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‘Donna il cui carne gli animi soggioga’: Eighteenth-Century Italian Women Improvisers

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Abstract

The article, by way of the careers of two of the most famous eighteenth century Italian improvisers, Corilla Olimpica and Teresa Bandettini, investigates the way in which favourable socio-cultural circumstances allowed a number of Italian women living in the eighteenth century to make use of the widespread fashion of their time for extempore poetry to excel in an occupation, gaining success together with acceptance and advancement in society, thus taking one of the earliest steps forward in the history of women’s liberation.

Keywords: Corilla Olimpica, Extempore Poetry, Fortunata Fantastici Sulgher, Poetic Improvisation, Teresa Bandettini

1. *Introduction*

Io non avrei mai avuto idea dell’entusiasmo estemporaneo, se non avessi veduto il bel fuoco e non avessi udito i bei trasporti di Corilla. Se questi pregi sieno comuni a tutte le donne poetesse per la maggiore sensibilità de’ loro nervi, per la maggiore elasticità, e delicatezza delle loro fibre, e per qualche stravagante prodigioso rapporto dell’utero colla mente, io non so; ma so bene, che Ella mi è sembrata sempre superiore ne’ suoi voli, ne’ suoi trasporti, nelle sue immagini, e nelle sue idee a tutti gli uomini poeti, che ho sentito in suo confronto, e lungi da Lei. (Amaduzzi and De’ Giorgi Bertola 2005, 215)¹

¹ ‘I would never have had an idea of extempore enthusiasm, if I had not witnessed the fine fire and heard the fine ardour of Corilla. Whether these virtues be common to all women poets, owing to the greater sensitivity of their nerves, the greater elasticity and delicacy of their constitution and to some bizarre, exceptional relationship between the uterus and the mind, I know not; but I do know well that she has always seemed to me superior in her flights, her ardour, her images and her ideas to all the male poets I have heard in competition with her, and alone’. Giordano’s essay has been translated from Italian by John Denton.



These are the words used by Giovanni Cristofano Amaduzzi, in a letter dated 29 April 1777 to abbé Aurelio De' Giorgi Bertola, when singing the praises of Corilla Olimpica, the most highly celebrated, popular and envied woman extempore poet in the eighteenth century. The cornerstone of so much admiration was the 'enthusiasm' generated in audiences by Corilla's 'fine fire' and 'fine ardour'. Gifts that lay behind her superiority to 'all male poets' were sensitivity, delicacy, and 'some bizarre, exceptional relationship between the uterus and the mind'. Thus Amaduzzi took the overpowering emotions aroused in audiences to be the characteristic aspect of the female improviser's extempore performance, acknowledging Corilla's singularity as a specifically feminine quality. However, when listing her virtues, her 'ideas', i.e. the originality of her poetry, come last, after her 'flights', 'ardour' and 'images'.

The clues provided by this eyewitness account are very useful departure points in understanding the phenomenon of eighteenth-century poetic improvisation in Italy, a genre in which women not only found room for manoeuvre but also excelled.² Considering the period in which extempore poetry 'became customary and set up a tradition' (Croce 1918, 219), i.e. 1700 to 1850, among the leading names in the genre we find a substantial female group. From Bernardino Perfetti, the first of the major professional improvisers in the eighteenth century, to Giuseppe Regali and Giannina Milli, the last ones, together with other famous names such as Francesco Gianni, the Napoleonic Imperial poet and Tommaso Sgricci, who improvised whole tragedies, among a large group of minor figures,³ the names Maria Maddalena Morelli (Corilla Olimpica), Teresa Bandettini and Fortunata Fantastici Sulgher stand out.

The aim of this article is to investigate one of the earliest stages in the long, hard struggle for women's liberation, limited to eighteenth-century extempore poetry, which is quite distinct from the nineteenth-century patriotic brand, with special attention devoted to the former's two leading female representatives: Corilla Olimpica and Teresa Bandettini.

² For bibliography on eighteenth-century extempore poetry, apart from information in the writings of contemporary Italian *letterati* and foreign travellers on the *Grand Tour*, as well as entries covering individual male or female improvisers and Arcadian shepherds/shepherdesses in the major biographical reference works and the relevant chapters in the leading histories of Italian literature, see Vitagliano 1905; Croce 1918 and 1949; Gentili 1980; Di Ricco 1990 and Fernow 2004.

³ Reading the names in the index of the study by Vitagliano, among the long since forgotten female improvisers we find: Teresa Bacchini, Maria Beoti, Beatrice Bugelli dal Pian Degli Ontani, a certain Gazzeri, Teresa Gualandi Gnoli, Lucrezia Landi Mazzei, Maria Domenica Mazzetti Forster (aka la Menichina di Legnaja), Anna Maria Parisotti, Livia Sarchi, Rosa Taddei (1905, 141-142 and 181-188). We can add Livia Accarigi and Emilia Ballati Orlandini (see Giordano 1994, 23-32 and 37-39).

