

ON THE MEANING OF GUERI IN PETRUS CAXARO'S CANTILENA

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In his foreword to M. Fsadni and G. Wettinger's *Peter Caxaro's Cantilena*, G. Aquilina states that "the authors had to contend not only with difficulties of an arbitrary spelling in a hand very difficult to read, but also with the unravelling of the obscure meaning of several obsolete words which they have explained tentatively through Arabic".¹ Undoubtedly, the authors' approach to this hitherto unknown text was the right one since the lexicon of the *Cantilena* is predominantly of Semitic origin.

Fsadni and Wettinger point out that the only non-Semitic word in the poem is *vintura*.² Maltese scholars seem to agree on this point.³ It is my intention to refute this assertion and to suggest that *gueri* in line 2 is actually a romance acquisition, i.e. a word of Germanic origin (*WAIGARO) which, filtered through the French GUÈRE, becomes GUARI (GUERI) in the Italian language of the XIII century.⁴

There have been two interpretations of *gueri* in the *Cantilena*. The first one by Fsadni and Wettinger who, both in their original English study and in their 1983 Maltese edition, give it the meaning of "in the past", "l-imghoddi", on the assumption that *gueri* is opposed to *homorcom* ("your lifetime"). They refer the reader to the Arabic transitive verb *wa:ra* ("to bury"), without hiding the fact that the meaning is not clear and that the reference is only a tentative one.⁵ The authors rightly limit themselves to what the word suggests rather than to what it expresses.⁶ The second interpretation of *gueri* is provided by D. Fenech in his essay on Caxaro. According to Fenech, *gueri* has got the same roots as *gireni* in line 1 (i.e. g-w-r) and is, therefore, [p.316] closely related to it: *gireni* means "neighbour", *gueri* "neighbourhood".⁷ Fsadni and Wettinger refute this suggestion on the basis that it goes against the orthographical rules of the 15th-16th century - *gwieri*, in modern Maltese, would have been written *jueri* or *iueri* or *giuri* in Caxaro's times.⁸ I agree with Wettinger and Fsadni's objection to Fenech's interpretation. However, it is important to note that even Fenech considers *gueri* to be of semitic origin.

¹ G. Wettinger, M. Fsadni, *Peter Caxaro's Cantilena*, Malta, 1968, p.5.

² Cfr. G. Wettinger, M. Fsadni, *Peter Caxaro's Cantilena*, cit., p.40; G. Wettinger, *Looking Back on the Cantilena of Peter Caxaro*, in *Journal of Maltese Studies*, n.12 (1978), p.100; G. Wettinger, M. Fsadni, *L-Għanja ta' Pietru Caxaru*, Malta 1983, p.54.

³ Cfr., for example, D. Fenech, *Wirt il-Muża*, Malta 1977, p.15.

⁴ On the etymology of *guari*, *gueri* cfr. C. Battisti, G. Alessio, *Dizionario Etimologico Italiano*, v. III, Firenze, 1952, and M. Cortelazzo, P. Zolli, *Dizionario Etimologico della Lingua Italiana*, v. II, Bologna, 1980.

⁵ G. Wettinger, M. Fsadni, *Peter Caxaro's Cantilena*, cit., p.42.

⁶ K. Vassallo, in his essay *Poeżija bil-Malti ta' 500 sena ilu*, in *Vatum Consortium jew Il-Poeżija bil-Malti*, Malta, 1968, pp.584-586, accepts Wettinger and Fsadni's suggestion and translates *gueri* as "l-imghoddi" in his version of the *Cantilena*.

⁷ D. Fenech, *Wirt il-Muża*, cit., p.15.

⁸ Cfr. G. Wettinger, *Looking Back on the Cantilena of Peter Caxaro*, cit., p.101; Wettinger, M. Fsadni, *L-Għanja ta' Pietru Caxaru*, cit., p.50.

