

The Pantomime Other: Building Fences in Pantomime Performance in Malta

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Introduction

Malta is an island-state at the southern-most tip of Europe. Being roughly equidistant between Sicily to the north and Libya to the south, and because of a history that involved interactions with Europeans, Africans and people from the Near East, the Maltese could not easily be defined by foreigners who visited or settled on the island. Travel writings from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries show the struggle that their authors faced to describe the indigenous population; however, this quote from William Lithgow in 1612 is quite typical:

The peasant or natural inhabitants are of the Affrican complexion, tanny and sun-burnt; and their language semblable to the Barbarian¹ speech. These rural Maltezes are extremely bent, in all their actions, either to good or evill wanting fortitude of minde, and civil discretion, they can not temper the violent humours of their passions, but as the headstrong tide, so their dispositions runne, in the superfluous excesse of affections. They follow the Romane Church, though ignorant of the way (quoted in Freller 2009, 403-405).

European travellers and colonisers created a narrative that described the Maltese as non-European, or at best as a population inhabiting the extreme periphery of Europe and possessing only some qualities usually found in European communities. Throughout the centuries, the Maltese population, or at least that small part of the population that had access to education and had acquired

¹ Presumably “Barbarian” refers to the languages spoken in the Maghreb region.

European tastes, insisted on its European heritage to try to combat the othering project that effectively ruled out the Maltese from any position of influence in the running of the island.

Grand Narratives in a Small Island

One of the preferred narratives among the Maltese about the start of British colonialism in Malta speaks of the brave resistance that the population of the villages in Malta put up against a French occupation led by Napoleon Bonaparte himself. The new French rulers had hardly been on the islands for six months in 1798 before they were blocked in the walled towns with no possibility of acquiring fresh supplies of food or water. The blockade took around eighteen months, during which time both sides suffered extreme hardship, with lack of food causing disease and starvation. The period also enabled the Maltese to organise themselves both on a military level as well as through representative institutions. Eventually, after the Maltese had received the assistance of the British Navy, the French capitulated. Subsequent developments saw Britain take over Malta in order to protect the inhabitants' interests (Farrugia 1995, 1-6). The representatives of the Maltese people continued to remind their British rulers that they had never been conquered by Britain but had earned their protection by suffering and shedding their blood to rid the islands of Napoleon's troops. As an editorial in a Maltese newspaper in 1903 showed, the Maltese claims to having earned their liberty did not hold much water with the British government:

One hundred years of fearful experience have elapsed, and is there anybody, by this time, who is not convinced that, in Downing Street, Malta is merely considered as a fortress and nothing else, and the Maltese are so many white snails, slumbering for six months of the year in the crevices of the bastions and fortifications, and coming out during the other six months to feed on the plants which grow out of the crevices themselves when the rain wets the porous stone.

One hundred years have elapsed during which England has held in its claws this gem of the Mediterranean, the value of which it does not deny,

and yet she shamelessly declines to give to the people the right which belongs to them of governing themselves, simply for the reason that Malta is a fortress of the greatest value to the Empire.
One hundred years! (*Malta*, June 1903, reproduced in Frendo 1993, 217).

The claims made by the newspaper quoted above were representative of a widespread anti-British sentiment that a large section of the indigenous population subscribed to. Nonetheless, many other sectors had come to accept British colonialism almost as a natural condition that could be exploited just like other groups had previously exploited the Order of St John to gain ascendancy in Maltese society. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the Maltese population was divided between those who were in favour of the changes that British colonialism was bringing about and those who were resisting them. As was the case in many other colonies, the Maltese experience of colonialism was a mixed bag. While generally the system itself was geared to exploit the population in order to cater for imperial interests, a new class of subjects was created which saw an opportunity to achieve social mobility by serving those same colonial interests and acquiring an identity which was as similar as possible to that of the colonisers. The Fanonian syndrome of “black skin, white masks” was compounded by the fact that the Maltese considered themselves as European as their masters and therefore demanded different treatment to that suffered by British subjects in other colonies, even if this claim was not generally entertained by the colonial rulers.

