Medical pluralism and its impact on illness in 16th and 17th century Malta

Carmel Cassar

In early modern Malta, as in the rest of Europe, there existed two major systems by which one could explain health and sickness, life and death or, general success and failure in everyday life. The first was religious in nature and it was based on the general belief that God's omnipresence in the world served as an active force in which the good were rewarded and the impious were punished. God showed his hand on the malevolence of the world in the devastation caused by warring activities or, the infliction of famine and plague. It was believed that the only way these scourges could be controlled was by resorting to supernatural power. Belief in supernatural healing may have been largely circular reasoning but since it was largely ecclesiastical in nature it was believed to be supernatural. It had a vast spiritual and therapeutic effect on the majority of the people.

Key words

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Carmel Cassar PhD, FR Hist S
Institute of Maltese Studies, University of Malta, Msida
Email: carmel.cassar@um.edu.mt

The other view was that put forward by learned medicine based as it was on natural philosophy, which it largely borrowed from the Graeco-Roman world of antiquity and adapted to the Christian tradition. It was a view in which elements and humours were believed to govern everything in the natural world from meteorology to medicine. Pseudo-sciences such as astrology, magic and alchemy formed an integral part of the worldview and claimed to offer ways to understand and control the environment. In essence learned medicine was little different from popular magical healing since the practitioners had no real understanding of the circulation of blood, the nervous system, the digestive system nor anything else. The prescriptions they prepared were of little or no help and were indeed often potentially lethal. In order to give the impression that they were doing something useful they normally subjected their patients to a regime of emetics, purges and bleeding, as the normal forms of intervention available. The local medical practitioners provided a very fragmented version of natural philosophy. Nonetheless one must admit that for all their weaknesses the medicinal healing of the times had a very powerful effect on the world-view of people from all social levels. However the most useful and widespread official practitioners were probably not the highly educated physicians but rather the barber-surgeons, who had considerable practical skills in dealing with fractures, wounds, abscesses and a range of other medical complaints.

During the seventeenth century great efforts were made in an attempt to define the various branches of the healing profession. From now on the roles of physician, barber-surgeon and apothecary were defined and each sector had its own corresponding moral and professional responsibilities.[1] The physician was essentially the specialist of internal medicine who diagnosed the disease during consultations and prescribed prescriptions and concoctions. The physician refrained from any manual activities like operations - which were carried out by the barber-surgeon - and the actual preparation of medicine that was carried out by the apothecary. The physician, studied at a Medical College and distinguished himself by being conferred the title of Doctor of Medicine while his lesser colleagues, the barber-surgeon and apothecary, acquired their knowledge mechanically often through an apprenticeship and, in the case of surgeons, thanks to training in hospitals. It goes without saying that the barber-surgeon who suggested treatments for internal diseases, despite lack of training in the field was considered as a violator of the medical corporation and was furthermore a

threat to the medical profession. Nevertheless medical service, especially in rural areas, was provided by barber-surgeons. Malta was no exception to this general rule. An example is provided by the case of Nicola Gullo the barber-surgeon of Luqa who in the late 1630s was reputed for his ability to fix broken bones and even serve as a dentist.[2]

Social behaviour, brutality and illness

It seems that people from all walks of life avoided consulting physicians for some reason or other. Among the witnesses who deposed in the case against Don Vincentio Callus, the vice-parish priest of Qormi, one comes across Georgio Tabone who served as sexton of the parish church. Amongst other details Tabone recalled that he had accompanied Don Vincentio, on a couple of occasions to Żebbuġ, where he confessed to the vice parish priest Don Andrea Bezine. Tabone confirmed that Don Vincentio always went to Żebbuġ on foot and when he returned he always complained of pain in the liver and went straight to bed. It seems that Don Vincentio did not feel inclined to consult Doctor Mattheo Cassia, the resident physician of Qormi, possibly because he considered the Cassia family as his archenemy.[3] But most probably it never crossed his mind to consult a physician. In Tabone's view Don Vincentio was a good priest who had taught him prayers as he had done to the many children of the village. Tabone claimed that Don Vincentio had introduced the forty-hours devotion[4] at Qormi and if he received any alms or *guastelle di pasta*,[5] Don Vincentio kept a quarter of one *guastella* for himself and he used to send Tabone to distribute it among the poor, blind, and maimed of the village. Tabone even recalled how on one occasion a man from Żurrieq, who passed by the village of Qormi, told him that they were lucky to be served by Don Vincentio.[6]

