

‘Envoicing’ Women on Page, Stage, and Screen in Early Post-Unification Italy

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*Fra le caratteristiche della voce in quanto voce c'è infatti quella
di rivelare il sesso di chi la emette.*

A. CAVARERO¹

In this essay, I present a selection of actual and imagined female, middle-class voices – both spoken and sung – in the period from the 1870s up until Italy’s entry into WWI in 1915, in order to highlight their resonance and multi-chorality. Following Kaja Silverman, who, writing on cinema, insisted on the importance of the authorial voice for feminist purposes in *The Acoustic Mirror* (1988), I here consider a selection of the many contributions – as authors, performers, readers and spectators – that middle-class women made to the expanding culture industry and its consumption in the early post-Unification period². In pointing to their output and interconnections, and drawing on Carolyn Abbate’s notion of ‘envoicing’ – literally meaning ‘*in voice*’ – I argue that as role models, women writers and performers (consciously, or otherwise) interpellated growing numbers of women readers and spectators as early-Capitalist, socio-economically-aware, independent consumers³. Taken together, I want to suggest that they constituted a significant force in the struggle for emancipation – even while they may not (in some cases) have identified with the movement for female emancipation from the 1890s onward⁴. My approach is arguably essentialist and based on exclusion; yet, as Sue-Ellen Case argued nearly thirty years ago, while «essentialist maneuvers fail in their exclusionary practices, they do succeed in inhabiting certain concepts such as ‘women’, ‘lesbian’, etc. that are increasingly endangered by dominant society»⁵. To go about this, firstly, I will explain Abbate’s notion of ‘envoicing’ and clarify my understanding of the ‘Other voice’, before considering the emergence of female performers from the Renaissance period onwards. I then go on to consider the emergence of female spectators and women readers with the concomitant arrival *en*

¹ A. CAVARERO, *A più voci: filosofia dell’espressione vocale*, Milano 2013, p. 143.

² See K. SILVERMAN, *The Acoustic Mirror*, Bloomington 1988.

³ See C. ABBATE, *Opera; or, the Envoicing of Women* in *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, ed. by R.A. Solie, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1993, pp. 225–58.

⁴ The anti-feminist stances of writers such as the Neapolitan Matilde Serao (1856-1927) and Neera (pseudonym for Anna Radius Zuccari, 1846-1918), for example, are well documented.

⁵ *Introduction* in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. by S.E. Case, Baltimore 1990, p. 8.

masse of women writers, before concluding. My essay will refer to, and discuss, more or less in depth a number of primary texts on page, stage and screen from the period 1870-1915.

1. With Other Voice and ‘Envoicing’

Abbate coined the term ‘envoicing’ in 1993. Through a reading of Patrick Conrad’s film *Mascara* (1978), she suggested that «opera, far from being a revenge tragedy that Catherine Clément calls “the undoing of women”, is a genre that so displaces the authorial musical voice onto female characters and female singers that it largely reverses a conventional opposition of male (speaking) subject and female (observed) object»⁶. As Simonetta Chiappini has recently argued in relation to women in opera during the Risorgimento, «[A]ssai più che in letteratura la voce della donna arrivava (e arriva) al cuore dello spettatore con una potenza che il chiuso sistema della legittimazione patriarcale ottocentesca avrebbe potuto far credere impensabile. Forse la responsabilità è della musica, o meglio del canto [...]»⁷. Thus, the potency of song, or voice, functioned as a liberating force for female performers and their spectators; any contradiction that the suffering Italian opera heroine signified in performance through simultaneously embodying sexual desire and virtue – regardless of any prowess her acting ability displayed – was surpassed by the sheer sonority of her voice due to her wider *tessitura* (vocal range) and her ability to ‘out-sing’ her male counterpart⁸.

This would chime ten years later with Adriana Cavarero’s philosophy of voice in *A più voci* where she asserts that «la cantante lirica diventa una figura straordinariamente potente. Si tratta di una donna che, non solo porta nella sua voce il semantico e lo vince, ma anche svolge la funzione maschile, attiva»⁹. I wish to extend Abbate’s and Cavarero’s ideas on voice and apply them here to what I term the *body-as-voice* of physical and sexual prowess in its stress on nuances of gesture in live performance and on the silent screen pre-WW1. Here, too, it would seem – particularly

⁶ ABBATE, *Opera, or the Envoicing of Women*, pp. 228-29.

⁷ S. CHIAPPINI, *La voce della martire. Dagli “evirati cantori” all’eroina romantica*, in *Storia d’Italia. Annali 22: Il Risorgimento*, a cura di A.M. Banti e P. Ginsborg, Torino 2007, pp. 289-328 [314].

⁸ On the voice as a «positive symbol of liberation and artistic fulfilment, which was quintessentially the voice of freedom», see S. RUTHERFORD, *The Voice of Freedom: Images of the Prima Donna*, in *The New Woman and Her Sisters: Feminism and the Theater, 1850-1914*, ed. by V. Gardner and S. Rutherford, London 1992), pp. 95-113 [95].

⁹ Cavarero proposes a philosophy of vocal expression in tracing an imaginary history of voices of female figures since Antiquity that have disrupted the logocentrism of the written word, the semantic. See A. CAVARERO, *A più voci*, pp. 143-45.

at the height of the era of the *grande attrice* and the silent diva film – can female performance as ‘sonority’, or voice, be said to undermine, disrupt or render ironic male-authored narrative and saturate it with agency. In a symbolic relationship akin to the Italian feminist practice of *affidamento*, in which an older and usually more powerful and authoritative woman facilitates, through dialogue and friendship, a younger woman’s access to a stronger sense of self and of her social and symbolic value as a subject and as a woman, I retroactively apply the term to the relationship between female performing artists, women writers, and their spectators and readers¹⁰.

