DEFAMATORY NICKNAMES AND INSULT IN LATE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY MALTA: 1771-1798

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Language reflects and shapes the society in which it is spoken, being an active force used by individuals for self-defence or for aggression, defamation and insult, and hence to change society or to prevent others from changing it. Defamation dealt not only with slander proper, but also with words spoken in a spirit of malice. Defamation is the act of damaging the reputation of another by means of false and malicious communications that expose that person to contempt, ridicule, hatred, or social ostracism. Also, defamatory libels were a means of reinforcing the impression that they expressed the judgement of the whole community. Verbal insults and defamatory nicknames were part of the everyday life, and were very important to confirm society’s basic values.

Defamatory Nicknames
As David Gilmore remarks 'the nickname is the heaviest stone thrown on the individual'. Although many historians and social anthropologists tend to disagree, or at least 'partly agree' with such a statement, yet according to the majority of nicknames recorded in the Inquisitorial trials of late eighteenth century Malta, it seems that a nickname was equivalent to an open insult, which could cause violent emotional confrontations. Moreover, in the Mediterranean area, anthropologists say that in this region scandalous names are widespread. Mediterranean nicknaming was a sort of mechanism of community social control, the practice being identical to gossip. People gossip because it gives them a hostile pleasure. So do nicknames. While women are more often targets for malicious gossip, men are more often subject to the abuse of nicknaming.

Therefore, nicknames, although serving as a convenient linguistic identifiers, are also in quarrelsome communities like Malta, a form of verbal aggression, an expression of competitive envy, especially among men, deriving from sexual, economic and status conflicts among individuals and families where personal autonomy, honour, and reputation are paramount concerns. Nicknames should be seen as efforts to damage and diminish others, and as attempts to gain dominance over others by attacking their sense of self-identity, their family honour, and their masculine self-esteem. Nonetheless, elsewhere in Europe, to call people by nicknames was regarded as more offensive than in Maltese society.

Generally, nicknames are of two general types: family names, which are inherited; and personal names, which originate during the lifetime of a person and they may be passed on to descendants, becoming in turn a family nickname. In Malta, the distinction between the two types is found in *il- and tal*-. The former presenting the holder of a nickname, like Giosepp Summut known as *il-Birba* (the Rogue) from Naxxar; while the latter concerned with the nickname’s descendants or spouse, like the virgin Grazziella alias *ta Lazza*, who was the daughter of Lazzaro. It is true that nicknames were a popular and unofficial form of personal and family nomenclature, however, although nicknames are inherited, they do so without any fixed rules of lineality. People sharing a nickname have no sense of unity, as nicknames may actually divide the household. Some took the father’s name, some the mother’s, and others their own personal epithets. Michele Agius for instance took both the family’s nickname *ta Immar* (the donkey or the stupid), and his own personal epithet *il-Chibir* (the huge one). Nicknames may also skip a generation; therefore one looks in vain for underlying rules or systematisation.

The personal epithets get picked up usually in a man’s adolescence or youth. The belief is that everyone bearing a nickname is the object of laughter, because the expressions sound disrespectful, although they may mean nothing literally. The name is accessible to everyone as a speech act, and it has to be vigorously defended just as the body and reputation are defended. Thus the nickname has powerful implications for social censure and for social control in small communities. Name distortions and censorious nicknaming can symbolise more than simple rejection by the community. The injurious names can also represent powerfully felt threats to the very integrity of the person. Also imposing the hated name threatens a loss of control for man because it interferes with his freedom.

Defamatory nicknames were present through physical nicknames, which were rather offensive as these were taken from some aspect of the personality, whether physical or external. These were subdivided into various categories like complexion, height and stature, corpulence and obesity, disease, and other physical defects. In the period under study citation of physical nicknames are the ensuing: *Nigra* (of black complexion), *L’Orbo* (the blind or bereaved one), *ta Nanhna* (having a nasal voice), *Hain Serca* (evil eye), *Dabra* (ulcer), *Taritaglio* (stammerer, or one who suffers from a defect of speech), *Quattrocchi* (dim person), *ta l’Ammar* (flushed, feverish or ruddy face), *il Vecchio* (known as the old although to whom it was given was just twenty-eight years of age), *Il Zoppo* (the lame), *ta hass il-bard* (always shivering with cold), *ta Busach* (a pot-bellied person), *Bomba* (explosive person), *Icciechina* (the little one), *Bruno* (of dark complexion or gloomy), *Ta Tombu* (mound person), *tal-Piesipes* (whispering person), *ta Harac Nanna* (the one who burned the grandmother), *ta Fattar* (stout person of awkward figure), *L’Izfar* (of yellow complexion or pale), *ittusc* (deaf person), *ta Marsusa* (the compressed one), *Censo Jonfah* (he puffs when

