

MAN AND THE SEA IN MALTESE FOLK-POETRY

J. CASSAR-PULLICINO - M. GALLEY

"Lares"
Dr. Zammit St.
Balzen, Malta

Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique
12, rue la Bruyere
F-75009 Paris, France

In a previous paper, we referred to our joint research on the process of oral composition by Maltese folk poets, and we illustrated one limited aspect -- imagery.¹ This time, we shall focus our interest on the sea and more particularly on the relationship between man and the sea as reflected in Maltese folk-poetry. Our survey has entailed an analysis of 100 quatrains about the sea, with commentaries, supplementary material and motifs found in other related genres (riddles, proverbs, tales) both locally and in neighbouring countries. The present paper gives a brief account of the main features disclosed by our analysis.

Situated half-way between the eastern and western ends of the Mediterranean, the Maltese Islands (with an estimated population of 350,401 at end June, 1989 and an area just over 315 sq. Km.) lie at the crossroads of the "Middle Sea".² But this crossroads is not merely a geographical one; it has been a historical and cultural crossroads within the Mediterranean, and from the earliest times Malta has been a land of contact whose most salient effects produced the Maltese language spoken today "structurally Semitic with a Romance superstructure"³ and the religion of Malta: Roman Catholicism.⁴

Perception of the Sea

Like any other maritime people looking towards the sea, the Maltese have preserved beliefs and sayings, practices and feelings connected with the sea. Traces of old myths have survived from biblical times in relation to the theme of the boundaries of the inhabited world.⁵ As is well-known, the Straits of Gibraltar lying at the Far West of the Mediterranean marked,

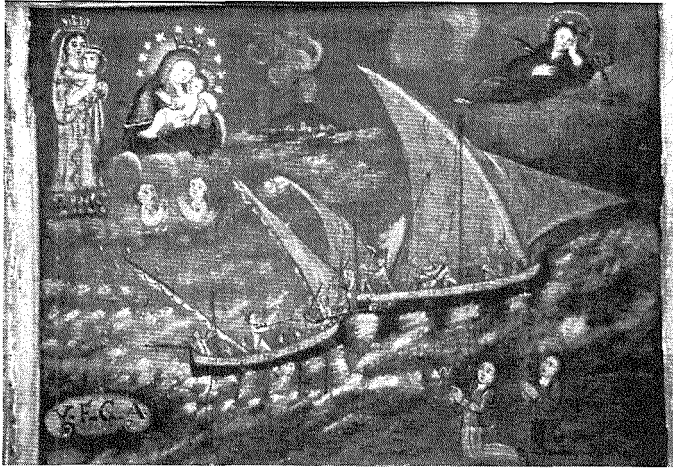


Fig. 1. Ex-voto from Qormi (Malta). Its subject is piracy: two Maltese sailors donated this painting in fulfilment of a vow made to the Virgin Mary, Tal-Hlas ("of Delivery"). Our Lady of Trapani is represented reclining on a cloud; Santa Rosalia and Souls of Purgatory are also represented. The pirates seem to be Calabrian, judging from the representation of the eruptive Stromboli in the background. No date

in the minds of the Ancients and of Medieval men,⁶ the absolute limit of the world not to be overpassed, since beyond it started the vast, tenebrous, awe-inspiring Ocean, perceived by the geographers themselves — from Ptolemy to Idrissi⁷ — and, interestingly enough, still described in Maltese recent folk literature, as the "Outer Sea" (il-baħar ta' barra) which "encircles the whole world" (imdawwar mad-dinja kollha). Mention is also made, in narratives of the early years of this century, of the famous Pillars attributed to Hercules in ancient times and having their equivalent in other legendary cycles, like the brass statue which, according to Arabic tradition,⁸ was erected by Alexander the Great. But whatever this visible sign placed at the entrance of the fatal Ocean can be — column(s), statue of a rider, lion, lighthouse, etc. — its function is to warn the sailors that no one should venture beyond, since — as we read in Maltese tales — "the waters are so soft that no boat can float", or — another variant — because the iron and brass nails fall out of the boat as if attracted by a magnet.

