

(RE)COLLECTIONS
OF A “PICCOLA STREGHINA”
FROM THE HEART OF THE
MEDITERRANEAN:
Gender and Class Consciousness in Grazia Deledda’s
Folkloric Writings
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Abstract

Nobel Prize winner in Literature in 1926, at the dawn of her literary career, Grazia Deledda (1871-1936) published several folkloric writings and ethnographic sketches based on tales and popular traditions that she personally collected among the members of the lower classes in Sardinia, an aspect of her production which has received considerably less critical attention in comparison with the scholarly scrutiny that has been devoted to her work as a novelist. Similar to other nineteenth-century female folklorists, Deledda promoted herself as a Sardinian collector in a complex social context and at a historical juncture when coming out in the public sphere was still unconventional for a woman. Nearly a century after her recognition as a Nobel Prize winner, it is important to acknowledge that she was not only a talented novelist but also a scrupulous divulgator of insular traditions. Hence, this article explores her positionality as a folklorist in her youth and some of the challenges she faced in gathering and publishing popular traditions in late nineteenth-century journals such as *Natura ed Arte* and *Rivista delle tradizioni popolari italiane*, under the mentorship of Angelo De Gubernatis. This article places emphasis on Deledda’s gender and class consciousness at this early stage of her life through an examination of her private correspondence with De Gubernatis and through a critical analysis of the first sketch that she published in *Natura ed Arte*, titled “La donna in Sardegna”. Although this piece is often listed amid her folkloric writings without much relevance attached to it, it shows an awareness of multiple social perspectives and touches upon several issues that characterised Deledda’s subsequent literary production, namely her ideological relationship with lower-class women, her self-identification as a middle-class woman, and the increasing consciousness of her mediating role between the prejudiced image of Sardinia in the Italian mainland and the more accurate picture that she wished to convey to the continental readership.

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Grazia Deledda (1871-1936) can rightly be regarded as the first woman to perform the role of “storyteller of the unknown and oral popular epic that was flourishing in her island.”¹ Nobel Prize winner in Literature in 1926, at the dawn of her literary career, between 1892 and 1901, Deledda published several folkloric writings, including ethnographic sketches, articles on popular traditions, local legends and fairy tales. However, this aspect of her production has been largely neglected. Attention to this early stage of Deledda’s development as a writer leads to a deeper understanding of her visceral attachment to her native island, her ambitious endeavour to make herself known on the Italian literary scene and her emerging gender and class consciousness. Hence, this article explores her positionality as a folklorist and some of the challenges she faced in gathering and publishing popular traditions in late-nineteenth-century Sardinia.

As Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) notably remarked, in this historical period folklore was studied chiefly as a “‘picturesque’ element” whereas it “ought to be studied as a ‘conception of the world’ of particular social strata which are untouched by modern currents of thought.”² Insular folklore, in particular, is marked by a fluctuating sense of openness and closure, of conservation and exposure. In his seminal treatise *Breviario mediterraneo*, Predrag Matvejević (1932-2017) underscored the peculiarities of insular contexts.³ Yet not all islands are identical: in this regard, Lucien Febvre (1878-1956) observed that, if Sicily tends to be historically and culturally framed as an “island at the cross-roads,” Sardinia leans towards the classification of “prison-island,” albeit paradoxically retaining features of both

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- 1 Benedetto Croce, “Grazia Deledda,” in *La letteratura della nuova Italia. Saggi critici*, 6 vols (Bari: Laterza, 1940, vol. 6), 317–326 (318). “Raccontatrice dell’epopea popolare, inedita ed orale, che fioriva nella sua isola.” Unless otherwise indicated, all translations into English are mine.
 - 2 Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 3 vols, ed. Joseph A. Buttigieg, trans. Joseph A. Buttigieg and Antonio Callari (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007, vol. 1), 186. “Elemento ‘pittresco’”; “Occorrerebbe studiarlo invece come ‘concezione del mondo e della vita’, implicita in grande misura, di determinati strati [...] della società.” See Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, 4 vols, ed. Valentino Gerratana (Turin: Einaudi, 1975, vol. 3), 2311.
 - 3 Predrag Matvejević, *Breviario Mediterraneo* (Milan: Garzanti, 2004 [1987]), 30–34.

categories.⁴ This image of Sardinia conjures the clichéd perception of the island as “resistant and refractory to what comes from the sea,” as Martin Butler and Gigliola Sulis commented.⁵ This marginalised representation of Sardinia, in spite of its central position at the heart of the Mediterranean Sea, places the island and its culture within a postcolonial critical framework, in line with the idea of the Mediterranean as “a space of resistance to Western modernity from within.”⁶

In her youth, Grazia Deledda found a way to break free from the geographical and cultural isolation of her island by participating in the nationalistic project of collecting popular traditions in post-Unification Italy. In her study on Deledda’s stylistic markers of orality, Cristina Lavinio observed that Deledda’s involvement in this folkloric enterprise begs in-depth study.⁷ Her liminality as a collector, suspended between her Sardinian peripheral position and her national and international aspirations, can be reappraised through an examination of her private correspondence with Angelo De Gubernatis (1840-1913), orientalist, folklorist, mythologist and founder of several journals, including *Natura ed Arte* and *Rivista delle tradizioni popolari italiane*.⁸ Particularly crucial for the establishment of folkloric research in Italy was the foundation of the *Società nazionale per le tradizioni popolari italiane* by De Gubernatis in Rome in 1893. The main objective of this association, which was supported by Margherita of Savoy (1851-

4 Lucien Febvre, *A Geographical Introduction to History*, trans. E. G. Mountford and J. H. Paxton (London and New York: Routledge, 1996 [1922]), 219–221.

5 Martin Butler and Gigliola Sulis, “A Tempest between Naples and Sardinia: Gianfranco Cabiddu’s *La stoffa dei sogni*,” *Shakespeare Bulletin* 37, no. 3 (2019): 309–340 (327).

