

Between rectitude and incongruity

The chiasmic structure of the *Cantilena*

MARK MONTEBELLO

Talk delivered for the occasion of the 50th anniversary
of the *Cantilena*'s discovery in 1966

University of Malta
7 April 2016

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Published by Faraxa Publishing
www.faraxapublishing.com

The author is grateful for the assistance given to him
by Karen Rotin and Ivan Cauchi while preparing this essay.

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ISBN 978-99957-0-924-2

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Résumé

The *Cantilena* may have a classical chiasmic structure. This structure confers prominence to the middle part of the poem to bring out the conflict/tension of life. This is an expression and reflection of the life of the *Cantilena*'s author on three inter-related levels: the affective, the intellectual, and the moral. Peter Caxaro lived between rectitude and incongruity. This essay proposes the *Cantilena*'s chiasmic structure for the first time, and supports this interpretative reading with evidence from Caxaro's own life.

The *Cantilena* is the earliest known written document in the Maltese language. The only extant copy of it remained lost for five centuries. Today it is the most studied and commented upon poem in Malta's literary heritage.

Chiasm, Chiastic (*definition*)

In rhetoric, chiasm (or chiasmus) is a figure of speech. It is derived from the Greek χίασμα (*chi-asma*), 'crossing', from the Greek χιάζω (*chiá-zō*), 'to shape like the letter X' (*Khi* in Greek). The adjective is 'chiastic' (not 'chiasmic'). With this literary technique two or more clauses are related to each other through a reversal of structures in order to make a larger point. That is, the clauses display inverted parallelism.

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A quick glance at the 15th century poem, the *Cantilena*,* of Peter Caxaro (c.1400–1485) one cannot miss a running emotional tension throughout: a sad story, an uncontrollable heart, a collapse in a well, a drowning, a rough sea, a luckless land. Furthermore, upon analysing the philosophical structure of the text attentively one becomes also aware of a deeper strain generated by clashing intellectual attitudes. Yet this is not all. For, when probing into Caxaro's private life, one may behold the moral discord of his existence. It seems, indeed, that, in matters artistic, philosophical and conventional, Caxaro lived a life vacillating between rectitude and incongruity.

In what follows we shall examine briefly these three levels of Caxaro's anguish in an attempt to understand better the matrix of his *Cantilena*. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the *Cantilena*'s discovery in 1966 by Michael Fsadni. Ever since publishing it almost two years later with Prof. Godfrey Wettinger, the poem has not ceased to fascinate with its beauty, enthrall with its complexity and stir with its national cultural and historical standing. It seems to be appropriate to mark this special occasion with joy and thanks but also with a contribution to the anthology of studies which grew around the *Cantilena*.

* See a literal English translation of it on page 27. For an introduction to the *Cantilena* and Peter Caxaro see: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pietru_Caxaro (accessed: November 2015).

An affective conflict

In his *Cantilena* Caxaro tells a story of woe; a grave setback of apparently calamitous proportions. The story may have been of a personal nature, as many scholars assumed,¹ though not necessarily.² The *Cantilena* could be a composition expressing a shared experience of many, or even one of universal and metaphysical meaning. If indeed the poem is a *zajal* in the tradition of the Andalusian Ibn Quzmân (1078–1160), as has been suggested with some authority,³ then the *Cantilena* could have been a sort of song which, as Ibn Quzmân himself would have advised,⁴ was “easy, but difficultly easy; both popular and learned, hard yet obvious, obscure and clear”. Undeniably, the *Cantilena* follows such advice.

