The Cantilena as a Reading Experience
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A patrimony of readings

Emerging as a legible text from the comparative obscurity of its fifteenth-century world, Peter Caxaro’s Cantilena has understandably inspired primary interest in its medieval origins. The cultural and social climate of its historical era, the medieval medium in which it is written, and its author’s personal circumstances mark out an irresistible field for scholarly research. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the greater part of Cantilena studies have dwelt on Caxaro’s genealogy and public roles, on potential real-life motives behind his intricately wrought allegories of hopeless despair and regained fortitude, and on the vernacular idiom showcased in his poem. These predominantly biographical and philological approaches have left little room for reviewing the poem as a reading experience. Consequently, the performative aspect of the work has often been assigned a secondary status to the scholarly endeavour to put together an historical picture of the author’s life and times.

To be sure, articles such as Oliver Friggieri’s “Il-Kantilena ta’ Pietru Caxaru: Sħarrriġ Kritiku [Peter Caxaro’s Cantilena: A Critical Analysis]” have redressed the balance somewhat, providing a close and insightful analysis of the poem’s rhetorical and figurative dynamics. Nonetheless, most of us still associate the Cantilena primarily with the question whether its dominant allegory of a collapsed house were not representative of Caxaro’s public humiliation due to his thwarted plans of marriage to the widow Franca de Biglera,1 or whether the same allegory were not motivated by the serious, and at one point armed, quarrel between Caxaro and the rival notary, Antonju de Sarlo,2 or whether the poem’s more specific image of a collapsed wall were not an oblique allusion to the murder of Caxaro’s brother, Nicola, whose appointment as suprammaremmarius by the municipal government of Mdina provides the necessary association with crumbling walls.3

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3 Nicola’s lifelong appointment as suprammaremmarius consisted in the good maintenance of the city walls. Joseph V. Brincat conjectures another poetic allusion to Nicola’s murder, namely, the sole romance word, “Vintura,” which he takes to be an instance of the contemporary poetic device of senhal, a disguised reference to, in this case, Nicola’s widow by the name Ventura. Joseph M. Brincat, Maltese and Other Languages – A Linguistic History of Malta (Malta: Midsea Books, 2011) 178-9.
Notwithstanding their potential significance as historical causes behind the Cantilena’s main allegories, such biographical details divert our attention away from the work’s foremost role as an aesthetic experience, whose artistic legacy can only be preserved through successive realizations of its allegorical and rhetorical potential, along different generations of readers. For instance, the poem’s first allegory of the persona’s devastated soul – his self-depiction as an individual cast down a well turned instantly into a turbulent sea – elicits a feeling of doom growing in proportion to the expanding dimensions of a watery expanse, an aesthetic experience that neither relies on nor calls for an historical equivalent. It is not by accident that historically oriented studies of the Cantilena overlook this overly hyperbolic figure in favour of the poem’s second figure of a collapsed house, whose actual realization could be more plausibly envisaged. This second allegory has accordingly stimulated a wider range of speculation.

Friggieri cautiously interprets the collapsed house as a potentially literal as much as metaphorical account, the obsessively repeated lamentation “It came down my house” serving as the poet’s prevailing cry of grief in either case. This resolves the referential issue by attributing to Caxaro a conscious balance between two simultaneous functions characteristic of all allegorical discourse: its literal and figurative roles. The ambiguity generated between these two levels of meaning, Friggieri elaborates, bestows upon the poem its aura of mystery and grief, even while the first image of being cast down a well enhances the probability of a wholly metaphorical function for both images.

The ceaseless endeavour to identify an historical event worthy of the poem’s evocative figures of ruin and despair testifies to biographical conjectures constantly falling short of the work’s aesthetic, rhetorical, and figurative power of suggestion. To amass biographical alternatives as posited equivalents to the poem’s allegories of devastation is to acknowledge a figurative use of language always in excess of the real historical events believed to have occasioned it. That excess is, of course, the literary experience we seek over and above historical fact. It is the surplus irony, the added lyrical poignancy, the further metaphorical insight, or the endless play of opposing perspectives for which we choose to read literature rather than historical narrative. Put briefly, the poem’s poignant vehicles of anguish, with their capacity to transmute external events into endless ironic inference and figurative extension, act as an alternative articulation and perception of historical fact.

5 Ibid. 48.
That scholars should persist in unearthing potential historical causes behind the Cantilena’s darkest allusions only reveals, therefore, an extraliterary field of research hard-pressed to keep up with the allusive power of the work’s lyrical devices. The poem’s often neglected rhetoric of optimism in its closing lines provides another example of an aesthetic effect outliving any single historical reference. By virtue of their aphoristic nature, these final proverbial lines diverge sharply from the speaker’s hitherto inconsolable state of mind, conveying instead his ultimate poise and resilience. Receiving relatively little attention in comparison to the allegories of catastrophe, this beautifully wrought conversion from extreme despondency to proverbial poise endures as a lyrical effect in excess of any single cause of grief, an ultimate restitution of spirit achieved through an artistic medium wider in its applicability than any particular reference to adversity. Hence Brandano de Caxario’s acknowledgement of the poem’s uplifting effect upon his own morale (“alinquatum exhilaratus”) several years after its production, the first recorded response to the Cantilena as an aesthetic medium, an artistic dynamics.

