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# Maria Savi-Lopez: The Portrait of a Neglected Woman Writer and Folklorist in Post-Unification Italy

Elena Emma Sottilotta

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- 1 Maria Savi-Lopez (1846-1940) was a prolific yet neglected writer, teacher and folklorist who authored numerous anthologies of legends and popular traditions in post-Unification Italy. Although Savi-Lopez's fame in the late nineteenth century went as far as the United States, today she hardly features even in works and anthologies specifically devoted to women writers in Italy. However, the dearth of biographical information on this forgotten writer can be replaced by a wealth of first-hand knowledge if attention is devoted to the unpublished correspondences she left behind. Her figure thus emerges from the oblivion to which many women writers were relegated thanks to the exchanges she engaged in with several Italian men of letters at the turn of the twentieth century<sup>1</sup>.
- 2 Following an overview of her life and literary production, this article investigates this woman writer by focusing on her role as a folklorist through the recovery of her letters, with particular emphasis on her correspondence with Angelo De Gubernatis (1840-1913) – renowned orientalist, professor of Sanskrit in Florence and of Italian literature in Rome, and author of several works in comparative mythology – which is held in the Fondo De Gubernatis at the National Central Library of Florence<sup>2</sup>. Starting with this correspondence and then incorporating reflections drawn from other epistolary exchanges with prominent Italian figures, the steps of this intellectually curious writer are retraced.
- 3 Savi-Lopez's letters disclose an intimate view of the activities of a woman who attempted to reconcile her studies with her manifold occupations and responsibilities. Everyday difficulties did not hinder her cosmopolitan interests and her determination to make a solid contribution to the cultural life of her time. Her ability to forge relationships with famous publishers and illustrious figures is particularly foregrounded. Indeed, these documents unveil Savi-Lopez's intricate web of

connections with several personalities of the time, such as Nobel Prize winner Giosuè Carducci (1835-1907), novelist Antonio Fogazzaro (1842-1911), publisher Enrico Bemporad (1868-1944), post-Impressionist painter Mario Puccini (1869-1920), literary critic Pio Rajna (1847-1930), folklorist Giuseppe Pitre (1841-1916), librarian and literary historian Fortunato Pintor (1877-1960), philosopher and literary critic Benedetto Croce (1866-1952)<sup>3</sup>. Her correspondences with these figures sketch the portrait of a late nineteenth-century writer who was also a lecturer, musician, translator, pedagogist and teacher as well as a scholar of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

- 4 These letters lend themselves to multiple levels of analysis and offer insights into diverse areas of study. First and foremost, they constitute an important biographical source, providing details on Savi-Lopez's life in Turin and Naples as a single woman who had to raise a son on her own, her relationship with him and his growth as he followed his mother's example by becoming a scholar and university professor, in spite of the economic difficulties they endured<sup>4</sup>. Her daily commitments are described in detail alongside the retellings of her journeys and her passion for popular culture, which she cultivated both through research in libraries and through first-hand fieldwork. In their private and confessional dimension, these documents are instilled with dignity and composure: despite being modest, she was conscious of the value of her own works, which were also an essential source of sustenance for her and her family, to the point that she often mentioned to her interlocutors her need to rely on financial subsidies. These letters also make it possible to gather previously unknown information on the publication process of her works by mapping articles and short stories that Savi-Lopez published in national and international journals. They are also noteworthy from a historical viewpoint in that they allow readers to glimpse the period during which they were written: several descriptions of Naples and its challenges, including the poor transport and the consequences of cholera, are recorded and accompanied by bitter comments on the conditions of the local educational system<sup>5</sup>.
- 5 Finally, Savi-Lopez's letters disclose her friendship and solidarity with other women: as will be shown, these proto-feminist hints are evident not only in Savi-Lopez's scholarly interests but also in the way she vouched for the participation of her female friends in several cultural initiatives. As such, the reappraisal of Savi-Lopez's life through her own words paves the way for the re-emergence of her personal life, anxieties, physical ailments and struggles. At the same time, this reassessment reveals her wide-ranging interests and frenetic literary activity, which were characterized by a strong patriotic spirit. A great passion comes to light for Alpine folklore, which she frequently collected in the field. It becomes clear that her contribution to folklore studies, a flourishing discipline in late nineteenth-century Italy, was far from marginal. Her commitment to this field demonstrates the extent of her modernity and ambitiousness as a scholar of popular traditions.

## Maria Savi-Lopez's life and oeuvre

- 6 Before delving into Savi-Lopez's involvement in folklore studies in post-Unification Italy, it is essential to provide an overview of her life and oeuvre. Salvatore Mazzarella, who wrote a brief introduction to the 2008 edition of Savi-Lopez's *Leggende del mare*, admitted that «[a]ttorno a Maria Savi-Lopez si sa ben poco»<sup>6</sup>. Similarly, Rosella Perugi remarked that «[n]on esiste una biografia dettagliata»<sup>7</sup> of this woman writer. Indeed,

the act of exploring Savi-Lopez's life and production today involves venturing into what Ombretta Frau and Cristina Gragnani evocatively defined as a «sottobosco letterario»<sup>8</sup>. This contemporary lack of knowledge, partially motivated by the scarcity of critical scholarly engagement with her works, is in line with the widespread dismissive attitude towards nineteenth-century women's writing in Italy. As Gabriella Romani aptly put it, «regardless of the popularity that all of these writers enjoyed during their lifetime, today, [...] they are almost entirely forgotten or purposely ignored»<sup>9</sup>.

