

Between public and private:

The identity of the first Greek female scholar EvanthiaKairis (1799-1866)

Entre public et privé :

L'identité de la première femme de lettres grecque EvanthiaKairis(1799-1866)

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Abstract:

EvanthiaKairis is the first representative of the female gender that has taken a place in the history of Greek literature and has constantly attracted both literary criticism and publishing interest. She was born in Andros in 1799 and initiated by her brother TheophilosKairis in the ideas of the Neohellenic Enlightenment and the Greek Revolution. Her social and personal identity is revealed in her writings and relationships. In her private correspondence with her brother, she expressed her inner world as a sensitive soul, while her other writings reflect the public image of a well-respected scholar and a staunch Greek patriot.

Keywords: female writing, patriotism, sensibility, 19th century

Résumé :

EvanthiaKairis est la première représentante du genre féminin qui a pris une place dans l'histoire de la littérature grecque et a constamment suscité à la fois la critique littéraire et l'intérêt de l'édition. Elle est née à Andros en 1799 et initiée par son frère TheophilosKairis aux idées des Lumières néohelléniques et de la Révolution grecque. Son identité sociale et personnelle se révèle dans ses écrits et ses relations. Dans sa correspondance privée avec son frère, elle exprime son monde intérieur comme une âme sensible, tandis que ses autres écrits reflètent l'image publique d'une femme de lettres respectée et d'une fervente patriote grecque.

Mots-clés : écriture féminine, patriotisme, sensibilité, XIXe siècle.

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Introduction:

Evanthia Kairis, the first representative of the female gender to take her place in the history of Greek literature, has constantly attracted both literary criticism and publishing interest (DIMARAS, 1983: 210). She was a spiritual child of the Enlightenment ideas that favored the education and their participation in the field of literature (DELON, 1997: 452-456).

In Greece, the first attempts at achieving the objective of women's education and participation in literary life were made at the end of the 18th century in the context of the national renaissance. This was a stand adopted by the elite Phanariot officials and princes in Constantinople and the Danubian Principalities, as well as by pioneer Enlightenment scholars, such as Adamantios Korais (KITROMILIDIS, 1983; DENISSI, 2001).

This article explores the life and work of Evanthia Kairis and examines the circumstances that shaped her identity. In particular, it proceeds to an assessment of her presence in public sphere through her translations and patriotic writings, as well as her private life through her correspondence.

1. First attempts and translations

Evanthia was born in Andros in 1799, the penultimate of the eight children of Nicholas Tomastos Kairis and Assimina Kabanakis. The firstborn was Theophilos who was to play an important role in her life. Theophilos was educated in Kydonies, in Asia Minor, and other parts of Greece, perhaps Chios and Patmos; he was ordained a deacon at the age of eighteen. He studied mathematics and astronomy at the University of Pisa, and, in 1807, he went to Paris where he became close to Korais. From 1812 to 1821, he served as a teacher and as the principal of the Academy of Kydonies, an important commercial and educational centre before 1821. Accompanied by her mother, Evanthia went to the thriving city in Asia Minor known as Ayvalık, and, under the guidance of her brother, focused on studying literature and learning French thus attaining a high educational level. She learned additional philosophy and mathematics, which was a male privilege. (PASCHALIS, 1929; XIRADAKIS, 1984; OLYMPITOU, 2010).

In 1814, at the age of fifteen, prompted by her brother, Evanthia addressed her first letter to Korais asking him to recommend a French book for her to translate: *I embrace you, respected father; and teacher! I kiss your right hand that publishes the Greek library and devises profound thoughts. I kindly ask you to send, along with the books for the community, a French book or a children's encyclopedia that I might translate, thus benefiting our nation according to my ability.* (POLEMIS, 1997: 15).

