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Women Poets and Improvisers: Cultural Assumptions and Literary Values in Arcadia

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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INTRODUCTION Last year's wonderful exhibit at the Philadelphia Museum of art on Eighteenth-century Rome, together with the publication of its sumptuous catalogue (in the volume *Art in Rome in the Eighteenth Century*), as well as the panel on Rome organized on the occasion of the thirty-first ASECS conference in Philadelphia, have focused American eighteenth-century scholars' attention on Papal Rome and on the Arcadian Academy. Susan Dixon's papers on "Arcadia Revisited: Conversazione in the Bosco Parrasio" and "Women in Arcadia" as well as Liliana Borroero and Stefano Susinno's collaborative paper titled "Arcadian Rome, Universal Capital of the Arts," provide a fitting introduction to, respectively, women's presence in

Arcadia and Arcadian patronage of the fine arts.¹ In opposition to a traditional representation of the Academy as the mirror of a frivolous intellectual life, these works, as well as work of Italian scholars such as Lucio Felici, Antonio Cipriani, Elisabetta Graziosi, and Anna Teresa Romano Cervone, provide a reevaluation of the cultural and literary role played by the Roman Arcadia during the eighteenth century. Against traditional assessments of Arcadia as "the last phase of our decadence, a world of literary people sequestered from life, absorbed in the reenactment of an old idyllic world," these new studies prove that the Roman Arcadia spear-headed a reaction against the late Baroque and literary mannerism at the beginning of the century, it promoted a reform of taste and a program of cultural education (Graziosi); it advocated Enlightenment principles and a taste for sensistic (i.e. scientific and philosophical) poetry (Cipriani; Felici); and it fostered the rise and diffusion of Neoclassicism (Borrero and Susinno).² In her paper Susan Dixon observes that little scholarly attention has been paid to the considerable number of female Arcadians and their professional accomplishments. In fact an evaluation of literary women's contribution to Arcadia—and through Arcadia to eighteenth-century Italian culture—still needs to be written. Although critics and historians have long noticed the leading role played by Arcadia in fostering women's literary activity and providing it with a forum—among them Ginevra Canonici Fachini (1827), Benedetto Croce (1946) and Amedeo Quondam (1973), to name only a few, there have been only a few specific studies of women poets' contribution to Arcadia, and they mostly deal with the first part of the century. Besides Teresa Venuti's and Clelia Bettini Attili's dated contributions (1922 and 1891, respectively) little more than a list of names, we find for example Bruno Meier's study of Faustina Maratti Zappi (1959), Anna Teresa Romano Cervone's and Luisa Ricaldone's study of women poets of early Arcadia (1991 and 1996, respectively), as well as Francesco Tadini's biographical study of Lesbia Cidonia (1995).³ To my knowledge the only systematic and sustained study of Arcadian women extending to the second part of the century is Elisabetta Graziosi's "Arcadia femminile: presenze e modelli." Susan Dixon attributes this lack of scholarly attention to Arcadian women to "the seemingly inconsistent and elusive nature of the Society." I would like to propose here a different interpretation of this omission. I believe that in order to fully understand the phenomenon Arcadia, and therefore its interpretations, we must also question the gender assumptions informing much historiographical discourse about it. I would like to venture here that the Academy's fostering of women exacerbated the criticism of those who opposed Arcadia on political and ideological grounds, giving them further ammunition to chastise Arcadia as an "effeminate," and therefore corrupt, institution. In studying the debate over the Capitol crowning of the most famous, celebrated and controversial woman poet of eighteenth-century Italy—Corilla Olimpica (1727-1800)—this paper studies the role played by gender values in shaping both Arcadian women poets' literary authority and historiographical interpretations of the cultural institution, Arcadia, that fostered their literary career. Women Poets and Improvisers / 71 It is my contention that Corilla's crowning was the event that, probably more than any other, contributed to foster the perception of Arcadia as an effeminate, when not degenerate, institution. Some ...

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