

Marriage and the Family in a Maltese Parish: St. Mary's (Qrendi) in the Eighteenth Century

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Abstract

This article addresses the Maltese traditional family, taking St. Mary's (Qrendi) as a test case. It results that couples married in their early twenties, while a high proportion of men and women never married at all. Marriage was not popular so that one-fifth of all marriages were remarriages. Very few widows remarried and it was only for some economic reason that they sought another man. There is no evidence though that a high rate of celibacy resulted in flagrant promiscuity even if there is evidence that the Qrendin were not so particular about their sex life. No birth control was practiced within marriage and children followed one another regularly. This brings into relief the parents' unconcern for their offspring's future as well as the inferior status of women because husbands made their wives several offspring. Relations between the spouses were poor so that dissatisfied couples went their own ways.

Keywords

Qrendi, remarriage, widows, celibacy, promiscuity, separation

A local priest affirmed in 1978 that the Maltese family was admired the world over for its morality and stability, broken homes were a rare exception, children were loved and tenderly looked after by their parents, and Maltese girls were praised by foreigners for their modesty.¹ Pope John Paul II seconded these claims when he delivered a homily at Ta' Pinu church on the island of Gozo on May 26, 1990. A strong Maltese family in the past, he pointed out, provided a sound basis to the stability and harmonious development of society.²

The object of this article is to query such statements. Were they a description of the real situation or simply an impression born of the longing for an ideal family life? More importantly, would these views have found support in eighteenth-century Malta? Inquisitor Mancinforte (1767–1771), for instance, contended that he knew no other place more scandalous than Malta.³

How are we to steer clear of these conflicting statements? St. Mary's (Qrendi) will be taken as a test case. This rural parish of 400 acres in the southeast of Malta had a population of 600 odd

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inhabitants in 1758. Its social structure was simple, with hardly a middle class. At the top of the social pyramid stood a handful of elites incorporating eight priests, four clerics in minor orders, and the village doctor—all identified with the word *signor*. Below them came the miller, the bakers, the hawkers, poultry sellers, and fishermen. There were also tailors and butchers, tavern keepers, and grocers. Down the scale stood the laborers and of course agriculture was the fundamental activity of most Qrendin.⁴

A good starting point for our analyses is provided by age at marriage, the most important demographic factor. A late marriage age, besides limiting the fertile period of the female population, could pose problems of sexual incontinence and sex outside wedlock.⁵ On the other hand, an early marriage age meant more offspring and plausibly irresponsible parenthood as well. Is it true that in traditional society, couples married in their teens? How representative were Maria Darmanin and Agostino Baldacchino who were sixteen and seventeen years of age respectively on their wedding day?

Luckily, the parish registers help us answer these fundamental questions. According to the *Liber Status Animarum* or the listing of inhabitants,⁶ in 1758 none of the males at Qrendi in the age group fifteen to nineteen was married while the percentage for women stood at 96.2.⁷ These figures may be approximate because the parish priest only put down the ages that the people told him. Family reconstitution offers a surer indication by comparing certificates of baptism and marriage for the same person.⁸ During the period 1700–1779, the mean age of Qrendi girls (166 cases) at first marriage was 22.9 years. Bridegrooms (179 cases) were some three years older than their fiancées; they got married at the mean age of 25.6 years. These ages tally with those of the rest of Malta in the same period. At the parish of the annunciation (Balzan), a village in the centre of the island, with a population of around 525, the mean age at first marriage was 22.6 for women and 25.8 for men.⁹ They are, however, smaller than the mean ages for men and women in Anhausen, a village in Bavaria, 27.0 for women and 29.2 for men.¹⁰ The figures for Malta are intermediate between what John Hajnal has termed “European” and “non-European levels.” The latter pattern implies that the mean age for the marriage of single women is below twenty-one, while according to the European way it must be above twenty-three, and has in general been above twenty-four.¹¹

Marriage is a personal choice but we can produce several reasons why the Maltese married in their early twenties.¹² For instance, unlike Béarn in the Pyrenees, a man was not dependent on his wife’s dowry to marry.¹³ Besides, he was given land when his father was still alive.¹⁴ Nor did a son have to wait, as in Greece, for the marriage of his sisters.¹⁵ Furthermore, one rarely remained in one’s parents’ dwellings when one married; in 1758, all of the 122 married couples at Qrendi headed their own household.¹⁶ In other words, marriage entailed the formation of a new household with the responsibility for the care of the children resting on the husband and wife—as opposed to some wider family group like the stem families in Portugal.¹⁷