Korais was impressed by her letter, which “left me totally flabbergasted”, as he would write later in a letter to Byron’s traveling companion John C. Wobhouse in which he recounted the progress of Hellenism (DIMARAS, 1979: 366). In response, he offered her wise advice on the “art of life”, based on prudence and modesty, virtues most specific to women, with which she would be endowed so as to impart them to her peers, according to the practice of female education in enlightened Europe, thus contributing to the renaissance of Greece. She would obtain her education by studying ancient Greek writers and European writings (POLEMIS, 1999: 15-19). He did not fail to send her some French books to translate, strongly recommending “the newly published moral textbook by a wise and respectable woman, Madame Guisot”. Korai’s translation proposal included the following works: Pauline Guizot, *Les Enfants. Contes à l’usage de la jeunesse* (Paris 1812); John Gregory, *Le legs d’un père à sa fille* (Paris 1774); Fénelon, *Traité de l’éducation des filles* (Paris 1689). Korais was worried that the reference to foreign manners would make it difficult for Evanthia, whose French was not perfect yet, and sent more books to issue a volume¹. Evanthia took his advice to heart and translated Fénelon’s *Traité de l’éducation des filles*, which she did not publish due to her brother’s reservations, despite Korais’ insistence, expressed in his correspondence with Theophilos, that the book be published. Soon after (in 1819), having obtained her brother’s consent, she published anonymously, but providing many clues about her identity, her translation of Jean-Nicolas Bouilly’s book *Conseils à ma fille*. In the preface to the translation, she envisaged writing a history of women to the benefit of “young ladies who love arts and letters: “*Maybe, my friends, instead of offering you stories about foreigners I should narrate the lives of Greek women to you. I know that our nation was fortunate enough to give birth not only to great men but also to well-educated and admirably virtuous girls and women [...] but, my friends, I am not capable of writing such a book and wish with all my heart that a wise teacher of our nation should attempt to write a book worthy of those women and suitable for us*”. (KAIRIS, 1820: η´ι´).

The project in question, which is indicated by the insightful thought of Evanthia, was finally carried out much later (RIZAKIS, 2007: 54). She also translated Antoine-Léonard Thomas’s, *Éloge de Marc Aurèle* (Paris 1775). Korais praised this translation of a work he had brought to Theophilos’s attention in 1817 with Evanthia in mind; however, due to her brother’s objections, it was published in 1835, after the death of Korais, and was dedicated to him “as a token of gratitude” (PATSIU, 2000: 60-61).

At the same time, she composed an ode, which was published, addressed to the Metropolitan of Ephesus, Dionysios Kalliarchis, a patron of letters in Kydonies (PANAGIOTOPOULOS, 1963). She also wrote two letters to the scholar Leontios Kambanis, a compatriot, with many praises

¹Her translation activity began at an early age and was a constant commitment for Evanthia, who left a rich, unpublished work with translations of moral books “for the use of the young girls” (PATSIU, 2000).

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written in an archaistic Greek. She was, obviously, a very promising young female scholar, as Theophilos noted in a letter to Korais (1814): “I have high hopes for her; she is my only consolation in times of sorrow. May your wish and the wish of the homeland make my hopes come true”. The French philhellene printer Ambroise Firmin Didot, who met Theophilos and Evanthia during his stay in Kydonies, spoke favorably of Evanthia and described her as a promising young woman. He wrote in his travel book on the East: *"His sister, charming Evanthia, was capable of understanding him. She spoke French and Italian fluently, and ancient Greek perfectly. She has an excellent grasp of mathematics, and among the things she and her brother studied during this period were Newton's conic sections [...] Who would have imagined that one would find such superbly educated people in a small, humble house, in this little, almost unknown city in Asia"*. (DIDOT, 1826: 375).

With the outbreak of the Greek War of Independence in 1821 the family was forced to return to Andros. Theophilos, as the plenipotentiary of Andros, was actively engaged in the struggle and often absent from the island. Evanthia also left the island and followed her merchant brother, Dimitrios, to Syros. She stayed in Syros for fifteen years that would prove important to her life and would mark her transformation into a public figure.

2. Public writings and image

Evanthia Kairis entered the public sphere decisively when she wrote and published the *Letter of Greek Women to the Philhellene Women* (*Επιστολή Ελληνίδων τινων προς τας Φιλελληνίδας*, Hydra 1825). In this combative and patriotic text, she denounced, on behalf of the women of Greece (the letter was cosigned by 31 women, the daughters, spouses, and sisters of freedom fighters and politicians), to international public opinion and, specifically, to the philhellene women the suffering of the war and the hostile attitude of the European governments towards the Greek struggle, due to the fact that it took place in the adverse political climate of the Holy Alliance: *"Friends of Greece we assure you that none of these ordeals have hurt us as much as the inhumanity, not to say brutality, shown towards our nation by many of those who boast of being born in wise Europe, of having been educated by wise teachers, of having read many moral books worthy of admiration, and, what is most surprising, that they are disciples of the Gospel and have listened to the most illustrious preachers of virtue"*. (POLEMIS, 1997: 55).

