During the Romantic era, especially in Italy, performers known as improvvisatori and improvvisatrici extemporised poetry in public in response to subjects requested by their audiences. This type of performance fascinated grand tourists from northern Europe, who reported on poetic improvisers in hundreds of travel accounts, journals, letters, and periodical articles. By uncovering historical data and interpreting literary texts, Professor Esterhammer identifies patterns in the responses of English, German, French, and Russian writers to the experience of improvisation. She explores how improvisation interacts with Romantic ideas about genius, spontaneity, orality, and emotional expressiveness, and relates to evolving concepts of gender and nation.

Esterhammer goes on to interpret the influence that the figure of the poetic improviser had in nineteenth-century English and European fiction. In this context, the improvvisatore casts new light on conflicts between poetic genius and socio-economic constraints, and on the evolution of the Bildungsroman.

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This series aims to foster the best new work in one of the most challenging fields within English literary studies. From the early 1780s to the early 1830s a formidable array of talented men and women took to literary composition, not just in poetry, which some of them famously transformed, but in many modes of writing. The expansion of publishing created new opportunities for writers, and the political stakes of what they wrote were raised again by what Wordsworth called those “great national events” that were “almost daily taking place”: the French Revolution, the Napoleonic and American wars, urbanization, industrialization, religious revival, an expanded empire abroad and the reform movement at home. This was an enormous ambition, even when it pretended otherwise. The relations between science, philosophy, religion, and literature were reworked in texts such as *Frankenstein* and *Biographia Literaria*; gender relations in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and *Don Juan*; journalism by Cobbett and Hazlitt; poetic form, content and style by the Lake School and the Cockney School. Outside Shakespeare studies, probably no body of writing has produced such a wealth of comment or done so much to shape the responses of modern criticism. This indeed is the period that saw the emergence of those notions of “literature” and of literary history, especially national literary history, on which modern scholarship in English has been founded.

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ROMANTICISM AND IMPROVISATION, 1750–1850

ANGELA ESTERHAMMER
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Note on translations

All translations are the author's own, unless otherwise indicated.