No doubt dissonant voices will argue that gender is irrelevant and that past and present voices are androgynous and gender ‘free’, and, following Roland Barthes, they have no originating force; or, as Jacques Derrida would have it, that the voices of a given text are endlessly differed or differentiated through binaries and hierarchies that underpin meaning. In the words of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, «critics align themselves with a poststructuralist repudiation of ‘essentialism’, which makes them less interested in individual writers as originators of meaning and more focused on textual production as a complex and powerful set of meaning-effects with political implications»¹¹. And yet, «Western literary history *is* overwhelmingly male – or, more accurately, patriarchal»¹². For this reason, I am aligning myself with Silverman, who reappraises Barthes’s ‘The Death of the Author’ on the importance of the authorial voice, in order that the ‘other voice’ may be found in the authorial systems of literary, performance and cinematic cultures.

Voices are oral performative utterances, either spoken or sung. Like the subjects who articulate them, they are socially and culturally conditioned, and, arguably, gendered. In the Renaissance, women who performed on the public stage were generally frowned upon for exhibiting themselves, and the Council of Trent (1545-63) reiterated St Paul’s injunction which forbade women to sing in church; in order that men could sing lead female roles in operas by Mozart and Handel in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they were castrated¹³. As male nonetheless, they occupied a

¹⁰ I am not the first to retroactively apply the notion of entrustment, or *affidamento* to the context of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Italy; Ursula Fanning (2013) and Lucia Re (2015) have presented similar arguments.

¹¹ S. GUBAR AND S.M. GILBERT, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, New Haven 1979, p. xxxvii.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 47. Italics their emphasis.

¹³ See CAVARERO, *A più voci*, p. 144: «Nel castrato, l’intrinseca femminilità’ del vocalico celebra evidentemente il suo trionfo piu’ diretto: il corpo maschile rinuncia ai propri connotati virili per farsi voce femminile».

position of power and authority which, as Classicist Mary Beard argues, began almost 3000 years ago in Western literature with Homer. In her chapter on *The Public Voice of Women* in her *Women and Power* (2017), Beard states that «public speaking and oratory were not merely things that ancient women *didn't do*: they were exclusive practices and skills that defined masculinity as a gender»¹⁴. Beard claims that we are the heirs to this tradition of gendered speaking, stating that «it is still the case that when listeners hear a female voice, they do not hear a voice that connotes authority; or rather, they have not learned to hear authority in it; they do not hear *muthos*»¹⁵. She acknowledges two main exceptions to women's public voice: firstly, women could speak as victims, as martyrs, usually to preface their own death, and secondly, women could speak out in public to defend their own sectional interests – their homes, their children, their husbands or the interests of other women. The first wave of women writers in the new Italy were speaking *in the interests of other women* 'with other voice', that is, with voices – both printed, spoken and sung – that (however consciously) were subtly and covertly challenging dominant, conservative, traditional views on women's social role as wives and mothers.

I am adopting here Simone de Beauvoir's definition of «Woman as Other» which she proposed in her feminist tract *The Second Sex* (1949) as a relational theory of femininity that asserts that the category of woman is defined by everything man is not. 'Other' here refers to, and stands in for, 'woman'; thus, I am gendering 'with other voice' as performatively feminine. This 'Otherness' presupposes a breaking away from a locus, a centre that is necessarily a stabilizing force, thus a destabilization. The 'other voice', or 'voices' in the plural, speak from the periphery of this centre, Cavarero's masculine 'semantic', and their Otherness positions them at once as different from, and potentially threatening to, the stability of the core. The core is the dominant force, and may be embodied as a dualism in contemporary times as white, Western, middle-class, and gendered male, while the 'periphery' might be expressed as black, working-class, and gendered female; or the 'core' could be configured as an ethnocentric Western *logos* whose subaltern – Gramsci's economically dispossessed – is the East, or today's economic migrants and refugees. We must, of course, be mindful of what Gayatri Spivak warned against in her famous essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, in making

¹⁴ M. BEARD, *Women and Power: A Manifesto*, London 2017, p. 17.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 30.

assumptions about the nature of collective subalterns: as scholars, might we not ironically be re-inscribing neo-colonial imperatives in seeking to somehow ‘rescue’ them, of threatening them with cultural erasure¹⁶? Yet, when the colonizers (in our case the Ottocento priests, politicians and intellectuals), and colonized groups (Ottocento Europe’s women of all social classes), are no longer with us, what *is* left is the multivocality and polyphony of the printed word, the text (of a novel, a play, a *libretto*, or a screenplay).

Whether they were acting purposefully or not, middle-class women began to disrupt the *status quo* thanks to a more liberal political climate following Unification, advances in science and technology (for example, the discovery of electricity, the invention of cinema, and the expansion of print media). Heretofore, such voices had been only partially uttered, and many were, and are, illegible. According to the 1861 census, around 75 per cent of Italians were illiterate, and among women, only 19 per cent could read¹⁷. There were, of course, regional and gender differences in literacy levels: in Lombardy the figure was much lower, with 48 per cent of men and 59 per cent of women registered as illiterate. In Emilia Romagna, it was 72 per cent of the population as against 83 per cent of the female population¹⁸. In 1901, 62 per cent of Italian women were illiterate, and still ten years later, 40 per cent of Italians could neither read nor write¹⁹. Yet, never before were women’s voices resounding with such polyphony and through different forms of media.

2. With Female Performers’ and Characters’ Voices

In Renaissance Italy during the revival of Antiquity, specifically in the mid- to late-1500s which witnessed the beginnings of the *commedia dell’arte* and the invention of opera in Italy, the first *diva* – such as the Venetian actress Vincenza Armani (1530-69), who was hailed as «divina» by the *commedia dell’arte* actor Adriano Valerini Veronese – emerged²⁰. Several hundred years later, following the demise of the *castrati*, early

¹⁶ See G.C. SPIVAK, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg, Urbana 1988, pp. 271-313.

¹⁷ G. FARINELLI, *Storia del giornalismo italiano: dalle origini ai nostri giorni*, Torino 1997, p. 212.

¹⁸ See D. MARCHESINI, *L’analfabetismo femminile nell’Italia dell’Ottocento: caratteristiche e dinamiche*, in *L’educazione delle donne: scuole e modelli di vita femminile nell’Italia dell’Ottocento*, ed. S. Soldani, Milano 1991², pp. 37-56 [37].

¹⁹ FARINELLI, *Storia del giornalismo*, p. 212.

