

A LITERATA TRANSLATOR FROM RUSSIAN INTO ITALIAN: ENRICHETTA CAPECELATRO CARAFA, DUCHESS OF ANDRIA

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Abstract: In this paper, I focus on the writer and translator Enrichetta Capecelatro Carafa (1863-1941), who signed all her translations from Russian into Italian, from the 1920s until her death, with the pseudonym Duchess of Andria. Reconstructing the trajectory of this prolific and talented translator means shedding light on one of the many profiles of women translators who worked hard in the early decades of the 20th century to introduce foreign literature into Italy. The case of the Duchess of Andria is emblematic, and at the same time original, for how she approached literary translation, for the number of translations she signed, and for the valuable legacy, still partly unexplored, that she left in the field of translations from Russian. The aim of this work is therefore to document a significant case study, with a brief foray into the field of translation criticism of Chekhov's short stories, translated and prefaced by the Duchess and published in 1936 by Utet.

Keywords: Duchess of Andria; Anton Chekhov; history of translation; women translators

1. Introduction

In the early 20th century, numerous women dedicated themselves to the field of translation, rendering important works of foreign literature into Italian. Despite their vital role, these women's efforts have often been unacknowledged, resulting in a "double invisibility" stemming from both their profession and gender. The volume *La donna invisibile. Traduttrici nell'Italia del primo Novecento*¹ (The Invisible Woman: Women Translators in Early 20th-Century Italy) seeks to rectify this oversight. As editors (with Anna Baldini), we collaborated with essay authors to illuminate the crucial work of ten female translators who rendered works from Swedish, English, German, French, and Russian into Italian.

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Received: 13.10.2024

Revised: 05.12.2024

Accepted: 19.12.2024

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¹ The volume was published following a study day organized at the University for Foreigners of Siena on October 5 and 6, 2021. The recording is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQL5W8oHZBM>.

In the early 20th century, Italian literary magazines frequently featured discussions on women's issues. However, as Irene Fantappiè (2023: 25) observes in one of the two introductory essays in *La donna invisibile*, women's names – particularly those of writers and even more so, translators – were very few. Women rarely intervened, and those who did often used pseudonyms. Among translators, one of the most striking cases is that of Lucia Rodocanachi, the ghost translator who worked for prominent writer-translators (Montale, Gadda, Vittorini) in the 1930s and 1940s, earning the title of the true 'invisible woman' of the 'decade of translations.' However, it also happened that translators themselves, more or less willingly and for various reasons, employed strategies of self-invisibilization: such is the case of Rosina Pisaneschi, a translator from German and a professional Germanist, who ended up in the shadow of her husband Alberto Spaini (cf. Biagi 2023: 124); and among the more well-known cases is Natalia Ginzburg, who was forced to sign herself as Alessandra Tornimparte, both as an author and a translator, to hide her Jewish origins following the racial laws of 1938 (cf. Bassi 2023: 183-195).

Other cases highlight gender disparities in recognition. Ada Prospero and Piero Gobetti began co-translating Russian works in 1919, including those by Andreev and Kuprin. However, they received unequal critical acknowledgment. In a review of Andreev's play *Savva* for the August 1921 issue of *Italia che scrive*, Ettore Lo Gatto, a founding figure of Italian Slavic Studies and a translator himself, repeatedly praised Piero while completely overlooking Ada's contributions. He thus writes: "It is a great merit of Gobetti to have translated this work of Andreev as well. The translation is almost excellent: very few flaws, almost insignificant ones" (Lo Gatto 1921: 167).

However, in a predominantly male context such as the early decades of the 20th century, there are exceptions, such as Enrichetta Capecelatro Carafa, Duchess of Andria (1863-1941), who was for two decades an extremely active translator from Russian, in addition to being a writer. Her translating career starts in 1921, with her versions of Andreev's *A Thought* and *The Black Masks*, up until 1941, when the Utet series *I GRANDI SCRITTORI STRANIERI* (Great Foreign Writers) includes her version of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* – Tolstoj being the author she translated the most, with an overall collection of eight titles, including *War and Peace* (Slavia, 1928), *Father Sergius* (Slavia, 1931), *The Kreutzer Sonata* (Utet, 1934), and *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (Utet, 1934)².

The present study will examine the trajectory of this prominent figure, drawing analytical insights from her published and unpublished memoirs³. The emerging

² For a complete bibliography of the works and translations of Enrichetta Capecelatro Carafa, Duchess of Andria, refer to Marcucci (2022: 174-175).