6 Butler and Sulis, “A Tempest between Naples and Sardinia,” 328.

7 Cristina Lavinio, “«Era un silenzio che ascoltava». Grazia Deledda tra leggende e fiabe,” in *Oralità narrativa, cultura popolare e arte. Grazia Deledda e Dario Fo. Atti del convegno, Nuoro, 10-11 dicembre 2018*, ed. Cristina Lavinio (Nuoro: ISRE Edizioni, 2019), 73–93 (77). The present article provides an overview of this long-overdue investigation into Deledda’s role as a folklorist on a regional, national and transnational level, which I carried out as part of my PhD project at the University of Cambridge. I am grateful for the award of a scholarship by the London-based Italian cultural association *Il Circolo*, which allowed me to carry out first-hand research in Sardinian libraries and archives. I would like to thank the director of the Coro “Grazia Deledda” Franco Motto and the staff of the Biblioteca “Sebastiano Satta” for their kind support during my research visit in Nuoro.

8 On De Gubernatis as a scholar of comparative mythology in Italy, see Giuseppe Cocchiara, *Storia del folklore in Europa* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2016 [1952]), 284–286, and Lorenzo Fabbri, “Angelo De Gubernatis e la mitologia comparata,” *Studi e materiali di storia delle religioni* 83, no. 1 (2017): 143–169.

1926) and inspired by the British *Folklore Society* inaugurated in London in 1878, was to generate a new impetus for the field of popular traditions in Italy, expanding the path traced by Giuseppe Pitrè (1841-1916) in Sicily.⁹ During her personal quest for local tales and customs in the second largest island in the Mediterranean Sea, Deledda approached Sardinian traditions as fragments of a microcosm that was radically distinct from other Italian regional cultures. Alongside the folkloric contributions made by scholars such as Francesco Mango (1856-1900), Egidio Bellorini (1865-1946), Andrea Pirodda (1868-1926) and Luigi Falchi (1873-1940),¹⁰ Deledda, being the first woman in Sardinia to undertake such a task, was a true pioneer.

The Challenges of a “Novello Folk-lorista”

Born after the Italian Unification to a relatively well-off middle-class family in 1871, Deledda lived in Nuoro until 1900. A turning point in her life was the departure from Sardinia after marrying Palmiro Madesani, for what she frequently referred to as “the continent,” that is, the Italian mainland. She started pursuing her ambition to become a writer from an early

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- 9 On Giuseppe Pitrè's life, oeuvre and seminal impulse for the foundation of folklore studies in Italy, see Giuseppe Cocchiara, *Pitrè, la Sicilia e il folklore* (Messina: D'Alma, 1951); Jack Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: The Cultural and Social History of a Genre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 109–134; Loredana Bellantonio, “Riflessioni sull'opera di Giuseppe Pitrè nel primo centenario della scomparsa. Gli scritti inediti,” *Palaver* 6, no. 1 (2017): 136–146; Rosario Perricone (ed.), *Pitrè e Salomone Marino. Atti del convegno internazionale di studi a 100 anni dalla morte* (Palermo: Edizioni Museo Pasqualino, 2017).
- 10 Deledda mentioned explicitly Mango, Bellorini, Pirodda and Falchi in her correspondence with De Gubernatis in a letter dated 8 May 1893, when she was striving to gain the support of other folklorists in Sardinia. See *Grazia Deledda. Lettere ad Angelo De Gubernatis (1892-1909)*, ed. Roberta Masini (Cagliari: CUEC, 2007), 22–24. Mango was the author of *Novelline popolari sarde* (1890). Bellorini wrote *Saggio di canti popolari nuoresi* (1892), *Canti popolari amorosi raccolti a Nuoro* (1893) and *Ninne nanne e cantilene infantili raccolte a Nuoro* (1894). Pirodda focused on traditions from Aggius in Gallura, which he published in *Rivista delle tradizioni popolari italiane* and *Archivio per lo studio delle tradizioni popolari* in 1894 and 1895. Falchi, director of the journals *Terra dei nuraghes* and *La Sardegna artistica*, collaborated with De Gubernatis and wrote *Storia critica della letteratura e dei costumi sardi dal secolo XVI ad oggi* (1898). For a more detailed overview of these and other scholars involved in the collection of Sardinian folklore, see Mario Atzori and Maria Margherita Satta, “Antologia delle tradizioni popolari in Sardegna,” in *Prima etnografia d'Italia: gli studi di folklore tra '800 e '900 nel quadro europeo*, ed. Gian Luigi Bravo (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2013), 79–107.

age. However, the path to achieve this dream was riddled with obstacles. It is important to bear in mind that Deledda learnt Italian at school and therefore wrote in a language that was different from her mother tongue, the Logudorese variety of Sardinian language from Nuoro. If this condition of plurilingualism was true for all post-unification writers, it was particularly challenging for women given their restricted access to educational prospects, which often led them to succumb to the prevailing illiteracy. Despite her linguistic and literary self-learning process and admirably strong ambition as a writer, Deledda was initially dismissed as a regional author and frequently discriminated against her language and literary style.¹¹

Her involvement in ethnographic research preceded the publication of her most renowned novels, such as *Elias Portolu* (1900), *Cenere* (1904) and *Canne al vento* (1913). Her work as a folklorist reached its peak with *Tradizioni popolari di Nuoro*, defined as "the most scientific and ethnographic of her writings,"¹² which was initially published in ten monthly instalments from August 1894 to May 1895 under De Gubernatis's editorship in *Rivista delle tradizioni popolari italiane*¹³ and as a volume by the Roman publishing house Forzani.¹⁴ This series of articles on oral traditions, which Deledda

