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The Inquisition in Malta as depicted in Maltese popular nineteenth to early twentieth century fiction

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Introductory background

The tribunal of the Roman Inquisition was set up in Malta in 1561, primarily as a reaction to the spread of Protestant and particularly Lutheran teachings, both among members of the Hospitaller Order of St John as well as among the Maltese cultured elite.

During that early phase of its existence the tribunal was headed by the Bishop of Malta, the Spanish Dominican Friar Domenico Cubelles (1540–66). It was during that initial period of the tribunal's functioning in Malta that a still unclear number of trials, a few of which resulting in real or simulated executions, took place. In 1565 the activity of the tribunal was interrupted by the Great Siege of Malta and, following the end of the Siege and Cubelles's death in 1566 the tribunal resumed its functions. In 1574, due to serious conflicts between the Grand Master and Bishop Royas, Pope Gregory XIII appointed Pietro Dusina as visitor of the Maltese diocese, inquisitor and apostolic delegate. From that point onwards the Roman Inquisition in Malta started to be headed by an individual directly appointed by Rome and having his own palace, court and officials. A powerful third authority had thus been established in Malta, lasting until April 1798 when it was suppressed, as a result of the abolition of the Roman Inquisition following the French Republican takeover of Rome.

The duality of functions of those appointed by Rome, namely as both inquisitors and apostolic delegates remained the standard practice throughout the presence and activity of the tribunal on the island for over 220 years. Such a double role was reflected in the structure of the authority: in his role as inquisitor, the appointee kept regular correspondence with the Congregation of the Holy Office, while as apostolic delegate, equally regular correspondence was required with the papal secretariat of state. Thus by 1575 the inquisitor in Malta assumed both a religious and a political role, with the latter gradually assuming even greater importance by the first decades of the 18th century.

While both functions played a significant part in the formation of the political and the broad religious and cultural realities of Malta during the period, after 1798 the Maltese Inquisitorial setup remained ingrained within Maltese national memory almost exclusively in its strictly religious function. More than that, after 1800, a transformative process was put in motion through which such a role came to be remembered, depicted and disseminated as an

institution of terror. The Maltese case represents an interesting example of where, what essentially was a Catholic theocracy for over two centuries, found itself rather abruptly administered by two successive and radically-different political administrations: a rabidly revolutionary and anticlerical one and a more permanent, albeit subtle Protestant one. In both cases, anti-Catholic sentiments in general and a derision towards the inquisition in particular abounded.

Erasure of the Maltese Inquisition's political role from public memory

In contrast with the experience in some other areas, notably in the Kingdom of Naples, there is no evidence to indicate that the suppression of the Maltese Inquisitorial tribunal in 1798 was met with any particular enthusiasm on a popular or even on a political level. By far the most frequent exercise of public barbaric retribution was meted out by the State and not by the Inquisition and this was most obvious to contemporaries. While cases brought in front of the tribunal abounded and remained so to the very end, the Maltese population was essentially staunchly Catholic. Evidence of anti-clericalism and of anti-Roman sentiment was conspicuous by its absence, as the rarity of anti-Catholic or atheistic cases dealt with by the Maltese tribunal confirm. When existing, such sentiments were often to be found within the ranks of the Hospitaller Order itself, rather than among the locals. From the political standpoint, the French Republican successes on mainland Europe and their invasion and take-over of Rome constituted a far greater concern to the Hospitallers than any relief that could have been felt by the suppression of the Order's old adversary on the island.

Following the expulsion of the French Republican administration from Malta by popular revolt and the establishment of British rule from September 1800, what may perhaps be described as the brief but traumatic anti-Catholic experience of the islanders was substituted by more subtle tactics through which a Protestant government and its followers sought to reduce the political and to some extent the social power of the Church. As early as February 1801 the bishop of Malta was informed by the British authorities on the island that neither the Roman Inquisition, nor any other form of foreign religious authority was to be re-introduced or in any way acknowledged by the British government. Thanks to their French adversaries the British had thus managed to rid themselves of the permanent presence of a papal delegate on the island, a reality that had bedevilled the Order's government for over two centuries. Not that the Maltese diocese itself had any particular motivation for supporting the re-establishment of the tribunal on the island. After 1800 the local British authorities either dealt with the local generally amenable bishop or, when this proved problematic, directly with Rome. Such developments rather rapidly dismissed the memory of the Holy Office's political role in Malta. The situation was to contrast sharply with that pertaining to the memory of the tribunal's religious role.

