
*Tales of the Uncollected:
Improvisational Poets of Italy around 1800*

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I^N an account of her stay in Florence in 1785, Hester Lynch Piozzi (Samuel Johnson's adored correspondent) singled out for special praise two women famous in that city for reciting, spontaneously, perfectly shaped verses on any given subject. One of these, Corilla Olimpica (not her real name) had been crowned with laurel in Rome, only the third poet laureate in modern history, and the first female so crowned. A younger woman, Fortunata Fantastici (her real name), achieved celebrity status singing and reciting intuitively in rhyme. She toured the country, playing crowded salons and some of the nicer theaters. A third improvising poet, Teresa Bandettini, was Fortunata's younger friend and professional rival, and Corilla's designated successor. She transported her audiences by dancing as she composed poetry on the spot, dressed in Grecian gauze.

These three, and other extempore poets of both genders, seemed to British travelers of the Romantic age to present the very embodiment of poetic afflatus, of the spirit that sings unimpeded through the poet the way the wind sings through the Aeolian harp. They performed with the emotional intensity of the creative moment on full display in pursuit of a sort of freedom, a pursuit that has endured through several art forms into modern times.

The canon left them out. Their improvisations were criticized for not holding up to scrutiny, and the small amount of work that they published simply failed to appeal to the changing tastes of the 19th century. The University of Chicago maintains a substantial collection of Teresa Bandettini; otherwise their works are scarce in most North American and British libraries.

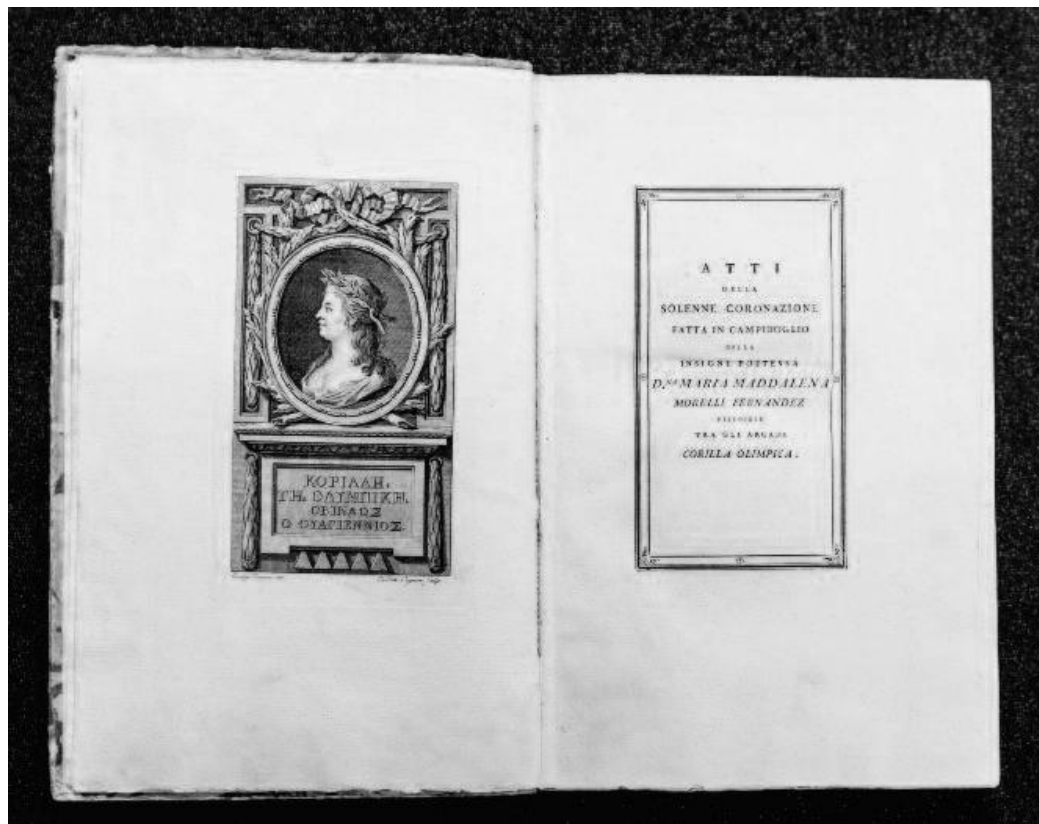
When Maria Maddalena Morelli Fernandez (Pistoia, 1727-Florence, 1800), known as Corilla Olimpica in Arcadia, was crowned Poet Laureate before the Pope on the Capitoline Hill in Rome in 1776, the Italian literary world cracked in half. Corilla's gender was an issue. Many honored members of the Arcadian Academy quit the order and formed their own group, the Academy of Strong Men. There followed reams of pamphlets and broadsides back and forth either defaming her or defending her. The author of one satirical drama about the coronation was arrested and condemned to death (but was released after just a few months in prison).

