

ANTHONY BURGESS'S *MF*: THE MEDITERRANEAN BACKGROUND TO A CARIBBEAN ISLAND

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From Anthony Burgess's continuous use of different linguistic systems in his novels, one can gather that the author is deeply fascinated by language. The author does not limit himself to existing and widely used systems; he even creates his own languages.¹ The language of the violent youngsters in *A Clockwork Orange* is perhaps the best known example of Burgesian linguistic creation. Not less interesting is the Castitan language in *MF*.

Where does this language derive from? Burgess himself highlights the origins of the Castitan language: "This was the old language of the Castitans, derived from the Romance dialect spoken by the first settlers, who themselves had gone to settle on the Cantabrian coast from some nameless place in the Mediterranean".² The language spoken in Castita, as in any other Central or South American state, is of romance origin. However, it is neither French nor Spanish nor Portuguese. Burgess has conveniently chosen a geographical point on the map where nothing exists: at "Latitude 15, south of Hispaniola. Three hundred miles west of the Leewards", (*MF*, p. 13) the author can let his fantasy roam wild and free, thus creating his own island with its own language.³

The island of Castita and its language, however, are not totally the fruit of Burgess's fantasy. This widely travelled author is a real master in the art of blending fact and fiction; and Castita, its people, customs and language are really a product of this art. When *MF* was published in 1971, Burgess had been living in the mediterranean island of Malta for some time. Many of the characteristic features of Castita are actually part and parcel of the Maltese environment. The historical background of the two islands is 'surprisingly' very similar: "[The first settlers of Castita] had been enslavers, but that curious wave of British Muslims, that had colonized Ojeda also, had freed the slaves and, becoming lax in their faith under this sun, had been absorbed by the Christianity of the island, though not before they had igloosed the frozen honey of the local stone into mosques. It was to the Dwumu, or great mosque-cathedral, in Fortescue Square that the procession now moved. And who had Fortescue been? A British governor of the time of the British raj or *rigija*, now ended. That rule had left, I discovered, a public works department, the English language, a thicket of laws, but no democracy" (*MF*, pp. 67-68).

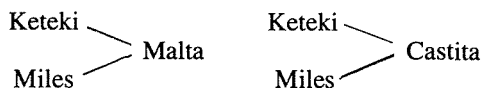
Allowing for a certain elasticity in the chronological sequence, it turns out that Malta has passed through nearly the same historical phases as Castita: in the 16th-17th century the Knights of St John used to thrive on the looting of Turkish vessels and on the wealth forthcoming from the ensuing slave trade; in 870 A.D. Malta was conquered by the Arabs, who ruled over the archipelago until 1090; the moslems were eventually absorbed "by the Christianity of the island" (today 95% of the Maltese are catholic); the principal features of North African house building (mainly the flat roofs) prevail unto this day and the honey coloured Maltese stone dominates the landscape; the island fell under British domination in 1800; British

rule ended in 1964, but it has left on the island “a public works department, the English language, a thicket of laws, [. . .]”. As for the presence of democracy on the island, the issue has been debated ever since the attainment of independence in 1964 and . . . is a very ‘hot’ topic today!⁴

The close resemblance between Castita and Malta is not limited to a common historical background; it is further emphasized through the description of contemporary events on the two islands. The “Senta Euphorbia *fista*, all statued processions, fireworks, candyfloss, miracles and drinking” (*MF*, p. 58) is none other than one of the innumerable village *festi* held in Malta in honour of the local patron saint! The description of the procession on the day of the Senta Euphorbia feast at the beginning of Chapter six (*MF*, p. 66) could easily find place in any guide-book to the Maltese islands, without hardly any alteration.⁵

The Maltese-Castitan connection is also rendered through the portrayal of minor details such as, for example, the entrance to Dr Matta’s house (*MF*, p. 164): “I watched her mount the steps outside the big oak door of Dr Matta, whose name was engrossed in copperplate cursive on a brass plate. She rapped the brass dolphin knocker [. . .]”. Brass dolphin knockers are a typical feature of Maltese houses, especially of the old imposing houses, with “steps outside”, which are still to be found in the three nobiliar villages of Lija, Attard and Balzan.⁶