One and all agree that, in a way, the *Cantilena* is a love song. But what kind of love? Many, again, have assumed that it speaks of some heterosexual relationship which went horribly wrong.⁵ Nevertheless, on the other hand, if the *Cantilena* sings of a more collective and general sentiment of shattered love, then the relationship should be extended in scope to comprise, for instance, love of country, of hometown, of political regime and the like. That the *Cantilena* might conceal as much, especially in connection to its geopolitical nuances, has already been proposed, albeit not very extensively.⁶

Linear reading

Of course the personal and the public dimensions need not exclude each other. The *Cantilena* might be skilfully voicing both concurrently. Whatever the case, however, there evidently subsists an inter-relational tension which all scholars concur is assuaged, however ephemerally, in its very last verse.⁷

Apart of the linguistic problems which this last verse comprises,⁸ such a conclusion squarely rests on a *linear* reading of the poem. This would *assume* that the *Cantilena* is structured

in such a way so as to be interpreted as a continuous whole while gradually working out its theme. This presupposes the existence of a thematic progression, or at least a topical exposition, moving from the first to the last verse, starting at the beginning and finishing at the end. In such manner, the poem thus culminates in the last verse which is held to be the interpretative key to the whole composition. Up till now, all those who attempted any interpretation of the *Cantilena* or proffered their comments on it, whatever the point of view and perspective from which they undertook this, *always* held to this supposition. No-one has ever doubted it or presumed otherwise.

Most probably this was so because all observers dealt with the *Cantilena* as a conventional poem or lyrical work while concentrating, justly enough and according to their respective skills, on other aspects of the composition. Though some paid attention to the physical structure of the *Cantilena*,⁹ none appear to have studied it holistically in its complexity. This must have been a question of emphasis rather than a fault. Though valid in itself, it still was incomplete. The flaw could also have been due to what has been called ‘the context of expectation’ or ‘an internalized probability system’,¹⁰ with which the western critical reader would almost automatically deal with a text with institutional assumptions foreign to it.

Due to this linear reading of the *Cantilena*, some have even brought themselves to justify the verses in the original manuscript which the transcriber jotted down by mistake.¹¹

Chiastic structure

But the *Cantilena* might have a different structural form; one which is ‘chiastic’ (or, as some call it, of a ‘ring composition’ type).¹² This possible arrangement might seem to corroborate, or at least point towards, its possible *zajal* origin. For scholarship has shown that Ibn Quzmân and those who followed his style, in their larger part designed their poetry in this chiastic fashion.¹³

This means that the clauses are related to each other through a reversal of structures in a sort of inverted parallelism, such as:

$$A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C \rightarrow D \leftarrow C \leftarrow B \leftarrow A.$$

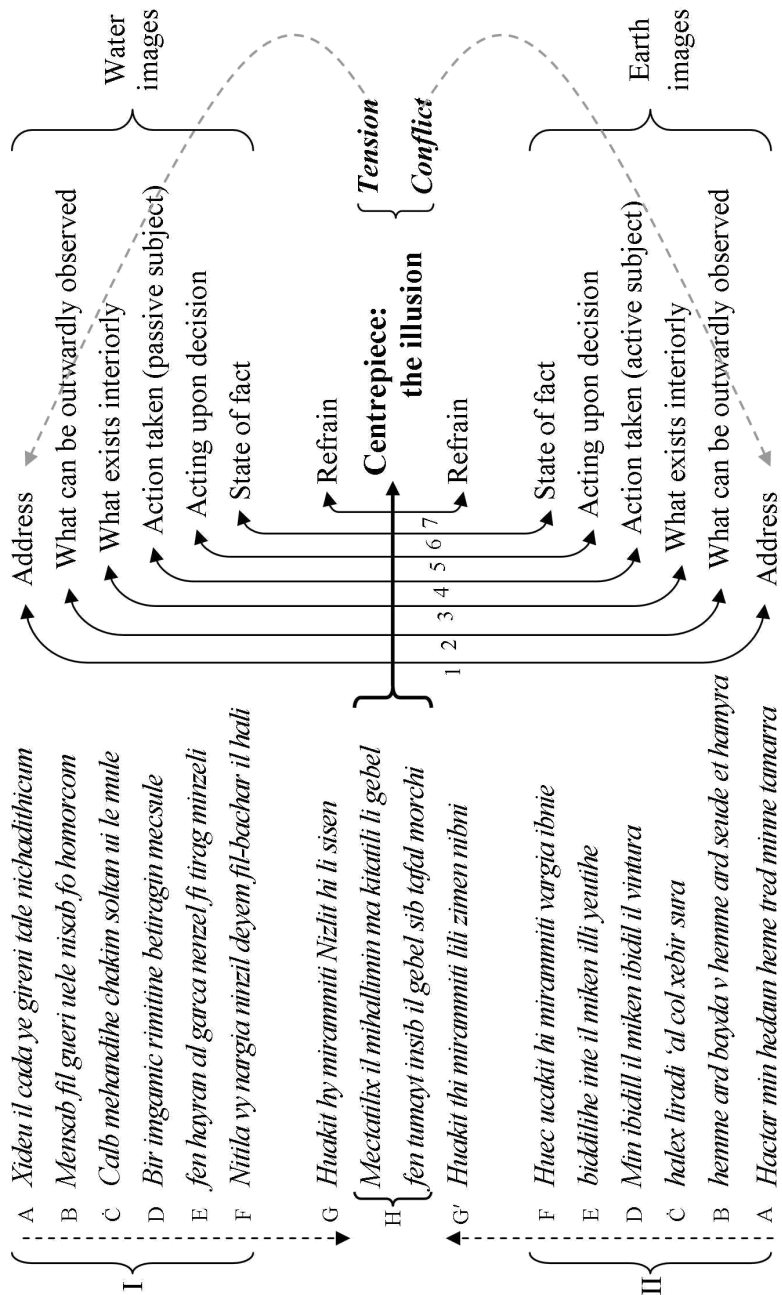
This seems to have been done in order to bring out more forcefully a larger point [D] which is common to them all.¹⁴ It is also done for mnemonic reasons; so that the text shall be recalled more easily,¹⁵ just as Brandan Caxaro had done.¹⁶ Fig. 1 on the next page might demonstrate more clearly our meaning. It shows the chiasitic structure of the *Cantilena* in all its complexity.

