

BUONAMICO'S FRENCH POEM

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The Gozitan scholar Gian Francesco Agius de Soldanis (1712-1770) is credited with preserving for posterity Giovanni Francesco Buonamico's poem entitled *Sonetto*, which he transcribed in his *Nuova Scuola dell'Antica Lingua Punica Scoperta nel Moderno Parlare Maltese Gozitano*.¹ The two Maltese versions, Buonamico's original and a second version rewritten by the copier *col mio nuovo alfabeto*, are accompanied by the following note: *Questa stessa Poesia dall'autore in vita così tradotta in Lingua Francese in un Sonetto*, which introduces the *Sonet* in French. Yet, Buonamico's *Sonet* is not exactly a translation into French of his poem in Maltese, *Sonetto*, perhaps better known by its first line, *Mejju ġie bil-ward u ż-żahar*. There are of course elements common to both, chief among them the climactic eulogy, the entire purpose of the poem in praise of Grand Master Cotoner. A first reading reveals similarities in the subject matter, but also differences which, in my opinion, are more evident. Let us consider the difference that strikes the reader at first glance: the form of the poems. The Maltese version, according to de Soldanis, carries the title *Sonetto*. The question as to why the title to the Maltese poem is in Italian

1 NLM, Libr 144, ff. 108-109.

Sonet.

Voicy venu le Moys, au quel l'agmable Flore
 Embellit souts les Champs, et parfume les Aïrs;
 Et pour monrer aux sieux souts ses attraits diuers,
 Pour chasqu' Aïre elle fait autans de fleurs esclore.

Les Zefirs pour flatter le feu, qui les deuore,
 Soupirant doucement parcourent l'Vniuers;
 Et les Bois reprennants leur beaux feuillages verts,
 Conuient les Oyseaux à saluer l'Aurore.

Ces Zefirs, ces Oyseaux, ces Feuillages, ces Fleurs
 N'ont rien de surprenant (quoy qu'ils charment nos caurs)
 Puisqu'enfin souts les ans le Printemps nous les donne.

Mais il est merueilleux, Grand Princee Cotonier,
 Que malgré les rigueurs de la Terre, et de l'Aïr,
 En soutes les Saisons vous nous donniez l'Autonne.



comes to mind and one may wonder whether de Soldanis took the liberty of providing this title himself, maybe for consistency with the French version, which carries the title *Sonet*. I have consulted two versions of *Mejju ġie bil-ward u ż-żahar*, the one in the de Soldanis manuscript, also found in Arnold Cassola's *The Literature of Malta*,² and reproduced on the site *www.akkademjatalmalti.org*, where the poem in old Maltese consists of sixteen verses, a stanza of eight verses and two stanzas of four verses each,³ and a second version in modern Maltese reproduced by Oliver Friggieri in his *Dizzjunarju ta' Termini Letterarji* where the sixteen lines are divided into four stanzas of four lines each.⁴ On the other hand, the French version is, as the title implies, a sonnet, that is a fourteen verse poem made up of two quatrains and two tercets and written in twelve syllable verses, corresponding to the *alexandrin*, the most noble of French verses. Cotoner would no doubt cherish a poem written in French in his praise by a Maltese. Buonamico therefore chooses a dignified form in keeping with the personage, the Prince of the island. His choice falls on the sonnet for precisely this reason of decorum.

This is not surprising as the sonnet, in imitation of Petrarca, is in fashion in sixteenth-century France, the poets *par excellence* being Pierre Ronsard (1524-1585), Joachim du Bellay (1522-1560) and the other poets of *La Pléiade*. In French literature, and all over Europe, the sonnet remains throughout the seventeenth century the poetic form that best expresses themes such as the flight of time or platonic

- 2 A. Cassola, *The Literature of Malta* (Malta: Minima Publishers, 2000) 19.
- 3 This poem is accompanied by a note confirming that "*traduzzjoni ta' xogħol tiegħu bil-Franċiż waslet għandna bis-saħħa ta' Ġan Franġisk Agius de Soldanis, c.1750*".
- 4 O. Friggieri, *Dizzjunarju ta' Termini Letterarji* (Malta : PEG, 1996) 92.

