

## The poetry writing and translation activity of Daria Menicanti: A translator-centred perspective

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### Abstract

This research is based on a “translator-centred perspective” and aims at analyzing the work of Daria Menicanti (1914-1985), considering both her work as a poet and as a translator, two activities which are deeply interconnected within her intellectual biography. Analysing some important elements of her life such as her family context, the dense network of social relationships, especially within the so called Scuola di Milano, as well as her role in opposition to some prominent male figures working for the publishing industry, we will try to shed light on this sophisticated intellectual who until now has been unfairly neglected. Some observations on textual aspects of her translation will also be presented, though they will be mainly and functionally applied to a “humanizing” research approach, aiming at considering Menicanti first of all as a person. The analysis will be conducted presenting available archival materials, both personal and preserved in the publishing houses archives.

### Keywords

Archival research, translator-centred perspective, gender and translation, poetry

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## 1. Daria Menicanti, poet and translator in the Italian 20th century cultural context

This article focuses on Daria Menicanti's agency as a poet and a translator, considering her within the "Translator Studies" (Chesterman, 2009) research framework, which pays particular attention to the "lives of translators that can be relevant for the analysis of translations" (Kaindl, 2021, p. 8). Our research therefore will take on a "humanized and translator-centred perspective, with the translatorial subject as its main focus" (Kaindl, 2021, p. 9). Through this approach based on archival research (given that "personal archives of translators are used as important sources for translator-centred research" [Kaindl, 2021, p. 10]), we will try to delineate the figure of Menicanti as a translator and a poet, though this will not mean "an automatic abdication of work on the texts themselves" (Eberharter, 2021, p. 86). The "humanizing" approach on which this research is based, will not consider Daria Menicanti in abstract terms but as an individual "against a social and cultural background" who is "subject to contextual and situational constraints" (Kaindl, 2021, p. 11) and thus becomes visible as a real person.

There are not many studies on the life of Daria Menicanti, also because she herself decided to destroy some of her personal archives. For this reason, the perspective of our analysis will also take into consideration what Mary Bardet has defined as a "microhistorical approach", which "conveys the personal experience and links the individual to the general socio-historical context" (Bardet, 2021, pp. 41-42). The analysis will take into account the cultural and social context in which Menicanti acted, paying particular attention to the Scuola di Milano (School of Milan). This intellectual environment represented her elective milieu and played a crucial role in her relationship with the publishing sector. Our perspective will mainly consider the network of contacts Menicanti was able to create with other authors and with publishers/editors. We will also try to verify if and to what extent she had any contracting power, especially in relation to the choice of works/translations to be published. Finally, we will take into account another element within the "translator-centred" research framework, that is the importance of gender issues in relation to translation activities. From this perspective, considerations on the binomial issue of visibility and invisibility, or what Guzmán refers to as "presence/absence", will therefore be applied not only to the texts but also to the figure of Menicanti and to her work as a poet and a translator, "in relation to the community or communities in which it is produced, occurs, and circulates" (Guzmán, 2009, p. 195).

Menicanti was born in Piacenza in 1914 and lived most of her life in Milan. She died, in 1995 in Mozzate in the province of Como. Her activity as poet and translator exemplifies the historical and socio-cultural condition in Italy between 1940 and 1990. Her work highlights how many female intellectuals believed translation to be a means to "access the literary field and the publishing world" (Baldini, 2023, p. 10)<sup>1</sup>. It also underlines a form of "double invisibility of these intellectuals, who had to accept a limited appreciation of their work because they were women and also because they acted as agents of the translation process" (p. 12). If we consider women's poetic activity, acknowledgement and visibility were also largely absent in Italy at that time. It is possible to "measure, though only approximately, the esteem poets deserve in their century (or in later years) by considering their presence in anthologies" (Colella, 2022, p. 16). This situation is exemplified by two famous anthologies published in Italy during the 1950s. The first, edited by Giacinto Spagnoletti (1951), only included three female contributions while the second, edited by Luciano Anceschi (1953), had only two. The prolonged invisibility of female poetry in Italy (see Raffo, 2022, p. 7) is also shown by some broader anthologies published between 1960 and 1980. In the volumes edited by Edoardo Sanguineti (1969) and Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo (1978), not a single female poet was included. However, Menicanti is

<sup>1</sup> All translations of critical quotes—originally written in Italian—are by the authors of this article, unless otherwise noted.