Another way of presenting the same structure would be in a cyclic fashion as appears in Fig. 2 (page 8). One may observe the perfect coherence of the chiasitic structure of the *Cantilena*.

There is a third way of presenting the same structure. In Fig. 3 (page 9), the designations *I-A*, *I-B*, *I-C* and the rest represent the *Cantilena*'s verses as they appear in the two previous figures. This figure better demonstrates the chiasitic organisation of the poem. The 'axle' (*H*), which represents the middle verses of the *Cantilena*, brings together all the other verses in a perfectly constructed inverse parallelism.

These three figures display the same concept in three different ways. As one may observe the structure is perfectly consistent and symmetrical in itself in all the three cases. One might be uneasy with the novelty of this structural interpretation of the *Cantilena* since, over a span of almost fifty years, no-one seems to have noticed it or publicly proposed its existence. Nevertheless, if one studies it well, one may see that it is almost obvious. For the verses *I-A/II-A*, *I-B/II-B*, *I-C/II-C* and the rest *really* correspond with each other as in a mirror. One sees that they are *truly* organised in such a way so as, from the outermost verse inwards, they resemble circles or rings (marked in Fig. 1 and Fig. 3 as 1, 2, 3, *etc.*) around the same common centre. One may easily see that all the verses feed into the central part. While giving it an all-important prominence, they give substance to its meaning.

