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Author(s): Teresa G. Russo

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Matilde Serao: A True Verista for the Female Character

By Teresa G. Russo

The complicated fictional world of Italian author Matilde Serao, and her portrayal of woman in society has heightened the doubts of her place in the canon of Italian letters. She began her career as an investigative journalist and became one of Italy's most prolific writers and recognized public figures of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century. She published over forty volumes of fiction, wrote journalistic prose for her front-page editorials during a period when male journalists dominated the arena, and was the first woman to establish four major newspapers and a literary magazine in Italy. Her accomplishments as a journalist set the standards for the profession as it is known in Italy today, and her literary achievements were held in high esteem. She surpassed her female contemporaries in Italy with her collection of popular novels and a number of short stories, but has been criticized for her treatment of the female character in her novels by today's critics. During the last thirty years American critics, such as Lucienne Kroha, Nancy Harowitz, Ursula Fanning, and Judith Jeffrey Howard, have questioned the use of Serao's rhetorical devices to portray women in society.

Serao's conventional characterization of women and her conservative position on certain issues, such as divorce, resulted in negative criticism, viewing her literary expression of women's lives and approach to portraying women as a critical and improper during a time after Jane Austin (1775-1817), George Sand (1804-1876), and Edith Wharton (1862-1937) had departed from the traditional stereotypes of women in literature. Her critics believe Serao misinterpreted women because she did not possess the ability or originality to deviate from the modern prose developed in Italy by Alessandro Manzoni, Luigi Capuana, and Giovanni Verga.¹ Serao appears contradictory and hypocritical to her critics for having a career and not attempting to portray women with the same strong characteristics as she possessed. Pro-feminist critics claim that Serao had an opportunity, as an eminent female figure in the nineteenth-century, to change the image and role of women in Italian literature — but failed to do so.

Serao, however, is a *verista* and a writer sincere to a literary movement that developed to honestly represent society and the people in its world as it really appeared. Her experiences as a journalist and her dedication to reporting the truth of the problems of a young developing nation influenced her literary style and themes. Serao presents her observations and culture within the literary development of *verismo* and with her journalist skills, demonstrating her realist tendencies in the novel. She began her career at the age of twenty-one under the influence of a newly unified nation, struggling to surpass the Greek city-state mentality and to maintain its nationhood status.² As early as 1876, while working as a journalist for *Il Giornale* of Naples and for *Il Piccolo* and collaborating with *Gazzetta Letteraria Piemontese* and *Corriere del Mattino*, Serao addressed the

TERESA RUSSO is studying at Oxford University, UK.

unrighteousness of political corruption and the injustices of women in her society columns and investigative reports at a time when such issues were unpopular to address in Italy. Her editorials critically focused on the manners of her time and the social suffering that resulted from Italy's first phase of unification. In 1878, Serao published a controversial article and one of her well known observations of female issues, "Votazione Femminile" in *Il Piccolo* ("The Female Vote," August 1878). Serao addressed the issue of women's suffrage in Italy as she asserted that women needed more than the right to vote: "But this is not enough," she wrote, "—it is not enough to give a right without supplying the occasion to exercise it."³ In the article, Serao demonstrated her broader vision for women—public office: "Joking aside, it is time, oh gentlemen, that the woman is not violated anymore, and it is time that she enters public office, it is time that she is permitted sacrosanct rights."⁴

Serao's editorials continued to address female issues when she established *Corriere di Roma* in 1885 with her husband, Edoardo Scarfoglio, as observed in her article "*Le Telegrafiste*." The article describes the poor conditions that women faced in the workplace and portrays the unjust working experiences that female telegraphists encountered. When this article was published, Italy had experienced many changes and challenges: southern towns faced poverty as factories and artisan workshops closed with the introduction of new free trade tariffs at the end of the war; Naples lost her textile and engineering factories; taxes rose; the government was burdened by an immense public debt; and the 1868 grist tax was placed on wheat milling, resulting in riots across the nation.⁵ Serao responded by reporting in her columns the aftereffects of these events as later felt by society, the rising local and national problems of her day, and the hardships facing women. Her descriptions demonstrate the extent to which women were being overworked and underpaid, as well as the unfair treatment and demerits they received when they became ill. Serao brought attention to schoolmistresses who died of neglect and hunger because the *Casati Law* was not properly implemented to provide for educators and because the local government lacked funds for state primary schools. In *Le Telegrafiste*," she focused on telegraphists, who also experienced uneasy work conditions and were affected by poor government laws. She connects the reader directly to the feelings of telegraphists and the reality of their experiences by bringing the reader through the workday and life of a telegraphist and introducing a career telegraphist, Guilietta Pagano of Capodimonte. Serao discusses the limits placed on women in this profession and the long-term ramifications, ending the article with a statistic that three out of forty women will die of maladies developed from the poor conditions of the workplace: Sara Lattes from consumption, Adelina Porcelli from anemia, and Anna Cufino from *phthisis*.⁶