- 7 However, the scant biographical data available on Savi-Lopez can be broadened by drawing directly from her correspondence. A veil of uncertainty has surrounded her year and place of birth: although Angelo De Gubernatis vaguely recounted that she was a «femme-auteur italienne, née, vers 1850, à Naples»<sup>10</sup>, several scholars reported that she was born in 1846. This is corroborated by Savi-Lopez's own words in a letter that she wrote to Pio Rajna on 10 November 1924 in which she exclaimed: «Non credevo di vivere così a lungo! – ora ho 78 anni»<sup>11</sup>. During her youth, Savi-Lopez moved to Turin, where she took shelter with her father who had escaped Naples to avoid political persecution by the Bourbon police. In 1875, she married Edoardo Savi, a Piedmontese doctor with whom she lived in Turin, where her son Paolo was born the year after. In 1882, her husband passed away. With regard to her hometown, Giulio Petroni in *Della storia di Bari, 1860-95* (1912) stated that she was born in the town of Terlizzi in the region of Apulia rather than in Naples, a detail that was also reported in a review of Savi-Lopez's *Battaglie nell'ombra*, written by Michele de Palo in 1887<sup>12</sup>. However, in an undated letter that Savi-Lopez sent to the mayor of Turin Secondo Frola (1850-1929), preserved in her correspondence with Fortunato Pintor in the *Archivio Centrale dello Stato* in Rome, she made explicit reference to her birth in Naples:

Nel 1882 rimasi vedova in Torino del Dottore Cav. Edoardo Savi, coll'unico mio bambino Paolo, che aveva cinque anni. Ero povera e dovetti cominciare una dura lotta per la vita. Non possedevo nessun titolo che potesse giovarmi; non ero mai stata a scuola; avevo soltanto studiato sempre con ardore in casa mia e sapevo suonare bene il pianoforte. Torino non abbandonò la giovane vedova ed ebbi subito molte lezioni di pianoforte; poi, pubblicai il primo romanzo – *Casa Leardi* – del quale dura ancora la fortuna, sopra un giornale dello Speirani. Nell'estate andai a Viù, e mi trovai per la prima volta fra le Alpi: ne fui come affascinata, e le amai come amavo il mare, vicino al quale sono nata in Napoli<sup>13</sup>.

- 8 Despite the ambiguity regarding her birthplace, it is clear from the several remarks in her books and correspondences that she identified herself fully as Neapolitan. In the years in Turin following her husband's death, she remained alone with a child to look after and led a demanding life while working as a private teacher, a job with precarious conditions that were at times exhausting. She confessed her feeling of humiliation on several occasions in her correspondence with her «ally» Antonio Fogazzaro<sup>14</sup>. Starting from an exploration of the «galassia sconosciuta [...] costituita dal vastissimo corpus di lettere di donne e di lettrici affezionate» sent to Fogazzaro, Adriana Chemello studied the heartfelt letters that Savi-Lopez wrote to the Italian novelist from 1885 to 1901, held at the Fondo Fogazzaro in the Biblioteca Civica Bertoliana of Vicenza. Chemello's analysis of Savi-Lopez's epistolary relationship with Fogazzaro focuses on the personal dimension of these letters as a «romanzo autobiografico, racconto di sé, costruzione consapevole del proprio personaggio»<sup>15</sup>. This «diario dell'anima»<sup>16</sup> can lead to relevant meta-reflections on the value of such intimate exchanges from the point of view of women's studies since scholars can use this kind of private archival material to rectify

the neglect that lesser-known women writers often face. For the purposes of this article, these letters are remarkable for the details they provide on Savi-Lopez's day-to-day occupations and cultural interests, life achievements and literary aspirations.

- 9 Furthermore, by intersecting the contents of the letters she wrote to Fogazzaro, De Gubernatis and other Italian intellectuals, the reconstruction of her multifaceted but blurry portrait can start taking shape. In a letter to artist Mario Puccini dated 4 February 1927, Savi-Lopez provided further details about her upbringing and the development of her fascination for legends. She introduced herself with these words :

Non sono andata a scuola, ma fin da quando ero bambina ho avuto una grande passione per lo studio, e insieme alla mamma cieca mi piaceva di leggere tanti libri serii della biblioteca di mio padre. Quando in Torino fra una lezione di musica ed una lezione di disegno, di francese o di lavoro divenni scrittrice, non avevo mai veduto le Alpi da vicino, [...] non mi ero mai occupata di leggende, e non conoscevo nei suoi particolari la storia del Piemonte! Quando l'estate durante la sosta delle lezioni, volli condurre il bambino sulle Alpi per la sua salute, fui meravigliata dalla loro bellezza, per ragioni di studio divenni alpinista nelle Valli di Lanzo, nel Biellese, riscrissi tra gli alpigiani le leggende. Di ritorno a Torino, quando riprendeva la vita faticosa per le lezioni, passavo le poche ore delle quali potevo disporre nell'Archivio di Stato e nella Biblioteca del Re, studiando con ardore. [...]. L'opera mia è semplice e modesta, ma forse perché ho sempre scritto sia per un'ardente passione per lo studio di argomenti che mi piacevano, sia per fare un po' di bene, essa ha avuto fortuna<sup>17</sup>.