There exists not only the art of writing poetry, but also the art of activating its insufficiently realized aesthetic possibilities along different stages of its enduring legacy. As Walter Benjamin would argue, the self-referential qualities of an artistic medium cannot be simply inserted in history, as though its form and meaning were fixed once and for all at a given moment of composition; rather, the artwork questions history as it continues to be realized in ever changing circumstances of reception. This evolving tradition of the Cantilena, its endurance as a growing patrimony of readings, is the aesthetic principle applied in the following sections, which focus primarily on the work’s performative potential realized through successive acts of reading.

**The interplay of hyperbole and synecdoche**

Caxaro’s efforts at translating historical fact into aesthetic consciousness find their foremost example in his artful manipulation of hyperbolic images of despair, which prepare the ground for a rhetorical and tonal shift towards a contrastive mood of defiance. To endow the poem’s devices with a referential, rather than an aesthetic, function is to discard such figurative and stylistic movements in favour of a series of historical impracticalities. For instance, why should the Cantilena’s speaker announce the visibly catastrophic collapse of his house to – of all people – his neighbours, except that this highly stylized figuration is part of the poem’s hyperbolic performance of lamentation, an

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aesthetic function that simply fails as an external piece of information? It is the same hyperbolic preference that compels the speaker to claim for his calamity an extent of ruin never before undergone by humankind – hardly a realistic claim were it to refer solely to the experience of a collapsed residence.

Caxaro’s employment of hyperbole is also evident in the primary allegory of despair: the deep well down which some unruly heart had flung the lyrical speaker, and whose contained water promptly transmutes into an entire sea of troubles, amidst whose turbulent waters the floundering speaker momentarily gives way to a suicidal frame of mind. That the persona’s collapsed house should be deemed the first human catastrophe of its kind, that a deep well should instantly transmute into a sea whose expanse and turbulence are implicitly more suited for suicidal despair – these structures of thought do not convey information but, as Ronald Carter points out for hyperbole in everyday use, insert an attitude and a reaction towards what is said, by deliberately overstating facts and running contrary to perceived reality.\(^7\)

Not only is any historical function removed from the impossible descriptions of the Cantilena’s hyperbolic images, but also, the historical truth to which they allude remains unstated, since their intensifying figures rely on a prior knowledge of their author’s public misadventures. Given Caxaro’s high social standing within a small literate community, as well as the notable administrative and public positions held by different generations of his family – members and ambassadors of the Council of Mdina, judges and jurymen, captains of small merchant ships, members of the standing army known as Dejma, in one case a procurator of the Mdina Cathedral, and in another the supramammarius of Malta\(^8\) – there can be little doubt that any real catastrophe of the proportions implied in the Cantilena would have promptly become public knowledge, at least amongst the educated class which would have provided the poem with its first readership.

Caxaro’s own positions and possessions leave little doubt as to his personal prominence in society: a judge in Gozo, a judge in the Government’s and Bishop’s courts, a notary or secretary of the Council of Mdina, and an owner of two houses and various plots of land and fields around Malta.\(^9\) Furthermore, Brandano de Caxario’s designation of him as a philosopher, poet and orator\(^10\) single the poet out for his superior intellectual and persuasive abilities, faculties that reinforce the profile of a renowned and important figure. Given this social

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\(^8\) Wettinger and Fsadni 20-1.


standing, no humiliating or tragic event in the poet’s life would have gone unnoticed, much less required broadcasting or replicating through poetry. The hyperbolic images in the Cantilena thus operate at an aesthetic distance from real facts, opening up a creative space in which the poet’s known circumstances could be innovatively and extravagantly re-enacted. Herein lies the poem’s enduring legacy as an artistic performance, its validity as an ongoing aesthetic realisation of human anguish.

Predominant though the hyperbolic schema is throughout the Cantilena, it would not alone account for the work’s refined weave of contrasting effects. This is rather accomplished through a masterful interdependence between its varying devices. A case in point is the interplay between hyperbolic and synecdochic figures. In the opening stanza, the ruthless heart that had cast the poet into his sea of troubles is a synecdoche for a whole person, as Friggieri points out, but this somewhat commonplace figure is further qualified as a fickle heart, unrestrained in its whims by “master, king or feudal lord,” that is, by any form of controlling agent. The “master, king or feudal lord” can be seen as further medieval synecdoches (or contemporary metonymies) for the broader concept of government, and illustrate the way Caxar embeds one synecdoche within another, forming an intricate convolution of figures that could only unfold in relative stages. Synecdoche has the double effect of representing a whole person or thing – say, the widow Franca de Biglera who had apparently had second thoughts about Caxar’s proposal of marriage – while yet focusing on the entire figure’s most pertinent or significant part, in this case, a fickle heart as the seat of inconstant sentiments. Likewise, the poem’s other major synecdoche of a collapsed wall stands for the speaker’s whole residence while drawing particular attention to those structural parts of its architecture that would visibly begin to crumble.