Let us return to more familiar shores, and cast anchor in Maltese waters. However, even here a permanent danger threatens — the danger of being completely submerged by the floods (again, a trace of ancient cosmogony), as expressed in the following quatrain:

<u>Meta Malta issir baħar</u>	"When Malta becomes a sea,
<u>U jgħaddu l-iġfien Sqallin,</u>	And Sicilian galleys sail over it,
<u>Igħidu Requiem aeternam</u>	They will say <u>Requiem aeternam</u> ,
<u>Għax hawn għammru il-Maltin.</u>	Since here lived the Maltese.

But the threat of destruction may also be used as an argument by a lover:

<u>Dik Malta l-ewwel ma nħalget,</u>	Our Malta was the first to be created
<u>Dik Malta l-ewwel ma tinzell!</u>	Our Malta will be the first to sink!
<u>Ej, ħanina, busni bewsa</u>	Come, my loved one, give me a kiss,
<u>Qabel il-mewt taħsad bil-mingel.</u>	Before death mows us down with her scythe.

Generally speaking, the sea is seen as an immense boundless expanse of water, somehow a witness of divine power, and man dreams of being able, at God's image (Job 9: 8), to tread upon the sea:

<u>Jekk il-baħar isir trejgħa</u>	Would the sea turn into a small road,
<u>Fuqu nimxi lejli kollu,</u>	On it I would walk all night long,
<u>Jiena mmur sa fejn ħanini,</u>	And go as far as my beloved,
<u>Jekk ikun marbut inħollu.</u>	And if he is bound I'll untie him.

The last line is a reference to the time of greatest piratical activity (15th--16th centuries mostly), when the Moslems of the Barbary States used to raid Malta and carry away people as slaves, whilst the Christians of Malta would practice privateering along the Tunisian coasts:

<u>Kelli nsiefer, immur 'il bogħod,</u>	I had to leave my country and go far away,
<u>L-irsiera ngħib lis-Sultan tiegħi...</u>	To bring slaves to my Grand Master.

As mentioned before, the sea is immense in the mind of man; it is also very deep. Therefore, the imagination of the Mediterranean man has exercised itself to wish, for example, that the whole sea would turn into ink: the Maltese folksinger, assisted by the clouds (providing fine paper) and the stars (used as scribes), would then be in a position to describe the endless pains of lovers! In contrast, the same image in the Koran⁹ serves to emphasize the opposition between the finite -- whatever its dimension -- and the infinite which is the mark of God:

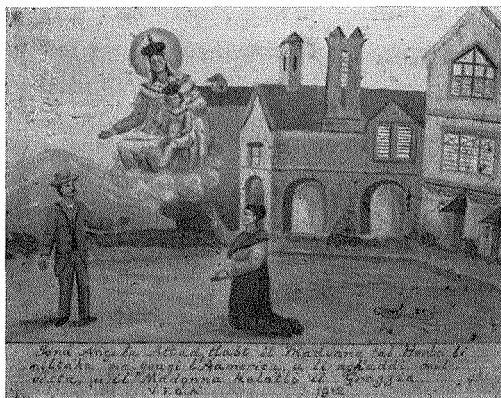


Fig. 2. Ex-voto on emigration from Tal-Herba (Malta). Date: 1912.

In the inferior part of the painting the text runs as follows:

"I, Angela Attard, have prayed Our Lady Tal-Herba, so that I can join my husband in America and that I pass the medical examination, and the Madonna obtained the Grace for me."

"if all the trees on earth were pens, and if the ocean, together with seven others, were ink, the words of Allah could not be exhausted. Allah is mighty and wise." (XXXI, 26—27.)

