

TWO OLD MALTESE POEMS

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IN previous numbers of this Journal there have appeared English translations of selections of Maltese literature. The present translation is in the same tradition.

Long before man started to write down his poetic compositions, the art of verse composition was practised verbally, some of the products being transmitted orally from one generation to another. Men composed the verses because they wanted to, using an innate sense of rhythm to help them with the metre.

The two poems which follow differ slightly in their nature. The first, 'From the Singing of the People,'¹ is rather a collection of varying numbers of separate, or related, verses: it will be seen that some of them are spoken by a man, others by a woman. Many of these verses might well have had their origin at some function such as *Mnarja*, the festivities held in the Buskett Gardens on the eve of, and during, the feast of SS. Peter and Paul (29th June). Here, friendly competitions would develop, often spontaneously, between two or more people, each trying to outdo the other in impromptu verse.

The second poem, 'The Bride of Mosta,' is a unity, with a narrative theme, and is the more interesting of the two as regards its history.² One of the oldest songs there is in Maltese, it was widely known in olden days, but seems gradually to have become less and less widely known. This is one of the hazards in the life of those tales which are preserved by oral means only. Fortunately, before possibly being lost, it was committed to writing and first appeared in 1897 in *Archivio Glottologico Italiano* by Professor Luigi Bonelli. Bonelli appears to have heard it in Malta, most probably from the famous Maltese writer Annibale Preca. Preca himself, in his turn, had taken it from a manuscript given to him by

¹ 'Mill-Ghanja tal-Poplu' and 'L-Gharusa tal-Mosta' are the first two poems in *Il-Muża Maltija*, ed. Ġ. Aquilina, A.C. Aquilina & Co., Malta, 1969. This is the text used for the translation.

² For the history of the song – as distinct from the history of the event depicted – see Ġ. Cassar Pullicino, 'Il-"Ghanja tal-Gharusa tal-Mosta" b'xi żieda,' in *Leben il-Malti, Marzu-Ġunju, 1942, Għadd 133-136*, pp. 26ff. There is also similar material by the same author in his *Kitba u Kittieba tal-Malti, It-Tieni Ktieb, L-Ewwel Taqsima*, Università Rjali ta' Malta, 1962, pp. 15ff.

his friend Dun Pawl Chetcuti from Mosta, who learned it orally from his old aunt, and Preca later published it in 1904 in *Malta Cananea*. The original version published by Preca had fourteen verses, but the standard version in *Kitba u Kittieba tal-Malti* and *Il-Muza Maltija* now has sixteen. The two additional verses were discovered by J. Cassar Pullicino. He learned them from his mother, who had herself learned them from her grandmother from Gharghur.

So much for the history of the song, but what about the history of the event which the song depicts? A large amount of the literature in Maltese deals with events connected with Malta's history. From about the 13th century onwards, until the later years of the rule of the Knights of the Order of St. John (1530-1798), Malta was attacked and raided by the Barbary corsairs, and later by the Turks also. As a result of some of these raids, a number of people were either killed or carried off as slaves. The sad and moving story of 'The Bride of Mosta' could have had as its inspiration one such raid.

There has, however, been some discussion as to whether or not the story of 'The Bride of Mosta' is, in fact, a Maltese tale at all, or whether it is simply a variant of a Sicilian folk-tale.³ The most noticeable similarities between the Sicilian and Maltese tales are in the way in which the captive girl appeals, without success, to her mother to pay the sum demanded for her ransom. Although the mother is not at all willing to pay the sum, the girl's husband (in the Sicilian tale) or bridegroom (in the Maltese version) is more than prepared to do so.

Is the Maltese tale, therefore, simply a version of the Sicilian one, or is it a genuine traditional Maltese song? Internal evidence shows that it must be quite old. Songs with common features are often assigned to a common source: and as it is true that many Maltese proverbial sayings are very similar to those in Sicily, so 'The Bride of Mosta' could, from one point of view, be said to be a Maltese version of the Sicilian tale. On the basis of known facts, however, it would seem that the Maltese song is not an imitation of the Sicilian one. Nobody actually knows for sure the time when the event which the song depicts took place. Some say it was a 16th century event, others say it was perhaps three centuries earlier. No definite date can be assigned to the Sicilian tale either.

