

# KARISSIME GOTIFRIDE

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## The *Cantilena*: Vintura. Why? Who?

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When Godfrey Wettinger and Michael Fsadni O.P. discovered Pietro Caxaro's *Cantilena* on the 22nd September 1966<sup>1</sup> they not only discovered the earliest known poem in Maltese but the most intriguing one as well. After 33 years scholars are still battling with its linguistic, metric and semantic obscurities, each one naturally examining it from his own viewpoint (Montebello lists no fewer than 52 titles which appeared up to 1990 in his bibliography on pages 57-61). This is as it should be, but I can't help expressing my disappointment that my *emendatio*, published in the *Journal of Maltese Studies*, n. 16 in 1986, was met with a certain reluctance, except for Cassola<sup>2</sup> and Montebello.<sup>3</sup>

Oliver Friggieri's silence<sup>4</sup> makes me suspect that my exposition was not sufficiently clear. He simply states that 'Bhala regola l-versi jidhru mfasslin fuq l-endekasillabu' and points out 'versi endekasillabi imperfetti' (although he then perceptively observes that the penultimate syllable is always accented and some verses have an accent on the fourth and the eighth) but he does not quote my attempts to pick out the epenthetic vowels, which exercise makes all the verses except the first and the fifth (which show *anacrusi mobile*) perfectly hendecasyllabic. It is very important to note that epenthetic vowels were widely used in Sicily ('vutàrisi, mmaritàrisi, dirimillu, tiràrisi'<sup>5</sup>; 'balata, chinisia, camula, chiricopa, caramuciu/carmuciu, Machaluba, magazenu, misida'<sup>6</sup>) and in Malta when writing dialectal or Semitic words, not only in the literary register but also in official and legal documents: a few examples from Notary Zabbara<sup>7</sup> show 'parchimina, arburo, ruvuru, ruvalo, carratello' (Romance) and 'Mitharrife, Marsa xilocu, moramma, machazeni, merkelet il mohos' (Semitic). Wettinger<sup>8</sup> shows 'misirach, mijarru, mihabibe, minaydra and misidae'. It is significant that the latter word was also written with the epenthetic vowel separating *m* and *s* in Sicily and in Malta, that it is also in Zabbara and that the tradition kept going till the first decades of this century. In my 1986 article<sup>9</sup> I mentioned examples taken from Wettinger which show continuity up to the late Eighteenth century: 'misirach' 1521, 'il merchile' 1548, 'il hayit' 1556, 'il chineyes', 'il chibir' 1581, 'ta sicayac' 1659, 'i cicchejchen' 1781. In the *Cantilena*, words starting with *mi-* fall into this pattern, therefore we see 'mirammiti, mihallimin, miken, mehandihe', which is a purely graphic device to avoid the *m+consonant* cluster which did not feature in the writing system of Latin, Tuscan and Sicilian. In the same way the *consonant+l* cluster is avoided in 'nitila, kitatili, mectatili' and *cons. + m* in 'mihallimin, rimitine, zimen, hamyra, timayt/tumayt', *m+cons.* 'heme tred' and other consonantal clusters are avoided in 'nichadithicum' *th+c*, 'rimitine' *t+n*, 'chitali, kitatili' *k+t*, etc.

Certain inconsistencies are revealing: compare 'mectatili' (without the epenthesis between *c* and *t*) and 'chitali, kitatili' (with epenthesis), as well as 'timayt' and 'tumayt' where the epenthesis is rendered by different vowels (both *i* and *u* are high and close). Compare also the form with the enclitic pronoun 'rimitine' in Caxaro with 'gialitini' in Ignazio Saverio Mifsud (1739)<sup>10</sup> and the full preposition in 'fo homorcom, betiragin, fi tirag' with Mifsud's 'fedina, fi gisem, bedich' (for 'f'dina, f'gisem, b'dik'). The 300 years separating Caxaro and Mifsud prove that there was a graphic tradition which may have

been imperfect in itself but which certainly constitutes an obstacle to the correct reading of the poem's text nowadays unless we make a serious palaeographic effort. It is this scientific basis which establishes the verses as regular hendecasyllables.