The *Letter* was also translated into English by the philhellene George Lee. Entitled *A Voice from Greece, Contained in an Address from a Society of Greek Ladies to the Philhellenes of their own Sex in the Rest of Europe* (London 1826), it made Evanthia famous worldwide. The preface to the translation described her as “one of the most enlightened women of Greece” (PERLORENTZOU, 1988). Two other of Evanthia’s letters with a political and social content were

later published in the *General Gazette of Greece* (*Γενική Εφημερίδα της Ελλάδος*). In the first (1827), she championed the humanrights of the women of Kydonies and, in the second (1828), she thanked the philhellene women of America for supporting the Greek struggle, responding in a heroic tone to six letters they had sent, which were also published in the *General Gazette of Greece* (August 1828): "*Friends! We no longer lament the incineration of our homeland, the loss of our possessions, the captivity of our beloved ones and the diaspora of our relatives, because we see that, as a result of the prayers to God Almighty of the philhellene women of America and almost of all Europe, our Homeland remains steadfast despite the raids of our tyrants and is rapidly advancing towards its liberation*". (POLEMIS, 1997: 92)

Meanwhile in 1826, Evanthia published *Nikiratos* (*Νικήρατος*), a play inspired by the battle of Messolonghi, which rekindled philhellenic sentiments everywhere in Europe and the world. In the play she paid tribute to the heroic victims and to the Greek women who sacrificed themselves for their homeland. Her objective was to rally the Greeks and create standards of moral behavior by exalting bravery and patriotism and stigmatizing those who did not perform their patriotic duty (STIVANAKIS, 2000). The play, staged in Syros, was a great success and the edition soon went out of print, while part of it was translated into Italian by Carbonaro Severiano Fogacci (1841). The poet Alexander Soutsos wrote a dithyrambic review in the newspaper *The Friend of the Law* (*Ο Φίλος του Νόμου*) (SOUTSOS, 1827), and Evanthia was dubbed the "tenth muse" and the "virgin of Messolonghi" by the Italian philhellene poet Cesare Malpica, who dedicated a poem to her (1836), while the patriot Angelo Brofferio drew inspiration from *Nikiratos* for one of his *Scene Elleniche* (1844) (PERLORENTZOU, 2000). In 1828, the Ermoupolis High School principal Georgios Serouios dedicated laudatory verses to her ("You belong on Mt. Helicon, you are a student of Pallas Athena"), while later he sent her a copy of a published speech with a dedication (POLEMIS, 1980; POLEMIS, 1984c). The Athenian publisher, Konstantinos Rallis, wrote to her in June 1840 that he wanted to reissue *Nikiratos* and, expressing his feelings of "high esteem", wished she would become an example to be emulated by other Greek women who sought to ascend the Helicon of the Muses (POLEMIS, 1984b). Her involvement in public affairs prompted her to write another short work entitled *Hellas* (*Ελλάς*), in which she criticized political events, turning against the tyranny of the period of governor Capodistrias, during which democratic liberal Greeks expressed their opposition; she did not, however, publish it (POLEMIS, 1982; KOUMARIANOU, 2006).

3. Correspondence and sensibility

In the years 1835-1839, Evanthia regularly corresponded with Theophilos, who at that time lived in Andros and was in charge of an orphanage. Their frequent correspondence began in 1821 when Theophilos was absent from Andros due to his participation in the Greek War of Independence

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and continued until 1844, when he would return and remain in his hometown until his death. Her correspondence consists of more than 229 letters written between 1814 and 1866, more than half (155) to Theophilos, whom she greatly loves and admires for his morality, education, dedication to the progress of the nation and participation in the struggle for freedom (KOUMARIANOU, 2000). She wrote to him from Andros in July 1822: "*Because you dear brother, you taught me how much we owe our homeland, you often told me that one must sacrifice one's very life for the freedom of our homeland and not only did I hear you say it, but I saw you doing it in actual fact*". (POLEMIS, 1997: 19).