Serao transferred her journalistic instinct and realistic tendencies and sentiments to the novel, continuing her focus on women. Her first novel, *Cuore inferno (The Infirm Heart)* was written in 1881, ten years after the completion of Italy's unification. The new country's late development and early tribulations inhibited the advancement of its literary culture and the formation of the modern novel, which was introduced in 1827 with Manzoni's *I promessi sposi (The Betrothed)* and developed by Capuana, Verga, Federico De Roberto,⁷ and Serao after the rest of the European countries had identified their modern prose and established their romance novel. Manzoni in 1862, following the start of the unification process,⁸ was commissioned to write a government report on the Italian

language and composed the essay, *Dell' unita' della lingua (On the Unity of the Language)*. He changed the course of the Italian novel, bringing it a sense of history, language and a natural romantic art by cultivating the epic and unifying a myriad of genre into a singular element.⁹ The Italian novel then began to address poverty, morality, politics, economics, women issues and the intensified social problems in the dialectic and national language through the literary movement of *verismo*, a rhetoric style developed only in Italy and born of Manzoni's influence of realism in the Italian novel. The national political shift placed these issues in the foreground and influenced the *veristi* to write on behalf of the disadvantaged who were most affected by the new changes.

Serao followed this realistic literary movement which, according to Capuana, is an art that repeats the secret process of nature,¹⁰ and, according to Verga, the art must be absolutely impersonal, proclaiming that:

the triumph of the novel is reached when the process of the creation remains a mystery as to unfold the human passions . . . and the work of art appears to be made by itself . . . it remains for proper reason, for the only fact that it is as it must be, and it is necessary that it remains.¹¹

The Manzonian *veristi* considered themselves the profaners of virtue and beauty, revealing the true images of life, which at times could be unattractive and grotesque, and aiming to portray an objective presentation of life in the novel.

As an author, Serao was sincere to this movement, addressing social problems through her female roles. Her contemporaries applauded her poetics, which imitated the theoretical ardor of Capuana, and her artistic expression characteristic of the moral temperament of Verga.¹² She was considered one of the best of the regionalist writers of this literary movement, portraying the culture and life of Naples and Rome, as Verga wrote about the poverty of Sicily in *I vinti*, and using the regional dialects and language to achieve an accurate portrayal of society.¹³ Serao was also known for her rhetorical devices of the female double: the angel/monster dichotomy and femme fatale; the use of the pre-Freudian biology as destiny theory; and her novels' portrayal of passion as central to life in southern towns.

The origin of Serao's *verismo* style is based on a complete moral thought and presented as a symbolic and poetic transfiguration, according to Antonio Gatto in *Il realismo nelle novelle e nei romanze della Serao (Realism in the short stories and novels of Serao)*. With her realistic element, she was able to describe a vivid and limpid world, such as in her novel *Castigo* (1893), where she describes the handkerchief of the dead Anna Acquaviva and the symbolism of blood as life:

That handkerchief was dignified, for sometime, in custody of scented stain, it was passed through the white gloved hands, at the dance, at the theaters, at all the spectaculars of the joys of humanity; and then, two hours before, it leaned on the bloody wound of the heart broken forever. And those small strains of blood still damp, were pulling with a singular and frightening charm that only the blood poured out because the blood appeared still as life, because the blood is fluent life . . . that revolver and that blood were the dead; and, around him and in him, was the elevated and dismal silence, the stillness of finished things.¹⁴

She saw every object, act, and movement with full clarity and marked with distinction. According to Italian critic Benedetto Croce, Serao accurately noted the characteristics, customs and figures of a myriad of societies and situations. Her artistic expression portrays the manner in which her memory retained the precision of the world around her. Croce said that these images and figures remained in memory, but were activated by her intelligence and heart.¹⁵

With this emotional quality and artistic expression, Serao presented sentimental elements and characteristics of late nineteenth-century Naples, Rome, and southern Italy. She addressed the social and economic problems of a quasi-third world Naples, her concerns of poverty, and the corruption surrounding the founders of social progress in her novels, while maintaining a focus on the disposition of Italian women, such as in *Il ventre di Napoli* (*The Belly of Naples*, 1884), *L'anima semplice di Suor Giovanna della Croce* (*Sister Joan of the Cross*, 1901) and *Il paese di Cuccagna* (*The Land of Cockaigne*, 1891). Her experience as a journalist in Rome inspired *Il conquista di Roma* (*The Conquest of Rome*, 1885) and *Vita e avventure di Riccardo Joanna* (*The Life and Adventures of Riccardo Joanna*, 1887). These two later novels maintained her *veristic* style as she focused on politics and sex in Rome and revealed the austere elements of journalism. Serao clearly utilized *verismo* to critically focus on the problems of society in southern Italy, which was lagging behind the political and social trends of other Western states. Her realistic memory, asserts critic Pietro Pancrazi, allowed Serao to resuscitate the facts and describe people as she saw them, while she attempted to render them in a realistic manner and within the sentiments of that time.¹⁷