The Ascent of the British Amateur

When a certain Major Campbell Todd landed in Malta in October 1909 as part of his duties with the British Army he found that British amateur theatre “had been pretty much moribund for some time” (Mompalao de Piro 1985, 5) and he immediately set about to sort it out. In January of the following year he directed his own work, *Captain Reece of the Mantelpiece: A Nautical Extravaganza in*

Three Acts, a work very obviously based on W.S. Gilbert's ballad "Captain Reece". His fascination with musical theatre was evident, as he was soon to stage other works by or in the style of Gilbert and Sullivan. He worked with other British people residing on the island at the time to produce amateur theatre that was aimed at a British audience. His endeavours, at least to the island's English language press at the time, were hugely successful, such that he often had to perform extra shows. Campbell Todd's capabilities as an amateur theatre-maker were immediately recognized on the island, and not only by his compatriots.

During the previous century, theatre in Malta had developed as a three-pronged affair. Italian opera had established itself as the most important theatrical genre, to the extent that the government had built a new opera house through local taxpayers' money, despite the fact that there was a lot of opposition from influential quarters in Malta itself, such as the Catholic Church. Opera was the only type of theatre that could be maintained as a professional venture during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The other two main theatrical activities were amateur performances in English and in Maltese. Performances in English by British amateurs started being organised soon after the start of British rule in 1800, while Maltese amateur theatre-makers started setting up their *teatrini* or small theatres to perform drama and comedy in Maltese during the 1840s. As a general rule, these three theatre-making activities stayed out of each other's way. Opera was for the higher classes of the Maltese population and for the officers in the British forces who had probably developed a taste for the genre back in their homeland. Amateur theatre in English was supported mainly by British business families and military personnel who were trying to reproduce some of the entertainment they had enjoyed in Britain. The *teatrini* established by the indigenous population were very modest theatres, usually adapted from existent buildings, and their main spectators were lower class people who had very little money to spend on entertainment.

Thus, the manner in which Major Campbell Todd was received in Malta was in many ways exceptional. Not only was he seen as a messiah by the British amateurs, to the extent that he could dictate his own rules on the community (Mompalao de Piro 1985, 5-6), but his work was immediately noticed by the Maltese theatre community as well. *Captain Reece of the Mantelpiece* was such a huge success that it was taken up by a prominent theatre producer, a certain Mikelang Borg, who was always on the lookout for new fashions in popular theatre and who had introduced genres like French vaudeville to vernacular theatre in Malta (Galea 1998, 70-76). The suggestion actually came from a prominent British-leaning politician, a certain Augustus Bartolo, who supported British interests in Malta through his political activities, mainly by founding and representing the imperialistic Constitutional Party (Schiavone 2009, 184-185). He defined himself as “though not a Briton a Britisher” (Bartolo 1911, quoted in Hull 1993, 213). In this case, he also used his influence as founder and owner of the newspaper *Daily Malta Chronicle* to make sure that both the original production in English, as well as the Maltese version, soon acquired the reputation of masterpieces. In truth, Bartolo was such an anglophile that he commended anything with an English flavour. He is even recorded as being one of the first ever Maltese to play football (Schiavone 2009, 185) and the benefactor of the first trophy awarded for organized football in Malta (Baldacchino 2007). It is therefore not surprising that he was so keen on this play, written by an Englishman who was living in Malta at the time and who obviously had considerable influence on the British community.

Mikelang Borg (Borg 1934, 80) states that Bartolo approached him, after having attended more than one performance of *Captain Reece*, and offered to negotiate with the author to obtain permission to stage the play in Maltese, if Borg’s company was interested. Before long, Bartolo himself was translating the

text, and simultaneously using his newspaper to start raising awareness of the event:

The Maltese Amateur Theatrical Society L'Indipendenza will give a performance next month, in the vernacular, of Major Todd's highly successful musical extravaganza *Captain Reece of the Mantelpiece* by the author's kind permission ("Local News", *Daily Malta Chronicle* 1910. March 8, 2).

