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**Literary and Epistolary Figurations of Female Desire in Early Post-Unification
 Italy, 1861-1914***

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On 10 November 1889, the 18-year-old aspiring actress, Antonietta Adamo, from Naples, wrote to the actor and *capocomico* Francesco Pasta (1839-1905) offering sex in exchange for work in his *compagnia*: ‘I am willing to do anything to get into your *compagnia*, anything. [...] Look, I am down on bended knee, beseeching you, praying to you, begging with you, praying to you, in the same way as we pray to our Holy Father! [...] All young women long for is a husband, a social position. Me, nothing, nothing! I feel within me a genius that will be extinguished only when I die’. She ends the letter by giving Pasta her home address and offering herself to him sexually: ‘I offer myself to you’.¹ Such a bold proposition may come as no surprise from an actress in the context of late nineteenth-century Italy, where female performing artists’ social status was at best ambivalent in the eyes of priests, politicians, and intellectuals. Though celebrated for their talents, female performers were by the same token regarded with suspicion by bourgeois society for behaving promiscuously according to the social norms of the day, as indeed some did.² Hegemonic official discourse championed women’s ‘proper’ roles as mothers and wives, particularly following Unification and the introduction of the Pisanelli Code (1865-66), which

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¹ Antonietta Adamo to Francesco Pasta, 10 November 1889, Fondo Pasta, Biblioteca e Museo Teatrale del Burcardo, Rome: ‘Sono disposta a tutto, perchè Lei mi accetti in compagnia, a tutto. [...] Veda: m’inginocchio ai suoi piedi e Le scongiuro, Le prego, come si prega il nostro Padre Celeste! [...] Tutte le giovinette ambiscono chi uno sposo, chi una posizione sociale. Il niente, niente! In me, sento un genio che mi spegnerà con la vita’. All translations are my own.

² See K. Pullen, *Actresses and Whores: On Stage and in Society* (Cambridge, 2005).

enshrined in law women's subordination to men politically, socially, and economically.³

Recent scholarship has drawn attention to the 'de-eroticisation of culture' in nineteenth-century Italy – how the preoccupation with female virginity, notably its preservation, became an obsession in Catholic Italy, as elsewhere.⁴ In this chapter, I will show, however, that Italian tragic opera and imported French novels played a significant role in awakening a certain kind of desire in both ordinary and exceptional women in nineteenth-century Italy. My newly-presented evidence for this comes from my study of the hundreds of love letters and fan letters to and from performing artists and their fans held at theatre archives throughout Italy.⁵ Evidence of female (heterosexual) desire abounds on the Italian tragic opera stage, as well as in realist fictional representations in the Italian novel and *novella* by female and male Italian authors following Unification.⁶ From at least as early as the premiere of Bellini's opera *Norma* (La Scala, Milan, 1831), female singers were being cast as single and sexually desirous of men – in the role of the tragic heroine, at once pitied for her suffering and condemned (typically to death) for transgressing social mores. There are countless others, including the court jester's daughter Gilda in his *Rigoletto* (La Fenice, Venice, 1851), the high-class prostitute Violetta from Verdi's *La traviata* (La Fenice, Venice, 1853), the dishonoured Sicilian peasant woman Santuzza in Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Teatro Costanzi, Rome, 1890), the Parisian

³ Pisanelli's Civil Code, passed on 25 June 1865 under law number 2358, was enacted in 1866. On the Code's introduction, see Katharine Mitchell, 'La Marchesa Colombi, Neera, Matilde Serao: Forging a Female Solidarity in Late Nineteenth-Century Journals for Women', *Italian Studies* 63 (1), Spring 2008, 63-84, n. 2.

⁴ See E. Senici, *Landscape and Gender in Italian Opera: The Alpine Virgin from Bellini to Puccini* (Cambridge, 2005), 9.

⁵ In addition to the Biblioteca e Museo Teatrale del Burcardo in Rome, fan letters from this period are held at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini in Venice, the Biblioteca Livia Simone at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan, and the Museo Biblioteca dell'Attore in Genoa.

⁶ Female (hetero)sexual desire is presented in short stories and novels by (among others) Giovanni Verga, Iginio Ugo Tarchetti, Antonio Fogazzaro, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Luigi Capuana, Sibilla Aleramo, Matilde Serao, and Neera.

seamstress Mimì in Puccini's *La bohème* (Teatro Regio, Turin, 1896), the opera singer Tosca in Puccini's opera of the same name (Teatro Costanzi, Rome, 1900), and the eponymous geisha heroine of his *Madama Butterfly* (La Scala, Milan, 1904). With the exception of Mascagni's opera and Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, all these operas were adapted from French realist plays or novels.⁷