Her novels also contain tenderness and compassion for women while railing against the local government and policies as noticed in *Il ventre di Napoli* and *L'anima semplice di Suor Giovanna della Croce*. In *Il ventre di Napoli*, Serao demonstrates the ruthlessness of politicians and the uncontrolled bureaucracy that scandalously displaces an elderly nun into the corrupt streets of Naples. And, similarly, in *L'anima semplice di Suor Giovanna della Croce*, a former nun is forced into the corrupt streets to provide for herself when the local government closed the monastery of Sant' Orsola in Naples and monasteries throughout the city, signifying the closure of monastic houses in Italy from 1866 to 1881 to raise revenue. The confiscation of Church property displaced 25,000 ecclesiastical bodies in the first year and left the poor jobless and without a major base of welfare.¹⁸ The social and political questions that she accentuated also raised moral issues, such as in *Il paese di Cuccagna*: "an entire society, a city that, as under a biblical punishment, undergoes moral and material ruin for playing the game of lottery," describes Pancrazi.¹⁹ Serao addressed these problems and continued to challenge the political establishment until the end of her career with the novels *La mano tagliata* (1912) and *Mors tua* (1926), which was presented at the 1926 Nobel Conference, expressing her anti-militaristic views and concern about the direction of the Fascist government.

Two other Italian female writers, Carolina Invernizio and Liala, joined Serao in writing "about women for women." Carolina Invernizio wrote typically novels in a series, focusing on brutal crimes, redemption and the theme of children lost and found among the middle class family with little attention given to the bourgeois family, proletarian, and the poor.²⁰ Her female characters represent women who are unable to control their passions and are punished and women who are victors when regulating their passions.²¹

Invernizio was influenced by Italy's unification and represented a society after nationhood like Serao. Liala, pseudonym of Liana Cambiasi Negretti, is known for her novels about passions of love and death while presenting the psychological elements of her characters within their social classes. She additionally addresses individualism among the bourgeois and progressionist classes, and Italian critic Maria Pia Pozzato describes her female protagonists as creators of love that embrace the traditional bourgeois matrimony.²² The first woman to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1927, Grazia Deledda, was another Italian female author among Serao's contemporaries and, like Serao, was influenced by Verga and the *veristi*, presenting the cultures of Sardegna. She focused on the economy and the tensions among opponents of the egoism utilitarian system, rather than defining women as Serao, Invernizio, and Liala did.²³

Serao is undeniably a complete writer and best known among her female contemporaries. According to Umberto Eco,

As for Matilde Serao, undoubtedly her personage was more complete and reasonably is taken into great consideration in literary history that usually causes one to neglect the other two authors [Carolina Invernizio and Liala] of our triptych — as seen diffusely in a medallion that is dedicated here. And nevertheless for various and good reasons she remains as the champion of the popolare literature, and maybe not so much in her realistic-veristic novels, in which she discusses the populace, but characteristic of those in which her vicissitudes of love and passion unfold in fine furnished parlours and in exhausted alcoves with draperies and trifles.²⁴

Serao initially established herself as a stronger writer and an acute inquirer of the feminine spirit with her novels *Scuola Normale Femmine* (*Normal School for Girls*, 1885) and *Telegrafi dello Stato*.²⁵ It was in these earlier years that Serao utilizes the *veristic* art to present the common and poor people. In the last twenty years of her life, she focused on the aristocratic life, characterizing her protagonists with conventional moral tensions as she continued her realistic elements and portrayals of women. She presents “maternal sentiments,” according to Gatto, and makes more use of the female double in a series of these later novels. She is especially successful in her inquiry of the female psychological case-study that Capuana practiced while examining the aberrant human behavior. Serao uses her sentiments and observations of life to unfold the human passions of her characters which have received the most criticism, leading to questions regarding her contribution to Italian literature. The female characters, such as the young orphan Anna Acquaviva in *Addio Amore!* (*Farewell Love!*, 1890) and *Castigo*, and her focus on emotions and passions of love have some critics questioning her potentially misogynist views, while Eco applauds these literary techniques as surpassing the height of the *popolare* literature. The controversy arises from her female figures who have passions that generate afflictions, literally developing strange maladies.²⁶ Their passions produce a physical torment, suffering similar conditions as Christ did. For instance, Anna's passions lead to a medical condition in which all her blood rises to the surface of her body and her hands filtrate blood; her agony becomes a religious suffering or martyrdom.

Serao also presents self-reliant women, such as the protagonist Duchess Hermoine

Darlington, who in *Castigo* represents a diametrical figure of Anna: she knows how to control her passions; and she is separated from her husband, living a liberated life, and always traveling alone. Her idiosyncratic condition appears to represent a re-figuration of Anna that returns to this world to regain control of her destiny. However, Hermoine dies, and the passiveness of Anna is not exonerated.