A comparative exercise between the personal spelling usage of Brandano and that of Pietro may provide the only solution to the problem of pinpointing precisely the epenthetic vowels (a key which readers in those days must have possessed) and perhaps also to the eventual attribution of the two quatrains to different authors surmised by Cassola.<sup>11</sup> Contrary to Fuad Kabazi's misinterpretation of my conclusions (based on the premise alone) and his vague reference that 'gli schemi metrici più interessanti ed astrusi sono di derivazione araba',<sup>12</sup> I do not doubt that the first six lines and the last six lines are hendecasyllabic rhyming couplets in the normal Romance tradition. The metrical problem lies with the eight lines in the middle which, as I pointed out in 1986, are represented in a most unorthodox manner, the first four being separated from the rest and the next four (unrhymed) written together with the last six lines (rhymed). Oliver Friggieri<sup>13</sup> and Thomas Bonnici<sup>14</sup> interpret the two quatrains as intended repetitions, with the former considering the poet's renouncement of rhyme as a device to disadorn his lines to better express his sadness: I find this a Romantic interpretation which would attribute to Caxaro stylistic devices which were well ahead of his times. As Paul Zumthor and other specialists have demonstrated, the Medieval poet's freedom was severely limited by strict conventions. He was a craftsman rather than a poet in the Romantic sense. Bonnici also apparently prefers to consider the two quatrains as intended repetitions and quotes three highly interesting compositions from the 13th century. Apart from the fact that Caxaro was writing in the late 15th century, the repetitions in these three short texts keep to very regular schemes and are mostly *anaphora* and repetitions in symmetrical positions. Having been written in the 13th century they most probably were meant to be sung to the accompaniment of contemporary musical instruments, and their lexical structure would therefore have been determined by the musical score, whence the abundant *replicatio*.

In the diplomatic edition of the *Cantilena*<sup>15</sup> the eight middle lines taken together do not conform to any recognizable pattern (DEEFGHED), and the changes in the second quatrain (lines 11-14) are very evidently improvements on the imperfections of the first (lines 7-10). Careful observation of what is identical shows that (1) there are no changes in the first hemistichs (let's call it, for convenience, the left half of the poem) and that (2) the third line is the same in full:

Huakit hi mirammiti  
 Mectatilix mihallimin  
 fen timayt insib il gebel sib tfal morchi  
 Huakit thi mirammiti

On this solid structure there are variations in three lines on the right half of the poem:

A (lines 7-10)

*lili zimen nibni*  
*me chitali tafal morchi*  
*sib tafal morchi*  
*blank*

B (lines 11-14)

*Nizlet hi li sisen*  
*ma kitatili li gebel*  
*sib tafal morchi*  
*lili zimen nibni*



The first version has two serious imperfections: (1) the second hemistich in the fourth line is blank, producing a short verse in a poem where all the lines are hendecasyllables and (2) 'tafal morchi' is repeated in the two middle (contiguous) lines, moreover at the end of both, which is a very important position. This may have been intended as an epiphora (not a very elegant one) or else it could have been a typical error by the amanuensis whose eye would have gone on the previous line while his hand repeated its ending. In both cases the author (Pietro) or the copyist (Brandano) would have wanted to stop and rewrite it or copy it out again. Semantically it does not seem to make much difference but from the technical point of view the second version is an improvement on the first: the four lines are full and there are no repetitions in the hemistichs on the right hand side. The second line keeps the verb in the negative form 'me chitali, ma kitatili' and changes only the noun with the result that the fault now lies with the rock ('li gebel') not with the clay. The first line is an objective, factual statement (the foundations gave way) and the last line is a subjective lament (that had taken me so long to build), and in this way the progress from the objective to the subjective is given more strength. As regards the rhetorical device of repetition, the second version maintains the *anaphora* of the disconsolate utterance 'Huakit hi mirammiti' in the first and the last lines, while the parallel structure of the two hemistichs in the second line 'Mectatili il mihallimin, ma kitatili li gebel', with the slight modification of the feminine form of the third person in the verb, 'kitatili' instead of 'me chitali', is scrupulously better.

