

## FURTHER COMMENTS ON PETER CAXARO'S CANTILENA

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I AM certain there still remains much to be written and said about this poem by both students and scholars of the Maltese language alike. I should think that even students and scholars of semitics in general will in time, attempt some research into this significant inscription; particularly those interested in comparative semitics.

Without much further ado I will now examine the literary value and significance this poem holds in and bears on the history of our language; the language of the Maltese archipelago.

The foregoing work is based on the assumption that the authors who discovered the 'Cantilena' have deciphered the writing correctly. As one reads on, he may find that I have repeated some things the authors have already dealt with extensively. This occurrence, of which I am fully aware, is not to be taken as repetition on my part. It has been simply inevitable that my work should overlap that of my predecessors. In most of these instances I have intentionally picked up where the authors left off in order to either clarify a point or to elaborate further on some theory of my own.

Orthographically speaking, 'one must admit that it is not very long since the current orthography was permanently adopted and given full recognition by all. Living proof of this statement is my mother's and auntie's mode of spelling to this very day. Such sounds as 'k' being spelt the Italian way 'ch' and other examples are, 'sc' for 'x', 'i' instead of 'j' and 'ci' for 'c'. That is how recent our standard orthography is! And this is only half a century ago whilst Caxaro's poem was written some 500 years ago! How greater therefore must we anticipate the difference to be after such a lengthier period? Compare contemporary English with Chaucerian English and it will give one a first hand insight into the changes which have occurred in English since Chaucer; then compare the Cantilena as we inherited it from the author to today's Maltese. Time may not of necessity be a criterion for any change in a spoken tongue as one must also consider other factors influencing and infringing on linguistic changes. Any country which has had a stable government and history over such a long period as we are discussing should bear distinct changes in its language, both

written and spoken. If not, then this reflects badly on the populace as a stagnant and backward nation; fortunately this is not so in this case.

Since Caxaro's composition to the present day, Malta has seen many and varied changes not only in her history and bureaucratic structure but also in her customs, science and hence in her language. Therefore, if environment has so strong an influence on a nation's tongue, as indeed it has, then once we realize and appreciate this phenomenon we will comprehend more easily the changes which have occurred in our Maltese tongue over the centuries. As an illustration of linguistic change brought about by environmental factors, apart from our poem, a classical example is the English spoken in Australia with all its idioms compared to the way it has developed in its homeland, England. The true Australian accent, as distinct from all English accents is surprisingly stable throughout the Commonwealth of Australia in spite of the vastness of the land. When spoken, it sounds like a mixture of Cockney with a distinct Australian characteristic about it. As for the idioms, it is difficult to say where or how these originated without reliable scientific research. Such terms as '*fair dinkum*' (meaning – true; in all sincerity; honest; purely), '*bludger*' (meaning – a man who lives off the earnings of bad women; a parasitic person) and another dialectal form is the Australian way of asking a question, '*How ya gowin mayt?*' (How are you going mate?) i.e. 'How are you' or 'How do you do?' (cp. M. '*Kif sejjer sieħbi?*') – Who can really tell how these idioms and forms of speech and accents came into existence to form their own distinct Australian character? Certainly the environment has had much to do with it and other factors such as early convict settlements, migrant invasions from Europe, mixing with the Aborigines and isolation from the western world. These would indeed be the four main contributing factors towards the development of Australian English. Now in the case of Australia we have only mentioned a period of less than two centuries and the influencing factors have all been no less powerful and imposing than the results. In the case of Malta, the time lapse has been longer and the influencing criteria far stronger and more turbulent.

Caxaro's Cantilena throws much light on medieval Maltese orthography and for those who are interested I would strongly recommend a copy of this book, not only to understand fully this commentary but for the intrinsic value contained therein. I do not feel it is necessary to deal with the whole poem word for word as the authors have already executed a highly commendable study in this

regard. It would be futile, arrogant and presumptuous of me to attempt, what would ultimately result in a copy of the author's work.