The Maltese Inquisition in popular memory: protector of the Faith or an institution of terror?

A Protestant government and in particular the steadily increasing presence of Protestant individuals, the latter varying from naval and military personnel to affluent businessmen and from visitors to the island in the Grand Tour tradition to fiery Protestant pastors. These often

vociferously expressed their reactions towards the Maltese Catholic environment which they generally found shocking. The memory of the Maltese inquisition was not spared in that onslaught. In one of the most popular travelogues authored by a British resident on the island and published in 1836, but followed by various re-editions, no less than four pages were dedicated to the evils claimed to have been perpetuated by the inquisition in Malta. The author even reported that ten years previous a torture rack had been discovered in the subterranean chambers of the palace, the seat of what the author described as a 'diabolical tribunal'. Thus, while on the strictly official level the administration usually treaded with the utmost care on local Catholic traditions and practices, private individuals were an altogether different matter. By the early 1800s no less than three Protestant missionary societies had been allowed to function from Malta and the local Church's alarm grew to the extent that some Church quarters asked for the island to start being considered as missionary land, to fall under the jurisdiction of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith. Protestant anti-Catholic sentiment remained a reality and one that was stoked up during the occasional disputes between Church and the British colonial administration. As late as 1949 the British Lieutenant-Governor of Malta referred to the 'torture-chambers with their snake-pit and the execution yard' within the inquisitorial abode.

Such anti-inquisitorial sentiments constituted the initial but also a sustained depiction of the Maltese tribunal as an obscurant, medieval and cruel institution which was incompatible with either British liberal traditions or with those increasingly held and expressed by the Italian exponents of the Risorgimento. While often in the former case such a depiction of the inquisition was part of a larger strategy aimed to denigrate the Catholic Church, in the latter instance – at least where the more moderate elements were concerned – the inquisition and its suppression at least from Malta was interpreted more as a proof that the Catholic Church sometimes required reform and that it was amenable to it.

The rise of Maltese popular literature

Within such a background, the influx of Italian liberals in Malta during the first half of the nineteenth century provided the major motivation for the rise of Maltese fiction during the last decades of that century and the beginning of the following one. Being close to the Italian mainland and still having an essentially Italian culture even after decades of British rule, Malta provided an ideal place of refuge and which could be used as a publishing hub, thus exploiting the recently-granted press freedom to the island. Moderate Italian liberals like Tommaso Zauli Sajani (1802–72) and his wife Ifigenia (1810–83), but also radical exponents including Giuseppe Nicola Corvaia (1785–1860) and, to an even greater extent, the former priest Luigi de Sanctis (1808–69) all published newspapers and at times fiction which varied in its doses of denigration towards Rome. An Italianate Maltese middle class generally lacking such literature constituted a welcome audience and such works assumed considerable popularity with the local literate elite. The translation into Maltese of liberal Italian fiction with a Maltese background and printed in Malta was soon to follow and, in most cases, made up the earliest typology of fiction in the local language. Examples of this included the translation of *Giammaria*, originally authored in Italian by M.A. Bottari, among other.

By the last decades of the century gradually-increasing literacy rates at least in basic Maltese created a thriving market for published matter in that language, even if Maltese remained considered as a dialect used by the uneducated. The lack of a standard orthography for the language, the exclusion from all official State and Church communications and its consideration as a corrupt Arabic dialect, rather than a language in its own right, all militated against the publication of Maltese fiction aimed towards the Maltese middle class.

Two main formats for the publishing and dissemination of Maltese popular fiction emerged and remained the standard ones down to the mid-twentieth century. These consisted of the lengthier novels, often consisting of a long-winded plot, at times over a thousand pages long. Such works were published on a subscription basis, with each of the eight-page part bought by its subscribers weekly. Printed in large type they were often sparsely and crudely illustrated, adding to their mass-appeal. Hundreds of titles were published, with the more popular ones being re-printed several times over. It proved a thriving business, with the more renowned authors being also involved in the printing and publishing trades. A dominating exponent in the field was Arturo Caruana (1876–1919). Novelist, translator, poet but also an established printer and publisher in his own right, Caruana was a major contributor towards the dissemination of cheap novels in Maltese, generally claiming to be based on historical facts and which reached thousands of subscribers. He was, among other, the author of an almost 800-page illustrated pseudo-history of the Malta's rulers from antiquity to Edward VII. His scores of pseudo-historical publications, whether authored by himself, translated or simply published by him constituted what was possibly the major source of the island's history for generations of the Maltese semi-literate majority, either directly through reading or indirectly through subsequent oral dissemination of the printed content. His achievement was followed by others, notably Emilio Lombardi (1881–1956) who remained active well into the 20th century. Both formats often comprised illustrations, including those featuring grim inquisitorial cells and punishments.