20. Ibid., vol. 131A, case 87, ff. 213-222
23. Ibid., case 69, ff. 303-304; *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 1, Malta 1987, 190.
24. Ibid., case 78, ff. 345-357.
25. Ibid., case 80, ff. 366-373.
27. Ibid., case 191, ff. 919-32.
32. Ibid., case 37, ff. 249-256.
33. Ibid., case 79A, ff. 234-235.
35. Ibid., vol. 135B, case 251, ff. 443-452; *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 2, 1053.
36. Ibid., case 262, ff. 500-5.
38. Ibid., case 293, ff. 694-700.
40. Ibid., case 41, ff. 292-301.
he walks, being crippled from both legs),
a'Beruda (one abounded with fleas),
a'Muncar (has a long nose),
Sneina (a small tooth),
a'Farrias (bald),
a'Samna (of dark complexion),
a'Secat (the flat one),
Issichen (an emancipated person),
il-Haddieha (she has paralyses of movement),
il-Bombila (a fat, round-bellied person),
il-Lisuet (of black complexion, or dark-skinned),
Bezzun Sciaiham (a very fat person),
zizi (one who chirps),
Brutto (the ugly).

Moral qualities with defects was another section representing defamatory nicknames in Malta, being also subdivided into the following categories: holiness and religion, moral behaviour and evil deeds, cruelty and quarrelsome disposition, timidity and quiet disposition, pride and garrulity, rashness and foolishness, and verbal and other idiocricies. Instances of these types are the following: a'Mishab (the outstripped),
a'Hafs (silly, mentally defective),
susa (messy person when eating or using food material),
a'Rasa (stubborn),
a'Mihru (one kept in custody),
Manetta (the handicapped),
tal-Hobla (pregnant),
tal-Bessana (a dupe),
tal-Inning (the hanged),
Mogli Bliima (ignorant),
ta'Colerita (angry, enraged),
ta'Sceca (troublesome),
ta'Buda (scoundrel, a person with no character),
Mignuna (crazy, mad),
Manena (feeble-minded),
a'Hacchega (the obsequious),
a'Mezzano (broker),
a'Scuafi (prowling person),
a'Bicci (crude, ruthless),
a'Brone (hard-hearted),
a'Cozo (a butting person),
a'Paccio (silly, incompetent person),
a'Supperf (proud, arrogant),
a'Buras (bird-headed),
a'Zebbejah (impostor, cheat),
a'Isban (outlaw),
a'Hali (spendthrift person),
a'Hars (the looter),
a'Gerri (one who wanders outside),
a'Bosacca (hypocrite),
a'Misriva (stolen),
a'Roninella (one who believes everything),
a'Mishut (the cursed),
Idueellas (litigious person),
a'Fitta (importunate person),
a'Harbat (destroyer),
sersa (chatterer),
a'Bitza (plunderer),
Badada (slow-witted, silly),
Paliuzzo (clown),
a'Muctula (the murdered),
a'Har rasca (the harsh),
a'Dittura (to behave arrogantly),
a'Sarsar (one who deludes with false hopes).
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with the phrase 'you were baptized with the urine of asses' also insulted badly Giuseppe Sammut. The basic message in insults is simple: male victims are described as cuckold and female victims as whores. Fra De Pier said that St. Joseph was a cuckold. Giuseppe Calleja insulted Grazia Deguar, a married woman from Zebbug, by telling her that she was a whore. This indicates how much the role of women was important, where loyalty to her husband and children was vital for the survival of all the family's honour.

The epithets used, in insults, concentrate on two main themes. The first was sexual – used almost entirely against the sacred or women, and here playing primarily on the themes of sexual indiscrimination, prostitution and venerable disease. Such insults seem to have been used equally by men and women. The Knight Fra Alfonso Benvenuti, First Lieutenant of the galley San Luigi, said in front of various people:

The excommunication given by either the Pope or the Bishop serves for nothing, and I estimate them in my buttocks... One day I went to Heaven, but I could not fuck God because he ran away, and so instead I fucked the Holy Mother, Heaven and all the Saints... What a fucken moan, I cannot walk during the night without being recognised because of it.