2. *A Hybrid Art*

Extempore poetry has very ancient origins, with roots in various periods and cultural settings, both popular and high, illiterate and literate. It is a poetic genre in which the creative process is 'improvised' on themes suggested by members of the audience during a performance. In the eighteenth century, though retaining all the features of an impromptu performance, it was not only a leftover from a period characterised by orality, but also had points of contact with more orthodox, 'noble' literature, inasmuch as the breeding ground of improvisation lay in poetic material from the Greek and Roman traditions, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, fifteenth-sixteenth century chivalric epics, and Renaissance and Arcadian verse. This 'literary' material, cleverly or mechanically made use of by the performer, was supported by the persuasive resources of orality, without which it would have shown all its poor essence. Thus, eighteenth-century improvised poetry was certainly linked to the literary environment, though retaining orality as its main feature (of 'composition', since improvisation is extempore, of 'communication', that is, performance, and 'transmission', which is left to memory), as well as the performer's competence and appeal and audience involvement, all typically theatrical. So we are dealing with a hybrid phenomenon, halfway between poetry and theatre. It was on this ambiguous balance that the great reputation of the eighteenth-century extempore poet relied in his/her role as a new bard of ancient ancestry and at the same time the product of the taste and historical, political and social conditions of his/her own time.

As a crucial link between the *ancien régime* and the contemporary world, the eighteenth century witnessed the passage from a phase of great uncertainty and immobility to one of excitement, an urge for renewal, which led to profound socio-cultural changes impacting both the figure and role of the members of the literary profession, as well as the reputation of the female intellect, and, more generally, women's access to culture. During the eighteenth century, with the spread of less reactionary ideas about the education of girls, the ever growing circulation of printed books and the increase of fashionable salons and Arcadian colonies to which women were admitted, the opportunities for them to make contact with the literary environment increased.

Although widespread female education was a long way off, a number of books on the subject were published in the eighteenth century,⁴ which did not deny women's right to education in principle. One of the subjects 'allowed' was literature, which, together with music and dancing, made up the triad of the *artes foemininae*, which were accepted, since they belonged to

⁴ For a general survey of eighteenth-century didactic/moral writings concerning women's education see Guerci 1987 and 1988.

the domain of entertainment. During the century, albeit limited mostly to the nobility, women's education became ever more common, though its end was seen as a way to improve their role as family members and certainly not as a stage in their social emancipation. The age-old prejudice limiting the fair sex to 'needle and spindle' was hard to demolish; confined to the private sphere, women had to excel in the difficult art of daily life involving, apart from domestic duties, denial of the right to personal dreams and aspirations, exhibiting perfect altruism, unending understanding and total compliance.

With the spread of the Arcadian Academy, which, by favouring the good taste of the classics in contrast with baroque excess, introduced poetry to high society, the various academies were founded and the first salons opened their doors, presided over by a lady. Following the example of the Parisian *salons*, in Rome, Milan, Naples, Venice, Padua, Genoa, Bologna and, only towards the end of the century, Florence, after the beginning of the rule of the House of Lorraine, the salons of a number of upper-class ladies became the meeting places for civilised Italian society. In these new 'courts', where high culture was ensured by the presence of scholars, scientists, artists and intellectuals, women found a new freedom: they could converse, entertain, express their opinions openly, without losing any aspect of their femininity, and avoid being accused of overwhelming ambition or immorality. Women were also admitted to the various 'Arcadian colonies', which, during the century, spread out from Rome to many other Italian towns, though a misogynous regulation demanded 'nobiltà dei costumi', a minimum age of twenty-four and poetic experience, while men were only expected to be 'eruditi'. These environments were halfway between the public and private spheres, establishing 'appropriate' spaces for discussion and meeting that were less selective from the social and cultural points of view than the salons, thus facilitating the birth of an initial female intellectual élite.⁵ More a social than a strictly educational phenomenon, the abstract Arcadia also permitted fledgling 'letterati' dressed up as shepherds and shepherdesses to play with versifying gallant, satirical, scientific and celebratory themes.

Furthermore, the eighteenth century was the period of the greatest splendour of opera which, by linking two heterogeneous arts like poetry and music, was not too distant from extempore poetic performances; the latter were actually often accompanied by music. It is no coincidence that the opponents of improvisation used the same moral-intellectual arguments underpinning the hostility to opera. The rationalism of the period led to demoting music to a lower rank among the arts, considering it irrational, with no cognitive value since it was empty of concepts, aiming only to delight the senses. A stage work in which poetry was at the service of music thus seemed hybrid, incoherent, implausible and frivolous.

⁵ On the Arcadian shepherdesses see the valuable data base *Donne in Arcadia (1690-1800)*, <www.arcadia.uzh.ch>, containing plentiful bio-bibliographical and critical material on the subject.

3. *A Profession*

In a century in which taste was dictated by Arcadian ideals, operatic arias could be heard in theatres and courts, and in which salons, academies and fashionable venues were favoured by a frivolous, idle society, the extempore poetry phenomenon flourished. It was in this sociable context that women, in line with their well-established reputation as hostesses, found room to manoeuvre.

However, these favourable socio-cultural circumstances were not sufficient to explain the wide-ranging nature of this phenomenon. A large group of women managed to exploit this new fashion, intelligently creating a profession, reaching success in fashionable society, as well as recognition and social upgrading. Making use of the Arcadian stamp of approval on taste by way of presenting a way of creating poetry seen from the viewpoint of technique and mastery of the classical literary tradition, the female improviser made her appearance as a professional who spoke, wrote and acted, applauded by her audience. Her repertoire was grounded in solid academic study and general knowledge, enabling her to deal with any subject proposed, good knowledge of metre, so as to create her verse quickly, and a good memory. But in her improvisation she used all the techniques making up the appeal of an actress, whose advantages she enjoyed while also running the risks involved. While their poetess colleagues, by publishing a sonnet in one of the multitude of collections of poetry, gained limited recognition, the women improvisers made money out of their art, which was being established as a real profession. This was how they gained financial independence from men and the family. By emancipation they became 'public' celebrities. Even the most admired queens of the salons held conversations in their home environment, in the private sphere which had imprisoned women for centuries. The female improvisers, on the other hand, like actresses, performed in public, toured Italy, appeared on stage, held master classes in improvisation for a fee; in short, they left the private sphere to face the public domain. Actually, the female improviser gave more performances in private, rather than public environments: theatres, salons and academies being private spaces. But the way in which she presented herself was different. While the lady who ruled over her salon was a 'private' hostess, because she held conversations in her own home, with a carefully selected group of people, simply for pleasure, the female improviser presented herself as a 'public' entertainer, since she was entering other people's private spaces, where she did not know her audience and offered her talents in exchange for money or gifts. But a woman performing in public becomes a 'public woman', just a short step from being considered a prostitute. The new freedom won by these improvisers inevitably led to the accusations of immorality that had always made life difficult for women working in theatres.

