

## MALTESE CHILDREN'S RHYMES AND POETRY

by J. CASSAR PULLICINO

The songs and ditties falling under the heading 'Children's Rhymes' immediately conjure up recollections of our earliest existence and childhood activities, of games and emotions long since forgotten. I have used the wider term 'Children's Rhymes', and not 'Nursery Rhymes' on purpose, for apart from those verses which are traditionally passed on by adults to a child while it is still of nursery age, there is another kind of verse lore passing between children beyond the age of six when out of sight of their parents or at play that in a very real sense also belongs to children.

Let us make this distinction clear. In defining the scope of their encyclopaedic work on Nursery Rhymes, Iona and Peter Opie write as follows: 'As well as the nonsense jingles, humorous songs and character rhymes, it includes the more common lullabies, infant amusements, nursery counting-out formulas, baby puzzles and riddles, rhyming alphabets, tongue twisters, nursery prayers and a few singing games the words of which have an independent existence in the nursery...'<sup>1</sup> Extending their field of study beyond the nursery the same writers stress that 'the scraps of lore which children learn from each other are at once more real, more immediately serviceable, and more vastly entertaining to them than anything which they learn from grown-ups'. More importantly, these well known authorities on the subject state: 'Such a verse... can be as traditional and as well known to children as a nursery rhyme; yet no one would mistake it for one of Mother Goose's compositions. It is not merely that there is a difference in cadence and subject-matter, the manner of its transmission is different. While a nursery rhyme passes from a mother or other adult to the small child on her knee, the school rhyme circulates simply from child to child, usually outside the home, and beyond the influence of the family circle. By its nature a nursery rhyme is a jingle preserved and propagated not by children but by adults, and in this sense it is an 'adult' rhyme. It is a rhyme which is adult approved. The school-child's verses are not intended for adult ears.'<sup>2</sup>

How do Maltese children fare in this tiny branch of traditional lore? To what extent do they share this universal experience and delight in apparently trivial verses that nevertheless endure for generations whereas newer compositions become dated and forgotten? There is a considerable Maltese material which can be grouped under the heading *Children's Rhymes*, whether of the nursery type or not. A few texts, tentatively recorded in 1904 by H. Stumme and by some local writers in the early years of this century,<sup>3</sup> were expanded by the present writer in 1948 into a modest collection<sup>4</sup> which has since doubled in size and awaits publication. The material is therefore available, and to a certain extent we may say that our young have definitely not lost the power of entertaining themselves and that they still cherish this part of their traditional lore. But a very real danger has reared its ugly head amongst us. Owing to social pressures and to a mistaken sense of prestige values equating higher status with 'Englishness' in speech and manners, many Maltese parents generally tend to discard the words and jingles in which they were themselves brought up in favour of English rhymes that are in reality alien to the Maltese tradition. Matters are not made any better in the schools, where Maltese rhymes do not figure in the organized play activities of the pupils. As verses learnt in early childhood are not usually passed on again until the little listeners have grown up, and have children of their own, what may well happen is a complete break in the process of transmission which, in some thirty years time, might result in the disappearance of a good part of our traditional nursery lore, and consequently in the loss or distortion of our national identity.

Nursery rhymes everywhere serve to measure the child's progress as regards ability to talk and repeat what it hears. For it is by dint of repetition and imitation that the child is ushered into its new world of aural and oral adventures expressed in simple rhyme and doggerel. The child experiences its first journey on its father's knee as it is rocked to and fro to the accompaniment of a special rhyme:

<i>Banni bannożzi,</i>	Clap, clap your hand
<i>Ġej it-tata ġej</i>	For Daddy is coming
<i>Bil-pastizzi u bil-ħabbtejn,</i>	He brings you cheesecakes and money,
<i>Kollox għal... (child's name)</i>	Everything for (child's name)
<i>W għal... ipp, xejn.</i>	And nothing (for the other baby).

(Tarxien)

Our children's delight in this jingling sort of rhyme has its close counterpart in Sicily, where the first line of the verse bears an uncanny resemblance to the Maltese version:

Manu manuzzi  
 Pani e ficuzzi  
 Veni lu tata  
 Porta 'i cusuzzi  
 Nuàtri nn' 'i manciamu  
 E a Totò 'un cci nni damu.<sup>5</sup>

Far away to the North and a thousand miles away from Malta, English babies receive a similar exhortation:

Clap hands! Clap hands!  
 Till daddy comes home;  
 Daddy's got money  
 And mammy's got none.<sup>6</sup>

Lullabies or cradle songs also form part of nursery lore. Up to some years ago a traditional lullaby in Maltese survived in these islands, running into some sixteen stanzas of which, however, only two or three were well-known. It was first collected by L. Bonelli and published in 1895.<sup>7</sup> It is an exquisite piece of popular composition, rich in imagery and poetic feeling, opening with the following lines:

<i>Orqod, ibni, orqod</i>	Sleep, sleep, little child
<i>Fil-benni ena tal-ħarir... Laam!</i>	In the cradle made of silk...
	Sleep!
<i>Dik ommok il-Madonna,</i>	The Holy Virgin is thy Mother,
<i>Missierek Ġesù Bambin... Laaam!</i>	And the Child Jesus is thy father... Go to sleep!