Personification

When he has to face such a wide unfathomable extent of water, man may have a feeling of uncertainty, and even of fear, as reflected by our quatrains. Memorable shipwrecks are narrated also, with dramatic effect, on the ex-voto paintings which hang in the parish churches or country chapels: the stormy sea is described as "growling ominously", and "holding the coasts in its grip", or "wanting to swallow the earth".¹⁰

A similar process of personification is found in folk-literature; like a human being, the sea is said to have a "head" (rather "hard", ijsa) and a "belly" (rather "soft", ratba), a "face" and a "neck" (ghonq) on which the seafarer goes aimlessly; it can be either "awake" or "asleep", "standing" (that is "rough", qam) or "sitting" (that is "calm", qiegħed), and always possesses physical strength (qawwi). Like an animal, the sea is pictured as a "stallion" (mfafħal, "reared for breeding purposes"). A male, then, and the

Maltese word for "sea" (baħar) is, as in Arabic, masculine, while the earth is figured as a female: il-baħar sinjur, l-art sinjura, one song states clearly. The association between sea and earth, male and female, is also suggested in the following lyrical verses:

<u>O, xi ġmiel ta' baħar dana</u>	Oh what a beautiful sea this is
<u>Li jbewwes max-xatt ix-xatt!</u>	That laps and embraces its shores!
<u>Li kont taf jien kemm inħobbok</u>	If you knew how much I love you,
<u>Minni ma tinfired qatt.</u>	From me you would never part.

Even popular riddles lay stress on the inclination to make love ascribed to the personified sea, suggested here as a harmless old man:

<u>Xwejjjaħ numeruż</u>	A nice old man who makes love,
<u>Xi drabi jkun batut,</u>	Sometimes he feels out of sorts,
<u>L'għandu weraq langas fjuri</u>	He has neither leaves nor flowers,
<u>U l-frott tiegħu buon sapuri.</u> ¹¹	(But) his fruit taste really good!

The use of the diminutive, xwejjjaħ, literally "little old one", implies some emotional relation between man and the sea.

In spite of its asserted virility, the sea seems to be more ambiguous when perceived in its deep mysterious waters,¹² teeming with life, fishes of all kinds, as well as enigmatic Sirens who lure the sailors and fishermen with their enchanting voices. As illustrated by the Sirens themselves — half girl, half fish — fantasy and realism are combined in the content and expression of the quatrains related to the sea. Let us examine the realistic element.

Reality and life

There are indeed very accurate notations, and technical vocabulary, on the life and craft of the fishermen when out at sea, as well as on the condition of their wives left at home:

<u>Mart il-baħri dejjem tibki,</u>	The Sailor's wife is always crying
<u>Aktarx amla nkella miżżewġa...</u>	More like a widow than a married woman...



Fig. 3. Maltese fishing-boats;
a protective eye is painted on the prow

unless, according to one folksinger, the woman meanwhile enjoys herself in the ballrooms — Hi tixxala fil-ballijiet. Other quatrains reflect the emotional implications connected with emigration, especially from the 1st World War onwards, when many Maltese had to leave their native island and emigrate far away:

Il-ġuvintur kollha sa jsiefru.

The young men are going away, all of them,

Kemm ha jħallu qlub maqsuma!

Leaving many broken hearts,

Ix-xebbiet kollha bil-wegħda

All the young women are taking a vow,

Li l-vapur jintorna lura.

(Praying) that the ship return.

The moment of cruel separation when the ship was ready to leave was felt so strongly that at one time the authorities decided to have a band playing on the quay to cheer up both those who were going, and their wives who, for the time being, were staying behind:

<u>... Il-banda qiegħda ddoqq,</u>	The band is playing,
<u>Il-vapur sejjer isiefer,</u>	The ship is about to leave,
<u>Fa jōhodli 'l min inhobb.</u>	Taking away my beloved from me.