Undoubtedly, some young couples did marry without a cushion of land or savings. According to General Graham, the British commanding officer in Malta at the start of the nineteenth century, boys married at fourteen, girls at twelve. He described a young Maltese couple setting up house with no furniture, save a bed mat, clothes barely sufficient for modesty, and subsisting largely on bread and water.¹⁸

Generally, however, habits of prudence must have prevailed through a large part of the community. In fact, as in other Maltese villages, but unlike seventeenth-century rural France where almost everybody got married,¹⁹ a high proportion of the men and women at Qrendi never married at all, another characteristic of the European marriage pattern.²⁰ They would not have achieved economic independence or else they reached this level of prosperity only when they were too old to marry. We should not forget though that, as Timothy Guinnane has argued for Ireland, people could have relied on a number of substitutes for marriage.²¹ For instance, forty-five-year-old Paolo Debrincat in 1779 was living with his three unmarried sisters, aged thirty-eight, thirty-three, and thirty-one years,

Table 1. First Marriages and Remarriages at Qrendi, 1750–1798

Total Marriages	First Marriages	Widow to Bachelor	Widow to Widower	Spinster to Widower
277	222	11	13	31

Source: Parish Archives (Qrendi), Liber Matrimoniorum ii (1718–1801).

Table 2. Number of Widows/Widowers in Various Parishes

	Qrendi (1758)	Balzan (1780)	Attard (1784)	Dingli (1786)	Mqabba (1790)
Widows	33	29	8	8	32
Widowers	10	5	5	5	9

Sources: Qrendi—Curia Episcopalis Melitensis (CEM), Status Animarum 16, no. 9; Balzan—CEM, Status Animarum 4, no. 1; Attard—CEM, Status Animarum 18, no. 1; Dingli—CEM, Status Animarum 7, no. 5; Mqabba—CEM, Status Animarum 11, no. 8.

respectively.²² How did they maintain themselves? Were the females perhaps supported by their brother? We may never know but in a rare example we get a glimpse of one Anna Farrugia who had an independent economic activity with which to sustain her life; she owned several pieces of land that she rented out.²³

The best means to find the proportion of those who remained celibate is to examine the records concerning women who died single at fifty or more years old, that is to say when their chances of ever getting married had become almost nil. About 174 such women died at Qrendi between 1750 and 1797; of these, thirty-two (18 percent) were single.²⁴ Another proof of the unpopularity of marriage is that in 1779, of the eighty-seven men and sixty-eight women aged more than fifty, twenty-two males (15 percent) and thirteen females (19 percent) were unmarried.²⁵ Pursuing this line of reasoning further, it must be noted that several marriages were remarriages. As Table 1 shows, in a fifty-year period they amounted to fifty-five, or nearly one-fifth (19.9 percent) of all marriages. If we may use earlier studies as an inference, this percentage is lower than that established for other countries. E. A. Wrigley and Roger Schofield have calculated that in mid-sixteenth-century England, 30 percent of the brides and grooms had already been married at least once before.²⁶

Evidence in the table also suggests that a substantially higher proportion of men found a second marriage partner than did women, the ratio standing at 6:11. An intriguing problem arises here because were not stepmothers presented as wicked?²⁷ Were not men apprehensive lest their wife ill-treated their children born of their former spouses? Such anxiety was expressed in the Maltese proverb *min ghandu mart missieru ghandu demla fuq ilsienu* (He who has a stepmother has an ulcer on his tongue).²⁸ Several factors may explain why almost twice as many men remarried as did women. First, there was a surplus of widows because women usually married at an earlier age and lived longer than men (see Table 2). Second, widowers tended to marry younger single women rather than widows. Third, men with young children were dependent on a woman. True, this did not mean that they had necessarily to marry. Michele Bonanno, for instance, brought his mother-in-law to look after his seven young children when his wife died, while Giovanni Gristi and his only child, nine-year-old Rosa, moved in with his late wife's mother.²⁹ But Paolo Caruana is a better representative of widowers. He was left with four children aged between six months and seven years to look after when he lost his wife on May 24, 1791; he married Maria Pace of Zurrieq the following October 2.³⁰ Fourth, remarriage solved a widower the problem of replacing the labor of his late wife. Few farmers, for example, could afford to hire assistants but needed the cooperation of their spouses and children to carry out the daily chores in agriculture.

