

ROSA CALIFRONIA AND HER *BREVE DIFESA  
DEI DIRITTI DELLE DONNE* (1794):  
A PHANTOM WRITER AND THE DISCOURSE  
ON WOMEN IN 17<sup>TH</sup> AND 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES  
ROSA CALIFRONIA E LA SUA *BREVE DIFESA  
DEI DIRITTI DELLE DONNE* (1794):  
UNA SCRITTRICE FANTASMA E IL DISCORSO  
SULLE DONNE NEL SETTECENTO E OTTOCENTO  
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*Abstract:* This paper examines Rosa Califronia's treatise entitled *Breve Difesa dei diritti delle donne* published in 1794 in Assisi. Her text is being viewed in the context of the 17th and 18th century debate on women that was prominent in Early Modern Italy. Califronia's aim is to refute some of the most scornful polemic treatises on female nature, written during the 17th century. More specifically, her treatise will be examined alongside the proto-feminist ones of Lucrezia Marinella and Arcangela Tarabotti, the 17th century Venetian writers, and their textual adversaries. Furthermore, this paper will focus on Rosa Califronia's responses to other 18th century authors who were writing pro or against women. Her *Difesa* will be also examined in connection to Mary Wollstonecraft's and Marie de Gouge's works that were dealing with the rights of women. Califronia argues that human rights should apply to women as well, since they possess mental capacities equal to men. She also maintains that education should be provided equally to both women and men, since women are in their intellectual abilities as reasonable and capable as men.

*Keywords:* Rosa Califronia, Women Rights, Education, Querelle des Femmes, Early Modern Italy

*Riassunto:* Questo articolo esamina il trattato di Rosa Califronia intitolato *Breve Difesa dei Diritti delle donne* pubblicato ad Assisi

nel 1794, il quale prende in considerazione il dibattito sulle donne, tema di gran rilievo tra il XVII e il XVIII secolo. Lo scopo di *Califronia* è di rifiutare alcune delle più evidenti polemiche sul tema della natura femminile scritte durante il XVII secolo. Più specificatamente, il suo testo verrà esaminato contemporaneamente allo studio proto-femminista di Lucrezia Marinella e Arcangela Tarabotti e alle scrittrici veneziane del XVII secolo. Inoltre, questo articolo si concentrerà sulla risposta che Rosa Califronia dette ad altri scrittori e scrittrici che, nel corso del XVIII secolo, espressero la loro opinione, sia favorevole che contraria, riguardo alle donne. La sua *Difesa* sarà esaminata in connessione al lavoro svolto da Mary Wollstonecraft e Marie de Gouges, le quali si occuparono dei diritti delle donne. Infatti, Califronia sostenne che i diritti umani debbano essere ugualmente applicati al genere femminile, dato che esse possiedono le stesse capacità mentali degli uomini, e che l'educazione debba essere offerta in egual misura a uomini e donne, dato che le donne hanno le stesse capacità intellettuali e di ragionamento degli uomini.

*Parole chiave:* Rosa Califronia, Diritti delle donne, Educazione, Querelle des Femmes, Storia moderna italiana

“Nè mai si vede a nostri giorni un’ opera ragionata su i diritti delle Donne”, Rosa Califronia laments, noticing that during her own time, the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, there were not many treatises written on the defence of women. She points out though that during the 16<sup>th</sup> century many treatises were written praising the female sex, a trend that continued over the 17<sup>th</sup> century; nevertheless, Califronia remarks that during the 18<sup>th</sup> century the genre of defences on women has diminished. Furthermore, she observes that in Italy during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which was ironically called according to her the century of “che appellasi illuminato”, the only thing that illuminated men had been the defects of women. Moreover, she argues that women did not have the negative affect on society that they had been accused of (Califronia, 1794: 3). She states that she and her sister Polifronia will try to defend women’s nature and intelligent mind as well as female rights by providing arguments that would prove the necessity of female education (Califronia, 1794: 72). The

sociocultural historical context of her text can be placed in the Enlightenment tradition relating to the continuities and discontinuities of the Renaissance and especially the 17<sup>th</sup> century expression of the “Querelle des Femmes” (Williams, 1999: 1-3). The 18<sup>th</sup> century “Woman Question” continued the discourse of the 17<sup>th</sup> century debate about women but its orientation shifted from the female nature theme to a more utilitarian discourse about how women could contribute to the public good and to the happiness of society. Thus, as Califronia remarks, if women could be educated, then they would be able to contribute to the public good. The debate themes were about female identity, nature, education, motherhood and political participation (Findlen, 2005, 5). Furthermore, during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the discourse about natural and acquired rights regarding men also expanded on whether women were eligible to acquire them.