- 10 She had never received a formal education when she was young: she herself admitted that she cultivated her passion for books by listening to the tales told by her blind mother. As she grew up, she spent her time in libraries and archives while writing novels and articles for various journals and she courageously crossed the Alps, overcoming adverse weather conditions and intimidating altitudes to collect local legends. After the strenuous years in Turin, Savi-Lopez returned with her son to Naples in 1888. There, she started her publishing career in parallel with her work as a teacher in several secondary schools, such as the *Primo Reale Educatario*, the *Istituto Froebeliano Vittorio Emanuele II* and the *Istituto Femminile Bech per Stranieri*. In the Parthenopean city, she further developed her network of correspondences with illustrious scholars, wrote novels, short stories, and essays, and deepened her historical and folkloric studies. At this stage of her life, she was often forced to work at night on her studies, having to reconcile her interests with the care of her son, who eventually died at the age of forty-two in 1919 ; this loss was a watershed in Savi-Lopez's life, after which she decided to move to a Catholic institute managed by nuns belonging to the Order of the Daughters of Charity in the *Casa centrale figlie della Carità* located at Arco Mirelli 10 in Naples. She joined the Third Order of Saint Francis and lived in a monastic cell for the rest of her life. Despite her old age, she continued working as a teacher for female workers. She died in Naples in 1940, but even in the last decades of her life, she wrote and published tirelessly.
- 11 Her thirst for knowledge comes to the surface in her exchanges. In a letter to De Gubernatis dated 16 June 1890, she provided details about her self-perception as a writer : «come Ella sa sono un po' selvaggia, e vivo tanto volentieri fra i miei libri, i cari parenti, gli amici gentili, senza curarmi di certe conoscenze che molti fanno per vanità»<sup>18</sup>. She considered herself «una specie di topo di biblioteche», as she mentioned in a letter to Fogazzaro on 9 October 1885<sup>19</sup>. Her production – which counts over sixty volumes – spans a variety of genres, including short stories, essays, novels, anthologies

for schools, historical and biographical works and folklore collections<sup>20</sup>. It is not surprising that the most notable Italian folklorist of the time, Giuseppe Pitrè, showed admiration for her eclecticism: «Ingegno veramente versatile questo della signora Savi Lopez ! Oggi ci dà un romanzo, domani una conferenza storica o letteraria; domani l'altro un mazzetto di poesie, e poco appresso una raccolta di leggende e di credenze popolari»<sup>21</sup>.

- 12 In *Stelle femminili*, a historical dictionary that gathered bio-bibliographic information on women who distinguished themselves during their lives, Carlo Villani (1855-1931) introduced her as a Neapolitan writer moved by «un intento nobile e generoso, la rigenerazione morale cioè della società, e specialmente dei nostri giovani»<sup>22</sup>. Her writing was influenced by Christian principles and inspired by the ideal to create literary works with an edifying purpose. She published works in the field of children's literature and novels for young girls and boys with a clear pedagogical intent, including *Racconti per le giovinette* (1891), *Solo al mondo* (1892) and *Creature di Dio* (1893), as well as educational anthologies for schools such as *Antologia per le scuole ginnasiali, tecniche e complementari* (1898) and *L'aurora della vita. Letture educative, istruttive e civili per le scuole elementari* (1905). Several of her novels, such as *Serena* (1885), *Silvia Aliberti* (1896) and *Maria* (1899), feature female characters who embody the stereotyped feminine ideals of domesticity, virtue and sacrifice – although, as observed by Masoero, these fictional figures, despite being «[r]assegnate ad un ruolo secondario nei primi romanzi, con l'andare del tempo sembrano emanciparsi»<sup>23</sup>.
- 13 Savi-Lopez also collaborated with journals such as the *Revue des traditions populaires*, *Archivio per lo studio delle tradizioni popolari*, *Cordelia*, *Flora letteraria*, *Fortunio*, *Il giornalino della domenica*, *Il pungolo*, *Il propugnatore*, *Natura ed arte*, *Nuova antologia*, *Rivista d'Italia*, *Rassegna pugliese di scienze, lettere ed arti* and *Roma*. She received several prizes and recognitions for her literary accomplishments, including the honorary pension for literary merits by the Council of the Civil Order of Savoy in 1886, a golden medal for a lecture she presented at the *Esposizione Beatrice* held in Florence on 1 May 1890 and the prestigious Giannina Milli literary prize, awarded unanimously by the Royal Academies of Rome, Florence, Milan, Naples and Venice in 1919. In Savi-Lopez's letters to De Gubernatis, it is possible to unravel the thread of the preparatory work that led to the aforementioned *Esposizione Beatrice*, an exhibition devoted to Dante Alighieri's muse held six-hundred years after the alleged death of Beatrice Portinari, during which female creativity was celebrated in its multiple forms. Savi-Lopez put De Gubernatis in touch with her friends, talented female scholars and artists who participated in the event, and she consoled him when he faced significant economic losses for having invested excessively in the initiative. She dedicated her speech «La donna italiana del Trecento» to her father, exiled from Naples. In a letter dated 6 May 1890, Savi-Lopez recounted to De Gubernatis the effort she had made for the conference. Her supportive nature comes to the forefront through the esteem she showed for her friends, such as the lesser-known writers Luisa Viglione and Maria Bobba; history teacher and writer Giovanna Vittori; lecturer Virginia Fornari; and artist Camilla Maldura, whom Savi-Lopez defined as «una delle migliori dilettanti di pittura napoletane»<sup>24</sup>. She did not hesitate to suggest their names to De Gubernatis so that they could contribute to the *Esposizione Beatrice*<sup>25</sup>.
- 14 A sensitive scholar, Savi-Lopez was aware of her skills and reputation, which went beyond national borders. In an article by American writer and journalist Fanny Aymar

