naples, shared the vocation to transmit the love for liberty.

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EISSN 2037-0520