

(Middle)browsing Mondadori's Archive: British Novels in the *Medusa* Series, 1933-1945

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Abstract

Working at the intersection between the publishing world and literary history, this article uses the archival materials – correspondence and readers' reports – preserved at the Mondadori Foundation in Milan to investigate the modes and presence of English literature within the *Medusa* series, launched by Mondadori in 1933 to host translations of foreign novels. Archival materials allow to illuminate two significant aspects of Anglo-Italian literary transfer: thanks to its strong connections with London, Mondadori played a key role in establishing transnational publishing ventures (i.e. Albatross) that played a key role in the development of a European modern (and not only modernist) novelistic canon. This very fact was crucial when it came to implement the British catalogue of the *Medusa* series, responsible for the introduction of contemporary, quality and highly readable novels, in a word, of *middlebrow* novels. Focussing on selected case studies, this article will show how the *Medusa* British catalogue actually opened new perspectives that were crucial for the subsequent development of the Italian novel.

Keywords: literary transfer, transnational literature, Italian reception.

Publishers' Archives and the History of the Modern Novel

This essay focuses on the presence of British literature in Mondadori's *Medusa* foreign fiction series from its launch in 1933 to the end of World War II in 1945, with a particular focus on the publishers'

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correspondence preserved in the archive of the Fondazione Arnoldo and Alberto Mondadori in Milan.

A series is a particularly apt point of entry for analysing the reception process of a foreign literature within a given literary system, since “it involves and concerns both the publishers’ agenda and the definition of a literary canon” (Cadioli 2015: 12). A book is thus “perceived first and foremost inasmuch as it belongs to a series and is therefore provided with the recognisable features of that series, especially when we are dealing with genres and subgenres” (Cadioli 2015: 12).

“Genre” will also be particularly relevant to my analysis, since I intend to show how the *Medusa* played a key role in fully establishing the novel at all levels of the Italian literary system (where poetry still held a hegemonic position; Spinazzola 2010). In this light, I will show that the British titles featured in the series worked, at once, to strongly characterize its identity, and, at the same time, to contribute to the promotion of quality contemporary novels marked by a high degree of readability.

Contemporary, quality, highly readable: these three features describe, within the British literary system of the late 1920s and 30s, the vast area occupied by so-called *middlebrow* fiction. Coined in 1925 on the pages of *Punch*, the term *middlebrow* sparked a heated debate in the later part of that decade, involving J. B. Priestley and Virginia Woolf among others; over the last fifteen years, meanwhile, middlebrow literature has been the object of a considerable number of studies aimed mainly at challenging the predominant “modernist narrative” of twentieth-century literature. For example, Chris Baldick (2004: Kindle edition) has advocated for an extension of the literary field taken into account by literary historians, specifying a wide range of novelists hitherto excluded from the literary-historical canon (Priestley, Winifred Holtby, Somerset Maugham, among others). Other scholars, grouped around the Middlebrow Network at Sheffield Hallam University, have begun investigating the many implications of the tricky and slippery term “middlebrow”, showing that it can include

an aesthetic mode that uses experimental and engaging tactics to integrate a variety of genres and styles available in literature, the arts, design, music, theatre and film; dissemination and transmission practices that aim for success with a large cross-section of the public; and consumption practices that negotiate among both intellectual and whimsical tastes and attitudes. (Sullivan and Blanch 2011: 2)

From this perspective, Nicola Humble proposes a definition of middlebrow that rests not on “literary merit or cultural hierarchies, but on the culture and practices of reading as they changed and developed in that period” (2011: 42). To substantiate her claim, Humble provides the example of Penguin books, in which “The strength of [the] series identity worked to dissolve the status differences between various forms of literature” (2011: 57).

The term middlebrow, therefore, does not have an *essential* meaning; rather, it illuminates the constant and difficult negotiations taking place in the British novelistic field of the 20s and 30s, caused by both the unprecedented availability (and production) of novels, and the considerable growth of the reading public – which itself generated mixed feelings in British intellectuals (in Woolf, most notably, but also in Q. D. Leavis, whose *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1931) provides an invaluable insight into the cultural stakes of “literary” reading in that period (Brown 2008)). We can thus begin to anticipate the critical importance of looking more closely at the various fiction series that were in circulation during the period.