Apart from the opening and closing stanzas, the lullaby may be sub-divided into three main parts i.e. (a) a dialogue between Mother and Child, (b) aspects of the Holy Family's life during the Flight into Egypt, and (c) an invocation to angels, saints, etc. to induce the child to sleep. The identification of the child and its parents with the Holy Family lies at the basis of this popular composition. This motif has been current among Christian mothers since the early years of Christianity and the opening words of the song (*Orqod, ibni, orqod*) link up in wording and spirit with the lullaby, dating probably from the twelfth century, which the Madonna herself is believed to have sung to the Baby Jesus, beginning with the line *Dormi, fili, dormi* (sleep, my son, sleep)<sup>8</sup>.

The dialogue between the Holy Mother and the Baby Jesus in the cradle compares in its delicacy of feeling and pathos with that exchanged between Mary and the crucified Christ in the composition by Jacopone da Todi (1240-1306) entitled *Il Pianto della Vergine* (The Virgin's Lament).

In the second part we have various scenes depicting the episode of the Holy Family's rest during the journey to Egypt – the Mother swathes the Baby Jesus in his swaddling clothes, St. Joseph rocks him in the cradle and sings lullabies to him. Comparable folk material from Sicily shows the Madonna in the act of breast-feeding the Divine Son, Ss. Martha and Magdalen help her put up the cradle, while St. Joseph rocks the baby to sleep. These variants of a widespread European tradition that has evidently travelled as far South as Malta draw their inspiration from an episode of the Flight into Egypt which traditionally records a rest on the journey and is known in Christian art as *Il Riposo*. From the 16th century onwards it has attracted many artists with varying degrees of success (e.g. Lucio Massari).<sup>9</sup>

In the third part of the Maltese cradle song we read that, in addition to supernatural helpers such as the Madonna, St. Claire, St. Joachim and the Angels, the tired mother invokes sleep itself. Sleep is personified as a person coming from afar and wearied out with his exertions, or described as something which the mother could wrap up in a paper and carry home with her:

<i>Li kont naf dak ngħasek fejnu</i>	If I knew where your sleep is hidden
<i>Ķemm kont ni ġri mmur għalib!</i>	I would make haste and fetch it,
<i>Gewwa karta bajda nsorru,</i>	Wrap it up in white paper
<i>'L ibni ckejken ni ġi ntiħ.</i>	And give it to my little one.
<i>Ejja, nagħsu, ejja,</i>	Come, o sleep, come,
<i>Ejja mill-b' għod, għajjen,</i>	Come from afar, however wearied
<i>Biex traqqadli 'l ibni c-ckejken.</i>	you are, Make my little one sleep
<i>Halli minnu ni striedħ jien.</i>	That I may get some rest.

In Sicily, sleep is likewise conceived as a person wandering on his never-ending job. The mother asks him: 'Where are you off to?' And he replies: 'I go to induce children to sleep, and I make them sleep three times a day – in the morning, at noon and in the evening'. Like the Maltese song, the Sicilian verse invokes sleep to come from afar, *Somnu, veni du luntanu* or from the East, *Suomnu, veni di Livanti* (Noto) or from over the seas, *Veni, suomnu, di lu mari* (Monterosso)<sup>10</sup>

Naturally this lullaby stands in a class of its own and very few nursery rhymes reach up to its standard. Some rhymes, however, are quite serious in tone and content. One well-known stanza, in particular, reflects our people's preoccupation with the lack of sufficient rain in Malta:

<i>Agħmel, xita, agħmel</i>	Rain, rain, rain
<i>Halli jinbet il-ħaxix,</i>	That the grass may grow,
<i>Il-ħaxix intub 'il-mogħża</i>	We shall give the grass to the goat
<i>U l-mogħża ttina l-ħalib</i>	And the goat will give us milk;
<i>Għandi nagħġa mmur nirgħaba,</i>	I'll take out my sheep to graze
<i>Bis-suf tagħha nagħmel qmis.</i>	And I'll make me a shirt of her wool.

(Luqa)

Incidentally, this presents a sharp contrast to the English nursery rhyme in which English children drive off rain far away to Spain:

Rain, rain, go to Spain,  
Never show your face again.

or, according to another variant:

Rain, rain, go away,  
Come again another day.<sup>11</sup>

Much closer in feeling are the Sicilian lines

Chiovi, chiovi, chiovi  
E la gatta fa l'ovi,  
E lu surci si marita  
Cu la còppula di sita, ecc.  
(Termini)<sup>12</sup>

Simple morning and night prayers also form part of Maltese nursery literature. The following night prayer heard in various villages up to some years ago is an example:

<i>Bambin ċkejken ċkejken,</i>	Little, little Child (Jesus)
<i>Kollok xama' u libien,</i>	Surrounded with candles and incense
<i>Nirrikmanda ruħi 'l Alla</i>	I recommend my soul to God
<i>U l-bqija lil San Mikiel.</i>	And everything else to St. Michael.

A number of rhymes exemplify popular composition as a direct result of the introduction of education. They are humorous verses employing mostly mnemonic devices for ABC instruction or for the teaching of the numerals in the Italian or the English language. The following lines were quite popular up to the last War:

(i) ABC	ABC
<i>L-iskutella bil-kafè;</i>	The bowl is full of coffee;
<i>Il-kikkra bil-plattina</i>	The cup and the saucer
<i>U s-surmast ma jridx jagħtina.</i>	And the teacher won't give us any.