The purpose of this paper is the search for common grounds amongst the 17<sup>th</sup> century proto-feminist movement situated in Venice and the treatise on female rights of Califronia published almost two centuries later in Rome. This paper examines the treatise *Breve Difesa dei diritti delle donne*, published in 1794 in Assisi, in comparison to the proto-feminist literary works of Lucrezia Marinella and Arcangela Tarabotti who lived and published their books in Venice during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, interpreting it as a contribution to the genre of defences on women. In addition, this paper examines the polemical works against women written by male authors which are included in the treatise of Califronia. Her work can be used as a historical tool in order to understand how women envisioned themselves in society at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and can act as a stimulus to further research the public discourse about femininity, motherhood and political participation, female rights and education.

Since the author of the *Difesa* is writing under a pseudonym, it is hard to unravel Califronia’s true identity. Her or his identity is being disguised under this witty pseudonym made up by the Greek words *kalos* (καλὸς) which in Greek means someone who is good, i.e. virtuous. As a prefix *kalos* can be used along with many verbs or nouns. The second part of her surname derives by the verb *phronō* (φρονῶ), which refers to someone who has intellectual abilities, i.e. who is prudent (Liddell and Scott, 1940).

In other words, Califronia is good and virtuous and possesses the virtue of *phronesis* (φρόνησις). She also refers to her “sister”, Polifronia, with whom she claims to “collaborate” with in order to prove female mind to be absolutely capable, and thus argue for the need of education for women. Her sister’s name is a compound adjective *poluphrōn* (πολύφρων), deriving also from Greek, and is attributed to someone who carries a lot of intelligence and thought (Liddell and Scott, 1940). Unfortunately, I have not yet been able to trace a text written by her alleged sister, whose mention may only be a literary trick. Furthermore, the noble title that Califronia accredits to herself as “Contessa Romana” makes me wonder whether she is intentionally using this title ironically aiming at her adversary Orazio Plata Romano or whether her intention was to display her place of origin praising thus Rome with her work.

Califronia contributed to the debate about women by making the relevant references into its recent past, a century ago. Lucrezia Marinella’s proto-feminist treatise *La nobiltà et eccellenza delle donne, et i difetti, e mancamenti de gli huomini* (1600) as well as Suor’s Arcangela Tarabotti’s radical works such as the *Tirannia Paterna* (1654) or *Che le donne siano delle specie degli uomini* (1651) were radical defences of the female nature. These writers and their work went through a phase of oblivion during the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the following centuries, regardless the publicity that they received during their time (Dunhill, 1999: 32-33). These women wrote treatises, which were published in Venice and Leiden, to counter-refute misogynist treatises. Marinella’s textual “enemy” was Giuseppe Passi, while Tarabotti’s enemy was Orazio Plata Romano who had written about the human or non-human condition of women. Califronia does not mention their work directly; she may have been unaware of them or excludes them by choice. Nevertheless, the fact that she could have been aware of the works of her enemies raises questions. We can only speculate the reason that led to this omission. She might have omitted them intentionally in order to establish herself as a pioneer into the tradition of defences of women and to take her argumentation a step further from previous women writers by demanding equal rights for women.

Italy, during the Enlightenment, was influenced by the new political ideas of revolutionary France. Furthermore, along with the Italian contribution to new scientific ideas, the impact of the Italian universities and academies, which were supported by the 18<sup>th</sup> century “enlightened Catholicism”, led to the advancement of societal cultural reforms. Women were excluded by the declaration of rights and their position in law did not improve. Nevertheless, during this period Italian women from a wide range of societal backgrounds could participate actively in manly intellectual environments (Findlen, 2009: 12-13 and Messbarger, 2002: 7). Additionally, Italy’s diversity in ideas, political attitudes, religious beliefs and gender roles caused by its political fragmentation before the unification affected also women and their position in society. More specifically, we can trace variations in the state of women in society and education from one Italian city to the another (Findlen, 2009: 14-17).