Economic support was the main reason for a widow to remarry, too. But before considering this topic, what was the rate of the widows who remarried? This is a particularly difficult measure to establish because the extremely high rate of mobility in the parish prevents the tracing of those women who had moved away.³¹ However, we can estimate the proportion of brides who were already widows because parish registers record invariably the marital status of all brides. Of the 277 females who married between 1750 and 1798 at Qrendi, only twenty-four were widows or little more than one-twelfth (8.7 percent).

The great majority of these women eschewed matrimony for various reasons. Of course, several individual impulses come into play here. Factors such as love, loneliness, sexual deprivation, and the need for affection deserve consideration when discussing marriage. But matrimony in traditional society must have had little romance about it; it was the result of sheer necessity, for lack of an alternative.

The following analysis is based on the findings for only twenty-four widows. It rests therefore on a body of evidence both slender and patchy, which may not allow for serious conclusions to be drawn up. We are talking here of probabilities rather than certainties or firmly based opinions. Yet, these impressions sound only too true and we can reason on the basis of the little we do know. First, younger widows with young children were the most likely to wed again. The proverb *la titef ir-ragel ikollok tbakkar u taghgen* (The widow must get up early and knead)³² signifies the pressure to remarry. This urgency is also well documented in historical sources and is seen in the extremely short intervals between death of spouse and remarriage. Teresa, a widow with three children, was typical. She lost her thirty-year-old spouse on November 9, 1780, but took another husband only eleven months later, on September 29, 1781.³³ The same was the case with thirty-year-old Grazia. Her husband Francesco Saliba was murdered on May 4, 1794; she found refuge in another marriage on June 1, 1795.³⁴

Second, the husband's occupation must have reflected on the matter. In other words, the tendency to remarry was higher in certain occupational groups than in others. Unfortunately, it has been impossible to identify the occupations of the husbands, but it is reasonable to suggest that some occupations presented widows with a less need to remarry. A grocers' wife, like Maria Spiteri, for instance, would have been used to taking responsibility for the family economy.³⁵ She would have been involved in running the family enterprise when the husband was still alive, which was relatively easy for her to manage. This was not so with widows of artisans. Such trades demanded physical skills that few women were likely to acquire; and a widow would marry a workman already skilled in the trade.³⁶

One possible cause, however, for widows to take a husband should be absolutely ruled out. Unlike the case in seventeenth-century Abingdon, an English parish in Berkshire, no economic penalties tended to discourage Qrendi widows from marrying.³⁷ Nor is there evidence which indicates that, as in seventeenth-century France, Maltese widows were prohibited by law from making a hasty marriage.³⁸ They did not suffer the humiliation of rough music or the *charivari*, either.³⁹ The Catholic Church never condemned second marriages⁴⁰ since "it is better to marry than to burn."⁴¹ Yet, confessors advised widows to think well before taking this step,⁴² on the Pauline exhortation that "a wife is bound to her husband . . . she is happier if she remains as she is."⁴³

St. Francis de Sales endorsed this teaching in his *Introduction to the devout life*, in which he compared the true widow to a chaste turtle-dove, perpetually mourning for her lost husband. He also compares her to a "little March violet, which spreads an incomparable fragrance with the perfume of her devotion, hidden beneath the foliage of her humiliation." To emphasize his point, he brings the story of Naomi who returned to Bethlehem with her daughter-in-law Ruth when her husband died. She asked the people to call her no longer Naomi (a name of delight) but Mara (the unhappy one) since "an almighty hand has filled my cup with bitterness."⁴⁴