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- 11 These persistently dismissive attitudes and the fluctuating scholarly interest towards Deledda in twentieth-century literary criticism are emphasised in a volume aimed at reassessing her literary production, fittingly entitled *Chi ha paura di Grazia Deledda? Traduzione, ricezione, comparazione*, ed. Monica Farnetti (Pavona: Iacobelli, 2010). On Deledda's language, see Cristina Lavinio, "Primi appunti per una revisione critica dei giudizi sulla lingua di Grazia Deledda," in *Grazia Deledda nella cultura contemporanea. Atti del seminario di studi 'Grazia Deledda e la cultura sarda fra '800 e '900'*, 2 vols, ed. Ugo Collu (Nuoro: Consorzio per la Pubblica Lettura "Sebastiano Satta", 1992, vol. 1), 69–82.
- 12 Lynn M. Gunzberg, "Ruralism, Folklore, and Grazia Deledda's Novels," *Modern Language Studies* 13, no. 3 (1983): 112–122 (117).
- 13 The first instalment of *Tradizioni popolari di Nuoro* was preceded by an article in which Deledda reported the parody of a *goso*, a popular genre of Sardinian religious songs. See Grazia Deledda, "Preghiere: lauda di Sant'Antonio," *Rivista delle tradizioni popolari italiane* 1, no. 1 (1893): 62–68.
- 14 The date 1894 is reported in the frontispiece of the volume. However, as remarked by Benvenuta Piredda in her analysis of the influence of Deledda's folkloric research on her literary production, this date "is to be considered incorrect because in that year the first chapters had just been published in *Rivista delle tradizioni popolari italiane*" ["è da considerarsi errata perché in quell'anno erano usciti appena i primi capitoli in *Rivista delle tradizioni popolari italiane*"]. See Benvenuta Piredda, *Le tradizioni popolari sarde in Grazia Deledda* (Sassari: Edes, 2010), 22. On the genesis of *Tradizioni popolari di Nuoro*, see Atzori and Satta, 84–88. Deledda's folkloric writings have been republished in *Tradizioni popolari di Sardegna: credenze magiche, antiche feste, superstizioni e riti di una volta nei*

reported in the original dialect of Nuoro with parallel translations in Italian, contains references to proverbs, curses, poems, riddles, children's games, prayers and rituals, superstitions and beliefs related to the natural and supernatural worlds, popular remedies, spells and religious hymns. She also detailed nuptial and funeral customs, traditional dresses, greetings and festivities. Her approach was clearly influenced by the positivist prejudices that prevailed overseas. Not coincidentally, while she was collecting folklore, she published her novel *La via del male* (1896) and dedicated it to Paolo Orano (1875-1945), author of the essay "Psicologia della Sardegna" (1896), and Alfredo Niceforo (1876-1960), author of *La delinquenza in Sardegna* (1897), both inspired by the criminological theories of Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909). Niceforo referred explicitly to Deledda in *La delinquenza in Sardegna* (1897), quoting excerpts from *Tradizioni popolari di Nuoro* and defining her as a "brilliant Sardinian writer."¹⁵ However, in the second edition of *La via del male*, the dedication to Niceforo and Orano would disappear, suggesting Deledda's intention to distance herself from their positivist positions.¹⁶

What is striking about Deledda's folklore collection is her attempt to record and portray the popular traditions she observed in an apparently detached manner. To do this, she mastered a different mode of narration from the one she usually adopted as a novelist, a scientific perspective that has subtle implications in terms of gender, class and identity issues.¹⁷ Nonetheless, her own "self" as a female collector is prevalent throughout her folkloric writings, and her voice intentionally, and indeed frequently, emerges in between these descriptive passages. This "centrality of self-representation" is common among Sardinian writers, who tend to document insular life as the main focus of their texts, showcasing a fixation, if not ob-

più significativi scritti etnografici dell'autrice sarda, ed. Dolores Turchi (Rome: Newton Compton, 1995).

- 15 "Geniale scrittrice sarda." See Alfredo Niceforo, *La delinquenza in Sardegna* (Palermo: Remo Sandron, 1897), 100.
- 16 Margherita Heyer-Caput interpreted this removal as a "sign of the intellectual independence that defines the revision of *La via del male* in its entirety." See Margherita Heyer-Caput, *Grazia Deledda's Dance of Modernity* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2008), 35. On the influence of criminal anthropology in Deledda's works, see Jonathan R. Hiller, "The Enduring Vision of Biodeterministic Sardinian Inferiority in the Works of Grazia Deledda," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 17, no. 3 (2012): 271-287.
- 17 In this regard, Enrica Delitala observed how Deledda approached local customs with "an idealised and detached attitude" ["un atteggiamento di idealizzazione e distacco"]. See Enrica Delitala, "Grazia Deledda e la 'Rivista delle tradizioni popolari italiane'", in Collu (1992, vol. 1), 307-312 (308).

session, with the island.¹⁸ In the final paragraph of the preface to *Tradizioni popolari di Nuoro*, Deledda wrote:

The collection that we are presenting today is certainly incomplete. First of all, it is the first work of a novice folklorist, who lacks the culture and erudition necessary to render this kind of work more interesting. It is a volume arranged without pretensions, [...] with the sole intent of encouraging others to follow this work and to complete with scholarly endeavours what this young and inexperienced pen cannot do in the present moment.¹⁹

Her label as a "novice folklorist" declared that she was simply an amateur scholar while simultaneously creating a space for herself within this new field of enquiry; this approach characterised her public presence and autobiographical writings, which were suspended between an overt modesty and an inner consciousness of her own talent. Although this attitude aligns with her self-effacing yet resolute personality, this humble definition does not give justice to her work as a folklorist. The downplaying of her own work can be interpreted through the lens of Joan Radner and Susan Lanser's strategies of coding, more specifically as a way to "claim incompetence."²⁰ Such claims represent both "a conventional strategy by which the woman writer says on her own behalf what she knows her audience thinks: that she has little right to be writing, and that her work is bound to be inferior"²¹ and a subtle "appropriation of male forms,"²² such as the male-dominated discipline of folklore studies in the late nineteenth century.