³ The memoirs (ms XX, 2. Entry numbers 535347-51) are contained in five handwritten notebooks housed in the "Rare Books and Manuscripts" section of the National Library in Naples. While it is difficult to determine the beginning of the writing due to the absence of dates, some chronological indications allow us to conjecture that the end of the writing occurred around 1940. The published sections are in Grizzuti (1991: 11-24; 25-64). In this contribution, I will cite directly from the memoirs by indicating the memoir number as well as the page when referencing the unpublished parts, while I will refer to the page number only when quoting from the published sections of Capecelatro's memoirs.

trajectory will be combined with some reflections on her translation approach, referring especially to Duchess of Andria's translations of Chekhov's novels (Utet, 1936).

The translator's memoirs, a collection of five notebooks, were entrusted in 1945 by her friend Benedetto Croce to Guerriera Guerrieri, the director of the National Library in Naples, along with some unpublished novels⁴. Regrettably, the Duchess of Andria's archive was destroyed during the American bombing of Naples in 1942. This archival gap, common in the trajectories of many translators from the first half of the 20th century, has deprived us, at least for now, of potentially invaluable materials. These might include correspondence with publishers of her translations (Caddeo, Sansoni, Slavia, Utet), notes, and workbooks. However, we remain hopeful that similar materials may yet emerge through future research and exploration of other archives.

2. The Profile of Enrichetta Capecelatro through Her Memoirs

Enrichetta was born in 1863 in Turin, where her father, Antonio, served as Inspector General of the Postal Service.

A little over a year later, the family moved to Naples, where young Enrichetta "became aware of her existence" (I, p. 39). Then, in 1867, another change occurred: a move to Florence, where, as one can read in an unpublished part of the notebooks, "almost immediately my mother wanted to give me a female companion who, without being a teacher, would teach me to read and write a bit, and above all to speak the beautiful Tuscan language" (I, p. 42). The passion for reading and writing emerged early in this child, who had few toys and loved composing stories more than anything else.

As with other children from upper-middle-class and noble families, her education was individualized: at the age of six, she was entrusted to two teachers, one for music and one for French. In the following years, when she was about ten, additional teachers were added for Italian literature, English, handwriting, and drawing.

The tendency towards introspection and an inner life, as recalled by adult Enrichetta, was very strong in her: "my happiest moments were those when I was alone writing on my own. I would come up with short stories, comedies, poems, novels, but I was extremely protective of these writings and didn't want to show them to anyone" (II, p. 60).

The Florentine period was a vibrant time for Enrichetta, a time filled with continuous discoveries and growth, outings and important meetings, including her first contacts with the Russian world and culture. Her exposure to this new context came through two primary channels: firstly, through her interactions with Angelo De Gubernatis and his Russian wife, Sof'ja Bezobrazova (a cousin of the renowned anarchist Bakunin), who were frequent visitors to their home. Secondly, Enrichetta's

⁴ *Amor Fati* (ms XX-15), *En silence* (ms XX-11), *Fiat voluntas mea!* (ms XX-16), *Fonte Gaia* (ms XX-9 e ms XX-10), *Il peccato di disperazione* (ms XX-6 e ms XX-7), *La Cia* (ms XX-8), *L'attesa* (ms XX-5), *L'attimo* (ms XX-12), *Rondini e viole* (ms XX-13).

father returned from a trip to Russia with a collection of books, personal gifts from Tsar Alexander II, who had sought his expertise on the Italian postal system⁵.

On October 27th 1877, fourteen-year-old Enrichetta had to leave Florence with her family due to another transfer of her father, this time to Rome. She recalls the pain of that moment: “There was no remedy. That was an extremely painful time for me: it was a whole period of my life that was closing” (II, p. 79). Even the Florentine house, ready to be left behind, had become “sad,” but what saddened her most was parting with her French teacher, who had been with her for eight years and had left an unparalleled mark on her spirit, shaping the pupil’s literary endeavor: Enrichetta wrote the novel *Miettes* (Pierro, Naples 1906), and the unpublished *En silence*, both in French.

In Rome, where she lived for eight years, her literary talent flourished. It was there that she published her first works, including *Diario dantesco* (Elzeviriana, Rome 1881) – where she drew on her studies in Florence with Giambattista Giuliani (1818-1884), one of the most highly regarded Dante scholars of the 19th century – and the poetry collection *Rime* (Cellini, Florence 1888). The latter, republished with additions in Naples in 1892, solidified her reputation as a talented poet and writer. Her work garnered acclaim from eminent critics of the time, including Benedetto Croce, as well as contemporary literary figures such as Carlo Catanzaro and Carlo Villani.