It is quite evident that the author is playing around with the same components in order to reach the best expression possible. Technically the basic structure has 5 out of 8 hemistichs which are stable, one hemistich is shifted from the first line to the last one but is otherwise unchanged, one hemistich was blank and the one in the second line is only partially modified. So actually 6 and a half hemistichs out of 8 are the same, and the difference boils down to only one full hemistich and one noun. This scheme cannot be considered as an aesthetic or expressive variation, it is simply a correction, probably by the author himself. The modification which would point at a second attempt by the author is the fact that the second hemistich in the first line is brought down to the last line while the two hemistichs in the first and the second have been composed anew. It is not a typical amanuensis' error.

What remains intriguing is why did the author experiment with these four lines when he seems to have been satisfied with the rest? Were they really a refrain? In ballads refrains are placed at the head of the composition and at the end of each stanza or in the *congedo*. And then, why didn't he manage to make those four lines rhyme (as couplets DDEE, like the rest, or on alternate lines DEDE or crossed DEED)? Was he truly satisfied with just the partial assonance, final *e* in the first couple, one accented the other one not, and final *i* in the last two, both unaccented? Or did he intend to elaborate it further, later on? In my opinion Brandano must have discovered a draft of the poem, possibly on a loose sheet of paper; he was not copying from a *canzoniere*. He may even have copied neatly for us those lines which may have had words crossed out and substituted in the rest of the poem, and failed to notice that Pietro had rewritten those four lines without crossing out the previous attempt, and so Brandano transcribed the whole poem as he saw it.

I will not enter into the interpretation of the poem's message, since this has been amply treated by Friggieri and Montebello, and up to a certain point by Bonnici as well, but will stick to the formal aspects. Nor will I discuss the linguistic details which have been dealt with by Wettinger and Fsadni (1968, 1983), Cowan (1975), Fenech (1977), David Cohen and Vanhove (1986).<sup>16</sup> All these works were ignored by Kabazi who, in a rather

unscholarly article (1989-90) without bibliographical references, gave linguistic interpretations based on Classical Arabic. In between his 'impressione esensoriale' and a very rhetorical conclusion, Kabazi suggested that the poem was not written by Caxaro but was simply a *qasida* from the Maghreb or Andalusia transcribed by Pietro in the Latin alphabet, and that the word 'vintura' ('leggermente storpiata' he calls it!) was inserted by Brandano who did not recognize the original Arabic word.<sup>17</sup>

The rubric introducing the poem clearly attributes the composition of the *Cantilena* to Pietro Caxaro and defines him as 'philosopher, poet and orator'. It also declares that the language is 'lingua melitea', not Arabic. The fact that Brandano (1508-1565), whose handwriting is unmistakable, was a close relative of Pietro (who died in 1485) and copied the poem in a register containing contracts dated 1533-1536, does not allow any doubt about the poem's authorship. Fifty-seventy years is not too long a span of time in a family's tradition and Pietro's papers must have been at hand since he was so famous.

Even the word 'vintura' is beyond suspicion. As I pointed out in 1986 its strategic position at the end of the verse and its rhyme with the next verse ('sura') make it a 'rima obbligata'. Then there's also the fact that the line is a calque of a Sicilian proverb which I quoted from Castagnola<sup>18</sup> (v. locu), 'Cangia locu o paisi, ca cangi vintura'.<sup>19</sup> This was later confirmed by Arnold Cassola<sup>20</sup> who discovered a version which is even closer to Caxaro's: 'Cui muta locu muta vintura' in Pitré.<sup>21</sup> Also very significant is Wettinger and Fsadni's note on 'sura'<sup>22</sup>: they traced a saying quoted by Agius De Soldanis which rhymes 'sura' and 'ventura', 'Ghad li kerha e Sura sabihha elventura'. Much has been said on the word 'vintura' as the only Romance word in the *Cantilena* and which purportedly shows that in those days Maltese was more 'pure'. The use of 'vintura' has nothing to do with the use of Romance words in Maltese during the 15th century, otherwise we would have to make the same inference on reading Bonamico's *Mejju ġie bil-ward u ż-żahar*, which would take us on to 1672, and Dun Karm's *Lil Mikiel Anton Vassalli* in our century!<sup>23</sup> The literary language is not a reflection of the spoken language but an idealized form, a special variety, which is usually considered superior to all the other varieties, so much so that for centuries it was considered the only one deserving to be studied and was put forward as the model for learning a language (the classical method). It is therefore meaningless to calculate the use of Romance words in poems as if it could be a percentage of the lexical composition of the language as a whole. For this information we have to look elsewhere, in more humble writings.

