A Curious Maltese Variant of an Arabic Proverb

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A rich mine of information long exploited by Maltese scholars is the Maltese-Italian 4-volume dictionary compiled in the middle of the 18th century by Rev. Agius de Soldanis, as yet unpublished by available in MS in Malta's National Library.[1] Its full bi-lingual title, couched in the somewhat erratic Italianate spelling of the time and reflecting the now exploded theory that Maltese was a Punic language rather than an outgrowth of Arabic, reads:[2]

> *Damma tal Kliem Kartaginis / Mscerred fel Fom tal Maltin u / Ghaucin / Maghmula / mel Kanoniku Gianfrangesku Agius Ghauci / Sultana / Raccolta / delle Parole Cartaginesi / sparse nella Lingua de' Maltesi e Gozitani / Fatta / dal Canonico Gio. Francesco Agius de Soldanis / Gozitano.*

It is indeed a painstakingly assembled collection and is all the more valuable for embodying also a great many proverbs and idioms and much other incidental information.

On folio 314 v° of Volume I, we find the following three successive entries under the letter 'K':[3]

> *Kordien il p. dal n.s. Kordiena v. Kordiena*
> *In Prov. el Kordien f-scafar ghanein ommu iedher ghazziel . . . . . nella punta della palpebra di sua madre, sembra Filatore*
> *Kordiena n.s.f. . . . . .*

The word *Kordien* is thus described as the plural of *Kordiena*, although it is actually a collective noun from which the *nomen unitatis* is formed. The reader is then referred to this so-called singular, but no meaning is assigned to it. In between, *Kordien* is recorded as occurring in a proverb, where however it appears to be used as a singular, and once again the word is left untranslated.

The blanks are puzzling, for the word is a common one in modern Maltese and means

1 Regia Bibliotheca Melitensis No. 143.

2 In Maltese, then in Italian: "A Collection of Carthaginian words diffused in the tongue of the Maltese and Gozitans, compiled by Canon Gianfrangesku Agius—the Gozitan—Sultana." In the Italian, the name is given as Giovanni Francesco and the surname is Latinized as Agius de Soldanis.

3 "Kordien: plural of singular noun Kordiena—see Kordiena.
In proverb: el Kordien f-scafar ghanein ommu iedher ghazziel— . . . at the point of its mother's eyelid seems a spinner.
Kordiena: singular feminine noun . . ."

'a tike', or 'tick'. One can only surmise that de Soldanis' hesitancy was over the precise Italian equivalent to adopt.

The proverb may therefore be transcribed according to present Maltese orthography as: *Il-qurdien fi xfar ghajnejn ommu jidher ghażżiel.* Its literal translation is: "The tick on its mother's eyelids appears to be a spinner," de Soldanis' addition of "at the point of" being unjustified. The proverb is no longer in currency, and its exact application is therefore conjectural, but the implication seems clear that in certain circumstances a creature might appear to be better than it really is.

All the words in this proverb have readily identifiable Arabic originals. These may be transcribed as follows (without any attempt to relate them syntactically): *al-qurrād* (pl. *airdān*)—*fī*—*ashfār*—*ʿaynayn*—*ummuh*—*taẓhar*—*ghazzāl.*

This immediately brings to mind a proverb current in Egypt[4] and no doubt in many other Arab lands, the components of which may again be transcribed singly and in their classical forms as: *al-qird*—*fī*—*ʿayn*—*ummuh*—*ghazāl*, and which in Lower Egypt would be pronounced: *il-ʾird(i) fʿen ummuh ghazāl.* It means: "In its mother's eye, the monkey is a gazelle." Since, especially to Arabs, the monkey is a paragon of ugliness and the gazelle a paragon of beauty, the proverb provides a striking illustration of a partiality in judgment, or the blindness of love.

The formal similarity between the Maltese and the Arab proverb is too striking to be accidental. If the principle of *lectio difficilior* is to be applied here, one should infer that the Maltese version is closer than the Arabic one to some lost original. It is arguable, however, that in this instance a different reasoning process should be applied, or rather that the conclusion might be reversed if the principle was applied to single components rather than to the proverb in its entirety. The fact is that neither monkeys nor gazelles are familiar creatures on the Maltese scene, and indeed neither *qird* nor *ghazāl* is in use in the language today. May it not be that for these reasons the contrast between the ugliness of the one and the beauty of the other seemed less forceful in Malta, the sense of the proverb less obvious, and that in the course of time the unfamiliar words were replaced by others that bore some phonetic resemblance to the originals, and made some sense? The surmise is strengthened by the use of the preposition *fi*, literally 'in', which is more appropriate to the Arabic proverb (where the reference is to vision) than to the position of the tick *on* an eyelid.

In some areas of language—in toponyms, for example—it is not unusual for words to outlive their functional associations, and then to be given conjectural and fanciful significations even at the cost of some distortion in pronunciation. This happens in Scotland with place-names of Gaelic derivation—an example is the unlikely story that Tillicoultry owes it name to an incident in which a cowherd, on reaching a stream in spate, warned his son not to attempt a crossing "till a coo try." Idiomatic expressions also consist of metaphors not only dead but forgotten: in English, many people speak of "being on tenterhooks" without ever troubling to find out what tenterhooks are, and I have even heard some distort the word to "tender hooks." A comparable process appears to have been at work in the proverb that concerns us here, although there can be few parallels to the extensiveness and complexity of the transformation.

4 Aḥmad Taymūr, *al-Amthāl al-ʿāmmiyya* (Cairo, 1949), Item 1742, p. 300.