

20. ELEONORA PIMENTEL FONSECA

Eleonora was born in Rome on 13 January, 1752 of Portuguese parents. The Fonseca Pimentels were an aristocratic family, and Eleonora's father was a marquess.

After the Jesuits were banished from Portugal, they feared reprisals even in Rome and so the Fonseca family decided to head for the relative safety of Naples. They lived in a house in Santa Teresella agli Spagnoli.

Eleonora was a very bright girl. She studied Greek and Latin, Maths, Botany, Mineralogy, Astronomy, Chemistry, was interested in music and even got involved in economic and political research. Something of a child-prodigy, she enjoyed personal friendships, especially via mail, with some extremely well-educated men

Since it was impossible for women to go to school or university, they tended to show off their learning in the salons instead. Eleonora made her first appearance at the age of sixteen. Napoli boasted many “**enlightened men**” of science and literature at the time, including Ferdinando Galiani, Gaetano Filangieri, Mario Pagano, Francesco Conforti and Domenico Cirillo. Intellectual society was liberal and patriotic but it was limited to the upper classes which was both an advantage and a disadvantage. Eleonora was extremely widely-read, as was the fashion at the time. She was therefore very open to the idea of progress and freedom, which she managed to reconcile with her respect for the sovereigns of the Kingdom.

On 12 May 1768, along with her Abbot uncle, she was invited to court for the wedding of the young King Ferdinando to one of the daughter's of Maria Teresa d'Austria, Maria Carolina. Eleonora wrote the epithalamium ***Il Tempio della gloria*** for the bride and groom.

Not long afterward, Eleonora became a member of the Philatelists' Academy and the Arcadia, where she wrote poems under the pen-name of **Altidora Esperetusa**.

In 1775, prince and heir to the throne, Carlo Francesco Giuseppe, was born and the young Portuguese woman who was working as queen's librarian at the time wrote the cantata “**The Birth of Orpheus**” in his honour.

When she was 25 years old, Eleonora decided to accept a marriage proposal from lieutenant **Pasquale Tria de Solis**. She was, however, motivated more by a desire to please her father than by a desire for a husband and home of her own. The lavish ceremony was held in the Chiesa di Sant'Anna di Palazzo in October, 1777. Eleonora moved into her husband's home in the Pignasecca, where she had to put up with three gossipy, interfering, spinster sister-in-laws, who were jealous of their brother. Married life was torture for Eleonora. She even had to accept her husband's infidelity when she was pregnant, just two years after the death of their first son. Poetry provided an outlet for her pain and grief. Eleonora did not react against her humiliation, nor did she give up on her wish to have a child. She risked her life when she had another two miscarriages as a result of her husband's **physical and moral cruelty**: he never understood her passion for books nor her correspondence with foreign academics.

After long separation proceedings, Eleonora finally got to return to her father's house. In 1789, in a small volume she wrote along with other academics, she praised the special laws based on egalitarian principles that Ferdinando IV had decreed for the new **San Leucio colony**.

That same year, the **French Revolution** broke out and the Neapolitan monarchy's political attitude changed. The “masonic” queen who attended protest meetings and protected reformers began to discourage demonstrations of free thought. Public protests were subsequently banned as were any suspect newspapers or books.

The Revolution was responsible for rekindling beliefs which Eleonora had always held and which she had developed in Neapolitan intellectual circles. During the first anti-liberal demonstration she could not resist making her feelings known. She was thrown out of the library and told never to show her face in court again. Pimentel decided to join the **Jacobin party in Naples**.

When they heard that **Louis XVI** and the Queen, **Marie Antoinette**, had been killed in Paris, the Neapolitan monarchy became even more cruel, bitter and vengeful towards the Neapolitan Jacobins. Many of them were imprisoned, exiled or even condemned to death. Eleonora was spied on and followed. In 1789 she was arrested and taken to **the Vicaria, the main tribunal**.

The Neapolitan army tried to stop the French but it was useless. They managed to occupy Rome and announced the birth of the Roman Republic. In the meantime, Ferdinando, the Queen and their children had set sail for Sicily with Admiral Nelson. The day after the King's escape, the Vicaria prisoners were released, including Eleonora.

The French army led by Championnet were at the city gates when a group of Jacobins, including Eleonora Pimental disguised as a man, managed to seize control of the Sant'Elmo castle. They raised the Italian flag, criticised the decadence of the monarchy and proclaimed **Naples a Republic** under the protection of the Great French.

On 23 January, 1799, the French marched into Naples and their general, Championnet, nominated a **Provisional Republican Government**.

On 2 February 1799, the first edition of the Republican newspaper, the "**Monitor of the Neapolitan Republic**" was published and the editor was none other than Eleonora Pimentel. 35 editions were published. Working from her apartment in Sant'Anna di Palazzo, which she had converted into a newspaper office, Eleonora tried to be a modern journalist, providing people with news and information, but she forgot that a lot of people were **illiterate** and so could not read what she wrote.

The **Bourbon reaction** against the Neapolitan Republic was fierce. The **Army of the Holy Faith** led by Cardinal **Fabrizio Ruffo**, managed to re-establish control of Naples.

After an agreement had been reached, Eleonora boarded a ship bound for France along with many other Neapolitan Republicans. But Queen Caroline did not keep her word and all of them were dragged to the State prison instead.

Eleonora was taken to the gallows on 20 August 1799, along with Giuliano Colonna, Gennaro Serra di Cassano, Bishop Michele Natale, Nicola Pacifico, Vincenzo Lupo and Domenico and Antonio Piatti. The defendants were blindfolded and then made to walk from the Carmine fort to Piazza Mercato. The crowds jeered and shouted at Eleonora. The common people criticised the very woman who had campaigned so hard for equal rights for everyone, and worked to improve their living conditions. After witnessing her friends' execution, she was hanged and then buried in a chapel at Santa Maria di Costantinopoli.