

Paola Irene Galli Mastrodonato, 2024. *Emilio Salgari. The Tiger Is Still Alive!*
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This extraordinarily captivating monograph is dedicated to Italy's great adventure novelist, Emilio Salgari (born in Verona in 1862 and who died by suicide in Turin in 1911). As its author, Paola Irene Galli Mastrodonato, reminds her readers, Salgari, since the beginning of his literary career in the 1880s, "was overwhelmingly present in the publishing market and in an exceptionally large sector of the reading public but incredibly absent in cultural traditional institutions, like schools and universities" [19]. In fact, during the period spanning from the late 1800s to the end of the 1950s and beyond, Salgari's name was accompanied by a negative (pre)judice on the part of the academia and the right-thinking conservative, mostly overwhelmingly Catholic, Italian public opinion. At the same time, Salgari continued to have a massive readership, being without any doubt the most read author in Italy, besides being the most translated Italian author world-wide. Salgari's Italian readers, nonetheless, were trapped in a social context where the idea that their favourite author was somebody who wrote works of dubious literary, cultural and ethical merit continued to be hegemonic in the Gramscian sense of the world.

As pointed out by Galli Mastrodonato, this was a situation which started to be challenged only in the 1960s – when, paradoxically, Salgari's readership had already started to decline. Beginning in those years, a band of intellectuals deeply influenced by Salgari, and sometimes not belonging to the literary profession, in a very Garibaldi-like style – or, maybe more correctly, in a Salgari-like style – led an uphill battle to restore their favourite author's work to the dignity that it rightly deserves. Tired of being told by the official academia that Salgari was a writer of no value, suitable at most for adolescents and certainly far inferior to Jules Verne, they authored a series of articles and monographs on Emilio Salgari's 88 novels and 120 short stories and novelettes, along with some important biographies of their favourite author.¹

¹ A list of these works is included in the bibliography which closes Galli Mastrodonato's monograph. Although the list is detailed and on the whole exhaustive, an important work not listed there is Giovanni Arpino & Roberto Antonetto, *Vita, tempeste, sciagure di Salgari, il padre degli eroi* [Life, storms, misfortunes of Salgari, the father of the heroes], Milano: Rizzoli, 1982. It is a biography which Galli Mastrodonato certainly knows, as shown by the fact that in her work she repeatedly makes use of the moniker "father of the heroes and heroines" when mentioning Salgari.

This new approach aimed at re-evaluating Salgari's work, while also giving a realistic picture of his short and unhappy, but very industrious, life. It was a re-evaluation that also successfully pursued the goal of making a selection between the many works he had written and those –fewer in number but still quite numerous – that were apocryphal. Eventually, in 1980, academic Salgarian studies were officially inaugurated with a conference in Turin, *Scrivere l'avventura* ("Writing Adventure"), and went on to flourish "like a jungle in expansion", to quote Galli Mastrodonato's words.

Interestingly enough, however, this flourishing of Salgarian studies was far from completely removing the preconceived negative judgement of a considerable part of the academia. And it is against this backdrop, a still contested reevaluation of Salgari's work, that the relevance of Galli Mastrodonato's monograph becomes visible.

In her study, Galli Mastrodonato pursues the re-evaluation of Salgari's works by following two main strategies: highlighting Salgari's "unique writing method" and stressing the modernity and anti-Orientalist dimension of Salgari's stories. Galli Mastrodonato pursues her strategies through the examination of a wide selection of the eighty-eight novels authored by Salgari. In the first chapter she puts together "a sort of reasoned atlas of his works according to the geographical settings he has chosen for his plots and characters" [27] as well as the time settings of his novels. Hence she examines no less than fourteen novels set in so diverse and faraway areas as Southeast Asia, the Far East, the Americas, the Mediterranean, Africa, the poles, Australia, Oceania and the Czarist Empire, and in so diverse and faraway time settings as ancient Egypt, the 16th century, the mid-19th century, Salgari's own lifetime and the future (as Salgari is not only an extraordinary adventure writer but also, as stressed by Galli Mastrodonato, the first Italian science-fiction writer, although a too often forgotten one).