The thought of her fifteen-years-older brother kept her company, she imagined him teaching and encouraging her, especially at night when everything grew quiet and she could write to him undisturbed: "*I really enjoy whenever I am able to write to you while everyone is resting and asleep. Because then I really think that I am talking to you. Then, nothing can distract me from imagining that I see you and listen to you [...] This night is one of those beautiful nights, when we can see the sky shining with its infinite multitude of stars. Everything is quiet and all I can hear is the muffled sound of the sea and the frogs croaking*". (POLEMIS, 1997: 28).

At the time of the Greek Revolution, she felt that the center of the universe was elsewhere, where Theophilos, who was taking part in the struggle, was. She looked forward to his providing her with information about the important events, which she followed through newspapers, and she would express her concerns to her brother. Reading books soothed her and helped her face the war bravely: "*Some time ago, I began to read about the Peloponnesian War to forget the present one, which, although similar to the Persian War, seems to have much in common with the Peloponnesian one. I think it will last for a long time and will provide writers with a lot of material that will allow them to bequeath future generations with many books worth reading, through which they and those mentioned in them will gain immortality*". (POLEMIS, 1997: 29).

The references in her letters suggest she was reading Greek and foreign writers, Thucydides, Madame de Staël, Fénelon, the twelve volumes of Pierre Brumoy's *Greek Theater of Father Brumoy*, as well as adventure novels for entertainment. Through her brother's letters and descriptions, she participated in his travels, which she considered a godsend, while lamenting over the fact that she was not at his side: "*I came to the place where you say that you went as well as to Athens and I felt you were so fortunate to see what you wanted to; I pitied myself for not having the luck to see them with you, so that you could show them to me and tell me again how many good things education and culture can achieve; my heart broke when I reached the place you told me you went to, and when I came to Socrates's prison where you were in tears; I imagined I was watching him teach his friends true virtue and*

be condemned by the friends of deceit, and I wished with all my soul and heart that you achieve all that he was not able to". (POLEMIS, 1997: 31).

She also expressed philosophical and metaphysical concerns about the destiny of humankind, inspired by a book, entitled *Leçons de la nature*, that Theophilos sent her: "*I really liked that place [...] But I think it is possible that, no matter where people are, they can assume that they were created for eternity, and should not be deceived by the positive aspects of the world nor overwhelmed by passions and depressed by the evil things, which people can sometimes, perhaps out of ignorance, inflict on themselves".(POLEMIS, 1997, 116).*

This is the three-volume *Leçons de la nature, ou l'histoire naturelle, la physique, et la chimie, présentés à l'esprit et au cœur* (Paris 1801) by Louis-Cousin Despreaux, who also published the fifteen-volume *Histoire générale et particulière de la Grèce contenant l'origine, le progrès et la décadence des lois, des sciences, des arts, des lettres, de la philosophie, etc[...] terminée par le parallèle des Grecs anciens avec les Grecs modernes* (Paris 1780). On page 318 of the first volume, mentioned by Evanthia, the author believes that man should be happy in the serenity and purity of nature that calls to mind his Creator: "Heureux celui qui se plaît dans ces joies innocentes! son esprit est serein comme un beau jour d'été; ses affections sont douces et pures comme le parfum que les fleurs répandent autour de lui. Heureux qui, dans les beautés de la nature, retrouve le créateur, et se consacre à lui tout entier!".

She found the knowledge of the world fascinating and considered it to be infinite and forever unattainable: "*How sorry I feel, my dear brother, because I have only reached the point where you understand that you have learned nothing! How worried I am because I did not manage to learn what I needed, nor do I hope I can do it anymore! [...] It does not seem to me a minor thing nor can I believe that our ancient philosophers were able to discover without telescopes, blind and groping, so to speak, what our contemporaries, with their prior knowledge and telescopes, have just begun to confirm and learn that the ancients were right". (POLEMIS, 1997: 146-147).*

She also allayed his concerns regarding her marriage, which never took place; apparently this was something she, herself, did not desire: "*Oh, my dear brother! How you sadden her, because you do not appear to believe her, and because you suppose she desires to be happy through other means through which, if ever she imagined it were possible to be happy, if ever she hoped to be happy through them; already, however, because she is certain they do not bring happiness, as well as for many other reasons, she has relinquished her dreams, and even that hope that is granted to everyone, even that, has fled far from her".(POLEMIS, 1997, 196).*