A chief characteristic of the classic chiasitic model is the



The chiasmic structure of the *Cantilena*

Fig. 1

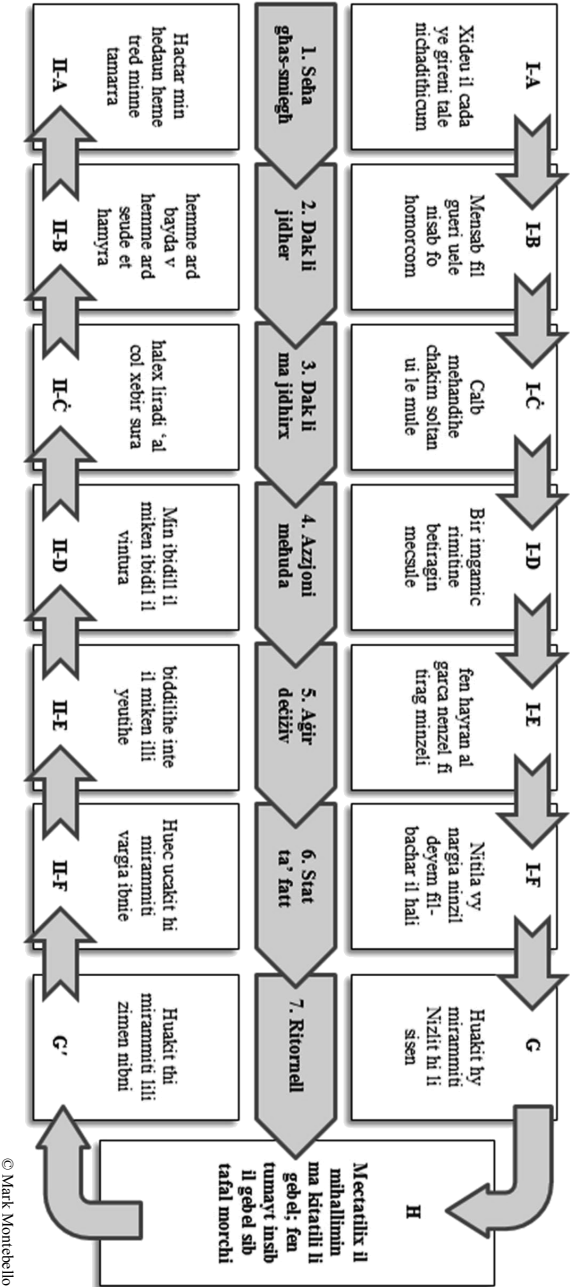


Fig. 2 – The *Camtlenda*'s chiasmic structure in circular form

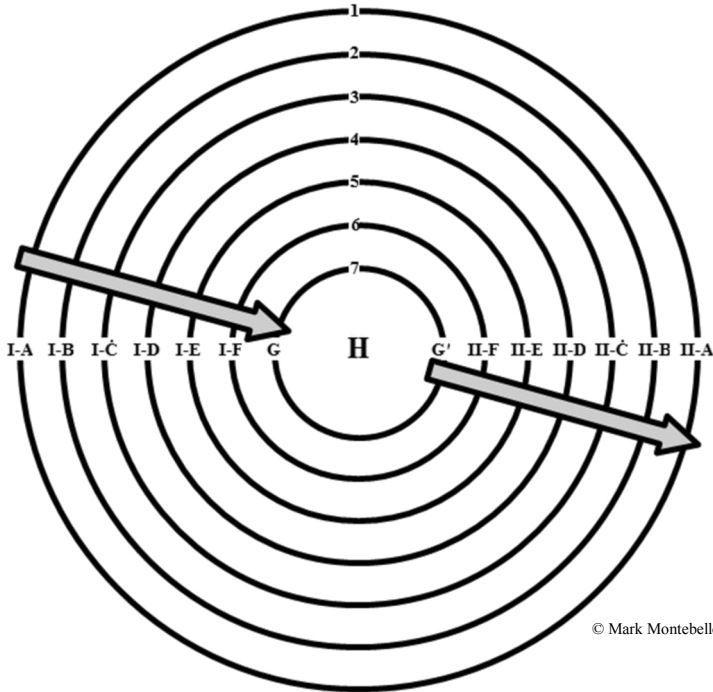
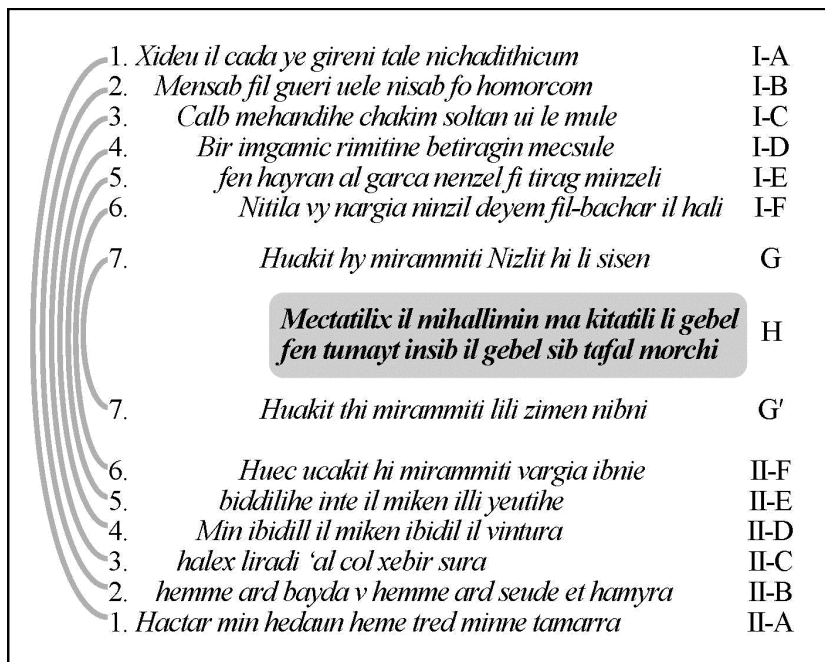


