

S O P H I A D E N I S S I

The Greek Enlightenment and the Changing Cultural Status of Women

In 1856 Andreas Laskaratos, one of the most liberal authors of his time, writes:

There is no doubt that we took a giant step in allowing our women learning. This step reveals that a revolution took place in the spirit; a revolution which has taken our minds away from the road of backwardness and has led them to the road of progress. Though this transmission has not received any attention yet, it constitutes one of these events that will leave its trace in the history of the human spirit.¹

Laskaratos is quite correct in talking about a revolution since the decision to accept women's education at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries was indeed a revolutionary act if we consider the state of Greek women who had been living in absolute ignorance and seclusion that prevailed throughout the years of the Ottoman occupation. What caused this revolution? What made Greek men, or rather a progressive minority at first, still subjects of the Ottoman Empire concede the right to education and even to a public voice for women? The answer will be revealed to us by taking a close look at the first educated Greek women who managed to break the traditional silence imposed upon their sex by patriarchal culture and make their presence felt in the male world.

We can distinguish two main groups among the first educated Greek women; those coming from the aristocratic circle of the Phanariots and those coming from the circle of progressive men of letters. The first group had its forerunners in Constantinople as early as 1778 but flourished from 1816 till the War of Independence mainly in the Danubian principalities, whereas the second appeared in 1818 and produced works even during the war years.

It is well known that the first Greek social group that was related to the ideas of the Enlightenment was that of the Phanariots. Highly educated with a wide knowledge of languages they soon became powerful in the Ottoman Empire, where they served as diplomats, interpreters and even hospodars i.e. Princes of the Danubian principalities for almost the entire eighteenth century till the War of Independence. The Phanariots

were the first to be exposed to French culture and to accept the ideas of the Enlightenment. In their courts they attempted to emulate the Enlightened Despots of the time by trying to cultivate the arts, give emphasis to culture, renovate legislation and achieve the spread of education to all social classes.² It is in this spirit that they conceded to the female members of their family not only the right to education but also the right to a public presence by encouraging them to publish works of their intellect or put on stage moral plays thus offering the first samples of female intelligence and talent. The forerunners of this group were two ladies, Doudou Ypsilanti and Domna Katinko who produced satirical poetry around 1778 in Constantinople.³ But the flowering of this group took place in the decade before the revolution; in 1816 Aikaterini Rasti translated Jouy's pedagogical work *Jeu de cartes historiques*; in 1819 princess Rallou Soutsou and her aunt, Aikaterini Soutsou, translated a courtesy book for young ladies by Madame de Lambert and Mably's work of political criticism, *Entretiens de Phocion*, respectively; in the same year, Roxani Samourkassi translated Salomon Gessner's play *Erastus*;⁴ before the end of this decade Efrossini Handjeri, the daughter of Prince Handjeris participated in a team compiling a great dictionary of the Greek language in Constantinople, at the same time publishing her poetry.⁵ Finally, another princess, Rallou Karadja-Arjiropoulou, not only translated an historical and a pedagogical work but also became the first Greek stage director and one of the first actresses of the small amateur company she had created in Bucharest.⁶ It is in those performances but also in the ones that followed after the Karadjas family had fled to Italy, that the first Greek amateur actresses appeared on stage. It is to Rallou Karadja that Bucharest owes the foundation of its first theatre, the so-called Theatre of the Red Fountain.⁷ All this female activity ended abruptly with the outbreak of the Greek Revolution. But apart from these tangible displays of female intellectual activity, it is known that the majority of women of the Phanariot society were being educated, often sharing the same tutor and attending the same classes as male members of the family by the beginning of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, the Phanariots seem to have adopted a liberal attitude towards women, treating their wives with the same respect as shown in progressive European circles; through the liberal treatment of their wives and daughters one could infer that their approved female model was not that of a weak and passive individual but a creative and energetic one who could pursue public activities with the consent of male members of this closed society, given that her primary role would always be that of an obedient wife and a caring mother.