There were other factors that could have discouraged widows at Qrendi from marrying. Most women without men could have earned their own living by some cottage industry, like cotton

spinning and weaving, the loom and the spinning-wheel often featuring in marriage contracts.⁴⁵ Besides, the parish had its own system of poor relief⁴⁶ and testators ordered cash and loaves to be distributed to the “poor of Our Lord Jesus Christ” (*pauperum Domini Nostri Jesu Christi*).⁴⁷ But widows fell back especially on family support, particularly kin.⁴⁸ These were an important source of help in times of need since those who made no such provision “contradict the teaching of the faith and indeed do worse than the unbelievers do.”⁴⁹ A grandmother, for instance, would take a grandson or daughter to live with her if the need arose.⁵⁰

A discussion of widows prompts the question how they coped with their supposed continence. Did they find an outlet for their sexual impulses in extramarital liaisons rather than in a stable marriage? A search in the Qrendi parish records yielded only one case of a widow who gave birth to a child.⁵¹ She could have been a prostitute or else she took up with the man whose child she bore. Be that as it may, she was one of eleven women who bore twenty-two illegitimate children from 1700 to 1800. This evidence is very flimsy to allow any reliable discussion on the subject. Did illicit contacts become increasingly frequent in the course of the century? Who were the women involved? Were they kept women, prostitutes, or servant girls? And who were the men? Were they of the same social milieu or of superior social standing? Was illegitimacy concentrated in the lower classes? Were these casual encounters or temporary unions?⁵² With all these limitations, it must be observed that three of the women were repeaters or *habituées*. Even so, it is impossible to prove whether bastardy was recurrent in certain families although the Maltese proverb warns that *bint id-debba l-gerreġja jekk ma tihux is-sena tiehu li geġja* (The daughter of a loose woman will win first prize either this year or the next).⁵³

But does the evidence in the parish registers reflect in some way the moral tone of eighteenth-century Qrendi? Why did one Maria not stay in her parish but went to Mqabba to be delivered of her bastard son?⁵⁴ Did it matter so much for her good name? Does this case plausibly refer to the villagers' reluctance against unrestricted sex? The case of Giovanni de Brincat may throw more light on the matter. This twenty-year-old lad was engaged to one Paolica from Zurrieq. He believed she was a virgin but later came to know she had bore two or three times. He was in a difficult position since for the Catholic Church, as for the Hebrews⁵⁵ and Romans,⁵⁶ espousals were more than a promise of marriage. According to the council of Trent “such promises are . . . obligatory and their violation involves the offending party in a breach of faith.”⁵⁷ As he did not want to keep the word he had given her, he thought of a desperate solution and tricked the parish priest in the celebrated style of Renzo and Lucia, the two characters in the novel *The Betrothed* by Alessandro Manzoni. On Sunday, October 6, 1776, the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary, toward nine at night, he and his new spouse, Liberata Micallef of Cospicua, knocked on the door of the parsonage. Having entered into the parish priest's study Giovanni, holding the hand of Liberata, declared, “This is my spouse,” to which the girl answered, “This is my man.” Father Antonio Mizzi scolded them severely and reported the matter to the ecclesiastical court the following day. Liberata was put under house arrest while Giovanni presented himself at the bishop's prisons; on October 21, they were fined 5 *uncie* each and went to live with each other.⁵⁸

Other evidence, however, may prove that the Qrendin may not have been so particular about their sex life. Did the villagers, for instance, countenance the living together of a couple once a contract of marriage had been concluded? How far did they go in distinguishing between legitimate children and those born in marriage but conceived long before? Do not such expressions as “he can do with me whatever he likes” seem to indicate that nobody minded how far the engaged couple went?⁵⁹ Table 3 plausibly affords an answer to these fundamental queries. It shows that 7.4 percent of 230 births between 1750 and 1798 had been conceived before marriage. In Malta, therefore, as in other Catholic countries like France and Italy and to a greater extent in Protestant England,⁶⁰ men ascertained their fiancée's fertility before entering into a marriage.⁶¹ The importance that parents gave to their offspring as farm hands as well as an insurance against old age must have been the main

Table 3. Premarital Pregnancy Rates

Malta		
Balzan (1700–1797)	204 cases	4.9%
Siggiewi (1748–1778)	277 cases	5.8%
Qrendi (1750–1798)	230 cases	7.4%
England		
Colyton (1538–1799)	976 cases	46.2%
France		
Sotteville-les-Rouen (1760–1790)	—	30.0%

Sources: Balzan—Parish Archives, Liber Baptizatorum ii (1682–1773), iii (1774–1835).