present in a collection published at the end of the 1970s (Frabotta, 1977a), which was entirely dedicated to female poetry from the postwar period. In line with what has been stated by the celebrated Italian writer Dacia Maraini in her critical analysis of this specific anthology, “only very few of the poets included in this volume are feminist. Most of them, definitely refuse all forms of separation between male and female in literature” (Maraini, 1977, p. 29). Menicanti herself is not listed at the end of the anthology (see Frabotta, 1977a, pp. 139-176) among those authors who agreed to answer some questions by the editor of the volume regarding, for example, the role of women in relation to their poetry, or the specifically female aspects of the linguistic and poetical output of their work. On the one hand, it seems that Menicanti refuses (at least publicly in the pages of an anthology) to meditate on her poetic work in relation to being a woman, although, on the other hand, she did agree to publish poems that acknowledged the complex relationship between her visibility-invisibility as a female poet in addition to the cultural and social impositions of the times in which she lived.

Referring to her dual role as a poet and translator, in 1985 Menicanti writes: “I’ll start by saying that I don’t translate on a professional basis. I am essentially a poet, but I’ve always adored the occasional work of turning around other languages within my own. Rendering thoughts and feelings expressed by someone else into another language is a challenge I cannot avoid” (Menicanti, 1985a, p. 8). Menicanti never really considered herself as a professional translator, yet she seems to have always recognized the crucial role of translation as a challenge. Her activity as a poet and translator was carried out simultaneously throughout her whole life. But the issue of visibility was highly differentiated: she experienced an initial first phase of invisibility as a translator (for reasons we will discuss in this analysis) alongside a substantial visibility as a poet, followed by an inversion with a high level of visibility as a translator alongside a substantial lack of acknowledgment as a poet. Notwithstanding the non linear success in these two activities, it can nevertheless be argued that Menicanti’s poetic creativity has benefited from her continuous activity as a translator – both, as we will see, from French and English as well as from classical languages into Italian.

For the purpose of our research we have looked at two specific archives: The Fondo Daria Menicanti, Centro per gli Studi sulla Tradizione Manoscritta di Autori Moderni e Contemporanei (hereinafter Pavia Manuscripts Centre) of the University of Pavia, and the Fondazione Arnaldo e Alberto Mondadori (FAAM), in Milan, the latter being the archive of the publishing house with which Menicanti mostly collaborated. If, as stated by Pascale Sardin, consulting archives is an undoubtedly fundamental step for the “visibilisation du rôle des intellectuelles dans les échanges transculturels au cours du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle” (Sardin, 2023, p. 247), given that archives fulfil an important function in their role of preserving memories to be passed down to future generations, it is also true that “ce sont les figures d’écrivains ou d’artistes les plus consacrées qui sont concernées en priorité par les efforts de conservation” (Arber & Tophoven, 2021, p. 120). The lack of acknowledgement of Menicanti both as poet and translator has allowed only a partial preservation of archival material dedicated to her work. Moreover, most of these documents concern critical exchanges and in house reviews of her work for which mainly male figures were involved in giving their opinion on her production, hence also in deciding for the editorial fate of her poetry. As regards Menicanti’s published translations, archival editorial documents of the publishing houses mostly relate to in house reviews on works commissioned in translation, whereas no reports on economic conditions of payment have been preserved (or at least made available to scholars). With regard to Menicanti’s personal archive, she appears to have kept in particular a wealth of documentation relating to her unpublished translations, and many letters proving her correspondence with dear friends and relatives. However, she has destroyed, so as not to leave any trace of it (see Minazzi, 2011a, p. 44),

the entire correspondence with her husband, which might have shed light especially on the period of her anonymous translations, something which we will discuss later. The “silence” of archival material corresponds to a symptomatic “process of self invisibilization” (Baldini, 2023, p. 16), although it remains possible to speculate on the socio-cultural conditions of the era in which Menicanti lived as well as on details of her personal life. The author “didn’t get the support she should have deserved [...] during her lifetime [...] maybe because of all the light shed on her husband” (Ria, 2012, p. 17). The acknowledgment of Menicanti’s work, in particular of her poetry – which was integrally but posthumously published in Italy along with some unpublished poems in 2013 (Menicanti, 2013) – is largely due to the meticulous and strenuous work by scholar Fabio Minazzi, professor of Philosophy of Science at the Università dell’Insubria (Italy). Minazzi had the chance to meet Daria Menicanti at the beginning of the 1980s for reasons “all linked to the studies on the life and thought of Giulio Preti [...] so as to be able to put together relationships, cultural environments, events and historical-cultural contexts, through which the philosopher had manifested his intellectual and civil activity” (Minazzi, 2011a, p. 25). The couple’s relationship also sheds light on the so called Scuola di Milano, a specific intellectual context that:

was completely unrelated to the Italian cultural climate of the 1930s – both to neo-idealism philosophy both to fascism, not to mention its distance from Catholic culture. In fact, the Scuola di Milano found its own critical roots in the work of philosophers such as Dilthey, Simmel, Husserl and the neokantians. Therefore, its natural horizon was a wider European culture, in which to find inspiration through a deep and constant work of research and documentation, always in terms of what was happening beyond the Italian borders (Minazzi, 2011a, p. 34).