In 1885, Enrichetta moved to Naples and married Riccardo Carafa, Count of Ruvo and later Duke of Andria, on April 19th of the same year. Both descended from patriotic families that were hotbeds of revolutionary and anti-Bourbon ideas. The couple also shared a love for the arts, literature, and theatre, transforming their home into a literary salon. Among those who gathered there were distinguished writers, translators, and intellectuals from both Italy and abroad. Notable among their foreign guests were Émile Zola, the French novelist, and Pyotr Boborykin, the Russian writer.

Florence and Naples, more than Rome, represent two foundational pillars for Enrichetta: Florence contributes to the formation of her cultural identity; it is the city where she spends her childhood and early adolescence, which were both periods of study and solitude, but also of creativity and relationships with important teachers. Tuscany also leaves an indelible mark that is evident linguistically when reading her translations, and it is also present in some of her creative works. For example, the protagonist of the novel *Rovine di stelle* (1928), Professor Onorato Aldinelli, inherits two estates in Valdinievole and a house in Siena, the birthplace of his wife Sara. One of her unpublished novels, started on July 16th 1927 and titled *Fonte Gaia*, is entirely set in Siena.

Naples, on the other hand, represents a return to her roots and is the city with which she never lost contact. She spent her summer vacations there, and her mother, through her stories, kept the connection to her grandparents and loved ones alive. Naples is also the place of her emotional and intellectual maturation, as well as her social ascent. In *Gli anni napoletani*, there are numerous depictions of luxurious interiors and receptions, such as when she recalls her appointment as a lady-in-waiting to Queen Margherita in the spring of 1900. With a life surrounded by splendid liveries, “refined

⁵ About this cf. Caratozzolo’s article about the Duchess of d’Andria, in which the author highlights her significant contributions to literary translation from Russian into Italian (2011: 58).

and sumptuous” dinners, evening silk or velvet gowns, and wool morning dresses, as well as men’s redingotes, some of Enrichetta’s life scenes echo the aristocratic salons of St. Petersburg depicted in *War and Peace*. This novel, translated by Enrichetta in 1928 for *Slavia*, marks the beginning of an intense career translating Tolstoy’s works⁶.

In general, the notebooks she left behind appear as a family and cultural history, with a distinct interest in describing daily life in Naples during the last quarter of the 19th century; they include detailed references to modes of transportation, theatres, receptions, and balls, but also featuring the rituals of ordinary people. This work thus showcase her exceptional talent for self-narration over time. Her writing style is fluid yet literary, occasionally verging on the grandiose – a hallmark of the Duchess’s creative prose. From an early age, she constantly experimented with diverse writing genres, laying the groundwork for her later accomplishments as a translator.

Notably, this text only briefly touches upon her reflections on translation, which nonetheless takes on an important significance, offering valuable insights into how she entered this new field: the death of her husband in 1920 coincided with her longing for renewal. Consequently, translation became her ideal pursuit as her life, though not brief, neared its conclusion. This ‘rebirth’ was facilitated by her mentor, Federigo Verdinois, one of the few respected translators of Russian literature at the turn of the century.

Shortly after mentioning her husband’s death, Enrichetta recounts: “I passionately devoted myself to studying Russian, and translated volume after volume; by now, I might have translated more than thirty of them” (p. 63). Her dedication was immense, facing a language she described as: “so rich, evolved and, at the same time, primitive in its grammatical forms” (II, p. 99).

Interestingly, for the Duchess of Andria, coping with grief meant successfully integrating her new passion for literary translation with her longstanding love of creative writing. This integration came after years of apparent inactivity, as evidenced by her own words:

I regained my fervour for work. I wrote a volume: *Favole comuni e meravigliose*, which reflects my state of mind at that time: a shadow crossed with light. Then I wrote another book: *Il miracolo*, and finally a long novel: *Rovine di stele*, bearing an epigraph from Friedrich Nietzsche: ‘Ruins of stars. In these ruins, we have built our universe’ (p. 63).

This trajectory is notable when compared to other female translators of the same period, who typically used translation as a stepping stone to careers in publishing or as poets and writers. In contrast, this woman’s experience represents an original fusion of translation and original creative work, born from her process of mourning.