²⁰ See *Oratione di Adriano Valerini veronese, in morte della divina signora Vincenza Armani, comica eccellentissima. Et alcune rime dell’istesso, e d’altri auttori, in lode della medesima. Con alquante leggiadre e belle compositioni di detta signora Vincenza*, Verona 1570. See also R. KERR, *The Rise of the Diva on the Sixteenth-Century Commedia dell’Arte Stage*, Toronto 2015.

nineteenth-century Italian sonnets venerated the operatic *prima donna*²¹. According to Susan Rutherford, the *attrice cantante* Giuditta Pasta (1797-1865) in the role of Norma from Vincenzo Bellini's 1831 opera of the same name was the acknowledged «diva del mondo» in the press between 1822 and 1836²². Sopranos were performing in the title role as never before in the increasing number of the peninsula's public theatres thanks to audience demand to hear the extent to which the female voice could sing unimaginable musical passages. This genre of opera can be termed 'women's opera' for its explicit address to female spectators: the melodramatic plots were about women – their emotional and romantic lives, their sufferings and ideological dilemmas – and performed by women, insofar as the suffering heroine is the central character in the opera, and has an immense capacity for love²³. The operatic narratives in which she features were typically based on so-called 'dangerous' French-imported novels and plays whose themes included female sexuality, adultery, matricide, prostitution and rape (Ponchielli's *La Gioconda*, Puccini's *La Bohème* and *Tosca*, and Cilea's *Adriana Lecouvreur* being examples). Opera titles frequently bore her name, and the plots spoke directly to Italian female heterosexual spectators' emotional lives. It was the first performance of Verdi's domestic opera *La traviata* in 1853 which premiered at La Fenice with Fanny Salvini-Donatelli (1815-1891) in the title role, that marked the arrival of the erotic and sexually self-aware woman on the Italian stage²⁴. The heroine, Violetta Valery, a high-class courtesan, represents the first in a long line of young and beautiful, sexually desirous and assertive, yet sympathetic, tragic opera heroines whose feelings of sexual desire for the hero threaten to usurp the dominant hegemony (she reappears in later Italian tragic operas; for example in Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* in the figure of Santuzza, and in Puccini's eponymous *Tosca*, and had her origins in the *bel canto* tragic operas of Bellini and Donizetti, for example *Norma* and *Lucia di Lammermoor*).

²¹ See F. IZZO, *Divas and Sonnets: Poetry for Female Singers in 'Teatri arti e letteratura'*, in *The Arts of the Prima Donna in the Long Nineteenth Century*, eds. R. Cowgill and H. Poriss, Oxford 2012), pp. 3-20.

²² S. RUTHERFORD, *La cantante delle passioni': Giuditta Pasta and the idea of operatic performance*, «Cambridge Opera Journal» 19/2, 2007, pp. 107-38 [108].

²³ I am borrowing the term 'woman's opera' from film studies, in particular, Christine Gledhill's *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (BFI, 1987). For Gledhill, 'woman's film' was about women, their personal dilemmas and sufferings.

²⁴ Discussing Verdi's *oeuvre*, Rutherford draws attention to Violetta's «paean to the pleasures of sexual liberty and independence: "Gioire, / Di voluttà' nei vortici perire. / Sempre libera degg'io / Folleggiar di gioia a gioia"» in Act I of *La traviata* that constituted «a provocation to the period's conservative ideas about women». See S. RUTHERFORD, *Verdi, Opera, Women*, Cambridge 2013, p. 111.

La traviata is based on, and adapted from, the French novel (1848) and play (1852) *La dame aux Camélias*, both by Alexandre Dumas *fils*. The narrative is purportedly autobiographical, for it is said to be based on Dumas *fils*'s love affair with the courtesan Marie Duplessis (pseudonym for Alphonsine Plessis), who had died of consumption in 1847. The play is one of the first dramas to take contemporary life as a theme, and one of the first to show a modern (as opposed to historical) courtesan in a sympathetic light. Verdi had written to his friend Cesare De Sanctis in 1853 saying it was the «subject of the times»²⁵. He and his librettist Francesco Piave wanted to retain the contemporary setting, but the Austro-Hungarian censors at *La Fenice* in Venice insisted that it should be set in the past, circa 1700 (it was not until the battle for Unification had been won that contemporary productions were staged from the 1880s onwards), by which time the opera had become an anachronistic (and romanticized) depiction of the high class courtesan's life²⁶. Where Bellini, Donizetti, and their librettists had sacrificed their heroines for love alone, Verdi sought redemption and social acceptance for his: though the court jester's daughter Gilda loses her virginity to the Duke in *Rigoletto*, Gilda is still regarded as *sympathetic*, and is looked upon with pity in her suffering by spectators virtue of her willingness to die for the man she loves. Violetta is another example of an 'heroic' and sexually 'corrupt' woman (according to the social mores of the day) who succumbs to the oppressions of masculine bourgeois dogma, which was at odds with the *demi-mondaine* world. Violetta's propensity to experience feelings of romantic love for Alfredo, to make the 'noble' sacrifice requested of her by Alfredo's father to accept that her life is (apparently) worth far less to the society compared with Alfredo's sister's, puts Violetta in a sympathetic light – in spite of her social standing – in the eyes of Ottocento audiences. Accordingly, they are moved to pity Violetta in Act II when she agrees, in tears, to leave Alfredo at the request of his father who wishes to protect his family's honour, as well as when Violetta is dying of consumption throughout the entire last act. The audience (and Germont) feels pity not only because we have witnessed the integrity of Violetta's love for Alfredo from the outset, but more importantly, because the men, Alfredo and Germont, forgive her for her past life at the very last moment, thus enabling her to redeem herself. Verdi's sympathy for Violetta, which, as we shall now see, is apparent from a close-

²⁵ R. PARKER, *La traviata* in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, ed. by S. Sadie, Oxford 1997, pp. 799-802 [799].

²⁶ RUTHERFORD, *Verdi, Women, Opera*, p. 138.

reading of his choices of musical utterances to represent her in the drama, may have had something to do with his relationship with the renowned *bel canto* opera singer Giuseppina Strepponi (1815-1897): Strepponi had given birth to three children out of wedlock with two different men before living with Verdi for ten years prior to their marriage, which lasted until their deaths in old age²⁷.