## 2. Daria Menicanti and the Scuola di Milano: The translator’s agency at the service of male philosophers

Born in Pavia in 1911, where he also graduated with a dissertation on Husserl, Giulio Preti moved to Milan during the 1930s, to follow his “maestro” Antonio Banfi, professor of History of Philosophy at the State University of Milan. In 1932 Menicanti, who was studying at the Faculty of Letters at the same University (after having been trained or having studied English, French and German languages on her own), was working on her dissertation on Aesthetics in relation to the poetry and poetics of John Keats. In 1937, the friendship between Preti and Menicanti suddenly developed into a strange marriage, one that the critic Vittorio Sereni, using an appropriate expression taken from Verlaine, laughingly called “drôle de ménage” (Menicanti, 2022, pp. 64-65). As a couple, Preti and Menicanti began to attend the Scuola di Milano, a circle that, in addition to Preti also included the philosopher Antonio Banfi, and other prominent intellectuals<sup>2</sup>. This circle contributed to opening up new forms of hermeneutics discourse and represented a significant field in the cultural humus of 20<sup>th</sup> century Italy. The achievements of this young and new generation of thinkers were outstanding, given that they were all seriously committed to trying to understand the world, while having to deal at the same time with the major anxieties of the Fascist period (see Minazzi, 2013, p. 38). Menicanti would later write about the School:

being a poet, it was not the importance given to philosophy that struck me most... but the possibility of dealing with a new sensitivity that existed around me [...]; a rather daring sensitivity that represented the roots of a new kind of school, [...] the foundations of a new knowledge (Menicanti in Savini, 2012, p. 59).

<sup>2</sup> Banfi supervised Menicanti’s dissertation and among the other intellectuals was Vittorio Sereni, chief editor at Mondadori and dear friend of Daria.

The Scuola di Milano offered Menicanti the opportunity to begin translating philosophical texts. The first work she translated was the volume *Contemporary British Philosophers* (Muirhead, 1925), by the Birmingham University historian and philosopher John Henry Muirhead. The translation (Muirhead, 1939) was published in Milan by Bompiani with an introduction by Banfi. This work of translation from English into Italian was commissioned by Banfi and Menicanti's name appears, accompanied by the title Dott. (meaning 'graduated' in Italian), on the left-hand page of the volume. The rare traces of Menicanti as a translator are in the footnotes, mostly to explain the philosophical vocabulary used in the translation, and in each instance (see in particular Muirhead, 1939, p. 128, p. 202) initialled with N.d.T. (Nota del Traduttore/Translator's note). It is impossible to say whether the notes by the translator, written to supply the reader with information on the implicit meaning of the text, were the work of Menicanti alone: although she certainly had a deep linguistic knowledge of the volume, they may also reflect the subsequent philosophical (more than linguistic) collaboration in editing the volume with Banfi.

Menicanti's next translation in the philosophical field is her version of Pascal's *Les Provinciales* (Pascal, 1945), published in Milan by Maria Adalgisa Denti – another of Banfi's pupils – for the publishing house of the same name. The first edition does not indicate the name of the translator, but only of the editor "Giulio Preti". In a more recent edition of *Le Provinciali* (Pascal, 1972), issued by the mainstream publisher Einaudi only a few weeks after the death of Preti, the volume specifies that both the introduction and the translation are by Preti himself.

In the same year as Pascal's volume, Menicanti's translation of *L'Homme machine et L'Homme plante* by the physician and philosopher Julien Offray de La Mettrie (La Mettrie, 1955) was also published without acknowledgment. This was later reprinted in 1990, long after Preti's death.

According to Fabio Minazzi – who received this information directly from Daria Menicanti during one of their conversations at the poet's house – the translations of these two volumes were carried out by Menicanti herself. As regards the translation of Pascal, Minazzi writes that it "was initially drafted by Preti's wife in the first place [...] whereas the philosopher would have then taken on the task of editing the whole book" (Minazzi, 2011b, p. 16, note 19). As for the translation of the La Mettrie volume, which was first published when Menicanti and Preti had already separated (although not yet legally<sup>3</sup>), Minazzi adds "also in this case [Menicanti] gave a first version of the translated texts to Preti, who then edited them for publication" (Minazzi, 2013, p. 34). The final attribution of these works only to the philosopher/husband, was not unusual at that time:

The most significant indication of invisibility [...] was certainly the absence of the acknowledgement of the authorship of translations', which was the result of collaborative practices during which a service translation (often produced by a woman) was then edited by a renowned and illustrious writer (often a male one) (Baldini, 2023, p. 13).