³ See the following leading articles on the subject: A. Cremona, 'Is the Maid of Mosta a Myth?' *Journal of the Malta University Literary Society*, No. 10, March 1934. E. Rossi, 'Scibilia Nobili' e la Leggenda della Sposa della Mosta,' *Lares*, Anno III - N. 2 - Settembre 1932 - X. R. Corso, 'La Canzone della Sposa rapita dai pirati barbareschi,' *La Rivista d'Oriente* (Napoli, Ottobre, 1935).

However, the first reference to the Maltese story appears more than a century before the first reference to the Sicilian one. Moreover, an 18th century document has an allusion to the Bride of Mosta, and adds that 'songs about the captive maid are still sung.' The fact that the Bride of Mosta was a traditional figure in the 18th century must surely indicate that she had been known in Malta for a long time already. And it has been suggested that the episode depicted by the poem may go as far back as the 14th or even the 13th century.

Two introductory points must be made about the translation. First, there has been no attempt at all to imitate the original metre of the Maltese. In many respects Maltese is more concise than English, and consequently a good English version would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to fit into the corresponding metre. Second, although the translation is largely a close, literal one, there has been a certain freedom exercised in places: it is hoped that, in this way, something of the spirit of the original may be transferred to the English version as well – and this, surely, is one of the main prerequisites of the translation of works of literary merit.

MILL-GHANA TAL-POPLU

Miskina mart il-bahri,
La tara l-bahar titniehed;
Tissamma' l-farag joqrob,
Kull ma jmur aktar jitbieghed!

X'dawl ta' qamar tala' l-lejla!
Il-kwiekeb kemm huma çari!
Hanini, insaqsik kelma:
Għadek thobbni bħalma dari?

B'makturek żejjint 'il Malta,
B'erba' truf, b'erba' igfien;
Ġib sikkina, iftaħ qalbi,
Biex tara 'k inhobbok jien.

Għajnejk fossa tad-djamanti,
Wiçcek fossa taç-çurkett;
Ilsienek imqass tal-fidda,
Halqek ponta ta' stalledt!

Żewg għajnejn ghandu hanini,
Harishomlu minn kull għajn!
Il-guvni noqtol b'idejja
Jekk narah f'hoġor l-oħrajn.

Ilsienek kanarin jgħanni
Fuq il-ħabel ta' l-inxir;
Hanina, oqghod attenta,
Għax lili biss għandek ilsir. ♣

Kull dell li nara naħsbu dellu,
Kull ombra naħsibha tiegħu,
L-ikbar gwaj li fiha d-dinja,
Min tkun thobbu ma tkunx miegħu!

Wiçc ta' hena, ta' l-imħabba,
F'għieh il-pwieni, ftakar fija;
F'għieh l-imħabba illi nhobbok,
Thallinix f'din it-tbatija.

FROM THE SINGING OF THE PEOPLE

Have pity for the sailor's wife in fear,
For when she hears the sea she heaves a sigh;
She hears some consolation drawing near,
It farther goes away as time goes by.

What radiant moonlight on this evening rose!
How clearly do the stars appear, so bold!
Sweetheart, to you one question I must pose –
Do you still love me as you loved of old?

'Twas with your handkerchief's four sides I did adorn
This isle of Malta, and with galleons four.
Bring here a knife, my heart be open torn,
So you will see how you I do adore.

Your eyes like stones of diamonds have a sheen,
Your face is like the stone of some large ring;
Your tongue some silver scissors might have been,
Your mouth a dagger's point, bright, glistening.

My sweetheart has two eyes: I pray,
Guard them for him from every evil eye!
The youth with my own hands I'll surely slay
If him in others' laps I do espy.

Your tongue is a canary which, all day,
Upon the clothes' line sings in sweetest tone.
Sweetheart, to me your full attention pay,
Because you have a slave in me alone.

Each shadow which I see I think 'tis his,
Each shade I think his presence near me proves;
The greatest sorrow which the world knows is
The time one may not be with him one loves.

Oh face of happiness, of love so true,
Pray, for the sake of sorrow, think of me:
And, for the sake of my love shown to you,
Oh leave me not in this deep misery.

Demmi ċarċar ġo l-ghadajjar,
L-ghasafar niżlu xorbuh,
Meta nara l-helu wiċċek
Mn'ghajnejja jaqbez id-dmugh.

Fejnek? Fejnek? Xejn ma rajtek,
Sa l-hagar staqsejt ghalik!
Li kienu il-qlub jinqalghu
'Il qalbi naqla' w naghtik

Fejn ġebuni kapriċċija?
Fejn ġebuni s-sbieh ġhajnejk?
Donnok tfajtli l-ankri f'qalbi,
Kull ma mmur ningibed lej.