Ursula Fanning criticized Serao's development of the double motif in these later works, asserting that she radically used the device, moving from a latent double to the use of a manifest double that exemplified weak, docile women.²⁷ Even the women who initially appear courageous and strong, such as Hermoine, surrender to their passions, a tendency which has led to Harrowitz's criticism, in *Anti-Semitism, Misogyny, and the Logic of Cultural Difference*, that Serao "shipwrecked her female characters" in *Castigo*:

Hermoine, the somewhat liberated woman, drowns in the end of her yacht, the vehicle of her freedom, Anna has already killed herself in *Addio, amore!*, and Laura is left abandoned, after her husband Cesare is killed by Luigi in their final duel . . . Serao's fictional world is complicated, shifting construction in which her female protagonists play out the ambivalence, contradictions, and difficulties of modern society . . . The case of Serao as a writer divided over her own identity is not unique. However, the question of a woman writer with potentially misogynist views, especially one who concentrates on the situation of women in society, is one that has not been adequately addressed by criticism.²⁸

Another author, Judith Howard, in *The Vision of Matilde Serao*, criticizes Serao, saying that she provides imperfect images of women and attributes the shortcomings of Serao's female characters to Serao's ideological conservatism: "[she was] a rather outspoken anti-feminist who viewed the world through her perception of her proper role as a woman," asserts Howard.²⁹ This criticism, shared by some Italian critics, suggests that there is a contradiction between Serao's success as a woman and her convictions about women in society, which the critics believe influenced her representation of weak female characters. She is criticized for acquiring a respectable career and not using it to change the female roles in Italian literature from the traditional roles formed by the Manzonian *veristi* to roles that imitate her own success as a woman.

Kroha, on the other hand, notes the ambiance of Serao and realizes the "circumscribed perspective" of the literary culture that surrounds her. Kroha even suggests that Serao needs to be read in the light of late nineteenth-century Italian ideological exceptions. However, Kroha does not excuse Serao for not exceeding the trends of the Italian novel, but criticizes her for not deviating from the old genre and presenting stronger nineteenth-century female characters as Austen did with her female roles in the British novels 84 years before Serao was a writer. She believes that Serao had a greater tendency of not encompassing the strength to surpass the norms of the old-genre, rather than a sincere concern to present the social and psychic conditions of women: Kroha asserts,

She was far more intimidated by literary conventions and by an acute sense of her own personal limitations as an artist than by social or moral imperatives . . . Serao clearly saw that there was little possibility for an authentic portrayal of

women within the prevailing literary tradition, but did not possess the strength, conviction or originality to deviate confidently from prescribed norms.³⁰

Fanning agrees with Kroha that Serao's decisions as a writer were influenced by the nineteenth-century pressures of maintaining a masculine rigor for social and professional acceptance. Fanning believes Serao continued the age-old male tradition and techniques in her characterization of women for the benefit of her career and to maintain her status in journalism and literature.³¹

However, the reality is that while American and British women were breaking the stereotypes and working for women's suffrage, women in southern Italy were merely hoping to surpass their indigent conditions. Their social conditions were poor and their independence was yet not realized by the late-maturing nation. Serao attempted to reproduce these images; and in effect, she represented southern Italian women as poor, careerless, and limited by the laws of society as they appeared in her culture in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century. She believed the laws of the government hindered women from overcoming poverty and advancing their social status. Her initial novels addressed these problems while later Serao focused on presenting the consequential conditions the laws generated and afflicted onto society as her attempt to liberate women. Her intention was not to fabricate a society that did not exist; instead, she was concerned with presenting a "snap shot" of an abiding society, not yet realizing the modern trends and way of life.

The female writer/journalist had never existed in nineteenth-century southern Italy and her strong and well-known career was unorthodox for a woman. However, her outstanding position in society did not incite or encourage her to portray career women in literature; rather, in her novels, she demonstrated how it was rare and unacceptable to men. For example, in *Fantasia* (*Fantasy*, 1883), Serao illustrates society's view of career women in a dialogue between Lucia and Andrea:

- "“Those are the journalists’, said Andrea to Lucia. There are the correspondents from *The Liberta*, the *Popolo Romano*, *The Fanfulla*, for Rome; of the *Pungolo* and the *Piccolo*, for Naples.’ - ‘And is she a journalist?’

- ‘I think so, but I don’t know her name.’
- ‘I envy her, if she’s intelligent. At least she has an aim.’
- ‘Bah! You would rather be a woman.’
- ‘Glory is worth having.’
- ‘But love is better,’ he continued in a serious tone.
- ‘. . . love?’”³²

The mentality of Andrea was innately deep-rooted in the South and produced limiting situations and conditions for women who, nevertheless, did nothing to resist or change them. From the onset of her career as a journalist and then novelist, Serao portrayed this archaic thinking and inaction in order to change it.

Kroha, Harrowitz, Howard, Fanning and other critics are accurate in their assessment that Serao was influenced by male journalists and writers of *verismo*. Serao's career as

the only prolific female journalist placed her in the midst of authoritative male writers. However, she was also an independent writer and not easily influenced or intimidated to alter her views as her critics tend to believe: remember, no other woman had ever established a newspaper before in Italy, and Serao established four surpassing her male colleagues while representing women issues before their time. She changed Italian journalism, and as a journalist witnessed the reality that others turned away from in disgust. Journalism provided a first look at the injustices of women. Serao reported the horrors of life and transported those images to the novel, reminding society that these perturbations prevailed in small southern Italian towns; whereas British and American writers were portraying an affirmation of women's rights and a new role in society, breaking the stereotypes in literature and generating a new study of feminism in the novel.³³

What Serao's critics view as a faulty stereotypical characterization, that accents women's passivity, was the reality of life in southern Italy which Serao witnessed. Serao attempted to "photograph" her ambiance and a culture not yet realizing its economic and social rights — a young society, attempting to survive the problems that arose from unification which she recognized from her experiences as a journalist. She then used the developing literary movement of *verismo* to introduce and further speak against those injustices in literature. Serao's pen matured with age and vigorously continued to question the political establishment and direction of society during the second half of her career in novels such as *L'anima semplice di Suor Giovanna della Croce*. Her later works can not be judged without weighing her entire career from journalist to novelist, which in its entirety demonstrates that Serao did not favor the unjust treatment of women, but reported what she witnessed: the other reality and the ugliness of society.

