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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

Literary Academies

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Mots-clés

Academies

France

Italy

Literature

Résumé

Early modern literary academies were spaces of in-person and epistolary interaction and intellectual sociability. From the highly institutionalised royal academies to the *academies salonnieres* of Italy, they incarnated the practices of the educated, intellectual classes in Europe. In Italy, Arcadia was a prime example of how academies came to be defined as spaces of sociability. This entry will explore Arcadia and its place within the broader context of a ‘Europe of academies.’ The various forms of sociability on offer in academies provide a window into their distinctive features and practices which far surpasses the pure semantics of a lexical definition.

The Early Modern era saw literary academies woven liberally into the urban fabric of European cities, becoming one of the central attractions of intellectual sociability. Furetière's *Dictionnaire universel* (1690) defined the academy as an 'assembly of the educated classes, where science and the fine arts are cultivated.' In France, their association with the crown—academies were established by letters patent—conferred on them a highly institutionalised system of governance in a dedicated location. In Italy, however, the term regrouped a number of less specific overlapping practices. Before the third edition of the Accademici della Crusca's *Vocabolario* (1691), the term strictly denoted a circle of philosophers or an assembly of erudite gentlemen, later expanding to encompass meeting spaces and public institutions such as universities. Academies were initiated through social relationships and closely conformed in structure to literary salons. In England, meanwhile, until the beginning of the seventeenth century, academies referred to a form of informal 'voluntary association,' much like fraternities and societies. In the first years of the eighteenth century, however, the term reappeared, morphing to include the arts (the Academy of Painting, founded in 1711, is one example)¹: British literary and artistic associations, though labelled societies or academies, compared more closely with the informal Italian model. In France, academicians and the royal administration alike shared the desire for the institutionalised model which prevailed. French provincial academies developed out of social circles. In the sixteenth century, the predilection for association in intellectual urban centres² began to manifest as organised private gatherings, such as salons and reading societies. These would eventually be converted to academies following the cultural policies of the capital, and receive royal patents.³ The structure of French academies were progressively divorced from that of salons, evolving into 'coexisting yet disparate forms of sociability.' (Roche 47)

Italian academies were not establishments formalised through the occupation of a dedicated space or endorsed by local authorities. They generally took root in the private homes of scholars or the nobility, who hosted the meetings around a good meal and to a select list of guests. In this regard, they were akin to the literary salons of France, considered 'private houses open to those who had been formally introduced, the domain of a mixed sociability, governed by certain norms of civility.'⁴ In other words, this form of association 'occurred in response to the primary needs of "civil" life [and to] the increasing socialisation of cultural processes, [which] produced a disciplined, regulated, and structured organisation, combining pleasure, gambling, and entertainment with the desire for culture.'⁵ The proliferation of academies in every Italian city⁶ since the sixteenth century—from private meetings held in residences to lasting institutions like the Crusca—may explain the relatively limited importance of salons. As academies already addressed the need for sociable practices such as discussions, there was less of an impetus for the latter to develop. The art of conversation played a central role in Parisian salons, alongside gambling and literary readings. (Lilti 273–318) The desired outcomes, like in the Italian academies, were a 'coming together' (*conversari: cum, versari*) in accordance with the nature of man, who was a sociable (*conversevole*) animal,' and 'studious leisure (*otium litteratum*) away from the hubbub of public life'. In France, salons were thus the forums for 'learned elocution' and cultured conversation.⁷

Georg Simmel claimed that sociability finds its origin in the internal ‘impulses’ driven by ‘individual sentiment and contentment,’ and is accomplished through ‘pure reciprocal actions’ (e.g., without ‘material gain’). Sociable conversation fulfils this objective because, contrary to the goal of everyday discussion, which is to communicate information, ‘the subject discussed is merely a substrate for the pleasure derived from live interactions.’⁸ Defining academies as entities comprised of individual members leads to an understanding of sociability not in terms of temperament or behaviour, but as forms of association and cultural practices. Maurice Agulhon believed that sociability resided in the appearance of initially informal ‘voluntary associations’ which then become formalised,⁹ as was the case with Italian literary academies. Although being an academician implied politeness and sociability, Agulhon insists that studying academies as spaces of sociability ‘does not consist in reflecting on the physical limits of that intellectual environment; we must enquire into how it functioned, and beyond that, what intrinsic quality it might have possessed.’¹⁰ This line of enquiry favours a social approach, through the lens of the men and women who populated the abstract, idealised entity that was the Republic of Letters, and through the study of their intellectual practices.¹¹