Dawk ġhajnejk fosos rubini
Fil-kxiexet ta' l-argentieri;
Dawk xufftejk tal-passolina
W ilsienek tal-kannamieli.

Par imsielet mandolina,
Ġhax hekk l-użu ta' daż-żmien;
Min ihobb lilek, ħanina,
Qalbu toħla u ssir ġnien.

Ilsienek pagġatur nagħmel,
U f'qalbek nagħmel qasrija;
U ġhajnejk nagħmilhom mera
W inżommok titpaxxa bija!

Ejja 'l hawn, la tibżax minni;
Bil-katina ma' norbtokx.
Norbtok biss bl-egħruq ta' qalbi,
F'ħajti kollha ma nħollokx.

Is-siġra ta' l-amarena
L-egħruq tagħha fil-Mandragg;
Ix-xebbiet ġhejjun ta' l-ilma,
Il-ġuvintur kollha bil-ġhatx.

Ikser dġhajstek, itfi fanalek,
Imħabba tiegħek ma baqax;
Ġirieni kollha qaluli
Li minnek ma nintrigax.

My sorry blood in pools did flowing spill,
The birds came down to drink of it their store;
And when I see your sweet face, then tears fill
My eyes and leap from them in floods to pour.

Where are you? I've not seen you. All forlorn
I even asked the stones if they knew where.
If only hearts could from their place be torn,
My heart to give to you I'd gladly tear.

Into what state have my whims led me now?
And what same state have your eyes brought me to?
Some anchors in my heart you seem to throw;
As time goes by I'm closer drawn to you.

Your eyes resemble gems of ruby clear,
In boxes which a silversmith did beat.
Your lips to me black currant do appear,
Your tongue is as the sugar cane as sweet.

Just like a mandolin her earrings neat,
For thus it was the fashion of those years.
Whoever loves you, sweetheart, ah! how sweet
His heart is, like a garden he appears.

Your tongue into a gallery I'll make,
And in your heart a flower pot I'll mould;
Your eyes, them as a mirror I will take,
And you, entranced with me, I'll always hold.

Come here, with me pray have of fear no part;
I will not bind you with the chain to me,
But only with the tendons of my heart;
In all my life I will not set you free.

The winding roots of some sweet cherry tree
Within the Manderaggio do press.
The girls like founts of water seem to be:
How great the thirst which all the youths possess!

Now break your boat, your lantern now put out,
Your love for me has not continued true.
My neighbours all have told me without doubt
That I'll not be responsible for you.

Il-kitarra strument helu,
Kalamita tax-xebbiet;
Titla' 'l fuq u tinzel 'l isfel,
Donnu ghandha s-sharjiet!

Dik Malta l-ewwel ma nhalqet;
Dik Malta l-ewwel ma tinzel!
Ej, hanina, busni bewsa,
Qabel il-mewt tahsad bil-mingel!

Seba' kwiekeb hemm fis-sema;
Tlieta minnhom kemm jogħgbuni:
Wahda x-xemx, u l-ohra l-qamar,
L-ohra l-bidu tan-namuri!

X'riha din ta' berquq ghandek?
Liema sigra bdiet issajjar?
Meta nara 'l wiċċek, gojja,
Għal urajk jien kif nittajjar!

Kieku taf jien kemm inħobbok,
Kieku żżommni fuq idejk,
Titmagħni b'biċċa minn qalbek,
Tisqini bid-dmugh t'ghajnejk.

Dak sidrek bacil tal-fidda,
Jiena huta ngħum go fih;
Drament li d-dinja dinja.
'Il gismek jien ingawdih:

Jekk il-baħar isir trejqa,
Fuqu nimxi lejli kollu.
Jiena nmur sa fejn hanini;
Jekk inhu marbut, inħollu.

Hanini b'ghatli l-ittra
Fuq il-gwienah tal-ghasfur,
Kif tar, waqghetlu l-baħar, -
Ajma x'piena u x'dulur!

Ej, hanina, ngħannu għanja,
U ngħannuha t-tnejn flimkien!
Nixtieq, maħbuba ta' qalbi,
Thobbni n-nofs li nħobbok jien!

How sweet an instrument is the guitar,
Which, as a magnet, all the girls does pull;
Both high and low its notes do range so far,
It seems as though of magic it were full.