Siggiewi—Parish Archives Liber Baptizatorum iii (1715–1780).

Qrendi—Parish Archives, Liber Baptizatorum ii (1716–1751), iii (1751–1807).

Colyton—P. Laslett, *The World We Have Lost*, 148.

Sotteville-les-Rouen—L. Henry, “The Population of France in the Eighteenth Century,” in D. V. Glass and E. V. C. Eversley, eds., *Population in History: Essays in Historical Demography* (London, 1965), 450.

cause why men tested their future wife’s fecundity.⁶² To take a case from another parish, the curate of St. Catherine’s (Zejtun) in 1771 did not believe Rosa Mangion who tried to convince him that she had never had sex with her man, “he added that was impossible because so many girls sleep with their man before marriage.”⁶³

And was there a clear-cut distinction between legitimate and illegitimate births? In one instance, the parish priest put down the words *filius spurious* (illegitimate child) by the side of the child’s name and erased them with the ink only when the parents later married.⁶⁴ But if this was the position of the Church, Father Mizzi must have been up against a formidable obstacle. Research has confirmed that the Church in eighteenth-century Malta failed “to claim for itself the right to regulate marriage” and that “a sense of honour in sexual relations was lacking.”⁶⁵ Was not Nicola Sciriha arraigned before Inquisitor Gallarati Scotti in 1787 for believing that “sexual commerce is not a sin because God authored the sex drive?”⁶⁶

Besides, it is pertinent to observe that the number of twenty-two illegitimate births for all the eighteenth century did not necessarily determine the frequency of illicit relations because there were various means how to terminate pregnancy. Abortive potions like myrrh were not unknown.⁶⁷ Furthermore, women could ask slaves to procure a miscarriage for them by some magical practice, say drinking a glass of water in which a paper was put with some letters “unknown to me” written on it.⁶⁸ Practices of abortion must have been diffused through a large section of the population so that the government made it illegal under payment of 20 *uncie* to cultivate abortive plants or to counsel abortion.⁶⁹ For his part, Bishop Labini reminded his flock on June 13, 1788, that abortion was a most vile murder, the most horrible villainy one can commit against one’s fellowmen. He warned that not only those who maliciously obtained abortion were guilty of this crime but even cruel husbands who ill-treated their wives and careless mothers who did heavy work during pregnancy, went for long walks, refrained from tasting food,⁷⁰ went dancing, or were indiscreet in their fasts.⁷¹ And, another point, did the villagers, like the rest of Europe,⁷² have any knowledge of contraceptive means? Did they practice, for instance, *coitus interruptus* or onanism, defined by church courts as withdrawal and extravaginal ejaculation?⁷³ The canon *si aliquis* of 1241 labeled a murderer whoever practiced sterile acts to deceive nature. It declared that

If someone to satisfy his lust or in deliberate hatred does something to a man or woman so that no children be born of him or her, or gives them to drink, so that he cannot generate or she conceive, let it be held as homicide.⁷⁴

Table 4. Family Size, by Wife's Age at Marriage, 1700–1800

	Under 20	20–24	25–29	30–34
Number of women	24	39	22	10
Mean average live births	10.4	8.1	7.5	5.6

Table 5. Birth Intervals at Qrendi, 1700–1800

Birth Interval	Number of Births	Mean (Months)
0–1	95	15.7
1–2	94	24.2
2–3	95	26.6
3–4	94	26.9
4–5	88	29.8
5–6	84	29.9
6–7	74	30.3
7–8	63	31.9

Source: Parish Archives, Liber Baptizatorum i (1618–1717), ii (1716–1751), iii (1751–1807).

Such intimate aspects of people's lives are extremely difficult to ascertain. Two particularly illuminating references though throw some light into this department of private life. Parish priests instructed couples during confession that the husband should always be on top of his wife during copulation and that he "should be on his guard not to sow outside the natural vase."⁷⁵ The second reference comes from an Augustinian friar padre Gesualdi Agnelli who in 1773 asked his women penitents about such sexual practices: "Do you get on top of him (your husband)?"⁷⁶ Naturally, the clergy would not have been concerned with a problem which did not exist in the practices of the day.