After designing this first general map, Mastrodonato goes on, in chapters 2 and 3, to dwell on Salgari's longest and most famous series, the 10 novel-long Indo-Malayan cycle. Set in the mid-19th century, the cycle has as its main characters three of Salgari's most charismatic and most beloved heroes: the Bornean prince-turned pirate, Sandokan; the Portuguese adventurer (although with a Spanish name) Yanez de Gomera; the Indian hunter Tremal-Naik. Then, Galli Mastrodonato puts under her lens, in chapter 4, the second most famous and longest of Salgari's cycles, the one dealing with the corsairs of the Caribbean, set in the 17th century. There, she focuses her attention on another most charismatic and beloved Salgarian hero, the elegant and brave, but sombre and troubled, Italian nobleman Emilio di Roccabruna, who has become a privateer to avenge his family and is known as the Black Corsair because of the colour of his clothes. Finally, Mastrodonato concludes her work with a chapter on Salgari's legacy, where she nevertheless finds the space to still dwell on an additional number of

Salgarian novels, in particular those set in the American Far West. And, in so doing, she throws light on one of Salgari's most fascinating female "villains", the American Indian warrior-chief Minnehaha.

It is through the detailed and empathic comment of these novels that Galli Mastrodonato highlights Salgari's expertise as a writer. She shows how, through his writing techniques and tight formal control of his narrative procedures, Salgari unerringly aims at keeping foremost in the reader's mind the interest for the plot, stressing the basic elements of the story's construction. As argued by Galli Mastrodonato, Salgari reaches his goal by distancing himself from the pattern of adventure novels which was traditional in his times, squarely based on the hero's departure from home, his travels and adventures in a faraway land and his triumphal return to his country of origin. Rather, Salgari makes use of the "modernist device" of beginning his stories in medias res, "directly involving the reader in the matter of his narration" [23].

Galli Mastrodonato's interest in highlighting Salgari's "unique writing method" [24] is foremost in her discussion. She convincingly argues, by using many examples in support of her thesis culled from the novels she comments upon, that two still occasionally resurfacing adverse claims of some critics can be definitely disproved. The first is that Salgari is a "children's author"; the second is that his characters and plots have all the superficiality and inconsistency of characters and plots derived from melodrama.

As already remarked, the other main theme of Mastrodonato's work is the importance that is rightly assigned to the disconcerting modernity of Salgari's stories. It is a modernity that is disconcerting, because of the explicit and unambiguous ways in which Salgari challenges the *idées reçues* of his time – namely the age of triumphant imperialism – on race, colonialism and sex. Which is something that no other author of his and the following generation was ever willing and/or capable to do. In fact, Salgari's heroes and heroines were, according to the morals of his time, predominantly "bad" people and, even worse, they were people who did decidedly improper things. But today, in a somewhat more enlightened age – though not much more so, in this writer's opinion – those same people turn out to be good people, who acted praiseworthily and courageously.

To be convinced of what has just been said, it is sufficient to reflect on three issues. The first is that, up at least to the Second World War, the fact that Westerners had a legitimate right to keep non-Westerners under their domination and that this domination was also beneficial to the subjugated peoples was a widely shared opinion; nowadays, however, the fairness of anti-colonial struggles is generally accepted – provided, of course, that the Palestinians' struggle for their own independent state is not included.

Also, nowadays, the question of interracial marriages, which remained a taboo until well after the second world war, is something that is largely admitted in most Western countries, Italy included. But to fully understand how disruptive and shocking these issue appeared in Salgari's times, it is enough to remember – as Galli Mastrodonato does – that in 1895 when Salgari published *I misteri della jungla nera* – whose plot is centred on “the passionate love story between a Bengali snake hunter and the daughter of a British garrison officer”– in India a code had just been passed that severely punished any sexual contact between “natives” and “whites”, especially sanctioning relations between “white women” and “Indian men” [25].

The third issue, the question of gender remains still today a much more contested field. Nonetheless, Salgari's “border crossings” in this field – exemplified by novels like *Capitan Tempesta* and *Le Pantere d'Algeri*, expertly analysed by Mastrodonato – are far from provoking an automatic adverse reaction.

A way to highlight the modernity and the anti-Orientalist dimension of Salgari's work is the simple technique of comparing his characters and stories to those written by well-known and usually highly regarded Victorian authors, who were Salgari's contemporaries or who belonged to the generation following Salgari. This is a technique constantly pursued by Galli Mastrodonato while discussing Salgari's novels. The references to the works of Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Conrad, Edward Morgan Forster, Robert Louis Stevenson, A. E. W. Mason and others, and the comparison of their works with Salgari's novels are disseminated in Galli Mastrodonato's monograph. These comparisons make clear that the non-European characters and spaces portrayed by Salgari and those portrayed by his well-regarded Victorian colleagues are so radically different that the question might arise whether the reader is in front of different descriptions of the same spaces and the human beings that inhabit them, or rather if we are confronted by two worlds apparently having nothing in common with each other.