The first musicologist to draw operatic music into feminist interpretation was Susan McClary, who sought to uncover music's social meanings by focusing on how musical representations of gender can tell us much about a particular composer's attitude towards a given character, as well as how the characters will be read in a given geo-social and historical context²⁸. Examples of Violetta's demonstrations of noble love and desire for Alfredo occur in Act II when Alfredo's father pays her a visit to request that she leave his son to protect the family's 'good' reputation. Violetta tells Germont, «or amo Alfredo», and asks him, »Non sapete quale affetto vivo, immenso m'arda in petto?», against a musical backdrop of *tremolo* strings played softly and alternating between a major and minor key to create dramatic tension. The key turns resolutely major as wind instruments are introduced over loud, long-held notes sung in a high register as she tells Germont she would rather die than leave Alfredo. Following Germont's departure, Alfredo returns to find Violetta anxious and distracted, and in a grandiose build-up involving instruments from all sections of the orchestra, she begs Alfredo in a cathartic plea, '*con passione e forza*': «Amami, Alfredo, quant'io t'amo».

In the second half of Act II, Germont returns to plead with his son to abandon Violetta for the sake of their family's reputation. The scene changes to a party at Violetta's friend's richly-furnished Parisian apartment, where Alfredo meets Violetta who has returned to the Baron. He throws his winnings at her in a fit of fury to pay her back for selling off her possessions while they were living together, and is then asked to leave. In the third and final Act, Violetta is reunited with Alfredo and Alfredo's father embraces Violetta as his daughter. The opera lasts for approximately 127 minutes (depending on the performance), of which Violetta spends roughly 58 minutes suffering in grief compared with Alfredo, whose musical and stage suffering lasts in comparison for around 11 minutes. Violetta's death scene lasts for a good 31 minutes, yet the last

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

²⁸ S. MCCLARY, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, & Sexuality*, Minneapolis 2002² (1991).

word she utters, «gioia», is held for eight beats on a top B flat, ‘envoicing’ her before her demise.

Another ‘Magdalene figure’ had captured the hearts and minds of the Italian theatre-going public in Pietro Mascagni’s opera rendition of Verga’s *novella* ‘Cavalleria Rusticana’ (1880), which he turned into a play for a national audience and which was first performed at the Teatro Carignano in Turin in 1884. In so doing, Verga created a ‘new voice’ for the dishonoured woman, ‘Santuzza’ in the play (known as the saintly ‘Santa’ in the short story), by placing more emphasis on her ability to articulate her thoughts and feelings. As Enza De Francisci has shown

as soon as Verga [...] shift[s] [his] tale from the narrative genre to the theatrical (a genre which predominantly relies on speech), more emphasis is inevitably placed on [his] characters’ ability to articulate their thoughts and as a result, their individual voices (taken to mean not simply the ability to speak, but the right to express an opinion) get “louder”²⁹.

In the opera version, Mascagni and his librettists depict Santuzza similarly dishonoured and disrespected, but she is more sympathetic than in the play. When saying goodbye to his mother to fight a duel, Turiddu, having been involved in a sexual relationship with the married Lola, asks his mother to take care of Santuzza and to treat her as her own daughter («s’io...non tornassi...voi dovrete fare / da madre a Santa, ch’io le avea giurato / di condurla all’altare»), and Santuzza is portrayed sympathetically in the music; she is also ‘envoiced’ as the central character and a *mezzo-soprano*. While Santa is ‘saintly’ and has a silent role in Verga’s *novella*, in the play, Santuzza is singled out from the villagers and is positioned at centre stage. Moreover, where Verga’s omniscient narrator shows sympathy for all of the characters in the *novella*, in the drama he posits Santuzza as the dishonoured victim thus conveying her with pity. She thereby assumes the role of the suffering Fallen Woman for her audience, who participates vicariously in her torment, thereby projecting their own, hidden, inner sufferings. Significantly, in the absence of a positivistic, omniscient narrator, and in a similar fashion to the tragic Fallen Woman in realist opera, Santuzza can express her emotions *herself* to an attentive and transfixed audience ready to listen to, and familiar with, watching ‘envoiced’ suffering, melodramatic protagonists. Moreover, thanks to the introduction of naturalism on stage with Verga’s *Cavalleria Rusticana*, from 1884

²⁹ E. DE FRANCISCI, *A ‘New’ Woman in Verga and Pirandello: From Page to Stage*, Oxford 2018, p. 1.

onwards, actors no longer had to address the audience. Duse later performed the role of Nora in Luigi Capuana's translation of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879), in Rome in 1891. The feminist writer Sibilla Aleramo, writing in her revolutionary autobiography *Una donna* (1906), explains how she attended one of Duse's performances in her twenties accompanied by the retired female actor Giacinta Pezzana, who «aveva avvertito due lagrime brillar[si] negli occhi»³⁰. Pezzana and Aleramo were united in their appreciation of Ibsen's ending that was so distasteful to *il pubblico italiano*, who «protestava con candido zelo all'ultima scena» during which Nora leaves her husband and children³¹. We know from a reading of Aleramo's diary that without the influence of Nora, Aleramo «non avre[bbe], un anno dopo quella notte, lasciata la casa coniugale e [suo] figlio»³². As a symbol of national identity and international acclaim, Duse was contributing to a phenomenon in the new era of modernity that was encouraging women to increasingly look inwards, thus becoming self-questioning, self-aware and self-determined, with a more developed sense of self. In the words of Aleramo, «non ero una Madame Bovary, non ero vittima della letteratura, non facevo letteratura. Ibsen giungendo laggiù fino alla mia tragica coscienza, non mi prometteva gioia, ma solamente l'accordo con me stessa»³³. In a publication from 1976 titled *The Role of the Actor in Theatrical Reform*, František Cerný imagined the hope that female spectators might have been given by female tragic actors in European theatre at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, as they directed their pensive gazes towards the distance in their acting style. He posits:

In this period women dreamed of a happier life. They saw in female actors and their plays a hope for a better future, and tragic female actors reinforced these dreams more or less intensely; by the very fact that they did not perform in plays on many occasions, they expressed and reinforced spectators' hopes to go on living. A very characteristic key moment among female actors around 1900 is the technique of directing their pensive gaze towards the distance, towards the future which, perhaps, will offer more favourable conditions for the development of

³⁰ S. ALERAMO, *Una donna*, Milano 1995 (1901), p. 158.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

³² S. ALERAMO., *Un amore insolito: diario 1940-1944*, ed. by A. Morino, Milano 1979, p. 14.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

human existence³⁴.

