

# Petronilla Paolina de' Massimi

(1663-1726)

Marchioness Petronilla Paolini, also known by the Arcadian pseudonym Fidalma Partenide, was an Italian poet and writer. Her difficult life is recorded in her autobiographical poems. She was an admired member of the Arcadian Academy, whose work is noted today for its strong defense of women and anticipation of gender theory.

Petronilla is remembered as the "poetess of Rome", but she was actually born in Tagliacozzo, Abruzzo, on 24 December 1663, the only daughter of Baron Francesco Paolini of Marsica and Silvia Argoli. Her father, Baron of Ortona dei Marsi and Gentleman of the Colonna, was considered to be a highly cultured and successful politician, her mother "thoughtful, introvert and lover of solitude."

When Petronilla was four years old, her father was murdered in an ambush; mother and daughter then fled to Rome, taking refuge at the court of Pope Clement X. Petronilla received a good education during the time she spent at the boarding school of the Convent of the Holy Spirit.

Clement X had Petronilla removed from the convent shortly before her tenth birthday and married to his nephew, Marquis Francesco Massimi. Massimi, at that time aged 40, was a soldier with noble rank but a reputedly callous nature, then keeper of the Castel Sant'Angelo, Rome's notorious prison. Petronilla would later write about these events, as in her poem, "Unbind Your Angered Tresses," in which she bluntly mourned: "the strong hand of fate/Joined the fair April of my years/to alien old age."

Confined to what she called the "closed horror" of her husband's St. Angel Castle, she endured her marriage to a taciturn and possessive man who aroused in her no feelings except a dutiful respect for the sacrament binding them together, and perhaps a pity for his meanness, which she bore with patience and detachment.

At 19 years of age Petronilla finds herself with three sons, Angelo, Domenico and Emilio, but it was the death of one of her sons that effectively ended the marriage. She was then allowed to return to the Convent of the Holy Spirit, where she wrote the works for which she is known. These include both the unpublished poems and writings that might be expected of a woman of this period, but also published works, including musical libretti. As early as 1696, she was collaborating with Carlo Agostino Badia, providing the texts for several of his oratorios, including the *Legend of the Cross* (Italian: *L'Invenzione Della Croce*).

In 1707, on the death of her husband, Petronilla left the convent and moved to Palazzo Massimi where she could get back her possessions and, above all, she was able to get close to her children once more. Strengthened by this new freedom, the poet continued to compose and in 1709 she returned to visit the places of her childhood in Abruzzo.

She was sixty-two when she died of a chest infection in Rome on 3 March 1726, and was buried in the Church of St. Egidio.

In 2022, her memoir, *Life of the Marchesa Petronilla Paolini Massimi described by herself* (Italian, *Vita della Marchesa Petronilla Paolini Massimi da sé medesima descritta li 12 agosto 1703*) was published for the first time in its complete form.

Sources:

Research by Michael Lynch:

- [Info on #abruzzolink](#)
- [from encyclopedia.com](#)
- [from wikipedia](#)
- [from un-aligned.org](#)