The Maltese-Castitan link is further highlighted from a structural point of view. The whole plot of *MF* is triggered off by Miles Faber’s general interest in literature and, in particular, by his knowledge of the Maltese language: the resemblance of the English proper noun *Fenwick* to the Maltese noun and surname *Fenech* (‘rabbit’) and the complex interconnection between Maltese *jew* (‘or’), French *or* (‘gold’) and English *Jew* lead Miles to the solution of Professor Keteki’s riddle concerning Fenwick’s “*Gold gold and even titularly so*”. By solving this riddle Miles not only earns twenty dollars but also Professor Keteki’s friendship and respect: “Professor Keteki got [Miles] interested in a man called Sib Legeru, a Castitan poet and painter” (*MF*, p. 13). Basically, Miles’ interest in Castita could be represented through the following scheme:



The hero’s initial interest in Castita and Sib Legeru coincides with the solution of a ‘Maltese’ riddle; the solution of the Sib Legeru Castitan mystery definitely decrees the end of his Maltese interests. Therefore, the whole plot of *MF*, which starts off and finishes off with the Maltese language, is based on the power of language and of linguistic interpretation: the erroneous interpretation of a Maltese word (*jew*) sets Miles on the right track towards the revelation of the Sib Legeru enigma.⁷

The linguistic situations in Malta and Castita are absolutely identical; in both countries the people are bi-lingual. The 1964 Independence Constitution decrees that the national language of the Maltese islands is Maltese while the official languages are both English and Maltese. To put it in Burgess’s words, Maltese, like Castitan, is “the first, or alternative, language of the island”, (*MF*, p. 70) depending on the social status of the speaker and his interlocutor as well as on the degree of formality that governs their conversation.

Taking into consideration the almost parallel historical, religious, environmental and linguistic backgrounds of the two countries, one would expect the Castitan language to have a lot in common with the Maltese language. Surprisingly enough, apart from a few exceptions, this is not so! The Castitan language is more closely related to the Italian language and to its Sicilian variants rather than to Maltese. Actually, Burgess has been extremely consistent when 'creating' this new language: since the framework of Maltese is essentially semitic,⁸ it does not fit the Castitan language, which is "derived from [a] romance dialect" (*MF*, p. 67). Italian, and Sicilian, are more suited to the case.

The vocalic system of the Castitan language is modelled on Sicilian (and Maltese; the Maltese vocalic system derives from Sicilian) rather than on standard Italian. Italian, i.e. the language spoken in Tuscany, has the following vocalic system, with three velar and three palatal vowels (apart from *a*):

i	u
e	o
ɛ	ɔ
a	

The Sicilian vocalic system reduces the total number of vowel sounds from seven to five, thus giving:

i	u
e	o
c	c
a	

In the Castitan **vocalic system**, Burgess extends the Sicilian tendency of further closing certain vocalic sounds (it. *ɛ* > *i*; it. *ɔ* > *u*) to all the vowels. Practically, each vowel moves one step up the scale. Thus *a* > *e* (e.g. it. *santa* > *sentà*), *e* > *i* (it. *festa* > *fistà*), *i* > *ij* (it. *spina* > *spijna*), *o* > *u* (it. *rosa* > *ruza*), *u* > *uw* (it. *pubblico* > *puwblijgu*). Naturally, there are a few notable exceptions but, as the saying goes, these exceptions only confirm the rule.⁹

The **accented vowels** at the end of Italian oxytone words also seem to follow a consistent pattern in the Castitan language: it. final *à* > *et* while it. final *i* > *it*. Thus, the Italian oxytone common nouns *santità*, *ospitalità*, *pipì* change respectively into *sentitet*, *uspijtelijtet*, *pipit*. What would seem to be an exception to this rule (it. *castità* > *Castita*; it. *gran città* > *Grencijta*) is really a different case altogether. These two Italian common nouns are upgraded to proper nouns in the novel; in *MF* they are actually toponyms which indicate, respectively, the Caribbean island and its capital town. Therefore, they are to be classified in a category of their own.

As regards **diphthongs**, while there are a few examples of Italian *uo* in the Castitan language, *ie* hardly appears at all. In fact, the Castitan word *icsplijcari* owes its origin to the Latin verb *explicare* + Sicilian ending *-ari* rather than to its Italian equivalent *spiegare*. As for the rendering of *uo*, *Dwumu* < it. *duomo* and *Bwunmirketu* < it. *buon mercato* point to the dipraph *wu*. However, *muwvijemu* < *muoviamo* indicates that the variant *uw* is also possible.