love. In his *Art poétique, Chant II*, Nicolas Boileau⁵ is full of praise for the sonnet and attributes its very existence and “supreme beauty” to Apollo himself. The sonnet takes pride of place in the poetry sessions read in the fashionable Paris salons. It is revived in the French literature of the nineteenth century. In 1860, Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) expresses his admiration for this poetic form in a letter to his friend Armand Fraisse: « *Parce que la forme est contraignante, l'idée jaillit plus intense [...] il y a, là, la beauté du métal et du minéral bien travaillée* ». The sonnet demands discipline, a virtue pertaining to a prince. For example, in the last verse of his sonnet *L'Olive*, Joachim du Bellay elevates the woman he adores to the rank of a goddess, just as the last line of Buonamico's *Sonet* reveals the reason why Grand Master Cotoner is worthy of praise.

In his masterly analysis of the Maltese version, Friggieri dwells on the Baroque element of the poem, illustrated by what he calls “the aesthetics of exaggeration” in such expressions as the one referring to Cotoner as *dawl t'għajnejna* or the fact that thanks to his presence *fl-akbar bard ikollna s-sħana*.⁶ Other figures of speech dear to the Baroque tradition mentioned by Friggieri are antithesis, exaggerated comparisons, repetition and parallelisms, as well as the effective use of metaphors. Buonamico retains these thematic and stylistic elements in the French version where they are more refined.

5 Nicolas Boileau (1636-1711) is best known for his collection of *Satires*, for his *Épîtres* and for his *Art poétique*. Louis XIV appointed him *historiographe du roi* together with the playwright Jean Racine. Boileau was elected to the *Académie française* in 1684.

6 Oliver Friggieri reproduces the Maltese poem in modern Maltese. The quotations in this paragraph are reproduced as written by this author. The other quotations from the Maltese poem in this article are reproduced as they appear in the version given by the *Akkademja tal-Malti* on its site.

What strikes the reader in the Maltese version is the rhythm: the verses are octosyllabic and very musical, so that the poem, read over and over again, can easily be memorised. Friggieri reminds us that this poem was written on the occasion of the feast of *Calendimaggio* of 1675. Many Maltese would go to Valletta's main square in front of the Grand Master's palace to enjoy the evening festivities that took place on the eve of 1st May, the highlight of which would be the *Kukkanja* and the reading of poems in praise of the Grand Master. One is reminded of the French poems of the Middle Ages that were sung by the *troubadours* and *trouvères* with refrains that the listeners would easily remember and sing along with them. In the same way, the praise of the Grand Master would be celebrated by all, including the illiterate population.

The first eight lines of the Maltese poem celebrate the rebirth of nature in the month of May: flowers bloom, new leaves cover the trees, the fields are green, birds sing, tempests cease, the cold and rainy season is over, everyone is happy. This serene and gay atmosphere creates the right background for the philosophical thought in the next quatrain: the inhabitants of this country would go hungry and would have good reason to be unhappy were it not for – and the climax of the poem forms the last four-lined stanza – Cotoner, our joy, our Godsend, to whom we owe our well-being. The climatic metaphor is repeated in the last line: *Fl'achbar bart icolna e schana*. Just as during the month of May it is neither hot nor cold, under the guidance of our Grand Master the inhabitants of this island live comfortably and are happy.

In the pages dedicated to an analysis of the Maltese poem in *The Literature of Malta*, Arnold Cassola states that the word *achar* was copied erroneously by Agius de Soldanis as *achbar* and interpreted as “akbar”, whilst Buonamico's original text read *achar*, which has been interpreted as “agħar” in modern Maltese. Cassola states:

“This [latter] suggested interpretation of the verse would fit in well with the general context of the poem which harps on the contrast between, on the one hand, the wintry season that is now departed (*Aadda*) with its ‘bart’, ‘Sceta’, ‘Beracq’, strong ‘riech’ and stormy ‘bacher’ and ‘schab’ and, on the other, the ‘Uuard’, ‘Zahar’, ‘nuar’, ‘Uueracq’ and ‘chdura’ which Spring brings (‘gie’) along with it.”