18 On the "attachment" of Sardinian writers to their island, see Nereide Rudas, *L'isola dei coralli. Itinerari dell'identità* (Rome: Carocci, 2004 [1997]), 158–164, and Gigliola Sulis, "Sardinian Fiction at End of the Twentieth and Beginning of the Twenty-first Century: An Overview and First Assessment," *Incontri: Rivista europea di studi italiani* 32, no. 2 (2017): 69–79.

19 "La raccolta che oggi presentiamo è certamente incompleta. Anzitutto, è il primo lavoro di un novello folk-lorista, a cui manca la coltura e l'erudizione necessaria per rendere più interessante questa specie di lavori. È un volume fatto senza pretese, [...] col solo intento d'invogliare altri a seguirlo ed a completare con lavori e ricerche dotte ciò che ora la sua penna giovane e inesperta non può fare." See Grazia Deledda, "Tradizioni popolari di Nuoro in Sardegna: Nuoro," *Rivista delle tradizioni popolari italiane* 1, no. 9 (1894): 651–662 (653).

20 Joan Radner and Susan Lanser, "The Feminist Voice: Strategies of Coding in Folklore and Literature," *The Journal of American Folklore*, Special Issue: *Folklore and Feminism*, ed. Bruce Jackson, 100, no. 398 (1987): 412–425 (421).

21 Radner and Lanser, "The Feminist Voice," 422.

22 Radner and Lanser, "The Feminist Voice," 423.

The frequent disregard for Deledda's contributions as a folklorist may have several motivations: certainly, her work as a novelist received more attention partially because it rendered her famous on an international level, but also because, in terms of the hierarchy of cultural productions, writing novels and short stories was conceived as a higher form of creative engagement with the raw material that she collected when she was a younger and less-experienced writer; secondly, this neglect can be linked to the generally dismissive attitude towards women who participated in the collection of regional folklore in post-unification Italy, whose efforts have traditionally been disregarded. Almost a century after her Nobel Prize, it is important to acknowledge that Deledda was not only a talented novelist but also a scrupulous divulgator of Sardinian popular life and traditions, in particular from her hometown Nuoro.

Nuoro is part of the Barbagia region, which literally means the "land of barbarians." The villages in this area, and Nuoro in particular, used to be represented as "depositories of traditional Sardinian culture and language," an "identity paradigm" that became popular also thanks to Deledda's literary model.²³ The town was described by Deledda in *Tradizioni popolari di Nuoro* as "the heart of Sardinia, it is Sardinia itself in all its manifestations. It is the open field where the incipient civilization fights a silent struggle with the strange Sardinian barbarism, so exaggerated beyond the sea."²⁴ Deledda set Nuoro aside not only from the Italian peninsula but also from Sardinia itself, in a manner similar to other foreign explorers who ventured into this area such as D. H. Lawrence (1885-1930) and Max Leopold Wagner (1880-1962), who portrayed it as "the innermost regions of the island, less 'contaminated' by foreign cultures, an island within the island."²⁵

In her ethnographic sketches, Deledda – rather than denying a view of Barbagia as a locus of exoticism and otherness – builds on the picture of the town that prevailed "beyond the sea." Her ethnographic writings became a means for her to become a "spokesperson or standard-bearer of the insular world."²⁶ Although her representation of Sardinia tends to eternalise its status

23 Sulis, "Sardinian Fiction," 72.

24 "Il cuore della Sardegna, è la Sardegna stessa con tutte le sue manifestazioni. È il campo aperto dove la civiltà incipiente combatte una lotta silenziosa con la strana barbarie sarda, così esagerata oltre mare." Grazia Deledda, "Tradizioni popolari di Nuoro," 651.

25 Valentina Serra, "Island Geopoetics and the Postcolonial Discourse of Sardinia in German-Language Literature," *Island Studies Journal* 12, no. 2 (2017): 281–290 (284).

26 "Portavoce o alfiere del mondo isolano." Alberto Mario Cirese, *Intellettuali, folklore e istinto di classe. Note su Verga, Deledda, Scotellaro, Gramsci* (Turin: Einaudi, 1976), 39.

of subalternity, it is also true that Deledda embarked on this project with great determination and contributed through her writing to offer a more multifaceted portrayal of the island. Furthermore, her irony and bitterness towards the state of neglect of her region often seep through her anthropological gaze. In this respect, the rich correspondence between Deledda and De Gubernatis is central to understanding her sense of commitment and her desire to emerge on the national stage as a representative of Sardinian traditions.

Conscious of her own skills and talent but also of the difficulties of her task, in this epistolary exchange Deledda defined herself as "a little witch who inadvertently bewitches everyone but, similarly to witches, never has peace or comfort."²⁷ De Gubernatis turned into a positive figure for the emerging Sardinian writer. He became not only Deledda's point of reference in Italy but also her friend and mentor. In particular, he was a crucial guide in her autonomous training as a novice folklorist. For instance, in a letter dated 13 July 1893, Deledda explicitly asked him if fairy tales could also be considered as folklore: "Tell me: do fairy tales also play a part in folk-lore? There are some very beautiful ones."²⁸ In these letters, it is possible to discern her growing familiarity with the different genres of oral traditions and the progress she made thanks to her self-learning process.

Her activity as a folklorist led her to actions that went against the rigid social rules to which women had to comply at the time. Deledda constantly fluctuated between acceptance of these norms and their transgression. For example, when she documented a dense list of Nuorese proverbs, she wrote in a footnote: "Let's leave aside some proverbs that are too dirty to be collected by a young lady."²⁹ This ironic comment acknowledged her

27 "Piccola stregghina che strega tutti senza volerlo, ma che, come le streghe, non ha mai pace né conforto." Grazia Deledda in Masini (2007), 96.

