

TWO NOTES: BRIGHELLA AND THEZAN;  
THE "CANTILENA", MALTESE AND SICILIAN PROVERBS**Brighella, the Maltese alphabet, Manzoni and Thezan the lexicographer**

Don Giuseppe Zammit (1802-1890), who wrote in various nineteenth century newspapers, mostly under the pseudonym of Brighella, is best known for his satirical writings, in which none of his enemies is spared the bitter venom of his pen! Amongst his first known works were the Latin epigrams published in the *Mediterranean Literary Register* in the years 1827-1828 (Bonello-Fiorentini-Schiavone 1982: 29). Actually, his writings in Latin earned him the praise of various Italian periodicals, in particular *Civiltà Cattolica*. He is the author of numerous publications in Latin and Italian, amongst which his *Cento sonetti giocosi* (Bonello-Fiorentini-Schiavone 1982: 38). He contributed to numerous papers, such as *Lo spettatore imparziale* (1838), *Brighella* (1838-1839), *Democrito* (1842-1843), *Diogene* (1842-1843), and so forth (Bonello-Fiorentini-Schiavone 1982: 30; 38; 51; 56).

Apart from his many writings in Italian and Latin<sup>1</sup>, Brighella also devoted himself to contributing articles in Maltese. The "harsh" style of the writings in *Il Hatar* (1850) clearly points to Don Zammit as the author. This short-lived newspaper - twelve numbers in all - had as its prime aim the defence of Governor O'Ferrall against the accusations of *Il Malti* (Bonello-Fiorentini-Schiavone 1982: 100). *Il Hatar* was revived in 1860 and carried on, irregularly, until at least 1867. The satirical articles against the abuses of the British administration and against the Italian exiles in Malta are attributed to Zammit who, together with Giovanni Antonio Vassallo and Richard Taylor, was also a contributor to the anti-British *Ix-Xitan Izzopp* (1864) (Bonello-Fiorentini-Schiavone 1982: 135; 149).

*Il Giurnal Malti* (1864-1866) is another newspaper to which Zammit contributed. This newspaper was "pungente nei confronti degli inglesi, i quali 'pretendono che tutti parlino la loro lingua', e contro il *Malta Observer*. In polemica con alcuni suoi contemporanei nega che Garibaldi, durante la sua visita a Malta, abbia ricevuto calorose accoglienze ed afferma, invece, che partì dall'Isola 'scornato e sotto il lancio di sassi e carote'. Assume un tono particolarmente aspro verso gli uomini di governo e lo stesso governatore accusati tutti, fra l'altro, di manomissioni nelle istituzioni di carità. E' paladino della Chiesa cattolica e della legittimità e asserisce che Roma non sarà mai la capitale d'Italia e che Francesco II ritornerà presto sul trono" (Bonello-Fiorentini-Schiavone 1982: 149).

<sup>1</sup>On Brighella's life and his works in Latin and Italian, cfr. Mario Debono, *Don Giuseppe Zammit detto "Brighella"*, unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Malta, 1978. On his works in Maltese, cfr. Joseph Formosa, *Dun Gu'lepp Zammit Brighella u l-kitba tieghu fil gazzetti Maltin*, unpublished B.Educ thesis, 1997.

Another newspaper, written mainly in Maltese, and attributed to Brighella, is *Bertoldu* (1861-1862), a *Folliet Buffu Seriu Criticu Satiricu Politicu Liberali ecc.*, whose major targets are the newspaper *Gazzetta popolare* and theatre actors (Bonello-Fiorentini-Schiavone: 137). The 1861-62 series of *Bertoldu* was preceded by a single issue, by the same name and dated 24th January 1839, in which the compiler clearly states that his "xeuqa minnu fih li jibda jikteb ua ukoll xi hagia" was spurred on by the contents, certainly not deemed to be up to standard, of the newspaper *Il Kaulata Maltia*:

Ma din ix-xeuqa allura kibret liziet, u xe3let fih, meta gietu fideih il Kaulata Maltia: 3at li kif habat iduqa marlu l'aptit collu, 3aliex xei, u xei ma gietu taiba, u bnina. Imma il kbir Bertoldu meta lahaq qabat il pinna fidu, marieg izied jerhia, u riet jara jistax jimexxilu jamel kaulata ohra, li tista tati iziet piacir l'innies, li ua jistieden, billi ihauara fuq il 7ost li bih dari isajar Brajgiu il kirxa uara is-suq.