Whereas the hyperbolic schema magnifies images into broader visual dimensions, synecdoche narrows the field of observation to essential details, whose specifying function need never eliminate the whole referential field, but simply evoke it through its most crucial aspects. Together, hyperbole and synecdoche display Caxar’s intuitive skill at shifting between narrower and wider fields of vision, creating a metonymic play between the parts and the whole of a single catastrophic event. This play of contrary perspectives is in keeping with the noted prevalence of antithesis in the Cantilena, a unique performative quality analysed in detail by Bernard Mallia’s early and insightful study. Mallia devotes primary attention to the work’s division into two major sections that make for “an antithetical and at the same time progressive balance”

11 Friggieri 48.
between symmetrical extremes constitutive of the poem’s ultimate unity. Nor is this equilibrium of contrasting perspectives exposed by one critical study alone. Friggieri scrutinizes the predominantly vacillating nature of the poet’s consciousness, which constantly oscillates between opposing notions: “in the past” – “in your lifetime”; “I rise” – “I fall”; “it came down” – “I build”; “I hoped to find” – “I found”; “rock” – “soft clay”; “it came down” – “build it anew”; “white” – “black”. This sustained schema of contrasts, Friggieri elaborates, represents “the past and the present, the ideal and its collapse, hope and despair, dream and reality” in a lyrical sensibility that seems able to advance only through colliding viewpoints.

Both Mallia’s and Friggieri’s critical observations are unconsciously motivated, I believe, by the Cantilena’s overarching antithesis between its initially hyperbolic despair and its final tenor of defiance, the latter expressed in proverbial terms intended to boost the lyrical self into rebuilding his collapsed house, or ruined prospects, in pastures new. This sharply altered frame of mind – from lamentation to proverbial poise – is accompanied by a corresponding shift in address: the rallied neighbours at the beginning of the poem give way, in the final six lines, to the speaker’s poignant self-address, exhorting himself to change his fortune by first changing his building site. This shift in audience actualizes an ironic reversal: starting with a personal calamity passionately conveyed to the general public, the poem moves to the opposite stance of addressing a collective proverbial voice to the poet’s own inner self. Caxaro narrates a personal tragedy to all, but then assimilates the traditional sayings of all into his ultimate self-possession, internalizing public wisdom as much as he had externalized his personal anguish. The dialogic interplay of these mutually engendering voices enriches the work with another performative potential, namely, an intersection of vocal elements re-enacted as part of the artistic dynamics of the work.

**Intersecting voices**

The Cantilena’s movement from its initial lament in the first person to its final adoption of communal sayings in the second and third persons brings an individual voice and its universal complement into mutual interaction. The generic application of the second and third persons prevails in the poem’s final segment due to the appropriateness of these persons to the work’s aphoristic and impersonal ending. While Èmile Benveniste observes that both first-person and second-person speech entail a specific context as opposed to third-person

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13 Friggieri 50.
utterances, there nonetheless remains the distinctly non-specific or impersonal use of even the pronoun “you” in the case of proverbial language. In the poem’s ultimate recourse to popular wisdom, therefore, the deictic “you” has an ambiguous role: it can stand for the lyrical speaker permitting himself to be addressed by the judicious voice of communal wisdom, as discussed above; but it can also function as the virtual or generic addressee typical of proverbial discourse, akin in its neutrality to proverbial sayings in the third person. This ambiguity permits the persona to take on a more universal dimension without completely relinquishing the poignant effects of self-address, thereby blurring the boundary between a broader human condition and personal calamity.

The comparative impersonality of the poem’s closing lines is enhanced by the simultaneous disappearance of the Maltese suffix “-i,” whose prevalence in the preceding lines of the Cantilena deeply impress, on the reader’s mind, both the sense of personal loss (in its function as the possessive “my”) and the sense of a victimized speaker (in its alternative function as the verb object “me”). Several key terms ending in this suffix – such as “mirammiti” (“my house”) and “kitali” (“it gave way for me”) – create an inflectional and rhyming concentration on the lyrical speaker as both a ruined owner and a victimized patient. Technically known as homeoteleuton, this grammatical and acoustic device combines sense and sound into a heightened representation of the persona’s egocentric engagement with his own brooding and sombre self, prior to the ensuing interpersonal and relatively detached domain of shared wisdom. Activated by the act of reading, these inflectional, tonal, and discursive transitions unfold as a vibrant dialogism between contrasting voices, and call to mind Mikhail Bakhtin’s fundamental tenet that every single utterance exists dialogically, in that it subsists as an anticipation of, a response to, or a question about other relative utterances, themselves already implicit in its colloquial use.