(Tarxien)

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| (ii) One – <i>ta' Dun Ġwann,</i>                       | One – belongs to Fr. John,                       |
| Two – <i>tal-Gvernatur,</i>                            | Two – belongs to the Govern-<br>nor,             |
| Three – <i>ta' Mari,</i>                               | Three – belongs to Mary,                         |
| Four – <i>ta' Vitor,</i>                               | Four – belongs to Victor,                        |
| Five – <i>wara x-xitwa jigi i</i><br><i>s-sajf,</i>    | Five – after winter summer<br>comes,             |
| Six – <i>wara l-għomma jigi l-</i><br><i>frisk,</i>    | Six – after the hot weather<br>it gets cooler,   |
| Seven – <i>ta' Buleben,</i>                            | Seven – belongs to Buleben<br>Estate,            |
| Eight – <i>tas-sur Gejt,</i>                           | Eight – belongs to Mr. Gae-<br>tano,             |
| Nine – <i>ta' Wied il-Għajn,</i>                       | Nine – belongs to Wied il-<br>Għajn (Marsascala) |
| Ten – <i>nagħtik daqqa u nixħtek</i><br><i>'l hemm</i> | Ten – I'll strike you and push<br>you away.      |

(Bormla)

The inclusion of numerals in English in the last-mentioned rhyme presupposes earlier ones based on Maltese numerals. In fact in 1946 the late Luret Cutajar passed on to me the text of the following verse which was quite common at Zebbug in his boyhood days:

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| <i>Żewġ imwejsiet</i>                  | Two little pocket-knives,                    |
| <i>Tlieta tliet angli,</i>             | Three are the angels,                        |
| <i>Erb' u angeli,</i>                  | Four are the gospels,                        |
| <i>Hamsa ħames pġagi,</i>              | Five are the wounds (of Christ<br>crucified) |
| <i>Sitta quddisiet,</i>                | Six masses said,                             |
| <i>Sebġha sacramenti,</i>              | Seven are the sacraments,                    |
| <i>Tmienja erwieħ,</i>                 | Eight are the souls,                         |
| <i>Disgħa disa' kori,</i>              | Nine are the angels' choir,                  |
| <i>Għaxar kmandamenti,</i>             | Ten are the commandments,                    |
| <i>Hdax-il appostlu,</i>               | Eleven are the apostles,                     |
| <i>Tnax-il artiklu</i>                 | Twelve are the articles (of the<br>Creed)    |
| <i>Tlettax-il benediktu</i>            | Thirteen are the blessings                   |
| <i>Erbtax-il kelma</i>                 | Fourteen are the words                       |
| <i>Li ħarġu minn fomm Alla nni/su.</i> | uttered by God Himself.                      |

However altered and incoherent, these lines form a link in the chain of a well known tradition known as The Twelve Words of Truth which is found widespread all over Italy and in various European and other countries. The Maltese version has no mention of

the first numeral *wieħed*, 'One', which refers to God in extant European texts, and it is the only one running up to the number fourteen. Nevertheless, the text runs close enough to the versions from Sicily (Messina), Italy (Abruzzi, Cosenza, Basilicata), Portugal (prov. do Alemtejo) and Spain (Andalucia), which were published in 1882-1884, and in 1925-1932 to justify the general conclusion that the local composition follows the main current of the European tradition.<sup>13</sup>

One may add that A. Van Gennep gives a French rhyme containing, *inter alia*, the following lines corresponding to the Maltese ones:

Un, est Dieu le Père . . .  
 Quatre, sont les quatre Evangelistes . . .  
 Dix, sont les dix commandements de Dieu . . .<sup>14</sup>

R.M. Dawkins also mentions a Greek treatise by Anastasios Levides 'in the language spoken in Cappadocia' containing some mediaeval songs, among them 'a creed arranged by numbers: God is one; Second is the Virgin; Three is the Trinity; Four are the Gospels, and so on down to Twelve are the Apostles'.<sup>15</sup>

Schoolchildren react instinctively against any form of authority. Quite a few songs about teachers are being created all the time, showing the inventive powers of the schoolchild. The following are a few examples recollected from my early school life at Tarxien. I am sure readers can add substantially from memory to this kind of rhyme text:

*Il-Miss Tanti, ddoq q il-landi* Miss Tanti beats upon the tin vessels  
*Fuq il-bejt taz-ziju Ġanni.* On the roof of Uncle John.

The following quatrain, while describing the child's joy at the expectation of a holiday, reflects the folk's comment on the use of night caps by the schoolmaster and of forks and knives by the headmistress:

<i>Għada m'għandniex skola,</i>	Tomorrow we won't go to school,
<i>Is-surmastru bil-barjola;</i>	The schoolmaster has his nightcap on;
<i>Is-sinjora purcinella</i>	The headmistress looks like a clown
<i>Kemm taf tiekol bil-furkett!</i>	How well she can eat using the fork!

The following is another example of schoolchild composition in this style:

<i>Calleja ħobż a nejja,</i>	Calleja – unbaked loaf,
<i>Ġibli s-siġġ u w oqġħod ħdejjja;</i>	Get a chair and sit beside me;
<i>Ġibli l-pinna u l-klamar</i>	Get me pen and ink
<i>Ha nping ilek ras ta' ħmar.</i>	And I'll paint you an ass's head.