Tabone made a eulogy on Don Vincentio's kindness but it seems that practical support to the most vulnerable members of society was apparently provided by anyone who could help. Thus the notorious healer-cum-witch Betta Caloiro declared that the first time she met the devil *farfarello* was at the age of six when she had been instructed to carry some bowls of food to an elderly relative.[7] Most treatment was carried out in the home and it was usual for the sick person to make one's own diagnosis without any consultation with a medical practitioner. Only when the patient was unable to treat the disease with one's own medical knowledge was a healer fetched. The inhabitant of early modern Malta was unaware of the need to carry out medical check-ups unless it was strictly necessary. Illness narratives reveal that such choices were part of everyday lifestyle. When Vincentio Calleye alias *zeino* of Kirkop was given the *strappado* by the young French knight, captain of the Parish of Birmiftuħ, he received no medical treatment.[8] A similar event was registered in August 1597 immediately after the horse-race which was held in Valletta in honour of St Roque.[9] On that occasion the judges wanted to give first prize to Julio Busuttil. However when Busuttil's brother Mattheo went to collect the first prize *palio*[10] Bartholomeo Talavera, who was placed second, pretended the first prize. Both Busuttil and Talavera began to pull the pole from each other's hand with such force that they eventually managed to break it. It appears that Matheo Busuttil hit Talavera under the eye and wounded him. At this point Talavera's anger knew no bounds. He drew out his sword and attempted to hit Busuttil but was unable to do so due to the multitude of spectators present. Although Talavera repeatedly complained that he had been wounded there is no evidence that a medical practitioner was summoned on site.[11]

Society appears to have been generally much more brutal and violent particularly because the available documentation suggests that many were unconscious of the needs of the more vulnerable members of society. The evidence put forward by the cleric Andrea Gusman is a case in point. Gusman explained that the day before he was walking by the Vittoriosa marina and noticed a number of stevedores hailing from the villages sitting down by the shore. One of the stevedores had an ailing leg wrapped in linen bandages. Gusman noticed that at one point one of his mates threw a small stone at the sick man's leg and the man immediately began to writhe with pain and torment. When his friends began to laugh at him the ailing man became so mad with rage that he took out his knife from his waist and challenged his attacker. According to the onlooker Gusman no one dared say a word. The silence of his companions angered the ailing man even more. He retorted that he really wished to kill the one who threw the stone even if it were his own father or indeed the 'Son of God' himself.[12] Ironically it was this last blasphemous assertion that led the man into serious trouble with the Inquisition!

Lack of concern and even brutality was at times levelled at children by their own parents. The general attitude of the ecclesiastical and civil authorities may have induced parents to discipline the child through corporal punishment and moral strictures since this was seen as the positive obligation of the parents. On some occasions a father's wrath reached excessive levels so that one may come across court evidence on the excessive mistreatment of children by parents. Salvo, the twelve year old son of Michele Camilleri from the *Grutta Grande* (lit. Great Cave - *Għar il-Kbir* in the limits of Dingli), revealed that three years before, when the family was still residing in Gozo, his father threw his brother Pietro in a corner of the house and began to beat him savagely. Shocked and terrified by the ordeal the boy soon fell sick. It was at this point that his mother decided to consult a healer. The healer asked for the boy's cap. After she examined the cap closely the healer diagnosed that Pietro was suffering from a severe shock. Pietro's mother did not learn much more than what she already knew. But perhaps the most notable point here is the fact that the witness denounced the healer and the boy's mother, for resorting to popular healing practices rather than to report the brutal beating suffered by the boy at the hands of his father![13]

Probably the Inquisition case-study of Catherina Vitale's alleged cruelty towards her slaves may help to confirm the brutal world in which many people lived even more clearly.