As we peruse through the first line of the poem it is apparent that the only words still used in today's Maltese are 'ja' and 'giriēni'; the remaining words would be unidentifiable to a high school scholar of Maltese with the possible exception maybe of '*nichadit thicum*'. In the transcription, 'ja' for 'o' (exclamation, vocative case) is spelt 'ye' and this is clearly so even on the facsimile. As the authors have not commented either on the single word or on the phrase '*ja giriēni*', I feel I have a free hand in passing my verdict. With the exception of a translation, transliteration and a brief note on the frequent exchange of 'j' and 'y' and of 'gi', 'ge' or 'g' for soft 'g' (ġ), there is no further study rendered by the authors.

The Maltese interjection 'ja' is most commonly used today in exclaiming contempt for someone (*ja annimal!*). This is in direct apposition to its original use as in (*ja sidi* – my master; *ja ommi* – o mother; *ja Mulej* – dear Lord). Although contemporary Maltese still retains the original meaning of the interjectory syllable, mostly in literary writings or interjectory expressions, we find a strong contrast in the directly opposite meanings it has adopted in its day to day usage. Hence the Semitic 'ja' (  $\text{يَا}$  ) has narrowed its current meaning to what I have just submitted and its use to literary works. Its Romantic counterpart 'o' has been adopted by one and all. It would seem that 'ja' is close to extinction in its original connotation of love and respect but it may yet survive this evolutionary onslaught as there are several instances of its usage in the original sense in modern Maltese poetry. I myself like to use it because of its richer meaning and its Semitic beauty. Listen how I exalted my mother on one of her birthdays:

'Ja ommi, jien ibnek infaħħrek,  
L-ebda ħtiġa fik jiena ma nsib,  
Imma jtini kultant illi ngħannqek,  
U xi bewsa ta' iben nagħtik.'

The late Doctor A. Cremona in his well famed epic drama 'Il-Fidwa tal-Bdiewa' makes complete use of this rich syllable; '*Ja ġid mib-ghut minn darna ...*', '*Ja rabta ta' maktur ...*' and our national poet Dun Karm prays '*Raġa' seba, ja Mulejja ...*'.

Next in the exclamatory phrase comes 'giriēni' (my neighbours). Here again I feel this particular word qualifies for some constructive criticism. 'Girien' the plural of 'ġar' is very commonly used in current Maltese and hence is very much alive on the one hand whilst its singular form 'ġar', though still safely distant from ex-

tion is far less commonly applied in everyday conversations. Thus it is losing ground rapidly and heading towards its doom. The reason for this trend, which is so prevalent in Maltese, is difficult to pinpoint. One may be content to comfort himself in passively accepting this situation as a phenomenon common to most tongues, which results from the passage of time. For myself, I am not willing to accept complacently this, as it seems more logical to say that the use of the singular form is becoming less popular because a more common expression has prevailed over it. If it is far more common to hear one's neighbour referred to as ('*ta' ħdejjja*') or ('*ta' ma' ġenbi*') both meaning 'the one next to me', rather than '*il-ġar tiegħi*' or '*ġari*', my neighbour. Similarly in the plural form, though I reiterate it is still a live word in Maltese, the peculiar possessive tense in which it is used in this context is most uncommon if not obsolete. In fact I do not think it presumptuous of me to term it archaic. No Maltese today would ever think of using this phrase any more than a well balanced Englishman would go around conversing in Shakespearean or Chaucerian terminology. Instead of the more complex form '*ġirieni*' one would preferably say '*il-ġirien tiegħi*', literally 'the neighbours of mine'. That is why in explaining the singular form above, the first term I used was '*il-ġar tiegħi*' rather than '*ġari*' which is also perfectly correct grammatically. Without the interjection '*ja*', both '*ġari*' and '*ġirieni*' may legitimately be used and understood without difficulty. It is only with the addition of the exclamation that the term then becomes archaic.