A series is perhaps best approached through the multifaceted processes of its production, many of which can be observed in a publishers’ archive. Such a use of archival sources – alongside the more widespread use of author’s archives – has recently established itself in the field of literary studies. Nicola Wilson has investigated the methodological benefits of working on publishers’ archives for a renewed approach to the history of the novel:

While an author’s diaries and papers can reveal some of the complex interactions that turn manuscripts into published serials as books, a publishers’ archive is likely to provide a much greater sense on the comparative and contingent nature of literary production, as well as the wider networks of the marketplace to which author and publisher respond. [...] The archive opens up the thoroughly mediated and embedded workings of authorship and literary production, reminding us how the demands and expectations of readers and their patrons have shaped the history of the novel in terms of content, language and form. (2014: 84-85)

By studying a series, then, we can gain a wider outlook on and, at the same time, a deeper insight into, the interactions between the titles featured in the series and the novelistic canon in which it was grouped.

In some cases, such work challenges ingrained assumptions of literary historiography. This is the case, for example, in Lise Jaillant's recent study of the *Modern Library* American series: working on archival papers, Jaillant succeeds in "recover[ing] a forgotten moment in the history of modernism – the moment when 'high' modernist texts were sufficiently attractive to be reprinted in a cheap series, but had not yet been dissociated from lesser works" (2015: Kindle edition). Jaillant's work focuses, for instance, on the coexistence of both detective fiction and James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* within the same series.

My aim in this essay is to combine research on a publishers' archive with studies on the translation and reception of foreign literatures¹, as approached through Itamar Even-Zohar's polysystem theory (1990). As Zohar puts it:

translated works do correlate in at least two ways: (a) in the way their source texts are selected by the target literature, the principles of selection never being uncorrelatable with the home co-systems of the target literature (to put it in the most cautious way); and (b) in the way they adopt specific norms, behaviors, and policies – in short, in their use of the literary repertoire – which results from their relations with the other home co-systems. These are not confined to the linguistic level only, but are manifest on any selection level as well (1990: 47).

I shall therefore discuss the "*Medusa* function" within the Italian literary system of the 1930s with reference to the series' British selection, and, more generally, a set of literary Anglo-Italian relationships that reaches far beyond the borders of the novelistic imagination.

Mondadori's *Medusa*: a Modern Series for a Modern Publisher

Before dealing with the British titles in the *Medusa*, I shall briefly provide the main facts about the series, which has been surprisingly under-researched². The *Medusa* was inaugurated in 1933 and continued

¹ The need to combine book history and translation studies has also been recently highlighted by Sophie Levie (2009) and Norman Bachleitner (2009). Work on the Italian context, with special attention to the reception of German literature but with a more general outlook on European literatures during the twentieth-century, is being carried out by Michele Sisto (for preliminary results see Sisto 2013).

² In spite of its importance, there is no monograph on the series. I refer therefore

its publications until 1969 – a time range of ample significance from the Italian perspective. A collection entirely devoted to foreign contemporary fiction, the *Medusa* was discontinued at the end of the season that saw the greatest expansion of the novelistic genre at all levels of the literary system (see Spinazzola 2010). This phase culminated in the publication of Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Milan-based publisher Feltrinelli who, in the mid-1950s, had entered the publishing scene with his “quality bestsellers” (Ferretti 1983), exemplified by the world-premiere publication of Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* (1957). With the *Medusa*, Mondadori began his rather belated investment in foreign titles – belated when compared to the activity of those publishers that had already started to translate a wealth of foreign novels, such as Modernissima, Dauliana, Corbaccio, Bietti (Ragone 1999: 137), during the so-called “decade of translations” (“decennio delle traduzioni”). The impact of the *Medusa* is also evident in the launch, in 1947, of the *Medusa degli italiani*, a twin-series entirely devoted to contemporary Italian novels similar to the ones featured in the *Medusa*, that is, to novels intended to represent a novelty within the Italian literary field. Dates are significant in this case as well: the *Medusa degli italiani* was discontinued in 1961, in the immediate aftermath of the success of the first Italian “quality bestseller”, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's *The Leopard* (1958). Quality, contemporary, and highly-readable novels had finally found their place on Italian shelves.

Now, to return to the 1930s. The difference between the *Medusa* and other series offering a wide selection of foreign novels is that it originated within the new operational structure of Mondadori, which took shape in 1928 when Luigi Rusca started running it. Rusca's economic plan relied heavily upon a wide offering of new series, such as, among others: Giuseppe Antonio Borgese's *Romantica* (1930-1942), with its translations of nineteenth-century European novels; the *Romanzi della Palma* (1932-1943), which offered translations of contemporary popular novels in cheap editions; and, above all, the *Libri Gialli* (1929), with its wide selection of foreign and Italian crime novels, which achieved an unprecedented success.

to the short notice in Albonetti 1994, 81-90, Decleva 2007: 186-192, and to Ferretti and Iannuzzi 2014: 63-71.