Drawing on Lacan's concepts of ego formation and the mirror stage, Laura Mulvey's highly influential essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975) emphasised the prevalence of the patriarchal viewpoint in cinema to argue that the pleasure gained in looking is a male pleasure and that the 'look' in cinema is controlled by the male and directed at the female.⁸ In her more recent work in feminist film theory on the 'gaze' and 'spectacle' she makes a conscious break with the first phase of feminist theory and calls instead for a concentration on the historical conditions that created and inscribed a binarism of the male (active) gaze at women displayed as (passive) sex objects.⁹ Following Mulvey's lead, I draw on examples of heterosexual female desire in realist fiction and in love letters written by female performers, in order to argue that the frequent recurrence of this topos of the male gaze at the displayed and sexualised woman was due in no small measure to the ubiquity of sexually desiring female tragic opera and literary characters permeating Italian culture, and imported from France, from around 1830 onwards.¹⁰ I then discuss how a reworking of Mulvey's theory of the gaze directed at women through male identification, originally devised with reference to narrative cinema, may be applied

⁷ *Norma* is after *Norma, ossia l'infanticidio* (1831), a verse tragedy by Alexandre Soumet; *Rigoletto* is adapted from the play *Le roi s'amuse* (1877) by Victor Hugo; *La traviata* is from *La dame aux camélias* (1848), a novel by Alexandre Dumas fils; *La bohème* is based on Henry Murger's novel *Scènes de la vie de bohème* (1851); *Tosca* is adapted from Victorien Sardou's play *La Tosca* (1887).

⁸ See L. Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16, 2 (1975), 6-18.

⁹ See L. Mulvey, 'Unmasking the Gaze: Feminist film theory, History and Film Studies' in V. Callahan (ed.), *Reclaiming the Archive: Feminism and Film History* (Detroit, 2010), 17-31.

¹⁰ For recent work on sexually desiring tragic heroines in Verdi's operas, and on female spectatorship, see the chapter 'Sexuality' in Susan Rutherford's book *Verdi, Opera, Women* (Cambridge, 2013), 111-141.

to theatre performances in the context of nineteenth-century Italian culture. Such a reworking would involve a female gaze, by way of female identification. I will then go on to present a topos of the sexually desirous female gaze in a selection of realist fiction. In the final section of the chapter I draw on love letters by female performers to various *capocomici* and actors, such as Ettore Petrolini (1886-1936), Luigi Rasi (1852-1918), and Pasta, to show how these are revealing of the sender's hyperbolic adulation, sexual desire, and romantic love.

Female epistemophilic¹¹ and/or desirous gazes in the theatre

The general historical context for women's access to education and women's literacy illustrates that women's cognitive and social engagement, if measured only by educational legislation, actual practice, and statistical records, does not provide a realistic and exhaustive view of the development of a female subjectivity. Rather, and as I aim to show here, it was the scopophilic mode that was an important component in the identity formation of Italian women in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Though still predominantly rural compared with its European neighbours, Italy experienced an unprecedented period of political, economic, and social change following the Risorgimento. This era saw the rise of the middle classes, an expansion in the production and consumption of print culture, and increased access to education and the professions for women, particularly in urban areas.¹² In 1874 women were granted official permission by the government to enter the universities, and paradoxically, only later, in 1883, did the Ministry of Education allow girls to attend *ginnasi-licei* and the *istituti tecnici*.¹³ Typically, middle-class girls who received state education in late nineteenth-century Italy finished their schooling between the ages of twelve and sixteen years; the national curriculum for girls

¹¹ The term 'epistemophilic' means 'an excessive love for knowledge'. It was first coined as a type of 'gaze' by Laura Mulvey in the chapter 'Pandora's Box: Topographies of Curiosity' in her book *Fetishism and Curiosity* (Bloomington, 1996), 53-65 (59).

¹² See A. H. Caesar, G. Romani and J. Burns (eds), *The Printed Media in Fin-de-Siècle Italy: Publishers, Writers, and Readers* (London, 2011).

¹³ C. Covato, 'Educate ad educare: ruolo materno ed itinerari formativi', in *L'educazione delle donne: scuole e modelli di vita femminile nell'Italia dell'Ottocento*, 2nd edition, (Milan, 1991), 138.

included arithmetic, Italian grammar, physics, biology, history, geography, geometry, religious education, art, pedagogy, French, calligraphy, and domestic science.¹⁴

According to the general census of 1861, female illiteracy was on average around 86 percent in rural areas and 77 percent in towns and cities.¹⁵ In 1901, 62 percent of Italian women were illiterate, and still ten years later 40 percent of women and men could neither read nor write.¹⁶ Although these figures testify to a gradual rise in literacy levels towards the end of the century, it is important to bear in mind that they may be misleading, since if a person could merely write their name legibly and read a short passage, they were regarded as literate. The social, economic, and political condition of women in Unification Italy between 1861 and 1914 did improve thanks to the rise in female literacy, access to education and the professions, and better legislation protecting women in the workplace. Nevertheless, ordinary bourgeois women's everyday lives continued to be highly circumscribed and restricted compared with men's. One public venue where prescriptions pertaining to gender roles were less strictly adhered to, however, was the theatre auditorium. Theatregoing was a common leisure activity in Italy for the urban middle and upper classes at a time when the opera industry was at its most popular and socially inclusive.¹⁷ At least until the 1848 revolutions, the theatre venue was the main focus of civic life, and the stage and auditorium were forums for traversing gender confines for women spectators (as well as for men), whose only other means of exploring their sexuality was through the reading of novels. The composer and pianist Franz Liszt (1811-1886), writing about his tour of Italy in the 1830s, implied that women attended theatre performances to flirt with their lovers.¹⁸

In nineteenth-century Italy the theatre represented one of the few public venues where women could meet and talk in mixed company or among themselves.