Her concern for an accurate characterization of society as a journalist confronted Serao with the problem of how to portray women in literature. Her inclination to provide this realistic representation directed her to utilize the *veristic* art, in which she orthodoxically imitated Capuana's psychological case-study and presented the passions, which Verga declared was the triumph of the novel. Thus, it is not a question of her strength to overcome the norm, but a desire to imitate her contemporaries of *verismo* in order to present a genuine image of life in southern Italy. Serao's observations are moved by sentiments and only she can best explain the motive of her own works:

I am the slave of my memories, in memory, where the recollections are arranged in successive layer, as the traces of the geological life in the crust of the earth, and I give you the notes as they are found without reconstruction of fantastical spirits. From the first day I wrote, I never wanted anything else but a faithful and humble account of my memory. I have depended upon my instincts and do not believe that they have deceived me.³⁴

One can observe that a synthesis of the traditional literary style, her conservative convictions and her sincere interest to portray society's "real" vicissitudes influenced Serao's novels and portrayal of female characters, placing a greater emphasis on the latter: her photographic style of *verismo*. What has been criticized as her limitations are actually her strengths which she employed to challenge society and to encourage women to rectify the present problems and their status, making her a true champion of the *popolare* literature in

Italy and rightfully deserving of a place in the canon of Italian letters. She only failed in detaching herself from her subject, as Verga states is a principle for a *verista* writer. A *verista* would not develop compassion for the subject and select a position or provide an opinion because a concrete view would obstruct the objective illustration of reality. Serao became attached to the many cases and the names of the villages, churches, palaces, town squares, small towns, the old, the starving, the diseased, the women and their children — the names and historical places were told and retold so no one would forget: “to herself and for us, she repeated them and resounds their names.”³⁵ Serao acquired compassion and sympathy for the homeless and poor women, and provided her female characters with a divine suffering. In reality, her sentiments were to end women’s suffering and to bring honor and dignity to women.

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END NOTES

1. Manzoni (1785-1873) is a nineteenth-century poet, author, dramatist, and literary theoretician who immensely changed the course of Italian literature and language. The Manzonian novel followed a distinguished classical literature with a poetic characteristic, reflecting a small group of intellectuals, poets, and philosophers from the School of Sicily to Dante to Carducci and Croce. He is best known throughout Europe for his novel *I promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed*, 1827) which contributed to an important shift in literary sensitivities and marked a major change in Italian literature from the classics to a modern prose, initiating the movement of realism in Italian literature and developing *verismo*. Johann Wolfgang Goethe praised Manzoni for his poetic verses and applauded his *I inni sacri* (*The Sacred Hymns*, 1812). In *Classiker und Romantiker in Italien*, Goethe states that Manzoni’s works are the basis for unifying humanity. Capunana (1839-1915), a contemporary of Manzoni, is a theorist and primary exponent of *verismo* with his short-story collection, *Studio delle donne* (*Studies of Women*). He was one of the earliest supporters of realism in the Italian novel and embraced the *verismo* movement both in literary criticism and his fiction. His first study of women was *Giacinta*, a psychological presentation of a wronged woman, and his best known critical work is *Studi sulla letteratura contemporanea* (*Studies on contemporary literature*, 1880 & 1882) and *Gli “ismi” contemporanea* (*Contemporary “isms,”* 1898) (Merriam-Webster, Inc., “Capuana,” in *Merriam-Webster’s Encyclopedia of Literature*, Massachusetts, 1995, 208). And Verga (1840-1922), following the literary movement, is one of the most successful writers to practice Capuana’s theory and Manzoni’s literary style to provide a realistic account of poverty and Sicilian life in his novels, such as *Novelle rusticane* (*Little novels of Sicily*, 1883) and *I vinti* (*The Vanquished*). He was a novelist, short story writer, and playwright who is considered by contemporary

critics to be the most important “mover” of the *verismo* school of novelists. His works have been made into film, such as Luchino Visconti’s *La terra trema* (*The Earth Trembles*, 1948) based on Verga’s novel *I Malavoglia*, and into opera, Pietro Mascagni’s *Cavalleria Rusticana* (*Rustic chivalry*, 1884) titled after the original play and short story by Verga (“Verga,” in *Merriam-Webster’s Encyclopedia of Literature*, 1162). See Mario Puppo, *Manuale critico-bibliografico per lo studio della letteratura italiana* (Torino: SEI, 1994); Sante Mastteo and Larry H. Peer, *The Reasonable Essays on Alessandro Manzoni* (New York: Peter Lang, 1986); and especially Steven P. Sondrup’s “Poetic Language in the *Inni Sacri*,” in *The Reasonable essays on Alessandro Manzoni*, 259.