Fig. 3 – The *Cantilena*’s chiastic structure around a single axle

presence of seven of these circles or rings around the axle. The *Cantilena* is faithful to this typical factor as it is to all the other classical characteristics of any chiasmus.¹⁷ This may be seen in Fig. 4, which is a ‘step’ presentation of the same structure.

More equitable distribution

As one can immediately observe, the poem does not appear to be organised according to the principles of a linear method, as has been hitherto thought. To put it in other words, for interpretative purposes the *Cantilena* does not seem to be intended to function as a top-to-bottom recitation or incantation with a final concluding or climaxing verse. It is much more complex than that. It is more likely that it has a midpoint around



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Fig. 4 – The *Cantilena*'s chiastic structure in step format

which all the rest is organised in ever widening and enveloping rings. This means that the focal point of the *Cantilena* is not at the end but in the middle, as in any classical chiasm. It also means that, while using this structural form, Caxaro did not intend to emphasise the final part or, to be more specific, the word *tamarra*, but rather the double-verse section of the middle. It is here that his key message lies. Fig. 5 (next page) is a graphic demonstration of this.

From this figure it is clear that the literary distribution of the *Cantilena* is more stable than hitherto thought. Further down we'll have the opportunity to add some comments on the word *tamarra* in the last verse of the poem. Nonetheless, it suffices here to point out that, in a linear reading of the poem, the last verse, and particularly the word *tamarra*, acquire such importance that seems truly inflated. All the weight of the poem

rests upon them. Such a reading might have exposed the *Cantilena* to the danger of being misinterpreted altogether.

On the other hand, we may notice from the same figure that the chiastic model eases this discrepancy and distributes the weight of the poem more equitably throughout the whole structure. Though the proposed change of model, from a linear to a chiastic one, might seem capricious and arbitrary, from the rest of the essay it shall be shown that this is not so. There are various significant reasons why, contrary to what has been thought up till now, the *Cantilena*'s literary structure is a chiastic, and not a linear, one.

Semitic literary heritage

Though the literary chiastic structure can be found in various world cultures amongst literary works which possibly have an