*En passant* I have to add that I cannot agree with Arnold Cassola's assumption that 'tale' and 'gueri' may be Romance words.<sup>24</sup> It is true that graphically they seem to be Romance words but morphology and syntax make this hypothesis untenable. The Italian 'tale' is a demonstrative or indefinite adjective but the syntagma 'tale nichadithicum' places it in contact with a verb. Here I would consider a graphically agglutinated form of 'ta' li', as in the cases of 'uele' in verse 2 and 'lili' in verses 7 and 14 of the diplomatic (20-line) edition which are to be separated into 'u li' and 'li ili'. As regards 'gueri' we must keep in mind that the French 'guère' became 'guari' in Italian and was only used in the literary register. Morphologically it's an adverb but the syntagmatic context here needs a noun, 'fil-gueri'. This is evidently a case of graphic *ipercorrectio*, according to the Romance spelling of words of Germanic origin beginning with a consonantal *w* by initial *gu* (compare English 'war, warden, warranty' with Italian 'guerra, guardiano, garanzia', as well as with the Romance English equivalents 'guardian, guarantee', and 'guelfi' from 'Welfen'). This



practice was applied by notaries in Medieval Malta to render Semitic words beginning with *w*: 'guedirrum, chirbit il guard' for 'Wied' and 'ward'. Then there is the Latin *et* but this has a purely graphic value, like the conventional sign &: in fact in Italian poetry the *t* was not pronounced and it did not preclude the reader from applying the *sinalefe*. The practice of avoiding Romance words when writing poetry was one of the devices of the *straniamento*, the effort to rise above ordinary everyday speech and attain beauty in language, and as everyone knows the Semiticization of poetic expression was the rule up to the 1960s. It may be compared to the reluctance to insert English words in contemporary verse, even though everybody in Malta code-switches merrily in ordinary conversation.

But let's go back to Vintura. An ingenious intuition by Mark Montebello which deserved more than a humble footnote<sup>25</sup> links Pietro Caxaro's lament to the collapse of an internal tower of the castle at Mdina in 1454. In order to prevent further damage the Council (with Pietro Caxaro as secretary), on May 24 in the same year appointed Nicola Caxaro, Pietro's brother, as 'supramarammerius' to supervise the restoration of the walls. Montebello asks 'could we associate the *Cantilena*'s "mirammiti" to Mdina's "marammerii"? I will go a step further. In 1473 Nicola was murdered by some men from Siggiewi,<sup>26</sup> an event which must have shocked Pietro the poet but which must have thrown Nicola's wife into despair. Well, Nicola's wife was called Vintura.<sup>27</sup> This further explains why Pietro broke the unwritten rule which prevented the use of Romance words in Maltese verse: 'vintura' is a *senhal*, in the best Provençal and Italian tradition. Everybody knows Petrarch's constant use of words like 'l'aura' and 'lauro' in his *Canzoniere* and Dante's use of 'beato' and its derivatives in his *Rime*, as not-so-secret mentions of Laura and Beatrice. The device was still very much in vogue in the 15th century: Antonio di Meglio used it consistently in his commissioned lyrics for men who were in love with girls called Lucretia (acrostic), Cosa ('quant'esser servo a questa gentil cosa'), Lena ('né 'n ciò dispongo di mai perder lena') Alessandra ('A le' s'andrai, canzon, con humiltate' and 'Alma gentil reale, s'andrai qual dei').<sup>28</sup> In this as well Pietro Caxaro was following the Romance tradition of *rime d'occasione* and if he wrote this poem to express Vintura's sorrow more than his own for the loss of Nicola, Bonnici's perception of a female poetic first person will be proved right<sup>29</sup>, the *replicatio* of 'mirammiti' will be seen as an indirect form of *senhal* for Nicola, the allegory on which the *planh* is composed would have been inspired by his profession, and the poem could be dated to 1473. Of course all this is conjecture, just as Beatrice and Laura and Shakespeare's 'dark lady' and 'lad' are conjectural. All we can say is (1) that the word is there, (2) that the word was in the original Sicilian proverb which is here aptly incorporated in the text, (3) that it was also a woman's first name, (4) that Pietro's brother's wife was called Vintura, (5) and that she suffered a terrible misfortune when Nicola was murdered. Not a bad cluster of clues for a conjecture!