I shall not be delving deeper into the contents of this four page issue. What interests me here is to point out that in this issue of *Bertoldu* Brighella makes use of the two Arabic characters 3 (ghajn) and 7 (ghimel) and accepts them as an integral part of his Maltese alphabet. Such Arabic symbols do not appear in any other scripts of this writer. How is it that a product of veritable Latin culture, such as Don Giuseppe Zammit, accepts that two Arabic characters should form an integral part of the Maltese orthographic system? The answer is given by Brighella himself in a short letter carried in this same issue, a letter which clearly highlights Zammit's ideas on the Maltese alphabet:

**Sur Bertoldu**

Ftit granet ilu giedni uerqa fideja, b'lisem ta Kaulata Maltia. Hi verament giet uisq seua im3aita bdan l'isem 3aliex kul ma fia, ua kollox hallata ballata. Uara dan collu malli smait li inti ukoll thajart tikteb xi hagia, dik is-si3a gietni il-haira nikteb zeug kelmiet fuq dak is-santukruc ta dis3a u 3oxrin Littra, li iccompona, u praspal l'autur ta dik il kaulata. Xil mni3el kenem bzon, jen 3et allura, li izid tant granci imqammrin ohra, biex actar jikkonfondilna qaddisna? - Jen lil dauk il hafna torok ta Littri, u ta kukrumbusiet illiud manroxxilomx sigur lilma tal barka' anzi natiom is-sahta, u niskumnicaom, ghaliex min3air lebda bzon haudu fuq-isfel digna shiha - Iena naf, u inti tafu ukol, Sur BELTOLDU, li il figuri tal-Littri isiru skont il 7ost u il piacir tannies, ma mita dauna icunu approvati, u confermati miz-zmien, mill'usu, u mill'autorità; hatt majcun jista iziet inehhiom min flokom, u iqallibom scont il fehema im3arqa ta rasu, o incella ipaspar ohrai min flokom. Il-Littra 7(ghimel) kienet migiuba m'illsien illiudi mis-Sur Canonicu Agius, li stampa il Grammatka ti3u fis-sena 1750 - Issur Vassallo imba3at ragia usaa fil Grammatka uil kalepin Malti, li uraihom ukoll id-Duttur Steifen Zrafa gieb fil Flora, u fl'istoria fisica ta Malta - In kuantu 3al-Littra 3(aain) kienet usata mit-Thesan fis-sena 1600, mil bibliotekariu Navarro fil 1791 - u millimsemmi Vassalli, u min dauk

kolla li kitbu urajom, phal ma uma is-Sur Zrafa u ohrai, u issa flahhar is-sur Bri 7ella Venezian. Im-mela, Sur BERTOLDU, nitobok illi tik-kompiaci ruhek t3arraf lil Autur tal kaulata, hua min hu, edaun irragiuniet tighi kollha, u t3eidlu li 3al daqstant 3alxei joq 3ot jistenna li imberiklu dauk il Littri li ciappas skont cappricij fdik il Kaulata mahmugia, u li tqazzez, illi harget mil-listamparia Kumbiana tas-sur Cikku. - Inselli 3alik bil qalb kollha, u fil mentri li nitobok tik-kmandani, nitobok ukoll li izzommni kif dejem 3ettlek li jen.

Habib ti3ek sincier

BRIGHELLA

Brighella's letter is in response to the compiler of *Il Kaulata Maltia*, who had devised an alphabet of the Maltese language made up of twenty nine characters. Whilst no copy of *Il Kaulata Maltia* has survived in our National or University Libraries, it is possible to gauge what orthographic system this alphabet, made up of "tant granci imqammin ohra", is based on, since Guzè Cassar Pullicino actually reproduced the frontispiece of issue nr.1 of *Il Kaulata Maltia*, which in 1964 formed part of Prof. G. Galea's private collection (Cassar Pullicino 1964: 31). It is a known fact that the editor of the *Kaulata* was the famous Arabic scholar, Sir George Percy Badger (Bonello-Fiorentini-Schiavone 1982: 38), who was a strong opponent of the mixed Latin-Arabic alphabet then in use in government schools: "Richiamiamo in primo luogo l'attenzione dei nostri lettori sull'alfabeto che venne adottato per scrivere il maltese nelle scuole del governo. Egli è composto di quasi tutte le lettere romane, e di sei lettere arabe, le quali ultime non solo tolgono la simmetria dei caratteri romani, ma offrono altresì varj inconvenienti sì nello stampare che nello scrivere. Questa inutile innovazione [...]" (Badger 1839: 124). Badger's *Kaulata* orthographic system was therefore based on the Latin alphabet, with the addition of various diacritical marks and signs (e.g. h for current h; n for current gh; à; â; ù; ò).

