

JMS. 10 (1975)

(134-140)

MFN 3336

BOOK REVIEWS

J. AQUILINA, *A Comparative dictionary of Maltese Proverbs*. The Royal University of Malta 1972, pp. liii + 694.

The publication of this comprehensive collection of Maltese proverbs brings to all folklore students the fruit of Professor Aquilina's long years of preparation and research in this specialised field of studies. The vast corpus of more than 4,630 proverbs under 45 headings has been collected from oral and written sources, the latter including some private unpublished collections placed at the author's disposal.

Aquilina's interest in local proverbs goes back to his undergraduate days, when he wrote a delightful essay *Il-Qawl Malti* which has since found its way into school anthologies. He started collecting Maltese proverbs in 1940, shortly after he returned from his studies at the London School of Oriental and African Languages where he obtained his Ph.D. degree and presented his thesis on *The Structure of Maltese* that was eventually published in 1959.

As a resident lawyer in Gozo during the war years, and later with the help of some informants from various localities in Malta, Aquilina had a unique opportunity to register the age-old wisdom and proverb lore of our people. The field of research proved to be unusually fertile, and what was originally intended as a supplement to M. A. Vassalli's collection of 863 *Motti, Aforismi e Proverbi Maltesi* (Malta, 1828) gradually grew and assumed such proportions that Vassalli's original compilation now forms less than a fifth of Aquilina's collection.

In the presentation of this material Aquilina followed the three-fold method of (i) translation of texts, with clarifications where necessary, (ii) comparisons, and (iii) etymological notes on certain words. Variants are shown in italics, after the main entry. The resulting work is thus in reality three studies in one – a successful exercise in comparative folklore and philology that one very rarely finds combined within the pages of a single volume.

Each one of the 45 sections is preceded by an analytical essay indicating the main motives of the proverbs within that group. The proverbs within each section 'have been grouped according to the alphabetical order of a catch-word, the place of which is determin-

ed not by the letter with which it begins, but by the phoneme of the tri-consonantal group in the third person masculine singular, the usual order of Semitic dictionaries.'

The work under review is much more than a diligent compilation and classification of Maltese proverbs. To the scholarly presentation of his material Aquilina adds his formidable philological apparatus and the fruits of his vast reading in the specialised field of comparative paremiology. Although the philological explanations contained in this volume are not of direct interest to the folklorist, they help to punctuate and illustrate the evidence of cultural contacts and influences provided by the comparisons with corresponding proverbs drawn from a wide area ranging from the Mediterranean countries to more distant lands, like Germany England, Russia and Japan.

The more important comparisons, however, are with the writings of classical Greece and Rome and with the proverb material from Sicily, Italy, Spain, North Africa, Syria and Lebanon, which between them cover an area of intensive trading, cultural and historical give and take that has left its mark also in other places of the Mediterranean.

In his masterly introduction to the volume Aquilina stresses the difficulty of establishing the origin of Maltese proverbs which often have their counterparts in several languages, some of them geographically very far apart. 'The comparative list of proverbs I included under different entries brings into relief three main points: (i) Malta's characteristic paremiological heritage, (ii) the existence of some locally produced proverbs, and (iii) the survival of some Arabic proverbs still current in the spoken language in spite of the nearly 1,000-year-old discontinuation of direct contact with the Arabic world.'

Aquilina has been both purposeful and selective in his comparative sections: he has included 'not proverbs which just convey the same meaning or suit the same contexts but proverbs which are verbally close and which therefore might serve as pointers in the history of paremiological migration and loan translations.'

On the basis of this comparative material he concludes that 'in spite of the similarity between the Maltese and Arabic proverbs, the area of diffusion is sometimes so wide that for some of the proverbs one cannot postulate a direct Arabic or Sicilian origin.

The question of direct or indirect lineage in the case of proverbs which are more or less textually alike can be rather more complex than it looks because the present textual similarity may be a post-Arabic adaptation to a practically similar proverb in another language, in our case generally Sicilian or Italian. Some words in the original Arabic may have been changed to agree with the corresponding proverb from a Romance source. The lineage is often a matter of usage and context... but when all is said there is no doubt that the greater paremiological heritage reached Malta via Sicily.'

The 34 proverbial types discussed in the Introduction break some new ground and chart out the way for more detailed treatment in a separate monograph. They include such topics as metaphorical proverbs, proverbs based on narratives or related to fable, proverbs and folk-verse, proverbs and individual authors, biblical proverbs occurring in one or more of the 72 books of Holy Writ, proverbs drawn from classical authors, historical proverbs produced by certain events and therefore tending to disappear or to become less current, legal proverbs, *blason populaire* i.e. mocking and often insulting proverbs reflecting popular unfavourable judgments of the real or imaginary bad qualities of other people, villages, etc.; Wellerisms, i.e. proverbs or sayings attributed to real or imaginary persons so named after Sam Weller, a famous Dickensian character; epigrammatic proverbs, obscenity in proverbs, riddles and rigma-roles, and punning proverbs.