The second category of Maltese popular fiction consisted of brief and small-format accounts, usually in rhyme but also in prose. Typically consisting of 16 page-chapbooks such material mostly recounted some episode of heinous crime committed on the island or beyond its shores. Gory descriptions of murders and of the evil motivations that led to them abounded in such cheaply-produced and widely-disseminated material. Historical narratives published in this genre mostly consisted of the heroic exploits by Maltese real or construed heroes, such as Toni Bajada and Cejlu Tonna from the Great Siege of 1565 and the priest Gaetano Mannarino who had led the half-hearted revolt against the Order's government in September 1775. Such accounts however occasionally also included ones referring to the inquisition in Malta, as was Gaetano Gauci's, one, discussed below. Extensive 'historical' narratives thus flourished side by side with the more modest chapbooks, both providing otherwise scarce reading matter in Maltese to a population increasingly willing to indulge know more about its past in its own language. As is generally the case, this resulted in the creation of myth which, in the absence of a competing truthful version, becomes ingrained and accepted as the truth in collective national memory for generations following its creation. Thus has certainly proved to be the case where the activity of the Roman Inquisition in Malta was concerned.

Typology of Inquisitorial novels: specific historical episodes

A number of works in Maltese published in both formats discussed above recounted particular events in the Maltese tribunal's history, mostly those concerning its early anti-Protestant activity, focusing upon executions through public burnings. Sources for the writing of such accounts varied from Salleles's seventeenth-century account to the first popular history of Malta published in Maltese. Real or alleged burnings at the stake performed during the 1560s provided ideal scenarios for the weaving of a grisly story, so appealing to the late Victorian Maltese audience. Such novels wove an intricate fictional story, loosely based upon episodes taken from the standard histories of the tribunal, often Sebastiano Salelles' history or its subsequent derivatives. They were generally authored by individuals of a higher educational background than novels which were not centered round any particular historical incident. Examples of such literature, each from the two different genres of subscription novel and chapbook, illustrate the general characteristics of these works.

Gaetano Gauci's chapbook, appealingly entitled *L'Iccundannat ghal Hruk fi zmien l'Inquisizioni f'Malta: Raccont storicu* (*The Condemned for Burning during the time of the Inquisition in Malta: A Historical Account*) constituted a brief but a very emotionally powerful account of the alleged burning at the stake of the Frenchman Gesualdo in 1546. The author, a lawyer by profession, had originally written his account in Italian but had granted permission for it to be translated into Maltese. Gauci was one of those rare Maltese who expressed liberal and often anti-clerical opinions during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He authored the earliest study on the French Republican period in Malta in which the French administration was praised and the Maltese popular insurrection described as being the result of their ignorance abetted by the machinations of the priesthood.

Gauci's account showers heavy criticism towards the workings of the inquisitorial tribunal on the island, while it also cast doubts about the veracity of Salelles' accusations against Gesualdo. The Inquisition's introduction to Malta was itself a tragic consequence of the scandalous political and religious situation prevailing on the island, where, among other, the priesthood itself was corrupt to the core. An absolutist government and a backward population had allowed the introduction of the tribunal to Malta, unlike the Neapolitans who, in 1547, rose up to prevent a similar introduction to their city. Gauci here ignored the essential difference between the Roman Inquisition and its Spanish counterpart which was to be introduced in Naples.