¹⁴ See D. Bertoni Jovine, *Storia dell'educazione popolare in Italia* (Bari, 1965), 134, and M. Serao, 'Scuola normale femminile', in *Il romanzo della fanciulla*, ed. F. Bruni (Naples, 1985), 146-185 (150).

¹⁵ E. De Fort, *Storia della scuola elementare in Italia*, vol. I. *Dall'Unità all'età giolittiana* (Milan, 1979), 49.

¹⁶ G. Farinelli, *Storia del giornalismo italiano: dalle origini ai nostri giorni* (Turin, 1997), 212.

¹⁷ On audiences in nineteenth-century Italy, see C. Sorba, *Teatri: L'Italia del melodramma nell'età del Risorgimento* (Bologna, 2001), 93-153.

¹⁸ F. Liszt, *Lettres d'un bachelier ès musique*, printed in J. Chantavoine, *Franz Liszt: Pages Romantiques* (Paris, 1912), 147-240 (178).

Young women's attendance at theatre performances was frowned upon by traditionalists, who held that young women were impressionable and weak, and that exposure to theatre performances (and, indeed, novels) caused harm to their minds and bodies. Many newspaper articles from the first half of the nineteenth century depict women spectators as mainly preoccupied by fashion and gossip, and therefore as incapable of responding to the on-stage performances in a discursive and critical way.¹⁹ This despite the fact that exceptional women such as Madame de Staël (1766-1817) and Napoleon I's second wife, the Duchess of Parma Maria Luigia (1791-1847), wrote critically about theatre performances.²⁰ In addition, while women writers did not publish formal critical reviews and columns on theatregoing in newspapers and journals in Italy until the 1870s at the earliest, they were the active recipients, as readers, of news on theatre and theatre performances from at least the 1830s, for example, in the Neapolitan journals, such as *L'Indifferente* and *La Moda*.²¹

Yet something shifted during the course of the nineteenth century – perhaps due to the emergence of an early political consciousness among Italian women writers, activists and performers in the public sphere following Unification – for, as we learn from La Marchesa Colombi in her 1877 conduct manual *La gente per bene* (Respectable people), by that date women were expected to restrict their conversations to the interval.²² And for the first time, professional women writers such as Matilde Serao (1856-1927) and La Marchesa Colombi (pseudonym for Maria

¹⁹ See, for example, *Figaro*, 22 February 1845, 61-62.

²⁰ See Madame de Staël's book *De L'Allemagne* (1810) and her novel *Corinne, or Italy* (1807), inspired by an opera De Staël had seen in Weimar in 1803, and partly based on her own life. See, also, Maria Luigia's letters in *Correspondance de Marie Louise, 1799-1847. Lettres intimes et inédites à la comtesse de Colloredo et à Mlle de Poutet depuis 1810 comtesse de Crenneville* (Vienna, 1887).

²¹ One exception is a review by 'una gentilissima signorina siciliana' of Bellini's *I Capuletti e i Montecchi* in the *Giornale di scienze, letteratura ed arti per la Sicilia*, September 1832, no. 117; parte seconda, and in Beccari's emancipationist journal *La donna* (1868-1891): Padua (1868-1871); Venice (1871-1877); Bologna, (1877-1891), eulogies praising the work of renowned actresses appeared frequently.

²² La Marchesa Colombi, *La gente per bene* (Novara, 2000), 162.

Antonietta Torriani, 1840-1920), began to write about theatre-going and to review theatre events in regular newspaper columns. La Marchesa Colombi wrote ‘Colore del tempo’ (‘Sign of the times’) in Neera’s Milanese weekly women’s journal *Vita Intima* from June 1890 to January 1891, and Serao describes audience reception in her column ‘Api, Mosconi e Vespe’ (‘Bees, Flies and Wasps’) from the Neapolitan broadsheet, *Il Mattino*, which she wrote under the pseudonym ‘Gibus’, and which ran for 41 years in various newspapers, starting in 1885 under the title ‘Per le signore’ in the national daily *Corriere di Roma*. Thus, owing to the greater prominence of women writers on the literary scene from the 1880s onwards, women as readers, spectators, and writers/mediators of theatre performances were becoming critical respondents of culture and learning how to cultivate an epistemophilic gaze – one that was curious and wanted to know, and that evinced a nascent female spectatorship.

