

In Dialogue with Neera

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Abstract:

This essay examines the evolution of my twenty-year interest in the work of Italian 19th-century woman writer Neera (pseudonym for Anna Radius Zuccari), an interest that has culminated with the recent publication *Nineteenth-Century Italian Women Writers and the Woman Question: The Case of Neera* (2021). My attention to this writer has shifted from an initial exploration of the various characteristics of her production to what I now view as the principal lens for interpreting Neera's role and work: positioning her inside a matrilineal family tree within the Italian literary landscape, one that recognizes the importance of her legacy as literary mother to the numerous Italian women writers that followed. My essay considers Neera's significance today from this perspective while also reflecting upon evolving critical trends within *Italianistica*.

Keywords: Female Condition, Female Role-modelling, *Fin de siècle*, Letter Writing, Women Writers

1. My Dialogues with Neera

My relationship with the work of the 19th-century Italian writer Neera (pseudonym for Anna Radius Zuccari 1846-1918) began in the mid-1990's when I was introduced to her novel *Teresa* (1886) as a graduate student at The University of Wisconsin at Madison. The novel featured as part of a seminar dedicated to a selection of 19th-century texts, ranging from Pellegrino Artusi's cookbook *La scienza in cucina e l'arte di mangiare bene* to Igino Ugo Tarchetti's novel *Fosca*, united by the common thread of exemplifying the variety of the Italian *fin-de-siècle* literary and cultural production. The novelty of *Teresa* lies in its conscious portrayal of the oppressed female condition and its harsh condemnation of the system which condoned such oppression. Before women had full access to education and professions and lacked the right to vote, Neera's novel brought to the public's attention the limited options for female fulfilment outside of the family. Hers was one of few voices at the time calling out such injustices. Neera's portrayal of the female condition spoke to women of all ages and social levels while her status as one of the most prolific female writers of the period made her a point of reference for emerging women writers striving, like her, for literary success. She also dialogued with male writers, expressing objection in her essays and letter-writing to the benefits they enjoyed as privileged members of a

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patriarchal society. Throughout the decades Neera has continued to “dialogue” with readers and writers, male and female alike. Her work has been recognized as an early voice for women’s rights by exponents of 19th and 20th-century Italian feminism¹. The importance of her figure and production continues to have relevance in today’s society, both within the Italian context and internationally. 135 years after *Teresa*, and other novels, short stories, articles and essays by Neera on the female condition within *fin-de-siècle* society, debates continue today regarding many of the same issues she raised, albeit in broader terms. The internationally-resonating MeToo movement has brought, through the sharing of experiences of sexual harassment and violence, increased attention in recent years to the difficulties that many women have faced in obtaining the same recognition as men for the value of their intellectual labor. Annual reports of women’s representation within the business sector testify to the fact that women are underrepresented and often undercompensated with respect to men, especially in positions of leadership². Neera’s attention to matters regarding women’s position within society, the difficulty she portrayed for women in achieving objectives outside the domestic sphere and the discrimination she faced as a woman writer make her a noteworthy example of a woman’s voice that aimed to engage with her time but one that continues to hold meaning today, for women who continue to face discrimination and obstacles.

After my introduction to Neera in the graduate seminar at Madison, my interest in her work led to the dissertation *The Woman Writer’s Experience in Late-Nineteenth-Century Italy: From the Literary Dimension to the Epistolary Reality in Neera*, submitted upon completion of the PhD program in Italian Literature at The University of Chicago in 2001. My research continued with the publication of the article “Neera the *Verist* Woman Writer” in the journal *Italica* in 2004 and the 2010 special issue of the journal *The Italianist* dedicated entirely to Neera, titled *Rethinking Neera* and co-edited with Katharine Mitchell. The publication of my volume *Nineteenth-Century Italian Women Writers and the Woman Question: The Case of Neera* by Routledge in 2021 represents the culmination of an almost thirty-year relationship with this writer and her work. My research focus has shifted from an initial exploration of the various facets and characteristics of her production (from literary to epistolary) to what I now view as the main focus for interpreting and appreciating Neera’s role and work: understanding her relevance within the society of her time as well as her struggle to overcome the obstacles facing women striving to succeed, thereby providing an example for others who followed in her footsteps. *Nineteenth-Century Italian Women Writers and the Woman Question: The Case of Neera* represents the first monographic

¹ See Baldacci 1976, v-xii; Sanvitale 1977, v-xvi; Aleramo 1978, 63 and 68; Sanguineti 1979, 293-295; Arslan 1998, 140.