The Opies assert that the child's delight in the coincidence of sound is nowhere more apparent than in the pleasure he takes in tongue-twisters.<sup>16</sup> A few Maltese examples are enough to illustrate this kind of rhyme that still shows signs of vitality and tends to endure for generations:

- (i) *Qafas tal-qasab imdendel mas-saqaf* (Tarxien and Birgu)
- (ii) *Hawħa ħamra mħawla fil-ħamrija ħamra fil-ħawt ta' Hal Għar għur* (Tarxien and Birgu)
- (iii) *Xbin, għid lil xbintek li xbint xbintek għandha tifla* (Birgu)
- (iv) *Dari rari tara lira. . . tara lira tara rē* (Qormi)
- (v) *Platt fuq platt, platt taħt platt* (Tarxien)
- (vi) *Toni tani tiņa, tałli tani tina tajtu tut a* (Tarxien)

The art of riddling, at one time indulged in by adults of all classes and looked upon as an accomplishment of royalty in biblical times, has nowadays survived mostly among children. A 'true' riddle is a composition in which some creature or object is described in an intentionally obscure manner, the solution fitting all the characteristics of the description in the question, and usually resolving a paradox.<sup>17</sup> The following examples come to mind straightaway:

<i>Hawn ħaġ a:</i>	A riddle:
<i>Dejjem timxi rasha 'l isfel.</i>	'Always walks on its head.
(Birż ebbuġ a)	(Solution: A nail in your boot)
<i>Haġ a moħġ aġ a:</i>	Me riddle, me riddle:
<i>Akt ar ma tiekol minnha</i>	The more you eat (take) from it
<i>Akt ar tikber.</i>	The bigger it gets.
(Tarxien)	(Solution: a hole in the ground)

The descriptions which the rhyming riddles give of their solutions are usually phrased highly imaginatively in terms of something else. Thus, a bed is seen as a person who gets tired at night and rests all day (*bil-lejl għajjena/bi nħar mistrieħa*); the sky is a basket full of pears (roses) which, when turned upside down, will not fall (*kannestru bil-laņġ as(mimli ward)/wiċċu 'l isfel ma jaqax*); the clouds look like a bed sheet with patches but without any

threads (*liż ar imraqqa'/mingħajr ponti u lanqas ħajt*); the sea is thought of as an old grumbler and as a garden without trees or flowers (*xih gemgumi/g'nien bla sig ar lanqas fjuri/jagħmel ragħwa bla safun*); an onion is likened to a pretty white-faced girl wearing a pink dress who will make you cry if you ill-treat her (*libsti roz a/wicci bajdani/indum inbikkik/sakemm iddum/timmaltrattani*); a cabbage is thought of as made up of numerous carpets set on top of each other, each more beautiful than the one before it (*ikt ar ma tneħhi taḫiti/ikt ar issibhom sbieħ*). (Such images are perhaps the fittest introduction to poetry that a child can have.<sup>18</sup>)

Other verses awaken the child's sense of action and adventure. They may tell merely of some childish escapade:

<i>Ajma ż aqqi kemm tuġ aghni</i>	I've got a tummy ache
<i>Għax kilt l-għeneb mbux misjur;</i>	Through eating unripe grapes;
<i>Iddendilt mal-kanni zzata</i>	I hang to the vine trellis
<i>Qisni kelb tal-kaċċ atur.</i>	Like a sportsman's dog.

(Luqa)

One comes across the motif of trellis and grapes in various parts of Italy. A counting-out rhyme from Tuscany opens with the lines *Sotto la pergola nasce l'uva/prima acerba e poi matura*; the version from Abruzzo reads; *sotto la pergola nasce l'uva/prima cerva e po' matura*; the Neapolitan corresponding verse is *Tengo 'na prevula d'uva/meza acerva e mez'ammatura*; in Sicily the word *luna*, 'moon' has substituted the word *uva* – a sure sign, according to Pitre, that the rhyme was imported into Sicily from nearby Italy.<sup>19</sup>

Maltese children still recite the misadventures of the boy Ferdinand, who was baptized by the doctor to spite the priest:

<i>Darba kien hawn tifel</i>	There was a little boy
<i>Kien jismu Ferdinandu</i>	Whose name was Ferdinand,
<i>Il-qassis ma riedx igħammdu,</i>	The priest wouldn't baptize him
<i>Għammdu t-taḫib</i>	So the doctor baptized him
<i>B'inkejja tal-qassis;</i>	To spite the priest;
<i>Tela' fuq il-bejt</i>	He went up on the roof
<i>Beda jgħajjat 'il taż-ż ejt;</i>	And called the oil-seller;
<i>Niż el fil-kantina</i>	He went down to the cellar
<i>Beda jgħajjat daqs xadina.</i>	And began to shout like a monkey.

(Luqa, Tarxien)

It is interesting to note how children have adapted this rhyme, substituting an international folk hero for the boy Ferdinand. In the early 30's Charlie Chaplin had everywhere become one of the chief figures of the 20th century juvenile mythology, and in these

islands the sad waif, jauntily swinging his cane, wearing a seedy cutaway jacket, baggy trousers, huge out-turned boots, a dilapidated bowler hat and a tooth-brush moustache made such an impact on the mind of Malta's younger generation that he immediately found himself enshrined in popular children's rhyme. I clearly recall the words which were current among the twelve-year olds in those days:

<i>One day</i>	One day
<i>Charlie Chaplin kien għaddej;</i>	Charlie Chaplin was passing by;
<i>Kien għaddej minn Strada Rjali</i>	He was walking up Kingsway
<i>Beda jkisser il-fanalii;</i>	Smashing all the street lamps;
<i>Tellgħub fuq il-bejt,</i>	They took him up on the roof,
<i>Beda jgħajjat lil taż-żajt;</i>	He called out to the oil-seller;
<i>Tellgħub fil-gallarija</i>	They took him to the balcony
<i>Beda jgħajjat daqs tarbija;</i>	He began to cry like a baby;
<i>Hadub fil-kat qlett.</i>	They placed him on a litter
<i>Beda jaqbeż daqs mulett.</i>	He jumped up like a mullet.