The figure of the suffering heroine or Magdalene figure – played by the likes of Duse, Emma Gramatica, Adelina Patti, or Gemma Bellincioni – was the *Italianised* unifying node between opera, bourgeois theatre and the silent screen – the suffering Magdalen figure – who embodied Italy’s transformation, its apparent ‘moral decline’ and «ineffable spirituality, a ritualistic otherness, and an intuitive aura about invisible things»³⁵. We also see her clearly on the silver screen in the figure of the silent diva. Francesca Bertini, who co-directed with Gustavo Serena, and starred in the title role of the dramatic diva film *Assunta Spina* (1915), based her screenplay on Salvatore Di Giacomo’s novel of the same name. A southern melodramatic film of female sacrifice and passion set in working-class inner-city Naples, Assunta takes the blame for her fiancé’s crime of passion and is imprisoned. The opening frame of her posing in front of the Bay of Naples in chiton Greek-style clothing present her in the guise of a divine Greek goddess staring into the distance with a pensive gaze. Throughout the duration of the film, Assunta’s overemphatic gestures, appearance and hypersexualized gazes and expressions articulate her ‘envoicing’ through the *body-as-voice*, one that draws attention to herself as the most important subject of film text, and is in synchrony with her technologically-muted voice. By now the theatre auditorium was darkened and electricity had replaced gas lighting in the *politeama* – the non-lavishly decorated, egalitarian theatres built throughout the peninsula from the 1870s onwards. These eliminated the social class system in traditional theatres of separating spectators according to social class in favour of an amphitheatre-like *galleria* – which were being used along with *caffè-concerti* and the summer arenas as the first cinemas (the period from 1908 to 1914 has been described as early Italian cinema’s ‘brief and glorious season’)³⁶. The long histories of opera and theatre were intermingling for the first time with new technologies in a pivotal moment in media history in which divas were silenced behind a screen and their corporeal physicality and presence – their gestures of *affect* – became extensions of their voice – their ‘envoicing’. The first film entrepreneurs held screenings in theatres, taverns, and hotels according to a practice

³⁴ F. CERNÝ, *Les tragédiennes comme un phénomène caractéristique du théâtre européen à la fin du XIXème e au commencement du XXème siècle* in *The Role of the Actor in the Theatrical Reform of the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries*, ed. by M. Lukeš, Prague 1976, pp. 23-36 [33]. My translation.

³⁵ A. DALLE VACCHE, *Diva: Defiance and Passion in Early Italian Cinema*, Austin 2008, p. 1.

³⁶ G. BERTELLINI, *Introduction: Traveling Lightness*, in *Italian Silent Cinema: A Reader*, ed. by G. Bertellini, New Barnet 2013, p. 3.

that lasted well into the 1910s, and up until 1915 earlier forms of entertainment co-existed with cinema. Popular entertainment venues staged different kinds of amusements including ballets, legitimate theatre, puppet shows, parties, circus-type entertainments, and sporting events. As Paolo Caneppele has shown, «What one experiences in these facilities over different evenings was a combination of skating races, dancing nights, theatrical shows, ballets and film screenings»³⁷. We know that early cinema with its static camera to capture the *mise-en-scène* was accompanied by live music, plots were usually familiar to audiences, and that the point-of-view shot and the shot-reverse-shot were not features of Italian cinema until 1919³⁸. Professional actors would typically perform the plot in front of the screen for those who were illiterate, while audience members would read aloud the intertitles during what Sergio Raffaelli has dubbed the «oral cinema period (1896-1905)»³⁹. Thus, it could be argued that cinema spectator's in the period prior to WW1 were self-conscious and aware of one another's presence and the evening's entertainment in the same way as they were in attending a play or an opera, making the experience a far more sociable and interactive one holding more in common with theatre-going than the practice of sitting in a darkened room with the screen – a practice that only properly began from after the Second World War⁴⁰.

3. With Female Spectators' Voices

Carlotta Sorba's work on Italian theatres has been pivotal in pointing out differences with other European countries, where, from around the 1830s, the theatre auditorium was unlit and audiences sat in the dark⁴¹. In occupied Italy, the Austrian authorities ensured gas oil lamps were still in place in order that they could better maintain surveillance: we might recall the illuminated opening scene of Luchino Visconti's sumptuous historical film *Senso* (1951), in which a performance of Verdi's *Il trovatore* is interrupted by nationalist (interestingly, female) activists who cause a riot: «Fuori lo straniero da Venezia!», shouts the instigator – a haunting remark which bears a striking resemblance to the political zeitgeist of today. Though traditionalists felt that opera and

³⁷ P. CANEPELE, *Research on Local Moviegoing: Trends and Future Perspectives*, in *Italian Silent Cinema: A Reader*, pp. 305-14 [308].

³⁸ DALLE VACCHE, *Diva*, p. 1.

³⁹ S. RAFFAELLI, *On the Language in Silent Films in Italy*, in *Italian Silent Cinema*, pp. 247-53 [247].

⁴⁰ C. WAGSTAFF, *Cinema*, in *Italian Cultural Studies*, ed. by D. Forgacs and R. Lumley, Oxford 1996, pp. 216-32 [217].

⁴¹ C. SORBA, *Teatri: L'Italia del Melodramma nell'Età del Risorgimento*, Bologna 2001, p. 149.

theatre-going carried risks for women for their associations with sexuality, we know from depictions in nineteenth-century realist fiction, as well as in columns on theatre-going in newspapers and journals for women, that probably around half of the spectators were female. Due to the relatively slow phasing out of gas lighting and introduction of electricity in theatres in Italy until around the 1900s, women spectators were on display, which might have heightened their sense of engagement with female performers during the 1870s.