The figure behind the *Libri Gialli* was Lorenzo Montano, a Veronese writer of Jewish origins, and whose real name was Danilo Lebrecht³. In the years following World War I he had been a prolific contributor to the *Ronda*, a literary journal published in Rome between 1919 and 1923 advocating for a return to “classical” Italian writing (e.g. Leopardi) and a rejection of modern forms, such as the novel. Ten years later, however, Montano had become one of Mondadori’s most important advisors, and a transnational one at that, based as he was between London (where he spent most of his time) and Montreux. It was through his restless scouting of the market in London that Montano conceived of and implemented both the *Libri Gialli* and the *Medusa* – that is to say, the two series that made Mondadori’s fortune in the 30s and beyond.

In 1931 Montano wrote to Mondadori from London, inviting the publisher to launch

a collection of few and chosen volumes to be published every year, featuring the best contemporary foreign fiction, [which] would fit perfectly into your House’s plans; in fact, I’d rather say that, under this very aspect, if compared to what other publishers do, for better or for worse, your production is lacking.

An aspect of the series that is worth some reflection is the planned simultaneity between original and Italian publication⁴.

Montano’s correspondence with the publisher bears witness to his key role in Mondadori’s enterprise: in fact, Montano’s function in shaping and developing the new series was as relevant as that of the team of translators who acted as a kind of editorial board – Enrico Piconi

³ On Lorenzo Montano and his work for the *Gialli* series see Gallo 2002, whose contribution covers much of the correspondence between Montano and Mondadori.

⁴ “Una collezione di pochi e scelti volumi all’anno, la quale raccogliesse il meglio della produzione straniera contemporanea, troverebbe ottimamente il suo posto nel quadro dell’attività della sua Casa; anzi direi che rispetto a quanto si fa, bene o male, dalle altre case editrici, la vostra produzione per questo lato presenta una lacuna. Un punto del programma il quale, secondo me, è meritevole di qualche riflessione è la progettata simultaneità di pubblicazione nel testo originale e nella traduzione italiana”. Fondazione Arnoldo e Alberto Mondadori, Archivio Storico, Sezione Arnoldo Mondadori (henceforth FAAM, AsAME), file Lorenzo Montano, “Pro-memoria di Lorenzo Montano Sulla progettata collezione di grandi romanzi stranieri moderni”, typewritten, *s.l.*, May 6, 1931 (also quoted in Gallo 2002).

(English and French), Lavinia Mazzucchetti (German), Alessandra and Liliana Scalero (English), and Ervino Pocar (German), who were already well-established in the literary and publishing field, together with the relatively new entrant Elio Vittorini (English)⁵, who eventually became director of the series in 1960. Montano – who often did not even read the books he proposed (as he wrote to Mondadori)⁶, and who translated fewer than the others – acted in turn as a scout for foreign titles. On a weekly basis⁷, he met prominent British publishers such as Allen&Unwin, Watt, Heath and, above all, the literary agent Curtis Brown, who provided him with many of the titles that would later feature in Mondadori's catalogue.

Montano's correspondence with Mondadori shows that he was well aware of the *transnational* nature of processes of literary transfer, of the ways in which a book's success in Paris was still, in those years, a key factor for its potential success in Italy. For example, he was in touch with Mrs Sciattiel, Curtis Brown's representative in Paris:

A novel that is enjoying huge success in Paris these very days, Mrs Sciattiel informs me, is *Precious Bane*, published by Grasset under the title of *Sarn*. Another of her [sic] novels, *The House in the Dormer Forest*, has been translated with the title of *Le poids des ombres* and it is selling like hot cakes. I suggest you have a careful report issued on these and other novels by Webb⁸.

The correspondence allows us to grasp the scope of Mondadori's transnational network: Montano kept an eye on the French scene, working from London in order to have British (as well as American) books issued in Italy. London, with its modern publishing industry – based on a complex network of publishers and agents – was

⁵ On their contribution to the so-called “decade of translations”, see respectively Monteverdi 1989 and Ganni 2011 (Piceni); Antonello 2012 (Pocar); Antonello 2014 (Mazzucchetti); and Esposito 2009 (Vittorini).