One last word regarding the language of the poem. This should be defined pre-standard Maltese. In my paper 'Language and Demography in Malta: the Social Foundations of the Symbiosis between Semitic and Romance in Standard Maltese',<sup>30</sup> I explained that standard Maltese developed around the harbour area since the times of the Knights. Before 1530 there was no koiné in Malta simply because there was no centre exerting linguistic dominance over the rest of the island, both Mdina (the political centre) and the Borgo (the commercial centre) being too small and the towns being isolated. Caxaro's language, rather than representing a hypothetical 'pure' Maltese, must have been based on the 'dialect' spoken

in the West, defined as 'fir-rhajjel ta' fuq' by Vassalli (Discorso preliminare, section XXI).<sup>31</sup> Vassalli's description is too sketchy but some light might be sought from the material gathered for the Aquilina-Isserlin project<sup>32</sup>, since rural dialects are usually very conservative. This could explain certain vocalic correspondences or inconsistencies (e.g. *a>e*; *minzeli:hali*; *uele/uile*, *li gebel/il gebel*, *timayt/tumayt*), although I would expect Caxaro to have 'polished' his language to make it 'illustre'.

## NOTES

- 1 The details and the emotions of the finding are narrated by M. Fsadni in his *Esperjenzi ta' Kittieb* (Malta 1994), 34-37 and by G. Wettinger, 'The Discovery of Peter Caxaro's Cantilena', in *Pietru Caxaru u l-Kantilena tieghu*, ed. M. Montebello (Malta 1992), 8-11.
- 2 A. Cassola, 'Sull'autore dei versi 11-14 della Cantilena di Petrus Caxaro', *Melita Historica*, ix 3 (1986), 199-202.
- 3 M. F. Montebello, 'The Humanist Philosophy in Peter Caxaro's Cantilena' in *Pietru Caxaru u l-Kantilena tieghu*, ed. M. Montebello (Malta 1992), 15-55.
- 4 O. Friggieri, 'Il-Kantilena ta' Pietru Caxaru: Stharriġ Kritiku' in *Pietru Caxaru u l-Kantilena tieghu*, ed. M. Montebello (Malta 1992), 39-55 and O. Friggieri, *Il-Poezija Maltija. Antologija miġbura b'dahla minn O.F.* (Malta 1996). In both books he refrains from quoting or discussing my work on the verses and the quatrains.
- 5 G. Alfieri, 'Innessi fraseologici siciliani nei Malavoglia', *Bollettino del Centro di Studi filologici e linguistici siciliani*, xiv (1980), 3-77.
- 6 G. Caracausi, *Arabismi medievali di Sicilia* (Palermo 1983).
- 7 S. Fiorini, *Documentary sources of Maltese History. Part I. Notarial Documents. N° 1, Notary Giacomo Zabbara R494/1 (I): 1486-1488* (Malta 1996).
- 8 G. Wettinger, 1983, 'Some Grammatical Characteristics of the Place-Names of Malta and Gozo in Early Modern Times', *Journal of Maltese Studies*, xv (1983), 31-68.
- 9 G. Brincat, 'Critica testuale della Cantilena di Pietro Caxaro', *Journal of Maltese Studies*, xvi (1986), 1-21.
- 10 Joseph Zammit Ciantar, 'Malti tas-seklu XVIII', *Hyphen*, iv 5 (1985), 178-206.
- 11 A. Cassola, 'Sull'autore dei versi 11-14 della Cantilena di Petrus Caxaro', *Melita Historica*, ix 3 (1986), 199-202, attributes the second quatrain to Brandano.
- 12 F. Kabazi, 'Ulteriori considerazioni linguistiche sulla Cantilena di Pietro Caxaro', *Journal of Maltese Studies*, xix-xx (1989-90, but 1991), 42.
- 13 O. Friggieri, 'Il-Kantilena ta' Pietru Caxaru: Stharriġ Kritiku' in *Pietru Caxaru u l-Kantilena tieghu*, ed. M. Montebello, (Malta 1992), 52.
- 14 T. Bonnici, 'Galician-Portuguese Traits in Caxaro's Cantilena', *Journal of Maltese Studies*, xix-xx (1989-90), 47.
- 15 G. Wettinger, M. Fsadni, *Peter Caxaro's Cantilena. A poem in Medieval Maltese* (Malta 1968), 36.
- 16 W. Cowan, 'Caxaro's Cantilena. A Checkpoint for Change in Maltese', *Journal of Maltese Studies*, x (1975), 4-10. E. Fenech, *Wirt il-Muża* (Malta 1977). D. Cohen and M. Vanhove, 'La Cantilène Maltaise du 15e Siècle. Remarques Linguistiques', *Comptes Rendus du GLECS*, Tomes xxix-xxx (1984-86) 177-200.
- 17 F. Kabazi, 'Ulteriori considerazioni linguistiche sulla Cantilena di Pietro Caxaro', *Journal of Maltese Studies*, xix-xx (1989-90, but 1991), 42-45.
- 18 M. Castagnola, *Dizionario fraseologico siciliano-italiano, 1863*, ed. Cavallotti (Palermo 1980).
- 19 G. Brincat, 'Critica testuale della Cantilena di Pietro Caxaro', *Journal of Maltese Studies*, xvi (1986), 20-21, note to verse 13.
- 20 Arnold Cassola, 'Two Notes: Brighella and Thezan; The Cantilena, Maltese and Sicilian Proverbs', *Journal of Maltese Studies*, xxv-xxvi (1994-95 but 1998), 65-66.
- 21 G. Pitré, *Proverbi Siciliani*, vol. IV, (Bologna 1870-1913; photolitho. reprint 1969).
- 22 G. Wettinger, M. Fsadni, *L-Ghanja ta' Pietru Caxaru. Poezija bil-Malti Medjevali* (Malta 1983), 54.