This Malta 'twas that was created first;
The first 'twill be below the seas to roll.
Come, sweetheart, for your kisses I do thirst,
Before death with its sickle reaps its toll.

Within the sky some seven stars shine bright;
How three of them with pleasure do me move:
The sun by day is one, the moon by night,
Another the beginning is of love!

What scent of apricot pervades round you?
Which tree so sweet to ripen has begun?
Ah, when I see your face, my sweetheart true,
Then flying after you how I do run!

If you knew of my love but one small part,
If in your hands to hold me you would think,
You'd feed me with a piece of your own heart,
With tears from your own eyes you'd give me drink.

Your breast a basin is of silver cast,
And I within it swimming am a fish;
So while the world the way it is may last,
How I your body to enjoy do wish.

If ever to a road be turned the sea,
Upon it I would walk the whole night through.
I'll reach to wheresoe'er my sweetheart be;
If he is tied, his bonds I will undo.

Sweetheart, a letter he did send to me,
And with a bird he sent it, on its wing:
As off it flew, it fell into the sea –
Alas, what grief and sorrow this did bring!

My sweetheart, let us sing a song, come here,
And both together let us sing it through.
I wish, beloved of my heart so dear,
You loved me half as much as I love you.

Meta Malta issir baħar
U jghaddu ġ-ġfien Sqallin,
Nghidu: 'rekwiem eternam,
Għax haw' għammru il-Maltin!'

Il-warda taċ-ċentifolju
Mistohbija qalb il-weraq.
Qalbi għal kulhadd magħluqa, -
Għalik biss miftuha berah.

Qalbi u qalb hanini wahda;
B'żagarella marbutin.
Il-mewt biss trid tkun għalina
Biex ithollna minn xulxin!

Dak il-baħar kemm hu ikħal!
Jien xtaqt naqta' libsa minnu.
Hanini mar u ġibhieli;
Ma nistax nilmenta minnu!

Ixrifli, ħanina, ixrifli,
Ixrifli, minn bejn il-qsari!
Aqta' warda wixħethieli,
Jekk għadek thobbni bħal dari!

L-GHARUSA TAL-MOSTA

Għaliha l-Gharusa tal-Mosta,
X'sebħilha nħar ta' Tnejn!
Ġew it-Torok u ħaduħa,
U ħsiebħom ma kellħa xejn. *

Meta ġew il-ħaljin Torok
Beda jidden is-serduq,
Il-ħaddara kienet isfel,
Wil-għarus fil-għorfa, fuq.

ħaduħa u marru biħa,
Dawrulħa wiċċħa lejn il-Lvant,
Nezzgħuħa kisjet Malta,
U xeddewlħa it-turbant.

When Malta nought but sea becomes one day,
And over it Sicilian galleons bore,
'Eternal rest to them,' we then shall say,
'For here the Maltese used to live before.'

How beautiful the heart is of the rose,
As deep among the leaves it fain would hide.
My heart for everybody else I close –
For you alone it will be opened wide.

My sweetheart's heart and my own heart are one,
And fastened with a ribbon they remain.
For us, the only thing is death alone
Which from each other us can part in twain.

How deep appears the blueness of the sea!
From it a garment I would like to cut.
My sweetheart went and brought it here to me;
About him I have no complaint to put.

Appear, sweetheart, appear for me to see,
Appear between the flower pots to view.
Cut off a rose and throw it here to me
If you still love me as you used to do.

THE BRIDE OF MOSTA

Woe to the Bride of Mosta, maid so gay,
When Monday dawned, the future unforeseen!
The raiding Turks by rude force seized their prey;
Unwitting of their presence she had been.

Unheeded, wicked Turks came at the gate,
A startled cock, alarmed, began to crow.
Within, the happy groom upstairs did wait,
The wedding guests assembled down below.

They seized and dragged away this maid so fair,
Towards the hated East they turned her face.
From her her Maltese habit they did tear,
And in its stead a turban they did place.

Haduha u sejr in biha,
U qegħduha fuq il-poppa;
Nezzgħuha kisjet Malta,
U xeddewlha l-halja gobba.

Għaliha l-Għarusa tal-Mosta,
X'sebħilhanhar ta' Tnejn!
Qalbha ttaqtaq minn gēwwa,
Kif għaddietu dak il-lejl!