Having said this, can we establish whether married couples at Qrendi practiced any form of contraception during their marriage? The surest way to find this out, absolutely important to fathom people's *mentalité* toward matrimony, is to decide whether age at marriage was related to fertility. That is, was there a direct relationship between age at first marriage and the ultimate number of children a woman bore? Information gathered from family reconstitution reveals the fact that the twenty-four women who married under twenty had an average of 10.4 live births, while the ten whose first marriage occurred when they were between thirty and thirty-four, 5.6 live births (Table 4). This is ample proof that people practiced no reproductive strategies; the younger girls got married, the more children they bore. That is, fertility followed sharply physiological rules and was not concentrated in the early years of marriage.

A consideration of birth intervals proves too that women conceived all through their fertile period. It is at once apparent in Table 5 that the average interval between births does not level off after the second child is born. As at St. Méen, an eighteenth-century Breton community, a Western European age at marriage and a disastrously high infant mortality rate meant that there could be no brake on fertility to produce surviving heirs. These data can be contrasted with that for Terling, an English parish in central Essex. Here, a low infant mortality and a rather early age at marriage made possible that fertility be concentrated into the early years of marriage.⁷⁷

Still, we can produce two other reasons to back our argument that no birth control was practiced in the village. First, a high infant mortality rate expressed by the proverb *ahsbilhom ghall-maghmudija u wara ghat-tmiddija* (Prepare the child for christening and then for burial) meant that the woman had to produce children regularly to replace those who died. Second, this lamentable

state could not have produced a psychological scar that stopped parents from having more offspring. Couples who knew that a child would soon die could not become too attached to it.⁷⁸ The death of babies was attributed to the mysterious will of God, as was their birth, which parents had to accept.⁷⁹ "It is unjust that God has given me so many children, of whom no one died," a mother lamented to her parish priest in 1686.⁸⁰ Third, parents were as yet neither sensitive to their responsibilities nor apprehensive of the future of their offspring. For instance, in 1750 to 1785, nine unwanted Qrendi children whose parents could not afford to feed them were "dumped" at the foundlings' hospital at Valletta.⁸¹ Here, as at the *Hôpital des Enfants Trouvés* of Paris,⁸² a terrible mortality rate of 60 percent devoured them each year.⁸³ The catechism of 1752 warned couples of their duty to "procreate and bring up their children in the holy fear of God, so that they would earn happiness in this world and the next."⁸⁴ No word though was said about their education, and husbands made their wives several offspring without stopping.

The practicing of natural fecundity throws into relief the quality of the relations between spouses because, as has been well said, "birth control was first of all of benefit to the wives."⁸⁵ Childbirth was painful and risky. Confinements could result in death, as happened to twenty-eight-year-old Catarina Bonanno who, having given birth to a child Aloisio on March 30, 1778, died two weeks later on April 13.⁸⁶ All women dreaded the experience and prayed the Blessed Virgin for a safe deliverance.⁸⁷ Others relied on sympathetic magic and put a snake's slough on their thigh⁸⁸ or a silver bolt on their person.⁸⁹

Childbirth was a woman's business and no doctors were present at labor. When difficulties arose, concern was especially for the child, not its mother. It was baptized immediately *sub conditiones* by the midwife lest it died and went to limbo, deprived of the beatific vision.⁹⁰ "Saving these poor infants for whom the Divine Redeemer has shed His blood with infinite love" was so important that when a woman died with child a caesarean section was performed to extract it. The woman's belly was kept warm with some cloth and a perforated tube placed in her mouth, so that fresh air got into her uterus. Parish priests, under pain of suspension from their duties, had to be on the lookout for any moribund pregnant woman. If there was no one to do the operation or the family was unable to pay for the expenses, the parish priest had to do it promptly himself. For this purpose, he kept at hand a piece of iron or some other instrument.⁹¹

Women did not succeed to impose their will on husbands in the marriage bed when these insistently demanded their marriage debt. They were at liberty to marry or not but the status of a wife carried the inherent dual risks of the conjugal due and death in childbirth. There were women who claimed that "being master of my own body, I can do with it whatever I like" but they must have been the exception.⁹²