Right from the first-stage performances by the comediennes of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, actresses were taken to be 'siren enchantresses', 'Satan's snares', temptresses of lust, the woman who 'vende a prezzo vile su per le scene,

i gesti e la favella' (De' Sommi 1968, 95).⁶ All biographical notes accompanying printed verses by a female improviser, this also being true for poetesses and all women writers in general, deliberately foreground the honesty, purity, great loving care for the family shown by her, together with her literary-artistic merits, the explicit purpose being to distance the traces of immorality inevitably linked to her profession. Adele Vitagliano, for example, wrote of Fortunata Fantastici Sulgher: 'as a poetess she was not that much superior to her contemporaries, but had the merit of linking literary skill with domestic virtues, making her family happy and intelligently educating her children' (1905, 139-140). It is also significant that Teresa Bandettini tried to 'legitimise' the profession recently achieved by publishing learned translations, thought out rhymes, tragedies and epic poems, thus aiming to elevate with a literary 'licence' a fame that she herself acknowledged to be ephemeral and doubtful.⁷

4. *'Carmine Temira edocet, oblectatque Corilla, / Tu quocumque animos vis, Amarilly, rapis'*

Corilla Olimpica (Maria Maddalena Morelli, Pistoia, 1727-1800) *oblectat*, Fortunata Fantastici Sulgher (in Arcadia, Temira Parraside, Livorno, 1755-1824) *edocet*, Teresa Bandettini (in Arcadia, Amarilli Etrusca, Lucca, 1763-1837), *rapis*. This is how Father Pagnini, an eminent Greek scholar from Pistoia, depicted the three most important eighteenth-century women improvisers, linking their names in the Latin couplet quoted in the title of the present sub-section, which in the free translation of the same author reads:

Con gli improvvisi accenti
 Temira spande di saper torrenti
 Corilla in ogni petto
 Mirabile diffonde alto diletto:
 E Tu Amarilli, puoi,
 Gli spiriti rapir ovunque vuoi. (Maylender 1926-1930, I, 277)⁸

⁶ 'Sells for vile money on the stage gestures and language'. This is how an anonymous H.N.A. described an actress to Leone De' Sommi.

⁷ Together with the large number of verses in the various collections of eulogies, Bandettini published a translation from the Greek of *Paralippomeni di Omero di Quinto Smirneo Calabro*, the tragedies *Polidoro* and *Rosmunda in Ravenna* and the poem *La Teseide*. For a thorough bibliography of Bandettini's printed works see the above mentioned data base *Donne in Arcadia (1690-1800)*, <www.arcadia.uzh.ch>.

⁸ 'With her impromptu words / Temira effuses torrents of knowledge, / Corilla in every heart / spreads marvellous high delight: / and you, Amarilli, can / ravish our minds and take them wherever you wish'.

Humble origins, premature intelligence, obstinacy, perseverance and boundless ambition were common to the two most famous women improvisers of the eighteenth century. Neither Corilla nor Amarilli were of noble birth or from rich families, and it was arguably this very humble condition that lay behind their decision to take up the profession of improviser.

The case of Bandettini is particularly informative, as an example of ambitious self-instruction which was to turn her from being an illiterate dancer into the favourite of educated high society, a legitimate, salaried professional.⁹ She was acclaimed, admired and idolised by the most illustrious men of her time, the extempore art being a true profession, in exchange for immediate monetary reward or fruitful protection, which bestowed upon her glory, honours and unending eulogies, but also resulted in disappointment, compromises and limitations. 'Quanto è sterile l'alloro!' (Di Ricco 1990, 45)¹⁰ she wrote disappointed to Bettinelli, after one of many let downs. She could live on her activities as an extempore poetess, but was forced to go on ever longer and exhausting tours to support her 'sickly' husband and son, to the extent of 'overstretching' her talent. Obligated to write opera libretti which she herself considered 'monstrous' in the hope of being employed by the Austrian court as reader to the Empress and Court Poet, Teresa was forced to sell her art only to pander to the taste and interests of her time.¹¹ Like Isabella Andreini in the early seventeenth century who, by carefully building up her public image and the distribution of printed works, had freed actresses from

⁹ See Vannuccini 1899, 501-526 and 732-756; Vitagliano 1905, 98-115; Di Ricco 1990; Giordano 1994, 40-58, and the above-mentioned data base *Donne in Arcadia (1690-1800)*, <www.arcadia.uzh.ch>.

¹⁰ 'When the laurel wreath is sterile'. Letter dated 9 September 1795. Bandettini's letters to Bettinelli can be consulted in the Biblioteca Comunale in Mantua, Fondo Bettinelli, busta 2, *Teresa Bandettini*; while those from Bettinelli to Bandettini are in the Biblioteca Statale in Lucca, Ms. 644.