(Paola)

With this compare the English rhymes:

- (i) Charlie Chaplin washing up  
Broke a saucer and a cup;  
How much did they cost?
- (ii) One, two, three, four,  
Charlie Chaplin went to war,  
He taught the ladies how to dance  
And this is what he taught them . . . .  
Salute to the King,  
And bow to the Queen,  
And turn your back  
On the Kaiserine.<sup>20</sup>

I give one further example of a simple rhyme that links our little island with the mainstream of a widespread tradition. Readers are no doubt familiar with the giant's awe-inspiring rhyme in the fairy-tale book:

fee, fo, fi, fum!  
I smell the blood of an Englishman.  
Be he alive or be he dead  
I'll have his bones to make my bread.

In Maltese folk-tales it is the old woman to whom the young man has shown some kindness who uses the following rhyme:

<i>Li s-sliem ma kienx qabel il-kliem</i>	Had you not saluted me before you spoke to me
<i>Kont nibilgħek belgħa</i>	I would have swallowed you up
<i>Inġ errgħek ġ ergħa</i>	Digested you
<i>U niż irgħek ż ergħa</i> <sup>21</sup>	And buried ( <i>lit.</i> 'sown) you.

Now this links up with the lines heard by Fr. Magri on Mount Lebanon in the early years of this century:

<i>Lewle salàmek</i>	Had you not saluted me before
<i>Ma sabaq kelàmek</i>	you spoke to me
<i>Kont nřass'fsek int</i>	I would have crushed you
<i>U'għadamek</i>	And your bones.

Very close to the Maltese welcome greeting are the words uttered by the *għul* (ogre) in Dr. Legey's Moroccan Tales (xxiv, p. 105):

<i>Koŭn ma slàmek sbeq slàmi,</i>	Had not your greeting preceded mine
<i>ndir. lbamek fi dorma,</i>	I would have made a mouthful of your flesh,
<i>ou demek fi jorma,</i>	A throatful of your blood
<i>ou 'azamek nterkonhoum bin snàni.</i>	And I would have crushed your bones between my teeth.

And now we pass on to children's games and their rhymes. It is well known that in some games children employ a special formula instead of the usual counting of fingers opened by the players. The leader repeats the rhyme as he points at the players in turn, one accented syllable to each child, and the child on whom the last word falls is the one chosen to take a part different from that of the rest.<sup>22</sup> These formulas, though often gibberish, have recognisable metrical shape. One of them, heard at Tarxien, runs as follows:

<i>Kemm trid bombi biex tiřpara</i>	How many shells do you require
<i>il-kanun ta' Birkirkara?</i>	To fire the cannon of Birkirkara?
<i>—Ix-xadina fuq il-mejda</i>	— The monkey is on the table
<i>Qiegħda tiekol platt, kawlat q.</i>	Eating a plateful of meat soup.

Apart from counting-out rhymes, however, rhymes often accompany the play to add zest to the game. While turning round and round in a ring, children say:

<i>Dawra durella,</i>	Tiny little circle
<i>Qasba ż agarella!</i>	A yard ( <i>lit.</i> length) of ribbon!
<i>Hija l-abbatija</i>	My brother at the orphanage
<i>Bil-maktur tal-mustaxija,</i>	With a crepe handkerchief;
<i>Axxa!</i>	Axxa!
<i>Missieri mastrudaxxa!</i>	My father is a carpenter!

(Tarxien)

This is one of the most popular nursery games – the song which instantly rises from the lips of small children whenever they join hands in a circle. With this compare the English version:

Ring-a-ring o' roses,  
 A pocket full of posies,  
 A-tishoo! A-tishoo!  
 We all fall down.<sup>23</sup>

The corresponding rhyme from Sicily goes like this:

Rota rutedda,  
 Lu pani a fedda a fedda,  
 La missa sunò,  
 L'ancilu calò,  
 E calò a dinucchiuni.  
 Quantu è beddu lu Signuri!  
 Olè!<sup>24</sup>

Some games are in dialogue form in which the players may participate. One well known rhyme is the following:

<i>Baqrambù</i>	Baqrambù
<i>Bil-kalzetta u biż-ż arbun!</i>	Wearing your shoes and stockings
<i>X'kilt illum?</i>	What did you eat today?
<i>— Kejla ful,</i>	— A measure of beans.
<i>Xi xrobt fuqha?</i>	What did you have after it?
<i>— Bajda friska.</i>	— A fresh egg.
<i>Mela għaddi ġ ewwa</i>	Come inside then
<i>W itla' fuq,</i>	And go upstairs,
<i>Ar' tkissirli l-friskatur,</i>	But mind you don't break the basin,
<i>Għax mbux tiegħi — tas-sinjur;</i>	Because it's not mine but the master's;

(Tarxien, Birgu)

Not so well known is the following version heard at Birkirkara during the last War:

<i>Tat-tila tula!</i>	You of the long cloth,
<i>X'kilt il-lejla?</i>	What did you have for supper?
– <i>Hobż u ġbejna.</i>	– (A piece of) bread and cheese.
<i>Minn fuq?</i>	And after it?
– <i>Terz ilma.</i>	– A measure of water.
<i>Minn isfel?</i>	And then?
– <i>Terz inbid.</i>	– A measure of wine.
<i>Għandek xi kelb jinbaħ?</i>	Is your dog barking?
– <i>Għandi: Wu! Wu!</i>	– Yes: Wu! Wu!