- 23 O. Friggieri, *Il-Poezija Maltija. Antologija miġbura b' daħla minn O.F.* (Malta 1996), 1-2, 80.
- 24 A. Cassola, 'On the Meaning of "Gueri" in Petrus Caxaro's Cantilena', *Melita Historica*, viii 4 (1983), 315-317 and 'The Romance elements in Caxaro's Cantilena', *The Sunday Times* (Malta), 11 October 1992, 29.
- 25 M. F. Montebello, 'The Humanistic Philosophy in Peter Caxaro's "Cantilena"', in *Pietru Caxaru u l-Kantilena tiegħu*, ed. M. F. Montebello (Malta 1992), 37-38 (footnote 97).
- 26 G. Wettinger, M. Fsadni, *L-Ghanja ta' Pietru Caxaru*, 24.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 26.
- 28 A. Lanza (ed.), *Lirici toscani del '400*, vol. II (Roma 1975), 58, 65, 67, 75, 78.
- 29 T. Bonnici, 'Galician-Portuguese Traits in Caxaro's Cantilena', *Journal of Maltese Studies*, xix-xx (1989-90), 46, 50.
- 30 Joseph M. Brincat, 1991, 'Language and Demography in Malta: the Social Foundations of the Symbiosis between Semitic and Romance in Standard Maltese', in *Malta. A Case-Study in International Cross-Currents*, ed. S. Fiorini and V. Mallia-Milanes (Msida 1991), 91-110.
- 31 M. A. Vassalli, *Mylsen Phoenico-Punicum sive Grammatica Melitensis* (Roma 1791), Discorso Preliminare, VII-XXXIX.
- 32 J. Aquilina, B. S. J. Isserlin, *A Survey of Contemporary Dialectal Maltese. vol. I Gozo* (Leeds 1981).