Vis-à-vis Italian, **consonants** seem to be more stable than vowels in the Castitan language. However, in a few isolated cases certain consonant sounds depart from the standard transcription. Normally, the voiced Italian dental consonant **d** is transcribed in the same way in Castitan, both in initial and in intervocalic position (e.g. *Dwumu* < it. *duomo*; *idijuta* < it. *idiota*). *Streta* < it. *strada* constitutes an exception to this rule.

The unvoiced Italian sibilant **s** undergoes much the same treatment as **d**. In fact, the transcription of this sound remains unvaried in Castitan (e.g. *fista* < it. *festa*; *spijna* < it. *spina*). The only transgression to this rule is *Ruza* < it. *rosa*. On closer examination, however, it turns out that in the Italian word *rosa* the **s** is actually pronounced as a voiced fricative [z], and therefore Burgess is transcribing the consonant as it is actually pronounced in Italian. It is interesting to note that the Maltese word for 'pink' is *roża* (*ż* is the Maltese letter for the voiced fricative [z]).

In Castitan, while the Italian **palatal combination ca** can either remain unvaried (as in *Castita* < it. *castità* and *bucca* < it. *bocca*) or else change into **ke** (as in *Bwunmirketu* < it. *Buon mercato*), the palatal combination **ga** changes to **ghe**, as in *Pepeghelju* < it. *pappagallo*). On the other hand, the Italian **velar combinations co** and **go** always change in the Castitan language, giving respectively **gu** and **cu**. Thus we have, for example, *mijregulu* < it. *miracolo*; *puwblijgu* < it. *pubblico*; *suwcu* < it. *sugo*.

The most unstable combinations involving consonants are those comprising **double letters**. Actually, in most cases Burgess treats Italian geminated letters according to a set pattern: the double letters are reduced to a single one, and the semi-vowel **j** substitutes the missing letter. Thus, Italian *stella* becomes *Stejla*, *gran città* > *Grencijta*, *messa* > *mijsa*, *pappagallo* > *pepeghelju*.¹⁰ However, exceptions to this rule are not lacking! *Bucca* < it. *bocca* is an example of conservation of the Italian spelling; *Pepeghelju* < it. *pappagallo* and *puwblijgu* < it. *pubblico* respect the set pattern only in part since the semi-vowel **j** does not substitute the missing letter; finally, in *todij* < it. *tutti* the unvoiced double dental consonants **tt** are reduced to the voiced single consonant **d**.

In his analysis of *MF*, G. Aggeler considers the Maltese/Castitan surname *Gonzi* tangible proof of the Maltese background to the Caribbean island: "The abundant references to things Maltese and bits of "Castitan" history point strongly to that island. One might mention in particular the name "Gonzi", which the archbishop of Malta shares with the riddling, lionlike creature who attempts to trap and kill Faber".¹¹ Actually, there are other **surnames** which Burgess has picked up in Malta. The author might have chosen the name *Guzman* for the shady character wanted by Paradeleos's henchman (*MF*, pp. 45–46) because of its clear romance origin. However, the surname *Guzman* – though not a very common one in Malta – was very much in the news during Burgess's stay there since one of the most popular singers on the island at that time was called Enzo Guzman. *Gonzi* was the surname of the Maltese archbishop of that time, that same archbishop who was to have an important role in *Earthly Powers*.¹² The archbishop's chaplain in *Earthly Powers*, Fr. Azzopardi, borrows his surname from the Castitan producer of a particular brand of rum, "Azzopardi's Cane Rum" (*MF*, p. 116)! Azzopardi is a very common Maltese surname.

Malta provides Burgess with fertile pastures where not only can he pick up ready made Castitan **onomastics** but also get ideas for the coinage of other proper nouns. The most important street in Grenchija is called “Main Street, or the Strèta Rijał” (MF, p. 66). *Main Street* is the English name for the principal street in many Maltese villages. Such is the case with Lija, the author’s village of residence in Malta.¹³ *Strada Rjali*, instead, was the Maltese name for the main street in the capital, Valletta.¹⁴ *Strèta Rijał* is obviously derived from it.