These apparently nonsense rhymes assume importance as the vehicle for the transmission of a vestige of cultural contact when one realises the direct relationship between the Maltese lines and the following 'rengaine populaire' from Lebanon given in 1928 by Feghali:

<i>W'ain k'ent el-bârha</i>	Where were you yesterday?
<i>'end 'ebte sâlha</i>	At my sister Salha's house.
<i>'aš ta 'mtak</i>	What did she give you to eat?
<i>ġébn è mâlha.<sup>25</sup></i>	Salted cheese.

The best known dialogue rhyme is perhaps that associated with the game known as *Tal-Paxxatore* or, from its opening line, *In giro in giro ngella*. I am sure most readers remember it from their childhood days, so I am not repeating the words here. Instead, I shall call attention to the fact that, in substance, the *Paxxatore* or Ambassador (Ambasciatore) who praises the love-sick knight and helps him in his quest for a wife fulfils exactly the same function of the *ħuttâb* or marriage-broker in ancient Maltese marriage customs. The Ambassador's game has been found in Italy, Albania, Spain, Portugal, and France; in Sicily a particular version of it was confined mostly to private schools up to the turn of the century.<sup>26</sup> It links up these islands with a widespread European tradition of chivalrous customs.

We have described, with illustrations of comparable material from a Mediterranean or European context, the main types and characteristics of children's rhymes in Malta. There remains to say something about the way in which this mini-literary form may exercise some effect on the developing imagination of the young. By and large, these rhymes stimulate the child's powers of observation. The magic jingle of an opening verse such as *Indi, indò/digli digli ndò* is immediately followed by three lines conjuring up

a household scene wherein a white dress with a heavy frill (*libsa bajda bil-pantò*) is being washed, ironed and delivered – an old-style service on an individual basis common enough before the days of our present dry-cleaning establishments:

<i>Indì, indò,</i>	Indí, indò,
<i>Digli digli ndò</i>	Digli digli ndò
<i>Libsa bajda bil-pantò;</i>	A white dress with a frill;
<i>Naħsilbielek, ngħaddihielek,</i>	I shall wash it and iron it for you,
<i>Nibgħathielek ma' Vitor.</i>	And Victor will deliver it to you.

(Birkirkara)

From an analysis of Maltese rhymes collected so far, one can say that there are no fanciful flights of the imagination that are completely removed from reality. The images are in some way or other linked to everyday scenes and occurrences which, however, mean quite a lot to the child and open up magic vistas for his enquiring mind. In one particular version of a well-known rhyme, imagination grows rife and although some lines sound rather illogical they help to build up the general sense of wonder so dear to the child:

<i>Pizzi pizzi kanna</i>	Pizzi pizzi kanna
<i>Dolores ta' Sant'Anna</i>	Dolores of St. Anne
<i>Sant'Anna ta' Murina</i>	St. Anne of the Marina
<i>Habba l-biċċa l-pellegrina;</i>	A grain for a cape's length;
<i>Il-berritta ħamra ħamra</i>	A red red cap
<i>Bil-bukkett, ta' ġiżmini;</i>	With a jasmine posy;
<i>Ġejja mara minn Haż-Żabbar</i>	A woman is coming from Zabbar
<i>Bil-geżwira u bil-fardal;</i>	Wearing a kilt and a pinafore;
<i>Eppejpija eppejpò!</i>	Eppejpija eppejpò!
<i>Xoxxa lavanda</i>	Smell the perfume
<i>Spara kanun</i>	Fire the gun
<i>Ballu fejn tmur?</i>	Where does the ball go?
<i>Tmur il-Lubjana</i>	It goes to Ljubljana
<i>Taqt a' pezza Indjana;</i>	And cuts a length of Indian fabric;
<i>Tmur il-Buskett,</i>	It goes to Buskett
<i>Taqli l-bajd u z-zalzetti;</i>	And fries sausages and eggs;
<i>Eppejpija eppejpò!</i>	Eppejpija eppejpò!
<i>Bella kaxxa ġigġifò!</i>	A fine box of fireworks!
<i>Mgħaref (dgħajsa) ta' fidda</i>	Spoons (a boat) of silver
<i>Bandi era tal-ħarir;</i>	And a silk flag;

<i>Ixtriġu biċċ a qubb ajd</i>	Buy him some nougat
<i>Itmaġġhielu, bellagħġhielu</i>	Make him eat it
<i>Ħabb atlu rasu mal-ħajt</i>	And strike his head against the wall.
(Birkirkara)	

The first line of the Maltese rhyme may have some relationship to Neapolitan *Pizzu*, *pizzu*, *pizzuluni*, or, in Pomigliano d'Arco, one of the provinces of Naples *Pizza*, *pizza*, *pizzipogne*, and Calabrian *Pizzpizzinguda*, not to mention a possible link with *cannella* and *Marina* in the following four lines from Palermo:

Pisa pisella  
A culuri di cannella,  
Cannella accussi fina  
Di 'santa Marina...<sup>27</sup>

Finally, in an interesting note on this game in the December, 1976 issue of *Il-Malti*. 'Kilin' mentions that Francisco Gomez de Quevedo in his brilliant picaresque novel 'Vida de Buscon Publos' (1626) (Part II, Chap. V) describes how the innkeeper's daughter played the game *Pizpirigaña* in much the same way as Maltese children play *pizzi pizzi kanna*, reciting the following rhyme:

Pizpirigaña	Pizpirigana
Mata la araña	Kill the spider
Un cochinito	A little pig
Muy peladito	With plucked bristles
'quien lo peló?	Who plucked his bristles?
La pícara vieja	The mischievous hag
Que está en el rin- cón	Who sits in the corner
Alza la mano	Raise your hand
Que te pica el gallo	And the cock will nibble at you
Un moñito azul	A blue bow of ribbon
Y otro colorado	And another coloured one.

The rhymes we have been speaking about, whether of the nursery or playground type, may be either said or sung. By their very nature they were destined to be recited, not written down, let alone translated or preserved in print. And yet, unless they are collected in book form and suitably studied, preferably within a Mediterranean context, they are liable to disappear like so many other floating traditions that pass out of sight – and out of mind. Their claim for serious attention by the scholar has been forcefully endorsed by Arnold Van Gennep: '*Aussi l'étude de ces formulettes n'est-elle*

pas, comme tant de gens l'imaginent, une amulette indigne d'un savant; mais c'est une voie détournée, presque la seule que nous possédions, pour étudier le mécanisme de la formation de la mémoire et de la personnalité enfantines'.<sup>28</sup>

There is a sort of magic about children's rhymes that makes one cherish the recollections of babyhood and childhood. But it is also something more than that. As the reviewer of *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* put it in the 'Times Literary Supplement' of November 9, 1951: 'it is the something which seems to have gone out of present-day poetry: the singing quality, the music, the irresponsibility, the lilt, the memorability. Never mind if the words make nonsense: they are evocative, and they cannot be forgotten... whatever their origin, whatever their age, whatever their authorship, that is the tribute that no one can deny them. They stretch back not only into the past, but also forwards into the future'.

With these thoughts I hope we will all be in a position to treat this humble form of literature with sympathy and understanding.

<sup>1</sup> OPIE, Iona and Peter, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1951, p. vii.

<sup>2</sup> OPIE, Iona and Peter, eds., *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1960, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> STUMME, H., *Maltesische Studien*. Leipzig, 1904 — B. Ghanjiet n. 22-23, 25-26, 34, 37-39 — pp. 65-67; PRECA, A., *Malta Cananea*, 1904; pp. 297-342, 393; MAGRI, M., *X'igħid il-Malti*, 1925, p. 157.

<sup>4</sup> CASSAR PULLICINO, G., 'Għana u Taqbil it-Tfal', in *Leġen il-Malti*, Ghadd 206-208, April-Gunju 1948, pp. 33-66. On September 15, 1948 Circular No. 39/48 issued by the Assistant Director of Education drew the attention of teachers to this study '... which should prove very helpful... in connection with the teaching of Maltese songs and ballads'.

<sup>5</sup> PITRÈ, G., *Giocchi fanciulleschi siciliani*. Palermo, 1883, p. 48.

<sup>6</sup> KELLNER, L., *Nursery Rhymes*. Leipzig, 1917, pp. 39, 45; also OPIE, I. and P., eds., *Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*. 1951, p. 196.

<sup>7</sup> BONELLI, L., *Saggi del folklore dell'isola di Malta*, Palermo, 1895. Some other stanzas, collected by A. Cremona, appeared in *Il-Malti*, 1931. For a fuller treatment of this lullaby see G. CASSAR PULLICINO, 'Tahnin u Għana tan-Nieqa', in *Leġen il-Malti*, XIX, 1949, pp. 107-127, and JOSEPH CASSAR PULLICINO et MICHELINE GALLEY, *Femmes de Malte dans les chants traditionnels*. Paris, Editions du Centre National de Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), 1981, pp. 21-55.

<sup>8</sup> MARTINENGO-CESARESCO, C., *Essays in the Study of Folksongs*. Everyman's, No. 673, s.d., p. 233.

<sup>9</sup> JAMESON, Mrs., *Legends of the Madonna as represented in the Fine Arts*. London, 1891, pp. 240-1.

<sup>10</sup> NASELLI, Carmelina, *Saggio sulle ninne-nanne siciliane*. Catania, 1948, pp. 24, 80.

<sup>11</sup> OPIE, I. and P., eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*. 1951 pp. 360-1.

<sup>12</sup> SORRENTO, L., *L'isola del sole*. Milano, s.d., p. 378.