Of particular importance, for their freshness and original approach, are the examples illustrating a number of structure-patterns which Aquilina identifies, and the evidence he provides of unsuspected correspondences between accentual rhythms in proverbs and examples from Maltese literature. The author points the way to further possibilities in this line when he says: 'A comparative study of the prosodic measures of some of the more rhythmic proverbs and literary verse lines with a corresponding number of syllables would broaden the present range of scansion patterns which in Maltese traditional poetry are largely based on syllabic accentuation falling in to specified stress positions. A wider comparative study than I could undertake here would no doubt reveal that while in some cases the accentual rhythm of a good number of proverbs agrees with that of traditional literary prosody, yet there

are other possible rhythmic stress positions that could enrich and vary the traditional range of fixed verse pattern mainly based on the rules of Italian prosody.'

The printing of this work, which involves types and faces peculiar to a number of languages, including Arabic, is outside the normal run of production undertaken by local printers. Messrs Giov. Muscat deserve all the more credit, therefore, for having printed this volume and issued it in bound form to resist long and frequent handling.

The proofing, checking and printing of the various sections of this work have inevitably had to be phased out over a number of years. Small wonder, therefore, that quite a few new proverbs or variants came to the compiler's attention after the section to which they referred had been printed. This additional material has been included at the end of the book.

This volume is provided with an etymological index, a subject-matter index and a chief-word index which between them enhance the value of the work as a reference tool.

J. CASSAR PULLICINO

Ġuzé Cassar Pullicino, *Il-Folklore Malti*, 2nd Edition, Royal University of Malta, 1975. IX + 166 pages. £M1.50.

The term 'second edition' should not be allowed to mislead those interested in our folklore, and they should be many. In mere number of pages, the present edition is about double the size of that published thirteen years ago, and in it has gone all the added experience and the fruit of devoted research both by the author himself and by other scholars. It has also been brought up-to-date where new developments have happened since 1959, such as in the case of the Second Vatican Council with its recommendations on Church liturgy in relation to national traditions and cultures.

To subjects that in the shorter work could only command mere paragraphs the author has now devoted pages, and in several cases he developed pages into chapters, such as when dealing with birth and childhood; lullabies, nursery rhymes; children's games; riddles; proverbs; folktales and legends; song, music and dance; love and betrothal; the Maltese wedding; death and mourning, and the *festa*.

Then again, Mr. Cassar Pullicino gives added information on traditional devotion to such patron saints as Saints Blas, Lukarda, Raymond and Spiridion, the patron saints of women during confinement, actually reproducing the text of popular prayers (p. 41) not only for invoking a happy delivery, but also for the good health of the child and relief from such minor discomforts as hiccups. In this context, that is the folkloristic element in Maltese popular prayer, of particular interest are the prayers for the relief of the souls of executed criminals – *l-erwieh iggustizzjati* – and for their intercession with God on our behalf (p. 134), as traditionally they were, and perhaps still are, the object of popular devotion. In one case, that of Ninu Xkora, his soul is said to have appeared to a woman who went to Corradino prisons to offer oil to keep alight the lamps over his grave. There is also an extensive quotation from a sort of popular contemplative verse in quatrains form, that used to be recited after the Holy Rosary, the *Vrajs*, heard by the author in Gozo.

There are frequent references to, and elucidations of popular sayings and beliefs in the field of trades and callings. On pages 80-82, for example, the author deals with the sea and those who earn their living from it, with special reference to Żejtun and Marsaxlokk fishermen.

Fishing is, of course, not the only trade in which the author delves for folklore elements, agriculture, for one, being another rich source. Village saint-day celebrations (or *festas*, as we call them, *feast* being by no means an exact translation), folk arts, dress and costume, magic, superstition and exorcism are all dealt with in abundance of detail.

In a recent B.A.(Hons) thesis, Marlene Said dealt with folklore in the Maltese novel (actually under the tutorship of Ġuzé Cassar Pullicino himself) and it is time someone dealt with the aspects of folklore in other fields of literature. In this book the author opens the way for those who would try to set their hands to research in the field of poetry with references to and quotations from Dwardu Cachia's *Katrin ta' l-Imdina* and Dun Karm Psaila's *Il-Vjatzku*.