The Torinese writer La Marchesa Colombi (pseudonym for Maria Antonietta Torriani, 1840-1920), provides reliable evidence of spectating practises in her conduct manual *La gente per bene* published in 1877, where she reveals how ‘gossiping’ was no longer a socially acceptable form of behaviour at the theatre: «Ricevendo visite in palco, la signora dovrà salutare, sostenere la conversazione durante gli intermezzi, e frenarla durante la rappresentazione per non esporsi alla vergogna di farsi zittire»⁴². Nor, indeed, as far as young women were concerned, was ‘flirting’, as we learn from the following pronouncement from La Marchesa Colombi: «In teatro una signorina [...] non dimostra mai di prestare più attenzione agli spettatori che allo spettacolo»⁴³. These more engaged audience behaviours may well have begun to take root twenty years prior, judging from a reading of Rutherford’s account of Verdi’s female spectators in 1850s Turin⁴⁴. Rutherford drew on film studies – specifically, Sue Rickard’s analysis of female spectatorship of mid-twentieth-century film musicals in which she argued for spectators’ identification with «feminine power», despite being «cued to identify with the male gaze» – to glimpse the beginnings of what we might term a historically modern ‘female gaze’ in the pages of the emancipationist journal *Eva Redenta* from November 1855⁴⁵. Following a performance of Verdi’s *La Traviata* at the Teatro Carignano in Turin, the unknown (presumably female) writer sees Violetta as not «dead», but as triumphantly redeemed due to her moral superiority⁴⁶. Another glimpse of the female audience can be found in Verga’s realist long story *Eva* (1873). In this, the first-person narrator, Gustavo, who has fallen for the alluring ballerina, Eva, comments on the

⁴² LA MARCHESA COLOMBI, *La gente per bene*, Novara 2000 (1877), p. 162.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁴⁴ S. RUTHERFORD, *La Traviata, or the “Willing Grisette”*: *Male Critics and Female Performance in the 1850s*, in *Verdi 2001*, Atti del convegno internazionale di studi, Firenze 2003, pp. 585-600 [597].

⁴⁵ See S. RICKARD, *Movies in Disguise: Negotiating Censorship and Patriarchy Through the Dances of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers*, in *Approaches to the American Musical*, ed. by R. Lawson-Peebles, Exeter 1996, pp. 72-88.

⁴⁶ RUTHERFORD, *La Traviata, or the “Willing Grisette”*, p. 586.

handsome-looking audience making eyes at one another as the ballerina's performance is about to begin:

I palchetti si andavano popolando di belle signore – almeno avevano indosso tanti fiori, e gemme, e nastri, e bianco, e rosso, che nella mezza luce sembravano tutte belle. Degli uomini poi ce n'erano così ben vestiti e così ben rasi, e colle testine così ben pettinate, ricciutelle e lucide, che quelle belle donne dovevano al certo guardarli con tanto d'occhi spalancati, come io guardavo loro, e istintivamente mi nascondevo le mani nude sotto il cappotto⁴⁷.

Thus, women (and young women in particular) were still profoundly 'on display' for the marriage market, in spite of fleeting moments of apparent male 'objectification' in the auditorium. Further on in the century, however, in the Neapolitan writer Matilde Serao's conduct book *Saper vivere*, her advice to young girls aged thirteen to fifteen is that they should go only rarely to the theatre or to a concert, but that by age sixteen – despite not yet having made their entrance in the world – they should be going to many concerts, plays and operas. By age eighteen, it is assumed that they are frequently going to the theatre, where they are advised to always sit in between two ladies, never to use the binoculars (or hardly ever, and only ever to look at the stage, not in the auditorium), to *listen to the music attentively*, not to talk, not to make noise, and when someone visits her box, not to turn around or change seats⁴⁸.

By this time, the beginnings of a mass, nationwide, middle-class female spectatorship-*in the-making* – one that was characterised by an 'epistemophilic' gaze, and which emerged in tandem with the arrival on the literary scene in Italy of the first wave of Italian women writers – was beginning to take root⁴⁹. Not only did this involve erotic curiosity, vicarious participation and identification with the central female character and performer, but the active engagement of women as discursive, early-Capitalist consumers of the theatre, opera performances they watched, and the early silent film screenings they attended. This new, middle-class, *spettatrice impegnata* 'envoiced' in fiction and journalism addressed to a middle-class female readership, offers mixed responses: some are discursive, others express 'affect', and still others are

⁴⁷ G. VERGA, *Eva*, in ID., *Una peccatrice, Storia di una capinera, Eva, Tigre Reale*, Milano 1959², pp. 226-315 [239-40].

⁴⁸ M. SERAO (signed GIBUS), *Saper vivere: norme di buona creanza*, Napoli 1900, pp. 284-89. Italics my emphasis.

⁴⁹ The term «epistemophilic» means «an excessive love for knowledge». It was first coined as a type of 'gaze' by Laura Mulvey in her chapter *Pandora's Box: Topographies of Curiosity* in her *Fetishism and Curiosity*, Bloomington 1996, pp. 53-65 [59].

a combination of both. Denza, the first-person narrator in La Marchesa Colombi's domestic novel *Un matrimonio in provincia* (1885), is transfixed by the opera singer who performs the role of Marguerite from Gounod's *Faust* (1859). Denza's reaction to Faust's declaration of love for Marguerite causes Denza to feel consumed by tenderness, as if he had addressed his song of love to *her*: «Allora lo spettacolo cominciò ad interessarmi moltissimo. Come faceva ad innamorarsi? Oh, con che ansietà aspettavo quel momento! Quando Faust si curvava amorosamente verso Margherita, e le gorgheggiava delle belle cose con voce dolce dolce, mi sentivo struggere di tenerezza, come se le avesse gorgheggiate a me»⁵⁰. Teresa from Neera's eponymous novel of 1886, who, like Denza, is a petit-bourgeois adolescent, experiences a similar close emotional involvement with Verdi's *Rigoletto* during her first outing to the opera. These portrayals of teenage girls watching tragic opera give voice to their vicarious, emotional responses to the tragic heroine's suffering and feelings of romantic love, awakening in the female protagonists their own newly-discovered sexuality.