¹¹ In a letter to Bettinelli, from Vienna, dated 14 January 1802, she wrote: 'Ora sto componendo un dramma per questo Teatro, anzi un mostro poi che vogliono che si rinunzi al buon senso. Avrà per titolo *La morte di Ettore*; devo storpiare Omero se voglio servire ai pregiudizi chiamati *convenienze teatrali* de' due eroi che rappresentano Achille ed Ettore. È forza però piegare alla necessità e sacrificare a certe viste particolari l'onore delle Muse e d'Apollone. Il Metastasio fu fortunato, egli scriveva in tempi in cui la musica era ligia della poesia; ora questa è una schiava tiranneggiata dal capriccio di poche note in cadenza. Da banda adunque gli scrupoli, io farò un'opera come un intercalare con le rime obbligate, e ballerò sulla corda co' piè legati' (Di Ricco 1990, 25n.; 'I am now writing a libretto for this Theatre, or rather a monstrosity in which they want me to sacrifice common sense. Its title will be *La morte di Ettore*; I must distort Homer if I wish to bow to the prejudices called *convenienze teatrali* of the two heroes representing Achilles and Hector. One must however obey necessity and sacrifice to certain sights the honour of the Muses and Apollo. Metastasio was fortunate. He wrote in times in which music was the servant of poetry; now the latter is a slave at the mercy of the whim of a few notes. Away with all qualms therefore, and I shall write a libretto with set rhymes, dancing on a rope with bound feet').

accusations of being whores and had managed to go down in history as the famous *amorosa* of the 'Compagnia dei Gelosi',¹² Amarilli placed all her hopes in her epic poem entitled *Teseide*, which was the source of her intellectual credentials, and dreamed of going down in history as the heir to the glory of Ariosto and Tasso.

For Corilla Olimpica, who experienced an ambiguous but uproarious renown and led the lifestyle of a princess, adored and protected by the most illustrious celebrities of her time, the career as an improviser was, on the other hand, an ongoing test of ambition, an unending race to overtake herself.¹³ With a free, independent character, as the first woman to be crowned in the Capitol in Rome and become a court poetess, Maria Maddalena Morelli was quite capable of managing her fame, nonchalantly surviving outrageous scandals, of which she was often the innocent victim:

Fu la prediletta di principi, di regine, di imperatori; per lei profusero carmi e madrigali letterati e poeti; perfino il pontefice Pio VI permise che sul suo capo si ponesse quella simbolica fronda di alloro che avea cinto il capo superbo d'un Petrarca. E dire che la sua vita privata fu delle più irregolari: separata dal marito, dignitario spagnolo, noncurante dell'unico figliuolo, a quando a quando amante di questo o di quell'abate, di questo o di quel principe, vagò di corte in corte a fianco di un Ginori o di un principe Gonzaga, senza che l'essere espulsa talvolta da una città o da uno stato la sconcertasse punto. (Villani 1915, 450)¹⁴

Adventuress and *prima donna*, the forerunner of the *femme fatale* in later centuries, she was soon followed as a model by generations of poetesses and

¹² Isabella Andreini also seems to have been an improviser. Her son, Giovan Battista Andreini, relates how his mother: 'In Roma fu non solo dipinta, ma coronata d'alloro in simulacro colorato fra 'l Tasso e 'l Petrarca, alor che doppo una mensa fattale dall'Illustrissimo e Reverendissimo Cardinal Cinzio Aldobrandini doveran pur presenti sei cardinali sapientissimi, il Tasso, il Cavalier de' Pazzi, l'Ongaro et altri poeti preclari, sonettando e scrivendo improvvisi, la stessa, dopo il Tasso, ne portò il primo vanto' (Andreini 1984, 28; 'in Rome she was not only painted but crowned with a laurel wreath in effigy between portraits of Tasso and Petrarch, after a banquet offered by the Most Excellent, Most Reverend Cardinal Cinzio Aldobrandini in the presence of six most learned cardinals, Tasso, Cavalier de' Pazzi, Ongaro and other famous poets writing and improvising sonnets in a contest in which Andreini came second only to Tasso').

¹³ See Ademollo 1887, Vitagliano 1905, 85-97, Giordano 1994, 119-137 and 201-237, Amaduzzi 2000, Fabbri 2002 and data base *Donne in Arcadia (1690-1800)*, <www.arcadia.uzh.ch>.

¹⁴ 'She was the favourite of princes, queens and emperors. Men of letters and poets showered her with odes and madrigals. Even Pope Pius VI allowed her to be crowned with the symbolic laurel wreath which had been placed on the proud head of Petrarch. And yet her private life was unorthodox: separated from her husband, a Spanish dignitary, neglecting her only son, on several occasions the lover of this or that abbé, this or that prince, she wandered from court to court together with a Ginori or a Prince Gonzaga, without turning a hair when she was expelled from a town or state'.

women writers. Some believe that she inspired the novel *Corinne ou l'Italie* (1807) in which Madame de Staël, by way of the story of Corinna, an extempore woman poet, who plays instruments, sings, dances, draws, acts and engages in conversation, criticised the exclusion of women with intellectual, literary and artistic aspirations.