⁶ See his handwritten letter from Lausanne dated October 12, 1932 to Mondadori, FAAM, AsAME, file Lorenzo Montano.

⁷ This emerges clearly from the frequency of the correspondence.

⁸ “Un romanzo inglese che sta facendo furore a Parigi in questo momento, secondo mi disse sempre la Sciattiel è *Precious Bane*, pubblicato da Grasset col titolo *Sarn*. Un altro romanzo suo, *The House in Dormer Forest* è uscito col titolo *Le poids des ombres*, e va a ruba anche quello. Le consiglio di fare esaminare con molta attenzione e subito questi romanzi e gli altri della Webb”. Handwritten letter from Lausanne dated October 12, 1932 to Mondadori, FAAM, AsAME, file Lorenzo Montano.

therefore one of the key hubs for the development of Mondadori's transnational identity. Indeed, we should not forget that, as Montano himself highlighted⁹, Mondadori seemed already to have understood the centrality of the British market when he took part in the so-called Albatross enterprise, "The Albatross Modern Continental Library: Hamburg: Paris: Milano", which was founded in 1932 by the American John Holroyd Reece (who was directing the Éditions du Pégase from his home in Paris), together with the German Kurt Enoch and the collector Edmond Davis (Decleva 2007: 187), alongside Mondadori (thanks to the mediation of his typographer Giovanni Mardersteig, who was responsible for the innovative covers of the series). The first series of quality paperbacks in English destined for the continental mass market (inaugurated by James Joyce's *Dubliners*), Albatross was a ground-breaking venture, which would also serve as inspiration for Allen Lane's Penguin. Mondadori's transnational connections proved fruitful once again when, in 1939, thanks to Reece and the British businessman Bernard Watson (who had taken over Albatross in 1937), Montano established the Mondadori London Office in Paternoster Row¹⁰. Let us turn now to consider more closely the place of British literature in Mondadori's catalogue.

Mondadori's British Catalogue

Mondadori's new series – both the *Romanzi della Palma* and the *Medusa* – played a key role in introducing contemporary British novels to Italy. A quick survey on translations published in the years 1933-1945 shows that, with the exception of Corbaccio and Bompiani (a newcomer who had previously worked for Mondadori and later became one of his main competitors) and of Bietti's "Wodehouse

⁹ "L'Albatross ha fatto una grande impressione a tutta Londra, ed è finora la vostra migliore carta da visita in quell'ambiente [Albatross made a big impression in London and, at the present moment, it is your business card there]". Handwritten letter from Lausanne dated October 12, 1932 to Mondadori, FAAM, AsAME, file Lorenzo Montano.

¹⁰ See Montano's typewritten letter to Mondadori dated August 26, 1939: "L'ubicazione è ideale: Paternoster Row è una delle vie classiche dell'editoria, vi hanno la loro sede la Oxford University Press, la Nelson, il gruppo Hutchinson, ecc. [The location is ideal: Paternoster Row is a typical address for publishers, hosting Oxford University Press, Nelson, the Hutchinson Group etc.]". FAAM, AsAME, file Lorenzo Montano.

series", translations of British novels were represented mainly by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction, with Charles Dickens, Rudyard Kipling and Robert Louis Stevenson having the lion's share. The most experimental works of modernist writers – such as Joyce and Virginia Woolf – were rather disseminated through literary journals, while the works of younger novelists (such as Christopher Isherwood and George Orwell) were almost entirely ignored, which was also partly due to censorship issues¹¹. Besides Kipling and Stevenson, two other British authors enjoyed a fair success, with their titles spread across the catalogues of more than one publisher: Aldous Huxley and John Galsworthy.

Regarding Mondadori's general catalogue, British literature is predominantly present in the two nineteenth-century series, the *Romanzi di cappa e spada* series, and, albeit in a lesser way, *Romantica*. The number of contemporary British titles drops in the "contemporary" *Palma* series: popular novels tended instead to be the sensational novels coming from the United States or the Weimar Republic in Germany¹². The *Medusa* bridged this very gap in Mondadori's catalogue, and in the Italian market more generally.

It is well known that Rusca would have liked to open the series with Joyce's *Ulysses*, thus giving the series a "modernist" slant: however, the novel was too hard to translate, and it is arguable that the Italian public was not ready for it – not to speak of the problem represented by a Jewish character like Bloom (Sullam 2013). Modernist experimental novels would not be made available to the Italian public for quite some time: Joyce and most of Woolf¹³, for example, came out only after the war, once they had become "modern classics" (Sullam 2012).