One recurrent characteristic of Burgesian *proper nouns*, be they of Maltese origin or not, is that they are very often emblematic. In a novel based on riddles and on the theme of incest, the ironic reference in names like *Castita* [‘chastity’] and *Indovinella Street* [‘Riddle Street’] is immediately apparent.¹⁵ In other cases the name, or nickname, of a person or place synthesizes their principal qualities, and the reader already knows what to expect from them. Such is the case with *Donj Memoriya* (the man who knew and remembered everything) and *Bwunmirketu* (where one would expect to get good bargains and buy “something cheap and simple”).

All Castitan **common nouns** originate from Italian. However, *zabb* and *pipit*, synonyms which stand for ‘the outer sex organ of male animals’ or ‘penis’, certainly owe more to the Maltese language rather than to Italian. The Maltese word for ‘penis’ is *żobb* (hence *zab*). Both in Italian and Maltese *pipi* stands for ‘urine’; moreover, in both languages the word is also metonymically used to indicate a child’s penis. However, this metonymical use is more widespread in Maltese than in Italian. By attributing to *pipit* the same meaning as *zab*, and by closely associating the two words, Burgess clearly betrays the Maltese metonymical meaning of the Castitan word rather than the Italian literal one.¹⁶

Of the Castitan **verbal forms** reproduced in MF all but one happen to be imperatives. *Icspljicari*, the odd verb out, is an infinitive which most probably derives from Latin *explicare* [‘to explain’], with a Sicilian loan ending, *-ari*.¹⁷ As for the imperatives, the consonants do not differ at all from those in the corresponding Italian words while the vowels and diphthongs are subjected to the already mentioned transformations. The only perplexity is caused by *Tacija* < it. *taci* [‘be quiet’]; the final *-a* is difficult to explain. Perhaps, since this imperative is closely associated with the noun *idijuta* < it. *idiota*, the final *-a* is an analogical one. In Italian, the majority of nouns ending in *-a* are of female gender. Although *idiota* happens to be an exception, it would not seem unreasonable to suggest that Burgess added the *-a* to *taci* for the sake of uniformity. Again, it is interesting to note that in Maltese one way of forming the feminine is by adding *-ja* to the masculine noun (e.g. m. *barrani* > f. *barranija* [‘stranger’]; m. *raħli* > f. *raħlija* [‘villager’]).

The endings of Castitan **adjectives** respect the following pattern: the Italian masculine ending *-o* becomes *-u* (e.g. *pubblico* > *puwbljgu*), the feminine ending *-ata* remains unvaried (e.g. *spinata* > *ispijnata*) while the final *-e* in Italian adjectives of neuter gender just drops (e.g. *reale* > *rijał*). The ending in *todij* (< it. *tutti*) seems to indicate that the masc. pl. ending also follows the general vowel transformation rule. However, this is not exactly so: the Castitan expression *todij cwestijoni* derives from it. *tutte questioni*; *questioni* is a fem. pl. noun in Italian, but the ‘masculine’ ending *-i* has induced Burgess to treat the word as a masc. pl. one. Thus it is actually the fem. pl. Italian adjective *tutte* that changes into the masc. pl. Castitan equivalent *todij*. Therefore, what we have here is *e* > *ij*.

The Castitan pronouns *nuij* < it. *noi* and *mij* < it. *mi*, the prepositions *pir* < it. *per* and *d'* < it. *di* and the interjection *Selvij* < it. *Salve* do not present any notable deviation from the rules, apart from the case of *d'* in front of consonant (e.g. *d'Grencijta*; *d'sentitet*). In Italian, the assimilation of -i only occurs when the preposition *di* is followed by a word starting with a vowel (e.g. *d'oro* for *di oro*; *d'argento* for *di argento* etc.). The assimilation of the vowel in front of a consonant is characteristic only of the Castitan language, and is therefore to be considered a Burgesian innovation.

The island of Castita, with its language and customs, would not have been what it actually is in *MF* without the Siculo-Maltese influence. The intermingling of such diverse features, characteristic of the Mediterranean and Caribbean cultures, is totally acceptable within the framework of a novel based on the theme of incest: where blood relatives of the first degree are allowed to defy the rules of nature, it comes as no surprise if two antithetical cultures defy the rules of space and . . . logic.