Qabduha u haduha,
Irrigalawha lill-Baxan;
Huma lkoll ferħu biha,
Daru magħha, kbar u zghar.

'Hu l-mant u omxot dlielek,
Hu l-muftieh, ixrob u kul.'
- 'Jien ikel le ma niekol,
Qabel rahli, il-Mosta, immur.'

'Dlieli le ma nomxothom
Qabel immur rahli, il-Mosta,
Tomxothomli l-hanina ommi,
U tidforhomli z-zija Kozza.'

'Għarusa, la ssewwidx qalbek,
Nagħmuluk sultana ta' Ġirba.'
- 'X'jiswieli li nkun sultana,
La wqajt f'idejn l-Ibirba?

'Għarusa, la ssewwidx qalbek,
Nagħmluk sultana ta' l-ibliet.'
- 'X'jiswieli li nkun sultana,
La wqajt f'idejn il-klieb?'

'Ja sidti, la ddejjaqx qalbek,
Hawn il-hwejjeg, ilbes u zzejjen.'
- 'Nilbes? - Nazza għal wiċċek,
Jien ilsira kelli nsir għal dejjem!'

'Ilbes, binti ilbes,
Hemm is-senduq, ilbes u zzejjen.'
- 'Nilbes? - Għobra għala wiċċi
Waqajt ilsira għala dejjem!'

They took her, and away they did repair,
And on their vessel's stem they put the maid.
From her her Maltese habit they did tear,
And in a lavish dress she was arrayed.

Woe to the Bride of Mosta, maid so gay,
When Monday dawned, the future unforseen!
Within her breast her heart filled with dismay,
Ah! how she passed that night in anguish keen!

They seized and took away this maid so fair,
A present to the Pasha she was made.
Both young and old rejoiced to see her there,
Attentive, gloating pleasure all displayed.

'Take off your mantle and arrange your hair,
Here, take the key, relax now, drink and eat.'
— 'I will not eat a single bite, I swear,
Till to my village Mosta I retreat.'

'I swear I will not comb and tress my hair
Till to my village Mosta I retreat.
Comb it for me, sweet mother, with your care,
And plait it, dear Aunt Kozza, so 'tis neat.'

'Do not be sad, fair bride, but be serene,
For we will make you queen of Jerba's lands.'
— 'What's it to me that I should be a queen,
When I have fallen in Barbarians' hands?'

'Do not be sad, fair bride, but be serene,
For we will make you queen of towns and all.'
— 'What's it to me that I should be a queen,
When in the hands of dogs I now did fall?'

'My lady, be not sad, but be serene,
Clothes, ornaments and garments we will give.'
— 'Why should I dress? — Fie on you! Me your queen?
A slave now and for ever I must live!'

'Come dress, my daughter, come and dress, I pray.
Dress and adorn yourself, there is a chest.'
— 'Why should I dress? In misery I stay,
And as a slave for evermore must rest!'

'Orqod, binti, orqod,
Hemm is-sodda, irpoza, strieh.'
– 'Nirpoza? – Ghobra ghala wiċċi,
Waqajt ilsira ghand il-klieb!'

– 'Morru ghidu 'l omni l-hanina,
Li l-fidwa tieghi hi seba' mija.'
– 'Ahjar seba' mija fis-sendug
Inkella binti mifdiya.'

'Morru ghidu liz-zija Kozzi
Li l-fidwa tieghi hi seba' mija.'
– 'Ahjar seba' mija fis-sendug
Inkella bint ohti mifdiya.'

'Morru ghidu 'l-Gharus tieghi
Li l-fidwa tieghi hi seba' mija.'
– 'Inbiegh il-ghalqa l-flinija
Imbasta gharusti mifdiya'

'Come sleep, my daughter, come and sleep, I pray.
Lie down and take your rest, there is a bed.'
– 'Why should I rest? – In misery I stay,
For as a slave to dogs I have been led.'

'Go, tell my mother, of her kind the best,
As ransom seven hundred 'tis they need.'
– 'Far better seven hundred in the chest,
Than that e'en my own daughter should be freed.'

'Go, tell my dear Aunt Kozza, aunt so blest,
As ransom seven hundred 'tis they need.'
– 'Far better seven hundred in the chest,
Than thay my sister's daughter should be freed.'

'Go, tell my Bridegroom, who should have my hand,
As ransom seven hundred 'tis they need.'
– 'At once I'll sell a certain piece of land,
As long as I may have my sweet bride freed.'