The list of titles translated from 1933 to 1945 outlines a different canon, one much closer to the *middlebrow* line than to the experimental-modernist one, as emerges from Table 1:

¹¹ On the dynamics of censorship see Rundle 2010.

¹² On this subject see Albonetti 1994, and on the reception of German "Weimar Romane", see Barrale 2012: 67-99.

¹³ Joyce was listed as the author of only *Dubliners* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* for a long time, partially because his translator (Cesare Pavese) did not like *Ulysses* (see Sullam 2013). Regarding Woolf, Mondadori translated her "biographies", *Orlando* and *Flush* (see below), while Treves secured the rights for *To the Lighthouse* (*Gita al faro*, trans. Giulia Celenza, Milan 1934).

TABLE I (continued from previous page)

Author	Title	Publisher (UK)	Title	Year of publication (UK)	Year of publication (IT)	Translator	Series number
William Somerset Maugham	<i>Rain and other stories of the South Sea Islands</i>	Reader's Library	<i>Pioggia e altri racconti</i>	1933	1936	Elio Vittorini	73
David Garnett	<i>Pocahontas, or the Nonpareil of Virginia</i>	Chatto & Windus	<i>La selvaggia della Virginia</i>	1933	1937	Salvatore Rosati	80
William Somerset Maugham	<i>The Painted Veil</i>	Heinemann	<i>Il velo dipinto</i>	1925	1937	Elio Vittorini	86
Charles Morgan	<i>Sparkenbroke</i>	Macmillan	<i>Nel bosco d'amore</i>	1936	1938	Alessandra Scalero	91
Richard Aldington	<i>Very Heaven</i>	Heinemann	<i>Un vero paradiso</i>	1937	1938	Alessandra Scalero	94
Rosamond Lehmann	<i>The Weather in the Streets</i>	Collins	<i>Tempo d'amore</i>	1936	1938	Enrico Piceni	96
William Somerset Maugham	<i>Theatre</i>	Doubleday (US)	<i>Ritratto di un'attrice</i>	1937	1938	Elio Vittorini	97

The chart clearly shows that the series relied on six main authors – Huxley, Lawrence, Priestley, Maugham, Galsworthy and Aldington – who provided 19 out of the 34 titles published between 1933 and 1945. Of these six, while Huxley, Lawrence and, of course, Nobel Prize winner Galsworthy were associated with several publishers (mainly Corbaccio and Bietti), Priestley and Aldington (who acted as a middleman between Mondadori and the English publishing scene. See Elisa Bolchi's essay in the present issue) were published exclusively by Mondadori and are therefore to be considered particularly representative of the series' identity. The same holds, significantly, for female authors like Margaret Kennedy and Vita Sackville West, who were associated with the larger category of *middlebrow feminine writers* (Humble 2001).

“Middlebrowsing” Readers’ Reports

In order to highlight their crucial function in the reception process of foreign literature within a series, I will now focus on readers' reports. I have focused on two “clusters”, choosing those volumes that distinguished the *Medusa* from other series: namely, the three Priestley novels, and several books by female novelists.

Priestley's Quality Entertainment

A very prolific and popular author during the interwar period, Priestley, as already mentioned, was made available to the Italian market exclusively by Mondadori. The apparently typical “Englishness” of his novels (Baldick lists him also under the authors of “Provincial Chronicles and Sagas”, 2004: Kindle edition) served probably to downplay his left-wing sympathies when it came to dealing with fascist censorship. Four of his novels were considered for publication: *The Good Companions*, *The Doomsday Men*, *They Walk Through the City*, and – unsuccessfully – *Wonder Hero*. The three accepted novels were read by Emilio Ceretti, Lorenzo Gigli and Alessandra Scalero respectively, all of whom played a prominent role within the publishers' business structure (Ceretti and Gigli translated Huxley and Katherine Mansfield; Scalero, Woolf's translator, had her own office in via Maddalena (see Bolchi)).

Mondadori probably came to Priestley as an author of “popular” English novels, and *The Good Companions*, reviewed by Emilio Ceretti in 1932, was originally destined for the *Palma*. However, the picaresque story – of three characters of differing social backgrounds who meet on the Great North Road and end up rescuing a Music Hall band from failure – was instantly recognized for its “literary” quality. A traditional comic novel, told by a reassuring third person omniscient narrator, *The Good Companions* could be read as a Dickensian story for the twentieth century. Ceretti’s report was brief and focused on this very aspect:

J.B. Priestley’s *The Good Companions*, which I read for the *Romanzi della Palma*, is an interesting book. However, I don’t think it could fit into our series. Its irony is too controlled, there is too little movement, and its development is far too slow. *The Good Companions* definitely originates in Dickens’ novels [...]¹⁴.