Variously analysed by Mallia, Brincat, Arnold Cassola, and Olvin Vella, the poem’s final proverbial tones respond to the persona’s heightened grief with a collective and anonymous form of enunciation, a traditional and folkloristic voice speaking to everyman. Mallia observes how the poet first adopts the minstrel’s “personal contact” with his audience, until a proverbial self-instruction (“You change the location that harms it”) instills in him “a ray of hope” conveyed through “the wisdom of his fathers.” Transmuting from the

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16 Bernard Mallia, “Il-Cantilena ta’ Pietru Caxaro” in Problemi ta’ Llum, X.4 (April, 1970) 124. See, also, the chapter in this volume by Federico Corriente and Ángeles Vicente, wherein the authors render this line thus: “change for it (i.e., the house) the location (finding instead one) which suits it,” PAGE. Corriente and Vicente are corroborating the earlier rendering of yeutihe as “to suit” in Cohen
despondency of a known speaker to the redeeming power of an anonymous ancestral lore, the Cantilena acts as a site where competing registers intersect, where the private anguish and unique occasion of first-person utterance must enter a dialogue with the more staid voice of ancestral wisdom.

Robert S. Sturges argues that the medieval text, already characterized by a “multiplicity of sources and authors” in its manuscript form and culture, anticipates Bakhtin’s notion of the polyphonic work and such latter-day critical concepts as “intertextuality, the disappearance of the author, and the audience’s role in the creation of meaning.” Sturges reinforces his argument by reference to post-structuralist theorists (Eco, Greimas, Jauss, Kristeva, and Todorov) who started their critique of monologic discourse with the study of medieval literature’s contrasting tendency towards dialogism. It is significant that intrinsically polyphonic medieval texts and a new critical idiom should be mutually enlightening, that a progressive critical awareness should justify its theoretical novelty upon the insufficiently realized potential of long-established literary techniques, so that tradition and innovation complement one another in a single growing literary faculty. This interplay of an inherited textuality and its progressively executed possibilities recalls Benjamin’s notion of the “continued life” of great works, unfolding as the interdependence of their component stages: their influential antecedents, their “realization in the age of the artist,” and their “potentially eternal afterlife in succeeding generations” of performers, readers, and critics. In similar fashion, the proverbial sources and the polyphonic possibilities of the Cantilena’s medieval text cannot be separated from successive periods of their realization, which are themselves justified only by virtue of having fulfilled the work’s long inhering possibilities of accomplishment.

A closer look at the Cantilena’s proverbial lines will disclose how the antecedent lore of communal sayings, already contending with the lyrical voice of dejection, is reactivated into a complex play of perspectives by the actual act of reading. The verse incorporating the only word of romance origin (“Min ibidill il miken ibidil il vintura”) has been analysed by Brincat as a calque of the Sicilian proverb: “Cangia locu o paisi, ca cangi vintura,” and identified by Cassola with the closer Sicilian version: “Cui muta locu muta vintura”. Since


these observations, Vella has added the subsequent verse (“halex liradi ‘al col xebir sura”) as another proverbial saying deriving from the Maltese context of quarrying, where one finds to this day variants of the quarryman’s customary expression that rock types change unpredictably every few inches. A literal connection thus obtains between the two proverbial sayings that form the rhyming couplet “Min ibidill il miken ibidil il vintura / halex liradi ‘al col xebir sura” (“He who changes his locale, changes his fortune! / For land changes appearance with every span”). Since the surface of land could literally change every few inches, to change locale could mean altering, in very concrete terms, the prospects for one’s building plans. Vella also highlights the second proverb’s connection with the poem’s central image of construction, implying that a realistic, down-to-earth context provides the reader with an immediately recognizable setting.

The couplet formed out of the two proverbs also features an end rhyme that evokes a third, concealed proverb, none the less significant for being so surreptitiously included. Wettinger and Fsadni imply this technique in one of their philological annotations to the poem, remarking that the end rhyme composed of “sura” (appearance) and “vintura” (prospects) brings to mind a further Maltese saying that employs the same terms for its internal rhyme: “Ghad li kerha s-sura, sabiha l-vintura” (uninviting appearances entail attractive prospects). This adage evidently enjoyed long currency amongst Maltese speakers up to the eighteenth-century, when it was recorded by the scholar Gio Pietro Francesco Agius de Soldanis. Would the adage not have been readily brought to mind through the coincidence between its internal and the couplet’s end rhymes? Appropriately enough, the unexpressed but acoustically invoked proverb adds thematic insight to the Cantilena’s central motif, for it converts the poem’s argument about external appearances (“sura”) that may ruin one’s future prospects (“vintura”) into its proverbial inverse: namely, that unattractive appearances may conversely entail attractive prospects. The Cantilena’s final segment is thus not a mere cluster of popular sayings, but a means of assimilating antecedent axioms into a creative interweaving and inversion of perspectives, from which further inferences constantly emerge.