Indeed, Mr. Ġuzé Cassar Pullicino has now set his organizing mind to indicate the way to those who would take up this most absorbing aspect of social history. In conclusion to the present edition, he adds a new chapter in which he evaluates what has been done so far and what remains to be done in the study of our folklore, actually charting out the various branches that have been only partially explored, or not at all, such as seasonal festivities (Christmas, Carnival, the *Imnarja*, *Lapsi* etc.) with their popular

celebrations and rituals; family life, dress and food; popular arts and trades; superstitions, ghosts and spirits (with a gentle hint to myself that I had promised quite some time ago to publish in book form a series of articles on the subject contributed to *Il-Berqa* under the title of *Dehriet u Apparizzjonijiet*, January-February 1958); charms, the evil eye, exorcism and incantation; folk medicine; tree and plant folklore; plant and flower symbolism; agriculture and fishery; bird shooting and trapping (which, tragically, still goes on very actively). Ġuzé Cassar Pullicino himself, needless to say, has contributions on some of these subjects with such studies as *Usi e costumi della Settimana Santa a Malta* (*Phoenix*, Bari, N 1-2, 1956), *Notes for a History of Maltese Costume* (*Maltese Folklore Review*, N. 3, 1966); *Antichi Cibi Maltesi* (*Melita Historica*, 1951), and *Background Material for the study of Folk Arts and Crafts* (*Maltese Folklore Review*, N. 4 1973) with a rich documentation that paves the way for further study, and various sections of his book *An Introduction to Maltese Folklore* (1947). The author has further enriched the present edition with a fuller and updated Reading List.

This review would be very incomplete were I to omit mention of Mr. Cassar Pullicino's reiterated insistence on the need of a Maltese folklore museum, an idea that has been referred to in at least two five-year plans, but never actuated. As he visualizes it, this should be partly an open-air museum, housing in proper and suggestive surroundings such things as the traditional wind-mill, the water wheel, the *herża* and the *girma*, the conical rubble construction that can still be seen occasionally in our fields. I have seen something of the sort in England, just outside Chichester.

Our debt to Mr. Cassar Pullicino in the study of Maltese folklore is incalculable. It is true, and only natural, that in several aspects he has built on foundations laid by those that preceded him, such as Luigi Bonelli, Manwel Magri, Hans Stumme, Bertha Ilg, with the activities of all of whom he deals succinctly in the first section of his book, and A. Cremona. But, besides doing more than any other, and perhaps over a larger span of years, to arouse and stimulate interest in folklore with his numerous contributions to press and radio, Mr. Cassar Pullicino has contributed many scholarly studies, specializing in research in popular oral literature, such as baby-language, rhymes, riddles, folk tales and folk song, some of which are actually dealt with in the present volume. He has also recorded dying folklore, and has considerable material, such as folk prayers and exorcisms, still unpublished. He has also bridged the gap that existed between the line of scholars that end-

ed with Bertha Ilg and present-day research. Indeed, Cremona started his activities some three generations before Mr. Guzé Cassar Pullicino, but he did not really contribute much of his own, though he did valuable work in comparing, interpreting and even putting to rights some of the mistaken conclusions arrived at by Manwel Magri, who was handicapped by the belief in the presumed Phoenician origin of the Maltese people, Sir Temi Zammit not having yet arrived on the scene to disprove this theory with his excavations.

I do not think it would be an exaggeration to say that it was Mr. Cassar Pullicino's enthusiasm and achievements that encouraged Prof. Guzé Aquilina to take the initiative in 1971 of having Maltese Folklore set as a special paper for the B.A.(Hons) final examinations. As the author himself points out, the changes and additions contained in the second edition of his book are meant to help students who would like to take up these studies. Prof. Aquilina himself, of course, has given a monumental contribution with his *A Comparative Dictionary of Maltese Proverbs*, the fruit of many years of research, and numerous talks and pamphlets.

This book makes fascinating reading for the layman who reads for relaxation or curiosity with its profusion of informative matter, recalling to many of us of the older generation customs and sayings that we may have forgotten or actually seen and heard but allowed to lapse from our memory. For myself, it brings to my mind, among other things, the small framed picture of Saint Spiridion, partly painted partly in beaten silver (or some cheaper metal) that used to be brought to our home whenever the stork was due for a visit. It used to go round the homes of near relatives and close friends wherever their was a confinement. I do not know where it has ended, but whoever has got it now, has got a minor treasure in his possession in the way of antiques.

For the student, as I hope I have not failed to make clear, the book is a mine of information, presented methodically and scientifically, and a stimulus for further work of research in this very promising and rewarding field of social science, with the paths that should be taken all laid out and clearly indicated by Mr. Cassar Pullicino.

GUZÈ DIACONO