In both volumes, Giulio Preti's peritexts show a tendency to never speak of the translation in the first person singular, but in the first person plural: "we translate in full", "we have chosen passages", or possibly to use impersonal forms "the letters are translated", "translated from". From a purely linguistic point of view, this could certainly be justified considering the typical use of the "pluralis majestatis" in academic writing at that time. One might, however, also interpret it as a latent trace of Menicanti's presence, to whom her husband only implicitly, and almost involuntarily, seems to have acknowledged a tribute.

The footnotes of the two volumes are erudite, philosophical in nature and, when we read them, Preti's vision of European philosophical history definitely shines through. Nonetheless,

<sup>3</sup> Menicanti and Preti were married from 1937 to 1951. Divorce became legal in Italy in 1970.

there are other notes, of a more linguistic nature, where the first person singular also appears, and in which some thoughts on translation difficulties are underlined, for example “Passo poco chiaro”/rather obscure passage (La Mettrie, 1990, p. 154, note 15), “Punto molto oscuro”/particularly obscure period (La Mettrie, 1990, p. 154, note 25), or also “This is how I translate ‘vulgivague’, a very rare word even in French (La Mettrie took it from Voltaire) meaning (littré): “persons devoted to vulgar love, who prostitute themselves” (La Mettrie, 1990, p. 154, note 5). The last note here reported – in the form of a “N.d.T.”/translator’s note – seems to bear witness to a possible collaborative editing process, based both on the work of translation carried out by Menicanti and shared with her husband’s knowledge of Pascal’s and La Mettrie’s’ texts.

In Daria Menicanti’s personal archives there does not seem to be any trace that could clearly prove what Minazzi came to know from personal conversations with the poet, but we should not exclude the possibility that she may have concealed some information on her work as a translator for her husband within the correspondence she decided to destroy. Minazzi remembers having only seen – but never read – a large number of letters signed by Preti and addressed to his wife which “remained for some weeks on Daria’s desk, but then disappeared. Probably she was re-reading those love letters and finally decided to destroy them all, so as to avoid leaving any tiniest memory of them” (Minazzi, 2011a, p. 44).

We have, then, no indications of this correspondence, and we also have no visible sign of Menicanti’s translation activity “at the service” of her husband’s philosophical work and of “his rich and articulated critical rationalism of European ascendance” (Minazzi, 2011a, p. 41) from which Menicanti’s poetry certainly gained nourishment. It is difficult to understand whether this autonomous choice for invisibility is “the result of a deliberate decision or of an accepted logic” (Biagi, 2023, p. 124). Preti’s academic career, although complex and non-linear – due to some personal animosities – may have necessitated a masking of Menicanti’s contribution in publications so as to avoid any interference with his own professional recognition. Another hypothesis can be advanced relating to possible economic reasons for this concealment. At the time, the rates paid to male translators – especially if they were prominent intellectuals – were on average higher than those paid to women, and Preti perfectly embodied the habitus of a prominent and successful philosopher.

In the light of these initial considerations, we may say that Menicanti’s activity as a translator began in an invisibility/absence that was partly chosen and partly, in all probability, due to remaining in the shadow of her husband, something which the poet to some extent recognizes, when she refers to issues related to her husband’s difficult academic career. On a number of occasions, Preti experienced academic failures caused, among other things, by the stance he took regarding the 1968 political movements:

he had dismissed the movement, his colleagues and himself. I tried to help him, I wanted to bring him back to Milan, my unhappy *academic baron*, I didn’t give a damn whether his attitude was right or wrong. But things got worse. He locked himself in a shell declaring that he had been abandoned and betrayed by everyone: in any case he would not leave his post. *I was a woman. I could not understand* (Menicanti, 2022, p. 69).