Fortunata Fantastici Sulgher had a somewhat different, less tumultuous career.¹⁵ She was more learned than Corilla and Amarilli (Temira *edocet*), had begun studying Greek and Latin and other foreign languages as a girl, as well as history, philosophy, morality, botany and even anatomy and achieved 'una certa reputazione' ('a certain reputation'), especially in Florence, where, every Wednesday, she opened the rooms of her house near the Ponte Vecchio 'al fiore dei cittadini e dei forestieri' (Pera 1897, 8; 'to the cream of local citizens and visitors'). She became particularly famous for her 'facili e piacevoli' ('easy and pleasant') poems, even though they were often 'infarciti di erudizione soverchia e di ingombrante mitologia che mortificavano la vivezza del sentimento' (Vitagliano 1905, 138; 'stuffed with excessive erudition and cumbersome mythology which upset the liveliness of feeling'). She is remembered for an extempore competition, which, in December 1749, saw her in a duet with Teresa Bandettini in a dialogue on the mythological theme of 'Hero and Leander' in the presence of Vittorio Alfieri. We have an exceptional eye-witness account of this performance, in the shape of a letter written by the otherwise unknown Dr Piccioli to his friend Giovanni Rosini:

Amico caro,

io sono uscito in questo momento pazzo, fanatico, sorpreso al segno del delirio dal famoso improvviso. Che piena di Bellezze, che cose grandi, inarrivabili, divine, che ho sentito stasera! Mai più mi troverò a tanto ... Questa è la più grande improvvisatrice, che io abbia sentita; anche più di Gianni; ha la vivacità di fantasia com'esso, ma una Locuzione, una frase così poetica, che il Suo linguaggio è quello dei Classici; maggior economia d'esso nelle immagini, giacché tu sai che esso era troppo ardito, maggior proprietà nell'Epitetare, nel quale genere m'ha sorpreso, giacché che tu sai che gli improvvisatori prendono ordinariamente quello che si presenta; ed Essa pare che scelga sempre il più proprio, il più conveniente, e il più vero nel soggetto ... Arrivò alle otto, e un quarto, la Bandettini, essendosi fatta aspettare, perché l'ora destinata era vanti l'otto ... Eccole tutte e due a sedere dirimpetto. Credi lo Spettacolo era interessante al sommo. Veder due donne che interessavano un pubblico intero. Era il trionfo del Bel Sesso. Cominciò la Fantastici con un complimento bellino, grazioso, e adatto. Piacque, e si sentì gl'applausi. Rispose graziosamente la Bandettini, e piacque anch'essa. Si sentì un poco di differenza nello stile, ma non vinse assolutamente. Fu chiesto il tema, e tutti in silenzio. Alfieri dal suo angolo disse: 'Bene via, Il ratto d'Europa'. S'oppose a questo tema; che non poteva cantarsi in dialogo, come avrebbero

¹⁵ Cf. Vitagliano 1905, 138-140; Di Ricco 1990, 27-29 and 217-228; Giordano 1994, 155-164 and data base *Donne in Arcadia (1690-1800)*, <www.arcadia.uzh.ch>.

desiderato. Dunque fu dato Ero, e Leandro. Cominciò la Fantastici facendo Leandro e disse benone. Rispose benissimo la Bandettini facendo da Ero. È impossibile il dirti quanto fosse bene trattato per ambe le parti, come ben concentrato il dialogo, e quanto interessante. Riceverono pieni applausi. Pareva che una desse coraggio all'altra ... Fu cantato dopo dalla Bandettini il tema d'Alfieri. Amico è incredibile quello che disse. Che vive descrizioni. Ella dipinse un Toro più bello di quello di Ovidio ... (Di Ricco 1990, 217-219)¹⁶

5. *The Sacred Poetic Fire*

Dr Piccioli left 'like a madman, a fanatic, overwhelmed and almost delirious by the famous improvisation' by Amarilli and Temira. The cause of this highly emotional state was the enthusiasm the hearer felt during and after the woman improviser's performance. Corilla Olimpica was the undoubted expert in provoking the 'sacred poetic fire'. In the letter from Amaduzzi to Bertola quoted above, this extraordinary phenomenon is described in its various stages (beginning, continuing and sublimation) and states (rapture, vision, passion, frenzy and transfusion of passion). After a slow, unsure, hesitant beginning linked with an initial state of concentrated meditation, inspiration was ignited:

¹⁶ Undated letter in the Lucca Archivio di Stato, *Carte Tommaso Trenta*, filza 18, lettera 53. 'Dear friend, I have just left like a madman, a fanatic, overwhelmed and almost delirious by the famous improvisation. What beauty, what magnificent, unrepeatable, divine things I heard this evening! Never will I experience anything like it again ... She is the greatest woman improviser I have ever heard; even greater than Gianni; she has his vivid imagination, but such a poetic turn of phrase making her language that of the Classics; less vivid images than him, since, as you know, he was too daring, more appropriate in her choice of epithets, in which she surprised me, since, as you know, improvisers usually make use of what is to hand; and she always seems to choose what is most appropriate, most proper, the truest in the subject ... Bandettini arrived at a quarter past eight, keeping people waiting, the appointed time being before eight ... There they were sitting opposite each other. Believe me that the performance could not have been more interesting. Seeing two women attracting the attention of the entire audience. It was the triumph of the fair sex. Fantastici began with a nice, graceful, appropriate compliment. This was well received and she was applauded. Bandettini replied gracefully and was also appreciated. There was only a small difference in style, but she was not the winner outright. The theme was requested; nobody spoke. Alfieri, from his corner, said 'Let us start with the Rape of Europa'. This theme was unacceptable, since it could not be conducted as a dialogue, as they wished. So Hero and Leander was suggested. Fantastici began in the role of Leander very well. Bandettini also did well in the role of Hero. I cannot tell you how well both contestants did, how the dialogue was to the point and how interesting it was. They were both well applauded. One seemed to instill the other with courage ... then Alfieri's theme was recited by Bandettini. My friend, her words were incredible. What vivid descriptions. She depicted a bull finer than that of Ovid ...'.