2. She first wrote as a freelance journalist while working as a telegraphist for the Ministero delle Poste (Ministry of the Post) and published her first collection of short stories, *Opale* (*Opale*, 1878) when she was twenty-two. Her early experiences at the Ministry influenced her later novel, *Telegrafi dello Stato* (*Telegraphs of the State*), published in 1886 and “*Le Telegrafiste*” (“*The Telegraphist*,” December 7, 1886), an editorial that appeared in *Corriere di Roma*. For a biography of Serao’s life see Gianni Infusino, “La Vita,” in *Matilde Serao: Vita, Opere, Testimonianze* (Casoria, Na: Polisud, 1977) and G. De Caro, *Matilde Serao aneddotica* (Naples: Arturo Berisio Editore, 1977); for a summary of her Neapolitan works see Pietro Pancrazi, *Romanzi e Racconti Italiani Dell’Ottocento: Matilde Serao* (Garzanti, 1944), xii-xiii; and for a chronological list by year of Serao’s narratives and publications see V. Pascale, *Sulla Prosa Narrativa Di Matilde Serao* (Naples: Liguori Editore, 1989).

3 Wanda De Nunzio Schilardi, *Matilde Serao Giornalista Con antologia di scritti rari* (Milella - Lecce: Universita degli Studi di Bari e del Ministero della P.I.), 207. [My translation of “Ma questo non basta — non basta dare un diritto senza fornirne la occasione di farlo esercitare” (*IL Piccolo*, August 2, 1878). All translations in this text are my own unless otherwise indicated.]

4. De Nunzio Schilardi, 210. [. . . “e’ tempo, o signori, che la donna non sia piu’ manomessa, e’ tempo che ella entri nei pubblici uffici, e’ tempo che le si concedano quei sacrosanti diritti . . .” (*IL Piccolo*, August 2, 1878).]

5. Christopher Duggan, *A Concise History of Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 135.

6. In *Corriere di Roma* on 7 December 1886, Serao writes: “Telegraphists have a horrible fear of being ill: because injury emergencies of medical and medicine result in a loss of earnings. Thus they even come [to work] sick until they are able to: until the bronchitis or the phthisis does not bed stricken them . . . Telegraphists are not permanent employee, they can not get a raise, they can not have a pension plan, they all can be dismissed from a provisional decree by the general director: and if they are not, at the age of forty they will be dismissed without any doubt . . . In three years, I remembered, of the forty telegraphists seven or eight left to become school teachers, eight married, three quit for health reasons, and three died . . .” [Translation of “Le telegrafiste hanno una paura orrenda di essere ammalate: perche’ al danno emergente di medici e medicine, si unisce il lucro cessante. Così vengono anche ammalate, sinche possono: sinche’ la bronchite o il tifo non le abbia buttate in letto . . . Le telegrafiste, non essendo in pianta, non possono avere aumenti, non possono avere pensioni, possono essere tutte licenziate, da un provviso decreto del direttore generale: e see no, a quaranta anni sono

licenziate senz' altro . . . In tre anni, mi rammento, sopra quaranta telegrafiste sette od otto se ne andarono a far le maestre: otto si maritarono: tre si ritirarono per ragioni di salute: tre morirono . . ." (De Nunzio Schilardi, 213).]

**Phthisis* is a health condition similar to consumption. The term was used to describe a disease process characterized by a generalized wasting of the body or decaying, such as pulmonary tuberculosis. Today the term is obsolete, and the medical condition is referred to as tuberculosis (Sidney I. Landau, vol. iii, *International Dictionary of Medicine and biology*. New York: John Widely and Sons, Inc., 1986, 2182).

Following *Corrier di Napoli and Il Mattino* in 1904, Serao founded her own newspaper, *Il Giorno* (After Serao ended her association with *Corriere di Roma*, she returned to Naples and established *Corriere di Napoli* in 1887 and in 1892 established another newspaper with her husband called *Il Mattino*. *Il Giorno* was Serao's last newspaper.), which featured a series of articles highlighting feminine issues: "*Perche le donne non si maritano?*" ("Why do women not marry?," December, 1906), "*E I figli?*" ("And the children?," November 17, 1907), "*Ma che fanno le femministe?*" ("What are the feminists doing?," June 20, 1925), and "*Si prega di non confondere!*" ("Please do not confuse!," April 19, 1926). Serao attempted to expand the rights of women, change their work environment and increase job opportunities, while arguing to maintain the traditional existence of the family. See De Nunzio Schilardi's *Matilde Serao Giornalista Con antologia di scritti rari* for samples of her articles from all four Italian newspapers.

