

# Book Review: The Maltese Cinderella and the Women's Storytelling Tradition

Veronica Veen

Malta: Veronica Emma Veen (2017); 240 pages

REVIEWED BY THE LATE ANTON F. ATTARD (written in 2018)

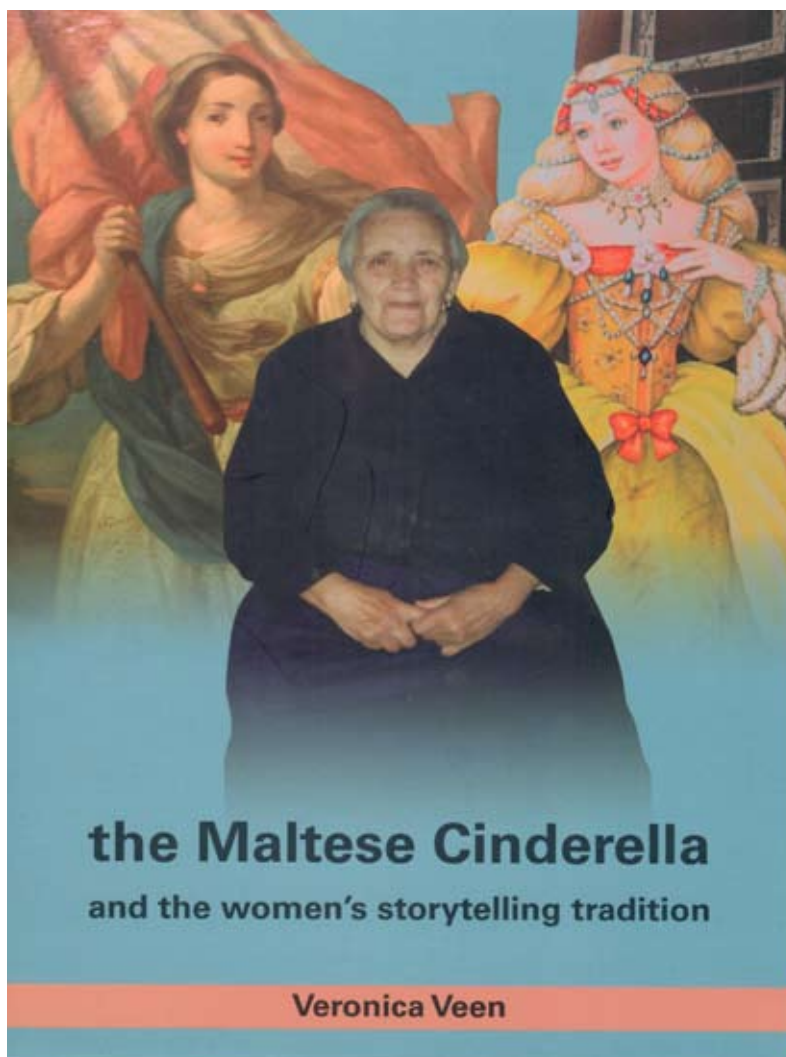
It is almost thirty years ago that I met Dr Veronica Veen, the Dutch cultural anthropologist and art historian/archaeologist. It is illustrative of her open-minded approach as a scholar that she immediately sought the cooperation and dialogue with local expertise.

At the time, the late 1980's and early 1990's, she was absorbed by an extensive fieldwork project revolving around the storytelling tradition on Gozo. The corpus of stories about a strong, bean-eating giantess who had reputedly brought the Stone of Qala up to its present location, had her special interest, since the connection between this place-bound tale with its many variants and Gozo's rich prehistoric past might be established: a stone-carrying giantess as a folkloristic remains of a goddess-culture that built megalithic temples.

In 1994 Dr Veen produced an English version of a book in which the results of her anthropological fieldwork were laid down. This book, titled *Female Images of Malta*, was a pioneering effort in the sense that she had recorded the numerous variants of the giantess-story and a fair number of others in a scrupulously precise and literal manner, in order to retain the oral character of the performances. She also paid more than the usual attention to the setting and the social context of storytelling.

## A Spectacular Find

In the wake of her research, in 1992 she managed, through trusted mediators, to trace an old female storyteller on Gozo, named Marija, who maintained a repertoire of numerous folkstories and even fairy tales. The key piece among these stories was a long



fairytale about *Il-Germudija*, the Sooty One, that instantly proved to be a fascinating variant of the internationally well-known and wide-spread tale of Cinderella.

