

# Women in 18th Century Malta

The following is the second part of Chapter 4 of Professor Yosanne Vella's 'Women in 18th Century Malta' recently published by SKS. The first part appeared last Saturday

## Magic

In the sixteenth and seventeenth century in the witch hunts conducted in Europe and North America one of the charges brought against women was precisely that of copulating with the Devil. The case of Sister Leonora seems a remnant of this accusation and it is not the only one where the Devil and women are mentioned. In 1749 Andrea Schembri from Naxxar reported a woman had been to his house to cure his sick wife. Andrea said that he had heard Maria Gusman, the Widow, whisper three times "Devil, cure the body and take the soul." Later that year Maria Gusman went herself to the Inquisitor to confess that ten years earlier as a young girl she had invoked the Devil.

Numerous cases exist which cite various incidents where Maltese women dabbled with magic spells however the above mentioned cases are particularly special because here the Devil is mentioned. This is very serious in the eyes of the Church, for complicity with the Devil could not be easily ignored or dismissed as superstition. Theologically the Devil exists and could use people in order to mock God.

Magic can be defined as an attempt at influencing events by occult control of nature. In eighteenth century Malta, the belief in magic and its power was fairly widespread and Christianity never succeeded in uprooting it entirely. The Inquisitor's Archives are literally saturated with exam-

ples of women who got into trouble and were brought in front of the Inquisitor because of their activities involving magic. Women were engaged in several types of sorcery, they prepared love potions, magic perfumes and practiced healing by magic. Much has already been written about them and one can definitely say that women were very much part of the scene where magic was concerned.

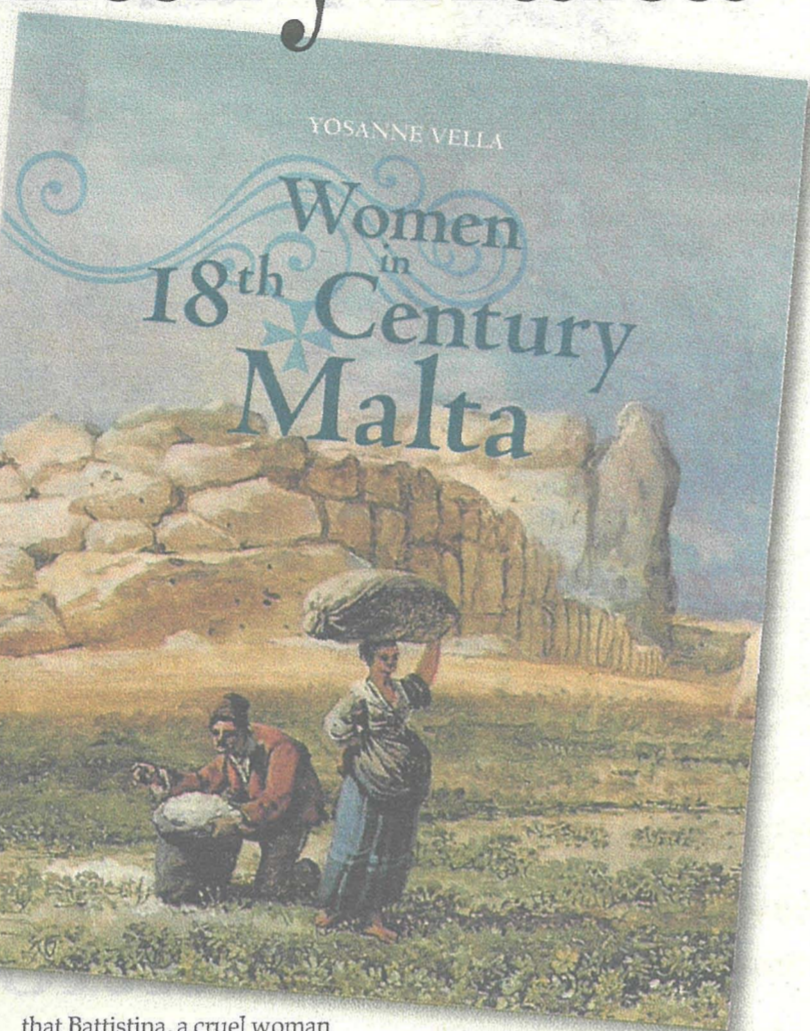
The following are examples of cases involving women from the Inquisitor's Archives. Two sisters, Maddalena and Anna together with their friend Catharina stated in confession that they had collaborated with Grattia in the making of a magic potion with salt, charcoal, palm leaves, olive leaves, fire and water. This mixture was supposed to make them charming and attractive. They explained that at the time, in 1721, Grattia, a sixty-year-old woman from Zebbug who lived in the Mandaraggio of Valletta, had assured her that she had the approval of the Church Tribunal. In 1710 Beatrice who was married to a Neapolitan, threw a paper packet in the face of a Maltese woman. This packet was found to contain white powder, olive twigs and birds' feathers. Beatrice did this to put a curse on her victim's family after the latter's brother Francesco, a barber ended his love affair with Beatrice and was now about to marry a certain Elizabethetta.