'*Nichadithicum*' on first glance appears to be a concoction of Maltese with a Latin suffix; on closer scrutiny and with the aid of the notes given on it, one soon appreciates the semitic structure. In current Maltese, this word is obsolete in this form; it survives only as the verb '*thaddet*'. The closest one can get to its meaning is '*ngħidilkom*'. Thus the Cantilena infers '*jiena nħadditkom*' for contemporary Maltese '*jiena ngħidilkom*' or '*jiena nithaddet magħkom*' (I shall tell you). It could be that the modern Maltese spelling of the suffix '*kom*' is given in the Cantilena as '*cum*' for one of two reasons. Either this is indicative of the Maltese spoken during that period as being somewhat closer to Arabic in pronunciation and this would not be unreasonable to expect, or else Peter Caxaro spoke the Maltese dialect popularly referred to as '*tat-tuf*', i.e. the vowel 'u' is used where in accepted Maltese we use 'o' and similarly 'i' is substituted for 'o' in certain words; viz. - '*duk*' (him) instead of '*dak*' and likewise '*killlex*' (everything) instead of '*koll-lox*'. Note the use of the 'c' in '*cum*' instead of the 'k' and the silent 'h' in '*nichadithicum*'.

'*Mensab fil gueri uele nisab fo homorcom*'. An interesting sentence! The first word given by the authors as '*ma nsab*' is indicative again, I think, of Maltese being that fraction closer to Arabic in sound than it is today. There are several instances where Maltese seems to have expanded the 'e' sound into 'a', whilst in Arabic it has retained its original form. I would like to point out at this juncture, that I refer only to Classical Arabic as there are as many variations in sound pronunciation and idioms in the spoken Arabic as there are tribes in the Sahara and Arabian deserts. Two examples of the interchange of the vowels 'a' for 'e' and vice versa in Maltese are; viz. — '*me*' instead of '*ma*' and '*le*' for '*la*'. In the latter case, an interesting development has taken place. Both *le* and *la* have been adopted into our language and both have equivalent claim to fame — the former meaning 'no' and the latter being a corresponding negative to '*ma*'. Both have their distinct functions in structuring ideas, viz. '*la tmurx*' (don't go), but '*ma tmurx*' (you will not go). For further comparison of the modern Maltese 'a' replacing the Arabic 'e' revert to '*ye*' for '*ja*' as explained above.

Another structural formation attracting the eye in this sentence is the different ways of spelling the same word '*fil*' (in the) and '*fo*' both for Modern Maltese meaning 'in'. The first occurrence is in keeping with current Maltese both orthographically and grammatically, i.e.  $fi + l = fil$ , the word assimilates with the article and the article 'l' has not changed its form as the following consonant is known as a weak or moon consonant as opposed to strong or sun consonants. The other form of '*fi*' given as '*fo*' tells us two things about the phrase; (i) that the 'h' in '*homorcom*' is either silent or it represents the Arabic ghain sound and, (ii) as such the vowel 'i' in '*fi*' has assimilated with the first vowel in the word following. Today one would drop the 'i' and simply say '*f'ghomorkom*', thus retaining the all important portion of all semitic tongues, the radical or the root. Note the modern Maltese placement of the digraph ghain instead of the silent 'h'. Precisely what appears to have happened is this. In Maltese we say '*fi ġnien*' (in a garden) but '*f'ghalqa*' (in a field) not '*fa għalqa*' as in '*fo homorcom*'.

The above notation is interesting in that it indicates that the ghain had apparently already lost its Arabic sound, at least in some parts of Malta. It is of interest too, that only very recently I heard this Arabic ghain pronounced by a Maltese from the sister island Għawdex, to be precise he hailed from the village of Għarb..