Mulvey’s ‘male gaze’ clearly manifests itself in the audience of theatre performances in Italy in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, when, following the demise of the *castrati*, women began to appear on stage in unprecedented numbers. John Rosselli’s research on singers of Italian opera, however, reveals that from as early as 1663, one commentator writing in Venice reported that for a woman to be able to perform on stage she had to be above all ‘beautiful’,²³ and male commentators throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries continued to talk of female singers as being, in Rosselli’s terms, sex objects. Male writers and critics from the nineteenth century, for their part, comment on the performing female artist’s appearance and beauty. Describing the singer Rosina Penco’s suitability for the role of Violetta in his *La traviata*, Verdi in his letter to the president of the Teatro

²³ J. Rosselli, *Singers of Italian Opera: the History of a Profession* (Cambridge, 1992), 58.

La Fenice says of her: ‘She has a good body and soul, and she looks good on stage’.²⁴ By contrast, women’s responses convey enthusiasm and fascination. My findings based on fan letters to female performing artists by Italian women writers certainly testify to female spectators’ admiration—and, perhaps, desire—for female performers, particularly in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Matilde Tortora’s edition of the letters between Matilde Serao and the actress Eleonora Duse (1858-1924), and Laura Mariani’s book examining the correspondence between Sibilla Aleramo and Giacinta Pezzana (1841-1919), contain numerous examples.²⁵

In his *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1961), René Girard argued that desire is triangular insofar as we borrow our desires from others. Far from being autonomous, our desire for a certain love object is always provoked by the desire of another person – the mediator; that is (in our case), the female spectator/writer, who projects on to an ideal of the female performing artist. The language women writers/spectators use, as mediators of desire, to address the female performer, is full of praise: Ada Negri (1870-1945), writing to Duse in 1921, describes her as a ‘Dear great soul’, and in a letter to her friend Giovanni Marano written in 1882, La Marchesa Colombi wrote of Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923), ‘You cannot imagine the fascinating beauty and artistic talent of [Sarah Bernhardt]. No sooner [had] Patti earned my wholehearted admiration than the former aroused yet more enthusiasm in me’.²⁶ These examples testify to an affirmative and epistemophilic interrelationship between female spectators/writers and female performers in the context of late nineteenth- and early-twentieth century Italy, thereby playing to the notion of the diva as Other, as unfathomable and

²⁴ Letter dated 30 January 1853, cited in M. Conati, *La bottega della musica: Verdi e La Fenice* (Milan, 1983), 312: ‘Ha bella figura, anima e sta bene in iscena’.

²⁵ See M. Tortora, *Matilde Serao a Eleonora Duse: lettere* (Naples, 2004), and L. Mariani, *L’attrice del cuore: storia di Giacinta Pezzana attraverso le lettere* (Florence, 2005).

²⁶ M. T. Cometto, *La Marchesa Colombi: la prima giornalista della Corriere della Sera* (Turin, 1996), 162. Letter dated 2 March 1882.

threatening to hegemonic values. As I shall now show, this affirmative and epistemophilic interrelationship between female spectators and performers can also be discerned in the literary fiction of the time.

Literary figurations of female desire and/or the ‘female gaze’

Perhaps I should explain here that by a ‘female gaze’ I mean not so much a female equivalent of the ‘male gaze’ but rather a gaze in which ‘erotic curiosity’, over-identification, epistemophilia, and desire are involved; it is a type of gaze which thereby exceeds and is different from the ‘male gaze’. Realist fictional portrayals in French and Italian literary fiction of female protagonists watching tragic opera describe how the protagonists respond vicariously to the tragic heroine’s emotional suffering and feelings of romantic love, awakening in the protagonists their own sexuality. Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* in the novel of the same name (1857), upon attending a performance of Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor* (Teatro San Carlo, Naples, 1835), recalls the romantic novels she enjoyed as a young girl and allows the music to reverberate in her soul as she watches Lucia’s mad scene: ‘Lucia embarked gravely upon her cavatina in G major; she bewailed love’s pangs, she cried aloud for wings. Emma, like her, was yearning to escape, to fly ecstatically aloft. [...] The voice of the heroine seemed to be simply the echo of her own consciousness, and this enthralling illusion might almost have been contrived from the very stuff of her life’.²⁷ In La Marchesa Colombi’s *Un matrimonio in provincia* (‘A Small-Town Marriage’, 1885), Denza’s attention is transfixed by the singer who performs the role of Marguerite from Gounod’s *Faust* (1859, Paris). Denza’s response to Faust’s declaration of love for Marguerite causes Denza to feel consumed by tenderness, as if

²⁷ G. Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, translated by Geoffrey Wall (London, 1992), 180-181. I draw on this French novel as it has an exemplary status in terms of nineteenth-century fictional heroines.

