

DEFAMATORY NICKNAMES AND INSULT IN LATE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY MALTA: 1771-1798¹

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Language reflects and shapes the society in which it is spoken,² 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.³ 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.⁴ 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'.⁵ Although many historians and social anthropologists tend to disagree, or at least 'partly agree' with such a statement,⁶ 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.⁷ 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.

1. This paper is found in A. Camenzuli, 'Maltese Social and Cultural Values in Perspective: Confessions, accusations and the Inquisition Tribunal, 1771-1798', unpublished M.A. dissertation, University of Malta 1999, 223-33.
2. P. Burke, 'Introduction', in *The Social History of Language*, ed. P. Burke and R. Porter, Cambridge 1994, 4.
3. J. Sharpe, 'Such Disagreement betwix Neighbours': Litigation and Human Relations in early Modern England', in *Disputes and Settlements. Law and Human Relations in the West*, ed. J. Bossy, Cambridge 1983, 178.
4. P. Burke, *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy*, Cambridge 1987, 108.
5. D. Gilmore, *Aggression and Community: Paradoxes of Andalusian Culture*, Yale U.P. 1987, 84.
6. G. Wettinger, 'Late Medieval Maltese Nicknames', *Journal of Maltese Studies*, vi, Malta 1971, 36-7; J. Davis, *People of the Mediterranean*, 87; J. Pitt-Rivers, 'Honour and Social Status', in *Honour and Shame*, ed. J. G. Peristiany, London 1965, 45-53.
7. D. Gilmore, *Aggression and Community*, 77-80.

Therefore, nicknames, although serving as a convenient linguistic identifiers,⁸ 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,⁹ 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 Giosepe Sammut known as *il-Birba* (the Rogue) from Naxxar;¹⁰ while the latter concerned with the nickname's descendants or spouse,¹¹ like the virgin Graziella alias *ta' Lazzru*, who was the daughter of Lazzaro.¹² It is true that nicknames were a popular and unofficial form of personal and family nomenclature,¹³ however, although nicknames are inherited, they do so without any fixed rules of lineality.¹⁴ 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' Ihmar* (the donkey or the stupid), and his own personal epithet *il-Chibir* (the huge one).¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ Name distortions and censorious nicknaming can symbolise more than

8. *Ibid.*, 82.

9. Particularly in early modern Spain: D. Gilmore, *Aggression and Community*, 77-83.

10. AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 132B, case 179, ff. 790-1.

11. G. Wettinger, 'Late Medieval Maltese Nicknames', 37.

12. AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 132A, case 68, ff. 301-2.

13. G. Wettinger, 'Late Medieval Maltese Nicknames', 34.

14. D. Gilmore, *Aggression and Community*, 85.

15. AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 136A, case 1, ff. 1-14.

16. D. Gilmore, *Aggression and Community*, 87.

17. *Ibid.*, 87-90.

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.¹⁸ 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),¹⁹ *L'Orbo* (the blind or bereaved one),²⁰ *ta' Nahniha* (having a nasal voice),²¹ *Hain Serca* (evil eye),²² *Dabra* (ulcer),²³ *Tartaglino* (stammerer, or one who suffers from a defect of speech),²⁴ *Quattrocchi* (dim person),²⁵ *ta' l-Ahmar* (flushed, feverish or ruddy face),²⁶ *il Vecchio* (known as the old although to whom it was given was just twenty-eight years of age),²⁷ *Il-Zoppo* (the lame),²⁸ *ta' hass il-bard* (always shivering with cold),²⁹ *ta' Busach* (a pot-bellied person),³⁰ *Bomba* (explosive person),³¹ *Ichiechna* (the little one),³² *Bruno* (of dark complexion or gloomy),³³ *ta' Tombu* (mound person),³⁴ *tal-Psiepes* (whispering person),³⁵ *ta' Harac Nanna* (the one who burned the grandmother),³⁶ *ta' Fattar* (stout person of awkward figure),³⁷ *L-Isfar* (of yellow complexion or pale),³⁸ *itrusc* (deaf person),³⁹ *ta' Marsusa* (the compressed one),⁴⁰ *Censo Jonfoh* (he puffs when

18. J. Cassar Pullicino, 'Social Aspects of Maltese Nicknames', *Scientia*, xxii, 2, Malta 1956, 75.

19. AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 130, case 5, ff. 43-46; J. Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 2, Malta 1990, 912.