3. The Beginnings of a Translator: The Duchess of Andria According to Ettore Lo Gatto and Leone Ginzburg

If the Duchess of Andria’s poetic activity had been baptized by Benedetto Croce, the recognition of her debut as a translator is no less authoritative. In the already

⁶ Caratozzolo (2011: 63-65) discusses this translation in detail.

mentioned 1921 review, Lo Gatto (1921: 68) indeed also focuses on Andreev's translations by the Duchess of Andria. He first praises her skill as a writer in both Italian and French, particularly emphasizing the beauty of her fables (*Favole comuni e meravigliose*), some of which are described as "unsurpassed in their exquisite conception and expression." Later, regarding "this other proof of literary activity," meaning her translation work, he says that she has succeeded "truly well" (*ibid.*) and adds important words about her translation poetics:

Striving to render Russian expressions as literally as possible, she has never forgotten her fine Italian literary taste and has managed, with simplicity, to resolve to a large extent one of the translator's most serious tasks: the reproduction of the characteristic expressions of the translated writer, without resorting, as Verdinois often does, to so-called corresponding expressions that ultimately alter both the thought and the form of the writer (*ibid.*).

The value of the Duchess as a translator did not go unnoticed by Leone Ginzburg either. A leading anti-fascist intellectual in Italy during the 1930s, Ginzburg was a prominent figure in the militant wave that, from the late 1920s, aimed at promoting the study of Russian language and literature. His contributions to Russian literature were significant, encompassing roles as a translator, preface writer, editor, and reviewer for journals such as *Cultura*, *Pegaso*, and *La Nuova Italia*⁷. All these texts attest to Ginzburg's philological rigor and the importance he placed on a direct and deep understanding of the Russian source text, which he viewed as an essential starting point for successful translation and cultural criticism.

Immediately after the 1928 publication of the translation of *War and Peace* issued by *Slavia*, Leone wrote the following in the opening of his article *Celebrazione fattiva di Lev Tolstoj*, published in *Il Baretti*:

A distinguished Italian woman of letters [...], the Duchess of Andria, as she translates for the first time fully and faithfully *War and Peace* by Lev Tolstoy [...], has applied this principle herself, commemorating Tolstoy's centenary in the best possible way; and she has accomplished the enormous task, [...], with infinite patience and constant love, achieving consistently excellent results, and in many parts truly remarkable (Ginzburg 1928: 57).

Thirteen years later, following the Duchess's death in 1941, when Ginzburg had to review the translation of the novel, which was to be published by Einaudi the following year and would become the canonical Italian version of Tolstoy's work for decades, his opinion on certain passages (especially the ending) had changed⁸. This underscores how no reading is more "up-close" than that of a competent, attentive, and meticulous translator.

⁷ For a more in-depth exploration, cf. Béghin (2007: 403-446).

⁸ On the Einaudi editions of *War and Peace* cf. Marcucci (2020).

4. The Duchess of Andria and Anton Chekhov

Among the particularly fruitful encounters between the Duchess and the great Russian writers she tirelessly translated, her work on the prose of her contemporary Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) remains a vital chapter in the latter's reception in Italy. This is evident non only from the prestige of the published selection titled *Novelle*, but also from the enduring relevance of her translation choices. The collection comprises twelve stories written between 1884 and 1890, featuring a diverse cast of characters: a banker, a lawyer, a second lieutenant, a shepherd, a pilgrim, a secret advisor, thieves and peasants, actors, an apprentice child, a surgeon's assistant.

While other translators of the time (and even subsequent ones) might occasionally make more felicitous individual translation choices, the Duchess of Andria's versions stand out for their vibrancy and linguistic freshness. To a contemporary reader, her translations remain notably less dated, preserving the dominant characteristics of Chekhov's poetic.

Undoubtedly, there are some oversights or errors that warrant revision, but these do not overshadow the significant work she achieved in capturing the deeper nuances of Chekhov's language, which resists to approximation and does not tolerate any embellishment. As stated by Korney Chukovsky (2007: 89)⁹, only a superficial gaze may judge Chekhov as a simple, clear, and "permeable writer"; the Duchess adeptly embraced this apparent simplicity, by adopting a particular sensitivity to the more lyrical and musical passages. Short stories such as the *Untitled*, *The Horse-Stealers* or the Tolstoyan *The Name Day Party* seem to align more closely with her strengths when compared to an earlier Chekhovian sketch like *Boots*, where she nonetheless attempts to reproduce the distinctiveness of the characters' speech through, for example, emphatic repetitions.