The significant detail is the emphasis on the refined character of the book: its “popular” character concerned not so much the plot as the narrative rhythm, which was not suitable for the sensational pace of the *Palma*.

Priestley’s ability to write *entertaining* novels without surrendering to the melodramatic is also underlined in Scalero’s long report on *They Walk Through the City*:

It seems that much more than other authors, who just care about tricks, shortcuts and “cuts”, Priestley has managed to give a movie rhythm to his novel, by which I mean a swift, adventurous and romantic rhythm, which never falls into the melodramatic. Priestley has not gone astray and, while sticking to his successful Dickensian line, he has been able to find a new way. We are

¹⁴ “Il libro *The Good Companions* di J.B. Priestley, da me esaminato per i *Romanzi della Palma*, è un libro interessante ma non adatto, a mio parere per la nostra collezione. Esso è troppo saggio nella sua ironia, troppo poco movimentato, e anche troppo lento nei suoi sviluppi. Il *The Good Companions* deriva certamente dai romanzi di Dickens [...]”. FAAM, AsAME, Segreteria Editoriale Estero (henceforth: SEE), report by E.C. [Ceretti?], April 1932, manuscript; a reproduction of the manuscript is available upon request on the website of the Fondazione Mondadori, report n. 418, <http://www.fondazionemondadori.it/livre/01_I%20pareri/012_I_percorsi/0121_Il_decennio_delle_traduzioni/index.htm> (accessed on December 1, 2015).

therefore confident that the public will welcome his new novel, long and yet not long-winded, varied and entertaining from the first page to the last¹⁵.

With the adventures of the “two lovers in the stone forest” (so reads the subtitle of the novel), that is, modern London, Priestley wrote what Scalero defined as “a kind of modern and Anglo-Saxon ‘The Betrothed’”¹⁶. Far-fetched as such a comparison might sound, it is certainly revealing of an important fact: the reference to Manzoni’s novel can be read as a hinting at a model, within the Italian literary system, of a quality “book for all people”¹⁷ – which, however, had not been the prevailing model for the development of the Italian novel. The selection of Priestley’s text therefore bespeaks the *Medusa*’s aim to provide Italian readers with modern and international versions of readable quality novels.

Modern Female Novelists for Old Country Stories

The female voices featured in the *Medusa* offer a very interesting case study: alongside Virginia Woolf we find Margaret Kennedy, Mary Webb, Vita Sackville West, Rosamond Lehmann and Enid Bagnold, all writers that have been placed, in one way or another, within the vast category of female *middlebrow* writing¹⁸. Of these authors, only Webb and Lehmann had been or were being translated by other publishers in those years.

¹⁵ “Ci sembra che assai più di altri scrittori, preoccupati di trucchi e mezzi e ‘tagli’, il Priestley sia riuscito a dare a un romanzo un andamento cinematografico; e intendiamo, in questo senso, un ritmo rapido, avventuroso, romantico, senza cader mai nel melodrammatico. Priestley non si è smarrito, non si è lasciato fuorviare, e pur mantenendo il suo felice carattere dickensiano ha saputo trovare una maniera nuova. In complesso, abbiamo fede che il pubblico accoglierà con favore questo libro lungo anzichenó, ma non prolisso, e vario e divertente dalla prima pagina all’ultima”. FAAM, AsAME, SEE, report by Alessandra Scalero, typescript, *s.d.*, reprinted in Albonetti 1994, p. 206-08.

¹⁶ “[U]na specie di moderno e anglosassone ‘Promessi Sposi’”. FAAM, AsAME, SEE, report by Alessandra Scalero, typescript, *s.d.*; a reproduction of the manuscript is available upon request on the website of the Fondazione Mondadori, report n. 419, <http://www.fondazionemondadori.it/livre/01_I%20pareri/012_I_percorsi/0121_Il_decennio_delle_traduzioni/index.htm> (last accessed on December 1, 2015).

¹⁷ Manzoni 1983; Spinazzola 1983.

¹⁸ See Humble 2001.