A specifically gendered response to live performances is a feature of many accounts published by women in late nineteenth-century Italy, one that is passionate and enthusiastic: middle-class female spectators are shown as gripped by the action on stage and/or by the music of an opera. In Serao's *Fantasia* (1883), at a performance at the Teatro Sannazzaro in Naples, «Le signore si entusiasmarono, stringendo gli occhialini, un po' abbandonate sui parapetti, mentre un fremito di diletto faceva sussultare il teatro. [...] Le donne si rompevano i guanti a furia di applaudire»⁵¹, while the third-person omniscient narrator of Annie Vivanti's *Marion, artista di caffè-concerto* (1891) mentions the female spectators' stunned responses to watching the poet improviser, Mario, perform:

Nella sala gialla del villino a San Pier d'Arena erano accesi tutti i lumi, e le signore prendevano il thè, tutte frementi ancora e commosse dai versi che Mario aveva recitato. Sublime! – sospirò la signora Astori. Che profumo! che delicatezza! – esclamò la profumata e delicata marchesa Elisi, e con infantile impeto d'entusiasmo afferrò le mani del poeta e le strinse fra le sue⁵².

The generally enthusiastic, emotive response on behalf of female spectators in realist fiction by women authors is also a feature of non-fiction accounts circulating in the

⁵⁰ LA MARCHESA COLOMBI, *Un matrimonio in provincia*, Novara 2000 (1885), p. 34.

⁵¹ M. SERAO, *Fantasia*, ed. by Alfredina D'Ascenzo, Bologna 2006 (1883), pp. 64-6.

⁵² A. VIVANTI, *Marion, artista di caffè-concerto*, Palermo 2006 (1891), p. 126.

public sphere at the time. Reviewing the female actor Giacinta Pezzana (1841-1919)'s performance in *Francesca da Rimini* at the Teatro Rossini in Ravenna in 1877, Adele Chiminello writes to the founder and editor of the emancipationist journal *La donna*, Gualberta Alaide Beccari: «La signora Pezzana fu applaudita entusiasticamente: lo sarebbe stata di più, se l'emozione non avesse *strozzato la voce* a molti...alle donne almeno, lo assicuro»⁵³. Away from the public eye, a woman from Milan known simply as «Emilia», writing to her lover after an evening's entertainment watching the *Compagnia Pietroboni* describes the evening as «commoventissima e triste in principio, finisce bene con grande soddisfazione di tutti; e *specialmente di noi Signore*»⁵⁴. Judging from these epistolary accounts, it would appear that women in particular, whose lives typically played out in the domestic sphere and were monotonous, enjoyed attending theatre performances and engaged with the music and/or musical performance as a form of erotic escapism, vicarious participation, and liberation from the drudgery of the everyday⁵⁵. Yet not all women took pleasure in going to the theatre – some preferred to read, as we discover from Silvia Ferro's testimony. A teenager from Genoa, writing in her diary in December 1904, she reveals how she is decidedly unimpressed with a performance of Verdi's *Aida* (1871): «La prima volta in vita mia a 16 anni d'essere andata al teatro; al Politeama Genovese all'*Aida*. Ma questo divertimento non mi attira; di quei soldi me ne comprerei tanti libri»⁵⁶.

4. With Women Writers' Voices

The influx of women writers writing critically about theatre and opera performances in women's journals and columns for women in newspapers from the 1870s onwards, coupled with the emergence of an expanding female readership, brought about a shift in the ways in which women spectators were engaging with live performances, and later, silent film. According to Gilda Corabi, between 1881 and 1920, 949 novels were published by women⁵⁷. Like the many skilled, professional women singers performing

⁵³ A. CHIMINELLO, letter dated 19 January 1877, cited in «La donna» (30 January 1877), p. 2681.

⁵⁴ EMILIA, *Le parole nascoste. Epistolario 1870-1881*, Milano 1987, p. 131. My emphasis.

⁵⁵ For a study of girls' and women's everyday lives in late nineteenth-century Italy as seen through the prism of realist fiction and journalism addressed to a female readership, see my *Italian Women Writers: Gender and Everyday Life in Fiction and Journalism, 1870-1910*, Toronto 2014.

⁵⁶ Extract from the diary of Silvia Ferro (1888-1965), held at the Archivio nazionale dei Diari in Pieve Santo Stefano, Arezzo.

⁵⁷ G. CORABI, *Scrittrici dell'Ottocento*, in *Atlante della letteratura italiana*, vol. III, a cura di S. Luzzatto e G. Pedullà, Torino 2011, pp. 162-76 [171].

Italian opera before them, women writers remained suspect for flouting their (expected) financial dependence on a man and were careful not to identify with the growing movement for female emancipation for fear that their work would not be taken seriously. Like the *grandi attrici*, silent divas and directors, some women writers had an international profile⁵⁸. It was thanks to the influx of women writers writing critically about theatre and opera performances in women's journals and columns for women readers in newspapers from the 1870s onwards, and the emergence of a sizable female readership following the rise in female literacy due to reforms in access to education for girls, that middle-class women spectators began to watch and listen to theatre and opera performances in a more discursive and critical way⁵⁹. La Marchesa Colombi wrote a regular weekly column in Neera's journal *Vita intima*, which was published in Milan and entitled *Colore del tempo*, for eight months between 1890 and 1891. Like her column *Cronaca* from 1876 in the journal for families, *Museo di famiglia*, it included comment and analysis on current debates, cultural events, society, the latest fashions, and focused on depicting public spaces rather than on issues pertaining to the domestic sphere. She addresses her readers respectfully in the third-person plural as «le mie lettrici», and posits herself as an enthusiastic observer and spectator of the events she describes. Her reports on performances have a direct honesty in style. In one entry (1 July 1890), she laments the mediocrity of performances at the Teatro Filodrammatico in Milan: «Al Filodrammatico ho notato soltanto questa sfumatura del colore del tempo: che ora i successi si fanno cogli stessi elementi con cui altre volte si facevano gli insuccessi: produzioni dal mediocre in giù, applausi e chiamate all'autore»⁶⁰. In the same issue, she recommends certain plays and reports on the audience's reception of a performance by a certain «signor Bonola»: «Ieri sera il pubblico ottimista e transigente della Commenda, ha pianto tutte le lacrime del suo cuore sul bozzetto del signor Bonola»⁶¹. The audience is considered here in the traditional sense as an optimistic, unified aggregate responding collectively to the theatrical event. In an entry in November of the same year, exasperated by outdated schools of thought and

⁵⁸ Among those whose works were discussed in print media and translated abroad, the names of Matilde Serao, Grazia Deledda, Neera, Annie Vivanti, Carolina Invernizio are most well-known.