² See for example the 2021 Women in Business report by Grant Thornton international consultancy network, <<https://www.bgt-grantthornton.it/en/insights/articles/2021/2021-women-in-business-report/>> (03/2022).

volume in English dedicated exclusively to Neera, repositioning her within the Italian literary landscape and canon. It aims to bring this woman writer out of the shadows of literary marginality, to which she has long been confined, by analyzing her contribution to literary and cultural debates and by demonstrating the pivotal role she played in the creation of a female literary voice within the *fin-de-siècle* Italian context. The comprehensive analysis of Neera's vast and varied production serves to locate her within the context of Italian literature as a writer who strove constantly for literary innovation, reacting and responding to the literary and social issues and trends of her time.

My continued dialogue with Neera throughout the years has led me to question whether she was as original and exceptional as I had previously believed her to be in her attention to women's issues. The continued struggle even today by women for recognition indicates that Neera was most likely not one of the first to recognize the issue but rather one of the first to write about it. Perhaps Neera is best located inside a matrilineal family tree within the Italian literary landscape, one that recognizes the importance of her legacy as literary mother to the numerous Italian women writers that followed her. Neera's work is one point along a long line of Italian women writers, one that begins with the moment when women were "allowed" to write and ends in the present, a moment when women's works are increasingly gaining acceptance and appreciation within the literary canon³.

Today it is still necessary to call attention to the many contributions by women to all fields of intellectual, artistic and cultural production. My current project, titled *Female Cultural Production in Modern Italy: Literature, Art and Intellectual History* (under contract at the time of publication with Palgrave Macmillan), co-edited with art historian Sharon Hecker, reveals the more recent evolution of my research focus. Bringing together essays by scholars from around the world, this volume is the first critical interdisciplinary examination in English of Italian women's contributions to intellectual, artistic and cultural production in modern Italy (1860-present).

2. Rereading *Teresa*: A *Fin-de-Siècle* Product or Not?

Teresa, the story of one of a multitude of young unmarried women buried inside the homes of provincial Italy, is the social analysis of the unmarried woman in *fin-de-siècle*. Neera denounces familial customs which place the daughter's right to fulfillment second to that of the son and condemns the social structures which locate women's only possibility for fulfillment in marriage, observing: "Quale infame ingiustizia pesa dunque ancora sulla nostra società, che si chiama inciviltà, se una fanciulla deve scegliere tra il ridicolo della verginità e la

³ I credit Nina Siegal's article "Art That Looks at What Women See" (2021) with the idea of one artist's contribution within a continuum of women's work, from past to present.

vergogna del matrimonio di convenienza?” (1976, 180). Neera places the blame for Teresa’s fate on the “fathers” of patriarchal society:

[Teresa] [c]apiva le ragioni del padre: aveva troppo vissuto in quell’ambiente e in quello solo, per non essere persuasa che la sua condizione di donna le imponeva anzitutto la rassegnazione al suo destino, – un destino ch’ella non era libera di dirigere – che doveva accettare così come le giungeva, mozzato dalle esigenze della famiglia, sottoposto ai bisogni e ai desideri degli altri. (Ivi, 170)

Teresa’s desire to hurt someone derives from the frustration of an unjust situation, a desire to make someone pay for what is happening to her, when there is only society and its treatment of women to blame. Referring to *Teresa’s* significance for its female public, Neera reveals in her autobiography *Una giovinezza del secolo XIX* (1919): “Era il dramma di tante anime femminili [...] e che avessi colpito nel segno me lo dissero innumerevoli lettere di ignote, e la loro commozione e le loro lagrime e il melanconico e pur dolce conforto di sentirsi comprese” (1980, 124). In *Teresa*, Neera gives voice to a multitude of women who suffer their condition in silence, without the means to effectively express their discontent. Neera spoke for women of her time, but it is possible to note that they also spoke for her. Neera’s perspective and experiences, as a woman subjected to the same restrictions, ultimately coincided with those of Teresa, as she reveals in *Una giovinezza*:

Non altrimenti la patetica storia della donna a cui manca l’amore germinava da lunghi anni nel segreto delle mie sofferenze, nelle ingiustizie di cui ero stata vittima, nella persecuzione che aveva attossicato fin dalle sorgenti la mia ingenua giovinezza. Era il dramma di tante anime femminili che si era ripercosso attraverso la deviazione di un’anima sulla speciale sensibilità dell’anima mia. (*Ibidem*)

Neera identifies with women like Teresa whose formative years are wasted within the oppressive confines of the family home. Entrusted to the watchful eyes of her aunts, Neera’s days also revolved around the monotonous duty which came to dominate her time: sewing and mending socks, as she narrates in an episode from *Una giovinezza*:

Incominciò allora la mia esistenza casalinga, metodica come una regola di convento; alzata alle otto, rifatta la camera e la sala di ricevimento (dove non entrava mai nessuno) preso posto verso le dieci al tavolino da lavoro, dal quale non mi movevo più sino alle quattro, con una zia da una parte e una zia dall’altra; alle quattro preparavo la tavola, alle quattro e mezzo si pranzava; alla sera lavoro di nuovo, generalmente calze, una zia da una parte una zia dall’altra, sino all’ora di andare a letto. (Ivi, 90-91)

It is evident from the above description that Neera’s years as a young woman within the domestic confines still weighed upon her later years as she wrote her autobiography. Those years remained within her memory as time wasted, as an inflicted injustice and as a deception made perhaps more painful by the fact that

it was enforced by other women, victims of the same oppressive system, who became oppressors themselves in a painful cycle. It is possible to conclude that Teresa's escape from the family home at the end of the novel represents Neera's metaphorical liberation from her own childhood experiences of oppression and unhappiness and the means of affirming herself as an intellectual and a writer. Writing and an unstoppable vocation accounted for Neera's ability to overcome the oppression and isolation of those years to pursue becoming a *scrittrice*.

Character analysis, emotional involvement and psychological introspection characterize Neera's writing and her portrayal of the female reality, revealing her ability to investigate with extreme insight even the most hidden aspects of the female psychology. Neera's heightened sensibility, together with her own personal experiences of suffering, provide the foundation for the representation of female oppression in her narrative production. The novel's intimate portrayal of Teresa's plight and the passages from Neera's autobiography in which she reflects upon her own upbringing and its limitations reveal the modern sensibility of this writer who observes her surrounding reality and transmits onto the page her own personal sentiments and experiences. It is worth noting that male critics of the time failed to appreciate the modernity of such literary choices. In the 1907 essay *Letteratura femminile*, Luigi Capuana writes regarding the work of his fellow women writers: "Esse mettono nella loro opera d'arte un elemento tutto proprio, la femminilità; ma niente di più" (1988, 21-22). In "The Ferrante Effect: In Italy Women Writers are Ascendant" (2019) Anna Momigliano refers to Italy as "a country where self-referential virtuosity is often valued over storytelling, emotional resonance and issues like sexism or gender roles", offering a possible explanation for why the subject matter privileged by many 19th-century women writers failed to gain recognition. By claiming personal experiences of solitude and suffering as the source of inspiration and subject matter for their work, *fin-de-siècle* women writers affirm a new kind of authority for the figure of writer while also proposing the worth of their production based on experiences other than scholastic training.