Califronia, for example, offers a short catalogue of illustrious modern Roman women to facilitate her argument in chapter 4 where she argues that women are not ignorant and arrogant. She provides a short catalogue of women that were her contemporaries who excelled in music, art, literature, sciences, languages, history and geography (Califronia, 1794: 46-55). We can assume that Califronia situates herself among the writers who preferred the moderns over the ancients,<sup>1</sup> and thus she does not refer to the classical exempla of women from antiquity to prove female excellence (Green, 2014: 12). Her defence on women, along with her short catalogue, can be interpreted as an apologetic work that declares female rights by providing examples of illustrious women in Rome. These paradigms act as proofs that women have the intellect and the abilities to exceed in various scientific or artistic fields and are not ignorant as men accuse them to be (Briganti, 2005: 117-119). Before the unification, the Italian cities had differences as well as antagonism (Findlen,

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<sup>1</sup> The “Battle of the Ancients and the Moderns” expresses a deep conflict among the “old” and the “new”, the ancient civilization and the Enlightenment, tradition and modernity, and since the 16<sup>th</sup> century this conflict has in various ways been continuously implicit in all areas of European culture (Rowland, 2001 & Fumaroli, 2001).

2009: 14). A city-state – that would produce educated women who proliferate in sciences, letters and arts – would have an element of superiority towards others, since if the women excelled, regardless of their ill nature, then men would profoundly also excel in all fields. Every city celebrated the intellect of their educated women, a fact that during the Grand Tour foreign visitors admired in Italy, i.e. its freedom (Findlen, 1995: 170). In that sense, it is not surprising why California includes only illustrious women from her native Rome and does not extend her catalogue to females from other cities.

Catalogues of illustrious women constituted by a genre dated back in the 14<sup>th</sup> century with Boccaccio's treatise *Concerning Famous Women* (1374). His work was a biographical catalogue consisting of women who had overcome their incapacities by nature and gender and had excelled in multiple masculine fields. During the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, male humanists wrote treatises concerning famous women, situating women in the public and private sphere. These treatises and catalogues contributed to the pro-women literature and engaged on the biological, mental and moral traits of women, arguing on female excellence (Dialetti, 2012: 69-71). Treatises such as Francesco Barbaro's *De re uxoria* (1415), Leon Battista Alberti's *Quarto libri della famiglia* (1434-37, 1340), Bartolomeo Goggio's *De laudibus mulierum* (ca. 1487), Henricus Cornelius Agrippa's *Declamatio de nobilitate et praecellentia foeminei sexus* (1529), Juan Luis Vives's *De institutione feminae christianae* (1523), and Ludovico Dolce's *Dialogo della institutione delle donne* (1545) helped in formulating new perceptions of female identity (Panizza, 2004: xx-xxi).

Nevertheless, during the 17<sup>th</sup> century an outburst of misogynist treatises occurred that exacerbated the discourse on the woman question. Passi is not the only example of fierce attack over female nature. Francesco Buoninsegni's treatise on women's defects, *Del lusso donesco* (1639), Ferrante Pallavicino's, *Retorica delle puttane* (1642) and Bonaventura Tondi's accusing women of being the source of all evil in his *La femina origine d' ogni male* (1687), all projected negative images of women (Cox, 2008: 182-183). Women humanists, such as Fonte and Marinella, criticised the claim that female education should be limited or

entirely prohibited; instead, they argued that, if women could acquire a high level of education, then by their abilities they would surpass male achievements (Grendler, 1989: 87-8, 92-4). In these defences, women were seen as being able to possess female virtues and sometimes they were seen as also having masculine virtues, and, thus, as being exceptional (Benson, 1992: 4-5).

During the Enlightenment, the discourse about human and political rights was at the centre of intellectual and political attention. The text of Califronia could be seen in comparison to the works of De Gouges and Wollstonecraft, since all three are arguing in favour of women's rights. Each text sheds light to different aspects of female rights. De Gouges pays attention on gender equality and mutual liberty. She compares the female situation in marriage and law with that of colonial slavery. Also, in her *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), Wollstonecraft argues that both male and female virtue and power stem from national education, which should be equal for both sexes, refuting thus the accusations of men towards women by questioning their ulterior motives. Furthermore, she observes that women view themselves as inferiors merely due to society's prejudice.

Califronia in the first chapter, she replies on the male assumption that women are not capable of reasoning, and thus repudiates Orazio Plata Romano who sustained that women were not humans. In this chapter, she presents the arguments offered by Plata and refutes them with mockery. This tact reminds us Tarabotti and her answer to Plata. Califronia demonstrates that Plata's interpretation of the Holy Scriptures is appalling and that there was not even one Apostle who prohibited women from being instructed nor claimed that they were mere animals not belonging to the human species (Califronia, 1794: 10-15). In her second chapter, she argues against the opinion that women are weaker in mind and body than men and refutes it by proclaiming equality for both sexes "io dico, che la specie delle femine è ragionevole in grado eguale a quella de' maschi" (Califronia, 1794: 18).