Compare '*ue*' in verse two in the compound word '*uele*', and '*ui*' in verse three, '*v*' in verse nineteen. It seems that either modern

Maltese has dropped all forms of saying 'and' and adopted the simple 'u' or else the author of the *Cantilena* is improvising new forms for convenience, a common device in Maltese poetry, or else Peter Caxaro has in the first instance joined the two syllables into one word and still retained their separate meaning or in the second instance the 'and' is preceded by a consonant 'n' in '*soltan*' giving an abrupt ending to a word in the middle of a phrase and has chosen for simplification of pronunciation and vowel stress to (i) leave the two syllables apart and (ii) to add an 'i' instead of an 'e' for further stress and to counteract the abrupt closing of the vocal cords in '*soltan*'. We refer to abrupt closings in Maltese poetry, such as this one as '*tronk*'.

Other instances of the same syllable or word, recurring in diverse forms within the same piece of writing are (i) the repetition of 'me' for 'ma' in '*mehandihe*', '*mectatili*', '*me cbitali*', until we come to '*ma kitatili*'; (ii) 'e' instead of the modern 'a' as in examples given and in '*le mule*' for '*la mula*', '*mucsule*' for '*mahsula*', '*ibnie*' for '*ibniha*', '*biddilibe*' for '*biddilha*', '*yeutihe*' for '*iwittiha*', '*seude*' for '*sewda*' and '*minne*' for '*minnha*'.

In contemporary Maltese we have in common usage the assimilation of conjunctions such as 'and' with the following word. This is most prevalent when the word preceding the conjunction ends in a vowel or a silent consonant like '*aħna wkoll*' not '*aħna ukoll*' or '*aħna u kollha*'. Again, we write '*beda(j) w spiċċa*' not '*beda(j) u spiċċa*'. So that further explanations of the structure and placement of the conjunction 'u' in the poem are: (i) it seems that as Caxaro was supposedly a learned man, then it follows there was no regularity or fixed rule in this regard; (ii) or the various adaptations were used for poetical syllabisation, although I doubt this possibility as the poem is written in blank verse and as such does not call for rigid rules; (iii) the ultimate theory is that Caxaro, though familiar with the orthography current at the time was not so well versed in Maltese. This would not be surprisingly so as Maltese had not been accepted as a language of the learned; there had not been any serious attempts to grammatize and hence standardize the spoken 'lingua franca'; from Maltese legal translations I have myself undertaken during my stay in Australia, I do not regard the language used by some notaries public as Maltese but a concoction of Maltese, Italian, English, Latin and some fabricated words which to me were unidentifiable and I honestly don't know how any court of justice can accept these documents as legally binding; and of course, one must not and indeed cannot negate the strong taboo against the learning of Maltese particularly in legal circles.