The second theme, used against both sexes, but more often against men, was that of various kinds of dishonesty and criminal activity, most commonly theft. Closely related were accusations of practising a dishonourable profession - such as pimp, and open accusations of criminal convictions. Christina Seitchel said that Adriano Lorenzoni was a well-known rascal in Valletta.; Giovanni Fenech, from Valletta, declared in front of Inquisitor Zondaradi that Fra Don Pasquale Gelsomino, a Conventual Chaplain of the Order, was imprisoned in Fort St. Elmo for certain crimes, which he had previously committed. Saverio Abela, a shoemaker, 'was publicly retained as a thief.'

Insults therefore emphasise fraud and bad faith but never lack of skill. Fortunato Tabone explained that Andrea Curmi was 'an ill-reputed man who easily blasphemed and sweared.' Even the Roman Catholic Church issued defamatory libels. When individuals' behaviour was so much offensive towards the Roman Catholic faith, Parish priests published their names prae foribus ecclesiastico.

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107. Ibid., case 71, ff. 422-437.
109. Ibid.
111. Ibid., case 31, ff. 377-8.
115. G. Hughes, Swearing, 7.
117. P. Burke, The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy, 104.
118. AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 166, last case numbered, no folios.
121. Ibid., vol. 140, p. 282, ff. 44-5.
123. Ibid., vol. 139, p. 232, ff. 34-41.
that is in front of the Parish Church as contumacious people. There is mention of
dr three contumacious individuals in the period under study: Lorenzo Borg; Antonio,
alias tu' Haccium; and Rosa Mallia. These were all declared as such in front of the
Church of the Collegiata in Birikkarata, because the Parish priest, Don Pietro Paolo
Micallef, found them guilty of heresy, blasphemy, devil invocation and maleficium.126

Sexual lies against men and women, allegations of begetting illegitimate
children and fornication were common in eighteenth century Paris,127 as well as in
Malta. Rosa Zahra defamed Giovanni Maria, alias tal-Caporal, by telling Inquisitor
Carpega that this man ‘frequently a married woman named Rosalia causing a
great scandal throughout all the neighbourhood of Gudja’.128 One unknown male
grocer even declared to a female client of his that he knew a man ‘whose
virile limb was bigger than that of an ass’.129

Drunkenness seems to have been socially acceptable, not sufficiently open to
censure to be used to blacken someone’s character. It could indeed, be used as
an excuse for unacceptable behaviour.130 Gregorio Mallia, a carpenter said that
the boatman Ignazio Grech had the habit of getting drunk.131 Maria Trichici
confessed that Libera Caruana was ‘usually always drunk with wine and had a
sacred tongue’.132

The values reflected in insults were essentially those necessary for survival in
the particular social and economic context in which people found themselves. More
often than not, insults were also directed towards the saints, usually protectors of
one’s enemies. The Surgeon Saverio Scicluna had a row with a fisherman, alias
Zanuett and he became so agitated that he insulted his saint by shouting: ‘your
Saint is full of shit, and I will break him’.133 Because Giovanni Battista Busuttil’s
dog used to bite people, Salvatore showed disrespect by telling him: ‘a horn in face
to your Saint for nourishing you’.134

Verbal insults, therefore, were only part of an arsenal of devices available for
attacking an enemy.135 Their efficacy largely depended on the existence of a local,
neighbourhood community. Honour was important because it gave people a place
within that community. The content of insults was also culturally determined. In
their most common use they were tools for use against an opponent, a symbolic

132. Ibid., vol. 139, case 243, ff. 107-114.
134. ‘Corro in faccia del santo che v’ha marito’: Ibid., case 61, ff. 267-8.

rejection, a means of forcing him or her to give way by public shaming. This reaction
was especially common among frustrated men. One convict named Marcello
Pignataro admitted that after the Maltesan Tribunal condemned him for twenty
years imprisonment in the Maltese islands, he repeatedly reacted against the Holy
Virgin, insulting her as being a ‘whore’.136


The Maltese seem to have shared the same notions of honour and symbolism
in defamatory nicknames and insults that were current in other Mediterranean
regions, especially the Spanish and Italian regions. However, it is only throughout
the few written examples of nicknames and insults that this study attempts to try
and understand male and female modes of behaviour in late eighteenth century
Malta. Unfortunately, as Peter Burke rightly claims, much of popular culture went
unrecorded in writing, not only because most ordinary people were illiterate, ‘but
due to the literate were uninterested in popular culture… or unable to transcribe
an oral culture dialect into a written variety of the language’.137 Nonetheless, insults and
defamatory nicknames surely reflected late eighteenth century Maltese society,
which seemed to be oriented more towards a social form of aggression than towards
a more ‘male’ form of physical aggression.