Mathews (c. 1855-1923), Savi-Lopez's portrait was inserted alongside those of Queen Margherita of Savoy (1851-1926), Contessa Lara (Evelina Cattermole, 1849-1896) and Marchesa Colombi (Maria Antonietta Torriani, 1840-1920), among others. It is worth reporting the words that Mathews used to describe Savi-Lopez :

Through the wide gate of poverty's compulsion, Maria Savi-Lopez, left a young widow ten years ago with a little son to support, found her talents pushing her into the literary life, and the impulse has been well justified in the result. Her novels, travels, and children's books have all met with a deserved success, especially so her *Leggende delle Alpi*, and her learned essay entitled *La Donna Italiana del Trecento* [...] <sup>26</sup>.

- 15 Her growing fame abroad is confirmed in her letters. Indeed, as she proudly reported to De Gubernatis in a letter dated 10 April 1893, she was invited to Chicago to take part in the World's Fair in 1893<sup>27</sup>. Although she did not manage to travel to the United States, a significant number of her books were sent to the *Woman's Building Library* of the World's Fair. Silvia Valisa's categorisation of the 222 books that were sent from Italy to Chicago on this occasion, shows how Savi-Lopez was well-represented in this international initiative. In fact, in the literary field, she was the second writer with the greatest number of books featuring in the *Woman's Building Library*, preceded only by Cordelia (Virginia Tedeschi Treves, 1849-1916)<sup>28</sup>. Interestingly, this library devoted to works by women writers worldwide also welcomed several works penned by Savi-Lopez's aforementioned friends Giovanna Vittori and Maria Bobba. Furthermore, it is worth underlining that out of the five books that Valisa classified as «folklore», four were written by Savi-Lopez, and both the Italian and the German editions of her *Leggende delle Alpi* were included, «a prova della diffusione internazionale del suo lavoro»<sup>29</sup>. Indeed, despite being a prolific writer for children, Savi-Lopez's deepest and most lasting passion was for popular legends and ancient myths.

## Maria Savi-Lopez as a scholar of popular traditions

- 16 Among Savi-Lopez's publications in the field of folklore, it is worth recalling not only her aforementioned *Leggende delle Alpi* and *Leggende del mare*, but also *Miti e leggende degli indigeni americani* (1894), *Nani e folletti* (1900) and *Leggende e paesaggi della Selva Nera* (1914). Detailed background information on her work as a folklorist can be deduced from her correspondence with De Gubernatis. She initially addressed him in a deferential tone before gradually becoming more friendly, albeit always retaining a professional demeanor. She was determined to become a contributor to De Gubernatis's journals, submitting articles on a range of subjects. She enthusiastically welcomed his proposal to contribute to the establishment of a new Italian society for popular traditions and provided details about potential members: «Coraggio dunque e adoperiamoci con tutto il cuore affinché l'Italia nello studio delle sue tradizioni popolari non resti indietro alle più colte nazioni del mondo civile»<sup>30</sup>. Being so fond of Italian and international legends – her studies include American, Icelandic, Bulgarian, Lappish, Russian and Mexican popular narratives, among others – she revealed to De Gubernatis that she was glad that the society of popular traditions founded in Sicily by Pitrè would take on a broader national and international vision thanks to De Gubernatis's initiative.
- 17 Savi-Lopez's exchanges with De Gubernatis turned into an opportunity to inform him about her central scholarly interest: popular legends. On 6 August 1885, Savi-Lopez was in Balme, an Italian town in the Lanzo Valleys in the western Alps, to document local



tales. She ventured on her own up the mountainous paths to personally hear the stories of those places. As Luisa Ricaldone wrote in her reflections on Savi-Lopez's fascination with the mountains, a key element that guided her research from a methodological point of view was the «dialogo con le persone»<sup>31</sup>. Savi-Lopez never shied away from direct interaction with the local villagers, whom she deemed a precious source of traditional knowledge that had to be preserved for future generations. She wrote her collections of legends not only by accessing rare archival material but also «servendomi sempre delle memorie raccolte per via»<sup>32</sup>. In a letter to Pitrè, she remarked that her book on Alpine folklore «non è stato scritto di certo fra i polverosi manoscritti degli archivii, o cercando la luce fra i miti e i misteri dei popoli nordici, ma fra la luce del sole, vicino alle Alpi ed alla Dora, che pur nella loro bellezza non giungevano a farmi dimenticare la mia lontana spiaggia napoletana»<sup>33</sup>. Her letters and writings thus reveal the «attenzione antropica, lo sguardo attento e talora compassionevole»<sup>34</sup> of a self-taught folklorist.

