

Historical Perspective

Tommaso Chetcuti: the man in the light of his times

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Abstract

This paper describes the life of the pioneer Maltese Psychiatrist, Tommaso Chetcuti as depicted by his esteemed friend and biographer Gavino Gulia and explores the advances in local psychiatric practice which he established in the Maltese Islands in the light of advances being made in Europe during his time, especially the prime works of Philippe Pinel and Etienne Esquirol.

Tommaso Chetcuti: the man in the light of his times

Gavino Gulia [b.1835; d.1889] graduated in medicine and surgery in 1861. Having studied the natural sciences under Stefano Zerafa, he maintained a lifelong interest in the field contributing a number of works in the subject. He supplemented his studies in practical medicine in Paris and was a corresponding member of the French Society of Practical Medicine.¹ In 1863, he left us a memorable biography of his friend and colleague, Tommaso Chetcuti, dedicated to Chetcuti's second wife, Chiara née Pullicino.²

Tommaso Chetcuti was born in Mosta, on the 17th of June 1797, the son of Giovanni Maria Chetcuti and Grazia née Magri, towards the end of the rule of the Knights of the Order of St. John. His father intended him to have a successful ecclesiastical career and left his son's private instruction to Frá Giovanni Magri, a terribly severe man who lived and taught in Lija, who would not hesitate to physically discipline any distracted student. He subsequently received further instruction at the Archbishop's Seminary in Mdina which was at that time believed to be the best place for a young man to receive moral and intellectual instruction. There, he studied grammar and classical poetry, the works of Cicero, Tacitus and Virgil and also developed a love for music. He then pursued legal studies at the University in Valletta qualifying as a doctor of jurisprudence in 1818. By the age of 25, he had good knowledge of Latin, Italian, French and English. He was a man of good spirits, a man of no pretences with a healthy conviction in what he believed was right and profound knowledge of Christian Literature. Even then, he was known to possess '*un'intelligenza non comune*' (an uncommon intelligence).^{2,3}

He then pursued the study of medicine in order to dedicate himself to the art of bringing others to health and wellness. He left for Naples to study medicine and took great interest in the works of Sydenham, amongst other well-known scientists of that age. He was always the first one to enter the hospital and the last one to leave. He was greatly loved and commended by his tutors, especially Professor Gennaro Mandacea who loved him like a son.

He received his medical degree from the University of Naples in 1822, after three years of study and he returned to Malta where he took residence in Rabat. There he became well-known as a diligent doctor who practiced medicine and surgery, including obstetrics, cataract surgery and created

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artificial pupils. He healed and comforted the sick. In 1824 he was appointed Assistant Physician at Santo Spirito Hospital at Rabat succeeding Dr. Paolo Mallia to the post of Physician-Surgeon General of Santo Spirito Hospital in Rabat in 1834.³

During the 1837 cholera epidemic, while several doctors sought to avoid contact with the sick to avoid contagion, Tommaso Chetcuti worked diligently with the infected and used the opportunity to study the disease. It was during this time that he produced his prominent work, *'Notizie Storiche E Patologico-Cliniche Sul Cholera Che Divampo' In Malta E Gozo Nell' Esta' Del 1837*, a monograph in 10 chapters, which he dedicated to Sir Henry Frank Bouvery. In this work, he describes the observations he made at Saura Hospital at Rabat and in his own private work in that same district. In this book, he writes of the supposed pathology of cholera and its diffusion from the Far East, its spread through the Maltese Islands, together with statistics concerning the number of cases and the number of deaths from cholera. He also discusses its symptomatology, prognosis, as well as dissection findings and a critique of the treatment used at the time, as well as its prophylaxis.⁴

In 1838, Sir Henry F. Bouvery, upon recommendation from Chevalier Vincenzo Casolani who held Chetcuti in high esteem, gave him charge of *la casa degli alienati*, as Superintendent of the Lunatic Asylum. Chetcuti was known to be well versed in the study and treatment of mental illness at the time and was well aware of the great responsibility he now faced. He travelled to visit psychiatric asylums in Italy, France and England.