21 Ibid. 407.
22 Wettinger and Fsadni 54.
23 My observation that the Cantilena’s final segment is a creative interweaving of several axioms has inspired Vella to look further into this possible play of proverbial perspectives, discovering in the process another relevant Sicilian proverb, “Terra niura duna bonu pani; terra bianca prestu stanca,” in Emma Alaimo, Proverbi Siciliani (Milano: Aldo Martello, 1974) 59.
Here too, a progressive execution of the text’s latent medieval techniques is the inheritable dynamics that sustains the poem as a work of art.

Caxaro’s aesthetic effort to distance his lyrical idiom from mere referentiality is demonstrated in both the hyperbolic-synecdochic tension analysed in the preceding section and the play between individual and communal voices considered here. In its transformation from historical fact to poetic performance, any public humiliation suffered by the poet would have received contemporary acknowledgement as an aesthetic triumph, surpassing the historical finality of his misadventure with the surplus meaning and the open-ended possibilities of spiritual renewal pertaining to the aesthetic experience. In transforming his thwarted ambitions and damaged social standing into an enduring aesthetic potential for successive generations of readers, Caxaro displays art’s fundamental capacity to assimilate the irreversible calamities of life within the ongoing adjustability of artistic perception. “Would that Maltese poets of our times wrote such poetry as this,” contends Mallia in response to a literary review by Erin Serracino Inglott that judges Caxaro’s poem as of little literary merit were it to be written today, a poem acquiring its value only by virtue of its centuries-old preservation. Rather, it is its high literary potential that surpasses its historical significance, even its relevance to the history of Maltese as a written idiom, argues Mallia. And we must subscribe to this view when we examine yet another aspect of the poem’s performative capacity, namely, its complex intertextuality with biblical parable.

**A transformative intertextuality**

As has been repeatedly observed, the Cantilena’s speaker recites to his summoned neighbours two dramatic occasions equally informed by biblical narrative. The poem’s initial account, culminating in the graphic image of a drowning sea, has evident antecedents in the Old and New Testaments. The ensuing narrative of a collapsed house relates even more specifically to the parable of the wise and the foolish builders, narrated by Jesus as a cautionary tale against those who would disregard the tenets of his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7: 24-27; Luke 6: 46-49). To heed Christ’s words is to have erected one’s house on rock, upon foundations sufficiently firm to make it withstand the buffeting winds, rain and floods. Conversely, to fail to put Christ’s words into practice is to act like the foolish builder whose house, thoughtlessly erected on sand, comes down with the first weather. This parable’s main agent of calamity – the floods – recalls the poem’s initial allegory of destructive waters,

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24 Mallia 124.
25 Ibid. 125.
26 Friggieri 47.
illustrating how the Cantilena’s watery motif is prolonged through the augmenting images of a deep well, a turbulent sea, and a ruinous deluge. Fatal waters are, of course, a favourite biblical theme, as this section will demonstrate by analysing the Cantilena’s subtle and transformative evocation of the Bible’s association of human weakness with deadly waters, salient examples of which are the Old Testament story of the Flood and the New Testament episode of Peter’s faltering faith and near drowning.

Sacred though biblical precedents are, the Cantilena reworks their strictly religious context into its own secular counterpart, its worldly complaint against false appearances. On the other hand, biblical motifs maintain an aura of spiritual and sacred revelation even when relocated, through ironic inversion and cynical adaptation, within more profane settings. The resultant play of secular and sacred perspectives can be observed in the Cantilena’s subtle response to the idea of spiritual negligence embodied in the parabolic builder who knowingly erects his house on sand. The Cantilena’s alternative focus on an apparently solid ground concealing soft clay – the poem’s tangible image of deception – transforms the biblical builder from a thoughtless agent of catastrophe into a victim of false appearances. Hence the persona’s emphatic refrain against guilt, his reiterated denial of any fault imputable to either his builders or himself. This ironic transformation of a blameworthy builder into a deceived party reveals the poem’s questioning stance towards biblical parable, its modulation of the Bible’s severe tones against unwisely sought foundations for one’s spiritual being into the alternative suggestion that a world of false appearances hardly leaves room for accountability.

A similar intertextual process can be discerned in Caxaro’s transformative drawing on the biblical motif of destructive waters. Here too, what makes for poetic refinement is not the mere extraction of images from their religious narrative, but their reworking into alternative implications within the interactive space between sacred and literary texts. The Cantilena’s persona starts his lamentation in an enervating frame of mind that culminates, by the end of the first stanza, in the image of a suicidal sea. The spectacle of water as a ruinous agent is reinforced by the ensuing allusion to the parable of the foolish builder, where the watery element once again plays a destructive role. In the intertextual space between biblical and poetic texts, therefore, the association of water with catastrophe is directly or inferentially intensified. Such a recurring correlation easily calls to mind other biblical instances in which water either effects a global purging, as in the Flood story, or a deadly test of faith, as in the apostolic episode of Peter’s debilitating doubt and imminent risk of drowning. Once again, however, these images are only poetically brought to mind through significant ironic reversal: survival from drowning is entirely up to the Apostle’s faith in the biblical narrative, whereas the Cantilena’s persona is
condemned to suicidal waters by the whims of another ungovernable heart. Likewise, it is a globally blameworthy mankind that brings upon itself a deservedly proportionate deluge in the biblical Flood, whereas the amplification of water into a sea of troubles in the poem’s first allegory is the unprovoked deed of the same wanton heart.