<p><i>Xiden il cada ye gireni tale nichadithicum</i> <i>Mensab fil gueri uele nisab fo homorcom</i> <i>Calb mehendihe chakim soltan ui le mule</i> <i>Bir ingemic rimitine betiragin mecsule</i> <i>fen hayran al garca nenzel fi tirag minzeli</i> <i>Nitila vy nargia ninzil deyem fil-bachar il hali</i></p> <p><i>Huakit hy mirammiti Nizlit hi li sisen</i> <i>Mectatiliz il mihallimin ma kitatili li gebel</i> <i>fen tumayt insib il gebel sib tafal morchi</i> <i>Huakit thi mirammiti lili zimen nibni</i></p> <p><i>Huec ucakit hi mirammiti vargia ibnie</i> <i>biddilihe inte il miken illi yeutihe</i> <i>Min ibidill il miken ibidil il vintura</i> <i>hallex liradi 'al col xebir sura</i> <i>hemme ard bayda v hemme ard seude et hamyra</i> <i>Hactar min hedau heme tred minne tamarra</i></p> <p>Linear structural design</p>	<p><i>Xideu il cada ye gireni tale nichadithicum</i> <i>Mensab fil gueri uele nusab fo homorcom</i> <i>Calb mehendihe chakim soltan ui le mule</i> <i>Bir ingamic rimitine betiragin mecsule</i> <i>fen hayran al garca nenzel fi tirag minzeli</i> <i>Nitila vy nargia ninzil de jem fil-bachar il hali</i></p> <p><i>Huakit hy mirammiti Nizlit hi li sisen</i> <i>Mectatiliz il mihallimin ma kitatili li gebel</i> <i>fen tumayt insib il gebel sib tafal morchi</i> <i>Huakit thi mirammiti lili zimen nibni</i></p> <p><i>Huec ucakit hi mirammiti vargia ibnie</i> <i>biddilihe inte il miken illi yeutihe</i> <i>Min ibidill il miken ibidil il vintura</i> <i>hallex liradi 'al col xebir sura</i> <i>hemme ard bayda v hemme ard seude et hamyra</i> <i>Hactar min hedau heme tred minne tamarra</i></p> <p>Chiastic structural design</p>
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Fig. 5 – The literary distribution of the *Cantilena*

oral tradition, including the Homeric one,¹⁸ its origin seems to be predominantly Semitic.¹⁹ One can note a solid foundation of it in the Bible, for instance, specifically in the period of the prophet-writers (from about 850 to 400 BC). So much so that the arrangement is sometimes called the 'Prophetic Rhetorical Model'.²⁰

Though possible biblical (evangelical) themes have been already noted in the *Cantilena*,²¹ this was not done in relation to any chiasmic structure of the poem. Rather, it was simply made with an association of similar images (such as the collapse of a house in Luke's gospel; though, together with this, a reference to Jeremiah being plunged into a well—as in chapter 38 of the book which bears his name—could have easily been made too).

Nonetheless, the biblical relationship in the *Cantilena* is much more profound, complex and broad than that. For the *Cantilena* does not seem to be just borrowing biblical imagery for their graphic qualities, as previously supposed, but rather it appears to share the very chiasmic structure of main parts of the Old Testament²² as much as of the New Testament.²³

This is not the place to examine every biblical text which makes use of the chiasmic model. How much Caxaro was familiar with the literary structure of these Hebrew texts cannot be known. However, if he came from a Jewish family, as has been suggested,²⁴ then he would have been acquainted with scriptural exegesis as with the chiasmic arrangement of some of the major texts of the prophet-writers.

What is more certain here is that the chiasmic model of the biblical texts integrally passed on to the Qor'an,²⁵ both in relation to the whole structure of the holy book and some of its particular parts,²⁶ which evidently are of a chiasmic nature. It was from this literary composition that Ibn Quzmân and most of his school's adherents were inspired in their works. The *Cantilena*, if it really follows in the *zajal* tradition of the Andalusian Ibn Quzmân, might indeed reflect the chiasmic model of this literary form.

Whatever the case, despite these more or less speculative reflections on the source of Caxaro's stimulus to compose the *Cantilena* in chiasmic form, this geneostructural aspect does not interest us directly here. The textual evidence produced by the *Cantilena* itself is enough to convince us of the structural model used in its creation.

The import of the chiasmus

We have already observed that the chiasmic structure is characterised by verses which relate to each other by being attached to an axle where half of them point backwards in a sort of inverted parallelism. From Fig. 1 this can clearly be seen to be evident in the *Cantilena*. Every verse of the first stanza (*I*) is reflected backwards (as in a mirror) to their corresponding verses of the second stanza (*II*).

Verses *I-A* and *II-A* (those at the very end) are an address or an entreaty: the first verse calls for physical attention (auditory); the second for mental consent (heed).