- 18 Her sense of commitment was never dissuaded by the dangers she faced during these expeditions: «A quanti pericoli, a quanta fatica andai incontro, sola con una guida, mentre raccoglievo leggende sulle nostre Alpi; quante lettere dovetti scrivere, quante ricerche dovettero fare i miei amici piemontesi per raccogliere per me qualche leggenda!»<sup>35</sup>. She was meticulous in reporting her sources, as testified by the accuracy with which she referred in her works to the historical sources that she consulted in various libraries and archives, a rigour that she frequently emphasised in her letters: «Par cosa da nulla eppure non voglio dire una parola a caso senza prove e documenti»<sup>36</sup>. She often commented that she was leading a peculiar life. She knew that this perceived oddity stemmed from her being a pioneering woman in this field of studies, particularly as a woman from southern Italy. During the composition of *Le valli di Lanzo: bozzetti e leggende* (1886), which she considered an «immenso tributo d'amore»<sup>37</sup> for the Piedmontese region that generously welcomed her exiled father, she highlighted how courageous she had to be to overcome this double discrimination:

Questi buoni piemontesi hanno giustamente un affetto appassionato tenace pel loro paese, moltissimi amano specialmente le Valli di Lanzo e può immaginare come sia aspettato questo libro scritto da una donna, da una napoletana. Il Direttore della linea Torino Lanzo ne ha già parlato nel consiglio e forse molti uomini seri avranno riso della temerità che ho avuta nel mettermi in questo cimento<sup>38</sup>.

- 19 Her contribution to folklore studies was commended both by nineteenth-century and contemporary scholars. In this regard, Anna Santoro observed that Savi-Lopez «possedette capacità di autentica antropologa»<sup>39</sup>, never missing an opportunity to immerse herself in the charm of local legends. Her genuine interest for popular culture constantly seeps into her personal account of how she collected them. In a letter to Fogazzaro on 18 July 1887, she revealed her patriotic aspiration as an Italian ethnographer:

Intanto mentre andavo innanzi nello studio sulle leggende ho visto che manca sia in Francia, sia in Germania come in Italia un libro che studii le leggende alpine delle diverse regioni mettendole a confronto insieme e mentre racchiuda le più belle leggende accenni alle loro possibili origini. Quando ho avuto questa certezza ho pensato forse con un po' d'orgoglio, che mi piacerebbe tanto vedere questo libro scritto in Italia da una donna ed ho continuato ancora pazzamente per così dire lo studio. [...] Mi pare che dobbiamo tutti mettere un po' l'orgoglio nazionale in queste ricerche onde mostrare che sappiamo pur conoscere e cercare le nostre leggende



alpine, senza far triste figura vicino agli Svizzeri, che hanno raccolto quasi tutte le loro, ed ai tedeschi che hanno pure studiato quelle di parecchie regioni alpine<sup>40</sup>.

- 20 These words demonstrate her deep-seated love for popular legends, even before De Gubernatis involved her in his national project devoted to Italian popular traditions. Her patriotism was interwoven with her wish to preserve the fragments of popular traditions that were considered to be endangered by the steady advance of scientific discoveries, industrial progress and urbanisation, marked by the distinctive zeal that animated the efforts of nineteenth-century folklorists across Europe. This idealised vision of the past, inspired by a Romantic legacy, is intermingled with her positivist inclination to systematically record traditions, legends and myths so as to gain a thorough understanding of the culture and beliefs of both ancient civilisations and ordinary people.
- 21 Yet in her writings she grouped popular legends thematically rather than chronologically: the lack of an evident scientific criterion in the organization of the subject matter led Antonino Buttitta to criticise her assemblage of materials<sup>41</sup>. However, it was precisely her thematic approach and her writing style that rendered her studies on popular legends appealing to the wider public, therefore making her works accessible to all rather than solely to experts in the field. Her skills as a disseminator of knowledge on popular culture were often emphasised in the reviews of her works. Giuseppe Pitrè, in his review of *Leggende delle Alpi*, recognised how the book «non è fatto esclusivamente pei folkloristi: esso è anche un libro di ricreazione», written «con tutte le grazie d'una donna colta e gentile, e dove l'oggettività delle leggende può sembrare velata dalla soggettività della scrittrice»<sup>42</sup>. Science and imagination, scholarly detachment and emotional participation thus found a non-paradoxical way to coexist in her folklore collections.
- 22 To complete the writing of *Leggende del mare*, Savi-Lopez asked De Gubernatis to publish an appeal to the scholars who collaborated with his journal *Natura ed arte* so that they could contribute to her study. In a letter dated 23 February 1888, she expressed her intention to compare Italian sea legends with those of other nations. It was therefore necessary to involve as many scholars as possible in this patriotic project to endow the volume that she was planning to write with international relevance:
- Rispetto alle leggende del mare so che posso raccogliere molto fra scrittori stranieri, e già vado studiando l'argomento, ma è mio desiderio di dare nel volume una larga parte alle leggende italiane mettendole pure a confronto, come ho fatto per quelle delle Alpi, e collegandole con quelle di altre nazioni, non curandomi però delle lunghe fiabe, dei proverbi o delle volgari superstizioni, ma cercando la leggenda marinaresca nella sua più fantastica e poetica espressione. [...] Per la Sicilia ho l'appoggio del Pitrè, per le Puglie ho quello di altri amici, e riceverò pure notizie dalla Liguria ma questo non basta [...]»<sup>43</sup>.
- 23 Not coincidentally, she chose to dedicate the book *Leggende del mare*, illustrated by Carlo Chessa (1855-1912), to her «illustri amici» De Gubernatis and Pitrè<sup>44</sup>.
- 24 Despite the difficulties she encountered, she never renounced her studies and often resorted to her connections in order to obtain out-of-print volumes and other useful sources. For example, in her letters to Enrico Bemporad and Pio Rajna, Savi-Lopez mentioned her scholarly work on the ancient cities in central America, written after she managed to obtain several valuable documents through the Italian ambassador in Washington. An article she published in July 1924 in the journal *Il Marzocco* paved the way for her «trasformazione [...] in Americanista»<sup>45</sup>, also thanks to her exchanges with