'*Calb mehandiħe ċhakim soltan ui le mule*' given in the transliteration as '*qalb m'ġħandħa ħakem, sultan u la mula*'. Not a difficult line but with two interesting notations. It may be that Caxaro spoke a dialect similar to that spoken by the inhabitants of Cospicua and its surrounds; those known popularly as '*bil-ka*', i.e. they place a 'k' sound where otherwise in Maltese we would use a 'q', viz. '*Kattus*' instead of the accepted '*qattus*' (cat), '*kalb*' for '*qalb*'. This sound is also heard in some areas of Ġhawdex. I cannot omit saying that although I have described the peculiar sound as 'k', in Maltese it is more like a combination of 'kh' and very similar to the Arabic kaf ق as distinct from the kaf ك. Some other sounds worth noting in this study which have altered or have become interchangeable with other Arabic sounds in Maltese are the Maltese 'd' representing the Arabic dāl د, dhāl ذ, dād ص and thā ث; the Maltese 't' representing Arabic tā ط, thā ث, ṭā ط and sometimes dād ص; the ġħ' in Maltese for the Arabic 'ain' ع, and ġħain غ; the Maltese 'ħ' for Arabic ḥā ح, khā خ and hā ه; the 's' sound for the Arabic sīn س, šād ص, and less commonly zā ظ; and the Maltese 'q' sound for Arabic kāf ق, kāf ك, and sometimes khā خ. Although I have allowed myself to drift into technical details I can justify my action as I deem it is all relevant to our study. To continue, therefore, where I left off. '*Mehandiħe*' for '*m'ġħandħa*' in modern Maltese is cut short by dropping a vowel between radicals and replacing the 'e' with an 'a'; viz. -dħa for -diħe. I have heard similar sounds in Assyrian (Iraqi) Arabic spoken by Iraqi migrants in Australia from Baghdad. An instance which comes to mind is the word '*nagħnigh*' (Maltese for mint) pronounced by them as '*naħiniħe*'. Similarly I have found that certain sounds and words in Iraqi Arabic are closer to Maltese than strangely enough Lebanese ones. Also, I have observed that Lebanese Arabic has an admixture of French words comparable to Italian influence in Maltese and Assyrian Arabic appears to have retained far more semitic traces and harsher sounds. As these latter observations of mine were only based on a limited number of Iraqi and Lebanese migrants in Australia, one should be aware of my limited scope and hence not to take my observations for granted. — Another notation in the sentence I am discussing, though I have veered off the track for a second time, is the use of the vowel 'o' in *soltan*. Compare today's Maltese *sultan*! Although in the study of semitic linguistics the vowels are not given the same importance as in romance languages, I still feel it scientifically of interest to comment on what may seem a minor difference. If during the times of Caxaro '*soltan*' was

more common than the contemporary 'sultan', how does one account for the present day spelling of 'xofftejn' rather than 'xufftejn'?

'Bir imgamic rimitine betiragin muqsule'. The 'i' in 'imgamic' is a vowel of convenience and 'mgamic' stands for today's (i)mghammieq (for Arabic مَغْمَق *i.e.* 'deepened' for the more common term 'magħmul fond' or (i)mƣannad. The difference in 'rimitine' to today's Maltese is 'irmietni'; joined it to the second radical, the second vowel 'i' is lengthened to the diphthong 'ie' and the third vowel is dropped completely. For 'betiragin' we say 'b'turgien' or 'bit-turgien' or 'b'tarag' or 'bit-tarag'. A remarkable change noticeable throughout the whole poem is the common dropping of superfluous vowels with the resulting sequence of radical/radical (R/R) as against the Arabic radical/vowel/radical (R/V/R). It occurs here in 'b'turgien' (R/R/V/R/R/V/R) and again we encounter this kind of formation in the Cantilena viz. *nitila, mirammiti, zimen, miballimin, etc. for modern Maltese nitla', żmien, imrammti, mghallmin.*

'Fen hayran al garca nenzel fi tirag minzeli'. This passage either means 'where, wishing to drown myself, I will descend the stairs of my downfall' or 'where, wishing to drown myself, I will descend the slippery staircase or the steep staircase'. This ambiguity arises out of the many grammatical inconsistencies in this passage which I briefly touched on previously. In the light of these inconsistencies I can elaborate that the more probable translation is the first one as the conjunction 'fi' (in) does not assimilate with the noun; thus there is no definite article. The second meaning however, must not be dismissed completely in view of these observations. Compare 'fi tirag' for 'fit-tarag' with 'sib tafal' for 'sibt tafal'. — The first word 'fejn' may be significant in that it has dropped the Maltese 'j'. This may indicate that in certain parts of Malta, such a dialectal form existed. The same word occurs another twice in the poem and remains consistent in its spelling. Also 'al' for 'ghal' has lost the ghain. Another indication to the loss of the ghain sound?! Or is this another grammatical error on the part of Caxaro? If the answer is the former, then we can safely say that the Arabic ghain in fifteenth century Maltese had already lost much ground in its pronunciation in many parts of Malta.