An example among many of these radically different descriptions is the comparison between Conrad's *Lord Jim* and Salgari's *Le Tigri di Mompracem*, two novels which, interestingly enough, were both published in 1900.

In the opening lines of *Lord Jim* – Galli Mastrodonato points out – the natives are defined as black and tiny; they appear to be physically weak; they live in hovels in a “miserable” fishing village next to a calm sea with “pale water”; they are headed by an insignificant old tribal chief and protected by a “white lord”, who, as Galli Mastrodonato underlines, “is the hero of the story that is related” [138].

In the incipit of *Le Tigri di Mompracem* – extensively quoted and translated by Galli Mastrodonato [135-36] – we are at night, in a “wild island with a sinister fame”, battered by “a tremendous hurricane”, where, at the far end there are huts lining a bay, surrounded by defences, while “numerous vessels” are “anchored

beyond the cliffs” [135]. Near the bay rises a high rock, where a house is situated. In this house, the only one with windows lit in that stormy night, we find a man “sitting on a limping armchair”, in a room “strangely decorated”. He is a native, who, quite differently from the natives portrayed by Conrad, is “tall, slim, with a body perfectly built”, and whose features are “mighty, manly, proud, and strangely handsome”. He has long hair which “falls on his shoulders”, and a very black beard which frames “his lightly tanned face”. And this man, Sandokan, the dethroned prince turned pirate, is, like Conrad’s “white lord”, the hero “of the story that is related”.

Under the guidance of Galli Mastrodonato, the reader soon discovers that Sandokan is the leader of a band of men who belong to all the ethnic groups living in South-East Asia. They are characterized by the most diverse physical features, but fight under a common flag, oblivious to any racial division, and appear eager to wage battle “like a legion of demons” [148].

The natives described at the beginning of *Lord Jim* and *Le Tigri di Mompracem* refer to the same geographical area and time, but – as pointed out by Galli Mastrodonato – no difference could be greater than the one which divides Conrad’s black, weak and tiny Bornean natives, led by an old and ineffective headman, and the manly, handsome, slightly coloured character based in an island “with a sinister fame”, and followed by redoubtable men similar to a “legion of demons”, springing from Salgari’s pen.

Galli Mastrodonato, nonetheless, with a touch of malice, notes that there is something that unites these two seemingly irreconcilable worlds. In fact, she notes that “Conrad’s Jim, who defeated the rajah of Patusan with the aid of the Bugis tribes he had befriended, becoming their new sovereign” [204], is “very similar” to the anonymous English adventurer – described in Salgari’s *Sandokan alla riscossa* (1907) – who had exterminated Sandokan’s family and usurped his throne. She also notes that both Salgari and Conrad, in describing their respective characters, based themselves on the life and exploits of the English adventurer William Lingard (ca. 1830-1888), as argued by Felice Pozzo (one of the band of Salgari’s scholars not belonging to the literary profession). However, whereas Conrad’s Lord Jim is portrayed as a “liberator” of “childish” natives, Salgari’s anonymous English adventurer is described as “a ruthless and cunning white-skinned enemy bent on murder and the violent occupation of a foreign land through treachery and bribery” [204]. Hence, Salgari’s view of a fictional character exemplifying the many British adventurers – like James Brooke, Sandokan’s celebrated antagonist in *I pirati della Malesia* (1902) – who gave such a powerful contribution to the building of the widest colonial empire in history is deeply anti-Orientalist and consonant with that of today’s most advanced historical research. On the contrary, Conrad’s perspective is exemplary of the

Eurocentric, imperialist and Orientalist Weltanschauung which was hegemonic in Salgari's time, but that the Italian master of adventure fiction did not share.

The same differences are highlighted by Galli Mastrodonato when she compares Salgari to other Victorian novelists, in particular Rudyard Kipling and E.M. Forster. To give the gist of these comparisons it suffices to quote what she writes, summing up her analysis of the Indias described by Forster and Kipling on one side and the one described by Salgari on the other:

... there is nothing regal, noble, wealthy, attractive, or even decent and clean in the native characters they [Forster and Kipling] imagined for their white supremacist plots, while Emilio [Salgari] has created unforgettable colored heroes and heroines who convey a sense of unending fascination with their looks, their attire, their beliefs, their ornaments, their jewels, their dances, their music, their warlike spirit, and their sophisticated plurimillennial culture that literally shines through the eyes of its holy men. [326]

But, of course, the differences between Salgari and his highly regarded Victorian colleagues do not end here. Another impressive distinguishing feature is the way in which women and their personal stories are dealt with.