a prominent scholar of American antiquities in Italy, Giulio Valeriano Callegari (1876-1954). She reported to Rajna that she was also in contact with the Carnegie Institution of Washington, which was carrying out excavations to resurface buried dead cities in the Yucatan Peninsula. She delved into this new topic with her usual curiosity, aware that she was researching a subject which had not been explored in great depth up to that point: «sembra che io sia la sola donna italiana che si sia occupata sul serio delle antiche civiltà americane»<sup>46</sup>.

- 25 Although rigid categorisations are never useful to adequately define the infinite facets of a writer's interests and personality, it is legitimate to ponder whether Savi-Lopez's existence can be interpreted from a proto-feminist perspective. Without disregarding her plainly traditionalist ideals, it is also true that her portrait as a woman writer and as a pioneering folklorist was more nuanced than it may seem. In a letter to Bemporad, dated 14 January 1908, she wrote:

Nessuno può essere più femminista di me – nel senso buono –. Ricordo spesso i giorni dolorosi in cui rimasi vedova, sola al mondo, con un bimbo di cinque anni, povera, senza un diploma – allora le signore non ne avevano, – e poi, a poco a poco, nella lotta ardua e continua sono venuti i diplomi, la cattedra di lettere, la pensione al Merito Civile di Savoia, e il bimbo è diventato, a 29 anni, professore ordinario d'Università<sup>47</sup>.

- 26 She had to earn a living for many years as a single mother by giving Italian, music and history lessons, and she succeeded in combining her scholarly ambitions with making her child's life more comfortable. Equipped with uncommon intelligence and sensitivity, she began her literary career by writing novels and short stories, finding «a room of her own» to live in discreet comfort, while developing her diverse aspirations even at a considerable age and after her son's premature death.
- 27 What emerges clearly from her epistolary exchanges is her desire to affirm her own individuality as a woman writer and folklorist in post-Unification Italy as she worked ceaselessly to guarantee her son a dignified life. Her correspondences also demonstrates her resolution in pursuing her intellectual interests. Nonetheless, she still needs to be given the recognition she deserves both as a writer and as a scholar of popular traditions so that her voice can finally be heard. This *excursus* into Maria Savi-Lopez's life can be concluded by quoting the eloquent words she wrote to Fogazzaro on 4 November 1885, which constitute a powerful reminder of the importance of recovering forgotten identities:

Ho preso passione alle carte vecchie, mi pare che se avessi tempo non farei altro che cercare le vecchie memorie, le figure dimenticate, mi piacerebbe illustrare opere che nessuno ha stampato, e che riposano fra i volumi innumerevoli degli archivi, mentre è tanto facile parlare di coloro che tutti conoscono e sarebbe invece opera utile e pietosa ricordare all'Italia i dimenticati<sup>48</sup>.

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## NOTES

1. This article stems from a paper entitled « Emerging from Oblivion : The Unpublished Letters of Maria Savi-Lopez to Italian Intellectuals at the Turn of the Twentieth Century », delivered at the

conference *Recovering Women's Identities between Centre and Periphery (XVI-XX Centuries)*, held at the Institute of Modern Languages Research, School of Advanced Study, University of London, on 5-6 March 2020. This study presents the first findings of a broader project that I am carrying out on this eclectic writer and folklorist starting from her forgotten epistolary exchanges. I am grateful to the Folklore Society in London for the award of the 2021 *Estella Canziani Bursary for Post-graduate Research*, which allowed me to carry out archival research on Maria Savi-Lopez.