The second group of educated Greek women was composed of the daughters, sisters or wives of progressive intellectuals who were also related to the ideas of the Enlightenment. Mitio Sakellariou, daughter of the learned reverend priest, Charisios Megdanis, and wife of a well-known physician, classicist and translator of the Greek Enlightenment, Georgios Sakellarios, published two comedies of Goldoni in 1818.⁸ But the most characteristic representative of this category is Evanthia Kairi, the so called first Greek woman intellectual.⁹ She was the sister of Theophilos Kairis, an exponent of the last generation of the Greek Enlightenment and one of the ardent admirers and close friends of Adamantios Korais. It is to this relationship that we owe Korais' view on women's education and his conception of the role the new generation of Greek women must play in the revival of the nation. In a letter written to Evanthia in 1815, Korais expresses his theory that the primary purpose of education among women must be to teach them the «art of life» which alone can lead them to a happy life, which, according to him, equals a virtuous life.¹⁰ The «art of life» is achieved when educated women manage to attain decency and modesty; two qualities indispensable to female nature, which can protect them from the sin of arrogance, which potentially exists in human nature and is likely to emerge with the cultivation of the intellect. When this is accomplished, women can fearlessly pursue knowledge and transmit it to others of their sex so that one day the Greek nation will reach the high state of female literacy of ancient times and that of the Western world where intellectual women are not the exception but the rule. He even expresses his desire to see intellectual women coming forth not only from the privileged circle of men of letters but also from the lower classes. Korais' view on women's education seems to me at the same time progressive and wise; progressive because it embraces women from all social classes and wise because through the theory of the «art of life» he is trying to armor women against intellectual arrogance which could overturn the existing social order and thus secure the balance in the regenerated society he envisioned. In 1818, Korais sent Evanthia Fenelon's work *Sur l' education des filles*, which she translated successfully but never published despite his persistence because of the objections of her brother, who feared the violent reactions of the most conservative members of Greek society. In the following year, she translated another work, *Praise of Marcus Aurelius* by the French scholar, Thomas, which again was not published, obviously for the same reasons.¹¹ By 1820, he permitted his sister to publish her third translation—that of Bouilly's *Conseils a ma fille*—by simply omitting her name from the work and publishing it under the initials E.N., the second being the initial of their father's Christian name.

Original works followed her translations of which the most eminent among them was her drama, *Nikiratos*, the first Greek play lamenting the massacre of Messolongi written shortly after its fall in 1826. Its tremendous success on stage led to her gaining a reputation and respect. Her public life ended abruptly with her brother's imprisonment in 1839. Anthia Ekonomou, the daughter of Konstantinos Ekonomos, another priest, exponent of the Greek Enlightenment and follower of Korais, also belongs to this group. Although she never published any of her work she was well known as a woman of wide classical learning, speaking eight languages. Some poetry that has been saved among her manuscripts shows her exceptional use of the Homeric language.¹²

The last intellectual Greek woman of the period we will be dealing with is one who doesn't properly belong to any of the above categories. Elizabeth Moutzan-Martinegou was a young aristocrat from Zante, born with a natural inclination to writing.¹³ In her autobiography, a work written to be kept in a drawer, she describes her tremendous effort to achieve knowledge and become useful to human society, a strange notion for the Septinsular gentry her family belonged to. Although Elizabeth didn't come from an enlightened background the ideas expressed in her work show that the young girl espoused the ideas of the Enlightenment; those ideas had reached her island through Italy and Elizabeth through her second inspired teacher but also through her readings, and she tried to live according to them. Secluded and oppressed, she managed, mainly through self-cultivation, to produce a great number of translated and original works, plays, poems, and even theoretical works on economics and poetics. Her autobiography is the first text of female revolt against the subjection of women and through it she gained the title of progenitor of Greek feminist thought.

In view of the first brief mass appearance of literate Greek women from different social circles at the beginning of the nineteenth century, I believe that it is no coincidence that all the young women who were involved in one way or another with letters came from an enlightened background or were acquainted with the ideas of the Enlightenment. In most cases the man of authority in their circle, familiar with the notions which gave priority to education as a means of the revival of the Greek nation was also open to the concept of women's education and to its consequent change in the female cultural status.

I therefore believe that at this early phase in the amelioration of the female predicament, the fact that the beneficial influence of the ideas of the Enlightenment made women's education not only acceptable but desirable by the influential circles of Korais and the Phanariots constitutes the revolution that Laskaratos was talking about. Surprisingly

enough, we rarely connect women's upgrading with the Greek Enlightenment nor pay due respect to the first progressive men who helped achieve the transition from the Eastern female model prevalent for hundreds of years to that of the West. Furthermore, I would like to stress that the first female social models that were projected in the pre-revolutionary period by the Phanariots and Korais were basically progressive. At a superficial level both were aiming at producing docile women suitable for their role as devoted wives and mothers, who were eager to play subordinate roles to the male members of their family. At a deeper level these social models offered women the liberty of public expression through the publication of their works and theatrical activity, a radical novelty for its time. This novelty constitutes an even greater revolution if we consider the female state of absolute slavery and seclusion of the majority of pre-revolutionary women and the new possibilities for a complete change in their cultural status that was offered to them at the beginning of the previous century.