The next verses towards the inside in each stanza (*I-B*, *II-B*, *I-C* u *II-C*) are coupled: they all speak of different presences. The verses *I-B* and *II-B* both make an appeal to something which can be clearly seen (a phenomenon), the first (*I-B*) in a negative sense (a story which is not encountered anywhere); the second (*II-B*) in a positive sense (a land which is found easily). In corresponding equivalence to these, verses *I-C* and *II-C* both make an appeal to something which is hidden (noumenon): the first (*I-C*) to a non-physical human quality (concealed sentiments [of the heart]); the second (*II-C*) to a material physical element (veiled attributes of immovable properties).

The following verses of each stanza (always inwards), that is, *I-D*, *II-D*, *I-E* and *II-E*, are also all coupled: they speak of different types of acts. Verses *I-D* and *II-D* both mention an taken action: the first verse (*I-D*) has a passive subject (who underwent an action on which he had no control); the second (*II*

-D) has an active subject (who accomplishes a possible action). In corresponding equivalence to these, verses *I-E* and *II-E* both mention a deliberate action: the first (*I-E*) speaks about the subject who acts upon his yearnings (which are somewhat negative); the second (*II-E*) about the subject who acts upon a (somewhat positive) decision which had been taken or could have been made.

The next verses in each stanza (inwards), that is, *I-F* and *II-F*, both declare a state of fact in direct relation to the subject himself: the first (*I-F*) speaks about an interior experience (despair); the second (*II-F*) about an exterior experience (a failed plan or project).

The following verses (*G* u *G'*) form the immediate frame of the centrepiece *H* by having a variation on a single refrain theme. Each one of these verses is made up of two parts: the anterior part is an identical repetition (*Huakit hy [thi] mirammiti*); the posterior part shows a development on the theme in almost a psalmist manner with the second verse (*G'*) adding some information to that of the first (*G*).

The centrepiece (*H*), made up of two coupled verses, expresses the heart of the entire theme; the reason of all the tension and conflict: that is, something taken for another (illusion). As in all chiasmic texts this central part is directly related to the verses which are the most removed from it, that is, the outermost verses of the poem which form the widest ring or frame (*I-A* and *II-A*); the verses which appeal to the attention of the listeners. The relation of *H* with *I-A* consists in an (urgent) appeal so that someone shall (physically) hear the intelligence (*H*); the relation of *H* with *II-A* consists in a (considered) recommendation so that someone shall (mentally) heed the same intelligence.

The whole chiasm has various embellishments which are made to the generic model and with which the composition is made more complex. We have already observed most of them in the paired qualities placed in counter-opposition to each other:

auditory–heed; physical–mental; phenomenon–noumenon; negative–positive; non-physical–physical; passive–active; interior–exterior. There may be other still which we have not observed here. However, there is one which needs particular attention. Caxaro builds each stanza around particular images: the first stanza (*I*) is entirely constructed around watery images (the well, the sea); the second (*II*) around earthly ones (the building, the land).

It might be worth noting here that in medieval astrology (with which Caxaru must have been conversant) the Earth and Water signs (*Virgo*, *Taurus* and *Capricorn*, and *Cancer*, *Scorpio* and *Pisces* respectively) are compatible with, and complement, each other. Earth signs bring security and stability to the Water signs, and teach them about practicality. People under the Water element are emotional, sensitive and they hate boisterous characteristics of the Fire and Air signs. The people under the Earth element are practical, persistent, loyal, critical, and determined. Unlike people under the Fire signs, who need recognition for their work, the Earth signs will get any projects done without the need for recognition. Hence, the Earth signs can find support and encouragement from the Water; the Earth will provide a firm shoulder for the Water. By choosing these elements from medieval astrology Caxaro may, within the chiasm, be suggesting such reflections.

The significance of the chiasm

If our reading here is essentially correct, the poem's centrepiece *H* (*Mectatilix il mihallimin ma kitatili li gebel / fen tumayt insib il gebel sib tafal morchi*) takes a most prominent and essential position. Though such importance had already been noticed,²⁷ the interpretative linear model used at the time contradicted such an import and worked diametrically against its centrality. In fact, the whole weight and emphasis of the poem's internal configuration actually retreated from the centrepiece and

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