Exemplary of how Salgari portrays his female heroines is Fathma, the protagonist of *La favorita del Mahdi* (1887), a novel set during the revolt of Muhammad Ahmad, the Sudanese religious and political leader, against the Egyptians supported by the British. As Galli Mastrodonato points out:

Fathma [...] is a living contradiction, dismantling the basic stereotype of the "exotic" as the "myth of the languorous, passive sexual availability" of "an Orient ... constructed as feminine": she is physically and psychologically strong and determinate, she decides who to love and she masters her subjectivity by saying "– I'm an Arab!", by proclaiming her religious faith and her allegiance to the Mahdi, and by being a battling woman (she is "fearless" [...]) [46].

Fathma is the blueprint of Salgari's heroines, both European and non-European, either as positive characters or as fascinating "villains". In fact, as Galli Mastrodonato points out, the vast majority of Salgari's fictional female characters are strong and independent heroines, they fight for their ideals (which are not necessarily limited to the choice of the man with whom they want to live), they are ready to run any kind of physical and psychological risks to reach their objectives, and in doing so they often take up arms and fight.

Summing up, characters such as Tremal-Naik and Suyodhana – respectively the hero of *I misteri della jungla nera* and his antagonist (a complex and interesting 'villain') – "cannot possibly exist in Kipling's or Forster's fictional rendering of

India” [249]. Likewise, no female heroine such as Ada Corishant, the young English woman whom the Indian Tremal-Naik loves, being loved back, “is present in coeval works of fiction written by white authors” [277].

As noted by Galli Mastrodonato, the absence of this kind of character in the Victorian fiction of his time – the European woman who loves a non-European man – is quite striking if one remembers that notwithstanding official prohibitions against interracial sexual relations, in India these relations had been frequent enough to generate a well-defined ethnic group, the “racially mixed” Anglo-Indians. However, this was a group that was looked down upon by white public opinion, “a prejudice – notes the author – that was still at the heart of Hollywood’s 1956 version of John Master’s 1954 novel *Bhowani Junction*” [277].

In carrying out her re-evaluation of Salgari’s work, Galli Mastrodonato competently draws on her in-depth knowledge not only of Salgari’s work, but of Western literature at large. She has the ability to make use not only of her extensive knowledge of literature, but also of wide-ranging historical sources, which she correctly deploys. Furthermore, Galli Mastrodonato, in discussing some controversial points in Salgari’s work, sometimes falls back on her own personal experiences, as an Italian born in Somalia, who has spent her childhood in Kenya during the Mau Mau revolt and her early teens in the Shah’s Iran. In so doing she is able to throw additional light on Salgari’s work, showing that non-European events or customs which the Italian master of adventure fiction describes, and which have been decried as fantastic constructs by some critics, did in fact exist and were witnessed by her. Finally, there is no doubt that Galli Mastrodonato is emotionally involved with the subject she studies, which sometimes leads her to make use of rather harsh a language, when passing her judgments on some of Salgari’s critics. Nonetheless, it is an emotional involvement which undoubtedly helps her to achieve – and therefore to transmit to her readers – a profound understanding of the subject of her work.

Of course, together with the evident strengths of Galli Mastrodonato’s work there are its weaknesses. A main one is the contention that the two leaders of the Tigers of Mompracem, Sandokan and Yanez, are tied by a homosexual relationship.

On the basis of his own experience, this author can point out that the passages cobbled together by Galli Mastrodonato in order to prove her point simply highlight a deep and extremely important personal relationship, without implying any kind of homoerotic attraction. Also, the denial of Galli Mastrodonato's thesis is contained in the very plot of *Le Tigri di Mompracem*. In that novel, we see Yanez going so far as to risk his own life in order to favour the relationship between Sandokan and Marianna, the woman whom Sandokan is in love with. Yanez does this because he deeply loves Sandokan *as a friend*; he certainly would not have done so if he had loved him *as a lover*.

When all the above is said, the fact remains that Galli Mastrodonato's monograph is an extraordinary work, written with extraordinary passion and no less extraordinary competence, destined to remain a reference text for anyone dealing with Emilio Salgari and his role in Italian modern letters. It is also a work which conclusively proves that Emilio Salgari has not only been the major Italian author of adventure fiction, worth to be included in the Pantheon of "high literature", but also an absolutely unique example of a counter-Orientalist fiction-writer in the age of triumphant imperialism.