28 "Mi dica: c'entrano anche le fiabe nel folk-lore? Ce ne sono di bellissime." Deledda in Masini (2007), 45. For a translation into English of two fairy tales written by Grazia Deledda, "Nostra Signora del Buon Consiglio" and "I tre talismani", see Cristina Mazzoni, *The Pomegranates and Other Modern Italian Fairy Tales* (Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2021), 112–122. For an analysis of "Nostra Signora del Buon Consiglio," see Cristina Mazzoni, "'The Loving Re-Education of a Soul': Learning from Fairy Tales through Grazia Deledda and Cristina Campo", *Quaderni d'italianistica* 24, no. 2 (2008): 93–110, and "A Fairy Tale Madonna: Grazia Deledda's 'Our Lady of Good Counsel'", *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 19, no. 1 (2019): 131–145. "I tre talismani" was originally collected by Deledda's friend Maria Manca, founder of the first female periodical in Sardinia, *La donna sarda*.

29 "Lasciamo da parte alcuni proverbi troppo sudici per essere raccolti da una signorina." Grazia Deledda, "Proverbi e detti popolari nuoresi (Proverbios e testos nugoresos)," *Rivista delle tradizioni popolari italiane* 1, no. 11 (1894): 821–830 (828).

awareness that including these scandalous proverbs would reflect poorly on her as a young woman. In another letter, she mentioned how her folkloric research led her “in the sheepfolds, in the poorest and darkest houses, between smoke and misery.”³⁰ She also emphasised how she adopted stratagems such as telling lies and pretending to be sick to gather popular remedies, which were an integral part of the folk wisdom that she eagerly wanted to preserve. Her zeal for this search of oral fragments is evident from the very beginning of her correspondence with De Gubernatis.

The Cinderella of Italy

Enthused by De Gubernatis’s project to collect popular traditions, on 2 May 1893 Deledda sent a letter to Antonio Scano and Antonio Giuseppe Satta, editors of the journal *Vita Sarda*, which was published *in toto* first on 14 May 1893 in *Vita Sarda* under the title “Per il folk-lore sardo”³¹ and then in *Versi e prose giovanili*.³² Deledda’s letter to Scano and Satta, to which she attached the programme of the *Società delle tradizioni popolari italiane*, reveals the importance she placed on this folkloric endeavour. She defined her collection as a “patriotic work” and an “intellectual crusade,”³³ strong terms that convey the seriousness and rigour with which she embarked on this task. She entrusted the editors of *Vita Nuova* to encourage other Sardinians to take part in the project, since “in each village there is at least one student who can succinctly collect the beliefs, the small ancient poems, the domestic customs, the superstitions, the popular festivities.”³⁴ They needed only to gather notes and send them to Deledda, who offered to compile them, order them and cite their sources.

The publication of this appeal would give rise to a misunderstanding with De Gubernatis: it can be deduced from Deledda’s reply that the task that De Gubernatis had entrusted to her consisted only in securing new members for the society rather than taking such an official position. De-

30 “Negli ovili, nelle case più povere e più oscure, tra il fumo e la miseria”. Deledda in Masini (2007), 101.

31 Grazia Deledda, “Per il folk-lore sardo,” *Vita Sarda* 3, no. 8 (1893): 3.

32 Grazia Deledda, *Versi e prose giovanili*, ed. Antonio Scano (Milan: Treves, 1938), 241–242.

33 “Opera patriottica” and “crociata intellettuale.” Deledda, *Versi*, 241.

34 “In ciascun villaggio c’è almeno uno studente che può raccogliere succintamente le credenze, le piccole poesie antiche, gli usi domestici, le superstizioni, le feste popolari.” Deledda, *Versi*, 241.

ledda was therefore forced to apologise to him for publishing her unsolicited invitation to Sardinian scholars in *Vita Sarda*. In other words, she was perhaps too hasty and too zealous in her response to De Gubernatis's initiative. After sending her letter to Scano and Satta, Deledda suggestively commented in a letter to De Gubernatis dated 8 May 1893 that

If I manage to stir my friends, to ignite in them the enthusiasm that I already feel for this work, it is certain that Sardinia will offer an interesting contingent to the study of folk-lore. I promise you that I will do everything possible, everything that is in me. Unfortunately, a strange and painful phenomenon occurs in Sardinia. Sardinians continuously lament that their island is the Italian Cinderella, still waiting for a good fairy or perhaps a Christopher Columbus who may take her from the darkness and from the corner in which she subsists, – they all shout, but when it is necessary to do something, when an intellectual movement is required of them, a little practice for their theories, then no one moves, no one is moved!³⁵

Deledda's analogy of Sardinia as the Cinderella of Italy, the quintessential fairy-tale heroine in distress, was in line with the tendency among local intellectuals to victimise Sardinia, presenting it as a land in dire need of a saviour. In this respect, the wish for a Christopher Columbus to intervene and save the island from its obscurity situates Sardinia in a colonialist paradigm, resonating with contemporary reassessments of the island's historical past as "semi-colonial."³⁶

It is worth noting that Deledda identified with great clarity the age-old ills that afflicted Sardinia. On the one hand, by presenting it as a forgotten,

35 "Se riesco a scuotere i miei amici, a spandere in loro l'entusiasmo che io sento già per questa opera, è certo che la Sardegna porgerà un interessante contingente allo studio del folk-lore. Io le prometto di fare tutto il possibile, tutto quello che sta in me. Pur troppo in Sardegna si verifica uno strano e doloroso fenomeno. I sardi gridano ad ogni istante che l'isola loro è la cenerentola italiana, che aspetta tutt'ora una fata benefica, o magari un Cristoforo Colombo che la tragga dall'oscurità e dall'angolo in cui sussiste, – gridano tutti, ma quando si tratta di fare qualcosa, quando si esige da loro un movimento intellettuale, un po' di pratica per le loro teorie, allora nessuno si muove, nessuno si commuove!". Deledda in Masini (2007), 19. Deledda reported the same metaphor in her letter to Scano and Satta: "Everyone cries out that Sardinia is the Cinderella of Italy, still waiting for her fairy godmother to discover her and take her out of the obscurity in which she lives" ["Tutti gridano che la Sardegna è la Cenerentola d'Italia, che aspetta tutt'ora la fata benefica che la scopra e la tragga dall'oscurità in cui vive"]. Deledda, *Versi*, 241.