### 3. Menicanti’s visibility as a poet and translator and her creative workshop

Menicanti was to emerge from this shadow of invisibility as a translator in the 1960s, after separating from her husband (albeit still unofficially because the possibility of divorce in Italy did not yet exist). In 1961, she published the translations of two volumes by Paul Nizan, *Aden Arabia* (1961a) and *La conspirazione* (1961b). The in house reviews to be found at the FAAM on the novel *Aden Arabie* – in its French edition published by Maspero in 1960 – are unanimous

in their approval. The directors of the Mondadori Medusa series Giansiro Ferrata and Elio Vittorini, as well as the editor in chief Vittorio Sereni affirm that the book was relevant and recommended its publication. Vittorini's note states "It is very interesting [...] *Aden Arabie* with a preface by Sartre [...] to be addressed at an average readership" (see Vittorini in Archival documents); and Sereni also indicates "I agree with Vittorini on everything. Please urgently ask conditions for *Aden Arabie*" (see Sereni(a) in Archival documents). Mondadori was able to acquire *Aden Arabie* and *La Conspiration* and both novels were then published within I Quaderni della Medusa and the Medusa series, launched in 1933 and 1934 respectively. Most probably Menicanti's philosophical training and her familiarity with the Milanese circle, and even more so the friendship with Vittorio Sereni, chief editor at Mondadori, led to her being entrusted with these two translations. Two decades after their publication, Menicanti thus commented on her translations:

*Aden Arabie* and *La Conspiration* by Paul Nizan, which I produced for Mondadori, have been two books which I happily lived with while working on them. It is with these translations that I had to put my theories on the translator's cabinet in practice, keeping the nature of the language they were written in – that is French – in mind: brief phrasing, short sentences, pleasantly quick rhythm, were alien to me and only through great effort was I able to lay French down on my Italian, almost physically more serious and slower. (Menicanti, 1985a, p. 8)

At the same time, Menicanti also started to gain a degree of attention for her poetic production. The in house review of the poet and translator Giovanni Raboni – found at FAAM – (see Raboni in Archival documents) on the proposed publication of a first collection of poems, is extremely positive, very articulate and attentive to multiple aspects of Menicanti's poetry, ranging from rhythm to linguistic register and even finding a point of comparison with Katherine Mansfield's writing.

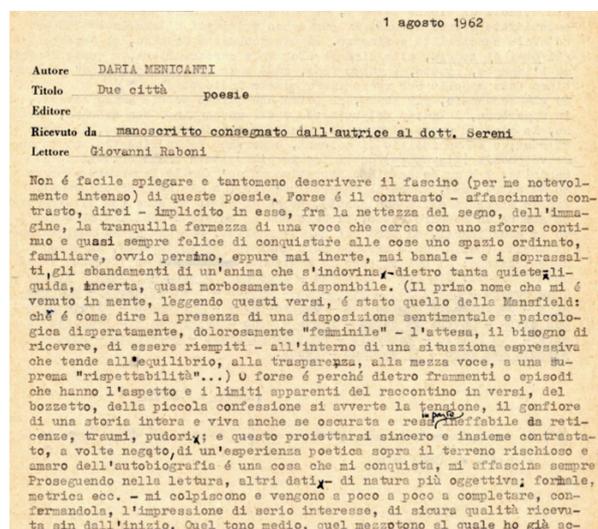


Figure 1. Giovanni Raboni's in house review of Daria Menicanti's poetry collection *Due città* later published with the title *Città come*.

Menicanti thus emerged from her invisibility as a poet by publishing her first volume of poems titled *Città come* (Mondadori, 1964), in the series Il Tornasole, directed by Niccolò Gallo and Vittorio Sereni. The work was awarded the Carducci Prize and Menicanti, who had already been proposing the reading of her lines to the intellectual Milanese circle for many years – often receiving comments about her still unacquired maturity – finally gained visibility within the Italian poetic canon of the time. Proof of this recognition comes from the publisher

himself, Alberto Mondadori, in a note of praise that we discovered in Menicanti's archive at the University of Pavia: it is a short note written on a card, dated May 16 1964, in which Mondadori goes beyond the in house review he had received from his lead editor Vittorio Sereni, linked to Menicanti by a long-lasting friendship. The publisher states that after reading the collection it was as if he had just returned from "a familiar journey though full of discoveries", which had brought him back to:

a dimension of poetry that is truly rare. You are not fashionable, luckily, therefore you are indeed a "poet" among the many, far too many who write poetry. And also the other places, beyond Milan, that particular atmosphere of the south, Pavia, l'Ossola have really struck me. And so for your book, for the solace that each "authentic" poem has given me, I do thank you. (see Mondadori in Archival documents)

Mondadori's appreciation of the value of Menicanti's poetics, as well as the symbolic status of the Carducci prize awarded to her, allowed her to publish a new collection (*Un nero d'ombra*, 1969) in the Mondadori's Lo Specchio series. Under Vittorio Sereni's direction, Lo Specchio had begun a series dedicated to poetry which was also open to foreign authors of international standing. Sereni wanted the series to be presented "as a goal, a point of arrival in which to publish important books by authors with an already consolidated path or on their way to becoming established" (Ferretti & Iannuzzi 2014, p. 88).