Despite the initial mocking and satirical tone of this text, the letter in question also reveals Don Giuseppe Zammit's very serious and erudite approach to the problems posed by the 19th century Maltese alphabet question (cfr. Cassola 1992: Introduction). Zammit's views on the issue are very clear: "Tena naf [...] li il figuri tal-Littri isiru skond il 7ost u il piacer tannies, ma meta dauna icunu approvati, u confermati miz-zmien, mill'usu, u mill'autorità; hatt majkun jista iziet inehhiom min flokom, u iqallibom scont il fehema im3arqa ta rasu, o incella ipaspar ohrai min flokom". Therefore, the standardization of the Maltese alphabet should not be left to the whims of improvisation. On the contrary, it is the authority of experts in the field and the *effective use* of the letters of the alphabet over a prolonged period of time that can eventually sanction innovative features as definitive ones.

Brighella's insistence on the concept of *use* in the adoption or not of innovative linguistic features cannot but bring to mind Alessandro Manzoni's maxim that "l'Uso

è il signore delle lingue"<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, considering that Manzoni actually formulated his theory only in the course of various years during the nineteenth century, one cannot but admire Zammit's level-headedness and common sense in coming up with this yardstick, which was to become complementary to, if not indeed a forerunner of, the great Italian writer's linguistic theories.

It is precisely because he is sticking to the yardstick of use and authority that Zammit accepts 7 and 3 as forming an integral part of the Maltese alphabet. According to Zammit, the letter 7 had been used for around ninety years as a letter of the Maltese alphabet since it had first been mentioned by De Soldanis in his 1750 grammar and later on used by the grammarian and lexicographer M.A. Vassalli and the scientist Stefano Zerafa, while the letter 3 had an even older history since, apart from the aforementioned Zerafa and Vassalli, it had also been utilized by the librarian Gioacchino Navarro (1791) and by the French Knight of the Order of St John, Thezan, who lived during the seventeenth century.

What is of interest here is Brighella's mention of Thezan. Thezan is the author of the earliest extant dictionary of the Maltese language (cfr. Cassola 1992). We have no information regarding his dates of birth and death and his first name, and therefore it is quite difficult to ascertain the definite date of composition of his dictionary. Through the analysis of works by I. S. Mifsud (1764), F. P. de Smitmer (1781) and Stefano Zerafa (1841), I had come to the conclusion that the Thezan manuscript must have been drawn up some time between 1600 and 1647 (Cassola 1992: xvi-xix).

In this letter Brighella states that "Littra 3 (aain) kienet usata mit-Thesan fis-sena 1600 [...]". Unfortunately, he does not give the source of his information. It is therefore possible that he might just be repeating the date given by I. S. Mifsud in his *Biblioteca Maltese*. However, it has also been ascertained that in 1841 the Thezan manuscript was still in circulation, since Stefano Zerafa had had the possibility to peruse it (Società Medica: 1845: xxxiii). Is it possible that Giuseppe Zammit had also had the opportunity to go through the manuscript and to glean his information directly from the text?

If this were so, we would certainly be extending the age of Thezan's dictionary to the end of the sixteenth century, with his work becoming definitely the second oldest text written in Maltese, after the *Cantilena*, and thus preceding the word lists of Megiser and Skippon by a good number of years.

<sup>2</sup>The concept of "Uso" is described by Manzoni in his 1868 *Lettera intorno al Vocabolario* to Ruggero Bonchio as "[...] quell'Uso che è detto l'arbitro, il maestro, il padrone, fino il tiranno delle lingue, e anche da quelli che, all'atto pratico, fondano le loro teorie, e i loro giudizi sopra non so quant'altre cose diverse, secondo l'opportunità, senza rispetto all'arbitro, al maestro, al padrone, e senza paura del tiranno" (Manzoni 1972: 254).

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## Sicilian proverbs and Malta, Maltese proverbs and Sicily<sup>1</sup>

1. In the preface to his 1846 *Adagi, motti, proverbi e modi di dire proverbiali siciliani, etc.*, Vincenzo Scarcella declared that one of his aims was to "considerare i precetti di profonda sapienza contenuti negli adagi, nei motti, nei proverbî siciliani [...]" (Correnti 1995: 7). He considered Sicilian proverbs to be particularly rich and varied, firstly because "la Sicilia nostra fu stanza a molte sapientissime nazioni, che per colonie, e per commerciali istituti qui albergarono [...]" and, secondly, because they are "contenuti in frasi più animate, più brillanti che quelli delle altre popolazioni, essendo la Sicilia la terra dove sono miti i costumi, purissimo il cielo, balsamica ed olezzante l'aura che si respira, caldi gli affetti; svelti gli spiriti, accesi in quel foco, di che fiammeggiano i nostri vulcani [...]" (Correnti 1995: 7).