Lehmann's *The Weather in the Streets*, with its story of divorce and abortion, and Sackville-West's suburban *All Passion Spent*, were the only novels with a "modern" setting and featuring explicitly "modern" female characters (especially Lehmann's book). For the rest, a common thread seems to run through Mondadori's choices for the *Medusa*: leaving the modern, emancipated female protagonists of fast-paced novels to the popular *Palma* novels (especially those of German and American writers), the *Medusa* appears to privilege a number of seemingly more traditional stories featuring women protagonists in rural settings, or whose lives are centred around a country house. Such is the case, for example, with Margaret Kennedy. While her "contemporary" *Return I dare not* (1931) was translated for the *Palma*, *A Long Time Ago*, set against the backdrop of an unrecoverable Irish past in the country, was selected for the *Medusa*.

The reports suggest that Mondadori was trying to find contemporary female voices which could deliver a lyrical (but not experimental) rendition of apparently traditional plots. For example, in the wake of the success of Webb's *Precious Bane* (1924; acquired in 1933 by Salani), Mondadori secured the rights for Webb's second novel, *Gone to Earth* (1917), a nineteenth-century Shropshire romance, told by a third person omniscient narrator (unlike *Precious Bane*, whose heroine tells her story in the first person). The protagonist in *Gone to Earth* is the beautiful young gypsy Hazel, whose affections are sought by a local minister and a villainous squire. Referring to the complex and teasing depiction of Hazel's apparent sexual ingenuity – which, however, did not appear excessively modern and disquieting thanks to the classical romantic setting – Enrico Piceni praised the book for its ability to "titillate" readers who lack in psychological depth¹⁹, and also recommended a translator able to render "the deep poetry of the book"²⁰, for

¹⁹ "[p]er quel tanto di solleticante che è certo fatto per attirare i lettori meno profondi psicologicamente". FAAM, AsAME, SEE, report by Enrico Piceni, typescript, January 20, 1934, FAAM, AsAME, SEE, report by Alessandra Scalero, typescript, s.d.; a reproduction of the manuscript is available upon request on the website of the Fondazione Mondadori, report n. 543, <http://www.fondazionemondadori.it/livre/01_I%20pareri/012_I_percorsi/0121_II_decennio_delle_traduzioni/index.htm> (last accessed on December 1, 2015).

²⁰ "[l]a profonda poesia del libro". FAAM, AsAME, SEE, AB, FAAM, AsAME, SEE,

example Giacomo Debenedetti and Corrado Alvaro. The choice fell on the latter, whose translation deftly catches Webb's purple writing (which however was presented as a hallmark of literary quality).

Equally significant is Enid Bagnold's case. Following Alessandra Scalero's enthusiastic report, Mondadori decided to publish the long novella *The Squire* (1938). Set in a country house sometime before World War II (which might even be during World War I), *The Squire* tells the story of a pregnancy. Using shifting third-person focalization, Bagnold succeeds in providing different points of view on the event: the woman's (the Squire of the title, since her husband is away for business in India), the butler's, the midwife's, and the Squire's older children's. Bagnold's novella is striking for the crude vividness of its description and the total absence of gratuitous clichés about maternity.

For example, the baby is described through an anaphora of negations from the point of view of the mother, who, as she enters labour, looks at the "things laid out with which to wash what WAS NOT THERE, to warm the feet of what DID NOT BREATHE, the settling of the pillows and the blankets for what COULD NOT BE TOUCHED" (Bagnold 1955: 62). By the very same token, as soon as the baby is born, the mother becomes "the welcomed, the applauded, the humoured. Faces smiled over her" (1955: 63), a sentence which strikes us as dissonant with the preceding painful and almost uncanny description. Such a dissonance is also evident in the following dialogue, which alternates ready-made phrases with disquieting truths that, not surprisingly, are uttered within parentheses:

"What is it?" Nine months of wondering in one second solved.

"A boy, a beauty!"

("Doctors", said the mother, "say that! They are terrible things... that are not beauties". (1955: 63)

The striking ambivalence about maternity and the intriguing play on gender suggested by the book's title, as well as the interesting

report by Alessandra Scalero, typescript, *s.d.*; a reproduction of the manuscript is available upon request on the website of the Fondazione Mondadori, report n. 543, <http://www.fondazionemondadori.it/livre/01_I%20pareri/012_I_percorsi/0121_Il_decennio_delle_traduzioni/index.htm> (last accessed on December 1, 2015).

depiction of women's relationships (that, for example, between the protagonist and the midwife described in detail in this chapter), are almost totally overlooked in the Italian reception of the work. Scalero's report rather stresses the received image of maternity:

She, whose name we do not know, is in the last days of her pregnancy [...]. She is a mature woman, already mother of four; she is a Mother. The author describes nothing else. The intimate workings of Nature inside a female organism; her physical and moral response; the sweet preoccupation of an expecting woman; the obscure and profound relationship between a creature that is alive and another that is not yet born: of all this, and of many other similar things, this book is composed. It has a measure, a sense of realism and poetry at the same time to be found so firm only in a book by a woman, with woman's genius²¹.