<sup>13</sup> CANNIZZARO, T., 'Le dodici parole della verità', in *Archivio per lo studio delle tradizioni popolari*, Vol. 1, 1882, pp. 416-423; FINAMORE, Gennaro, 'Le duodece parole de la veretà', tradizione popolare abruzzese', *op. cit.*, Vol. II, 1883, pp. 97-99; PIRES, Antonio Thomaz, 'As doze palavras ditas e retornadas na tradição portuguesa', *ibid.*, pp. 100-103; 'La doce palabras torneadas en la tradición española', *ibid.*, pp. 104-106; WESSELOFSKY, Alessandro, 'Le dodici parole della verità', *ibid.*, pp. 227-230; RAMM, Axel, 'Le dodici parole della verità nella Svezia', *op. cit.*, Vol. III, 1884, pp. 60-64; GALLO DI CARLO, Gaetano, 'Una nuova variante delle dodici parole della verità', in *Il Folklore Italiano*, Anno Primo, Giugno-Settembre, 1925, pp. 187-190; CAPUTO, Maria, 'Le dodici parole della verità secondo una variante cosentina', *op. cit.*, Anno Settimo, Luglio-Dicembre, 1932, pp. 298-302. Some explanation is called for in comparing these various texts: (i) one cannot expect complete accuracy in the religious connotation attributed by the folk to the numerals, and (ii) the people's interpretation may vary from one country to another. As regards the number two, some European versions (Basilicata, Spain, Portugal and Sweden) relate it to the two tables carried by Moses containing the words of the Covenant. In its present corrupt form, the word *mwejsiet* of the Maltese text might possibly still retain some link with *Mosè*, 'Moses'. The three 'angels' of the Maltese verse appear as 'Patriarchs' in Italy (Abruzzi, Basilicata), Spain and Sweden, and as 'persons of the Trinity' in Cosenza and Portugal. In most countries, number four refers to the evangelists, number five to the five wounds of the crucified Christ; number seven is equated with the sacraments and number ten with the commandments.

With regard to number six, the 'masses' of the local text may link up, however remotely, with the 'burning candles' or 'lamps' of the versions from Abruzzi, Basilicata, and Spain. Coming to number eight, the explanation of 'eight souls' current in Malta has its counterpart in the Abruzzi as 'àleme ggiuste' and in Cosenza as 'animi giusti'. The association of number nine with 'angels' is close to the 'angelic choirs' mentioned in the Abruzzi, Cosenza, Spain and Sweden. Both in Malta and in the Abruzzi the number eleven refers to 'the apostles', who re-appear in Sweden as 'disciples'. Curiously enough, number twelve in Malta is equated with the twelve articles of the Apostles' Creed, whereas in the Abruzzi, Cosenza, Basilicata, Portugal, Spain and Sweden the reference is to the twelve Apostles. Malta is one of the few countries where the rhyme is extended beyond the number twelve. The thirteen 'blessings' of the local verse to a

certain extent are compatible with the interpretation of 'trireci grazie ri Sant'Antonie' given in Basilicata.

Finally, the survival of this text in Malta as a children's rhyme should not blind us to the probable magico-religious origin and function of the formula, as stressed by R. Corso in an erudite study entitled 'Superstizioni Euroafricane' (*Folklore X* (1924), pp. 7, 13) containing some Berber variants of the formula from Morocco and Algeria, besides one from Calabria.

<sup>14</sup> VAN GENNEP, A., *Manuel de Folklore Français Contemporain*. Vol. 1, Paris, 1943, p. 163.

<sup>15</sup> DAWKINS, R.M., 'The Recent Study of Folklore in Greece', in *Jubilee Congress of the Folk-Lore Society*. 1928, 1930, p. 131.

<sup>16</sup> OPIE, Iona and Peter, eds., *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, p. 30.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>18</sup> The most representative collection of Maltese riddles so far is G. CASSAR PULLICINO's *Haġa Moħġaġa u Taħbil il-Moħħ Ieħor*. Pts. I-IV, 1957-1959. His study 'Towards an Analysis of Maltese Riddles' (*Scientia* Vol. XXXV (1972) pp. 41-42, 85-91, 139-144, 181-189, Vol. XXXVI (1973) pp. 37-39) is an attempt to arrange, according to form rather than theme, the comparisons or conceptions making up each riddle, using an adapted form of the classification in A. TAYLOR'S *English Riddles from Oral Tradition*, University of California Press, 1951.

<sup>19</sup> PITRÈ, G., *op. cit.*, pp. 33-34.

<sup>20</sup> OPIE, Iona and Peter, *op. cit.*, pp. 108-110.

<sup>21</sup> MAGRI, M., *X'jgħid il-Malti fuk Missirijietna u l-Ġganti* ('Moħdija taż-Żmien' Nru. 39) 1904, p. 116. The words of the formula are erroneously given here as 'li l-kliem ma kienx qabel is-sliem' but are correctly printed 'li ma kienx is-sliem qabel il-kliem' in the texts of Magri's stories, e.g. in the story of 'The Seven Citron-Maidens' ('Moħdija taż-Żmien, Nru. 18, 1902, pp. 60-61.

<sup>22</sup> OPIE, Iona and Peter, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1951, p. 12.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 364.

<sup>24</sup> PITRÈ, G., *op. cit.*, p. 59.

<sup>25</sup> FEGHALI, M., *Syntaxe des Parlers Arabe actuels du Liban*. p. 467. Versions of this and other comparable rhymes from the Arab speaking countries are included in my study *Some Parallels between Maltese and Arabic Folklore*, which awaits publication. In this respect one may also refer to J. Bezzina's article 'An old Maltese Rhyme and some Parallels from the Middle East' (*Maltese Folklore Review*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1962, pp. 74-8) dealing with the well-known lines beginning *Darba kien hemm sultān*.

<sup>26</sup> PITRÈ, G., *op. cit.*, pp. xxxviii, lxvi.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 37-41.

<sup>28</sup> VAN GENNEP, A., *op. cit.*, p. 162.