Italian academies had their origins in private associations; royal or political administrations rarely founded such institutions. As an example, the State founded only two academies in Naples, and not before the eighteenth century: the Accademia Ercolanese (1755) and the Reale Accademia di Scienze e Belle Lettere (1778).¹² Yet the celebrated Florentine Accademia della Crusca—the purpose of which was the study and preservation of the Italian language—had been founded in 1582 by a group of friends who were all members of the Fiorentina academy (1540).¹³ The Roman academy of Arcadia was established in October 1690, by a circle of friends from the Infecondi (1632): its institutional filiation developed through the relationships maintained by the members who were perpetuating a social group rather than an institution. The academy moved from palace to palace before finding a permanent home on the hillside of the Janiculum in 1726.¹⁴ It would retain a hybrid structure: there were a variety of formalities (such as laws, diplomas, and admissions), but meetings continued to be held in private gardens and homes. Arcadia’s institutional boundaries were not limited to Rome, and nearly one hundred satellite academies, named ‘colonies,’ appeared in peripheral Italian cities. Scholars formed these regional colonies through their social networks, at their own estates: they adopted the common rules and admission procedures typical of institutions, and organised at least two formal meetings per year, but they were not required to settle in a dedicated space. This led some colonies to maintain the salon-style meetings in private residences, along with the sociable conversation practices populated by a select group of men and women of letters. The Urbino colony, founded in 1701, is a prime example of how salon and Arcadia practices overlapped. Urbino’s founder would remark eight years after its establishment that ‘the private academies, together with the colony, keep alive our ancient and venerated academy of the Assorditi.’¹⁵ Such spaces of sociability served to preserve the local intellectual milieu and the illustrious Accademia degli Assorditi (founded in 1550). Private meetings took the form of literary salons, in individual residences and with typical salon sociability. In this, Italian academies differed from the French model. Literary and social practices coexisted, melding Arcadic institutional formality with the informality resulting from entertainment and sociable activities.

Public meetings were organised for specific celebrations, replete with poetry recitations to which the local city and ecclesiastical elites were invited. Arcadian events were structured in the same way as in the provincial academies of France, with two forms of meeting: ‘the closed proceedings and the displays of pomp were, for academicians, the two halves of a coherent civil liturgy.’ (Roche 134) The addition of a ceremonial component multiplied the opportunities for various forms of sociability, since they were supplemented with meals and discussions with non-academicians. Musical performances were equally on the menu. The festivities contributed to making Arcadia part of the ‘practices of conviviality of the urban elite.’ (Lilti 10) We can infer the prevalence of meals from the few sporadic mentions in letters: it was especially important that food, drink, and ‘refreshments’ be provided. A number of letters offer descriptions of the gatherings. In 1782, the secretary of the Gorizia colony of Arcadia wrote the following: ‘Immediately upon our arrival in the magnificently prepared great hall, we were regaled with chocolate and refreshments, accompanied by coffee. Service continued throughout the day and into evening. And this is quite apart from the luncheon [...] during which, Silveno performed French verses set to pastoral music.’¹⁶ The association of convivial pleasures, such as the meal, and literary activities, such as poetry recitation, is clear. Arcadian festivities sometimes echoed French society theatre practices.¹⁷ The public gatherings, in all their pomp, sumptuous décor, and lavish entertainment, were therefore prime venues of aristocratic sociability.

New forms of sociability were also beginning to take shape. The letters themselves are tangible evidence of the relationships that existed between sender, receiver, and those cited in the text. They are far more than a simple ‘collection of static communications,’ revealing not only different facets of relationships, but also the inherent logistics of communicating over distances.¹⁸ Arcadia engendered a polite epistolary sociability through its system of communication grounded in a pastoral universe: members adopted unique Arcadian pseudonyms and had the option of using the ancient Greek calendar, based on Olympiads, when referencing dates. The socio-academic sphere was further expanded through the inclusion of non-resident members writing from France and Britain. Correspondence thus became a core component of academic activity at both the Royal Society of London and the Académie des Sciences de Paris, with the responsibility specifically delegated to certain academicians.¹⁹ Establishing a colony meant regular communication with the academy in Rome, as it was there that applications for admission, the issuance of diplomas, and academic publications were centralised. As a consequence of distance, new practices developed around initiating and maintaining social relations: first contact might be established through written communication or recommendation, with epistolary relationships deepening with the passing of years. But it was existing friendships that most often led to founding new colonies, and it is impossible to fully appreciate the academic institution without considering the social dimension or the affiliated forms of sociability. For friendships both pre-existed the institution and led to its creation. Amicable bonds allowed the academy to continue functioning—both during assemblies and when circumstances dictated long-distance epistolary discussions—and would outlive it in the event of disbandment.

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