36 Birgit Wagner, "La questione sarda. La sfida dell'alterità," in *Aut aut: il postcoloniale in Italia*, 349, ed. Giovanni Leghissa (Milan: il Saggiatore, 2011), 10–29.

exploited and mistreated region, completely detached from the continent and abandoned to its fate, she described it as if it were a land of colonial conquest, linking its decline and its possible salvation to external political and historical causes. On the other hand, she did not ignore the endogenous roots of this decadence. Aware of the importance of gathering popular traditions, Deledda saw in De Gubernatis's folkloric initiative an opportunity for her island, and herself, to fit into a continental and international context. She lucidly interpreted this enterprise as a unique chance to enhance not only the Sardinian territory but also its people, connecting them to an extensive and ever-expanding cultural network. A few weeks later, she wrote to De Gubernatis:

Therefore, since the great Sardinians are disheartened and none of them want to take charge of this enterprise, I place myself at the head of this army that is beginning to move. And I hope. I am very tiny, you know, I am tiny even in comparison with Sardinian women who are very small, but I am bold and courageous like a giant and I am not afraid of intellectual battles. Now I have put myself in this one and I hope to win it. In Sardinia I am well known and loved, especially by young people. Now I have appealed to them and I am sure that everyone will answer me, not so much for the love of country as for love of me.³⁷

Deledda was ready to assume this cultural and political mission personally, becoming its chief interpreter. She concluded her ardent letter to Scano and Satta with a tinge of humility, a recurrent *topos* for women writers which implicitly reflected the clash between her apparent unpretentiousness and the importance of the task she had taken in. She asked once more to help "this little worker who has dedicated her life and thoughts to Sardinia, and who constantly dreams to see her region, if not better known, freed at least from the slander coming from overseas"³⁸ – a dream that emerges preponderantly in her ethnographic sketch "La donna in Sardegna".

37 "Dunque, giacché i grandi sardi sono sconfortati e nessuno di essi vuol mettersi a capo di questa impresa, io stessa mi pongo in testa a questo esercito che comincia a muoversi. E spero. Sono piccina piccina, sa, sono piccola anche in confronto delle donne sarde che sono piccolissime, ma sono ardita e coraggiosa come un gigante e non temo le battaglie intellettuali. Ora mi son messa in questa e spero di vincerla. In Sardegna sono molto conosciuta ed amata, specialmente dai giovani. Ora io ho fatto l'appello ad essi e son sicura che tutti mi risponderanno, non tanto per amor di patria quanto per amor mio." Deledda in Masini (2007), 25.

38 "Questa piccola lavoratrice che ha consacrato la sua vita e i suoi pensieri alla Sardegna, e che sogna ad ogni istante di vederla, se non più conosciuta, liberata almeno dalle calunnie d'oltre mare". Deledda, *Versi*, 242.

The Woman in Late-Nineteenth-Century Sardinia

In a letter dated 8 November 1892, Deledda informed De Gubernatis that she would immediately start to "write the article about Sardinian women, putting in it, as you are pleased to write to me, all my knowledge and all the immense love I feel for my picturesque and unfortunate country."³⁹ "La donna in Sardegna," the first article to mark her collaboration with De Gubernatis and therefore her venture into the field of folklore studies, was published on 15 March 1893 in *Natura ed Arte*, accompanied by six illustration of Sardinian female peasants dressed in traditional fashion.⁴⁰ Deledda's spirit of observation and awareness of societal changes emerges in these lines, as well as her acute prescience of the gradual enculturing process that was going to radically alter the Sardinian *fin-de-siècle* landscape.

Although she never proclaimed to be a feminist, her sensitivity towards the condition of women is evident not only in her writings but also in her participation in the "Primo Congresso Nazionale delle donne italiane" in 1908.⁴¹ Not coincidentally, Deledda dedicated the incipit of the article to Eleonora d'Arborea, Sardinian medieval heroine and promulgator of the *Carta de logu* in 1392, a legislative code of great historical value. By placing her at the beginning of her discussion around women in Sardinia, Deledda recognised her importance as an extraordinary historical female figure in the island. The excursus continued with a wide-ranging investigation of Sardinian lower-class women, whose various typologies are skilfully portrayed by connecting their characterisation to the towns and villages to which they belong.

Deledda aroused the readers' curiosity by portraying typical Sardinian women through vivid images that nearly transform these descriptions into *tableaux vivant*. She explicitly focused on lower-class women rather than the aristocratic "gentlewomen" because the former were the ones she had studied in depth, while she knew the latter only "from afar or for reputation."⁴² The first portrait she delineated is that of a Sardinian woman strongly linked to tradition, without ambitions: "firmly

39 "Scrivere l'articolo sulle donne sarde, mettendoci, come lei si compiace scrivermi, tutto il mio sapere e tutto l'immenso amore che nutro per il mio paese tanto pittoresco quanto disgraziato." Deledda in Masini (2007), 13.

40 Grazia Deledda, "La donna in Sardegna," *Natura ed Arte* 1, no. 8 (1893): 750–762.

41 On Deledda and the feminist discourse, see Susan Brizziarelli, "Woman as Outlaw: Grazia Deledda and the Politics of Gender," *Modern Language Notes* 110, no. 1 (1995): 20–31.