20. *Ibid.*, vol. 131A, case 87, ff. 213-222.

21. *Ibid.*, vol. 131B, case 132, ff. 447-450; J. Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 2, 906.

22. *Ibid.*, vol. 132A, case 44, ff. 215-216; *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 2, 946.

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.

26. AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 132B, case 178, ff. 788-9.

27. *Ibid.*, case 191, ff. 919-32.

28. AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 133A, case 311, ff. 392-401.

29. *Ibid.*, vol. 133C, case 376, ff. 855-876.

30. *Ibid.*, vol. 134A, case 25, ff. 111-2; J. Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 1, 156.

31. *Ibid.*, case 35, ff. 153-160.

32. *Ibid.*, case 57, ff. 249-256.

33. *Ibid.*, case 79A, ff. 346-355.

34. AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 134B, case 121, ff. 564-7; J. Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 2, 1464.

35. *Ibid.*, vol. 135B, case 251, ff. 443-462; *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 2, 1053.

36. *Ibid.*, case 262, ff. 500-5.

37. *Ibid.*, case 290, ff. 676-683; J. Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 1, 313.

38. *Ibid.*, case 293, ff. 694-700.

39. AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 136A, case 31, ff. 252-261.

40. *Ibid.*, case 41, ff. 292-301.

he walks, being crippled from both legs),⁴¹ *ta' Berhuda* (one abounded with fleas),⁴² *ta' Muncaru* (has a long nose),⁴³ *Sneina* (a small tooth),⁴⁴ *ta' Fartas* (bald),⁴⁵ *ta' Samra* (of dark complexion),⁴⁶ *ta' Iccat* (the flat one),⁴⁷ *Issichen* (an emaciated person),⁴⁸ *il-Haddiela* (she has paralyses of movement),⁴⁹ *il-Bombila* (a fat, round-bellied person),⁵⁰ *ta' Lisuet* (of black complexion, or dark-skinned),⁵¹ *Bezzun Sciaham* (a very fat person),⁵² *ta' Zizi* (one who chirps),⁵³ *il Brutto* (the ugly).⁵⁴

Moral qualities with defects was another section representing defamatory nicknaming 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 idiosyncrasies. Instances of these types are the following: *ta' Misbuch* (the outstripped),⁵⁵ *ta' Hafifu* (silly, mentally defective),⁵⁶ *Cusa* (messy person when eating or using food material),⁵⁷ *ta' Rasu* (stubborn),⁵⁸ *Mahrus* (one kept in custody),⁵⁹ *Manetta* (the handcuff),⁶⁰ *tal-Hobla* (pregnant),⁶¹ *ta' Bezzuna* (a dupe),⁶² *tal-Imhallach* (the hanged),⁶³ *Mohhu Blilma* (ignorant),⁶⁴ *ta' Coleriti* (angry, enraged),⁶⁵ *ta' Scehuca* (troublesome),⁶⁶ *ta' Buda* (scoundrel, a person with no character),⁶⁷ *tal-Mignuna* (crazy, mad),⁶⁸ *Manena* (feeble-minded),⁶⁹ *il Hacchicha* (the obsequious),⁷⁰

41. *Ibid.*, case 43, ff. 304-5.

42. *Ibid.*, case 55, ff. 339-350; J. Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 1, 106-7.

43. AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 136B, case 120, ff. 709-712.

44. *Ibid.*, case 141, ff. 799-802.

45. AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 137, case 179, ff. 193-324.

46. *Ibid.*, vol. 138, case 226, ff. 191-260.

47. *Ibid.*, vol. 139, case 241, ff. 96-7.

48. *Ibid.*, case 256, ff. 151-2; J. Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 2, 1313.

49. *Ibid.*, case 260, ff. 163-4; *Id.*, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 1, 472-3.

50. AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 140, case 286, ff. 52-5.

51. *Ibid.*, case 298, ff. 91-122.

52. *Ibid.*

53. AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 140, case 323, ff. 219-222; J. Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 2, 1635.

54. *Ibid.*, vol. 164, case 1, ff. 1-449.

55. *Ibid.*, vol. 130, case 6, ff. 47-50; J. Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 2, 836.

56. *Ibid.*, vol. 131A, case 44, ff. 11-12.

57. *Ibid.*, case 51, ff. 35-38; J. Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 1, 188.

58. *Ibid.*, case 102, ff. 297-298.

59. AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 131B, case 119, ff. 376-379; J. Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 2, 770.

60. *Ibid.*, case 150, ff. 609-631.

61. *Ibid.*, case 167, ff. 690-691.

62. *Ibid.*

63. AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 132A, case 63, ff. 289-290.

64. *Ibid.*, case 100, ff. 481-482.

65. AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 132B, case 142, ff. 652-5.

66. *Ibid.*, vol. 133A, case 238, ff. 62-71.

il Mezzano (broker),⁷¹ *Sciufa* (prowling person),⁷² *tal-Biccier* (cruel, ruthless),⁷³ *tal-Brons* (hard-hearted),⁷⁴ *Cozzo* (a butting person),⁷⁵ *ta' Pacoc* (silly, incompetent person),⁷⁶ *ta' Supperf* (proud, arrogant),⁷⁷ *tal-Buras* (big-headed),⁷⁸ *ta' Zebbieh* (impostor, cheater),⁷⁹ *tal-Isbandut* (an outlaw),⁸⁰ *tal-Hali* (spendthrift person),⁸¹ *tal-Hars* (the looker),⁸² *il Gerrei* (one who wanders outside),⁸³ *ta' Basocca* (hypocrite),⁸⁴ *ta' Misruca* (stolen),⁸⁵ *la Rondinella* (one who believes everything),⁸⁶ *tal-Mishut* (the cursed),⁸⁷ *Idduella* (litigious person),⁸⁸ *ta' Fitta* (importunate person),⁸⁹ *ta' Harbat* (destroyer),⁹⁰ *Sersur* (chatterer),⁹¹ *tal-Bizzi* (plunderer),⁹² *Badada* (slow-witted, silly),⁹³ *Paliazzo* (clown),⁹⁴ *il Mactula* (the murdered),⁹⁵ *ta' Harrasci* (the harsh),⁹⁶ *ta' Dittura* (to behave arrogantly),⁹⁷ *ta' Sarsar* (one who deludes with false hopes).⁹⁸

Other defamatory nicknames were found among those associated with animals and insects: *ta' Serduqa* (cock, used to an arrogant and quarrelsome person),⁹⁹ *ta'*

67. *Ibid.*, case 253, ff. 132-3; J. Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 1, 146.

68. *Ibid.*, case 257, ff. 156-7.

69. *Ibid.*, case 273, ff. 230-3.

70. *Ibid.*, case 284, ff. 272-7; J. Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 1, 482.

71. AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 133B, case 332, ff. 485-587.

72. *Ibid.*, vol. 134A, case 14, ff. 51-54; J. Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 2, 1586.

73. *Ibid.*, case 80, ff. 356-363.

74. *Ibid.*; J. Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 1, 144.

75. AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 134B, case 114, ff. 519-522.

76. *Ibid.*, case 119, ff. 546-7.

77. *Ibid.*, case 127, ff. 588-595.

78. AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 135A, case 194, ff. 29-40; J. Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 1, 152.

79. *Ibid.*, case 201, ff. 75-80; *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 2, 1604.