Teresa's analysis of the female condition speaks across decades to the bigger issue of the restrictions that have faced women for centuries and that women today continue to confront in their struggle for recognition. In reference to women artists active in the same period as Neera, in "Art That Looks at What Women See" Nina Siegal credits them with taking "the first radical steps in the late 19th century, [...] daring to portray the people in their immediate circles – women, men and children, as well as themselves". The portrayal of themselves, as well as their fellow women, marked an important change within the artistic (and literary) landscapes of their time, as Siegal further notes: "They created a shift, a change in perspective, from being the model, the person a painter [writer] is looking at, to being the painter [writer] herself". Neera's work, where women are subject rather than object, participates fully in this shift in perspective.

3. Female Role-Modelling in Neera's Dialogues with Fellow Women Writers

Neera's numerous letter exchanges with leading figures from *fin-de-siècle* Italian literary, artistic and editorial circles provide a better understanding of this complex figure, and the diversified and at times contrasting positions that she adopted in her epistolary exchanges offer a more complete picture of the variegated contexts in which *fin-de-siècle* women writers lived and worked⁴. Neera's correspondences with women writers, such as journalist and novelist Matilde Serao and poets Vittoria Aganoor and Ada Negri, provide the basis for an understanding of the network of collaboration that existed between women writers of the period. Whereas budding writers such as Negri and Aganoor address Neera in their letters with admiration and respect for her production and the success she had achieved in male-dominated literary circles, the letters from affirmed writer Serao reveal the regard of one woman writer for another. Neera acknowledges in her theoretical writings the difficulty for women writers in expressing themselves publicly when she writes in *Le idee di una donna*: "A scrivere per sé ogni donna intelligente riesce a meraviglia. Scrivere per il pubblico è tutt'altra cosa ed è cosa difficilissima, che non si insegna e non si impara, ed anche quando la si sa è traditrice sirena che troppe volte trascina a naufragare fin sotto i fanali del porto" (1942 [1904], 833). It is possible to conclude that the private and intimate nature of the epistolary exchange allowed women writers the freedom to communicate a sense of solidarity amongst themselves, recognizing and encouraging their talent and literary achievements.

In a letter dated May 20, 1892, the year of publication of Neera's novel *Senio* and Negri's volume of poetry *Fatalità*, Negri writes to Neera: "Senio mi ha lasciata una impressione profonda. Non ho mai letto alcuna opera di donna che s'avvicini a tanta grandezza e lucidità d'ideali" (Arslan 1998, 203). Negri identifies Neera as a woman writer who has achieved literary greatness in the stylistic form of her production, recognizing in Neera's intuitive and spontaneous mode of expression a model for her own way of writing. She "confesses" to Neera her lack of knowledge, at least that deriving from formal studies and from experience, revealing instead how she finds inspiration for her writing in another, more intimate source, intuition. It is interesting to note that Negri exalts qualities of Neera's work, such as its direct and straightforward nature, that were often

⁴ Among the novelists with whom Neera corresponded are: Luigi Capuana, Giovanni Verga, Matilde Serao, Federico De Roberto, Roberto Bracco, Luigi Pirandello, Antonio Fogazzaro, Paolo Mantegazza, Emanuele Navarro della Miraglia and Tommaso Cannizarro. She corresponded with literary critics and representatives from editorial and journalistic spheres, such as Benedetto Croce, Vittorio Pica, Federigo Verdinois, George Héréelle, Ferdinand Brunetière, Edouard Rod, Gustavo Botta, Giuseppe Saverio Gargano, Jakša Čedomil and Leone Fortis. Letter exchanges with young, emerging writers such as Angiolo Orvieto, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Marino Moretti, Ada Negri and Vittoria Aganoor testify to Neera's interest in *letterati nuovi* (new writers). Her epistolary exchanges extended also outside literary circles to include figurative artists such as Giovanni Segantini, Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo and Vittore Grubicy de Dragon.

noted as defects of women writers' works by male literary critics because they were seen to denote a lack of formal training. Neera served as a model for other women writers not only for the success she achieved with the public and critics, but for the intimate stylistic quality of her production that provided a new kind of literary model for women writers of the time.