The political implications of this short notice are obvious. By announcing a performance that was in its early stages of preparation and was not even in rehearsal yet (Borg 1934, 81) as Borg's schedule was so busy that he never dedicated more than a few weeks to a new production, he made sure there would be no turning back for the producer. By using the description "Maltese Amateur Theatrical Society" he was making a direct reference to the Malta Amateur Dramatic Society, the company which had staged the original English-language production, thereby implying that the two were of an equivalent standard as well as similar in scope. Borg himself would probably never have used that terminology, as like other Maltese amateurs, he always referred to his enterprise by the Italian term *filodrammatico/a*. The act of convincing a major Maltese theatrical company to stage an English play was itself a major coup, as these companies consistently looked at Italian popular theatre for inspiration, and even Shakespeare was filtered through Italian translations, such that Hamlet was always Amleto or Amletu in Maltese productions. This "conversion" also happened at a crucial stage of Maltese political development, with the colonisers' attempts at Anglicisation coming to a head in what is referred to locally as "the language question" with people being asked to choose between Italian and English as a language of instruction and administration (Hull 1993).

To make sure the Maltese-language staging of *Captain Reece* would be a success, Bartolo himself directed singing and dancing rehearsals, and when he was satisfied with the progress his protégés were making,

managed to take along with him the author of the operetta himself, so that he would take a look and decide for himself whether the general proceedings met with his approval. And he approved everything and praised all the amateurs as well as the orchestra and its conductor Orlando Crescimanno.

Major Todd was so pleased with the enthusiasm shown by L'Indipendenza amateurs in rehearsing his operetta that he offered to procure the scenery that had been used some time before by the English amateurs. And so he did. (Borg 1934, 81, my translation).

After the performances, the *Daily Malta Chronicle* dedicated many columns to eulogizing it, focusing on the ability of the actors to pull off a British characterization even though they were acting in Maltese (“Maltese Amateur Dramatic Society L'Indipendenza”, *Daily Malta Chronicle* 1910, April 16, 6-7). What Borg would remember more than twenty years later when writing his theatrical memoirs was that the “English ladies and gentlemen” who had performed in the original production approved of what the Maltese troupe was doing, that the performances were attended by the best families in Malta as well as many British officers, and that the company was honoured by having the Governor himself in attendance for one of the performances.

On Saturday the 2nd instant, His Excellency the Governor and Lady Rundle honoured the proceedings with their presence. They were met near the entrance to the state box by the six daintily attired little ladies appearing as the daughters of Mrs Gossip in the play, whilst the five year old daughter of Mr M.A. Borg in jumper and slop of miniature proportions, she being a prominent member of the Mantelpiece crew, presented Lady Rundle with a bouquet of fresh flowers tied with the Mantelpiece ribbons.

As soon as His Excellency the Governor appeared at the front of the box, the curtain was rung up, and, to the accompaniment of the orchestra, the officers and crew of the Mantelpiece sang God Save the King. His Excellency and Lady Rundle evinced the pleasure afforded to them in the performance by remaining to the end. (“Maltese Amateur Dramatic Society L'Indipendenza”, *Daily Malta Chronicle* 1910. April 16, 7)

Presumably staying on “to the end” of the performance was not usual or expected from the governor and his wife, as they would not have been able to understand

the language used. At a time of linguistic upheaval, this could have been taken as a sign that British authorities were supporting the establishment of the Maltese language as a possible substitute for Italian, which was the dominant language of cultural expression. In fact this was also partially true, as the undeclared British policy for Malta was to allow the vernacular to replace Italian, knowing that the local population needed a more important European language to communicate outside their immediate community, and would eventually turn to English when they realised that they needed a language that could serve them beyond their immediate linguistic community, as actually happened later in the twentieth century (Frendo 1994, 14).

This was a clear demonstration that contemporary English theatre could and would eventually become an accepted part of Maltese theatre culture, with Borg himself going on to produce English works which were popular at the time, such as Sidney Jones' *Geisha* and works which had been successful in England, such as Jean Gilbert's *The Girl in the Taxi*, which in spite of not being originally an English work, was considered for production in Maltese after its London run. (Borg 1934, 126) For people like Borg, a theatre-maker who was equally at ease producing Italian opera for the Royal Opera House, which he managed for a time, as adapting French farce, England had become a new point of reference. Reading through his memoirs one cannot miss the feeling that in all his adaptations from English works he did his utmost to prove that he could stage the works he chose as well as any English performers that he had seen. However, staging his works in Maltese meant that he was not trying to attract English spectators, who probably would not have been interested anyway.

