ON THE MEANING OF GUERI
IN PETRUS CAXARO'S CANTILENA

ARNOLD CASSOLA

In his foreword to M. Fsadni and G. Wettinger's Peter Caxaro's Cantilena, G. Aquilina states that "the authors had to contend not only with difficulties of an arbitrary spelling in a hand very difficult to read, but also with the unravelling of the obscure meaning of several obsolete words which they have explained tentatively through Arabic". (1) Undoubtedly, the authors' approach to this hitherto unknown text was the right one since the lexicon of the Cantilena is predominantly of semitic origin.

Fsadni and Wettinger point out that the only non-semitic word in the poem is vintura. (2) Maltese scholars seem to agree on this point. (3) It is my intention to refute this assertion and to suggest that gueri in line 2 is actually a romance acquisition, i.e. a word of Germanic origin (*WAIGARO) which, filtered through the French GUERE, becomes GUARI (GUERI) in the Italian language of the XIII century. (4)

There have been two interpretations of gueri in the Cantilena. The first one by Fsadni and Wettinger who, both in their original English study and in their 1983 Maltese edition, give it the meaning of "in the past", "fl-imghodi", on the assumption that gueri is opposed to homorcom ("your lifetime"). They refer the reader to the arabic transitive verb wara ("to bury"), without hiding the fact that the meaning is not clear and that the reference is only a tentative one. (5) The authors rightly limit themselves to what the word suggests rather than to what it expresses. (6) The second interpretation of gueri is provided by D. Fenech in his essay on Caxaro. According to Fenech, gueri has got the same roots as qreni in line 1 (i.e. g-w-r) and is, therefore,

5. G. Wettinger, M. Fsadni, Peter Caxaro’s Cantilena, cit., p.42.
closely related to it: girenzi means “neighbour”, gueri “neighbourhood”. (7) Fsadni and Wettinger refute this suggestion on the basis that it goes against the orthographical rules of the 15th-16th century — ġwieri, in modern Maltese, would have been written jueri or iueri or gueri in Caxaro’s times. (8) I agree with Wettinger and Fsdni’s objection to Fenech’s interpretation. However, it is important to note that even Fenech considers gueri to be of semitic origin.

The word guari appears several times and in different orthographical forms (quàri, guàre, guàri, guàro, guàre) in Italian literature. The morphological function of the word varies from text to text. Salvatore Battaglia lists various uses of guari. (9) There can be little doubt that, in the phrase “mensab fil gueri”, gueri is structurally a noun. So much so that both the discoverers of the manuscript and K. Vassallo and D. Fenech have rendered it, respectively, with wari (“the past”), l-imghoddi (“the past”), hàra (“neighbourhood”). However one must equally consider the possibility of gueri serving another morphological function.

In the two instances prior to Caxaro’s lifetime that Battaglia has recorded guari as a noun, that is in Boccaccio’s Decameron (IV,7) and in the XIV century Storia dei Santi Barlaam e Gòsoapatte, it means “a great quantity” or “a certain quantity” and it is always followed by the preposition di (“of”). It is clear from the context of the Cantilenà that gueri does not have this meaning.

Guari has also been recorded as an adjective, in the sense of “much”, “many”. (10) The Maltese gueri, however, has nothing to do with this use of guari; it does not mean “much”, “many”, nor has it got an adjectival function.

The most common function of guari, and perhaps the most relevant in our case, is that of an adverb. Battaglia points out two different uses of the adverb guari. In the first instance guari means “for a long time”, “further on’ and can be traced in, amongst others, Brunetto Latini, Dante, Luca Pulci. In the second case guari stands for “molto, assai, alquanto, del tutto, affatto” and is to be found only in negative phrases combined with adverbs of place.

7. D. Fenech, Wirt il-Miżna, cit., p.15.
or quantity. This is exactly the case of gueri in the Cantilena: it is a negative phrase ("Mensab fil gueri uele nsab fo homorcom") combined with an "expression" of quantity (homorcom denotes a certain quantity of time — a life span). One could object that fil gueri is a noun and not an adverb. However, fil could easily be done away with, without damaging the meaning of the whole line. "Mensab fil gueri uele nsab fo homorcom' would read "Mensab gueri uele nsab fo homorcom" And the meaning of gueri would be "affatto", "del tutto", i.e. "Ma nsab qatt u la nsab f'homorcom" ("Such as was never found neither in your lifetime"). Gueri would stand for "qatt", "never", thus fulfilling an adverbial function.

The importance of fil becomes apparent when one analyses the line from a metrical point of view. As B. Mall'a has clearly shown, the second line of the Cantilena is divided in two parallel hemistichs. (11) The non appearance of fil before gueri would have weakened the internal parallelism enormously. By opting for fil gueri Caxaro also shows the reader that he is well versed in the rhetorical techniques of his times.

A final question to be answered is: "If gueri is a romance acquisition, how is it that Caxaro preferred the obsolete graphic form with an -e to the more common gueri?" The answer to this question should further strengthen the hypothesis that the author of the first document written in Maltese was really a well read "philosophi poetæ et oratoris" who knew a great deal about what had been written in nearby Sicily. In fact gueri (with an -e) is to be found only in the poems of the Scuola Siciliana and, more precisely, in Cielo d'Alcamao's famous Contrasto, (VII, 40). As G. Contini points out, gueri is derived directly from the French guère. (12)

Gueri, together with vintura, represents what Wettlinger describes as "the tip of a mountain of romance words in the Maltese language". (13)