Maltese women also made and wore various amulets and objects on their body to protect them against evil influ-

ences. In 1734 Magdalena Sammut reported that her mother Laurica who had died fifteen years earlier had given her a strange silver chain. She made her wear it whenever she was pregnant for it was supposed to have magic powers which prevented miscarriage.

The reason for which a large number of women got into trouble with the Inquisitor was precisely because of these activities. Some were accused by neighbours or relatives who had asked for their help but were now scared of the consequences. Others were accused of using sorcery for their own purposes and some for doing so for others for a fee. In many of the chantings one finds that saints, the Blessed Virgin and the Holy Trinity are mentioned and asked to intervene to help the magic spells to be successful. For example Anna Maria in 1742 tried to cure a twelve-year-old girl of fever by burning blessed olive leaves. While holding a crucifix in her hand she drew crosses with the ashes on the girl's body while reciting the Salve Regina, Our Father and the Creed.

Similarly in 1750 Teresa wife of Giovanni became sick and her sister blamed a certain woman called Battistina. Teresa's sister said that the whole village of Mosta where they lived supported her view

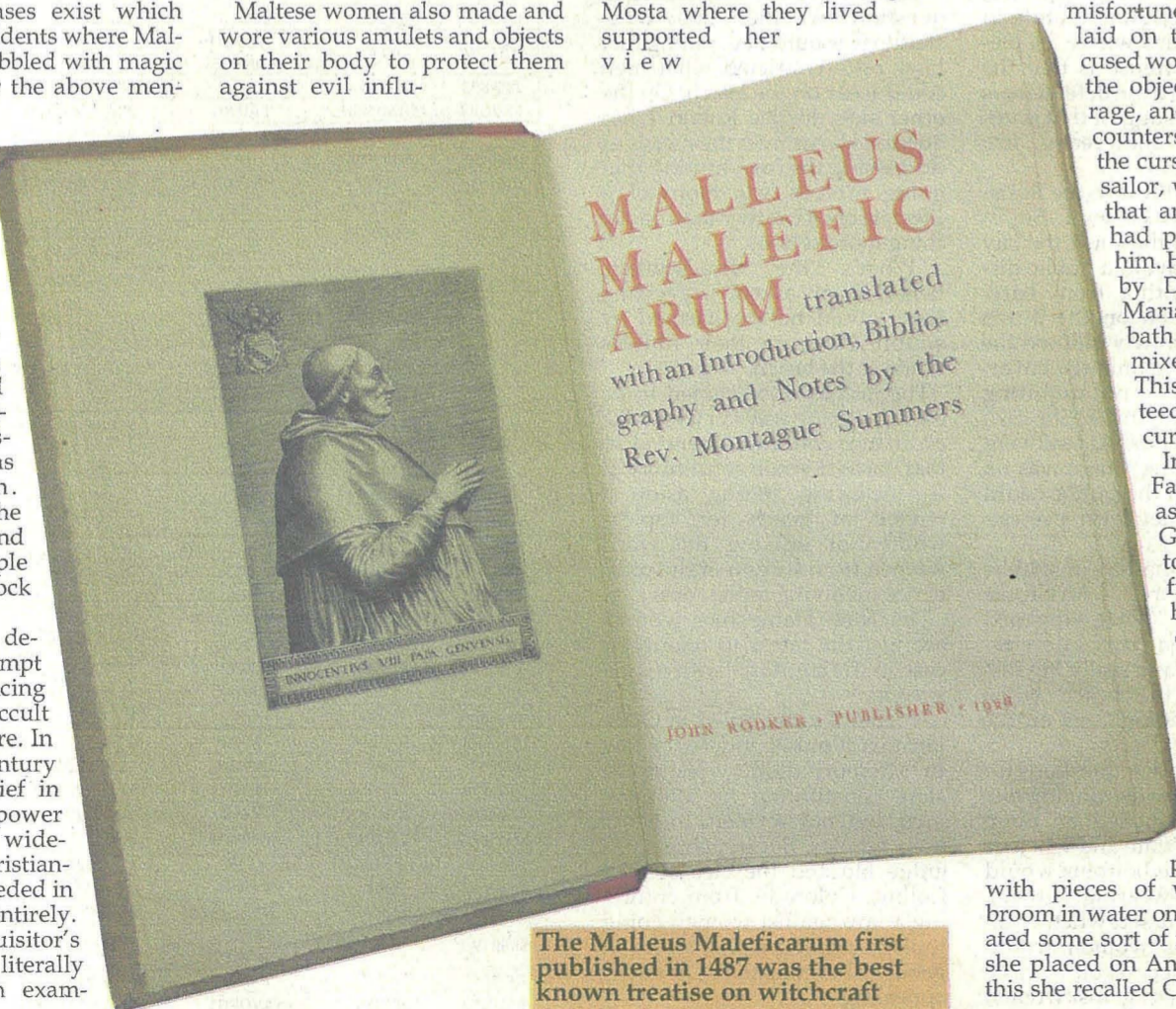


that Battistina, a cruel woman with a very bad reputation, had cast a magic spell and cursed Teresa. From the number of women accused of cursing others it would seem that people in eighteenth century Malta often attributed failures and misfortunes to a spell laid on them. The accused woman was often the object of fear and rage, and people tried counterspells to break the curses. Lorenzo, a sailor, was convinced that an evil woman had put a curse on him. He was advised by Don Stephanu Maria to have a bath in white wine mixed with herbs. This was guaranteed to remove the curse.