Amongst the thousands of proverbs registered in Sicily, a few have a Maltese connection. This is confirmed by Giuseppe Pitrè who, when writing about England in Sicilian proverbs in his chapter on *Ricordi storici, nazioni, città, popoli; aneddoti, favole*, points out that "l'Inghilterra ci richiama addirittura a Malta, e ci sarebbe da fare una lista delle tradizioni proverbiali che la nominano" (Pitrè 1870-1913, vol. I: CXCII). Despite his recommendation, as far as I have been able to ascertain, Pitrè only goes on to list three proverbs concerning Malta. The first of these is *Li galeri di Mauta vantati foru ridutti a carriari petri* ['the renowned Maltese galleys were reduced to carrying stones'], which he reconnects to historical events. Undoubtedly, this proverb must go back to the latter period of the Order of St John, when the presence of the Ottoman fleet in the area had become extremely limited and thus the role of the Order's fleet was cut down to the mere policing of Malta's surrounding waters, the transportation of goods and, sometimes, even to the carrying of stones, which served as ballast.

*Lu Ricivitori di Mauta* (Pitrè 1870-1913, vol. I: CXCII) also goes back to the times of the Order of St John, when a *Ricevitore* was stationed abroad, wherever there existed a Priory of the Order. It was the *Ricevitore's* duty to act as an official of the treasury and to collect revenue for the Order from its *commende* in foreign lands. As with any tax collector, it is quite obvious then that *lu Ricevituri* must not have been a very popular figure in the public eye!

The third proverb on Malta quoted by Pitrè is *Mauta carrubbi 'un ni rifiuta mai* ['Malta never refuses any carobs'] (Pitrè 1870-1913, vol. III: 151), which the author recorded in Chiaramonte and which is very similar to the Maltese proverb *Malta qatt ma rruftat qamh* [literally: 'Malta never refused any wheat'], but actually 'one never rejects something offered when one has not got it or has not enough of it. It is also used as a jocular remark in the sense of 'I never say no to any offer' (Aquilina 1987-1990: s.v. Malta).

<sup>1</sup> I must thank Prof. Santi Correnti of the University of Catania, Prof. Godfrey Wettinger and Prof. Victor Mallia Milanese both of the University of Malta, for their stimulating suggestions on the topic.

This idea that in the past the Maltese were a relatively poor people, who would accept all sorts of cheap ware, must have prompted some merchants from Riposto, early last century, to try and sell a number of crates of rotten oranges to the British administrators of the island. The sailors from Riposto are known to have had quite a tradition in trading with Malta, not only in ice (cfr. Patrick Brydone's 18th century account), but also in wine and oranges. On one occasion, having arrived in Malta with their vessels, these merchants tried to dupe the locals by including amongst the good oranges quite a number of rotten ones. The British answered most courteously "all right and very well" ..... but threw into the sea all the crates containing the rotten oranges! This episode is still alive in the memory of the inhabitants of Riposto, who today still have the popular saying *E ccu orràiti e veruelli, ni jittaru i cascì a mari* ['And, saying "all right" and "very well", they threw away the crates into the sea'] (Correnti 1995: 355).

Other Sicilian sayings concerning Malta are still in existence today. Finocchiaro Chimirri (1993: 93) points out that in order to describe an overcrowded place, full of confusion and disorder, many Sicilians resort to the use of the expression *u burdellu 'i Malta*. While no definite historical source or date has actually been identified for this expression, the author associates it with the hundreds of Sicilian exiles fleeing from the Borbonic police during the course of the *Risorgimento*, and finding refuge in the safe island of Malta, then an Italian cultural haven under British rule.

Correnti (1995: 276) points out that when someone in Sicily gets quite annoyed at his/her interlocutor's attitude and tempers flare up, it becomes quite common for the insult *Vo' pigghila a Marta!* [literally, 'Go and get stuffed in Malta', but actually 'Go to the Devil!'] to come up. Certainly, not a very edifying saying –considered by Correnti to go back to the early 19th century- for Malta to be associated with!