The word *guari* appears several times and in different orthographical forms (*guàrio*, *guare*, *guèri*, *guèro*, *guàire*) in Italian literature. The morphological function of the word varies from text to text. Salvatore Battaglia lists various uses of *guari*.⁹ There can be little doubt that, in the phrase “mensab gueri”, *gueri* is structurally a noun. So much so that both the discoverers of the manuscript and K. Vassallo and D. Fenech have rendered it, respectively, with *wari* (“the past”), *l-ingħoddi* (“the past”), *hâra* (“neighbourhood”). However one must equally consider the possibility of *gueri* serving another morphological function.

In the two instances prior to Caxaro’s lifetime that Battaglia has recorded *guari* as a noun, that is in Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (IV,7) and in the XIV century *Storia dei Santi Barlaam e Giosafatte*, it means “a great quantity” or “a certain quantity” and it is always followed by the preposition *di* (“of”). It is clear from the context of the *Cantilena* that *gueri* does not have this meaning.

Guari has also been recorded as an adjective, in the sense of “much”, “many”.¹⁰ The Maltese *gueri*, however, has nothing to do with this use of *guari*; it does not mean “much”, “many”, nor has it got an adjectival function.

The most common function of *guari*, and perhaps the most relevant in our case, is that of an adverb. Battaglia points out two different uses of the adverb *guari*. In the first instance *guari* means “for a long time”, “further on” and can be traced in, amongst others, Brunetto Latini, Dante, Luca Pulci. In the second case *guari* stands for *molto*, *assai*, *alquanto*, *del tutto*, *affatto* “to” and is to be found only in negative phrases combined with adverbs of place [p.317] or quantity. This is exactly the case of *gueri* in the *Cantilena*: it is a negative phrase (“Mensab fil gueri uele nisab fo homorcom”) combined with an “expression” of quantity (*homorcom* denotes a certain quantity of time - a life span). One could object that *fil gueri* is a noun and not an adverb. However, *fil* could easily be done away with, without damaging the meaning of the whole line. “Mensab fil gueri uele nisab fo homorcom” would read “Mensab gueri uele nisab fo homorcom. And the meaning of *gueri* would be “” affatto”, “del tutta”, i.e. “Ma nsab qatt u la nsab f’ghomorkom” (“Such as was never found neither in your lifetime”). *Gueri* would stand for “gatt”, “never”, thus fulfilling an adverbial function.

The importance of *fil* becomes apparent when one analyses the line from a metrical point of view. As B. Mallia has clearly shown, the second line of the *Cantilena* is divided in two parallel hemistichs.¹¹ The non appearance of *fil* before *gueri* would have weakened the internal parallelism enormously. By opting for *fil gueri* Caxaro also shows the reader that he is well versed in the rhetorical techniques of his times.

A final question to be answered is: “If *gueri* is a romance acquisition, how is it that Caxaro preferred the obsolete graphic form with an *-e* to the more common *guari*?” The answer to this question should further strengthen the hypothesis that the author of the first

⁹ Cfr. S. Battaglia, *Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana*, v. VII, Torino, 1972, s.v. *guari*.

¹⁰ In Giovanni Villani, Giovanni Boccaccio and Antonio Cammelli. Obviously, Battaglia only limits himself to a few examples. In Boccaccio *guari* appears an unlimited number of times. Cfr. A. Barbina, *Concordanze del Decameron*, v. I, Firenze, 1969, s.v. *guari*.

¹¹ B. Mallia, *Il-Cantilena ta’ Pietru Caxaro*, in *Problemi ta’ Llum*, X, 4, (April 1970), p.122.

document written in Maltese was really a well read “philosophi poete et oratoris” who knew a great deal about what had been written in nearby Sicily. In fact *gueri* (with an *-e*) is to be found only in the poems of the *Scuola Siciliana* and, more precisely, in Cielo d’Alcamo’s famous *Contrasto*. (VIII,40). As G. Contini points out, *gueri* is derived directly from the French *guère*.¹² As G. Contini points out, *gueri* is derived directly from the French *guère*.

Gueri, together with *vintura*, represents what Wettinger describes as “the tip of a mountain of romance words in the Maltese language”.¹³

¹² G. Contini, *Poeti del Duecento*, tomo I, Milano-Napoli, 1960, p.179.

¹³ G. Wettinger, *Looking Back on the Cantilena of Peter Caxaro*, cit., p.102.