The interaction of contrary perspectives is not foreign to medieval religious allegory in vernacular discourse and culture. Referring specifically to the English and French medieval context, Nicolette Zeeman may yet be revealing a broader worldview when defining vernacular religious allegory as the mechanism that “exploits discrepancies within its components” (150). The “critical, ironic or iconoclastic dimension” of the popular use of religious allegory in the later medieval period, Zeeman elaborates, involves the “thought-provoking conjunctions of things unlike.” The Cantilena’s adaptation of biblical allegory can be seen as part of this broader vernacular practice of the time, that is, as an allegorical mindset proceeding only through the tension of dissimilar viewpoints triggered by the popular appropriation of religious imagery.

That Caxaro’s poem evokes the “sacred, religious or biblical” domain only to surpass it towards a “profane theme,” aptly conveyed through an humanistic outlook, has been persuasively argued by Mark F. Montebello.27 Further evidence of the poem’s primary focus on human nature, Montebello remarks, lies in its inverted sequence of cause and effect: the Cantilena proceeds from the persona’s destroyed morale towards the concealed cause of psychological devastation, that is, the unforeseeable layer of soft clay (26). By virtue of the poem’s sequential reordering of agency and effect, human despair not only precedes its own empirical cause, but also functions as the affective medium through which all other related factors are perceived. This foregrounding of human sensibility is enhanced in the poem’s middle section, where the poignant refrain “Huakit hi mirammiti” (“It came down my house”) varies only slightly in its exclusive focus on the speaker’s disconsolate frame of mind. Anaphora, the initial sentence position assigned to this affective refrain, adds syntactical to lyrical priority.

The Cantilena’s movement from a biblical to an humanistic outlook betrays its persona’s tendency to shift grounds in the face of unpredictable outcomes, pragmatically adjusting his beliefs according to the fortuitous eventualities of life. This pragmatic flexibility of the persona’s temperament is just as evident in the timely shift from personal to communal voices at the moment of deepest

despair, as discussed above. The more ironic and crafty aspect of this morphing nature of the persona is, however, the fact that he should appropriate the very cause of his collapsed house – the allegorical figure of a ground that shifts unexpectedly – as the guiding principle for coping with life’s contingencies. So much is implied by the self-exhortation, “You change the location that harms (or suits) it,” as well as by the aphoristically conveyed reasons for change: “He who changes his locale, changes his fortune! / For land changes appearance with every span.”

It is a paradoxical turn of events that the very cause of his despair should provide the lyrical speaker with his newfound strategy of shifting grounds in the face of adversity, prompting him to assume an opportunistic and mobile disposition more attuned to life’s fortuitous circumstances. Nonetheless, the emerging awareness that shifting grounds can prove to be both one’s adversity and one’s ruse against adversity is the paradoxical insight attainable through animating the Cantilena as a subtle and inconclusive play of perspectives. The resultant growth in perception occasioned through the lyrical dynamics of the work can be further demonstrated by another evocative interplay of poetic devices, namely, the relationship between the poem’s melodic structure and its central topos of the fall.

**Melody and the Topos of the Fall**

A poem’s acoustic design – shaped from elements such as refrain, rhythmic structure, rhyming schema, pauses, stresses, and alliteration – equips the poet with a versatile tool for variations in both thematic and melodic motifs. The Cantilena betrays an overall acoustic schema whose intriguingly suggestive variations can be seen to correlate with the persona’s shifting humour. What has been designated as the poem’s peculiar musicality derives primarily from the compositional arrangement of its reiterated elements, as Friggieri notes with reference to its schema of “m” and “n” sounds combined with refrain and parallelisms (50). Just as acoustically organized are the poem’s six rhymed couplets, three of which convey the speaker’s opening appeal for his neighbours’ sympathy, whereas the other three constitute his closing and self-addressed resolution to look for pastures new. Between these two rhyming segments that articulate the persona’s opposing dispositions of suicidal despair and regained fortitude, rhyme fades away in two middle quatrains, whose brooding reiteration of the key register of downfall (“Huakit hi mirammiti”) momentarily displaces the poem’s overall melodic structure.29

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28 See note 16.
29 Friggieri 52.
The speaker’s melodic flow thus undergoes partial disintegration at precisely that lyrical moment when grief prevails as a poignant refrain, prior to the final three couplets’ recovery of both rhyme and resolution, that is, the restitution of both melodic and psychological integrity. It is not just the allegorical house that collapses in the Cantilena; but the very acoustic structure of the poem breaks down midway towards the regained fortitude of the last three rhymed couplets. The topos of the fall may thus be seen to pervade the lyrical as much as the architectural structure, sound as much as sense. After all, the composition’s historically preserved designation as a Cantilena makes it poetically mandatory that its sound must seem an echo to its sense.