She observes that there are minimal natural differences between men and women and their souls can be either virtuous or evil. The human mind needs to be cultivated if it is to be improved. She wonders though how many women and in how many places of the world are able to receive an education,

emphasising that only very few women were educated (Califronia: 18-19). The third allegation which she dismisses is that women are insane and vain. She demonstrates that vanity is found on both sexes. At this point, as Marinella did in 1600's, she provides examples of men's vices and proves that men can also be superfluous, fickle and polished (Califronia, 1794: 22-27). In chapter five, she refutes the accusation that women are "the origin of all evil" because of their vices. The title of the chapter, resembles Bonaventura Tondi's misogynist treatise *La femina origine d'ogni male* (Califronia: 27-33). In Chapter five, she replies at the last accusation that women are ignorant and superfluous and provides a brief bibliography attesting the excellence of women (Califronia: 33-46).

Califronia's treatise could also be viewed in the socio-textual context of two other treatises strongly connected with the French Revolution and the Enlightenment, the pamphlet of Olympe Aubry de Gouges *Déclaration des droits de la femme et citoyenne* in 1791 which was written as an appendix of the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* (1789) that is dedicated to Marie-Antoinette. In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (Williams, 1999: 36-37). Gouges is bitter about the outcome of the revolution and especially the position of women at the post-revolutionary period, in comparison with the pre-revolutionary state of women. Furthermore, she had noticed that female civil and legal rights had been neglected, focusing on the creation of a new form of relation between men and women that could be developed, and by proposing individual liberty as the optimum form of freedom.

In addition, Wollstonecraft argued that women should have the right to an equal education, like men do. If women were educated, they would be able to contribute to the new revolutionary political situation. The *Vindication* may have worked as an influential work for Califronia's *Difesa*, since both treatises are referring to education as a right that would enable women to surpass their status in society. Califronia could have known Wollstonecraft's work through its advertisement of the French edition in *Nuovo Giornale Enciclopedico d'Italia*, whose editor and journalist was Elisabetta Caminer Turra (D'Ezio, 2016: 109-119). In her critique Turra states that her ideas about a national education and cultural



formation would surely be an empowering act of justice towards women; indeed, her observation about Wollstonecraft is interesting: “Her book proved for the millionth time that women might deserve the honour of being considered as part of the human race” (Turra, 2003, 188-189), a statement indicating that the discourse about female nature was still prominent.

Califronia in her *Difesa* views the French Revolution with scold. In her preface, she argues that the revolutionary movement remains in hindsight, as a vain act in terms of the change in the social state of women. She points out that most of the promises made regarding a change in woman’s position were merely empty ones. More specifically, with a tone of irony she writes: “Diasi un leggiera occhiata al feroce teatro della Francia, ove a gran clamori si sono decantanti i DIRITTI DELL’UOMO. Quante providenze per lo sesso virile! Ai loro diritti qual Sistema si è stabilita mai? Che anzi hanno esse perduti a cagione della sognata eguaglianza, i titoli di famiglie illustri, e le insegne gloriose di loro nobiltà”. She views the ancient regime with a nostalgic view, since she considers her contemporary equality to be a distorted form of equality. She observes that the ex-noble men were equated with the people of the low strata, losing everything they owned, and the only thing that women in France gained is the fact that they could wear stockings (Califronia, 1794: 3 & Briganti, 2011: 31-32).

Education and its necessity for the public good is an argument put forward in the whole treatise of Califronia. She actually dedicates her last chapter, entitled “Si dimostra, essere utile, e necessario, che le Donne sieno colte ne’ studj”, on female education. For Califronia education is a fundamental right, well approved by many Italian scholars (Califronia, 1794: 72-84). Nevertheless, it should be noted that in 18<sup>th</sup> century Italy more women were accepted in academies and universities as academicians, students and professors rather than in any other European territory of that period (Green, 2014: 90-91 & Messbarger, 2002: 7-8).

Califronia returns to the 17<sup>th</sup> century controversy on whether women belong to the same human species as men do. She wonders why only men’s rights were included in the *Déclaration* and women’s rights were excluded. She assumes that this omission is associated with the notion that women were