Vinto, che Ella avesse o la usa ritrosia, o il suo timore, cominciava il suo canto bassamente, tentava tutte le vie per destare il fuoco, e sempre ne vibrava qualche scintilla, ma mancavano i suoi versi del pregio dell'unità, e della orditura d'un ordinato lavoro. Si sprigionava in appresso il fuoco rinchiuso, grandeggiava a poco a poco, e si diffondeva ne' sentimenti, nelle parole, nella voce, e nel gesto fintanto che non scoppiava in un incendio, che tutto avvampava, che la rendeva gigante, che la astraeva fuori di se, che la rapiva in alto, e quasi la trasportava a cimentarsi colla Divinità. Allora la celerità del suo canto, la rapidità delle sue espressioni, la felicità de' pensieri, e tutte le sue esterne operazioni erano un annuncio di quel fuoco celeste, che era in lei disceso, e che agiva su di lei senza veruna sua precisa, e riflessiva cooperazione. Quelli che la accompagnavano col suono, erano affaticati estremamente in seguirla, e quelli, che l'udivano, elettrizzati da quel fuoco contagioso non potevano fare a meno di non dar segni di tanto scuotimento, e di tanta impressione. (Amaduzzi and De' Giorgi Bertola 2005, 215)¹⁷

This contagious fire is transmitted to the audience and bounces back from them to the poet who receives a fresh impulse from the enthusiasm of his/her listeners.¹⁸ This phenomenon is explained scientifically today by cognitive neuroscience as 'one of the many neural expressions of a basic functional mechanism of our brain-body system called "embodied simulation"' (Gallese 2014, 55). This emotional reaction is caused by mirror neurons, i.e. motor neurons which are activated both when we act and when we see others act.

The signs of poetic inspiration or *afflatus* are to be seen externally, involving total commitment of the senses: the face reddens, the eyes light up, the gaze becomes rapt and distant, absorbed in a world of images and visions; the voice

¹⁷ 'After having overcome her usual hesitation, or worry, she began her poem with a low voice, trying out all the ways for lighting the fire, always creating some sparks, but her verses lacked the merit of unity, and an orderly framework. Subsequently she unleashed the hidden fire, gradually towering over others and spread out in feelings, words, voice and gesture up to the point at which she burst into flames, which flared up making her a gigantic figure, disengaging herself, enrapturing her on high, almost uplifting her to face God Himself. Thus the speed of her reciting, the velocity of her expressions, the bliss of her thoughts and all her outward looking activities were the forerunners of that heavenly fire, which had descended upon her and acted on her without any precise, reflective cooperation on her part. Those who accompanied her with instruments had great difficulty in following her and her listeners, electrified by that contagious fire, could not avoid showing signs of such agitation and shock'.

¹⁸ Saverio Bettinelli, in his treatise entitled *Entusiasmo*, describes 'il sacro fuoco poetico' ('the sacred poetic fire') as a ball bouncing from the improviser to the audience and vice versa: 'Il quale fremito e fuoco diffondesi negli uditori, che gridano per gioia tratto tratto, e s'alzano dal luogo, e applaudono, e pajano in lui assorti, e trasformati, e trasportati con lui, ripercotendosi come palla da lui a loro, da loro a lui l'entusiasmo, ed a vicenda crescendosi insieme le scosse della immaginazione, e della sensibilità' (1799, 48; 'the excitement and fire spreads among the listeners, who cry out with joy from one moment to the next, and they jump to their feet applauding and seem engrossed by him and transformed and rapt by him, their enthusiasm bouncing like a ball from him to them and vice versa and the tremors of imagination and sensitivity mutually increased').

becomes louder and gestures more agitated; all the body is overwhelmed by the flux of ideas, and images evoked by the rhythm of the rhymes:

Non si taccia, come nel principio, e nell'incremento di quel suo fuoco animatore acquistava negli occhi un certo truce, ma un truce amabile, e graziosamente rigoglioso, che insieme rendeva intenso il suo sguardo, smaltava il viso d'un insolito colore, e le donava quella giovinezza che Tibullo assegnò eterna ad Apollo ... Grande in appresso era il sudore, che le grondava dal viso, e che le inondava tutto il corpo, e grande era la commozione di tutti i sensi, e la dissipazione de' spiriti, onde restava infiacchita per molte ore. (Amaduzzi 2005, 216)¹⁹

At the height of her rapture, the poetess fell into a kind of trance, in the grip of the creative madness of Dionysus, i.e. divine possession.

Confessava poi Ella, che il fuoco poetico non le era prontamente propizio, benché pronto avesse il dono delle rime e che perciò le conveniva cercarlo, scuoterlo, e sprigionarlo a poco a poco. Soggiungeva, che prendeva diletto Essa medesima, quando lo vedeva in sua proprietà, e che da se medesima s'accorgeva di dir cose, che arrivavano nuove, ed inaspettate anche alla sua immaginazione. Diceva però, che quasi nulla intendeva cosa dicesse, quando era nell'apice del suo furore; ed infatti Ella non riconosceva mai per sue certe cose vibrato, ed entusiastiche, che restavano impresse nello stupefatto uditorio; e che le si ripetevano dopo l'improvviso, benché provasse una modesta compiacenza d'averle dette. (217)²⁰

6. *An Example of Professionalism*

If Corilla was the undisputed expert in bringing out the sacred poetic fire, but proved to be unable to defend herself from envy, enemies and political

¹⁹ 'We should not overlook the fact that, as at the beginning, and in the increase of her animating fire she took on a kind of menace in her eyes, but it was an amiable, gracefully lush menace, which made her gaze intense, painting her face with an unusual colour and bestowed upon her the youthfulness that Tibullus ascribed to Apollo as eternal ... Subsequently she began to perspire, the sweat pouring from her face and covering her whole body and the emotion of all the senses and dissipation of spirits was enormous, so that she was weakened for many hours ...'.