In the meantime, Menicanti's reputation as an acknowledged author was also supported by her ongoing activity as a recognised translator, no longer invisible, from French, but also from English. In fact, in the 1960s, a number of translations of hers were issued such as: *Amore e protocollo* (1962), the translation of Noël Coward's *Pomp and circumstance*, published for the Club degli Editori<sup>4</sup>; *Al mattino viene la gioia* (1964), a translation of Betty Smith's novel for the same publishing house; the translation of the French essay by Jean Paris on James Joyce (1966); and, most importantly, the translation of Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar/La campana di vetro* (1968) for Mondadori, in the series Nuovi scrittori stranieri, with the addition of six translated poems by the same author, to be found at the end of the volume. The New Foreign Writers series, directed since 1964 by Elio Vittorini, was an important venture in the Milanese publishing world, aimed at "presenting texts by writers with marked characteristics of research and innovation" (Ferretti, 1992, p. 202). The fact that Vittorini endorsed Menicanti's proposal to close the fiction volume with an unusual presentation of six poems by Plath in Menicanti's translation gives us proof of Menicanti's now accredited status as a translator and of her agency. In fact, this was a very unusual format for a novel, but documents found at the FAAM archive and dedicated to Plath show that, even though the first edition of *La campana di vetro* was relatively unsuccessful, the publishing house was interested in issuing also a collection of poems by the same author, who had already become an international literary figure. The editorial staff was eager to expand the volume with an appendix of poems as part of a planned launch of a volume dedicated to Plath's poetry. The choice of the six poems – to be published with facing texts – was completely left up to Menicanti, who, however, was not going to be considered as a possible translator for the future collection of poems to be published. The name that was put forward for the future volume was that of Giovanni Giudici, a male poet whose success was undoubtedly well recognized and appreciated in the Italian literary canon. Indeed, the volume *Lady Lazarus e altre poesie* (1976), edited by Giudici, has recently been republished with an afterword by scholar Teresa Franco (Plath, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> In 1960, Arnaldo Mondadori launched Il Club degli Editori, the first Italian mail-order book club, born in the wake of the US book clubs.

However, Menicanti's recognition as a reliable translator was confirmed when her translation of Paul G raldy's 1913's poetry collection *Toi et moi* was issued (1972) – once again for Mondadori – but this time in a series that was much less sophisticated from a cultural point of view and open to a wider (and specifically female) public, since it was offered together with the women's magazine *Grazia*<sup>5</sup>.

In an article discussing her translation process, published in the literary magazine *Salvo imprevisti*, Menicanti writes:

I translated the poems by Jean Giraudoux's from his little book *Toi et moi* (also for Mondadori), whose dense and sugary banality made me struggle a lot not to accentuate and thicken the author's original faults. Surprisingly, the booklet of my translation was a great success, a success that, if it is to the detriment of our good Italian taste, is perhaps due to the beautiful Art Nouveau illustrations adorning the poems (Menicanti, 1985a, p. 9).

Menicanti, though showing a remarkable non-subordinate attitude in the face of the French author of the poetry collection, incredibly confuses the author's name, which was Paul G raldy, and not Jean Giraudoux, and no one in the publisher's staff spotted the mistake. Apart from the Art Nouveau illustrations that may indeed have contributed to the work's wide circulation, a large part of its success certainly depended on Menicanti's translation, almost a rewriting of her own, although the volume presented the French original poems on the facing page. On the one hand, the translator obviously could not add any depth to the collection of love poems – strongly influenced by the time of its publishing in 1913 and by the author's minor literary value – but nevertheless she resolutely modified aspects such as structure, rhythm and musicality. The poet somehow took on a translation attitude that was meant to ridicule the stereotypical female vision presented by the typically male point of view in G raldy's collection (as shown for instance in the poem reported here below, in which the Italian version's final rhyming couplet, which makes the lines sound almost ridiculous in their predictability, is not present in the original text). Thanks to her sophisticated translation, Menicanti underlined some of the most evidently conformist features of G raldy's male poetic voice (our emphasis):

[...] Dans la maison lorsque tu s mes  
tant de sant , tant de clart ,  
tu dois te suffire   toi-m me.  
Il faut   ma s curit   
que tu sois plaintive, dolente  
et c line, et que tu te sentes  
toute petite. J'ai besoin  
De te savoir faible et fragile.  
Je t'aime aussit t beaucoup moins.  
Et je suis beaucoup plus tranquille. (pp. 82, 84)