Gavino Gulia describes the then state of the Maltese Psychiatric Asylum as a prison, a place of disorder where patients were tied with ropes and chains, and frequently beaten as an attempt to maintain order. He writes of how a common friend, a certain Professor Zerafa, professor of medical law and natural sciences, in a letter, described the gladness and rejoicing of patients when Chetcuti released them from their bondage, removed their chains, prohibited the beating of patients and restored order to Palazzo Franconi at Floriana whilst giving the patients the dignity they deserved. Chetcuti also kept statistical documentation of the psychiatric illnesses he encountered and wrote about his observations in the asylum, just as Pinel advised in his treatise.

As an ardent admirer of Esquirol, Chetcuti knew the former's work *'Des Maladies Mentales: considérées sous les rapports médical, hygiénique, et médico-légal'* as the main psychiatric textbook of the time, and like Esquirol, he advocated the use of emetics, purgatives, baths of 'immersion and affusion', douches 'to calm the raging excitement' and give 'an agreeable coolness to the head', the application of ice to the head in which the cold was believed to remove 'excess heat and excite the tonic action of skin', blood letting with leeches 'applied to the temporal arteries and jugular veins' and venesection - for it was believed that at the origin of insanity was a violent rush of blood to the head. 'I have seen a state of sadness pass into mania and fury, immediately after bleeding; and dementia to replace, reciprocally, the condition of mania'. Adequate dietary regimes

and the avoidance of constipation, as well as the importance of exercise and keeping oneself occupied, the use of tonics and antispasmodics were also deemed to be important in the treatment of insanity.⁵

Chetcuti was well aware of advances in psychiatry at the time and many of his beliefs reflect those of Pinel and Esquirol. Pinel, also acknowledged the use of baths, shower baths, opium, camphire and anti-spasmodics, as described in his *'A Treatise On Insanity In Which Are Contained The Principles Of A New And More Practical Nosology Of Maniacal Disorders'*.⁶ However, Chetcuti was known to use opium only in selected cases. Chetcuti, who also acknowledged 'the unfavourable circumstances to which lunatics are exposed', rarely made use of physical restraint and used seclusion in selected cases. In his treatise, Pinel writes of the zeal, good manner and kindness that were key to the successful management of those who were mentally ill, qualities which Tommaso Chetcuti certainly possessed, which made him successful in the treatment of his patients and which gave him the high esteem of the Maltese nation, as well as abroad. Pinel advised watchfulness and experience, as means of predicting a patient's next relapse. He was also aware of the importance of good conduct in the non-medical staff working in an asylum - Chetcuti banned the beating of patients as an attempt to keep order in an asylum, and Pinel advised the repression of cruelty and prevention of negligence in an asylum. Pinel also advocated for the removal of factors which might make a patient relapse into crisis. In his treatise, Pinel wrote of the 'happy time when it will be no longer necessary to bound their wishes or to restrain their persons'. This 'happy time' came to the Maltese psychiatric patient with Chetcuti's establishment as Superintendent of the lunatic asylum.

In his treatise, Pinel further writes of the qualities a doctor needs to possess in order to gain further insight and he includes a knowledge of the fine arts, the human passions including those who practiced austere measures in monastic life, as well as other great persons who 'attracted the admiration of mankind', qualities which Tommaso Chetcuti possessed. As advocated by Pinel, Chetcuti would, in his daily practice 'administer health and consolation to minds distressed and diseased' in order 'to restore them to themselves and to their friends'. Just as Thomas Willis was known in England to possess 'the utmost sweetness and affability' as 'the usual expression of his countenance', so does Gulia describe Chetcuti. Like Pinel, Chetcuti looked down on irrational remedies, superstition and quackery; he kept good records and acknowledged the importance of research.