In her letters Aganoor praises Neera's linguistic style and reveals her admiration for Neera as one of few Italian women writers, if not the only one, who has succeeded in the literary profession. Aganoor's letter dated August 11, 1903 writes to Neera: "E tu sei l'*unica* scrittrice, vivente, di romanzi, che scriva veramente *il puro italiano*, senza leziosaggini e senza sciatterie, *squisitamente* insomma" (ivi, 62). In another passage from the same letter, Aganoor reveals how she, as woman writer, participates in Neera's success: "È inutile ch'io Le dica come io L'abbia sempre seguita nel suo cammino trionfale con ammirazione *orgogliosa*; *orgogliosa* sì, perché appunto io sentivo spesso nella mia anima vibrare fraternamente la sua voce, quella dell'anima sua, e questa affinità m'inorgoglivava" (ivi, 49). Aganoor rejoices in Neera's ability to express a female voice in which she and other women can proudly recognize their own internal voices. In a letter dated March 19, 1907, Aganoor further reveals her understanding of Neera as capable of expressing the female *anima*, in contrast to the empty male voice of patriarchal society:

Ti dirò solo che ier l'altro fui a pranzo al Quirinale e mentre si facevano quei soliti discorsi *sciapiti*, (parole, o piuttosto ombre di parole, vuote di pensiero e talora anche di *senso*, somiglianti a certe orrendissime *frutta di bambage*, che fanno le monache nei conventi, e che a premere un poco, *cedono*, e non ne resta che un cencio) pensavo con indicibile desiderio a te, cara e alta amica mia e devi aver *sentito* il mio saluto venirti dietro. (Ivi, 67-68)

Neera's work represents for Aganoor an example of a different kind of expression, in contrast to the shallowness she associates with the male voice of patriarchal discourse. Aganoor's letters to Neera reveal the sharing between two women writers of the experiences and difficulties encountered within the literary profession. Considering the negative critical reception that women writers often received from male critics⁵, it is interesting to consider Neera's epistolary exchanges with women writers as private literary reviews. Katharine Mitchell points out in *Italian Women Writers: Gender and Everyday Life in Fiction and Journalism* that "[f]emale-authored reviews of writings by women were, more often than not, very positive" (2014, 110) and that "[i]t is quite likely that such displays of deference on behalf of female critics towards women writers contributed in no small measure to women writers' growing sense of self-confidence and self-esteem in the public eye" (*ibidem*). The encouragement that women writers of the period provided each other represents an important aspect in the construction of a family tree of Italian women writers in *fin-de-siècle* Italy.

⁵ See Borgese 1911, 360; Boine 1978, 15-23; Capuana 1988, 21-22.

Even in the letter exchange between Neera and Serao, whose shared status as two of the leading women writers of late-19th-century Italy provided a potential motive for competition, it is possible to observe the special attention reserved for the work of a fellow woman writer. In a letter dated 2 December 1881, Serao writes to Neera: “Del resto io mi occupo sempre di voi, leggendo-vi ansiosamente dove scrivete. [...] Così, tra le linee studio il vostro pensiero e la vostra vita” (Collino Pansa 1977, 73). Serao, like Negri and Aganoor, reveals the special appreciation reserved for the work of a fellow woman writer and the ability to “read between the lines” of their production.

In *Le idee di una donna* Neera addresses the struggles undertaken by women writers to assert themselves as writers, discussing the difficulties encountered in the male-dominated literary circles of the period:

Ognuno di essi [scrittori maschili] era ben disposto a festeggiare la scrittrice quando nel suo interno la considerava come un leggiadro puppazzetto del suo medesimo sogno, inoffensivo, divertente, forse utile. Ma è tutt'altra cosa se la donna diviene una rivale nella concorrenza. [...] Al punto in cui la lotta si impegna seriamente, la differenza del sesso è cagione di astio maggiore. È allora che la scrittrice si sente straniera in mezzo a quegli uomini inaspriti che hanno gettato la maschera della galanteria, ripresi dalla atavica brutalità dell'animale in guerra. (1942, 832-833)

Neera reveals the antagonism experienced by women writers in competition with their male counterparts for recognition and the strength of character needed to carry on and succeed. Her own sense of alienation as a woman writer likely influenced her to dedicate attention within her narrative and theoretical work to the theme of female alienation in society in its various manifestations, from spinsterhood and arranged marriages to female dissatisfaction within marriage.