In 1839 she returned to Andros with the prospect of teaching at the Orphanage; the Orphanage, however, had closed down, while her brother was being persecuted because of his religious beliefs. His doctrine, which he called *Theosebism* (*Θεοσέβεια*: respect for God), a mixture of theology, science and ethics, rejected the Gospel and had its own ritual permitting marriage only among disciples, which pitted him against the Orthodox Church (KAIRIS, 2008). Detained in monasteries on Skiathos and Santorini or exiled from Greece, Theophilos corresponded with Evanthia, who, along with her other brother Dimitrios, did everything possible to ensure Theophilos's release and return to Andros. In a letter written in 1838, Evanthia expressed her concern about his situation as well as her constant dedication and secret involvement in the difficult path chosen by her brother: "*How happy I would be if I could walk together with you, my brother and friend! It is true that this is something that can be achieved only through my imagination; through which I travel with him, I see the dangers, I tremble, I am horrified, I am dismayed, I am saddened, I worry about all he suffers and all he encounters; I see him tired, dusty, sweaty, his clothes and body torn by thorns and weeds; but with a cheerful face, a serene gaze, a quiet spirit, a prudent soul, and a confident and steady forward step, he does not take into account the road travelled or contemplate the one he is embarking upon*". (POLEMIS, 1997: 190).

In September 1840 Evanthia sent a letter to King Otto of Greece, who was traveling around the Cyclades, asking him to intervene for the release of Theophilos, then under detention in Skiathos. Despite all their misfortunes she would never stop supporting him, even when he was deposed from the Church; hence, the biting irony of the following: "*I read, dear brother, the circular of the Church Council concerning your deposition. Nothing it said upset me in the least, indeed I laughed and also wished that they, and the rest, come to no other harm for all the hardship they are causing us, simply that they, themselves, be deposed for the same reason my brother is being deposed and that they no longer be what they are, but become ungodly and atheists like him*". (POLEMIS, 1997: 223).

From 1845, when Theophilos returned to Andros, until his death in 1854, all the Evanthia's personal materials we dispose of are a sole letter of thanks sent to the painter Andreas Kriezis in Paris, who replied to her, as well as a letter to a lady who had visited her in Andros. Her last letter to Theophilos, then imprisoned in Syros, was cautiously optimistic. His death just a week later (10 January 1854) devastated her, something she expressed in a moving text. In 1856, she corresponded with Theophilos's disciple Georgios Laskaridis in London to thank him on behalf of her family for his financial aid and for his belief in her brother who "was not sacrificed in vain for the sake of Theosebism", since "friends of Theosebism" still existed (POLEMIS, 1997: 238). She also wrote to Ambroise Firmin Didot in Paris to offer him copies of two of Theophilos's books (*Cognitive*,

Elementsof Philosophy) and three of hers (*Conseils à ma fille*, *Éloge de Marc Aurèle*, and *Nikiratos*), expressing her pleasure in his interest and also calling attention to her brother's sacrifice: "I am grateful to you and I am greatly indebted to you; I found much relief in my sorrow, being assured that certain good men existed, honoring my brother who died unjustly and unlawfully in prison." (POLEMIS, 1997: 240).

From 1857, Evanthia corresponded with Spyridon Glafkopidis, a disciple and follower of Theophilos; she felt close to him because of his relationship with Theophilos and Theosebism: "Dear brother, and what else should we call you? What should I call you other than what our glorious common father called you? Whose sacred and multi-faceted struggle you have taken on, and that of the good and incomparable brother, and trying, and wishing, and hoping to fulfill those duties to us? What else, since Theosebism itself dictates that I call you by the sweet name of brother? And to whom else can I write but to you? And I want to speak frankly with you about my needs and desires, as I would to a good brother, and when I need advice, I shall seek your advice". (POLEMIS, 1997: 291).

They exchanged 50 letters, Evanthia writing from Andros and then Syros, where she had moved to live with the family of her brother Dimitrios, while Glafkopidis was also sending her books from his travels to Manchester, Glasgow, Athens, and London. This correspondence reveals a sincere interest, which led Glafkopidis, who was 20 years younger, to entrust the care of "Evanthia, equal to a dear sister and to a respected mother" to his trustees. Evanthia spent her last years in poverty, which forced her to give private lessons to girls; this caused the authorities to react and she was banned from teaching due to the persecution of Theophilos. She died in the family home in Andros in 1866 (POLEMIS, 2000).