Notes

- ¹ Andreas Laskaratos, *The Mysteries of Cefallonia in The Complete Works*, Atlas Publishing, Athens 1959, p. 79.
- ² K.Th. Dimaras, *The Greek Enlightenment*, Hermes Publishing, Athens 1989 (5), pp. 9-10.
- ³ Skarlatos D. Vizantios, *Constantinople*, vol. 3, Philadelfeus printing house, Athens 1869, p. 602.
- ⁴ For the above mentioned translations see respectively, Kula Xiradaki, *Women in the «Friendly Society» – Phanariot women*, Athens 1971, pp. 72-75, George Veloudis, «The presence of Salmon Gessner in the literature of the Greek Enlightenment», *O Eranistis* 11 (1974), pp. 24-25, Xiradaki, pp. 59-63 and 90-95.
- ⁵ Viconte de Marcellus, *Souvenirs de l' Orient*, Paris 1861 (3), p. 72.
- ⁶ Her translations have not been traced yet but the writers mentioned are John Gillies and Bretonne.
- ⁷ For her theatrical activity see: N.I. Laskaris, *History of the modern Greek theatre*, vol. 1, Athens 1938, pp. 186-190, John Sideris, *History of the modern Greek theatre*, vol. 1 1794-1908, Kastaniotis publishing, Athens 1990 (2), p. 22, p. 226, D.V. Ekonomides, «The history of the Greek theatre in Bucharest», *Elliniki Dimiourgia* 32 (1949), pp. 894-898.
- ⁸ The works translated were: *Paternal love or the grateful servant* and *The cunning widow*.
- ⁹ Some of the most representative works on her are: D.P. Paschalis, *Evanthia Kairi (1779-1866)*, Estia, Athens 1929; Kula Xiradaki, *Evanthia Kairi (1779-1866)*, Athens 1956; Paschalis M. Kitromilides, «The Enlightenment and Womanhood: Cultural Change and the Politics of Exclusion», *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 1. 1 (May 1983), pp. 39-61;

but also the recent proceedings of the first Congress having as its theme Evanthia Kairis's personality and works, that took place in the island of Andros on the 4th of September 1999: «Evanthia Kairi, Two hundred years since her birth 1799-1999», *Andriaka Chronika* 31, Kairios Vivliothiki, Andros 2000. The papers included are by Dimitrios I. Polemis, Sophia Denissi, Viki Patsiou, Maria Perlorentzou, Alkis Agelou, Ekaterini Koumarianou and Kyriakos Delopoulos.

¹⁰ Adamantios Korais, *Letters*, vol. 3, 1810-1816, Association of studies of the Greek Enlightenment, Athens 1979, p. 366.

¹¹ This work was finally published many years later, in 1835.

¹² For her personality and works see: «Anthia Ekonomou», *Ladies Magazine*, 7. 330 (Dec. 1893), pp. 3-6 and 7. 331 (12 Dec. 1893), pp. 3-5.

¹³ For Moutzan-Martinegou see Jiorgos Kehajioglou, «Elisavet Mouts(a)-Martinegou» in *I Paleoteri Pezografia mas*, vol B1, 15th c.-1830, Sokolis, Athens 1999, pp. 228-240; for her theatrical plays Anna Tabaki, «L'œuvre dramatique d'Elisabeth Moutzan-Martinegou», *Sigrisi/Comparaison* 7, June 1996, pp. 59-74.

Περίληψη

Σοφία ΝΤΕΝΙΣΗ: *Ο Ελληνικός Διαφωτισμός και η μεταβολή της πολιτισμικής θέσης των γυναικών*

Η εμφάνιση των πρώτων λόγιων Ελληνίδων της νεότερης εποχής στα τέλη του 18ου, αλλά κυρίως στις πρώτες δεκαετίες του 19ου αιώνα, φαίνεται πως είναι άρρηκτα συνδεδεμένη με τις ιδέες του ευρωπαϊκού Διαφωτισμού. Πρώτοι αποδέκτες των ιδεών αυτών υπήρξαν οι φαναριώτικοι κύκλοι και αυτοί των Ελλήνων λογίων. Στους κύκλους αυτούς συναντούμε τις πρώτες Ελληνίδες δημιουργούς (ποιήτριες και θεατρικές συγγραφείς), τις πρώτες μεταφράστριες, αλλά και τις πρώτες σκηνοθέτιδες και ηθοποιούς. Θεωρητικός των ιδεών που διέπουν αυτή την τεράστια επανάσταση για το γυναικείο φύλο, ο οποίος νομιμοποιεί όχι μόνο το δικαίωμα των Ελληνίδων στη γνώση αλλά και στη δημόσια έκφρασή της, είναι, όπως φανερώνεται από την αλληλογραφία του με την Ευανθία Καΐρη, ο πατέρας του ελληνικού Διαφωτισμού Αδαμάντιος Κοραΐς.