This act of mimicry seems not to have impressed Major Todd or the rest of the British amateur performers in Malta. This is quite clear from the way the company he led during the few years he was in Malta developed in the following decades, remaining an all-British acting troupe more or less up to Independence,

when its personnel was substituted by anglicised Maltese (Mompalao de Piro 1985, 46-71), but the best example can be seen through an examination of a production the company put on the following Christmas.

Christmas pantomime was a relatively unknown genre in Malta until Major Todd produced his *Aladdin and his Wonderful Lamp* at the beginning of January 1911. Only a handful of pantomimes are known to have been performed previously, including those performed aboard naval vessels or by their crews. (Spiteri 2014, 48-49). Yet *Aladdin* “played to packed houses for no less than twelve performances,” (Mompalao de Piro 1985, 12) an extraordinary figure even by today’s standards for a small country like Malta. The audience consisted predominantly of British people, who thus recovered another link to the culture they had left behind when they made their way to Malta. The performers were all British as well as for at least another half a century the company would not admit Maltese performers amongst its ranks.

Christmas Pantomime itself is an intrinsically British theatrical genre, created and transformed primarily after the 1843 Theatre Regulation Act from a poor alternative to legitimate spoken theatre into a new type of theatre that fused several traditions into a formulaic genre that is still recognizable today (Richards 2015, 2-3). Its popularity with audiences from very diverse social classes made it a national theatrical institution that could be used for propaganda (Davis 2010, 101-105) and also exported to the colonies, both to serve as entertainment to British citizens serving or otherwise making a living in the colonies (Tait 2001, 67-83) as well as to reinforce British cultural superiority amongst indigenous populations.

Major Campbell Todd’s contribution to pantomime in Malta was certainly an exercise in proving the superiority of the British people over the indigenous population, but it was also a cynical account of colonial relations on the island. The text Todd prepared followed all the structural and thematic features

associated with pantomime and with the story of Aladdin as it had already been established within the genre. It is set in China, but there are several references to Malta in the text, including giving Chinese police officers the names of Maltese towns. However, the main engagement with Malta and the Maltese comes in this extract in the very first scene and is spoken by the Evil Spirit, a character portrayed by Major Todd himself (Todd 1910, 3).

I've just arrived from a place named Valletta
Where some are good, but most might well be better.
The capital of a great land called Malta
When I've got time some things I shall alter:
It is a military and naval station
With an enormous civil population
Which fact, the "Chronicle" gives me good grounds
For saying, daily grows by leaps and bounds,
And makes the only hope of their salvation
Rest in the future on much emigration
Strictly between ourselves I would confide
I cannot blame them for Race Suicide (Todd 1910, 5).

The statement is a faithful interpretation of British policy at the time in Malta, which saw the islands as a fortress colony, or simply territory that had to serve military purposes. The indigenous population, beyond that which could profitably be used to service British military and naval interests, was considered not only as superfluous, but even as undesirable or dangerous. In 1911 the civilian population of Malta stood at just above 220,000 (populstat.info 2003) and had been on the increase at least since the beginning of British occupation, and this had led the government to seek ways of controlling the population, first through enforced birth control (Price 1954, 31-34), and when this failed, through encouraging emigration (Malta Virtual Emigration Museum 2013). "Race suicide," a term probably coined by Theodore Roosevelt in 1905, to describe an altogether different situation (Roosevelt 1905), but whose implication was that the birth rate is substantially less than the mortality rate, would not be something the Maltese

were contemplating, but possibly something that would have made governing Malta easier for the British. The use of this term would have been extremely offensive to the ordinary Maltese, who cherished their family above anything else and who took pride in having large families. Maltese people would have also found their mating habits compared to those of hares or rabbits (“in leaps and bounds”) (Todd, 1910, 5) equally offensive.