he had addressed his song of love to her: ‘Then the performance really began to interest me. How did he fall in love? Oh, how eagerly I waited for that moment! When Faust bent amorously toward Marguerite, murmuring sweet nothings to her in the softest of voices, I felt as though I were consumed with love, just as though he had murmured these things to me’.²⁸ Teresa from Neera’s eponymous novel (1886), who is, like Denza, a lower-middle-class adolescent, experiences a similar close emotional involvement with the unfolding narrative of Verdi’s *Rigoletto* during her first outing to the opera: ‘Teresa was enraptured. The beauty of art revealed itself to her heart already open to love. She anxiously followed the development of the dramatic action. The kidnapping of Gilda frightened her, she cried with Rigoletto, she had disrespect and scorn for the courtesans, and waited excitedly for Gilda’s return to the stage’.²⁹ Thus, in realist fiction, the female spectator is presented experiencing the action on stage and in the music vicariously, in a visceral way, through her body. In Luigi Capuana’s novel *Giacinta* (1879), the third-person narrator describes the music affecting parts of the protagonist’s body as her lover-to-be plays a piano piece to her: ‘Gerace also had a particular way of directing the notes at Giacinta; and she, who had realised it, felt them linger around her body, rest on her forehead, flutter over her cheeks and around her neck, tickling her’.³⁰ These fictional women in Italian realist novels, whose lives were confined to the domestic sphere, engage with the music and/or musical performance as a form of erotic escapism and liberation from the monotony of their everyday lives.

Such is the ambiguous nature of the literary realist genre that one could read the aforementioned passage as objectifying the female body, thus endorsing Mulvey’s

²⁸ La Marchesa Colombi, *A Small-Town Marriage*, trans. by Paula Spurlin Paige (Evanston, Illinois, 2001), 23.

²⁹ Neera, *Teresa*, trans. by Martha King (Evanston, Illinois, 1998), 60.

³⁰ L. Capuana, *Giacinta* (Rome, 1980), 58.

binarism. Indeed, the depiction of female performing artists in realist fiction by male authors points very clearly to the conception of the diva as Other, as a threatening figure of fascination who plays to men's desires, who is ridiculed and reviled yet worshipped. The ballerina, Eva, from Verga's novel of the same name, is described as a 'sirena' and an 'amazzone', who, as an embodiment of the figure of the *femme fatale*, is of great seductive charm, and leads the male protagonist into a compromising and dangerous situation.³¹ Yet Susan Rutherford has shown how the writers George Sand (1804-1876), George Eliot (1819-1880), and Willa Cather (1873-1947) all challenge the notion of the prima donna as erotic siren in their writings;³² the same can be said of women writers in early post-Unification Italy. The actress Vittoria in La Marchesa Colombi's novella *Teste alate* (1879), far from being depicted as an erotic siren, is described as talented, intelligent and well-respected for her art. Vittoria is 'a pure, passionate, bold woman; an independent, slightly masculine type. She easily got excited, ready to indulge her heart's first impulse, believing it to be the best. She was aroused by art, she became enthusiastic about an author, an actor, also an actress; she wanted to meet them, and she had words and ways of expressing her admiration that revealed all the fervour of her artistic soul'.³³ Interestingly, although in realist fiction by male writers the first person narrator may objectify the female performing artist, these same writers also depict female characters with desirous gazes who, it may be argued, objectify male characters. In Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Emma lusts after the tenor singing the role of Edgardo and fantasises about running away with him across Europe: 'Drawn to the man by his creation of the character, she tried to picture to herself the life he led, that extraordinary, hectic, splendid life. [...] With him she would have visited all the

³¹ G. Verga, *Una peccatrice, Storia di una capinera, Eva, and Tigre reale*, 2nd edn. (Milan, 1954), 228.

³² See S. Rutherford, *The Prima Donna and Opera, 1815-1930* (Cambridge, 2009), 58-89.

³³ La Marchesa Colombi, 'Teste Alate', in *Serate d'inverno* (Ferrara, 1997), 77.

kingdoms of Europe, travelling from capital to capital. [...] She longed to run to his arms, to shelter in his strength as in the very incarnation of love, and to say to him, to cry out to him, ‘Take me! Carry me away! Away! Yours, yours be all my ardour, all my dreams!’³⁴ Similarly, in Italian *verismo* fiction, women ogle at the men returning from the Risorgimento battle in Verga’s novella *Cavalleria Rusticana* (‘Rustic Chivalry’, 1880): ‘Turiddu Macca, son of old Mother Nunzia, when he came home from being a soldier, went swaggering about the village square every Sunday, showing himself off in his *bersagliere*’s uniform [...]. The girls going to Mass with their noses meekly inside their kerchiefs stole such looks at him?’³⁵

As previously mentioned, similar topoi of sexual desire on the part of heterosexual women are features of Italian tragic opera, beginning with the heroine of Bellini’s *Norma* (though arguably dating back to the premiere of the tragic version of Rossini’s *Tancredi* (Ferrara, 1816), embodied in the character Amenaide, who is in love with Tancredi), and can be seen with particular emphasis in Violetta from Verdi’s *La traviata* onwards through to the ‘end of the great tradition’, as manifested by Puccini’s *Turandot* (La Scala, 1926) in the character of the slave girl, Liù.³⁶ The ambiguous figure of the tragic opera heroine enabled female theatregoers to explore their own sexuality vicariously, to identify with her, and to satisfy their erotic curiosity. The prevalence of the topos of the sexually desiring woman arguably accounts for expressions of female desire in extant letters ranging from the 1840s to WW1, which have been documented in recent scholarship.³⁷ In the next section, I

³⁴ Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, 237.