'nitila vy nargia ninzel deyem fil bachar il hali'. Again we encounter the inclusion and the exclusion of the ghain! The preposition 'vy' for 'u' is probably no more than the 'u' plus the Arabic *و*, whilst 'ninzil' still survives in precisely this form in present day Maltese dialectology. It seems that 'bachar' was pronounced to the



equivalence of Arabic ح. This is highlighted by the presence of 'c' before the 'h' giving it a distinct harsh guttural sound. Even this survives in Maltese dialectology, but the accepted form bears the same sound as the Arabic soft glottal ح. Compare 'hali' with 'garca'. It would seem that the ghain sound increased or decreased in harshness or indeed diction according to the word it occurred in, or else the sound, at that time lay somewhere in between the 'g' and 'h'. Note also the Italianised spelling of 'nargia' (to achieve the soft 'g' effect) instead of 'nargħa' without the 'i'! This I think, is another indication of early Romanic influence on our orthography.

'*huakit hi mirammiti lili zimen nibni*'. The only word in this line about which I have said nothing is '*huakit*'. It occurs five times in the whole passage out of which, it is spelt '*huakit*' thrice, thence '*uackit*' and '*ucakit*'. A mere error or another inconsistency?! Hardly, as it occurs three times spelt the same way but only when preceded by a capital letter. This device, the use of capitals by Caxaro appears to indicate the start of a new sentence instead of the fullstop. In this instance I think it has more than one function and these are: (i) the 'h' is silent as is simply placed there because the author may have found difficulty in distinguishing a small 'u' from the capital 'U'; (ii) as there is no other letter in the Roman alphabet he could have chosen from, to represent a silent radical and as in Italian the 'h' is silent, he chose this one. The other two spellings may differ because of a misspelling in the second instance or else it may be consistent with some vague notion Caxaro may have had of shifting of radicals. Thus from '*uackit*' (V/V/R/R/V/R) he derives '*ucakit*' (V/R/V/R/V/R). Why this should occur at this particular juncture with no apparent variation in meaning or grammatical structure leaves me at a loss. This is a riddle, as minor as it may seem that some future scholar might explain in the future. Another worthwhile orthographic observation is the lack of stress or repetition of a radical where required; viz. '*Miramiti*' in preference to '*mirammti*' and '*deyem*' rather than '*deyyem*'. In the next line '*Mectatilix mihallimin me chitali tafal morchi*' where 'me' stands for '*imma*' Caxaro does not provide us with any sign for the elision of the first syllable '*im*'. In modern Maltese, this line would read '*ma ħtatlix mgħallmin, imma qatagħli tafal merħi*'. Is this a spelling deficiency? Or is it another dialectal formation? — An interesting sign the author uses, apparently to indicate an 'n' is ٧. It occurs three times in the poem, each time apparently for an 'n'. A similar sign varying slightly from the above, is inserted over the word '*miramiti*' (line 4, stanza 2 and final stanza lines 1, 4 and

5). Though the sign differs in each case ~, ʾ, ʿ, and ʔ it should be noted that in each of these cases the word is spelt with one 'm' whilst the once it occurs with a double 'm' or repeated radical (stanza 2, line 1), no sign appears above it. I think it stands to reason that the sign is significant and to my way of thinking it indicates a double or twin radical; perhaps Caxaro had a skeleton knowledge of Arabic and placed this sign instead of the Arabic shadda ّ! Or is it simply his own concoction, for his own reference, in the absence of an established orthography?

'*Fen timayt insib il gebel sib tafal morchi*'. — Again we have an example of radical shifting in '*timayt*' as against today's spelling '*ittamajt*'. There is an interesting anomaly here. If I were to place a semicolon after '*gebel*' and read the passage thus, '*me chitali tafal morchi, fen timayt insib il gebel; sib tafal morchi*', then I have defeated my own previous comparison of '*fi tirag*' with '*sib tafal*'. On the other hand, it is quite feasible and probable that this phrase is in the affirmative as this is not uncommon in medieval expression. And if we accept this reasoning, then the phrase is symbolic of a self lamentation by the author, as if to say 'after all that hard work; find loose clay (you fool). The Maltese equivalent of this being '*wara daqs dak xogħol; sib tafal merħi (ja ġifa)*'. To sustain my argument, note the further lamentation '*uackit hi miramiti*' etc, repeated thrice thereafter. Redundant? Or is he using redundancy as an emphatic device?