That overpopulation was a major preoccupation for the British rulers had been amply clear since the previous century. Badger, in his *Description of Malta and Gozo*, declares that

[...] it is calculated that the whole number of the inhabitants amounts to 120,000 not including Gozo, which is reckoned at 18,000 more. According to this statement, it appears, that upon a given space of ground where England contains 152 souls, Malta contains nearly eight times the number. [...]

In the report of the late Commissioners sent out to inquire into the grievances of the Maltese, they state the cause of the impoverished condition of the island to arise from “the improvidence of the people in multiplying their number beyond the demand for their labour.” Nothing can be more true than this fact; no sooner does a lad arrive at the state of puberty, than he begins to think of marriage before he has made any provision at all for maintaining a family (1838, 72-3).

Scientific Proof

The implication of both Badger’s text and Todd’s speech is that the locals have uncontrolled sexual passions, which makes them closer to the animal kingdom than to civilized humanity. Therefore, they have to be controlled by the rules of the superior species. During the nineteenth century a lot of pressure was made on the local population to change their marriage habits. A text contemporaneous to Campbell Todd’s pantomime, R.N. Bradley’s *Malta and the Mediterranean Race*, gives us a critical insight into the colonial rulers’ thinking. Bradley states that the Maltese, even the cultured classes, have very little interest in sport, and this *lacuna* is attributed to the fact that they had not been affected by the Aryan

civilization which had swept over Europe (Presumably, being successfully anglicised, people like Augustus Bartolo would have been excluded from this category). It was therefore the British garrison's duty to instil in the Maltese population this interest in sport, something which according to Bradley was not happening enough because the British servicemen in Malta made little contact with the locals (309). The importance given to sport is central to the difference Bradley sees between the British race and the Maltese race:

The playing-field is the training-ground for the *exercitus*; there one learns self-control, and that co-ordination of the faculties which is one of the developed psychological accomplishments. (310)

The Maltese are therefore lacking in self-control, and it is the duty of the colonisers to train them. However, this is no easy task, as ultimately the two belong to genetically different groups (9), and the Maltese are apparently destined to remain superstitious and untrusting, just like the Irish (290-1). The fertility rate of the Maltese is not referred to directly in Bradley's book (but see quote below), although the importance that the Maltese give to family life is, and to it is attributed the resistance to the colonial policy of mass emigration (296). However, it is a short step to connect the lack of self-control, superstition as well as lack of forward thinking, to the inability, in the eyes of the British, of the Maltese to control the size of their family. The superior British race, therefore, is entrusted with the difficult task of instilling in their colonial subjects some of the Aryan elements of civilization that had made them superior in the first place and had permitted them to conquer the inferior races. "The White Man's Burden", to use Kipling's phrase, was an arduous task indeed, as ultimately the Maltese, like other colonial subjects, were destined to remain in a subaltern position to their masters, and indeed would have to be grateful for these concessions:

For the sake of cleverly tricking his master to the extent of threepence I have known a Maltese servant incur the loss of a post which meant not only a living for himself and his numerous progeny, but practically a position of aristocrat among his class. For threepence which he did not

want he plunged himself and his family from comparative affluence into absolute ruin and despair (Bradley 1912, 294-5).

And the reason why the Maltese behaved in this manner and could therefore not improve their condition was, according to Bradley, the shape of their head, which was different to that of the English (295).

Campbell Todd and Robert Bradley were both in Malta in the second decade of the twentieth century, and were both writing before the onset of the First World War made Malta strategically more important than ever before and when suddenly the issue of overpopulation subsided, at least for the duration of the war. However, at the point in time when Todd wrote his pantomime and Bradley wrote his analysis of the Maltese race, Britain still considered the Maltese as an obstacle to the smooth running of her “fortress”. Todd claims that most of the local population is not “good” (Todd, 1910, 5). The grounds for this statement are never explained in the pantomime, but as by default, the good people in the text are the British, it is implied that the difference between these and the Maltese is what makes the latter less than desirable. This hypothesis is strengthened by the declaration of the narrator that, given a chance, he would change many things in Malta. Malta is therefore there to be moulded according to imperial requirements, and consequently so are its inhabitants.