It is important to note that Neera and contemporary women writers, members of a first generation of Italian women writers, did not possess strong female literary models in the Italian context that could serve to legitimate them as writers and their production as worthy. Patrizia Zambon notes, in fact, that although the careers of women writers had become normalized by the end of the 19th century in much of Europe and America, in Italy this was not the case: “In Italia in qualche modo vive ancora sul finir del secolo l'idea di una eccezionalità e quella di una particolarità della donna scrittrice” (1989, 293). Neera's relationship with fellow women writers, as expressed through her epistolary exchanges, testifies to her important role in creating a matrilineal family tree within the Italian literary landscape, providing a much-needed example of female role-modelling in the Italian *fin de siècle*.

4. Neera Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

In this context it is interesting to consider the evolution of the critical attention to Neera's work over time, from the appraisal of contemporary supporters such as Luigi Capuana and Benedetto Croce followed by decades of neglect

until her “rediscovery” decades later sparked by Luigi Baldacci’s 1976 reprint of *Teresa*. Neera owes her critical success during her lifetime principally to the continued attention of two prestigious and influential literary critics of the period, Capuana and Croce. Capuana was the first critic to take real interest in Neera’s work, reviewing in 1877 her second novel *Addio!* in *Corriere della Sera* in an article dedicated to young novelists⁶. His interest in Neera’s work continued with reviews of other novels in the following years⁷. Croce’s first article on Neera appeared in 1905 in *Critica*, and was later included as a chapter in *La letteratura della nuova Italia*. Croce appreciated Neera’s profound inspiration to convey life experiences, in particular those of women, as he notes in the chapter dedicated to her in *La letteratura della nuova Italia*: “Il problema della donna e quello dell’amore hanno formato l’oggetto principale e quasi unico del suo studio” (1948 [1914], vol. III, 123).

In 1919, in the preface to Neera’s posthumous autobiography *Una giovinezza del secolo XIX*, Croce reveals his disappointment for the lack of critical appreciation of Neera’s work up until that point: “Il pregio, in cui ho sempre tenuto gli scritti di Neera, non ha trovato a dir vero, generale consenso nel nostro mondo letterario, dove a questa scrittrice gentile, austera e nobilissima si assegna di solito un posto assai inferiore al merito” (xiii). With the exception of Luigi Russo’s inclusion of Neera in his 1919 volume *I Narratori*, Croce’s 1919 appeal for a reevaluation of her work fell on deaf ears among contemporary critics. Croce proposed Neera to the public again in 1942 by editing a collection of her novels, short stories and essays for publication by Garzanti as part of a series, under the direction of Pietro Pancrazi, dedicated to 19th-century writers. Croce’s attempt to repropose Neera met again with little success, with the exception of Guido Piovene’s 1943 article “Idee e personaggi di Neera”, where she is referred to as “uno dei più completi ed equilibrati ingegni della seconda metà del nostro ottocento”.

Successively, brief mentions of Neera appeared in volumes such as Francesco Flora’s 1956 *Storia della letteratura italiana*, Aldo Borlenghi’s 1966 *Narratori dell’Ottocento e del primo Novecento* and Giulio Cattaneo’s chapter on “Prosatori e critici della Scapigliatura al Verismo” in the 1968 *Storia della letteratura italiana*, edited by Emilio Cecchi and Natalio Sapegno. At the end of the 1960s, critics of Neera’s production were still proposing a Crocean interpretation of her work, which positioned Neera as essentially a moralistic writer, to the exclusion not

⁶ The article, entitled “Romanzi nuovi”, was published in three parts in the *Appendice* of *Corriere della Sera* on 25 June, 5 July and 8 July 1877. Alongside Neera, Capuana reviewed the work of Anton Giulio Barrili, Luigi Gualdo, Cordula, La Marchesa Colombi and Emma.