What can we say, therefore, of the relations between husband and wife? The catechism of the council of Trent repeated St. Paul's injunctions to the Ephesians and counseled the husband to treat his wife generously and honorably as his companion. At the same time, it made it clear that the man was the head of the household—"she (Eve) was not formed from his (Adam's) head, in order to give her to understand that it was not hers to command but to obey her husband." She was never to forget that next to God she was to love him, esteem him above all others, yielding to him a willing and ready obedience in all things not inconsistent with Christian piety.⁹³

Even popular wisdom as represented by those indices of popular attitudes, proverbs, was biased against women. Females were said to be cunning, unreliable, sharp-tongued, and double-faced. They were inferior to men: *seba' nisa f'sensihom ragel mignun ighaddihom* (A mad man surpasses seven women in their right senses.). And husbands were warned to impose their authority lest *ir-ragel tigiega u l-mara serduq, id-dar tinqaleb ta' taht fuq* (There is confusion in the house when a husband is a hen and the wife is a cock).⁹⁴

However, it remains for us to examine to what extent this image fitted daily experience. Did this misogynist lore characterize the actual domestic relationship? First, we should not forget that,

though the Council of Trent did not consider the consent of the parents as necessary for the validity of marriage,⁹⁵ marriages were often arranged by the parents. This is at least what such references suggest—"having found a man to give in marriage to his daughter . . .";⁹⁶ "my mother granted me in marriage to . . .";⁹⁷ (Giovanni Maria Farrugia) "has promised Marietta . . . to Eugenio Zammit of Zurrieq."⁹⁸

Two other observations are worth emphasizing when dealing with relations between spouses in traditional society. First, the couple had little time for themselves. They were so much occupied with the problems of daily living, to have sufficient daily bread, raise their children, avoid sickness, and perhaps save something on which to retire. And when men had some time to spare, they preferred to go to the tavern where they got drunk, blasphemed, fought among themselves, and played cards, perhaps, a game of *reversino*.⁹⁹ Wives had less time for socializing and were saddled with all the work of the household. Besides their daily chores—child rearing, cooking, cleaning, washing, mending, and ironing the clothes—they did much other work. They fed the chickens and gathered the eggs; they milked the sheep and went to the miller's and the baker's. Sometimes they helped with the farm work, sowing, hoeing, and giving a helping hand at harvest time. In fact, these "captive wives" (Hannah Gavron's phrase) were so rushed with their work that they had to combine their recreation with their labor.¹⁰⁰ They took the spindle or the spinning wheel with them when they went visiting or sat on their doorstep laughing and gossiping with other women on some Sunday afternoon.

Second, the structure of the houses did not provide couples with opportunities for sexual privacy. If a peasant's dwelling could be built in a few days, it was only because a peasant family would eat, procreate, and sleep in the same single room or two.¹⁰¹ The matrimonial bed commonly received the whole family; and even when a member of the family fell sick, he shared the bed with others. We should never imagine that in such embarrassing situations, when they could be seen or heard by their offspring, the couple had much emotional intimacy.¹⁰²

All the same, such joy was not to be had since marriage was only for procreation and not for carnal pleasure. A husband who sought carnal relations out of passion was a lover, a paramour, and a lecher while the woman was a whore.¹⁰³ How, therefore, were the couple to behave in bed? The Catholic Church put up the marriage of Tobias and Sarah as an example for all Catholics to follow. Sarah's previous seven bridegrooms had all died but Tobias was not to be afraid to marry her. "Heed me well," he was assured by Raphael,

The fiend has power over such as go about their marrying with all thought of God shut out of their hearts and minds, wholly intent on their lust, as if they were a horse or a mule, brutes without reason. Not such be thy mating . . . For three days deny thyself her favours; and the time you spend together, spend all in prayer . . . Then when the third night is past, take the maid to thyself with the fear of the Lord upon thee, moved rather by the hope of begetting children than by any lust of thine.¹⁰⁴

This notion was picked up by the doctors of the Church. "A man who marries for the sake of begetting children," Clement of Alexandria (d. c. 215) warned, "must practise continence so that . . . he may beget children with a chaste and controlled will."¹⁰⁵ St. Augustine (d. 430) believed that lust inherent in the conjugal act was legitimated only by the procreative act. And St. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274): "Whoever, therefore, uses copulation for the delight which is in it, not referring the intention intended by nature, acts against nature."¹⁰⁶ In the words of Jean Benedicti, a sixteenth-century moralist and theologian, "the man who behaves towards his wife more as a licentious lover than as a husband is an adulterer."¹⁰⁷