2. The corpus consists of thirty-one letters, thirty-three postcards and two « biglietti da visita », written in the period ranging from 23 February 1888 to 30 December 1894. Savi-Lopez's first two letters to De Gubernatis were sent from Turin. Starting from 22 January 1890, she resided in Naples in via Mancinelli 52, while from 27 May 1894 onwards, she wrote from her new house in Piazza Depretis 14. On De Gubernatis, cfr. COCCHIARA 2016 [1952], p. 284-286, VICENTE 2012, RABAULT-FEUERHAHN 2016 and FABBRI 2017.

3. The *Fondazione Biblioteca Benedetto Croce* in Palazzo Filomarino, Naples, preserves five letters that Maria Savi-Lopez wrote to Croce from 1893 to 1920, as well as letters written to Croce by her son Paolo Savi-Lopez and her daughter-in-law Emma Proto D'Albaneta. Through analysis of these correspondences and consultation of several autographed books that Maria Savi-Lopez gave to Croce, it becomes clear that they were in close contact with each other, so much so that Croce was the witness for Paolo and Emma's wedding. Several books that belonged to Maria Savi-Lopez are preserved in the *Biblioteca Croce*. Among these works, it is worth mentioning two pamphlets by Maria Pitre, daughter of Giuseppe Pitre, containing the translation from English of an Indian folktale and the translation from German of an article on Sicilian popular traditions, with a dedication to Savi-Lopez. Furthermore, renowned figures such as volcanologist Giuseppe Mercalli (1850-1914) and Ferdinando Borsari (1858-1891), founder of the *Società americana d'Italia*, donated their works to her.

4. Paolo Savi-Lopez (1876-1919), director of the *Istituto superiore di cultura italiano* in Paris, was a philologist and scholar of Romance literature. He worked as a university professor in Catania, Pavia, Strasbourg and Budapest.

5. Cfr. SAVI-LOPEZ, *Lettere ad Angelo De Gubernatis*, in particular the letters dated 9 March 1890, 8 August 1893 and 13 September 1893 (cass. 112 n. 29), Fondo De Gubernatis.

6. MAZZARELLA 2008, p. 9.

7. PERUGI 2019, p. 115.

8. FRAU and GRAGNANI 2011, p. XVII.

9. ROMANI 2006, p. 6.

10. DE GUBERNATIS 1888, p. 1732.

11. SAVI-LOPEZ, *Lettere a Pio Rajna*, 10 November 1924 (c.Ra.1477.1-13).

12. DE PALO 1887, p. 271.

13. SAVI-LOPEZ, undated letter to the mayor of Turin Secondo Frola (1850-1929), preserved in SAVI-LOPEZ, *Lettere a Fortunato Pintor*, (February 1903 - 15 December 1920, n. 23, 7.372).

14. SAVI-LOPEZ, *Lettere ad Antonio Fogazzaro*, 18 July 1887 (CFo 30, Pl. 183), Fondo Fogazzaro.

15. CHEMELLO 2010, p. 59.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

17. SAVI-LOPEZ, *Lettere a Mario Puccini*, 4 February 1927 (IT ACGV MP), Fondo Puccini.

18. SAVI-LOPEZ, *Lettere ad Angelo De Gubernatis*, 16 June 1890 (cass. 112 n. 29), Fondo De Gubernatis. Original emphasis.

19. SAVI-LOPEZ, *Lettere ad Antonio Fogazzaro*, 9 October 1885 (CFo 30, Pl. 183), Fondo Fogazzaro.

20. Among her publishers, it is worth mentioning Bemporad, Giannotta, Le Monnier, Loescher, Sandron, Paravia, Speirani, Vallardi. Although the majority of her works have been forgotten, some of her most renowned books on popular legends have been republished in recent decades: Ali Ribelli Edizioni released *Nani e folletti* in 2020; Primiceri Editore *Leggende del mare* in 2020 and

*Leggende delle Alpi* in 2019; Edizioni Archeoares *Leggende delle Alpi* in 2018, *Leggende del mare and Nani e folletti* in 2019; Yume *Leggende del mare* in 2017; Il Punto - Piemonte in Bancarella *Leggende delle Alpi* in 2014; Sellerio *Leggende del mare* in 2008 and *Nani e Folletti* in 2002; Arnaldo Forni Editore *Le valli di Lanzo* in 2005 and *Leggende del mare* in 2002.

21. PITRÈ 1891, p. 143.

22. VILLANI 1913, p. 175.

23. MASOERO 1990, p. 65.

24. SAVI-LOPEZ, *Lettere ad Angelo De Gubernatis*, 22 January 1890 (cass. 112 n. 29), Fondo De Gubernatis.

25. Each of these women took part in the *Esposizione Beatrice* and had epistolary exchanges with De Gubernatis: Luisa Viglione delivered the lecture «Le donne nell'Ariosto»; Maria Bobba focused on «Gli studi della donna»; Giovanna Vittori's lecture was entitled «Le eroine e le patriotte»; Virginia Fornari was awarded a gold medal for her lecture «Sante italiane». These lectures were then published in *La donna italiana descritta da scrittrici italiane in una serie di conferenze tenute all'Esposizione Beatrice in Firenze*, Florence, Giuseppe Civelli Editore, 1890.