80. *Ibid.*, case 211, ff. 117-8; *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 2, 1602.

81. *Ibid.*, case 212, ff. 119-130; *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 1, 485.

82. *Ibid.*, case 236, ff. 322-333.

83. *Ibid.*; J. Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 1, 392.

84. AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 135A, case 246, ff. 409-424; *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 1, 90.

85. *Ibid.*, vol. 135B, case 256, ff. 477-8.

86. *Ibid.*, case 304, ff. 805-841.

87. AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 136A, case 12, ff. 105-116.

88. *Ibid.*, vol. 136B, case 119, ff. 698-706.

89. *Ibid.*, case 122, ff. 721-730.

90. AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 137, case 164, ff. 43-54.

91. *Ibid.*, vol. 138, case 185, ff. 51-2; J. Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 2, 1298.

92. *Ibid.*, case 194, ff. 87-90; *Id.*, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 1, 128.

93. *Ibid.*, case 218, ff. 165-6; *Id.*, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 1, 59.

94. *Ibid.*, case 229, ff. 298-361.

95. AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 139, case 243, ff. 107-114.

96. *Ibid.*, case 247, ff. 125-8; J. Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 1, 509-10.

97. AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 140, case 298, ff. 91-122.

98. *Ibid.*, case 321, ff. 215-6; J. Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 2, 1276.

99. AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 130, case 39, ff. 466-631.

Bebuscu (snail, used to mean a young and inexperienced person),¹⁰⁰ *il-Dirba* (common lizard),¹⁰¹ *Hanfusu* (beetle, used to mean a grumpy person),¹⁰² *ta' Formica* (ant, used to mean a very small person),¹⁰³ *ta' Dacra* (little cuttle-fish),¹⁰⁴ *il-Bahal* (bastard, used to mean an illegitimate person),¹⁰⁵ *ta' Sardella* (a little sardine),¹⁰⁶ *tal-Uirziech* (cricket, used to mean a screaming person),¹⁰⁷ *ta' Lampuca* (dolphin-fish),¹⁰⁸ *tal-Bahria* (hawk-moth),¹⁰⁹ *ta' Gamiema* (turtle-dove, used to mean a grumbling person),¹¹⁰ *il Toro* (bull, used to mean a wild or savage person).¹¹¹

Yet, nicknames were not the only means, which reflected defamation. Insults were also particularly aimed to defame individuals in society.

Insults

Dishonourable behaviour was also present through insults. An insult is an act dishonouring a person without plausible reason.¹¹² Insults, like other forms of speech, are a product of the society in which they are aired. Insults, according to the tone used, may express impatience, hatred or simple disapproval. When Giovanni Gatt, a *buonavoglia* fell on the boat of a certain Andrea, from Senglea, the latter insulted him by telling him in front of many people and for many times 'you are a wicked Jew, and he who baptized you is even more wicked'.¹¹³

Shouted in anger in the heat of a quarrel, or by someone, who is drunk, insults may be more forgivable than when pronounced with apparent self-control.¹¹⁴ Nonetheless insults directed at individuals can still have serious repercussions, like in the personal degradation of the challenging insult 'you bitch'.¹¹⁵ Michele Chetchuti

100. Ibid., vol. 131B, case 160, ff. 670-671.

101. Ibid., vol. 133A, case 224, ff. 3-4; J. Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 1, 247.

102. Ibid., vol. 134A, case 9, ff. 33-34; *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 1, 496-7.

103. Ibid., vol. 134B, case 176, ff. 838-869.

104. Ibid., case 185, ff. 912-923; J. Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 1, 196.

105. AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 135A, case 246, ff. 409-424.

106. Ibid., vol. 136A, case 55, ff. 339-350.

107. Ibid., case 71, ff. 422-437.

108. AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 140, case 298, ff. 91-122.

109. Ibid.

110. AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 141, case 19, ff. 206-7; J. Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary*, 1, 422.