Conclusion:

Influenced by the content of her letters, the publisher of her correspondence declared that Evanthia's "horizon was limited" and that her letters characterized by "unbridled verbosity, a lack of ideas, and unbearable platitudes" comparing them to Theophilos's correspondence ones, which were also criticized for their "poor content" (POLEMIS, 1993). Indeed, the correspondence to her brother appears tedious because of the repeated references to her feelings, which, however, are expressed with admirable eloquence, revealing the awe that reduced her to a young schoolgirl in the presence of her teacher, as she would address him until 1835 (DELOPOULOS, 2000). On the contrary, Theophilos appears emotionally neutral, or, at least, not in the habit of expressing his emotions in such an extravagant manner; he was paternal and somewhat distant. Evanthia's letters to her other brother Dimitrios and her niece Evanthia are written in a prosaic manner and concern everyday issues. However in a letter, written in 1850, to a friend she expressed her feelings and

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revealed her literary talent through her idyllic descriptions of nature. It seems that her style varies according to the receiver.

On the other hand, her public writings and letters show self-confidence and social conscience, intellectual cultivation, high-minded beliefs, and a fighting spirit. Her public image was that of a well-respected scholar and a staunch Greek patriot, as witnessed by the comments of public figures, such as the publisher of *The Friend of the Law*, Joseph Kiappe, who described her with great enthusiasm: "*Anyone wishing to read about male beliefs, tender emotions, and brave ideas expressed with the graces associated with the female sex, should read the "Greek Women's Letter to the Philhellene Women of America". Written by one of the most important Greek women of the Aegean islands (whose name we do not reveal so as to protect her modesty) and signed by many other young women, this letter bears witness to a patriotic soul and a cultured, perceptive spirit. In short, we can rightly call her the flowering fruit of an even more bounteous tree*". (KIAPPE, 1825).

In September 1827, she met the missionary John Hartley, who noted in his letter: "*Evanthia, the sister of Theophilos, lays claim to interest of a particular kind: she is a lady distinguished for talent and acquirements [...] Here, we met a woman who aspires to raise her sex to literary eminence, by various publications highly to her credit*". (POLEMIS, 1984a: 83-84).

The American missionary Henry Post would also praise her in his book: "*Evanthia [...] a fine looking woman, between thirty and forty years of age and far exalted above her countrywomen in point of talents and literary accomplishments, has written a tragedy on the fall of Missolonghi, and an eloquent appeal on behalf of the females of Greece, and has translated one or two French works into her native language*". (POLEMIS, 1984a: 92).

Furthermore, she had gained the respect and admiration of young women, as evidenced by the letter of Alexandra Kaloudi of Kea, who, counting herself among the ones who benefited from the "esteemed" Evanthia's published translation of Bouilly, asked Evanthia to tutor her privately in 1833: "*Yes, esteemed benefactress of Greek women; since so many other girls were fortunate to have their minds and hearts educated by you in person, do not (for the love of Korais) deprive me alone of it... I hope that the heavy burden of teaching will be lightened by my love of education, my small knowledge of ancient Greek, French, and Italian, and, above all, my firm decision to convey what you wish to teach me and to follow, as much as possible, your brilliant lead*". (POLEMIS, 1999: 29-30).

In private, her sensibilities, even her weaknesses and excessive modesty, were revealed. Her rich inner world found an outlet in her letters to her beloved brother with whose ideas and values

she identified completely, while she felt she could express to him, in an elaborate manner governed by epistolary and rhetorical rules and with a certain romantic exaggeration, the feelings, worries, and sorrows of a sensitive soul (SAUDER, 1997; CORBIN, 2016), as well as her interest in his own life. She also felt she could share, to some extent, her inner life and her everyday routine in her letters to other friends. Her correspondence is an important example of letter-writing possessed of literary virtues, as well as an example of early nineteenth-century female writing².

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²The correspondence even inspired a fictional exchange of letters between Evanthia and another well-known scholar of the time (PANARETOU, 2007).

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