Todd’s text is clearly considering the Maltese population as the other in a colonial situation. Quite clearly they are silent, or mute, inhabitants of a colony. Not only do they have no rights but they are even considered to be unable to speak up to demand them. As most of the local population could not speak English and the British themselves were not making any effort to learn the indigenous language, communication between the two communities was very limited. This linguistic divide, whereby the language of the colonised is taken to be a non-language has been amply theorised by Gayatri Spivak, particularly in the essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988) and in subsequent revisions. For Spivak, the

essential condition of the subaltern, or the colonised subject, is that he (or more appropriately she) is not represented. Within the colonial world-view, the world of the colonised subject is devalued to a point that it ceases to exist. The colonised culture becomes subject to the whims of the Empire, frequently portrayed as a relic of some superseded civilisation that has no place in the modern, efficient world brought about by Europeans. This is, for example, how Badger describes the Maltese musical heritage:

The Maltese are not very rich in native musical instruments; and in their choice seem to have preferred such as are more noisy with the inhabitants of Arabia, than such as are more soft with the Arabs of northern Africa. Even these, however, are getting into disuse, and their place is being supplied by companies of blind fiddlers who are found almost in every village, and whose performances, if exhibited within the hearing of a man acquainted with the science, would certainly put him into a position to serve as an exact counterpart of Hogarth's Enraged Musician. The tambarine, a species of bag pipe, the kettle-drum, a hollow tube about half a foot in diameter with a distended skin over one surface, and a round stick tied to the centre of it which is rubbed up and down with the hand, causing a most monotonous sound (Badger 1838, 82-3).

The collocation of Maltese music within the music of Arabia has to be understood in the context that Badger had previously declared the Maltese to be "of a brown complexion" and had features "which characterize many people in the equinoxial regions of Africa" (1838, 76). When Todd describes the costumes of Maltese women, he is likewise compelled to compare them to creatures from a mysterious and exotic civilisation (1910, 6-7). What intrigues the character in the pantomime is the apparent inaccessibility of the Maltese women, hidden as they are behind their heavy hoods but nonetheless subjected to the gaze of the Western man. Although the women referred to in the pantomime are not enclosed in a harem, the clothes they wear lead the male to take a position that is stereotypical of colonial males with regard to non-western women who are beyond their reach but not beyond their desire (Betts 1995, 539). It is clear that one of the most obvious effects of colonialism (possibly also because its peak coincided with the Victorian

age) was a shift in the status of women in colonial society. While this topic has not been adequately studied in the case of Malta, it is evident that women became increasingly domesticated by being subjected to laws that saw the male as the dominant member of any household as well as cultural shifts that coerced the Maltese, both male and female, to behave in ways which were closer to the colonisers' behaviour. A case in point would be the acceptance of new courtship rituals that gave the male a more dominant role.

Conclusion

Aladdin and his Wonderful Lamp is an example of the kind of Orientalist representation that Edward Said focused on in his *Orientalism*. As such it forms part of a wider body of works produced by English writers to describe a land, in this case Malta, which in become part of the British empire had to be defined anew. This process relied on the renaming of the land itself (Malta still has its St Andrews, Pembroke and Victoria), legislation, geographical and scientific analyses, but also on imaginative texts. The underlying philosophy is that the colonised subject cannot represent himself, and therefore needs the coloniser to represent him (Said 1994, 21). The apparently innocent action of writing a pantomime becomes an instrument of colonial control, as it contributes to defining what is acceptable within the colonial context. After Campbell Todd, pantomime continued to flourish in Malta, to the extent that after Independence, it became one of the main markers of an anglicised section of the population who took it upon themselves to continue performing amateur theatre in English. Representations of Malta similar to that discussed in this paper remain the mainstay of contemporary pantomime in Malta. The main difference is that the speaking subject is now the anglicised Maltese who describes the rest of the population as culturally deficient. It is indeed a measure of the success of colonial practice that the process of othering the colonial subject is kept alive by

descendants of the community that was itself subjected to this process during the colonial period. While in colonial times othering was based on perceived racial differences, in the absence of a foreign ruler nowadays it is perceived social differences (as understood through markers like language use, which part of the small island individuals inhabit, cultural idiosyncrasies and possibly political allegiances) which tend to maintain Maltese society's need to create others.

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