Finally, when one wants to press the point that it is useless to try and make someone do something against his/her will, the expression *Tutta Marta non potti far vviri 'n sceccu ppi forza* (Correnti 1995: 276) is used. In this expression, which means 'the whole of Malta cannot make a donkey drink', the reference to Malta has not been explained. In my opinion, however, there is a plausible reason behind it: the intention of the proverb is to enforce the idea that even a multitude of people cannot persuade someone else to do something unwillingly. Mainland Sicily is surrounded by various other islands, such as Pantelleria, Lampedusa, the Egadi and the Eolie archipelagos. However, none of these islands can remotely compete with Malta as regards population: Malta is undoubtedly the most densely populated island in the neighbourhood of Sicily.

The reference to Malta would, therefore, be a clear allusion to the high density of the population on the island.

2. The above are examples of Sicilian proverbs which contain a reference to Malta. Malta has partly reciprocated since there are a couple of Maltese proverbs which refer to Sicily. The proximity of the two isles, and the commercial and economic links between them in the course of history, simply could not be ignored in popular sayings.

In fact, the two Maltese proverbs that refer to Sicily or Sicilians are both a result of the trading that went on between the two peoples. The first one *Il-ġobon Sqalli fūt qligh ihalli* ['Sicilian cheese leaves little profit'] (Aquilina 1986: 371) highlights the fact that, in view of transport costs and of the flourishing local *ġbejniet* ['cheeselets'] production, it was not really worth importing cheese from Sicily.

The second one, *Sqalli tajjeb aharqu ahseb u ara haʒn* ['Burn a Sicilian even if he is a good man, let alone if he is wicked'] (Aquilina 1986: 602), not only reflects the traditional rivalry that always exists between residents of neighbouring towns, cities, islands or countries, but is probably also remotely connected to the already mentioned *E ccu orràiti e veruelli, ni jittaru i cascì a mari*: having had experience of Sicilian traders who tried to dupe them, the Maltese must have become wary of all the Sicilians!

3. One of the greatest contributions of the Maltese language to Sicilian linguistic history, however, is to be found in a Maltese saying which has never been registered as a proverb by scholars of Maltese, but which I would definitely consider to be the oldest recorded proverb in the Maltese language!

In their presentation of the oldest text in the Maltese language -the pre-1485 *Cantilena*-Wettinger-Fsadni 1968 point out that the only word of romance origin to be found in this twenty verse poem is *vintura*. I have pointed out elsewhere (Cassola 1992b: 141) that *tale* in the first verse is more likely to be of romance rather than of semitic origin (< It. *tale* ['about this'], rather than from Ar. *ta'lin* ['about the following']). This would increase the number of words of romance origin to two.

However, I have also argued (Cassola 1992a: 863; Cassola 1992b: 141) that the Siculo-Maltese connections in the *Cantilena* are not to be limited to lexis but are also to be extended even to other phenomena, such as syntax. In fact, I have already demonstrated how the entire verse *Min ibidill il miken ibidil il vintura* ['He who changes his whereabouts changes his luck'] is nothing but a perfect syntactic and semantic calque of the Sicilian proverb *Cui muta locu muta vintura*. Therefore, *Min ibidill il miken ibidil il vintura* or, in current Maltese, *min ibiddel l-imkien, ibiddel xortih*, is certainly to be considered the oldest proverb registered in the Maltese language!

As for *cui muta locu muta vintura*, this is registered today by Correnti (1995: 65) as *cu cancia locu, muta vintura* and by Dispenza (1985: 128) as *cu muta locu muta vintura*. Last century, this proverb was registered by Pitrè (1870-1913, vol. III: 115) and compared to similar proverbs from Sardegna, Veneto and Toscana. According to Pitrè, all these proverbs derive from Lat. *Mutatio loci, mutatio sortis*.

In his *Bibliografia dei Proverbi Siciliani* (Pitrè 1870-1913, vol. I: XLVII-LVIII), the author lists thirty texts containing Sicilian proverbs, prior to the publication of his *Proverbi Siciliani*. These texts range from the *Brieve ritratto di sentenze cristiane, etc.*, published by Luigi Ciaccio in Palermo in 1582, to *Poesie e Prose nella lingua parlata piazzese*, published by Remigio Roccella in Caltagirone, in 1877. Pitrè's sources, therefore, do not go beyond the year 1582.

Thanks to the Maltese *Cantilena*, we can therefore backdate this Sicilian proverb to

the latter part of the fifteenth century, at least: Since Petrus Caxaro, the author of the verse *min ibidill il miken ibidil il vintura*, died in 1485, it stands to reason that the Sicilian proverb *cui muta locu muta vintura* was already a common saying during his lifetime.

Thus, if the presence of *Malta* in Sicilian sayings definitely surpasses the presence of *Sqalli* in Maltese ones, this has been amply compensated for by our providing a sure historical dating for Sic. *cui muta locu muta vintura*.

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