Brincat’s conjecture that the middle quatrains are an unfinished poetic segment, possibly transcribed by Brandano from an authorial draft that itself still lacked a final version, can of course be speculated as an historical cause behind the poem’s peculiar middle divergence from its own rhyming schema. This view contrasts with Friggieri’s more critical (as opposed to philological) description of the same segment as an aesthetically calculated variation from the poem’s rhymed beginning and end, a deliberate dismantling of a prosodic and acoustic pattern. Brincat contends that, when set against the poem’s metrical regularity, the isolated hemistich (or verse fragment) conveying the persona’s cry of grief midway through the poem, together with its repetition in what he considers a rewriting of the Cantilena’s middle segment, provide persuasive evidence of a copyist’s flawed (perhaps later discarded) attempt at transcription, if not the poet’s own draft version of the work. Friggieri’s contrasting view – that this divergence from the work’s overall rhyming and metrical schema dramatizes the persona’s pathetic fixation on his ill luck – suggests a broken voice worked into the poem’s lyrical flow, thereby effecting a breakdown of poetic structure that the reader must perform at the very instant when the graphic image of a collapsed house is being inconsolably conveyed. The poem’s structured, dismantled and resumed schema of rhyming couplets would thus read as an acoustic parallel to the tangible experience of a constructed, collapsed, and rebuilt house.

To be sure, Brincat does full justice to the Cantilena’s “art of medieval versification,” as well as its consummate employment of rhetorical devices. The following excerpt on Caxaro’s use of anaphora, parallelism, and other forms of repetition leaves little doubt as to Brincat’s conviction that the poet applied rhetorical and acoustic devices with painstaking attention to detail:

30 Brincat 170.
31 Friggieri 52-3.
32 Brincat 170.
33 Ibid. 170, 172.
There is anaphora in lines 7 and 10 to open and close the quatrain, *Huakit hy mirammiti / Huakit thi mirammiti*, and in 7 and 11, *Huakit hy mirammiti / Huec ucatik hi mirammiti* at the beginning of the quatrain and of the second six-line group. There is consistent use of two parallel phrases based on the same verb to establish contrasts: in line 2 with the verb *mensab, ni(n)sab* establishing a semantic contrast between *fil-gueri* and *fo homorocom*, the past and the present; in line 8, with the verb *mectatilix, ma kitatili*, where the negative particle *ma* is echoed in the abbreviated form of *imma* that precedes the verb, and a contrast is established between *il mihallimin* and *li gebel*; and the verb *ibidill, ibidil* in line 13, for contrast between *miken* and *vintura*; as well as *hemme ard* in line 15. There is also the repetition of words from one line to the next: *li gebel, il gebel* at the end of the second hemistich of line 8 and at the end of the first hemistich of line 9; the repetition of *tiragin, tirag* with a different adjective in lines 4 and 5, and the repetition of *nenzel, ninzil* in lines 5 and 6, and of *nibni, ibnie* in lines 10 and 11, and *biddilihe, ibidill* and *il miken* in lines 12, 13. This device gives a kind of stepping down movement from one line to the next and all these devices together give a remarkably close-knit structure to the text thanks to *replicatio* and contrasts.34

Brincat’s point – that such a technically fastidious poetic mind would hardly tolerate an imperfect middle section – excludes the possibility of a deliberte variation on medieval metrical norms through which the speaker (or singer) could enact a broken lyrical voice dramatizing his devastated soul. Apart from being intrinsic to the oral transmission of ballads, motets, cantilenas, romances and other medieval forms of poetic performance, poetic variation also seems to have been employed in particular medieval genres as an intratextual and self-reflexive technique. For instance, one definition of the *cantilenam* genre describes it as a shorter form of medieval sung poetry whose narrative stanzas alternate with songlike refrain so as to effect an intratextual return of the poem upon itself, in a calculated deviation from the linear isomeric narrative of such “high style” poetic traditions as the *chanson*.35 Can Caxaro’s lyrical descent from an isometric rhyming structure into a fragmented middle segment, only just held together by obsessive refrain, be attributed to this medieval trend of performative diversification and intratextuality, achievable by just such a technically fastidious mind as Brincat recognizes in the poet? Even this conjecture, one must keep in mind, relies on a present-day re-enactment of the Cantilena’s latent possibilities of realization. In other words, it is the Cantilena’s

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34 Ibid. 172-3.
inherent possibilities of artistic performance – such as its topos of the fall dramatized in a broken lyrical structure – that generates further scholarly interest in the medieval tradition of oral recital, rather than the other way around.