In 1715 Grattia Farrugia was asked by Anna Grech's family to cure Anna from a pain in her neck caused by a tumor, since she was well known for her ability in curing such pains. Grattia boiled olive and palm leaves with pieces of wood from a broom in water on a fire. She created some sort of mixture which she placed on Anna, as she did this she recalled Christ's Passion

and the Holy Trinity. Before throwing away the liquid she asked Anna's aunt Francesca to look deeply in it and to see if she could see the face of anyone she knew. She then threw the liquid into the fire. She explained this was a symbolic gesture for in the way the fire was extinguished by the liquid so would this liquid extinguish Anna's pain. Grattia from Qormi was warned several times to stop using her magical cures, but she still carried on with her activities and never turned away anyone coming to her house for her help. Finally in 1749 she was imprisoned in the Bishop's Court.

The publication of Malleus Maleficarum in 1486 by two Dominican priests had proclaimed that women who cured without having studied were witches and must die, since women could not enter universities this automatically condemned all women healers. During the seventeenth century, at the time of the Inquisitor Mgr Antonio Pignatelli (1646-49), there were no less than two hundred and nine denunciations of supposed witches. However, although all Maltese women practicing magic were condemned, great witch hunts like those which occurred in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries never took place in Malta. The penalties imposed by the Ecclesiastical Courts upon those who had been found guilty of sorcery were generally nothing more than to do penance. By the eighteenth century the initial urgent objective of the Inquisition to crush Protestantism had long



The Malleus Maleficarum first published in 1487 was the best known treatise on witchcraft



Two nuns with the habit of the Nun's Hospitallers of St Ursula founded by the Knights of Malta in Allegory of the Order of St John. Oil on canvas. 48 x 37cm Cathedral Museum, Mdina

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In 1734 Magdalena Sammut reported that her mother Laurica who had died fifteen years earlier had given her a strange silver chain. She made her wear it whenever she was pregnant for it was supposed to have magic powers which prevented miscarriage.

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So whether it was Sister Maria recalling visions and surrounded by followers as she suffered her spasms or Bizoche Teresa Muscat who after enduring a bad marriage dedicated her life to penance and pilgrimage, or whether it was the scores of women offering curses, love potions or magical spells like Maria Gusman, Beatrice, Anna Maria and Grattia who despite several warnings continued to offer her magical cures, they were all women who felt important and significant in their society because of religion or magic.



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Professor Vella has published various books, textbooks, papers and teaching resources on history education, as well as a number of history papers on Maltese history and historiography. She is the Vice-President of both the Malta History Society and of the Maltese History Teachers' Association.

Compiled by Marie Bennett

gone. Frans Ciappara an Early Modern historian describes the Roman Inquisition in Malta as "more lenient than the Spanish Holy Office and the courts of the secular government. The Tribunal started to take action only after it was reasonably sure of the facts. Its watchwords were prudence and caution... In matters of witchcraft the Holy Office proceeded with especial circumspection and slowness..."

It is difficult to say whether Maltese women in the eighteenth century practiced any valid medical cures besides all the other magic spells and potions. However by this time various women although not themselves doctors, were in fact employed with the

medical services in Malta. In various branches including the Holy Infirmatory, at the Hospital for Women and in the District Medical Services. These women such as midwives and female barber surgeons could at times be quite specialised and efficient, at this point one cannot help referring again to the young woman who in 1772 was sent to study surgery in Florence at the Order's expense. Undoubtedly women contributed a great deal to the nation's health services offered by the Knights of the Order of St John.

**Conclusion**  
Admittedly this is a very brief look at a very complex issue how-

ever an initial picture starts to emerge of the influence exerted by the interaction of these two strong forces of religion and magic on Maltese women in the eighteenth century. One could say religion was largely responsible for upholding strict limitations and stereotypes, and magic was in fact one way of exerting some kind of control. This explanation tallies with that offered by Carmel Cassar an anthropologist, who describes the effects of the Catholic Reformation after the Council of Trent on women by saying that "while on the one hand they 'officially' accepted the limitations imposed on them by the authorities, at the same time, they continued to resort to vari-

ous forms of 'illicit' behaviour, at times individually, and at times collectively, as a form of unconscious protest to male hegemony." On the other hand, from the cases mentioned in this chapter I would like to put forward another interpretation. It is clear that in fact these women were not rejecting religion in favour of magic but rather folk beliefs and superstitions were incorporated with religious beliefs and rituals. One gets the feeling that you are looking at two faces of the same coin, both religion and magic appealed to women because they could offer an alternative to the limited 'mother'/'wife' image imposed on them by their society.