On 26 April 1608 Embarech, the male black slave of Catherina Vitale, summoned before the Inquisition tribunal, declared to have seen his mistress mistreat her four female slaves quite often in the two months he had been living under her roof. In Embarech's view Catherina's cruelty knew no bounds especially towards the two siblings Vincentia and Perla. The male slave had been ordered to beat the two girls with a bulls' whip only a few days before, for allegedly having stolen some money. Embarech was ordered to tie the girls to the staircase and whip them. Furthermore his mistress decided to pour and spread hot lard over Perla's shoulders at which the girl screamed so much with pain that Embarech felt obliged to cover her mouth so as to avoid divulging the incident to neighbours and passers by.[14] Later the physician of the Inquisition Camillo La Munda who visited Perla confirmed Embarach's deposition.[15]

The two girls, Vincentia and Perla, had earlier accused their mistress of witchcraft but when summoned before the Inquisitor Catherina Vitale defended herself by stating that she had never practised witchcraft. But she admitted to having used split beans for the healing of migraine on the advice of her fellow Greek physician Corogna.[16] She even admitted to have spread a turtle's blood on her daughter's back as a cure and had the animal's flesh seasoned by the apothecary Filippo Sala. The meat was later fed to her daughter as a kind of medicine. The fierce attack on her honour must have induced Catherina Vitale to resort to torturing her slaves. She must have felt particularly vulnerable and felt the need to defend herself by declaring that all the rumours against her were false.[17]

Popular medicine versus the physician

Women's depositions in witchcraft cases involving children, or mothers, often reflect the anxieties produced by all stages of maternal life. Andrella Rispulo, a native of Naples and an inhabitant of Senglea, explained how amongst others she had learned an oration for the healing of women's breasts which she had performed several times. The healing spell was ideally carried out at sunset. The healer had to fill a bowl with water recite an Our Father and a Hail Mary, insert a string, a needle, and a comb in the water and recite an historiola – a brief episode in the life of Christ, the Virgin or the saints that were most often disease-specific, operating on the principle of analogy.[18]

Similar evidence confirms Giovanni Romeo's view that Neapolitan women had more faith in the cures provided by women 'experts' than those of the physicians.[19] Thus even those women who carried their babies satisfactorily through delivery were unusually dependent on the goodwill and assistance of family, friends and neighbours. The expertise of older women was at a premium, whether they were official midwives or not. The mass of the common folk was not inclined to seek formal medical treatment. First and foremost given the widespread poverty, patients and their families were unable to pay the physician's fees. Secondly, the physicians inspired feelings of intimidation so that the commoners preferred to consult the local charlatan or wise woman.[20] Finally the diagnosis of medical practitioners often proved to be either erratic or it consisted of medicaments which were little better than the ones provided by the cunning folk. In 1607, for example, the Sicilian physician from Syracuse Matteo Cimino used oil to heal the head-wound of the Muslim galley-slave Machamet.[21] Likewise in 1637 the Sardinian galley-surgeon Antonio Meline used egg-yolks to heal the wounded in battle.[22] These remedies were not much different from those used by the common folk.[23] One of the favourite healing methods used by the mid-seventeenth century slave-healer Chag Hali was a potion of different leaves mixed with water with which he bathed his patient.[24]

David Gentilcore points out that the limited efficacy of pre-modern medicine induced the early modern Catholics to resort to any sources of healing that were available to them. Thus he argues that, 'in this medically pluralistic society the intervention of physicians was but one source of relief, and not necessarily the most common'. Apart from the regular medical practitioners there were the cunning folk, exorcists and saints besides the widespread use of domestic medicine.[25] In 1594 Catherina Debono recurred to a middle-aged woman from Mosta, called Isabella *figlia di Baili*, to heal her young son since she was reputed as a healer specialist of children. Catherina, who was acclaimed as '*la maga della Musta*' (the witch of Mosta) was an expert in the preparation of herbal baths for her patients.[26] Seven years later Joanna Grima of Luqa took her two-year-old girl, who suffered from an eye-disease, to an old Sicilian woman called Margarita Fiteni, then living at Tarxien, who was reputed for her ability to heal little children from all illnesses. Margarita thought that she could heal the child by masticating an herb *ciminagro* and putting it on the eyes of the girl. Unfortunately, the mother could see no progress in the girl's eyes.[27] On another occasion a woman and her sister, the tertiary nun Catherina Bonnichi from Vittoriosa, consulted the midwife Agatha (de Suda?) to diagnose the disease that the woman's daughter was suffering from. Agatha fumigated some laurel leaves and made signs of the cross on the girl's forehead and lips while reciting the *Pater Noster* and *Ave Maria*.[28]