considered as animals (i.e. not possessing a human soul) and thus not been entitled to any rights. It is interesting that she returns to this question about human nature and the female soul that rose a textual controversy in the mid-seventeenth century due to a libellous misogynist treatise. The protagonists of this quarrel were the prominent Venetian writer and forced nun Arcangela Tarabotti and her adversary Orazio Plata Romano, the translator of a misogynist Latin tract entitled *Disputatio nova contra mulieres, qua probatur eas homines non esse*, written by an anonymous author. This tract was published in 1595 and was twenty-two pages long. Plata translated the tract in 1647 and added more accusations and arguments on the in-human nature of women. It was published under the title *Che le donne non siano della spezie degli uomini*. The authorship of the original tract was attributed to the German cleric Valens Acidalius (Panizza, 1998: xvi-xvii & Fleischer, 1981: 108-109). The author may also have been one of the members of the Accademia degli Icoogniti (Muir: 22-24, 56-59) and might as well have even been Giovan Francesco Loredan, a close friend of Tarabotti (Panizza, 1994: xxii-xxiv and Panizza, 2004: 144). Plata's work was placed into the *Index of Forbidden Books* in 1651 (Panizza, 2004: 11). Tarabotti, in 1651, by using an anagram of her religious name, published as Galerana Barcitotti the treatise *Che le donne siano delle spezie degli uomini*. Her treatise was an original answer to this misogynous text which refuted one by one all the arguments of the tract, providing fifty-seven sections of Plata's text, calling them "inganni", and replying correspondingly with fifty-seven "disinganni".

This original tract was republished in multiple editions during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. The first direct textual reply to this misogynous tract was made by Simon Gediccus in 1595 entitled *Defensio sexus muliebris*. This edition included also the misogynous tract under the title *Disputatio perjucunda*. Gediccus replied to the 51 accusations based on the Bible. He refuted the accusation that women were unable to save their souls, due to the fact that women did not have a rational soul and thus were not human. The tract was republished in new editions in Hague, Amsterdam during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries with the latest being published in Paris in 1766 (Fleischer, 1981: 119). The plethora of

these editions, over two centuries, demonstrate the existence of a readership. The vast circulation of the text as well as the place of women in the heat of the revolution which led to the declaration of rights to men but not to women, explain why Califronia returned to the controversy on women's human soul. Califronia, asked herself and her readers: "Giova forse il dire, che nel genere degli uomini vi è contenuta anche la specie del sesso femineo?" (Califronia, 1794: 3).

Her aim was to defend the female sex from past misogynous accusations that resembled a trial. First, she mentions one of the most misogynous treatises written by Giuseppe Passi, entitled *I doneschi difetti*, (Califronia, 1794: 3-4). Lucrezia Marinella, a Venetian cittadina and prolific writer, replied to this treatise using arguments to prove the excellence of women and the vices of men. Its title was *La nobiltà et eccellenza delle donne, et i difetti, e mancamenti de gli huomini*, published in Venice in 1600 in three editions. It should be noted that it was mostly female writers who wrote explicit and straightforward answers to male authors, in order to counteract their libellous texts by defending female nature and existence (Dialeti, 2011: 6-7).

Califronia also refers to another work composed during the 18<sup>th</sup> century which included all the biological, ethical and emotional vices of women, entitled *Lo scoglio dell'umanità* written by Diunilgo Valdecio and published in 1774 under the alias Carlo Maria Chiaraviglio, which had multiple editions the following years. This libellous text resembled Passi's regarding the scolds on women, arguing that women in general pose a threat to men. Fausto Salvani replied to the above, using an anagram in his name under the pseudonym of a female persona Marchesa di Sanival, with his treatise entitled *La Difesa delle Donne o sia risposta apologetica al libero detto Lo scoglio dell'umanità* (Messbarger, 2002: 6). Also, she referred to a poem composed by Giacomo Boreo Gorretta *I diavoli delle donne* (1573) discussing the vices of women. Califronia ironically writes that it would have been very easy for women to respond by also writing a poem entitled *I diavoli dei maschi* (Califronia, 1794: 43-44 & Briganti, 2011: 126-131)

In conclusion, the 18<sup>th</sup> century expression of the Querelle des Femmes shifted towards the ways that female position could alter,

via the path of education which should be available to all without the past restrictions to women. The arguments in favour of women regarding their state in society were milder during the previous centuries, but during the 18<sup>th</sup> century their demands, especially those concerning education, demonstrated that if women were able to be more educated, then they could contribute further to the welfare of their household as well as to the public good. Furthermore, during and after the French Revolution their demands were enriched within the political discourse (Giuli, 1997: 273-274). In Italy, the pleads for equal rights disappeared especially towards the begging of the 19<sup>th</sup> century during the Napoleonic reign and the Risorgimento (Giuli, 1997: 275). The same applied in France where voices like Gouges' were silenced (Williams, 1999: 38). Califronia contributes to the debate further by stating that women can and should be equal to men. In addition, she seems to be influenced by the Enlightenment ideas and by the works of Gouges and Wollstonecraft as well as by the 17<sup>th</sup> century Italian writers, signifying thus a continuity on the need for a change in the female position in Early Modern Italy.

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