Only after many years, meanwhile having published a book on the Dutch neolithic Funnel Beaker Culture and preparing more publications, she was in the position to carry on with elaborating on the earlier discovery. Meanwhile Marija had passed away at a very respectable age, a considerable loss for the Maltese heritage of orally delivered folklore. Fortunately Dr Veen found the support and cooperation of Gianna, the niece of Marija,

who proved to be in possession of an admirable memory. Many more stories, stemming from her favourite auntie, could follow in this way.

With great transparency, as she has always preferred to work, Dr Veen has conceived her new book *The Maltese Cinderella and the Women's Storytelling tradition* as a testimony of 'work in process' to recall and reconstruct as much as possible of this great fairytale and the rest of Marija's legacy. In this publication, with many entertaining and even hilarious moments, the role of Gianna, her informant, proved to be truly instrumental. Many details about women's life in the old days the stories refer to, have been added, embedding them in a sound, socio-cultural context. The book features some thirty stories in total and is generously illustrated with photographs by the author, attractive old fairytale prints and drawings by her husband. Note also that this book mainly deals with women's stories, that is stories told by and about women, according to the compact definition by Dr Veen.

### **Far From a Common Cinderella**

In the more theoretical parts of her book, Dr Veen demonstrates that *Il-Germudija* is everything except a common Cinderella, as can be seen from the exciting, carefully annotated text, directly derived from the telling session with Marija. The protagonist, in all her work, is even deviant from the mostly colourful heroines in the other (only) three Cinderella variants that were known in Malta so far, featuring in stories collected by the folklorists Bertha Ilg, Hans Stumme and Manwel Magri, all around 1900.

And there is a very substantial difference with the internationally more popular and famous variants derived from the *Cendrillon* by Charles Perrault (1694), with the famous glass slipper and the helpful fairy godmother. Like in the later German variant *Aschenputtel* published by the Grimm brothers (1812, 1819 and 1857) the heroine is a pitiful and dependent human being, terrorised by nasty stepsisters and an evil stepmother. Dr Veen brilliantly, in my opinion, argues that in the Maltese variants it is not the 'stepmother-problem' that 'reigns' the story (*Il-Germudija* is not even a daughter, but a maid!), but the threatening

domination by a daughter-in-law, entering a fixed matriliney, which is more in line with Maltese socio-historical reality. This is cultural-anthropological research of the highest level, explaining most of the typical deviations in the Maltese variants, of which *Il-Germudija* is by far the most radical.

In another theoretical part of the book the newly-found fairytale is thoroughly analysed from several points of view. Dr Veen demonstrates that the story teller managed to polish and concentrate the story into a superb structure consisting of triads on several levels, with the use of all kinds of motifs (for instance core motifs and the more invisible overarching motifs) that enabled her to create an intricate, layered symbolism. Her telling style is both vigorous and efficient. The characterisation of the energetic and brave servant girl, and of her almost timid lover (not at all a Prince, but simply the son of the house) is of an impressive psychological refinement. Additionally, the possible 'messages' of the fairytale, certainly of an emancipatory and egalitarian kind, and at the time also clearly somewhat subversive, are discussed.

The very important and readable fourth part of Dr Veen's book features a true treasure of stories, all of them with instructive introductions and references. We are finally able to read in English the three 'historical' Maltese Cinderella variants, originally written down in German and Maltese. Two of them (those collected by Ilg and Stumme, *Ċiklemfusa* and *Germuda-Żermuda*) also have far from docile protagonists. Then follow five related stories, among which Magri's magnificent *The Nether World*, and *Betta Pilusa*, told before 1870 to the gifted early feminist collector Laura Gonzenbach in Sicily. Altogether influences from Italy, especially from the early *Pentamerone* by Basile (1634) appear to have worked much stronger in Malta than Perrault and Grimm, another shift in the existing overall picture Veronica Veen presents us with.

This richly-illustrated book, that contains more than 240 pages, can be regarded as a true tribute to the female storyteller. The author was very lucky to find the world's greatest specialist in fairytales, professor Jack Zipes, willing to write an interesting (and admiring) foreword.