Moreover, “it would thus convey more forcefully the idea of a very strong antithesis based on the literary-linguistic device known as oxymoron, which was extremely popular with the writers of the Baroque age...”. Cassola adds that this graphic rendering, with *ch* as opposed to *chb*, “probably the correct one – it being chronologically the nearest to the author’s will – was adopted by Wettinger-Fsadni (1968: 34) and Fenech (1977: 19)”, while N. Cremona, Saydon and Aquilina, K. Vassallo and O. Friggieri adopted the *achbar* version. Cassola then goes on to propose a third alternative meaning for *achar*, i.e. *aħħar* [‘last’].

Without entering into the merits of which version is the correct one, I dare opine that while, as Cassola says, *achar* is a very strong adjective, one cannot deny that *achbar*, being the comparative form of “*kbir*”, carries contextual relevance.

It is clear that, for the Maltese version, Buonamico chose simple poetry, simple diction, understood by all, portraying a happy population led by a great, considerate, generous Grand Master. All these epithets are not expressed by Buonamico, but are attributed to the reader’s or listener’s description of the Grand Master by the supposedly popular adoption of positive and laudatory adjectives. This simple approach reminds the reader of the sixteenth-century French poet Pierre Ronsard, whose collection of sonnets under the title *Amours* are in imitation of Petrarca’s sonnets. Ronsard expresses his platonic love for three young girls:

thirteen-year-old Cassandre Salviati, the daughter of an Italian banker whom he met at a feast at the King's Court at Blois; the fifteen-year-old peasant girl Marie Dupin; and much later (in his fifty-fourth year), Hélène Surgères, a lady-in-waiting of Catherine de Médicis. The very names of Cassandre and Hélène evoked for him the legend of Troy in particular and Greek mythology in general. These sonnets, loaded with references to Greek mythology and with figures of speech, such as alliteration, metaphor and antithesis, contrast with the simple, natural language he uses when addressing the peasant girl. In the same way, in his Maltese poem, Buonamico is more natural and simple in his choice of both words and verse.

A common element in both poems is personification. *Uard, Zahar, Sceta, Beracq, Uueracq, Bachar, Sema, Gebiel, Aasfura, Gesira* are written in capital letters. This figure of speech is also present in *Sonet*; however, the precious language in fashion at the time, as well as mythological allusions, replace the commonplace diction of the Maltese poem. *Mejju gie' bl'Uard u Zahar.../T'ghattiet l'art be nuar u l'Uueracq.../Sa fl'e Gebiel neptet el chdura* is rendered in the French version:

*Voici venu le Moys, auquel l'aimable Flore
Embellit tous les champs, et parfume les Airs.*

Flowers are not only personified through the mention of *Flore*, but also through the human quality *Flore* possesses. It is *aimable*, lovable, and if the poet chooses from the most beautiful and most fragrant flowers – roses and orange blossoms – in the Maltese version, it is in the French poem that he embraces all flowers through the choice of *Flore* and that the sense of smell is conveyed through the choice of the expression *parfume les Airs*. Moreover, the idea in the last line is not expressed at all in the Maltese poem. *Flore* makes a

flower bloom for every star, and the poet chooses the poetic word *Astre*, not the ordinary *étoile*. The two lines, *Aadda l bart, e Sceta, u 'l Beracq...* / *Tar e schab men nuece e' Sema*, are rendered more poetic in *Sonet*. Once again, the elements of nature have human qualities. There are no more clouds in the sky, the poet says in the Maltese version. The second quatrain of the *Sonet* introduces the *Zephyrs*; devoured by the fire of love, they sigh softly, a human quality associated with love. The Baroque partiality for hyperbole is expressed through such vocabulary as *l'Univers*, the territory for the *Zephyrs*, the latter in its plural form. Every bird sings again in Spring, the poet says in the Maltese version; in *Sonet* the birds are invited by the woods, *les Bois*, to greet daybreak, *l'Aurore*. The woods, the birds and daybreak act like humans.