1 To put it in Carol M. Dix's words, "[. . .] Burgess is one of the few authors writing today in England who makes the fullest use of the raw materials of writing, that is the words themselves. His linguistic explorations or experiments make him at once one of our most adventurous writers; [. . .]". C.M. Dix, *Anthony Burgess*, London, Longman, 1971, p. 21.

2 A. Burgess, *MF*, London, Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1971, p. 67. All quotations from *MF* are from this edition, and subsequent references will be given in the text with page numbers and abbreviation.

3 At the beginning of the novel, Burgess cites S. Potter: "In his *Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada* Hans Kurath recognizes no isogloss coincident with the political border along Latitude 49°N". Was it Burgess's intention to prove that language cannot be constrained within fixed boundaries?

4 The striking resemblance between Malta and Castita has already been noticed by Geoffrey Aggeler in his *Anthony Burgess, The artist as novelist*, Alabama, The University of Alabama Press, 1979. Cfr., for example, p. 16: "During his brief, unhappy residence on the island [Malta], he managed to produce two books: a biography of Shakespeare and his novel *MF*, which is set in the United States and a tyrannically ruled Carribean island called "Castita". The striking resemblance this supposedly chaste little island bears to Malta would appear to be more than coincidental". See also pp. 53; 144; 206.

5 Obviously, this description has also a lot in common with the village feasts in Southern Italy, especially in Calabria and in Sicily.

6 One must bear in mind that during his stay in Malta Burgess lived in one of these imposing houses, in Lija.

7 "—What do you know about the Maltese Language?

—Dear me, you do dart about. Nothing, except that it's a Northern Arabic dialect with Italian loanwords and that it's had a written form for a little over a century.

So I'd given the wrong answer. Plausible, but wrong. [. . .]". (*MF*, p. 210).

8 Cfr. Burgess's own definition of the Maltese language in note 7.

9 The major one is Italian final -a. It remains unchanged in Castitan (e.g. *santa* > *senta*; *stella* > *stejla*). Other exceptions are: *a* > *a* (*aria* > *arija*); *e* > *ij* (*salve* > *selvij*); *i* > *i* (*idiota* > *idijuta*); *o* > *o* (*polizia* > *polijts*); *u* > *w* (*sangue* > *sengwi*). As can be gathered from the above list, the exceptions to the rule in the Castitan vocalic system usually occur either at the beginning or at the end of a word but hardly ever in the middle of it.

10 The *j* in *Grencijta* and *mijša* is probably part of the digraph *ij*. However, the examples *stejla* and *pepeghelju* prove that Burgess does actually combine a *j* with the other letter.

11 G. Aggeler, *Anthony Burgess, The artist as novelist*, cit., p. 206.

12 Cfr. A. Burgess, *Earthly Powers*, Hammondsworth, Penguin Books, 1983.

13 "Triq il-Kbira, meaning Street the Big or Main Street, [. . .]". Cfr. A. Burgess, *Earthly Powers*, cit., p. 8.

14 *Kingsway* was the corresponding English name. In 1974 the street's name was changed to *Triq ir-Repubblika/Republic Street*.

15 Cfr. G. Aggeler's observations in *Anthony Burgess, The artist as novelist*, cit., at pp. 202 and 206.

16 On the meaning of *pipì* in the Maltese and Italian languages, cfr., respectively, E. Serracino Inglott, *Il-Miklem Malti* [‘*The Maltese Dictionary*’], Malta, Klabb Kotba Maltin, v. VII, 1981 and G. Devoto, G.C. Oli, *Vocabolario Illustrato della Lingua Italiana*, Milano, Selezione dal Reader’s Digest, 1967, s.v. *pipì*.

17 On Sicilian *spiegari*, cfr. G. Biundi, *Dizionario Siciliano-Italiano*, Bologna, Forni Editore, 1969, ristampa anastatica dell’edizione 1857, Palermo, Fratelli Pedone Lauriel; V. Mortillaro, *Nuovo Dizionario Siciliano-Italiano*, Bologna, Forni Editore, 1970, ristampa anastatica dell’edizione 1876, Palermo; s.v. *spiegari*.