Tommaso Chetcuti reformed Casa Franconi using 1000 Francs of his own in this process. Chetcuti suggested to Sir W. Reid the need to remove patients from Palazzo Franconi and place them in *'La Splendida Casa di Wied Incita'* (the splendid house of Incita Valley in Attard), a large edifice with open air spaces, well ventilated, isolated and comfortable. Pinel himself had written of the importance of the hospital building as being an adequate place for a patient to reside in and resented the

confined halls and passages of the Bicêtre, which 'rendered the cold of Winter and the heat of Summer equally intolerable and injurious'. Pinel also wrote that a 'degree of liberty dictated by not weak but enlightened humanity, and calculated...' would 'in most instances... diminish the violence of the symptoms, and in some to remove the complaint altogether... Cruel treatment of any description... was unequivocally proscribed,' and 'no man was allowed to strike a maniac, even in his own defense.' These were advances established in Maltese psychiatry by Chetcuti.⁶ In his work, *Mental Disease in Malta*, Professor Savona Ventura writes of the introduction of a 'Restraint Book' by Chetcuti, in order to prevent abusive use of this measure.³

Chetcuti saw psychiatry as a specialty in its own right and was strongly opposed to irrational methods practiced at the time. He deemed the human brain to be the seat of intellect, morals and instincts, as well as the site of illness when one of these was disordered. Chetcuti was sought for the treatment of the most difficult cases of his time and to give his expert opinion in court during trials. His fame had spread throughout the islands and across all social classes. In view of his vast medical experience and breadth of knowledge, Tommaso Chetcuti was named Chief Physician of the Lazzaretto on the 1st June 1849. Wherever he went academic honours were conferred on him by the Royal Society of Medicine of Marseille and the Accademia Medico-Chirurgica di Napoli amongst others; however, despite his exhortations regarding the importance of the *Societa' Medica* of Malta, he himself declined the offer to become Professor of the Faculty of Medicine in Malta after the death of the famous Professor Giorgio Costantino Schinas in 1856.

He was married to his first wife, Theresa née Diacono from Zejtun, for 32 years. He suffered several attacks of gout and after having visited the European Continent in 1856 during the time of the London Exposition, he took the opportunity to visit Paris and seek the advice of some of his French Colleagues and friends, in order to treat the gout. Gulia describes Chetcuti as a tall, robust man with sharp facial features, of an open, pleasant and natural quality, respected greatly and dear to all of kindest charity, with whom it was delightful to converse. He also had a residence in Valletta. In 1856 his wife died of fulminant cerebral apoplexy and he mourned her for 18 months. On the 28th January 1858, he married Chiara née Pullicino.²

Meanwhile, the attacks of gout increased in frequency and severity. He eventually noted a drooping of the left side of his

mouth, hypersalivation and worsening impairment of buccal movements which he attributed to gouty infiltration. On the 18th October 1862, he left for Paris and returned after his condition improved, on the 15th November. Hence he began to receive those who sought his aid, in his own home. However, he soon began to note an enlargement of his cervical and parotid glands and realizing that he was approaching the end of his life, he asked for Extreme Unction. Tommaso Chetcuti died on the 17th of March 1863, aged 60. His funeral was held on the 18th of March in the Church of Mosta. He was buried in the same church and to this day, one can see the memorial in the corridor that links the two sacristies with a detailed inscription, as well as the coat of arms of the Chetcuti family.²

Chetcuti also spent time writing medical memoirs which he read to the *Società Medica di Malta*. He was a member and president of the *Società Medica d' Incoraggiamento*. His bibliography includes a series of publications dealing with psychiatry including: *Sulle Manie* [Filologo Maltese, 10th February - 30th March 1841]; *Descrizione del pubblico manicomio di Malta* [Filologo Maltese, 17th June - 22nd July 1841]; *Sulla Monomania Omicida Istantiva* [Malta, 1847]. He also published work on other subjects including: *Notizie storiche e patologiche-cliniche sul colera che divampo in Malta e Gozo nell'estate del 1837* [Malta, 1838]; *Rapporto ragionato della commissione incaricata dalla Società Medica di esaminare il progetto di studi relativamente alla medicina* (co-authored with Nicola Zammit, Malta, 1842); *Al Sig. G.C. Schinas Professor di Medicina nell'Università di Studi di Malta* [Malta, 1842]; *Discorso inaugurale recitato il 1mo Dicembre 1841* [Il Filologo Maltese, 9th December 1841, p.52]; and *Discorso inaugurale primumciato nella giornata pubblica del 16 Ottobre all'apertura dell'anno accademico 1846-1847* [Malta, 1846].³

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