While the ideas conveyed in the first eight lines of both versions hardly differ in substance, though they differ in their form, the next four lines are totally different also in subject-matter. The Maltese poem insists on the fact that care and peace of mind reign on this island of ours, whose population would otherwise be unhappy, hungry and enslaved. "Otherwise" means "were it not for *Cotoner*", whose name will only be mentioned (as also in the *Sonet*) in the last stanza. On the other hand, the corresponding four lines of the *Sonet* repeat the theme of the four elements of nature the poet has chosen to celebrate its rebirth. Buonamico here makes use of another figure of speech popular with contemporary French poets and later on with the Romantics, enumeration: *Ces Zephirs, ces Oyseaux, ces Feuillages, ces Fleurs*, though they charm us, do not surprise us, as they return every Spring. The reader is now ready for the climax of the poem. The second tercet is an address to the *Grand Prince Cotoner* himself. In contrast to the lack of surprise when Spring comes back, one marvels at the fact:

*Que malgré les rigueurs de la Terre et de l'Air,
En toutes les Saisons vous nous donniez l'Automne.*

Autumn personifies serenity, a balanced, therefore, a just Prince. The Grand Master is perfect in all seasons. Why is it that while the first word in the Maltese poem is *Mejju* and the corresponding season is Spring, the last word of the *Sonet* is *Automne*? The reason is that the poet needed a word that rhymed with *donne*, as his sonnet is based on the rhyming scheme that goes: abba, abba, ccd, ccd. In fact, in *Sonet*, the month is not defined, and spring rather than autumn comes to mind as one reads the first eleven lines.

The last four lines of the Maltese poem are also addressed to Cotoner, but the idea of calm, serenity and general well-being is not rendered by the mention of a season, nor does the poet call Cotoner "Great Prince". In fact, the language is simpler and perhaps more endearing. For what is more precious than eyesight, and what better way to express the love and gratitude of the Maltese population towards Cotoner than to call him *daul ta aineina*? Such an expression is more suited for the common population through its profound and intense meaning, whereas in the *Sonet*, its very form in *alexandrin* verses demands a more dignified diction when apostrophising the *Grand Prince Cotoner*.

Both poems reach their climax in the last stanza when the great benefactor of the Maltese is revealed in the person of Cotoner. However, the comparison with the benign natural elements is more profound in the *Sonet*, thanks to the poet's imagination in attributing to them human sensations, constituting a foreboding and reflection of the goodness, gentleness and good governance of this great prince.

The poet does not make the same use of the idyllic element present in both poems. As Friggieri notes in his analysis of the Maltese poem, this picture of village life contrasts sharply with the life led by the aristocratic Cotoner, hence

the use of antithesis which enriches the poem so that it fits in well, together with the choice of the octosyllabic rhyming verse, with the traditional Italian religious poems of the Middle Ages and of a later period, thereby enhancing its literary quality. In the *Sonet* the antithesis, though used in order to carry the same message, is more nobly expressed.

There is no doubt that Buonamico intended his Maltese poem in praise of Grand Master Cotoner to be not only understood, but possibly memorised by a Maltese audience; it was only logical to keep it as simple as possible, employing the octosyllabic rhyming verse as the most suitable form to this end. In projecting the same ideas in French, Buonamico still had to adapt both subject matter and form to the person he addressed, Cotoner himself. Moreover, the *Sonet* would also be read by the literate class, the Grand Master's courtiers including the French Knights. This is in keeping with the sonnet, in *alexandrin* verses, being not only the most dignified of French verses, but also the most popular at the time for showering praises in honour of princes and protectors.