A minor fault I would like to point out in '*buakit thi*' is the superfluous 't' given by the author. However, I do not think this is of any significance. Then we come to the personal pronoun '*inte*' which is slightly closer to modern Maltese than the Arabic أنت or أنت whichever the case may be. Unlike Classical Arabic, Maltese does not distinguish sexes of the second personal pronoun either in the singular or plural form.

'*il miken illi yeutihe*' — obsolete form of Maltese '*l-imkien illi jwittiba*'. '*Illi*', though not obsolete is less commonly used than '*li*'. This is another phenomenon in linguistic evolution; the shortening of words. Of course this is a phenomenon peculiar to most languages. At least I have encountered it in, apart from Maltese, Italian, English, Spanish, Arabic and Greek. A random example from Maltese is the shortening of '*ħasabiex*' (now obsolete) to '*sa-biex*' and '*biex*'.

'*min ibidill il miken ibidill il vintura*.' Do you see the inconsistency here? In one spelling he uses a double 'l' whilst in the same breath he uses a single 'l'. Why? The only reason I can think

of, if the first attempt is to be taken as the correct version, or rather the one Caxaro thought correct, is, so that he does not run into the tail of the 'y' in 'yeutihe' which in the facsimile is immediately above it. Though the author poses quite a task to his reader, I think there is a certain elegance which he obviously takes a pride in and which is more befitting a writer of Arabic. Perhaps it is a knowledge of this elegance which deprives him from adding another 'l' to this word! One more comment about this word. It is another occurrence of dual radicals given as one sound with the exception that this time there is no sign above the letter to indicate any duality or even the knowledge thereof.

'*halex liradi 'al col xebir sura*'. The Arabic plural '*liradi*' is today obsolete in Maltese. Had it survived it would have represented an adjectival form rather plurality of a noun. Note the apostrophe before '*al*'. Does this stand for a silent ghain?

'*Hemme ard bayda v hemme ard seude et hamyra*'. I have already commented on the rendering of 'and' into several different forms but the final one is puzzling. '*et*' can stand for the French or Latin meaning. As the introduction to the poem is in Latin I suggest it stands for the former. But why should Caxaro have used the Latin term? A slip of the pen passed unnoticed? Note the more Arabic '*hemme*', '*ard*' and '*seude*' compared to current Maltese '*hemm*', '*art*' and '*sewda*'. As the author has inserted an 'h' in '*hemme*' then it follows that the silent 'h' in current Maltese was then pronounced. This is no surprise as I recall my grand-auntie pronouncing '*xabar*' as '*xaħar*' and '*dabar*' as '*daħar*'. — Also note the radical/vowel sequence in '*hamyra*'.

The final verse, '*hactar min bedan, heme tred minne tamara*' reveals more spelling inconsistencies. Compare '*heme*' with '*hemme*'. The silent 'h' in '*hactar*' may stand for the alif, as no Arabic word starts with a vowel or, it may be indicative of a peculiarity Maltese pronunciation having evolved entirely on its own. Note the interchange of stress from Caxaro's '*min bedan*' to our '*minn bedan*'. '*Hedan*' is an archaic form, though I still remember the parish priest in my village using it along with a multitude of similar words which today would be classified archaic. '*Tred*' for '*trid*' may be another dialectal form for '*trejd*' or indeed '*tred*'. The final word seems to arouse much doubt. Unless '*tamara*' is a word which is unknown to us, then it can only mean one of three things. It could mean '*amar*' (to order); '*għammar*' (to habitate harmoniously) or (to furnish). A question which immediately comes to mind is whether this verb, whatever the meaning, refers to '*vintura*', '*art*' or '*imrammti*'. Because of the obscurity I shall treat all possibili-