Intercourse was shameful and the catechism of Trent urged couples to abstain from the marriage debt for at least three days before communion and oftener during lent. It brought the example of King David, who, when about to receive the showbread from the hands of the priest, declared that he and his servants had been clean from women for three days.¹⁰⁸ Padre Pelagio, an eighteenth-

century Maltese capuchin, added the three days of rogation and the great feasts of the Church like Christmas, the transfiguration, Easter, Pentecost, the assumption, Holy Trinity, and Corpus Christi. Husbands were also to abstain from intercourse during their wife's mensual period or when she was pregnant, as well as until she had been churched.¹⁰⁹

Family life, then, left much to be desired. But since marriage was for life, divorce was impossible and bigamists who migrated to some faraway land risked being hunted down by the inquisitors.¹¹⁰ The only solution was for the union to be declared invalid, a solemn declaration by the ecclesiastical court that there had never been a marriage. At Qrendi, there is only one such instance of divorce *a vinculo*; it concerned the widow Margherita Genuis and Giuseppe Farrugia who were related in the fourth degree of consanguinity.¹¹¹ Other reasons for divorce were impotence, duress, or when conditions were placed upon the substance of the marriage. For example, to quote the canon *si conditiones* (1234),

If one says to the other, 'I will contract marriage with you if you avoid children' or 'until I find someone more worthy in honour or in riches', or if you turn to adultery for money.¹¹²

In all other instances, the only solution offered by the church for unsuccessful marriages was judicial separation (divorce *a mensa et thoro*). This was a last decision because wives generally accepted their inferior position and actually fought to hold on to their wretched marriage. They would do anything for the security of their union, even if it meant staying with a man who would really rather be married to someone else. Even so, a judicial separation was hard to get and only in rare cases would a plaintiff win her case. Every possibility was tried to preserve marriage and reconcile the two sides; no marriage councilors listened sympathetically to the couples' difficulties. If the example of early modern Portsmouth is at all representative church magistrates may have pressed battered wives into reconciling with their husbands.¹¹³ It was only the cold arm of legalism that tried to preserve the stability of the family. Perhaps, so it was believed, time would heal the parties' quarrels and differences.

In these circumstances, the only way out for the couples was to take the law into their own hands and leave their spouse without official authority.¹¹⁴ There were three such men and a woman at Qrendi in 1758.¹¹⁵ However, it required a brave man or woman to defy church authorities. Churchmen were determined to uphold the sacrament of marriage and threatened with excommunication and burial in unblest ground whoever deserted his or her spouse without first obtaining a court-approved separation. Besides these spiritual risks, a wife who failed to cohabit with her husband could be forced to return to an unhappy marriage or else be imprisoned at the *castellania* or state prisons.¹¹⁶ But with all these liabilities, Padre Pelagio claimed in 1769 that "the abuse has become so common as to be regrettably tolerated."¹¹⁷ In fact, the number of these couples who did not apply to the ecclesiastical court for a separation *a mensa et thoro* so alarmed Bishop Labini that he issued an edict on October 28, 1780, ordering them to join each other without delay.¹¹⁸

The object of this article has been to query statements about a traditional healthy family life, taking the Maltese eighteenth-century parish of Qrendi as a test case. Do they rest on weak arguments and evidence and can a contrary case be suggested? Generally, the people's ability to marry depended on their capacity to support themselves and their offspring. This seems to reflect the classic Malthusian case of a population adjusting to the size that can be supported by available resources. In fact, couples married in their early twenties and a good number of the parishioners never married at all. Unexpectedly, a high percentage of celibates did not result in flagrant promiscuity. The parish though had its own small share of illegitimacy and the men did test their bride's fecundity before marriage. Couples must have known all about abortion and contraceptive means but they practiced no form of family limitation. Natural fecundity in turn reflects the poor relations between couples, who, since divorce was impossible to get, only judicial separation was left to them. But as the

Church authorities tried to preserve marriage, a few Qrendin defied the church authorities and went their own separate ways.

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Notes

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Bio

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