³⁵ G. Verga, ‘Cavalleria Rusticana’ in *Pane nero, and other stories*, trans. by D. Maxwell White (Manchester, 1965), 37.

³⁶ See W. Ashbrook and H. Powers, *Puccini’s Turandot: The End of the Great Tradition* (Princeton, 1991).

³⁷ For the first edited collection of letters by four ordinary women who wrote to their fiancés or husbands between 1844 and 1903, see *La finestra, l’attesa, la scrittura: ragnatele del se’ in epistolari femminili dell’800*, C. Barbarulli et al. (eds) (Ferrara, 1997); for examples of fan letters to Garibaldi by women, see Chapter 7 in L. Riall, *Garibaldi: Invention of a Hero* (New Haven, Connecticut; London

consider the use of language in the correspondence between actresses and actors/*capocomici* in late nineteenth- and early-twentieth century Italy.

Epistolary figurations of female desire

Among the hundreds of letters stored in the various collections held at the Biblioteca Teatrale Museo del Burcardo in Rome, most of those written by female performing artists are couched as formal introductions to directors of *compagnie* from women requesting work, in much the same key as the missive cited at the beginning of this chapter. Their style and content are akin to a modern-day covering letter accompanying a CV, providing very detailed descriptions of personal achievements and accolades. Many instances of female writers' epistolary style feature a critical, discursive voice. For example, the letter to *capocomico* Luigi Rasi, written by the actress Elettra Brunini Privato from Florence on 26 July 1893, states: 'I have read the monologue, and I like it very much for the quality of the author's elegant style'.³⁸ Since the epistolary collections at the Burcardo are mainly those amassed by male actors and *capocomici* (Pasta, Rasi, Boutet), there are many more letters whose content evokes female desire than the reverse. Certainly men expressed sexual desire for actresses; this is apparent from a reading of Vito Pandolfi's *Antologia del grande attore* (1954), which contains formal dedications to *grandi attrici* (Adelaide Ristori

2007). Gabriella Romani has published on 'Women Writing Letters: Epistolary Practices in Nineteenth-Century Newspapers, Manuals and Fiction', in S. Scarparo and R. Wilson (eds), *Across Genres, Generations and Borders: Italian Women Writing Lives* (Melbourne, 2004), 24-37, and on *Postal Culture: Writing and Reading Letters in Post-Unification Italy* (Toronto, 2013). Laura A. Salsini's book *Addressing the Letter: Italian Women Writers' Epistolary Fiction* (Toronto, 2010) presents another important contribution to studies on letter writing in Italian culture, and Mark Seymour documents a woman's fan letters to the circus acrobat from Calabria, Pietro Cardinali, in 'Epistolary Emotions: Exploring Amorous Hinterlands in 1870s Southern Italy', *Social History*, 35(2), (2010), 148-164. More recently, Martyn Lyons discusses the ways in which four single women from 1840 to WW1 negotiated the boundaries between private emotional lives and the public scrutiny which constrained them in their letters to their fiancés, whom they then went on to marry in 'Questo cor che tuo si rese': The Private and the Public in Italian Women's Love Letters in the Long Nineteenth-Century', in *Modern Italy* 19 (4), (2014) (forthcoming).

³⁸ Elettra Brunini Privato to Luigi Rasi, 26 July 1893, Fondo Rasi, Biblioteca Teatrale Museo del Burcardo, Rome.

and Eleonora Duse, among others) by male writers in verse.³⁹ Among the collection of letters held at the Burcardo, there is one from the actor Francesco Ciotti (1833-1913) from Pistoia, who, on 19 January 1902, wrote to Ristori to wish her a happy birthday:

To Adelaide Ristori, [...]who, with the mastery of her powerful art, travelled the two hemispheres, and knew how to enthrall and to thrill the crowds. Francesco Ciotti, your artistic companion in art, witness of your unforgettable triumphs, on this day, 19 January 1902, the 80th year of the glorious existence of the esteemed actress, sends his most humble and reverent greetings.⁴⁰

A similar letter of absolute admiration and respect was written by criminologist and socialist politician Enrico Ferri (1856-1929) to Eleonora Duse from Rome on 1 December 1898:

Regretting that I cannot see you again this evening in *The Lady of the Camellias*, as I saw you (do you remember?) in Siena fourteen years ago, I wish to send you greetings and good wishes for this evening and for many years to come.

While abroad a few weeks ago, I heard the ever great echo of enthusiastic and continuous admiration for you and I am delighted as your old admirer and friend.

And as such, despite the great distance, once again I send you warm greetings. Enrico Ferri.⁴¹

³⁹ See V. Pandolfi, *Antologia del grande attore: raccolta di memorie e saggi dei grandi attori italiani dalla riforma goldoniana ad oggi* (Rome, 1954). For the more familiar notion of bourgeois men having affairs with female performers, see *A History of Private Life: From the Fires of Revolution to the Great War*, Vol. IV, in M. Perrot (ed.) (Cambridge, Mass., London, 1990), 668.

