

Abstract

The “Old Lady of Vinegar” is one of the most popular themes in Sicilian folk literature. In the years of the French revolution, an old beggar sold “miraculous water” in Palermo to women who wanted to kill their husbands. Society seemed to tolerate this peculiar form of divorce, believing it was some kind of magic. The Court, however, thought otherwise. Inspired by the ideas of the Enlightenment, they “scientifically” proved that it was a case of poisoning and condemned the old woman to death. Having conducted in-depth archive research confirming the authenticity of the story, the Author has decided to tell this compelling story as a novel. Starting from the trial, she expands her scope to take in all of 18th-century society, presenting a truthful picture of Palermo at the time, where commoners talk about their lives using the same words recorded by a Court clerk two hundred years ago. Her story documents the conflict between reform-minded magistrates adhering to the Enlightenment, on the one hand, and a deeply rooted folk culture, on the other.