The above evidence confirms the view that domestic medicine continued to be a predominantly female field, in part because poor, elderly women were frequently driven to the margins of society and thus depended on their knowledge for their livelihood. At the same time healing and health were considered a natural part of the female domain. It was part of the women's concern for the family's survival and well-being.[29] One woman, Marietta Butigeg of Gudja, who denounced herself in 1602, thought there was nothing wrong when she tried to cure Domenico Vella, her niece's husband, who was in bed suffering from rheumatism. Marietta had heard people say at the village that an herb called *sambuca* could relieve the pain. Therefore Marietta crushed some leaves and cooked them in a pot. Then she massaged the ointment into Vella's knees and legs.[30] Marietta's case shows that there existed a general belief that herbal and collective wisdom could cope with simple illnesses. Healing was part of the female sphere, since the relationship with the body

– vis-à-vis disease and reproduction – formed part of what was considered the feminine sphere and its responsibilities.[31] Similarly Angelina Rodiota, alias *Pandigliudena,* felt there was nothing wrong for her to go around preparing healing remedies composed of a mixture of wax and lead during the plague of 1592-1593.[32] One may add that women often shared their domestic chores and it was a standard practice for women to help one another in times of need.[33]

On their part physicians held 'vague and imprecise' concepts of disease and tended to explain phenomena in terms of stories full of metaphor and incident that abounded in descriptions of pathological events. It follows that diseases were frequently categorised on the basis of their lethality. In 1600 Don Mariano Briffa asked to be relieved from his morning duties at the Cathedral, where he served as canon, due to ophthalmic problems. Briffa was lucky because he was able to seek the advice of an eminent physician who was then living in Malta – Pietro Parisi. When asked to explain the reason for his ophthalmic problem, Parisi asserted that the air at night effected Don Mariano's eyesight and was thus harmful to him.[34] In his diagnosis of Don Briffa's eyesight Parisi was putting into practice the suggestions he wrote in his book of 1593. According to Parisi the ways to avoid bad air was simple and open to all. In fact he advised his readers not to live close to the foci of corrupt air, such as dead bodies, marshes, other stagnant waters, sinks sewers, dung-hills, kitchens, and places were flex and hemp were soaked.[35] Unscientific as this might be it seems that such views were commonly held among physicians at the time.

Concluding remarks

The documents discussed above show clearly that there existed a good deal of play within the corporate medical community in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to the extent that medical dealings involved both trained and untrained practitioners. To a much greater extent than historians have been willing to acknowledge, the popular healer and the physician inhabited a unitary world so that elite and popular medicine were contiguous or overlapping rather than contrary or dichotomous. This point is strengthened when we examine medical ideas and the language used by all types of medical practitioners. One must admit that to a very considerable extent trained and untrained practitioners participated in a shared medical discourse. That discourse was grounded in the Galenic theory of the ancient world based on the notions of the second century Greek physician Galen. Galen's theory of the humours was a highly pervasive and influential one on the cosmology of medieval and early modern Europe. It formed the fundamentals of medical theory known to the educated elite from their schooldays. Furthermore it was popularised through versions of contemporary medical ideas which circulated freely and widely in print. Naturally, there were very great differences in the extent to which trained and untrained practitioners could articulate that discourse or use it creatively. Yet its forms were so variable, and its influence so pervasive, that it seemed impossible to escape it. Galenists made no claims to the infallibility of their art. On the contrary, they stressed its limitations in many cases, especially when patients were suffering from acute diseases or painful chronic conditions.