26. MATHEWS 1893, p. 288.

27. SAVI-LOPEZ, *Lettere ad Angelo De Gubernatis*, 10 April 1893 (cass. 112 n. 29), Fondo De Gubernatis.

28. VALISA 2018, p. 241.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 248. As she wrote to De Gubernatis, the publication of her *Leggende delle Alpi* in Germany with the editor Bonz in Stuttgart in 1893 was greeted with favourable reviews. In the United States, she reported that there was an interest to publish the translation of her *Leggende Americane* even before the book had been released in Italy. Cfr. SAVI-LOPEZ, *Lettere ad Angelo De Gubernatis*, 19 November 1893 (cass. 112 n. 29), Fondo De Gubernatis, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Firenze.

30. SAVI-LOPEZ, *Lettere ad Angelo De Gubernatis*, 4 April 1893 (cass. 112 n. 29), Fondo De Gubernatis.

31. RICALDONE 2010, p. 70.

32. SAVI-LOPEZ, *Lettere ad Antonio Fogazzaro*, 21 August 1885 (CFo 30, Pl. 183), Fondo Fogazzaro.

33. SAVI-LOPEZ, *Lettere a Giuseppe Pitrè*, 4 December 1887 (P-B-13).

34. RICALDONE 2010, p. 71.

35. SAVI-LOPEZ, *Lettere ad Angelo De Gubernatis*, 6 September 1893 (cass. 112 n. 29), Fondo De Gubernatis.

36. SAVI-LOPEZ, *Lettere ad Antonio Fogazzaro*, 9 October 1885 (CFo 30, Pl. 183), Fondo Fogazzaro.

37. SAVI-LOPEZ 1886, p. 7.

38. SAVI-LOPEZ, *Lettere ad Antonio Fogazzaro*, 19 November 1885 (CFo 30, Pl. 183), Fondo Fogazzaro.

39. SANTORO 1987, p. 67.

40. SAVI-LOPEZ, *Lettere ad Antonio Fogazzaro*, 18 July 1887 (CFo 30, Pl. 183), Fondo Fogazzaro. Original emphasis.

41. BUTTITTA 2008, p. 424.

42. PITRÈ 1889, p. 126.

43. SAVI-LOPEZ, *Lettere ad Angelo De Gubernatis*, 23 February 1888 (cass. 112 n. 29), Fondo De Gubernatis.

44. In a letter to Pitrè, she asked his permission to dedicate *Leggende del mare* to him as well as to De Gubernatis: «Ed ora debbo chiederle un favore. Ho vivo desiderio di dedicare a Lei ed all'altro mio amico gentile Angelo De Gubernatis, questo volume sulle leggende del mare. Me lo permette?». Cfr. SAVI-LOPEZ, *Lettere a Giuseppe Pitrè*, 18 December 1892 (P-B-13). She then made the same request to De Gubernatis: «Debbo anche domandarle un altro favore. Ho stabilito di dedicare a Lei ed a Giuseppe Pitrè, che mi è pure amico, il mio nuovo libro sulle leggende del mare. Me lo permette?». Cfr. SAVI-LOPEZ, *Lettere ad Angelo De Gubernatis*, 27 December 1892 (cass. 112 n. 29), Fondo De Gubernatis.

45. SAVI-LOPEZ, *Lettere a Pio Rajna*, 20 November 1926 (c.Ra.1477.1-13).

46. *Ibidem*.

47. SAVI-LOPEZ, *Lettere a Enrico Bemporad*, 14 January 1908 (115.6).

48. SAVI-LOPEZ, *Lettere ad Antonio Fogazzaro*, 4 November 1885 (CFo 30, Pl. 183), Fondo Fogazzaro.

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## ABSTRACTS

Maria Savi-Lopez (1846-1940) was a Neapolitan writer, teacher and folklorist who wrote numerous collections of legends and popular traditions in post-Unification Italy. Despite being a prolific scholar, today her name has fallen into oblivion. This article thus aims to delve into her life and folkloric works through an analysis of her unpublished epistolary exchanges with renowned nineteenth-century intellectuals.

Maria Savi-Lopez (1846-1940) était une écrivaine, enseignante et folkloriste napolitaine, autrice de nombreux recueils de légendes et de traditions populaires dans l'Italie post-unitaire. Bien qu'elle soit une érudite prolifique, son nom est aujourd'hui tombé dans l'oubli. Cet article se propose donc de présenter sa vie et ses œuvres folkloriques à travers l'analyse de sa correspondance inédite avec des intellectuels bien connus du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle.

Maria Savi-Lopez (1846-1940) fu una scrittrice, insegnante e folclorista napoletana, autrice di numerose raccolte di leggende e tradizioni popolari nell'Italia postunitaria. Pur essendo una studiosa prolifica, oggi il suo nome è caduto nell'oblio. Questo articolo si propone pertanto di presentare la sua vita e le sue opere folcloriche attraverso l'analisi dei suoi scambi epistolari inediti con noti intellettuali dell'Ottocento.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** Savi-Lopez (Maria), Italie post-unitaire, études folkloriques, recueils de traditions populaires du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle

**Parole chiave:** Savi-Lopez (Maria), Italia post-unitaria, studi di folklore, raccolte di tradizioni popolari ottocentesche

**Keywords:** Savi-Lopez (Maria), post-unification Italy, folklore studies, nineteenth-century collections of popular traditions

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