These are the words of a translator and "cultural middlewoman", and a skilled one at that. Yet, the capital letter of the nameless (because universal?) "Mother" (held up positively against the protagonist's friend, a "passionate woman", later on in the report), the direct link to Nature, the "feminine poetry" demonstrate that Scalero was – consciously or not – translating Bagnold's work specifically for the Italian public of those years, and thus overshadowing its subversive potential. It should not come as a surprise, at this point, that the book's title was translated as *Nasce un uomo* (A man is born): the portrait of a selfless, disinterested Mother in the beautiful natural surroundings of the English countryside.

²¹ "Ella, di cui non sappiamo nemmeno il nome, si trova agli ultimi giorni della sua gravidanza [...]. È una donna matura, madre già di altri quattro figli; è una Madre. Null'altro ci descrive l'autrice, se non questo. L'interiore lavoro della Natura entro l'organismo femminile; le sue reazioni fisiche e morali; l'ansia dolce dell'attesa; gli oscuri e profondi rapporti tra la creatura viva e quella che non è ancora nata: di tutto questo e di tante altre cose affini è fatto il libro, con una misura, con un senso di realismo e di poesia insieme che solo in un libro femminile, quando si tratta di un ingegno femminile, è veramente saldo, è dato trovare". FAAM, AsAME, SEE, AB, FAAM, AsAME, SEE, report by Alessandra Scalero, typescript, *s.d.*; a reproduction of the manuscript is available upon request on the website of the Fondazione Mondadori, report n. 16, <http://www.fondazionemondadori.it/livre/01_I%20pareri/012_I_percorsi/0121_Il_decennio_delle_traduzioni/index.htm> (last accessed on December 1, 2015). Reprinted in Albonetti 1994: 458.

Conclusion: Preparatory to Anything Else

Precisely because it is not unique, Bagnold's case is an excellent example of how the production of a series of foreign fiction is already an act of translation in its own right; and, furthermore, how the documents relating to this production, when available (which is more and more often the case for publishers' archives)²² provide us with invaluable clues and insights on the process of reception. Readers were (and still are) also translators: a textual analysis of their reports also sheds light on their subsequent stylistic work on the literary texts. Publishers' archives are thus to be placed in a *continuum* alongside translators' archives²³ and authors' archives. The study of all available archival materials is a necessary step towards a better understanding of literary works *both* in their textual *and* in their social dimension, as well as towards challenging predominant literary-historical narratives.

Such has been the case for this initial survey of the *Medusa's* role within the Italian literary system, where the reception of modernism occurred at a very late stage. What we now consider – at least according to literary history handbooks – as the novel of the 1920s and 30s was, in Italy, the novel of the 1950s and 60s²⁴; and yet such a phenomenon could not be fully understood without recovering the “contemporary” catalogue of the Italian 30s.

Last but not least, it is worth noticing that many of the titles discussed or mentioned in this essay have recently been reissued both on the Anglophone market and in Italy: this is the case for example of Kennedy, whose books have been published in a dedicated series by Vintage, and of Bagnold, whose work is now featured in the interesting catalogue of Persephone Books. In Italy, Mary Webb has recently been added to the Elliott catalogue, while Somerset Maugham, one of the *Medusa's* “pillars”, has been consecrated by the literary publisher,

²² I am thinking here of the research projects on publishers' archives held at Reading University (see for example Wilson, Gordon et al. 2014). On the particular importance of publishers' archives for the study of twentieth-century literature see also Braida 2011.

²³ In a recent issue of *The Translator*, Jeremy Munday (2014) suggested that extra-textual translators' papers might enable us to produce or reconstruct a “microhistory” of translation and translators.

²⁴ See Sullam 2012.

Adelphi. What is the rationale behind these revivals? Are they just revivals? Or are these novels recovering the place they originally had next to the Modernist classics? Browsing the archives of the past, will give us a better understanding of the catalogues of the present.

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