42 "Da lontano o per fama." Deledda, "La donna in Sardegna," 762.

attached to tradition, she follows her mother's habits, customs, ideas, in the same way as her mother had preserved those of her mother, and in her maternal education she will pass them on to her children and her grandchildren."⁴³ Despite describing lower-class women as uneducated, Deledda showed respect for their beliefs and admiration for their diligence. Though it is possible to discern her self-distancing from them, it can also be assumed that she was attempting to build on the previous knowledge and prejudices of her target continental readers in order to offer a more nuanced depiction of Sardinian womanhood.

In conjunction with an overview of local female costumes, the geography of the Sardinian territory, with its mountains, vegetation, colours and flavours, is outlined. Deledda would return to these ethnographic descriptions in a subsequent article on "Tipi e paesaggi sardi," published in 1901 in *Nuova Antologia*. In a positivist fashion, she seemed to acknowledge an intimate connection between geography and social conditions, which in turn influenced women's characterisation. She observed: "each [woman] reflects the environment in which she lives, the costume she wears, the landscape that surrounds her;"⁴⁴ "it is always the environment, always the new external manifestation of existence, which exerts influence."⁴⁵ It is tempting to interpret statements such as "each region has a specialty, a reflection of nature in the face and spirit of the woman"⁴⁶ as a feminisation of the geography of the Sardinian landscape. However, in Deledda's view, as elucidated in the subsequent passages of the article, women were far from being a mere background or reflection of Sardinian nature. Their essential function on a societal level is underlined: "everywhere the Sardinian woman works."⁴⁷ Women were the pillars of the familial and social structure: "And they work and work, poor women, exposed to the bad weather, reaping under the sun, harvesting grapes, gathering olives in winter, – in mines, in the

43 "Attaccata saldamente alla tradizione segue gli usi, i costumi, le idee di sua madre, come questa aveva conservato quelle della madre sua, e nell'educazione materna le trasmetterà ai suoi figli ed ai suoi nipoti." Ivi, 751.

44 "Ciascuna [donna] riflette l'ambiente in cui vive, il costume che indossa, il paesaggio che la circonda." Ivi, 752.

45 "È sempre l'ambiente, sempre la nuova esterna manifestazione della esistenza, che influisce." Ivi, 754.

46 "Ogni regione ha una specialità, un riflesso della natura nel volto e nello spirito della donna". Ivi, 755.

47 "Dappertutto la donna sarda lavora." Ivi, 757.

manufacturing field, in the vegetable gardens and at home."⁴⁸ Her discussion on local women is interspersed with verses of typical female songs in Sardinian, followed by translations in Italian in the footnotes. These *muttos*, improvised love rhymes, reflect Deledda's conception of poetry as "the history of the people."⁴⁹

In her first sketch, Deledda also showcased a knowledge of the economic and social relations existing between city and countryside, namely between the progressive cities of Cagliari and Sassari and the inland with its wild mountains and remote villages, where development and progress were more difficult to attain. The villages were "not yet crossed by the microscopic railways that the government has granted us,"⁵⁰ a significant aside in which Deledda's resentment towards the unjust post-unification government comes to the surface. Through this sarcastic remark the writer alluded to the historical issues related to the debated *Questione sarda* (Sardinian Question), which locates itself within the broader *Questione meridionale* (Southern Question) in Italy, a phenomenon that generated a collective intellectual effort to understand the socio-cultural causes of the perceived backwardness of the *Mezzogiorno*.⁵¹

The Barbagia region is described as the most picturesque of Sardinia: the costumes are generally described as "barbaric" but for the most important occasions "there are clothes of a supreme delicacy, which recall the sweetness of chestnut leaves."⁵² Nuoro, located in the heart of Barbagia, was called the "Athens of Sardinia"⁵³ for its cultural liveliness and for being the place of birth of several intellectuals such as Sebastiano Satta (1867-1914), Antonio Ballero (1864-1932) and Francesco Ciusa (1883-1949). Deledda underlined the idea that Nuoro was

48 "E lavorano, lavorano, povere donne, esposte a tutte le intemperie, mietendo sotto il sol-leone, vendemmiando, raccogliendo ulive in inverno, – nelle miniere, nelle lavorazioni, negli orti e in casa." Ivi, 756.

49 "La storia dei popoli". Ivi, 759.

50 "Non ancora solcati dalle microscopiche ferrovie che il governo ci ha regalato." Ivi, 751.

51 Deledda did not shy away from expressing her criticism towards the governmental economic policies implemented in the island. For instance, in the short story "Colpi di Scure" (1905), she sharply criticised the exploitation and deforestation provoked by the introduction of the railway system in Sardinia. In this respect, see Fiorenzo Caterini, *Colpi di scure e sensi di colpa. Storia del disboscamento della Sardegna dalle origini a oggi* (Sassari: Carlo Delfino Editore, 2013).

52 "Barbari", "ci sono vestiti di una delicatezza suprema, che richiamano al pensiero la dolcezza delle foglie dei castagni." Deledda, "La donna in Sardegna," 754.

53 "Atene della Sardegna." Deledda, "Tradizioni popolari di Nuoro in Sardegna: Nuoro," 651.

one of the few Sardinian towns touched by modernity. Consequently, female attitudes were more civilised there: it was therefore not unusual to find “a woman of the folk with a newspaper or a novel lost in her basket of sewing or even to hear her absorbed in comments on political and administrative elections.”⁵⁴ Deledda’s irony or perhaps her self-complacency in being a native woman of Nuoro emerges between the lines.