Let's consider the opening of the story *The Bet* (1889) as an example of a precise and respectful rendering of Chekhovian dominant themes: «Была темная, осенняя ночь. Старый банкир ходил у себя в кабинете из угла в угол и вспоминал, как пятнадцать лет тому назад, осенью, он давал вечер» (Eng. Translation "It was a dark autumn night. The old banker was walking up and down his study and remembering how, fifteen years before, he had given a party one autumn evening.") (Chekhov 1977: 229).

Is this a typical Chekhovian beginning, where the narrator immediately enters the heart of the situation, without reconstructing the background? Not to be underestimated is the rhythmic structure of this incipit, with the repetition of the temporal marker 'osen'yu' in relation to the initial adjective 'osennyaya.' From a contrastive analysis between the version by the Duchess of Andria and two later translations – specifically, Agostino Villa's translation published in 1958 by the prestigious publishing house Einaudi and – it clearly emerges that the Duchess of Andria was able to translate Chekhov's incipit in a direct and immediate manner, in a literary Italian that is still

⁹ For further insights into Chekhov's poetics, see in particular the studies by Chudakov (2016), Stepanov (2005), and Suchich (2016).

current today and, above all, without the inadequate lexical and syntactical recherché that characterize Villa's version¹⁰.

In the case of a short story like *Van'ka*, the translator demonstrates an awareness of Russian stylistic variations, as she judiciously employs Tuscanisms in order to recreate the popular linguistic atmosphere of Russian; she leverages, without exaggeration, the resources of Italian, including its regional variations, drawing on the lively language she experienced in her Florentine childhood.

The talent of the Duchess of Andria as a translator is complemented by her critical acumen as a preface writer, as evidenced in her introduction that precedes the translated stories. This is indeed yet another exception if we consider that, as Michele Sisto (2023: 51) points out, at least for the first half of the twentieth century women were almost excluded from the practice of "marking" their translations: prefaces were generally reserved for men.

Regarding Chekhov's stories (1936: 7), the Duchess describes them as "sketches made with a pencil," but with "the incisiveness of an etching," whereas in the misery that unites the characters and in the vulgarity of their daily lives she sees, as it filters through and trembles – these are the verbs she uses which – "a clarity that comforts, one that, amid today's despair, says: "Tomorrow!" In another text, this time introducing Gogol's *Taras Bulba – The Overcoat* (1937, 5), she turns to the analogy of wildflowers, "much more personal than garden or greenhouse flowers," in order to describe the originality of this writer's prose, in which she sees the coexistence of light and shadow, the alternation of "moments of extreme emotion and moments of calm ruefulness" (ibid., 11), thus reminding us of Belinsky's famous definition of "laughter through tears."

The Duchess of Andria's translations encompass seven out of eleven titles included in the Russian prose series published by Utet between 1934 and 1941¹¹, during a period of ideological closure and tension, and of a generally decreasing number of translations from Russian¹². The astonishing quantity of her works, as well as their prestigious placements and consistently high quality indeed warrant her a name on par with those of men who have long been recognized for this role, and even more it underscores the need for continued exploration of her extensive body of translations.

¹⁰ I report here the three Italian versions also commented on Marcucci (2022: 105-106): «Era una scura notte di autunno. Il vecchio banchiere *andava* da un angolo all'altro del suo studio e *ripensava* come quindici anni innanzi, *di autunno*, egli aveva dato una *serata*» (Chekhov 1936: 13); «Era una cupa nottata d'autunno. Il vecchio banchiere *passeggiava* innanzi e indietro nel suo studio, e s'andava rievocando come quindici anni prima, d'autunno, aveva dato un *ricevimento*» (Chekhov 1974 [1958]: 152).

¹¹ *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1934) and *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1934) by Tolstoy; *Notes from the House of the Dead* (1935) by Dostoevsky; *Short Stories* (1936) by Chekhov; *Boris Godunov and Other Stories* (1937) by Pushkin; *Short Stories and Plays* (1939) by Andreev; and *Anna Karenina* (1941).

¹² In this regard, cf. Sorina (2009), who identifies the following four phases in the history of translations from Russian: 1. growth (1924-1929); 2. saturation (1930-1933); 3. decline (1934-1940); 4. recovery (1941-1945).

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.