²⁰ 'She later confessed that the poetic fire was not immediately favourable to her, although the gift of rhyming was readily available to her and so it was best for her gradually to search for it, bestir and unleash it. She added that she was delighted when she realised that she possessed it and was saying things that were new and unexpected in her imagination. She did say, however, that she understood hardly anything of what she was saying, when she was at the peak of her frenzy, and actually never acknowledged to be hers certain highly emotional things that reached the astonished audience, and that they repeated to her after the improvisation, although she appeared mildly content to have said them'.

exploitation, Amarilli was not only her equal as far as allure and magnetic attraction were concerned (the lines by Vittorio Alfieri in the title of this article: 'Donna, il cui carne gli animi soggioga' – 'Woman whose poetry enslaves minds' – were dedicated to her; Alfieri 1912, 172), but was able to manage her personality with an expert hand, as we have seen, and practised her art with outstanding professionalism, prudence and intelligence.

To begin with, Teresa Bandettini had an excellent feeling for audiences, as well as making an intelligent use of codified strategies, foreseeing complements, greetings and thanks from her audience, she often indulged in extempore jokes *ad personam* (see Di Ricco 1990, 163-164), or avoided subjects which could be unpleasant or politically 'dangerous', as when, reciting Conte Ugolino in Tuscany in 1794 she avoided 'tutto quel che di spiacente dice Dante dei Pisani', or in the *Allocuzione di Virginio alla Figlia*, omitted 'tutte quelle espressioni sonanti Libertà e Patriotismo' (214)²¹ which, in a climate of Thermidorian reaction to revolutionary excess, could have been unwelcome. She was an expert director of her performances, carefully selecting the formulas used to invite members of the audience to suggest a theme, passing from one subject to another, or interrupting the narrative, making intelligent use of metre or moving the account on with strategies such as overturning worn out clichés.

In her private life her behaviour was impeccable. She was married to Pietro Landucci, who also came from Lucca, an actor ('primo grottesco'), therefore her equal, never linking her name with gossip and being very careful not to provoke envy. For example, as soon as she arrived in Florence, where the now aging Corilla no longer performed, but where Fantastici Sulgher lived and presided over a salon, she avoided an extempore performance for a fee before a Florentine audience in a tavern, so as not to be criticised, not to attract attention, and not to let people think that she wanted to undermine Temira's reputation. Moreover, Bandettini disliked performing in theatres, thinking that it was unseemly to resemble stage performers too closely: the former dancer, ennobled thanks to extempore poetry, whose career had begun on the stage, had no intention of returning there (Chelini 1794 in Di Ricco 1990, 195).

Her whole life had been devoted to the mirage of finding a safe haven under the protection of a powerful patron. After being granted a pension by the Duchy of Modena, she ended up her career as court poet in Lucca, the tiny state of her birth, and became aware of the disappointment holding this office involved. Lucca was not Vienna, to which she had aspired: Imperial Poetess with a diploma and pension.

²¹ 'All the nasty things Dante says about the Pisans'; 'all those expressions involving Liberty and Patriotism'. *Dettaglio delle Accademie tenute a Livorno nell'autunno del 1794 dalla celeberrima Sig.ra Teresa Bandettini poetessa incomparabile*, Lucca, Archivio di Stato, *Carte Tommaso Trenta*, filza 28, n. 15.

7. *The Border between the Judgement of Eyes and that of the Ear*

Both Amarilli and Corilla refused to publish the transcriptions of their improvisations, imagining the risk of transferring to the page and print poems composed for listeners. Extempore poetry is a violent, impetuous exercise which can give rise to marvellous though intermittent, random results and does not produce permanent values. Proud of their talents, but also quite aware of the specificity and limits of their art, both of them realised that it was impossible to preserve its merits beyond a public performance. If we know some of the extempore lines this is thanks to hurried transcriptions by witnesses present at performances distributed in a somewhat clandestine way. Amaduzzi was also aware of this when, in the above-mentioned letter to Bertola, he noted that the poetic value of an 'Immortal Lady' like Corilla Olimpica remained 'senza documento, e senza orme durevoli per essere le migliori sue cose condannate ad essere un ristretto pabulo dell'aure, e dell'orecchie, ed uno stupor passeggero dell'intelletto' (Amaduzzi and De' Giorgi Bertola 2005, 218).²² Metastasio, too, who, describing in a letter to Algarotti 'l'inutile e maraviglioso mestiere' ('the useless, marvellous art') he had abandoned, but in which he had made his initial virtuoso efforts, wrote:

Poiché, riflettendo in età più matura al meccanismo di quell'inutile e maraviglioso mestiere, io mi sono ad evidenza convinto che la mente condannata a così temeraria operazione dee per necessità contrarre un abito opposto per diametro alla ragione. Il poeta che scrive a suo bell'agio elegge il soggetto del suo lavoro, se ne propone il fine, regola la successiva catena delle idee che debbono a quello naturalmente condurlo, e si vale poi delle misure e delle rime come d'ubbidienti esecutrici del suo disegno. Colui all'incontro che si espone a poetar d'improvviso, fatto schiavo di quelle tiranne, convien che prima di rifletter ad altro impieghi gl'istanti che gli son permessi a schierarsi innanzi le rime che convengono con quella che gli lasciò il suo contraddittore, o nella quale egli sdruciolò inavveduto, e che accetti poi frettolosamente il primo pensiero che se gli presenta, atto ad essere espresso da quelle benché per lo più straniere, e talvolta contrarie al suo soggetto. Onde cerca il primo a suo grand'agio le vesti per l'uomo, e s'affretta il secondo a cercar tumultuariamente l'uomo per le vesti. Egli è ben vero che se da questa inumana angustia di tempo vien tiranneggiato barbaramente l'estemporaneo poeta, n'è ancora in contraccambio validamente protetto contro il rigore de' giudici suoi, a' quali, abbagliati dai lampi presenti, non rimane spazio per esaminare la poca analogia che ha per lo più il prima col poi in cotesta specie di versi. Ma se da quel dell'orecchio fossero condannati questi a passare all'esame degli occhi, oh quante Angeliche si presenterebbero con la corazza d'Orlando e quanti Rinaldi con la cuffia d'Armida! Non crediate però ch'io disprezzi questa portentosa facoltà, che onora tanto la nostra spezie; sostengo solo che da chiunque si sacrifichi affatto ad un esercizio tanto contrario alla ragione non così facilmente:

²² 'Without documentation, and lasting traces, her best things being limited nourishment for the air and ears and a passing wonder for the mind'.

...Carmina fingi
 posse linenda cedro, et levi servanda cupresso. (Metastasio 1954, 327-328)²³

8. *Conclusions*

As an often overlooked phenomenon, seen as minor, when it was not openly looked down upon by literary critics (see Croce 1918 and Dionisotti 1967, 86), including contemporary ones, extempore poetry had an ambiguous reputation, combining admiration for boundless versatility, wealth of language and flair and the irrepressible suspicion of this incredible ability to produce a stream of impromptu verse. While it is true that illustrious men of letters such as Foscolo, Manzoni, Monti, Alfieri, Goldoni, and Pindemonte, showered this or that improviser with praise, they certainly did not mistake a performance in an academy for a certificate of eternal poetic glory. Apart from the words of Metastasio, the sonnet written by Alfieri in praise of Bandettini is symptomatic; the line 'Donna, il cui carme gli anima soggioga' is followed by 'Rimar mi fa, benché tal rime io danni' (i.e. although the lady enthral listeners with her poetry, Alfieri does not have a high opinion of its literary quality). Furthermore, Goldoni's admiration for Bernardino Perfetti, in his *Mémoires*, was contradicted in *Poeta fanatico*, where the fashion for improvisation seen as the expression of the spread of the mania for composing verse, is harshly satirised. Yet again, when Monti was praising Amarilli's 'veloci carmi' ('lively poems') and her 'eleganza ne' bei modi ardita' (Monti

²³ 'Since, thinking, at a more mature age, about the mechanism of that useless, marvellous art, I have come to the conclusion that the mind forced into such a rash operation must dress in clothes diametrically opposed to reason. The poet writing at leisure chooses his theme, examines its purpose, orders the chain of ideas that are to lead him naturally to this end, and makes use of metres and rhymes as obedient executors of his plan. On the other hand, he who faces the challenge of extempore poetry, enslaved by these tyrannies, ought to, before thinking of other things, make use of the minutes allowed to him to arrange the rhymes to be matched with those of his opponent, into which he slipped carelessly, and then hurriedly accept the first thought that enters his mind, suitable to be expressed by them albeit mostly foreign and on occasion in opposition to his subject. Whence the former searches for the clothes for the man at his convenience, while the latter hurriedly and frantically for the man for the clothes. If the extempore poet is barbarously enslaved by this inhuman lack of time, he is admittedly compensated by protection from the severity of his judges, who, blinded by present flashes, have no room for examination of the minimal analogy of before and after in this type of poetry. But if from the ear they were forced to pass on to examination by the eyes, oh how many Angelicas would show themselves with Orlando's breastplate, and how many Rinaldos with Armida's coif! Do not think that I disdain this extraordinary ability, which greatly honours our species; I only maintain that from anyone who makes the sacrifice of practising an art so contrary to reason: ... can we expect that such verses should be made / as are worthy of being anointed with the oil of cedar, and kept in the well-polished cypress?' (Letter from Vienna dated 1 August 1751. The Latin lines at the end of the passage quoted are from Horace, *Ars Poetica*, 331-332).

1969, 236, 239; bold and finely shaped elegance'), no man of letters was willing to consider an improviser a true poet. Admittedly, in the eighteenth century the widespread social importance of literary phenomena provided the poetic improviser with a substantial, relatively differentiated audience, in his/her presence in salons, academies and theatres; this type of audience was more accustomed to listening than reading and was therefore better disposed towards oral expression as compared with nineteenth century private reading practices. Extempore poets had a very ambiguous nature: they presented themselves as the new bards, but were really only entertainers; indeed, in a society grounded in written culture, they could only be able manipulators of literary products made inflexible by tradition, devoid of their original function. It was precisely in this dysfunctional orality that they could play a legitimate role. The improvisers themselves were quite aware of this and never challenged official culture, only aiming to be accepted by it.

It may well have been in the ambiguity of the role of the extempore poet, and in these apparent contradictions, that the success of the women improvisers lay. They could be tolerated by the moral prejudices of a society which, nevertheless, and in spite of the Enlightenment, remained deeply male-centred. On the other hand, persons who met considerable difficulties in being considered autonomous individuals could feel comfortable practising a phenomenon which drew upon a way of creating verse empty of individuality.

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