In “*La donna in Sardegna*”, the young Deledda gave further confirmation of her ability as a versatile writer and acute observer of insular folklore. She ended this ethnographic sketch by claiming that her studies aimed exclusively at giving a picture of the women of the people and not of the women of the bourgeoisie, among whom there were women who were becoming progressively more accustomed to modernity:

We also have women who attend high school and prepare themselves for the struggles of science and art, women who paint, sing, play, study, think, write. They are in small number if compared to the immense space of the island, – but they are enough if compared to the percentage of the population; – and they represent the vague gleam of a new era, the dreamed Sardinian Risorgimento, destined to be mothers, teachers, guides to a new, healthy, strong and intelligent generation that will raise Sardinia from the literary, artistic, political, economic and social darkness in which the island lies.⁵⁵

It is a conclusive message of hope mixed with bitterness, a hope placed in the women of the Sardinian bourgeoisie that, by cultivating arts, letters and politics, could transfer to the children of the twentieth century “a healthy and strong culture.”⁵⁶ These final references to middle-class women are particularly significant: it is not far-fetched to imagine that in this passage Deledda was thinking about herself and her own positioning within Sardinian society as a woman destined to become the chief listener,

54 “Qualche popolana col giornale o il romanzo smarrito nel panierino del suo cucito o, addirittura, nel sentirla occupata di elezioni politiche e amministrative.” Deledda, “*La donna in Sardegna*,” 754.

55 “Per ciò abbiamo anche noi donne che frequentano il liceo e si preparano alle lotte della scienza e dell’arte, abbiamo donne che dipingono, che cantano, che suonano, che studiano, che pensano, che scrivono. Sono in numero ristretto per l’immenso spazio dell’isola, – ma sono abbastanza in confronto al numero della popolazione; – e sono il vago barlume precursore di un’era novella, del sognato Risorgimento sardo, destinate qual sono ad essere madri, maestre, guide ad una nuova, sana, forte e intelligente generazione che solleverà la Sardegna dal tenebroso letterario, artistico, politico, economico e sociale in cui giace.” Ivi, 762.

56 “Una sana e forte cultura.” Ivi, 762.

observer and teller of its popular life. Through these optimistic words, she voiced her dream of helping her native island to resurge from the decadence which it had been fatally confined to up to that point.

Deledda's cultural formation was nourished by the folkloric substratum that connected her to Sardinia. In her novels, she would reinterpret and re-propose the corpus of traditions and legends that she collected in her youth beyond the borders of her island, as a vital lymph for her creative imagination and for the readership of the new Italian nation. Her contribution as a collector is inserted in the transnational quest for popular traditions that was gaining a foothold in the late nineteenth century across Europe. In Italy, the fragmented nature of the new-born Italian state engendered a multiplicity of centripetal contributions to folklore studies which were fuelled by a complex mosaic of deeply regional perspectives. In this regard, it is significant that the first collection of Italian folktales would be published only in the mid-twentieth century by Italo Calvino. Prior to Calvino's *Fiabe italiane* (1956), the publication of folklore collections in Italy, despite being a prolific phenomenon, was largely distinguished by a regional denominator.

Such drives, though present throughout the Italian peninsula, were particularly prolific in the South and in the islands. Deledda's role as a folklorist was grounded in these polycentric endeavours to gather the multifaceted Italian regional traditions. In his collection of Sicilian fairy tales, Giuseppe Pitrè conjured an evocative parallel between tradition and the sea, which has been thoroughly interpreted by Eveljn Ferraro: "Tradition is unique but varied, mobile, multiform like the sea."⁵⁷ Decades later, Calvino himself would resort to a "sea metaphor" to describe his leap into the abyss of nineteenth-century folklore.⁵⁸ For Deledda, Pitrè, De Gubernatis and all the nineteenth-century men and women of letters who participated in this

57 "La tradizione è unica ma varia, mobile, multiforme come il mare." Giuseppe Pitrè, *Fiabe, novelle e racconti popolari siciliani*, 4 vols, trans. Bianca Lazzaro, introduced by Jack Zipes, preface by Giovanni Puglisi (Rome: Donzelli, 2013 [1875], vol. 1), 52. As Ferraro observed, tales and traditions "emerge from the same ancient sea, in disparate shapes and names, and across borders." See Eveljn Ferraro, "'La tradizione è come il mare': Giuseppe Pitrè's Transnational Approach to Folk and Fairy Tales in the New Italy," *Italian Studies* (2022): 1–13 (10).

58 Italo Calvino, Introduction to *Fiabe italiane, raccolte dalla tradizione popolare durante gli ultimi cento anni e trascritte in lingua dai vari dialetti*, 3 vols (Milan, Oscar Mondadori, 2015 [1956], vol. 1), X. On Calvino's sea metaphor, see Elena Emma Sottilotta, "From Avalon to Southern Italy: The Afterlife of Fata Morgana in Laura Gonzenbach's *Sicilianische Märchen* (1870)," *Women Language Literature in Italy / Donne Lingua Letteratura in Italia*, no. 3 (2021): 103–121 (112).

search for oral traditions, the act of collecting folklore was a means to participate in the cultural life of the time on a local, regional and (trans)national level. These efforts can be reassessed as an expression of the “mutable and diversifying locality” that distinguishes the Mediterranean basin and that makes it “simultaneously suspended, stretched, and stratified within a heterogeneous modernity.”⁵⁹

As a whole, Deledda’s folkloric quest was not only an important apprenticeship but also a performative means to make herself and *her* Sardinia known in the Italian peninsula and beyond, from the heart of the Mediterranean Sea to the world. Her venture into folklore studies gave her the opportunity to place herself at the centre of the investigation into the habits and customs of her people by successfully setting the stage for her ethnographic performance and by poetically reinforcing her own bond with Sardinia, while collecting in person a folkloric repertoire that will eventually permeate the narrative fabric of her novels and short stories. Her contribution to late nineteenth-century folklore studies ultimately constituted a fertile ground on which she drew heavily for her subsequent production, transfiguring and transfusing for literary ends the rich material drawn directly from the voice of her own people.

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59 Ian Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2008), 2.

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