⁵⁹ The composer and pianist, Franz Liszt (1811-1886), writing about his tour of Italy in the 1830s, famously implied that women attended theatre performances merely to flirt with their lovers. See F. LISZT, *Lettres d'un bachelier ès musique*, printed in J. CHANTAVOINE, *Franz Liszt: Pages Romantiques*, Paris 1912, pp. 147-240 [178].

⁶⁰ La Marchesa Colombi, 'Colore del Tempo' in *Vita Intima*, 1 July 1890, p. 1.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

conventions of theatre productions, she critiques Victorien Sardou's *Tosca* (1887), saying:

Ma come si può sperar molto da un affastellamento di lavori in cui la maggioranza, per quanto si sa, non si stacca dalle vecchie scuole, dalle vecchie convenzioni, in cui si contano parecchie commedie francesi fatte perché il pubblico rida senza la menoma cura del vero o della verosimiglianza nella favola come nei personaggi, in cui è notata la *Tosca* di Sardou che si reggeva così male in piedi malgrado il potente appoggio di Sarah Bernhardt?⁶²

In December of the same year, she comments on Duse who will perform Dumas *filis*'s *La Principessa Giorgio* (1874) and whose success she prophesizes: «Si può prevedere senza tema d'ingannarsi, che le echeggeranno intorno grida d'ammirazione ed applausi. È questa la dolce frase musicale che accompagna la modernissima ed intellettuale artista ad ogni sua comparsa»⁶³.

Serao was living and working in Naples when writing her column *Api, Mosconi, Vespe*, which she wrote using the pseudonym Gibus in the issues of *Il Mattino* from March 1892. Like La Marchesa Colombi, Serao uses a direct and candid style of language to report, comment on, and describe theatre scenes, though contrary to La Marchesa Colombi she addresses a general readership – «amica lettrice: amico lettore» – presumably because the reading of newspapers was widely considered to be an activity associated with men. Though Serao also refers to «il pubblico» in the singular, unlike La Marchesa Colombi, Serao explicitly draws attention to *le spettatrici*: who was in attendance and what they were wearing. In March 1892, commenting on the singer Checco Marconi's performance in a Neapolitan salon, she writes:

Marconi ha cantato davanti a un pubblico olimpico [...]. Fra queste celestiali spettatrici, la padrona aveva un vestito nero ricco di mirabili merletti... Ha suonato il pianoforte Umberto Mazzone: suonato con finezza e con forza, un *notturmo* delicato *minuetto*. Checco Marconi era in una serata più che felice: e la sua voce calda e vibrante ha fatto estasiare l'uditorio nei due stornelli di Palloni, nell'aria della *Griselda* di Giulio Cottrau – grande successo, anzi il *bis*⁶⁴.

Serao would typically comment on the performances of singers and mention women's fashions, never failing to list names of certain important society women. In her entry

⁶² La Marchesa Colombi, 'Colore del Tempo', *Vita Intima*, 4 November 1890, p. 1.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 30 December 1890, p. 2.

⁶⁴ M. SERAO (signed GIBUS), *Api, Mosconi, Vespe*, «Il mattino» (22-23 Marzo 1892), front page.

on 30-31 March 1892, she comments on the actress Gemma Bellincioni's amazing hairpiece, which she likens to a butterfly. Without fail, in fact, Serao mentions the fashions of the women performers and spectators present, describing a great number of them: «Ricordo la signora Errera, la contessa Anguissola, la signora Premoli... Musica deliziosa [...]. Per citare qualche cosa la signorina Cucini ha cantata con trasporto la *Serenata Medioevale* che non ho mai sentita cantare meglio; la signorina Lombardi quella *Chanson de Barberine* che risveglia nell'anima tutte le nostalgie dell'amore» (20-21 March 1892, *Mattinate di Ricordi*). On 10-11 April, in *A San Carlo: la sala*, Serao even goes so far as to equate the intrigue of the spectacle on stage to that in the audience: «Abbastanza piena e presentante, come sempre, uno spettacolo interessante quanto quello del palcoscenico». Similarly, describing an engaged and transfixed audience in her entry on 24-25 April, she comments on «il pubblico molto intellettuale» of the previous night both on stage and in the audience at the Teatro dei Fiorentini, and describes the audience as «così attento, e così vibrante a ogni movimento spirituale della scena! Ho notato: la signora Hermann Stevens sempre così elegante, in un vestito nero; la signora Laura Schettino in abito di velluto rosso...»⁶⁵. Thus, on occasion the women in the audience become the celebrities themselves, the subject of gossip and commentary as in modern-day women's magazines.

5. Conclusion

If the utopian idea of the Italian feminist Diotima group of a female symbolic, separate from male discourse in which *affidamento* is practiced among symbolic mothers whose figurative daughters are taught self-affirmation and belief can be realized, only in giving voice to those who were not afraid to speak *con altra voce* for future generations of women can we construct a vital and important genealogy and chorality of printed, performed, spoken and sung voices which are the lessons of history for a better future. In this essay, the voices of a growing number of female producers and consumers of the culture industry at Italy's *fin-de-siècle* have illustrated only a selection of their vital and important contributions. Though taken together, and in the words of Abbate, they may not have «drowned out everything in range», professional women writers and performers whose successes were frequently documented in the print media, epistolary writings, and in novels, were interpellating their readers, educating and influencing

⁶⁵ M. SERAO (signed GIBUS), *Api, Mosconi, Vespe*, «Il mattino» (24-25 Aprile 1892), front page.

them in the newly-acquired national Italian language on a level which, heretofore, had not been possible because the technology and science was not available. They were 'envoiced' in ever-increasing volumes in the *cartes de vistes*, via the printing press and in publicity circulating among aspiring young women, who were identifying with, and desiring to imitate – to copy – their idols.