In medieval romance languages, the terms *cantilena* and *carmina* are interchangeable in their reference to vernacular songs appealing to the common class and characterized by indecent insinuations on prominent figures. Nonetheless, the medieval term *cantilena* also referred to songs on heroic wartime deeds conveyed by “a great variety of singers,” including monks and noblemen, though the genre continued to be used by, for instance, common women publicly singing the disgrace of fellow female citizens. While these facts, drawn from John Haines’s *Medieval Song in Romance Languages*, cover an historical period starting centuries before Caxaro’s time, they bear a significant resemblance to Wettinger’s comments on profane fifteenth-century cantilenas sung by a group of Gozitan youths accompanied by a priest, as well as Wettinger’s further remarks on contemporary *canczuni* “sung in the streets of the town for a considerable time by boys, slaves and infant pupils” as a mocking reminder of some fellow citizen’s personal calamity. Taken together, both sources suggest a medieval milieu in which individual misfortune was mockingly sung by different oral genres, amongst which the cantilena also attained to more serious heroic themes.

Mallia implies a similar ambivalence for Caxaro’s Cantilena, a composition whose narrative function is subordinated to its songlike performance accompanied by a guitar, yet whose tragic and stylized motif suggests recital within educated medieval households, surpassing the humbler objectives of popular verse. Once again, it is very significant that the poem’s latent possibilities of melody and style should guide the critic in conjecturing its original milieu, that the work’s performed blend of popular and elevated literary qualities should prompt him to delineate a similarily complex world of medieval oral recitation. If today’s different readings of Caxaro’s Cantilena seem to have been predated by the genre’s own history of varied applications, ranging from descent into public ridicule to elevation to heroic style, it is nonetheless the modern act of reading that postulates this tradition by actualizing the poem’s potential contrasts, its dormant possibilities of intratextual play.

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37 Ibid, 66.
39 Mallia 120.
The Cantilena as a growing heritage of readings and enactments (whether of an aesthetically consummate work, or an incomplete draft, or a combination of both) safeguards its institution as a work of art against reduction to a single perspective, performance, or insight. Nonetheless, certain lyrical qualities of the work remain salient in all readings, such as the prevailing topos of the fall, evoked by the initial image of the speaker thrown down the well, by the subsequent allegory of his collapsed house, and by the metrical collapse of his singing voice – all of which make his final resolve to reconstruct both house and morale, in correspondence with the poem’s return to rhyming couplets, all the more outstanding as an aesthetic transcendence of ruin.

**The Poem’s Afterlife**

The Cantilena’s play of perspective through hyperbole and synecdoche; its modulation from a despairing to a defiant tone; its corresponding change from an individual to a collective (proverbial) voice; its humanistic transformation of biblical parable, alluding to man’s “intrinsic spiritual power” to overcome unforeseeable humiliation; its reversal of the chronological sequence of cause and effect; its structural disintegration at the very point when the image of the collapsed house becomes most poignantly reiterated – these and other realizations of its latent aesthetic potential reveal it to be an evolving literary tradition. The poem’s allegorical and inferential capacity transforms even its historical point of departure into an expanding field of conjectures, if only because its primary function as a connotative artwork has the potential to accommodate more than a single circumstance of grief. Hence Montebello’s judicious observation that “Caxaro may not be referring to one single case,” but to the broader human condition, deploying an allegorical technique that “functions as a stimulation to further reflection, and as an openness to the mystery and riddle of life,” rather than encouraging a “futile […] search for a strict correspondence” between each of his poetic figures and “concrete” circumstances.

Bearing in mind that any humiliating incident undergone by Caxaro would have been widely discussed on account of his prominent position in society, the Cantilena could not but have been intended, from its very conception, as an aesthetic experience exceeding the simple reiteration of publicly known events. Its original and enduring significance lies elsewhere, namely, in the way it reworks the meaning of a devastated life through newly unfolding allegorical and parabolic insights, that is, through a connotative dynamics set to work by

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40 Montebello 31.
41 Ibid. 30.
each act of reading. A literary work is readable as such to the extent that its figurative potential remains to be read, for the act of reading literature must always take place at the threshold of the yet unsaid, of what remains to be more subtly discerned and articulated. To recover an all but ruined life through an artistic response to misfortune is still the primary allure of Caxaro’s Cantilena, but this response is only attained through reactivating the evocative interplay of guilt, deception, and shifting grounds.

In all probability, the Cantilena’s endurance as an expanding field of inferential and figurative possibilities will hold off any final interpretative or historical word for quite some time. Even predominantly historical research into the personal background and social circumstances surrounding the work’s author has proved somewhat susceptible to revision. A case in point is Wettinger and Fsadni’s second study, in 1983, of additional biographical details amending their earlier postulations on Caxaro’s relations. The provisionality of knowledge implied by such revisions need hardly bewilder us. It merely confirms the poem’s afterlife as a growing institution of aesthetically stimulated probings into the enigma of human resignation and resilience, a poetic tradition so fecund in its inferential capacity, so open to further insight.

References


42 Wettinger and Fsadni 9.