References

1 On their part the helpless and uneducated masses tended to regard popular medicine as the be-all and end-all of health care within society with the result that the masses often failed to distinguish between various types of medical practitioners. The sick and their kinsfolk sought the services of a medical practitioner to heal with the result that they found nothing wrong in consulting all forms of healing available to them whether this was formal 'medical' healing or simply a 'popular' cure. The coexistence, overlapping and competition between various forms of healing at the disposal of the masses meant that popular healers often transgressed the official boundaries. This odd contradiction was typical of early modern society in all its aspects. Similar strategies of monopolization and exclusion can be attested in the history of the traditional professions like the priesthood and the lawyers starting from the sixteenth century.[36] In short formally trained physicians, like formally trained adherents of other professions, began to regard themselves as a community of legal practitioners who sought to exert their authority throughout society. G. Panseri, 'La nascita della polizia medica: l'organizzazione saanitaria nei vari stati italiani', G. Micheli, (ed.), Storia d'Italia. Annali 3: Scienze e tecnica nella cultura e nella società dal Rinascimento a oggi. (Turin, 1980), p.180.

2 G. Micallef, Hal-Luqa. Niesha u grajjietha, (Malta, 1975), p.77.

3 A(rchivies of the) I(nquisition of) M(alta) Crim(inal Proceedings), vol.23A case 299, fol. 177v.

4 The Forty-hours devotion, known as Q The boy uarant'hore, was usually staged during the celebration of feasts like carnival. The Jesuits and the Catholic Reformation Church encouraged such practices during un-Christian festivities. It consisted in the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament for forty continuous hours.

5 In nineteenth century Sicily the guastelle were a kind of flat bread which used to be filled with fresh cheese and other food items cf. Nuovo vocabolario siciliano-italiano compilato da Antonio Traina, (Palermo, 1868), p.455; The eighteenth century Maltese erudite Gian Francesco Agius de Soldanis in his "Damma tal Kliem Kartaginiz", N(ational) L(ibrary of) M(alta) Libr(rary manuscript) 143(i) fol.214 refers to the collura which was popularly used by the ancestors and were still distributed to the people during the titular feasts of saints. cf A.E. Caruana, Vocabolario della lingua Maltese, (Malta, 1903), p.379. Can we assume that the bread prepared in the villages was in the form of the modern ftira?

6 AIM Crim. vol. 23A case 299, fols. 217-18.

7 AIM Crim., vol.19B case 46, fol.477a-v; cf C. Cassar, Witchcraft, Sorcery and the Inquisition. A Study of Cultural Values in Early Modern Malta. (Malta, 1996), p.19.

8 AIM Crim., vol. 14A case 9, fol. 303v-304v: 18 November 1595. The strappado, also known as corda was the most generally used kind of torture. 'The accused's hands were tied behind the back, attached to a rope which was thrown over a beam in the ceiling, and hauled into the air, there to hang for a period of time, then let down, then raised again'. E. Peters, Torture, (Oxford, 1985), p.68. In this case the use of torture was grave because it was not ordered by a criminal court. It does however provide evidence of the arrogance young members of the Order of St John exerted over simple Maltese peasants.