7. De Roberto (1861-1927) was faithful to the *veristic* theory as seen in his first works, *Documenti umani* (*Human documents*) and *Processi verbali* (*Minutes [verbal proceedings]*). He also accentuated a study on the psychological, which according to Italian critic Aurelia Accame Bobbio, surpasses the limits of scientific studies of human fantasies to reconstruct the interior life of his characters. This historical scientific reconstruction is seen in *I Vicere'* (1894), a novel which represents the social life of the Uzeda family and other Sicilian families within the framework of the *Risorgimento* and the transition from the antique or old way of life to the new political regime. De Roberto was also a literary critic for the newspaper, *Dorriere della sera*, in Milan and conducted a critical study on Leopardi's works (Aurelia Accame Bobbio, *Profilo storico della letteratura italiana*. Brescia: Editrice La Scuola, 1971, 382).

8. General Garibaldi unified the Two Kingdoms of Sicily with the rest of the peninsula in 1860 as he conquered Sicily and marched to Rome with his men of a thousand. King Victor Emmanuel of Piedmont Sardinia became the first King of unified Italy in March 1861. The actual unification process was complete in 1871. For a history of Italy see Duggan's *A Concise History of Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) and the Longman History of Italy series (London and New York: Longman, 1980), especially vol. 6 *Italy in the Age of the Risorgimento 1790-1870* by H. Hearder and vol. 7 *Modern Italy 1871 to Present Day* by Martin Clarke for an account of political events and movements and socio-economic status and progress during the years Serao wrote.

9. According to scholar Jean-Pierrri Barricelli in "Magnum Nomen Universale: Manzoni Revisited:" "Manzoni is a social historian too, but also a social philosopher . . . And in this one novel [*I promessi sposi*], he embodied the whole nineteenth century and more, even from just the point of view of literary modes. He wrote a historical novel that did not go unnoticed by that student of the historical novel, Georg Lukacs, but he wrote

more than that, outdistancing in this category the narrow confines of history cultivated by the father of the historical novel, Sir Walter Scott, in his *Ivanhoe* and *Quenten Durwards*. Manzoni cultivates the epic, and blends into a single unit the historical novel, the socio-logical, the psychological, the idealistic, the realistic, the classical, the Romantic, the existential, the pessimistic, the symbolic, the comic and the optimistic or providential (*The Reasonable Romantic Essays on Alessandro Manzoni*. New York: Sante Matteo and Larry H. Peer, Peter Lang, 1986, 4).

10. Puppo, 167.

11. "Il trionfo del romanzo si raggiungera allorché . . . il processo della creazione rimarra un mistero, come lo svolgersi delle passioni umane . . . e l'opere d' arte sembrera esseri fatta da see . . . ch'essa stia per ragione propria, per il solo fatto ch' e come deve essere, ed' necessario che stia" (Puppo, 167).

12. Antonio Gatto, *Il realismo nelle novelle e nei romanze della Serao* (Naples: Glauz, 1976), 17.

13. Many criticized Serao's use of language and even her husband, Scarfoglio, denounced her writing ability. According to Pietro Pancrazi, Serao's excessive expansion of her sentiments and her superfluity chronicle style was her downfall which lead to her "bad writing." However, Serao strategically used language to bring color to her characters as she explained in an interview with U. Ojetti: "I who have been much accused of writing in an imperfectly bad language, I admit to not knowing how to write well, admire on bent knees [he] who does write well . . . But if my language is incorrect, if I do not know how to write well, and if I admire who does write well, I confess to you that, if by chance I learned to do so, I would not do it. I believe with vivacity in that uncertain language and in that broken style to infuse in my works *calore*, and the color not only vivifies the bodies but preserves them from every corruption of time. This I think. Will the other works (and they are a small number) composed in the purest icy language survive? Us four (I intend Verga, De Roberto, myself and some of Capuana) accused of imprecision, have a public that follows us and reads us: why do we need to die in posterity? The novel is a recent form of art, and there aren't any opposing historical argument. We will see (or: time will tell). [Translation of "Io che sono stata tanto accusata di scriver in una lingua cattiva imperfettissima, io che anzi confesso di non saper scriver bene, ammiro in ginacchio chi scrive bene . . . Ma see la mia lingua e' scorretta, see io non so scrivere, see io ammiro chi scrive bene, vi confesso che, see per un caso imparassi a farlo, non lo farei. Io credo con la vivacita' di quel linguaggio incerto e di quello stile rotto di infondere nelle opere mie il *calore*, e il calore non solo vivifica I corpi ma li preserva da ogni corruzione del tempo. Questo io penso. Le altre opere (e sono poche) redatte nel linguaggio purissimo, gelido, vivranno? Noi quattro (intendo Verga, De Roberto, me e un poa Capunan accusati di scorrettezza, abbiamo un pubblico che ci segue e ci legge: perche' nella posterita' dovtemmo morire? Il romanzo e' recente forma d' arte, e non ci sono argomenti storici in contrario. Staremo a vedere" (U. Ojetti, *Alla scoperta dei letterati*, Milano, Dumolard ed., 1895, quoted in P. Pancrazi, *Romanzi e Racconti Italiana Dell' Ottocento: Matilde Serao* (Garzanti, 1944), xxx.] See also P. Pancrazi, *Matilde Serao*, p. xix and U. Ojetti, *Cose viste*. Vol. 4 (Milano: Treves 1928), also in translation by Henry Furst: Ojetti, *As They Seem to Me* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1927 and reprinted in 1968).