⁴⁰ Francesco Ciotti to Adelaide Ristori, 19 January 1902, Fondo Bevacqua, Biblioteca Teatrale Museo del Burcardo, Rome.

⁴¹ Enrico Ferri to Eleonora Duse, 1 December 1898, Fondo Storico, Biblioteca Teatrale Museo del Burcardo, Rome.

The style and tone of these fan letters, though patently adoring, is at the same time respectful and relatively restrained compared with the letters examined below written by female performing artists to actors and *capocomici*. These reveal the sender's amorous devotions and feelings of sexual desire. In considering the letters by female artists, we must bear in mind Michelle Perrot's caution that '[t]heir contents are dictated by rules of propriety and a need for self-dramatization. Nothing is less spontaneous than a letter'.⁴² Indeed, as Mark Seymour correctly warns, 'Historians need to be wary of regarding personal letters as transparent windows onto the hearts and minds of the past'.⁴³ In their respective studies, both Seymour and Martyn Lyons describe the cultural phenomenon of the novel and opera that very likely played a part in shaping Italian bourgeois women's concepts of emotion, and their expression in the nineteenth century.⁴⁴ If anything, this connection is even more applicable to the case of the Italian diva, whose private and professional life was steeped in the flamboyant emotions conveyed by the reading of novels, plays and libretti in her preparation for the performance of roles.

As previously noted, what was considered 'proper' behaviour for ordinary middle-class women in nineteenth-century Italy and their emotional lives differed for female performing artists; the boundaries between actresses' private emotional lives and public scrutiny were blurred thanks to an early twentieth-century 'diva fever' made possible by technological advances such as photography and film. Nor can we make assumptions about female performing artists' social class; the diva, or 'divine woman' is often seen as transcending the social constructs of class, race and gender, and lived her life outside the confines of bourgeois morality. Originating in Mediterranean Catholic cultures, the contemporary western diva offers consumers a

⁴² *A History of Private Life*, IV, 4.

⁴³ Seymour, 'Epistolary Emotions', 149.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 157; Lyons (article forthcoming in *Modern Italy*, 19 (4), (2014)).

secular alternative to female religious iconicity. According to Angela Dalle Vacche, s/he is an accessible, secular alternative to the *mater dolorosa*.⁴⁵ Where the *mater dolorosa* is submissive, chaste and introvert, the modern western diva exudes eroticism, being alluring and extrovert whilst s/he is by no means anti-religious. S/he harnesses the discourses of religion and propriety and uses them to her/his own ends.

Professional women in the public eye in early post-Unification Italy, as writers, actors, journalists, dancers, singers, were exempt from many of the strictures of bourgeois life. Martyn Lyons's recent article has shown that for a single young ordinary woman, writing was a public act insofar as public scrutiny constrained her and required the 'enlistment of a network of female accomplices' who delivered and exchanged her letters. Women were 'subject to a culture of surveillance, but [...] participated in their own 'culture of disobedience'.⁴⁶ However, professional women's private correspondence remained precisely that: private. Yet because there is an interest in maintaining the memory of earlier generations, and, in the case of letters held at the Biblioteca e Museo Teatrale del Burcardo in Rome, a fascination with the notorious recipients that transforms these private papers into relics, they have become public property. Writing to Francesco Pasta from Rosario di Santa Fe' on 7 July 1881, the actress Adelaide Negri Falconi (1833-1902) added to the final page of a letter her husband had written to Pasta a short note in which she confesses her feelings for the *capocomico*:

Checco [Pasta]! Oh why can I not say that I, too, am all yours... the [sic.] forbids me and the affection I bear for the good Flora [Pasta's wife]; God! what pain it would cause her if she were to discover that I

⁴⁵ A. Dalle Vacche, *Diva: Defiance and Passion in Early Italian Cinema* (Austin, 2008), 1-21.

⁴⁶ Lyons (article forthcoming in *Modern Italy*, 19 (4), (2014)).

lock in my breast a little of your teacher Antonio![?] But, no, I will shut up in my heart this guilty passion!...
 Until next time, and please send my heartfelt kisses to dear Flora from her very affectionate friend Adelaide.⁴⁷

Writing on 1 November 1897 to Eduardo Boutet, Virginia Reiter (1862-1937) wrote feelingly about her love for him:

If only you knew how much I think of you. I think of you at your newspaper, at the printer's... at the Pincio, at the theatre! and even in Via [?] 8 [...]. Write to me Eduardo. Tell me what you are doing in the evenings, where you spend them. Do you think of me sometimes? I want to tell you something: the evening you said hello to me, the last one... left me with a heavy heart, so heavy... that with you gone I cried a lot [...]. I clasp your hands and ... your Virginia.⁴⁸

Her desire is similarly effusive in a letter dated 31 October 1898, in which she informs him, 'Wicked Virginia, how I desired you on Saturday! It was my great triumph'. In a letter sent on a Sunday in Rome in 1906, she invites him over to hers: 'But are you sure you don't want to come up for a moment to the box, or to my house so that I can say hello to you, clasp your hand, speak with you? Please don't forget the Ca' d'oro. Yours affectionately, Virginia'.⁴⁹

My final example is correspondence between the caffè-concerto singer Anna Fougez (pseudonym for Maria Annina Laganà Pappacena) and Petrolini, with whom she had a relationship in 1913. **[PLEASE INCLUDE IMAGE OF ANNA FOUGEZ**

HERE] On 4 October, Fougez writes frankly and knowingly about her feelings:

⁴⁷ Adelaide Negri Falconi to Francesco Pasta, 7 July 1881, Fondo Pasta, Biblioteca Teatrale Museo del Burcardo, Rome.