⁷ Neera’s fourth novel, *Un nido*, earned the writer another review by Capuana on the pages of *Corriere della Sera*, this time all to herself, marking her entrance into literary circles as *scrittrice*. See Luigi Capuana, “Neera. *Un nido*”, *Corriere della Sera* (8 March 1880). Capuana later included the article in *Studi sulla letteratura contemporanea*. His 1892 review of the novel *Senio* was later included as a chapter in the 1898 volume *Gli ‘ismi’ contemporanei*.

only of the proto-feminist outlook present in her literary and theoretical production but also that of her important contribution to the *verist* movement in Italy⁸.

Interest in the feminist nature of Neera's narrative production and in the apparent contradictions between her narrative and theoretical production accounts, in part, for a rebirth of critical attention to Neera in the 1970s. In the 1976 reprint of *Teresa*, Luigi Baldacci presents the novel to the modern public as a "document[o] essenzial[e] dello spirito femminista" (7). Although Baldacci gives special attention to *Teresa*, calling it "uno dei più bei romanzi italiani dell'ultimo ventennio del secolo passato" (ivi, 5), he proposes the feminist aspect of all of Neera's narrative "nella misura in cui la donna è sentita come classe (oppressa) e non come ideale complemento dell'uomo" (ivi, 7). Baldacci's 1976 reprint of *Teresa* repropoed Neera to the attention of critics and readers alike, as Francesca Sanvitale notes in the Introduction to the 1977 reprint of Neera's *Le Idee di una donna e Confessioni letterarie*: "Chi avrebbe mai pensato di rileggere l'opera di Neera, se l'occasione non fosse venuta dalla recente riproposta di uno dei suoi primi romanzi, *Teresa*?" (5). In the decades following Baldacci's reprint of *Teresa*, several critics in both the Italian and Anglo-American contexts, such as Antonia Arslan, Anna Nozzoli, Anna Folli, Patrizia Zambon, Giuliana Morandini, Lucienne Kroha, Sharon Wood, Ann Hallamore Caesar, Katharine Mitchell, and myself, have continued to dedicate attention to Neera's production in its variety, from her novels, short stories and essays to her epistolary exchanges with leading literary and cultural figures of the time. Newfound interest in Neera's production is further documented by the republication of several of her novels and theoretical works in recent decades, such as *Una giovinezza del secolo XIX* (1975 and 1981), *Teresa* (1976, 1995 and 2009), *Le idee di una donna e Confessioni letterarie* (1977), *Crepuscoli di libertà* (1977), *L'indomani* (1981), *Dizionario d'igiene per le famiglie* (1985), *Monastero e altri racconti* (1987), *Crevalcore* (1991), *Un nido* (1994) and *Lydia* (1997), as well as the expanding digitization of Neera's writings (see, for example, the Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense di Bra's "Monografie digitalizzate" online pages and The Italian Women Writers database hosted by the University of Chicago).

This essay has examined Neera's acknowledgement throughout her production of the difficulties encountered by women writers of her time and the perseverance required to prevail in the literary profession, an occupation mainly reserved for men in Neera's time. Neera's efforts and the success she obtained position her within a group of women writers whose endeavors and accomplishments in *fin-de-siècle* Italian literary circles designate them as literary mothers for later generations of women writers. Neera's pursuit of a career not easily accessible to women at that time, her active role in literary debates and letter exchanges with leading literary, artistic and journalistic figures and her criticism

⁸ I argue that Croce's categorization of Neera as an idealistic writer, accounts in part for the lack of attention given to her naturalist production. See Ramsey-Portolano 2021, 73-97, for a reevaluation of Neera's contribution to *verismo*.

of society's restrictive roles for women constitute the many and diverse ways in which this *fin-de-siècle* woman writer rejected contemporary notions of female inferiority and social structures that aimed to enforce upon women a model of female submission and passivity. Neera's example and her production continue to hold meaning for women even today, as a voice from an earlier period registering and condemning the restrictions facing women of her time. It is important to acknowledge and appreciate Neera's contribution to breaking the cycle of female oppression by creating a shift in perspective, from women as objects to women as subjects.

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