14. "Quel fazzoletto era stato composto, per tanto tempo, nella sua custodia di raso profumato, era passato per le bianche mani inguantate, al ballo, ai teatri, a tutti gli spettacoli della gioia umana; e poi, due ora prima, see era appoggiato sulla ferita sanguinate di un cuore infranto per sempre. E quelle piccole macchie di sangue ancora umida, lo attiravano con il singolare e pauroso fascino che solo il sangue versato ha poiche' il sangue e' vita fluente . . . Quella rivoltella e quel sangue erano la morte; e, intorno a lui e in lui, era l'alto e tetro silenzio, la immobilita' delle cose finite" (Serao's *Catigo*, 7).

15. Gatto, 19.

16. *Il ventre di Napoli* first appeared as a series of journalistic prose on the front page of *Capitan Fracassa*, protesting against the declining socio-economic conditions as well as the growth of cholera in Naples in 1884 and attacking the politicians for closing their eyes to the ills of the city while reporting positive statistics. Serao directly addresses Governor Depretis, criticizing him for his insensitivity and for not acknowledging the true disposition of Naples as a government official should: "How interesting. You don't recognize it, honorable Depretis, the belly of Naples. You are wrong, because you are the Governor and the Governor should have knowledge of everything . . . and following the criticism is a documentation of all the adversities of the city as Serao lists what the politicians failed to admit to its citizens [The quotation is from Serao's first article of the series, which reads in its original text: "Efficace la frase. Voi non lo conoscevate onorevole Depretis il ventre di Napoli. Avevate torto, perche' voi siete il Governo e il Governo deve saper tutto. . ." n. 258 *Capitan Fracassa* (Roma, September 17, 1884): 1, quoted in Gianni Infusino, *Napoli* (Napoli: Quarto Potere, 1977), 23]. See also Pancrazi, xxv.

17. Pancrazi, xix.

18. Duggan, 135.

19. "Tutta una societa', una citta' che, come sotto un castigo biblico, va in rovina morale e materiale per il gioco del lotto . . ." (Pancrazi, xxi).

20. Umberto Eco, "Tre Donne Intorno Al Cor . . ." in *Carolina Invernizio, Matilde Serao, Liala* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1979), 22.

21. Eco, 16.

22. Maria Pia Pozzato, "Liala" in *Carolina Invernizio, Matilde Serao, Liala* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1979), 100-113.

23. Vittorio Spinazzola, "Introduction" in *Elias Portolu* (Milano: Arnolo Mondadori Editore S.P.A., 941), 13.

24. "Quanto a Matilde Serao, indubbiamente la sua personalita' e' stata piu' complessa e a buona ragione viene presa in considerazione da quelle storie della letteratura che abitualmente trascurano le altre due autrici del nostro trittico--come si vedra' pui' diffusamente nel medaglione che le viene qui dedicato. E tuttavia anch' essa per varie e buone ragioni rimane come campione di letteratura *popolare*, e forse non tanto nei romanzi realistico-veristi, in cui parla del popolo, ma propria in quelli in cui le sue vicende d'amore e passione si svolgono in salotti bene arredati e in alcove esuate di tendaggi e ninnoli." (Eco, 5).

25. De Caro, 9-10.

26. Nancy Harrowitz, *Anti-Semitism, Misogyny, and The Logic of Cultural Difference: Cesare Lombroso and Matilde Serao* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 89.

27. Ursula Fanning, "Angel v. Monster: Serao's Use of the Female Double" in *Women and Italy: Essays on Gender, Culture and History* (New York: St. Martin Press, 1991), 266.

28. Harrowitz, 97-98.

29. Lucienne Kroha, "Matilde Serao's Fantasia: An Author in Search of a Character" in *Women and Italy: Essays on Gender, Culture and History* (New York: St. Martin Press, 1991), 245.

30. Kroha, 245-6.

31. Fanning, 269.

32. M. Serao, *Fantasia*. Translated by H. Harland (New York: US Book Company, 1890), 120.

33. For instance, as early as 1719 the bourgeois novel began in England and presented women in literature as Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722), Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747-48) and Austen's female protagonists. The tradition continued into the nineteenth-century, and individualist women appeared in American writers' female protagonists, such as Wharton's nonconformist Countess Ellen Olenska who, in the *Age of Innocence* (1920), opposed the manners and morals of the upper class and the docile women who lived by the social standards. See Umberto Eco, Marina Federzoni, Isabella Pezzini, and Maria Pia Pozzato, *Carolina Invernizio, Matilde Serao, Liala* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1979), 5-27.

34. "Io scavo nella mia memoria, nella memoria, dove I ricordi sono disposti a strati successivi, come le tracce della vita geologica nella crosta terrestre, e vi do' le note cosi come le trovo senza ricostruire deglie animali fantastici. Dal primo giorno che ho scritto, io non ho mai voluto essere altro che una fedele ed umile cronista della mia memoria. Mi sono affidato all' istinto e non credo che me abbia ingannato" (Gatto, 20).

35. ". . . a see' e a noi, ella ne ripete e ne fa risuonare I nomi" (Pancrazi, xxix).