Gauci rather skillfully depicts Gesualdo's sufferings and eventual cruel execution in terms reminiscent of Christ's own Passion. The account targets particularly Malta's first Inquisitor, Cubelles, who Gauci describes as a rapacious, cruel and haughty ecclesiastic, a sort of 16th century Jewish high priest who plotted to ensnare his hapless and innocent victim. It was him who, through the use of false witnesses, ensured the condemnation of Gesualdo to be burned alive at the stake. No reference is made to Grand Master d'Homedes' involvement in the case since, among other, Gesualdo was a conventual chaplain of the Order. The author then created a narrative based on a powerful fictional debate taking place between what he terms the 'clericals' and the 'liberals', namely the adherents of the priesthood who wanted Gesualdo burnt and those who supported the people in defence of Gesualdo. Again, this is reminiscent of the rival crowds who shouted for and against Christ's condemnation. When one friar, the Pontius Pilate of the story, took up the cudgels in favour of Gesualdo, referring to Christ's

teaching of forgiveness, many of the clericals were incensed and physically attacked the friar and the other liberals. After having his sentence confirmed by a priest in the inquisitor's service, Gesualdo was started on his long, painful and humiliating public procession to his place of execution, being beaten, insulted and humiliated along the way, again reminiscent of Christ's Way to the Cross. The haughty Cubelles in full regalia and surrounded by his priestly retinue again pronounced the cruel sentence on his victim, with hideous cries of Burn him! Burn him! coming from the ignorant rabble. All of a sudden Gesualdo's disheveled wife, the Veronica in the story, faced the crowd, pleading for her husband's life and ending in deranged laughter as the poor woman went mad with grief. Gesualdo was executed at three in the afternoon, again mirroring Christ's own death at that precise hour.

A lengthier novel, described as one of the best-written in Maltese for the period and published in two volumes was based on the story of another early victim of the Maltese Inquisition, namely Matteo Falson. Falson had been found guilty of heresy, declared a relapsed heretic and burnt in effigy in 1574 since he had escaped from Malta. His extensive landed property was confiscated and divided between the State and the Inquisition and remained an important source of income for the tribunal down to 1798. The author, Agostino Levanzin (1872–1955) was an eclectic character and both a novelist and journalist. His novel was originally featured in a popular Maltese-language newspaper, published by himself. The Falson family, a well-established Maltese one, was depicted as the victim of intrigue by an unscrupulous and immoral knight. The account is replete with well-known historical characters, events and dates which gave further credence to the veracity of the story. Footnote references to such established histories, as those by Vassallo and Vertot are often provided. The long-winded novel reached its climax when Falson ended up locked in the inquisitorial dungeons and about to suffer the torture of the 'well of knives'. The description of the sufferings of those who fell under inquisitorial scrutiny and the existence within the inquisitorial palace of a well studded with knives, were powerful enough to imprint themselves upon the collective Maltese memory pretty much to this day: Chapter 46 of the novel was actually entitled 'The Well of Knives' and opens with the following grim description of inquisitorial cruelty:

The construction of the Inquisitor's palace started in 1574, with the help of Grand Master La Cassière. Underground dungeons were dug where the accused, irrespective of whether they were guilty or innocent, were incarcerated. There they were left to slowly starve. There was also the well of knives. This consisted of a deep shaft with sword blades embedded on its sides in such a way that anyone who was thrown in it would end up sliced to bits before he reached the bottom of the pit. Those who entered the Inquisitor's prison were likely to end up dead as they were tied by the neck to the metal bars of tiny windows from which hardly any light or air entered the cell. Since the names of those who accused others in front of the inquisitorial tribunal were never disclosed, many innocent victims ended being denounced to the inquisition by someone who hated them or wanted to see them deprived of their worldly goods.

Typology of Inquisitorial novels: generic historical fiction

In greater demand was a more generic form of fiction which featured a far lesser dose of historically-correct content, albeit such narratives still claimed to be 'historical novels' on promotional material as well as on their title page. A significant difference between such generic fiction and that tied to specific historical characters was that the former hardly ever attacked the inquisition as an institution, or indeed specific inquisitors, but targeted totally fictional characters, often employed by the tribunal as guards or executioners. Alternatively, it is wicked individuals who use the inquisitorial tribunal to ensnare innocent victims, as in the case of an episode from Arturo Caruana's *Marta, jew Bint id-Deffien tal-Pesta* ('Marta, or the Daughter of the Plague Gravedigger'), first published in 1911. The novel, consisting of 475 pages, contains the following scene in which an upright Inquisitor was misled into accusing an innocent man because of the machinations of an evil accuser:

Poor innocent Isidore was brought in front of Inquisitor Pallavicini. The Inquisitor, an upright and just man who was elevated to the dignity of Cardinal, upon casting his eyes on the accused, grabbed the report written by the evil Henry, and addressed the accused:

'Isidore, according to this report you are an accomplice to a man who has refuted the faith of Our Lord Jesus Christ. [a sharp exchange of words then takes place between the innocent Isidore and the Inquisitor] Be silent Isidore! You have until tomorrow at this time to tell the truth and avoid suffering those tortures which are mandatory to those who offend our Catholic religion. Take him away!'