A casa, quando tu diffondi  
tanta salute, tanta chiarezza,  
Basti a te stessa certamente.  
**Ma** occorre alla mia sicurezza  
che tu sia pigra querula dolente  
**o, meglio**, che tu ti senta  
piccola piccola. **Per me** ho bisogno  
di saperti fragile e spenta.  
Subito ti amo **molto meno**  
e mi sento assai **pi  sereno**. (pp. 81, 83)

Menicanti was probably interested in translating as a profession partly for economic reasons (the commission of *Toi et moi* was almost certainly accepted on this basis), but also because, beyond the literary value of the translated text, she appreciated this activity in relation to her poetry writing, in that she seemed to exploit translation in order to enhance her creative process.

Vittorio Sereni is fully aware of this, and in an in house review dated August 30 1974 – addressed to the Mondadori editorial board and designed to urge the publication of

<sup>5</sup> The Italian magazine *Grazia* was first published by Mondadori in November 1938. *Grazia* was modelled on the American magazine *Harper's Bazaar*.

Menicanti's third collection of poems (*Poesie per un certo Federico*) – he insists on various aspects, stressing how the work to be published could achieve interesting sales figures (see Sereni (b) in Archival documents). The publishing system was then on the eve of radical change and, since the 1970s, also because of the death of Arnoldo Mondadori, had begun to consider the economic aspect and a fast turnover of the book market as priority elements. Sereni states that Menicanti is appreciated by other authors, among whom Sergio Solmi, Carlo Betocchi and Eugenio Montale. He also stresses that Menicanti's translation practice runs counter to the translation norms of a publishing house such as Mondadori. Sereni, in fact, had defined the above mentioned translation of *Toi et moi* as “questionable but effective” (see Sereni (b) in Archival documents), attributing a potential impact of the translator also on Menicanti's poetry writing itself. In addition – as seems evident in the hand-written annotation at the bottom of the review on *Poesie per un certo Federico* – Sereni, who was reporting the point of view of another Mondadori editor, Marco Forti, made clear his preference for Menicanti over Maria Luisa Spaziani, who was not more ‘brava’ i.e. talented (in the sense of the poetic quality of her writing) but more ‘brava’ in the other meaning of the Italian term that is ‘bold’, ‘daring’, henceforth more capable of acquiring greater visibility.

Perchè te ne parlo chiedendoti di leggerla? Perchè mi sembra un caso particolare. Penso che se debitamente appoggiata dai nostri settimanali femminili se ne potrebbe fare (v. il titolo) un piccolo caso. Ma vedrei di più un'edizione poco costosa (non un Oscar), del tutto a parte, oppure senz'altro un volume tipo Gèraldy, magari illustrato, per Biblioteca di Grazia: un libro di poesia per la campagna estiva del '75 o per le strenne dello stesso anno. Può essere un esperimento, con i rischi del caso. Ma non è un esperimento di quelli che possono indurre a successivi esperimenti analoghi: è davvero un caso a sè.

Se questa soluzione non la vedi, è chiaro che ripiegherò su una proposta di contratto per lo Specchio esortando l'autrice alla pazienza.

Vittorio Sereni  
Vittorio Sereni  
il quale non pensa, come Forti, che la Spaziani sia più brava; ma solo più "brava".

**Figure 2.** Vittorio Sereni's in house review of Daria Menicanti's poetry collection *Poesie per un certo Federico*, with an interesting handwritten annotation

The collection whose publication Sereni sought to support was eventually accepted. Once again Menicanti's poems were to be published in Mondadori's Lo Specchio poetry series, with the final title *Poesie per un passante: 1969-1976* (1978), which obtained the Premio Napoli/Naples award.

#### 4. Back to poetic invisibility and to an unpublished translation activity

Some years later, in 1982, Menicanti's brand new collection of poems, *Ferragosto*, had also already been reviewed and approved for Lo Specchio, once again by Sereni, who in the meantime had moved from the role of chief editor to that of external consultant for Mondadori. However, Sereni suddenly died and a few weeks later Menicanti received a clear refusal from the publishing house prompting the poet to leave an anonymous comment in *Autodizionario degli scrittori italiani*, clearly talking about herself but using the third person:

she saw her best book, *Ferragosto* [...] rejected by that same publishing house. Menicanti still keeps wondering about the reasons for that refusal. In fact, the explanation she was

kindly given – in simple words the publishing house would have started publishing only great poets and Nobel prizes winners – turned out to be a decision which actually never seemed to be corroborated by facts. Menicanti who inherited a character not particularly inclined to forgiveness from her father, hopes – according to the Chinese legend – to be able to see the body of her enemy floating by along the river, one day (Menicanti in Piemontese, 1990, p. 230).