Historical Data

Sometimes the quatrains refer to much earlier events which happened in Maltese history, particularly during the long conflict, in the 16th--17th centuries, between the Knights of St. John and the forces of Islam, represented by Soleiman the Magnificent and the daring corsair admirals from the Barbary States. This is one example:

<u>Jien sefirt u mort il-gwerra,</u>	I left my country to go to war,
<u>Ikkumbattejt mal-Gran Baxan,</u>	I fought against the Grand Pasha,
<u>Ġibna Griegi u Torok magħna</u>	We brought Greek and Turkish slaves.
<u>Bla turbant u inqas sarwan.</u>	Wearing neither turban nor baggy trousers.

Occasionally sympathy goes out even to a Moslem slave, doomed to hard labour on a galley:

<u>Hammad! ja Hammuda!</u>	O Hammuda! Hammuda!
<u>Kemm hi xortik mishuta!</u>	How accursed your fate is!
<u>Lejlek u nharek taqdef,</u>	Rowing night and day,
<u>Mad-dgħajjes dejjem marbuta.</u>	Always tied to the boats.

The above examples reflect historical data and elements of everyday life related to the sea; in other words, reality is mirrored in folksongs. Nevertheless, as already pointed out, fantasy is ever present. Like other maritime peoples constantly exposed to hardships and perils when out at sea, the Maltese have a propensity for interpreting natural phenomena as the effects of maleficent influences; thus the tromba, or waterspout, which has always terrorised the sailors in this part of the Mediterranean,¹³ is attributed by Maltese fishermen to the Evil Eye. Needless to say, they try to counteract its action by all possible means: special prayers,¹⁴ exorcisms, magic. As a sign of protection,¹⁵ they also paint a large eye on each side of the bows of the boats, according to an old, widespread Mediterranean practice.¹⁶



Fig. 4. An Egyptian boat in Alexandria; among colourful decoration on the prow of the boat, the "evil eye" (as if neutralized)

We now come to the last predominant aspect of the relationship between man and the sea. Obviously, the genre analysed, a lyrical one, is appropriate for the outpouring of the poet's thoughts and inner feelings.

Man's Inner Feelings

Several quatrains start with a warm friendly address to the sea by the poet:

- | | |
|--|--|
| -- <u>Bongornu għalik, ja baħar!</u> | -- "Good morning to you, o sea!" |
| -- <u>Fejnek int, ja baħar, baħar!</u> | -- "Where are you? O sea! O sea! |
| <u>Jiēn dalghodu ġejt narak..."</u> | I've come to see you ..." |
| -- ... <u>Jien fis-sajf niġi inżurek</u> | -- "... In summer I come to visit you, |
| <u>Fix-xitwa nabbandunak.</u> | In winter I'll abandon you." |
| -- <u>Eħla, baħar, eħla,</u> | -- "Turn sweet, o sea, o sea, |
| <u>Bħalma teħla f'lejlet Lapsi...</u> | As you turn sweet on the eve of Ascension Day ..." |

The same process of apostrophe is used in Egyptian folk-poetry to-day (PIGNOL 1987: 29):

"O wave of the sea, your melodies to the shores
Are a lamentation on my (miserable) condition."

In this case, sympathy is expressed towards man, a victim of love, as in this other example (JARGY 1970):

"When I awoke, I did not find Layla beside me,
I questioned the sea who started crying with me ..."

Sometimes, it is the image of escape which is underlined as in:

<u>I'tla', baħar, u istorni,</u>	Arise, o sea, arise and protect me
<u>U aħbini ġewwa għerienek...</u>	And conceal me inside your grottoes...

There may be a quest on man's side for some kind of communion with nature:

<u>Il-baħar għamiltu sodda,</u>	Of the sea I have made a bed,
<u>Is-sema għamilt liżar,</u>	And of the sky a sheet,
<u>Il-kwiekeb għamilt imsiebaħ,</u>	Of the stars I've made lamps,
<u>Il-qamar għamilt fanal.</u>	And of the moon a lantern.