9 The 16 August was celebrated as the day of St Roque. The saint died at Montpellier on 16 August 1327.

10 The palio is a piece of rich cloth given as a price in a horse-race.

11 AIM Crim., vol.15A case 72, fols.316-320v.

12 AIM Crim. vol.19A case 21, fol.189: 23 May, 1601.

13 AIM Crim., vol. 23A case 381, fol.687: 11 April, 1604.
14 AIM Crim., vol.28B case 131, fol.597: 26 April, 1608.
15 AIM Crim., vol.28B case 131, fol.595: 24 April, 1608.
16 Catherina Vitale's parents were Greek and she could speak Greek fluently. The case has been discussed at length in C. Cassar, Daughters of Eve. Women, Gender Roles, and the Impact of the Council of Trent in Catholic Malta. (Malta, 2002), pp.100-109.
17 AIM Crim., vol.28B case 130, fols. 575-77.
18 In her deposition Andrella repeated the historiola. The English translation runs as follows. 'Our Lady, Saint Mary on her way she went and met a poor girl who complained bitterly, and Our Lady asked her, "What do you have that makes you complain so bitterly?" The girl told her, "I am unable to lactate neither to my child nor to my neighbours' children". Our Lady advised her, "Pick a hair pin and a comb from your head and start singing about the holy wounds of Christ so that you won't hurt and suffer no harm". This has been stated by St Peter and blessed by St Nicholas and it could neither prick nor hurt you, nor any other Christian'. AIM Crim. vol. 20A, case 95 fol.375-v.; cf. C. Cassar, Witchcraft, Sorcery and the Inquisition, p. 46.
19 G. Romeo, Inquisitori, esorcisti e streghe nell'Italia della controriforma, (Florence, 1990), pp.204, 220.
20 C.M. Cipolla, Public health and the medical profession in the Renaissance, (Cambridge, 1973), p.114.
21 NLM A(rchives of the) O(rder of) M(alta) vol. 663, fol.63.
22 AIM Crim., vol. 54 bis, case 5, fol.37.
23 Kenneth Gambin refers to a few case-studies of the mid-1630s where medical practitioners, physicians or surgeons, declared to have practised magical remedies. Gonsalvo Habel, a Maltese physician practised sorcery against theft AIM Crim., vol.51A case 107, fol.522: 29 June, 1635; Paolo Capones, a Maltese surgeon from Senglea, resorted to love magic AIM Crim., vol.51B case 140, fol.918: 20 July, 1635; Francesco Cagno, a Sicilian physician, was denounced for love magic. AIM Crim, vol.52A case case 171 fol.129: 22 August, 1635; A French physician, practised love magic and rituals of sorcery to get wealthy. AIM Crim., vol.52B case 288, fol.835: 31 August, 1637; cf. K. Gambin, 'Fabio Chigi: Inquisitor-Missionary and Tridentine Reformer', (MA unpublished thesis 1997 – University of Malta), pp. 133, 143, 154, 171.
24 C. Cassar, 'Witchcraft beliefs and social control in seventeenth century Malta', Journal of Mediterranean Studies, (1993) vol.3, no.2, p.321.
25 D. Gentilcore, 'Contesting illness in early modern Naples: Miracolati, physicians and the Congregation of Rites' in Past and Present. A Journal of Historical Studies, (1995) no.148: p.119.
26 AIM Crim., vol.13 case 55, fol. 190-v.
27 AIM Crim., vol. 23A case 321, fol.323.
28 AIM Crim., vol. 18 case 211, fol.185-v.
29 C. Cassar, Witchcraft, Sorcery and the Inquisition, p.50.
30 AIM Crim. Vol.20B case 123 fol.668.
31 I.M. Lewis, Ecstatic religion, (2nd ed) (London, 1989), p.79.
32 AIM Crim., vol.16A case 43 fol.463v.
33 AIM Crim.,vol.29B case 35 fol.502.
34 The petition of Don Mariano was sent to the Inquisitor by the Deacon of the Cathedral, Don Antonio Bartholo. AIM Civ(il Proceedings) vol.11 fol.128: 20 May, 1600.
35 'Hor questa aria come cosa mista, non come elemento semplice si corrumpe per diversi cagioni ò superiori, come per congiuntioni e aspetti di pianete, influssi, e ecclesiastici: i quali havendo dominio nell'elemento dell'aria, la putrefanno: e così da una secreta qualità dè cieli viene à prodursi nell'aria una nuova qualità nimica, e velenosa: O inferiori come i vapori, che si lievino dall'acqua morte, e putride de stagni, ò dà corpi morti, non seppiliti, ò da alcuna essalatione, che esce dalli abissi, ò dalle profonde cavarne della terra, e così ancora dal vitto, che communamente si usi in alcuna città, ò Regno per necessità. Di che havendosene fatto consuetudine, e habito per lungo tempo, fa che quelli, che usano l'istessa sorte di vitto, incorrano, e siano soggetti alle medesime malattie…' P. Parisi Avvertimenti sopra la peste e febre pestifera, (Palermo, 1593), p.36.
36 By the nineteenth century the old professions were joined by new ones like engineers, architects, accountants in their effort to exclude 'charlatans' from their midst. N. Elias, 'Scientific Establishments', in N. Elias, H. Martins, and R. Whitley (eds), Scientific Establishments and Hierarchies. (Dordrecht, 1982), pp.3-69.