Eventually, however, the inquisitor eventually realises that the accusations against Isidore were false and malicious and he has him released.

More commonly it was the evil of individuals who manage to obtain employment with the inquisition – particularly as jail-keepers or the executioners – who were the villains of the piece. In Arturo Dimech's novel *Il-Mostru tal-Palazz jew Imħbba u Mibgħeda* ('The Monster of the Palace, or Love and Hate'), published as late as the immediate post-World War II period, it is an innocent orphan girl who ends up languishing in an inquisitorial dungeon thanks to the machinations of the evil inquisitorial officer responsible for torturing those accused. The poor girl has to put up with both her cell-keeper, Kustanz and his abhorrent superior, the 'Monster', in charge of torture. Both characters were physically reprehensible as much as they were morally corrupt:

Kustanz was as thin as a corpse, his eyes half-closed and lame, so that his right leg made a loud sound with every movement. When he walked everyone laughed, especially children ... His hair was always tousled as he never had it combed. He was really ugly, a mirror-image of his superior, the 'Monster'.

The 'Monster' was a giant of a man, with huge legs and an enormous forehead. He was ugly and his bearing made people dislike him. He wasn't more than thirty years old but those who didn't know him thought he was over fifty. He was a reprehensible character both in his looks

and behavior. Notwithstanding this he had managed to obtain a good job in the Inquisitor's Court. It was a noble and just Court but one that was exploited by many to further their servile and evil intentions. He was the Head of the cell-keepers and of the executioner and overall in charge of torture.

The sufferings of innocent girls by individuals working with the Inquisition was one of the more popular themes in this genre. Girls could have their honest romantic aspirations thwarted by the heinous intentions of inquisitorial employees. Thus the girl Saverja had their sweetheart Marcello persecuted by the inquisitor's executioner, a reprehensible character who also happened to be her father.

Emilio Lombardi's *Bertu, jew il Misteri tal Palazz ta l-Inkwizitur tal-Birgu* ('Bertu, or the Mysteries of the Inquisitor's Palace in Birgu'), published in 1911, with later editions in 1970 and 2005, opens with a rather graphic description of what claimed to be the prisons within the inquisitorial palace and its prison:

This prison was divided into a number of small cells, where all those arrested were detained under the supervision of the executioner of the Inquisitor. At that time the executioner was a certain Nikol Falson, an energetic and strong man, whose look was enough to make one tremble.

Nikol weaves a plot to have innocent hero Bertu falsely accused and sentenced to be tied up and thrown in the notorious inquisitorial 'well of knives'. However the long-suffering Bertu finally manages to prove his innocence and, through the inquisitor even manages to obtain forgiveness to his tormentor Nikol from the otherwise inevitable death penalty.

Concluding remarks

During the immediate decades following the suppression of the Inquisitorial tribunal from the Maltese islands the intellectual ground was being prepared for depicting that institution as a cruel one, the horrors of which were incompatible with modern society. The rise of the novel in Maltese took up this theme with enthusiasm and made it one of the most popular in that genre. Maltese Catholic authors addressing a staunchly-Catholic audience could still weave their plots around an institution which, albeit Catholic, was by then defunct from the islands. While the more intellectual authors generally targeted the institution and what it stood for, the far greater number of popular authors and works generally presented a picture of an essentially good tribunal, which could however be manipulated and used by unscrupulous individuals, often in its employment.

The fascination with horror fiction during the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries could be addressed by the fictional descriptions of the inquisitorial prisons, torture chambers, well of knives, and horrific executions. Its appeal was sustained by the reprinting of many of such works and this has perpetuated a negative and stunted view of the Maltese tribunal in the untrained minds. It is a view which modern Maltese academics have still to strive hard to set right.