The fact remains that Corilla Olimpica was one of the most admired of the improvising poets who so fascinated Hester Piozzi and, later, Byron and the Shelleys. She lived the life of a rock star. She married briefly, then abandoned her

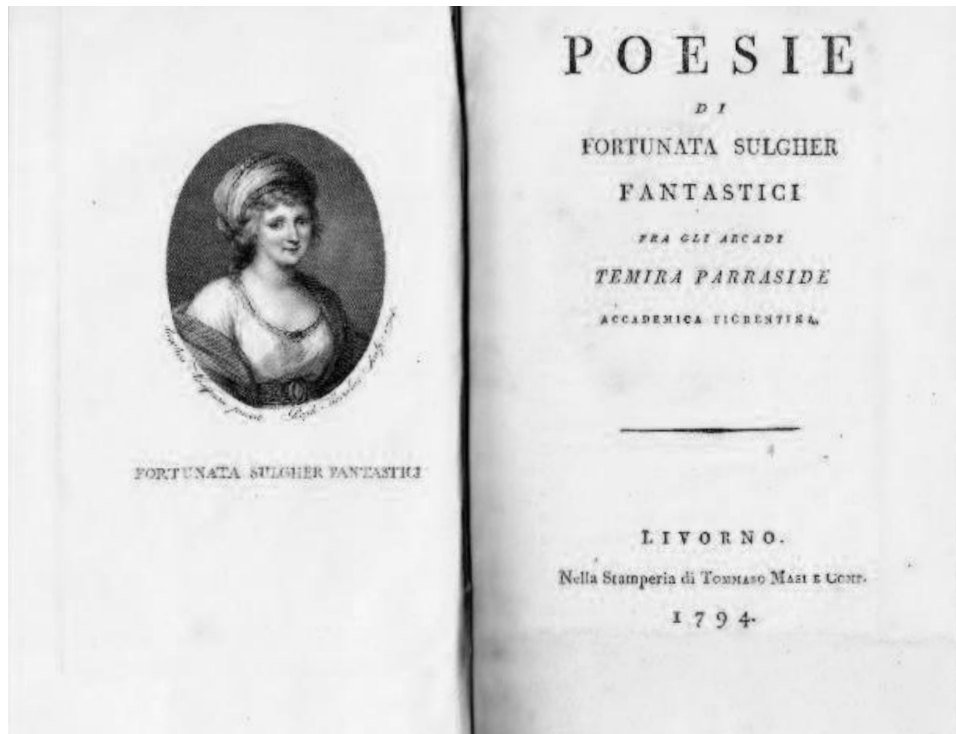
husband and child to follow her muse into theaters and palaces, living off the patronage of the rich and famous. Casanova knew her, Mozart performed for her, the Hapsburg Empress Maria Teresa promoted her, and the poets and musicians of the day—Metastasio, Pindemonte, Zanotti, Nardini, and others—fought over her. It is traditional to mention that Corilla Olimpica was at least in part the model for the title character of Madame de Staël’s novel, *Corinne*.

Devoted to the spontaneity of the live performance, Corilla Olimpica published very little. A few sonnets appeared in ephemeral publications of the Arcadian Academy. A brief pamphlet of poetry dedicated to the Empress Maria Teresa was printed at Bologna in 1763, and the great printer Giambattista Bodoni of Parma printed a two-page sonnet of hers in praise of Cornelia Knight in 1794. These publications are extremely rare. Collectors of this poet must look to ephemera such as contemporary reviews, announcements, and the considerable body of argument surrounding her coronation.

Bodoni was one of her admirers. To commemorate the laurel coronation at the Capitol, Bodoni collected the orations and gratulatory verses delivered at the event and published them in 1789 as the *Atti della solenne coronazione* (Acts of the solemn coronation of . . . Corilla Olimpica) (fig. 1). Bodoni himself wrote the starstruck preface, signing it with his anagrammatic Arcadian name, Obindo Vagiennio. He also closed the volume with a laudatory sonnet of his own, one of very few known poems by the master printer. The last lines of the sonnet



(Fig. 1)



(Fig. 2)

commend the printed book to Corilla with a Horatian sentiment: “It seems to me that from these printed leaves of paper a monument emerges more lasting than bronze or marble.”

