LETITIA ELIZABETH LANDON’S THE IMPROVISATRICE: 
THE FATAL COMBINATION OF GENDER AND GENRE

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It lies not in our power to love and hate;  
For will in us is overruled by Fate.

(Marlowe)\(^1\)

Letitia Elizabeth Landon’s long poem *The Improvisatrice* was written and published in London in 1824. Landon was already a famous poet at that time, since she started at an early age publishing poems and reviews for the *Literary Gazette* edited by William Jerdan, signing her contributions with the enigmatic and intriguing initials of L.E.L. *The Improvisatrice*, her second volume, was immediately a great success and thereafter sold extremely well, increasing her fame. In the Advertisement to the poem she describes it as “an attempt to illustrate that species of inspiration common in Italy, where the mind is warmed from earliest childhood by all that is beautiful in Nature and glorious in Art”. The narrator is a young artist who finds self-expression through both pencil and lute, and is “entirely Italian – a young female with all the loveliness, vivid feeling, and genius of her own impassioned land”.\(^2\) This description adumbrates the leading themes of this poem: female artistic genius set against a well-defined Italian background. My aim in this essay is to explore the representation in *The Improvisatrice* of the intersections and reciprocal influences between gender – female genius both of the author and of several characters in this poem – and genre, in particular how the oral


improvisation becomes long poem in Landon’s hands. The discussion will focus – with special reference to Letitia Elizabeth Landon – on how the traditional Italian culture in which the art of improvisation originated gave birth to a well-exploited literary style in Romantic literature, and how this oral art was exploited and transformed by female writers.

Landon’s work contains strong echoes of Mme de Staël’s Corinne, whose poems she translated for the English public in 1833. And if Corinne was “the book of the woman of genius”, The Improvisatrice is the poem of this female icon, because Mme de Staël’s novel enormously influenced contemporary and later women writers, and for them “the myth of Corinne persisted as both inspiration and warning: it is the fantasy of the performing heroine”. The protagonist of this long poem, a famous Italian woman painter and poet, performs her lyrics, songs and tales in public spaces, usually on subjects requested by the audience: hence “Improvisatrice” is the only name she is known by. One day in Florence, her place of birth, she meets an English gentleman, Lorenzo, and falls desperately in love with him. It seems that this love is requited, as they meet again during a ball, at which they exchange a kiss. Lorenzo, however, is already engaged to Ianthe, whom he marries in obeisance to his family’s will, despite the fact that he is not in love with her. By chance the wedding takes place in the dismayed presence of the Improvisatrice, who falls ill from the shock.

She never recovers from the disappointment, even when Lorenzo comes back to Florence, to explain his story and propose to her. She dies soon after and leaves her self-portrait to Lorenzo, as a tangible memoir of her lasting love. This main plot is interleaved by many other stories about women, love and despair, narrated by the Improvisatrice alone as monologues or as public performances before a worshipping audience.

Each of these tales has a female protagonist. The first character to be introduced is the Improvisatrice herself, who is both the heroine of the central story and the narrator of all the others. These are more or less legendary women, from both past and present time, such as

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3 Letitia Elizabeth Landon knew Mme De Staël’s Corinne, ou l’Italie very well since its first publication in French in 1807. She then published the English translation for the British edition together with Isabel Hill in 1833.