Lalla Romano, acclaimed novelist and close friend of Daria, defined this break as the “Mondadori’s execution” in the columns of the daily *Corriere della Sera* at the time of Menicanti’s death (Romano in Ria & Savini, 2012, p. 20). The rejection, in fact, coincided with a return to a partial invisibility in terms of her career as a poet. *Ferragosto* (1986a), and the subsequent collections *Altri amici: 1956-1985* (1986b) and *Ultimo quarto: 1985-1989* (1990), were, in fact, issued by minor independent publishers, with little symbolic editorial power, and in one case even at the expense of the author herself.

The phase of invisibility as a poet in the last part of Menicanti’s life is paralleled by an absence of important published translations. Nonetheless, Menicanti carried on translating for literary magazines, as shown by Menicanti’s translations of Dylan Thomas (Menicanti, 1984) and John Keats (Menicanti, 1985b) for the literary magazine *Itinerari*. In 1985, Menicanti also sent her Italian version of Michel Tounier’s short story “Le Nain rouge” (Menicanti, 1985c) to the literary magazine *Salvo imprevisti*.

Translation, then, returns to its status as a basically unattributed activity, though for Menicanti it continued to be important from the point of view of her own activity as a poet. In fact, four notebooks containing exclusively translations of poetry, most of which have never been published, but tracing an activity spanning two decades, from 1962 to 1985, are preserved at the Pavia Manuscripts Centre. The notebooks initially (1960s) present translations of classics such as Archilocus, Alcman and Pacuvius, and in later years, of modern authors such as Federico García Lorca, Charles Williams, Dylan Thomas, John Keats and Nelly Sachs (see Menicanti in Archival documents).

Observing the way in which the poems are reported within the notebooks, it is worth pointing out that the translations of the classics are almost without corrections. This seems to testify a habit and awareness of the translating process from Greek and Latin certainly dating back to the years of Menicanti’s high school and university studies. The poet herself described her approach to the classics as dating back to her adolescence years: “I was still attending high school when I came up against Catullo for the first time [and], I reduced the Greek lyric poets (poor them) to free verse” (1985a, p. 7).

Other translations of the more modern authors, on the other hand, testify to the importance of multiple phases of self-revision, with some of the compositions being re-written in up to five different versions, that are dense with corrections, crossing out, and rethinking. Although hidden or unpublished, this activity testifies to an important process of poetic experimentation, that accompanied Menicanti’s authentic/creative writing, possibly offering her, throughout her entire professional life, both a space of freedom and of self-control.

In conclusion, we can underline how Daria Menicanti’s poetry writing and translating activity went through various phases of absence and presence which, from the 1980s onwards, has culminated in a substantial lack of acknowledgement. This seems also dependent on the fact that the male figures who had certainly contributed to her legitimacy in the publishing field were no longer there to support her, as shown by the archival evidence presented here. This reflects the difficulty, at that time, of defining one’s female personal voice within a purely male literary and editorial tradition, one still displaying the link between publishers’ investment and

forms of legitimation, coming mainly from men. Menicanti probably became more invisible also by choice, due to her own espousal of specific socio-cultural models of the time as well as the fact that she became increasingly disillusioned by her long-lasting collaboration with Mondadori.

Nevertheless, the underground aspect of Menicanti's lifelong translation activity also tells the story of the evolution of her personal poetry and creative writing. Today, Daria Menicanti and her work enjoy renewed attention, dedicated to her activity and aimed at a closer examination of those key biographical elements which were important for translation processes and which can "shed light on why certain translations were created at a given time and in a given form" (Eberharther, 2021, p. 74). The analysis presented here proposes a microhistory of Menicanti "in terms of presence, rather than absence" (Guzmán, 2009, p. 197), bearing in mind that "translation is exchange, [...] and that it occurs in and among collective spaces" (Guzmán, 2009, p. 193). The approach on which our research is based adheres to the notion of the complexity of the analytical gaze as it underlines the importance of "exploring relevant aspects of the translators' biographies, such as the networks which they participated and the social and cultural contexts that determined their work" (Strümper-Krobb, 2021, pp. 67-68). Archival research is fundamental for a Translator's Studies approach as it helps showing how translational activities are embedded "in more complex coordinates than a biographist reductionism or clichés of translation studies discourse allow for" (Strümper-Krobb, 2021, pp. 67-68).

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