⁴⁸ Virginia Reiter to Eduardo Boutet, 1 November 1897, Fondo Boutet, Biblioteca Teatrale Museo del Burcardo, Rome.

⁴⁹ Virginia Reiter to Eduardo Boutet, 31 October 1898 and 1906 (date and month unknown), Fondo Boutet, Biblioteca Teatrale Museo del Burcardo, Rome.

Dearest Ettore, [...] though I am young I have always felt only capable of loving a man who, rather than flattering me to satisfy a girl's pride, has been able to understand me and who honestly makes me happy. I believe I have found that man in you because it is not only my ambition to have by my side a great artist such as you but I am attracted to you by your unusual qualities. I believe I have found in you the man I was looking for, who will know how to tolerate and correct the frivolities of my 18 years and who at the same time will know how to read inside my soul, and, after having studied me, can be convinced that in essence I am good, loyal and more than capable of a serious relationship. [...] Please accept from the bottom of my heart the most affectionate kiss from your little Anna.⁵⁰

Later, on 22 October, she is similarly candid and effusive:

My Ettore,
I hope we will see each other soon to spend some wonderful hours together like in Milan, but unfortunately it will depend on you and I hope you will still give me a sign that you would enjoy my company. [...] Write to me straight away if I can be hopeful, and while I wait accept a dear embrace and an affectionate kiss from your Anna.
My parents send you their best regards.⁵¹

Conclusion

Female protagonists in Italian realist fiction respond to the emotional suffering and feelings of romantic love on the part of tragic opera's heroines vicariously, awakening in the protagonists their own sexuality: they engage with the music and/or musical performance as a form of erotic escapism and liberation from the monotony of their

⁵⁰ Anna Fougez to Ettore Petrolini, 4 October 1913, Fondo Petrolini, Biblioteca Teatrale Museo del Burcardo, Rome.

⁵¹ Anna Fougez to Ettore Petrolini, 22 October 1913, Fondo Petrolini, Biblioteca Teatrale Museo del Burcardo, Rome.

everyday lives, which are played out in the domestic sphere. The female protagonists' gaze complicates and exceeds the 'male gaze', being one of erotic curiosity, over-identification with the heroine (arguably to the point of masochism), epistemophilia, and sexual desire. Linked to this, through a reading of a sample of letters written by professional *dive* and an aspiring actress in post-Unification Italy, I have shown that the topos of the sexually desiring woman extended beyond the imaginary. Though the openly honest and intelligently expressed declarations of love expressed by female performing artists are not surprising considering the performers' exemption from bourgeois social mores, they were an integral feature of the everyday lives of many professional women in post-Unification Italy.

Returning to the point made at the beginning that recent scholarship has described the culture of nineteenth-century Italy as 'de-eroticised', I have shown here the opposite to be the case: on the contrary, from the 1830s onwards, the topos of the sexually desiring woman in Italian tragic opera and imported French novels played a significant role in awakening a certain kind of desire in exceptional women in post-Unification Italy. This was a period in which, thanks to educational legislation introduced during the period 1874-1883 and the rise of female literacy, women were engaging cognitively and socially in the culture as readers and spectators: educated middle-class ordinary women were watching sexually desiring women in the theatre auditorium and reading about them in Italian realist fiction. As such, the scopophilic mode *exceeded* improvements in law made to the social, economic and political condition of women in early-Unification Italy. Through the scopophilic mode, actresses, aspiring actresses, and women writers learned about their sexual selves, which are apparent from female performers' candid expressions of (heterosexual) feelings and desires in their epistolary writings, and women writers' portrayals of

female protagonists' gazes in Italian realist fiction. Such bold self-assertions in literary and epistolary writings were facilitated by the blurring of the boundaries between the 'public' and the 'private' spheres at a time of unprecedented social and economic advancement, including the rise of the movement for female emancipation, whose followers were closely linked to celebrated actresses through friendship ties, as the researches of Michaela De Giorgio and Laura Mariani have shown.⁵² Female performing artists' expressions of sexual desire, together with the emergence of women writers in literary circles challenging 'masculinist' ways of spectating in their fiction and journalism as never before, also offered female spectators new modes of seeing, being, and desiring, thus opening up new possibilities for the expression of female sexuality and desire.

⁵² See M. De Giorgio, *Le italiane dall'Unità a oggi: modelli culturali e comportamenti sociali* (Rome, 1992), 126, and L. Mariani, *L'attrice del cuore: storia di Giacinta Pezzana attraverso le lettere* (Florence, 2005).