111. Ibid., case 31, ff. 377-8.

112. J. Caro Baroja, 'Honour and Shame: A Historical Account of Several Conflicts', in *Honour and Shame. The Values of Mediterranean Society*, ed. J. G. Peristiany, London 1965, 90.

113. 'Giudeo maledetto, e quello che ti battezzo' ancora': AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 133A, case 308, ff. 384-5.

114. D. Garrioch, 'Verbal Insults in Eighteenth-century Paris', in *The Social History of Language*, ed. P. Burke and R. Porter, C.U.P 1994, 104-5.

115. G. Hughes, *Swearing*, 7.

with the phrase 'you were baptized with the urine of asses' also insulted badly Giuseppe Sammut.¹¹⁶ The basic message in insults is simple: male victims are described as cuckolds and female victims as whores.¹¹⁷ Fra De Pier said that St. Joseph was a cuckold.¹¹⁸ Giuseppe Calleja insulted Grazia Deguara, a married woman from Zebbug, by telling her that she was a whore.¹¹⁹ 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 venereal 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 moon, I cannot walk during the night without being recognised because of it.¹²⁰

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 Seichel said that Adriano Lorenzoni 'was a well-known rascal in Valletta'.¹²¹ Giovanni Fenech, from Valletta, declared in front of Inquisitor Zondadari 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.¹²² Saverio Abela, a shoe-tanner, 'was publicly retained as a thief'.¹²³

Insults therefore emphasise fraud and bad faith but never lack of skill.¹²⁴ Fortunato Tabone explained that Andrea Curmi was 'an ill-reputed man who easily blasphemed and swore'.¹²⁵ 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 ecclesiastiche*,

116. AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 134A, case 96, ff. 414-5.

117. P. Burke, *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy*, 104.

118. AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 166, last case unnumbered, no folios.

119. Ibid., vol. 136A, case 55, ff. 339-50.

120. Ibid., vol. 137, case 161, ff. 1-18.

121. Ibid., vol. 140, case 282, ff. 44-5.

122. Ibid., vol. 132B, case 203, ff. 975-7.

123. Ibid., vol. 139, case 232, ff. 34-41.

124. D. Garrioch, 'Verbal Insults', 109.

125. AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 141, case 2, ff. 133-6.

that is in front of the Parish Church as contumacious people. There is mention of three contumacious individuals in the period under study: Lorenzo Borg; Antonio, alias *ta' Haccium*; and Rosa Mallia. These were all declared as such in front of the Church of the *Collegiata* in Birkirkara, 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 Carpegna that this man 'frequented a married woman named Rosalia causing a great scandal throughout all the neighbourhood of Gudja'.¹²⁸ One unknown male greengrocer 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 condemnation 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 Trichbic confessed that Liberata Caruana was 'usually always drunk with wine and had a sacrilegious 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 Busuttill'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 context of insults was also culturally determined. In their most common use they were tools for use against an opponent, a symbolic

126. *Ibid.*, vol. 137, case 176, ff. 161-88.

127. D. Garrioch, 'Verbal Insults', 112.

128. AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 140, case 269, ff. 1-4.

129. *Ibid.*, vol. 138, case 201, ff. 111-4.

130. D. Garrioch, 'Verbal Insults', 113.

131. AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 140, case 280, ff. 38-9.

132. *Ibid.*, vol. 139, case 243, ff. 107-114.

133. '*Santo di merda. Ti rompo il tuo santo*': *Ibid.*, vol. 134A, case 8, ff. 27-32.

134. '*Corno in faccia del santo che v'ha nutrito*': *Ibid.*, case 61, ff. 267-8.

135. D. Garrioch, 'Verbal Insults', 115.

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 Salernitan 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 because 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 verbal form of aggression than towards a more 'male' form of physical aggression.

136. '*Puttana*': AIM Crim. Proc., vol. 139, case 261, ff. 166-72.

137. P. Burke, 'Introduction', 10.