Corilla’s younger contemporary, Fortunata Sulgher Fantastici (Livorno, 1755-Florence, 1824; fig. 2) entered the Arcadian Academy with the name Temira Parasside, but it never replaced her legal name in the public eye. (Members of the Academy routinely took on special names upon induction, as if their identities “in Arcadia” were somehow elevated over their routine selves. In Corilla’s case, her Arcadian name superseded her birth name: Corilla Olimpica enjoyed international fame, Maria Morelli was unknown.) Fortunata Fantastici avoided the Byronic lifestyle embraced by her predecessor, preferring a traditional marriage and limited touring. Hester Lynch Piozzi praises her singing voice and her musicality, as well as her “youth, beauty, erudition, and fidelity to her husband,” but ultimately finds her less thrilling than the aging poet laureate. Fantastici toured as an improviser in the 1780s and 1790s, to great praise and success. Unlike Corilla, she composed several volumes of written poetry. A definitive collection was printed at Livorno in 1794.

Fantastici’s published poetry, relegated to obscurity for no good reason, exhibits a strong awareness of belonging to a league of accomplished women. She dedicates her poetry collection to Maria Amalia, Duchess of Parma (1746-1804), who defied gender roles to the point of cross-dressing and carousing with her guards. Fantastici includes an afternote in the 1794 collection addressed to Paolina Secco-Suardi



(Fig. 3)

(called Lesbia Cidonia in Arcadia), another notable poet whose fame has been left behind. The central poem in the 1794 book is a canzone to the Swiss artist Angelica Kauffmann, who painted Fantastici's portrait as well as that of Teresa Bandettini. In a personal rhapsody entitled "A Dream," Fantastici presents herself standing fiercely naked except for a breastplate, bow raised in one hand, arrow in the other, quiver hanging by her side, ready to do battle with that other archer, Amor. Hardly the shrinking obedient wife.

Teresa Bandettini Landucci (Lucca, 1763-Lucca, 1837; fig. 3) came from a far less privileged background than either Corilla Olimpica or Fortunata Fantastici. Orphaned in childhood, she

grew up in deprived circumstances with relatives and read classics sporadically on her own. At age 15, she joined (or was bartered to) a dance company, and over the next ten years she developed her talent of reciting while dancing.

She ultimately left the company for a solo career. By the time she arrived in Florence in 1795, her fame was secured, she had joined the Arcadian Academy (with the name Amarilla Etrusca), and she was welcomed into the Florentine salons of Fantastici and Corilla Olimpica.

Corilla, now in her 70s, was especially charmed, recognizing in the younger woman's talent a worthy successor. They developed a close friendship, and certainly Corilla was a mentor. According to one account, she admitted to inviting Bandettini into her home "to enliven her declining years." The literary world celebrated her, and even the young Niccolò Paganini dedicated sonatas to her (these were rediscovered in 2002)!

Bandettini's performances must have been thrilling and edgy. She took chances in pursuit of the creative moment, the spark of immediacy. According to contemporary accounts, she could become emotionally overwhelmed onstage. Aware of criticism that spontaneous poetry did not hold up in print, she published a brief statement about it. "Art and reflection could make these verses better," she wrote in 1791, "but while these two daughters of time could change the features of any poem, they could lose the ingenuity stamped into the unmediated song."

And this is the point that so enthralled the traveling Romantic poets of England: the pursuit of the creative moment, the poet seized by the poem as it was taking shape in her voice.

Like Fortunata Fantastici, Bandettini wrote and published poetry in contrast to her live performances (which she declined to have transcribed). Her first books were printed in Venice at the expense of a patron in 1786. Notable among her later publications are *La morte d'Adone* (Modena, 1790), *Rime estemporanee* (Verona, 1801, often enlarged and reprinted), the romance in epic meter *La Teseide* (Parma, 1805, printed by Bodoni's star student, Luigi Mussi), and a translation from late antique Greek of *Paralipomena of Homer* by Quintus Smyrnaeus (Modena, 1815).

With these three ephemeral writers, it is beside the point to judge the quality of their poetry. They uncovered extraordinary native talents in themselves and rode them to achievements past every barrier that their social world could impose. Their pursuit of performing the creative moment has remained a fugitive goal in several arts, including abstract expressionist painting, jazz and other kinds of music, and rap poetry slams. For those who can accomplish it, it must feel like a sort of freedom.



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