ties. If we take the first meaning 'to order', then we ask what the author might be ordering. Is he ordering, that is, reshaping his fortune '*vintura*' or is he referring to the land, that is to say 'he wishes it under his will'? – The next meaning, 'to habitate harmoniously', can only refer to either '*imrammti*' or '*art*'. In any case, whichever we choose it would not alter inference much, as the one would mean 'to live happily (producing many offspring) inside the house', whilst the other would mean 'to till and cultivate the land and thus produce a good harvest'. What I mean here is, they both infer fertility of one thing or the other. Finally, if the verb is taken to mean 'furnish', then it must be in reference to the house, whether actually or symbolically.

As to the interpretation of this poem I have two alternatives; the physical as against the metaphysical. The immediate and superficial message the poet conveys in the poem, is his deep grief over having lost the house he has been building for so long '*lili zimen nibni*', with a longing to occupy it upon completion. He blames the poor quality of the land '*tafal morchi*' for the disaster, rather than the workmen '*mectatilix mihallimin*'. However, in the sextet, the poet introduces emotional elements, '*Calb mehandihe chakim soltan ui le mule ...*' and to express his sorrow he speaks symbolically '*Bir imgamic rimitine*' and '*hayran al garca*'. These symbolic expressions alone suffice to rule out a superficial poem and instead rule in the metaphysical. It appears, as has been suggested by the authors, and by the eminent poet of our times Karmenu Vassallo, that Caxaro had been deeply disappointed by the severance of some strong emotional tie. As the story centres around a house, then the emotional severance appears to have been a broken love affair. He accuses his loved one of being ruthless and cold, '*Calb mehandihe ... ui le mule*' whilst he himself lapses into the depths of iniquity, '*Bir imgamic rimitine*' and '*deyem fil bachar il hali*'. Once we accept this theory, then the house no longer exists in reality but it becomes his ideal which was building up to a climax as the love affair progressed. Then suddenly, it seems, the clay gave way; *i.e.* the bond of love loosened under pressure. A modern Maltese simile to this would be, '*iż-żejt tela' f'wiċċ l-ilma*'. The whole truth was expounded with such force that his whole idealistic world collapsed in a moment. '*Il miken*' then becomes the environment, but it still remains mysterious as to whose environment he is referring, whether it be his or his beloved's. I am suggesting that his loved one was influenced by external forces because '*liradi al col xebir sura*'; *i.e.* every inch of ground has its identity and if

you change your mind about one portion (you allow other forces to influence you), then you might as well not pursue your ideals. For, once you have 'taken the plunge' (*la tikriha oqgħod għaliha*), it is too late to make amends and you will have to suffer the consequences, '*beme tred minne tamara*'.

In conclusion and to summarise, I think this poem serves to shed some light on the Maltese spoken 500 years ago, on the concrete versus abstract thinking of the populace, reality against illusion and moreover the trend of the fifteenth century Maltese poetry towards Romance rather than Semitic patterns. Although the Cantilena is no literary gem and despite its brevity, we can now boast our Maltese language to have taken a literary form, at least 500 years ago and that at that time, profane subjects as opposed to sacred, were just as prominent in the minds of our ancestors. Who knows what we might have found, had the formal founding of the church-physical in Malta by Roger the Norman and later consolidated by the Knights, not been so anti moslem and so utterly intolerant towards the crescent? For it is, in this question, which still remains unanswered, that no earlier inscribed trace of our linguistic and edificial culture lies; and until some devoted Maltese compatriot devotes himself to studying the Turkish language and thereafter conducts a lifetime of research into Malta's history as affecting and affected by the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires, until then this phase in our illustrious history will remain obscure.

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