However, the folk-poet is often accompanied by his beloved. Together they go out to sea, perhaps to protect their privacy far from the sight of others:

<u>... Immorru bejn sema u ilma</u>	... We will go between sky and sea,
<u>Fejn ma tarana ebda ruħ.</u>	Where there is not a single soul.

Sometimes, a colourful picture is drawn of a ship adorned with precious metal and cloth; on board there is a crew of both boys and girls whose roles seem to be inverted:

<u>Bastiment tal-fidda naħmel,</u>	I'll make a silver ship,
<u>L-arbli deheb u l-qluġħ ħarir;</u>	With golden masts and silken sails;
<u>Ix-xebbiet naħmel kaptani</u>	The girls will be the skippers
<u>Il-ġuvintur naħmel baħrin.</u>	And the boys the sailors.

Eroticism is still more clearly suggested in the following Egyptian poem:



Fig. 5. Graffiti on the walls of a prison in Gozo, Malta
(probably first half of the 19th century)

"Aziza said: Yunis, my sweet,
I am a barque -- and you the captain;
Come with me on the sea -- let us toss and turn,
Let us see on which shore we alight ..."¹⁷

A Sicilian 'canto' echoes a similar idea:

<u>Nta sta vanedda cc'è 'na navi armata</u>	In the bay there is an armed ship
<u>Cu 'ntinni d'oru e cu veli di sita;</u>	With golden masts and silken sails;
<u>Ddà dintra cc'è 'na donna veru Fata,</u>	There's a woman on it, a real Fairy,
<u>L'omu si tira cu la calamita.</u>	She attracts man like a magnet. ¹⁸

As regards the structure of these quatrains, we shall make two brief remarks:

(i) One notices, sometimes, an apparent break in the stanza, dividing it into two halves, with juxtaposition of the couplets, the first two lines being usually descriptive, rather realistic, whereas the last two are more lyrical in tone, such as:

<u>Il baħar inzejjen b'ħutu,</u>	The sea is adorned with its fish,
<u>Id-dinja mzejna bil-ħdura;</u>	The world is adorned with its verdure;
<u>Il-mara mzejna bir-raġel</u>	The woman is adorned with her husband
<u>Ix-xebba mzejna b'unurħa.</u>	And the maiden is adorned by her honour.

In fact, however, the shift from one couplet to the following one is based on a corresponding, somehow echoing, metaphorical link, as, for instance, in a previously quoted stanza:

<u>O, xi ġmiel ta' baħar dana</u>	Oh what a beautiful sea this is
<u>Li jbewwes max-xatt ix-xatt!</u>	That laps and embraces its shores!
<u>Li kont taf jien kemm inħobbok</u>	If you knew how much I love you,
<u>Minni ma tinfired qatt.</u>	From me you would never part.

(ii) This type of structure is occasionally the starting-point of a series of quatrains in which the first formulaic lines provide, for the 3rd and 4th lines, a theme for variation in chain, such as:

<u>Smajt tifsira f'nofs ta' baħar,</u>	I heard a whistle in the midst of the sea,
<u>Kien namur ta' żewġ ħutiet;</u>	The wooing whistle of two fishes;
<u>Jinnamraw il-ħut fil-baħar,</u>	The fish make love in the sea,
<u>Aħseb u ara ix-xebbiet.</u>	Let alone the young women.

Six other variants could be quoted (3rd and 4th lines); such as:

... <u>Ħanini, nfittxu niżżewġu,</u>	My beloved, hurry, let's get married,
<u>Biex ma jsirx x'impediment</u>	To prevent some impediment.

or

... <u>Dina m'ħijiex ħaġa kbira</u>	It's nothing to be surprised at
<u>Li niżżewġu aħna x-xebbiet.</u>	That we young women get married.

the idea being always to persuade the partner that love is a natural phenomenon.

In this article we have illustrated just a few aspects of the relationship between the Mediterranean man and the sea, and of its ambivalence. Fuller treatment falls outside the scope of the present paper.

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