

MODERN PHILOLOGY

OLD FRENCH *MEDESME* IN SICILIAN

FOR those who are not well acquainted with the Sicilian dialects one of the most striking words in Traina's dictionary<sup>1</sup> is that which appears under the forms *midè*, *midemma*, *midemmi*, *mirè*, *miremma*, *vidè*, *videmma*, *videmmi*, *virè*, *viremma*. The instability of the consonant sounds in these forms seems at first sight to be inexplicable. However, when the word is pronounced in true Sicilian fashion the puzzle is solved, as the initial consonant is simply an indistinct bilabial sound the nasal quality of which is fairly well defined in some sections (as at Casteltermini and Caltanissetta) but almost completely disappears in other sections (as at Polizzi and Cianciana) while the medial consonant is a dental between *d* and *r* (somewhat resembling English voiced *th*) so that either transcription might be accepted. No greater mistake can be made than to ascribe to Sicilian consonants in general the value indicated by Tuscan symbols used by the transcribers, as the Tuscan sounds are pronounced clearly and forcibly while the Sicilian sounds are often weak and indistinct.

Pitrè in his vocabulary (Vol. IV of his *Fiabe, Novellè, e Racconti* [Palermo, 1875]) lists *midemma*, *mmidemma*, *videmma*, *mmidè*, *mmirè*; *vidè* (Cianciana), and *videmmi* (Polizzi).

Traina suggested OFr *medesme* as the origin of this proteiform word. This suggestion is probably correct. In Polizzi, besides denasalization of the initial vowel in this word we also note it in the initial vowel of *massino* (*ma se no*) which becomes *vassino* (Pitrè, *op. cit.* III, 268, 270). *Midesimenti* is also listed by Traina and has the same meaning as *midè*, *midemma*, etc. The use of the word *midè*, *midemma*, etc., is almost exclusively adverbial, with the meaning of Tuscan *pure* or *anche*. (*Puru* also exists in Sicilian.) *Stissu* corresponds to OFr *medesme* in its other uses.

The meaning of *midè*, *midemma*, etc., which we find in Sicilian may have existed in colloquial Old French of the time of the Norman conquest, although the writer has been able to find no examples of it. In the *Chanson de Roland* (which scholars are now inclined to date

<sup>1</sup> A. Traina, *Vocabulario Siciliano-Italiano* (Palermo, 1868).

between 1096 and 1108; see T. A. Jenkins, *La Chanson de Roland* [D. C. Heath & Co., 1924], p. xlv) we find three examples of *medisme* which may shed some light upon the subject. In line 592 we read "Altre bataille lor livrez *de medisme*" in which *de medisme* appears to have exactly the meaning of the Sicilian word. In line 1036 we have (Jenkins, *op. cit.*) "Ed il *medismes* en est molt esguarez," which Paris (*Extraits de la Chanson de Roland* [Paris, 1921] prints (l. 99 of the *Extraits*) "En lui *medesme* en est molt esguarez," while Clédat (*Chanson de Roland* [Paris, 1890]) prints "En lui *medisme* en est molt esguarez."

In the reading given by Jenkins the reading of the Old French word might be construed as being the same as that of the Sicilian word, but in those of Paris and Clédat the sense would be entirely different.

In line 2382 of the *Roland*, Jenkins and Clédat read "Mais lui *medisme* ne voelt mettre en oblit," while Paris reads (l. 653 of the *Extraits*). "Mais sci *medesme* ne vuelte metre en oblit," the readings differing again in the spelling of the Old French word, Jenkins and Clédat accepting *medisme* while Paris prefers *medesme*. The only cases in the *Chanson de Roland* in which Paris accepts *medisme* (with *i*) are where it is in assonance (ll. 592, 2343). In Paris' Introduction (p. 8, § 18), he states: "Il a sans doute existé un *is* de *ipsi* qui peut expliquer *medisme* a côté de *medesme*."

Bédier (*Chanson de Roland* [Paris, 1922]) prints directly from the Oxford manuscript and has only *meisme*, but the Oxford manuscript is considerably later than the actual composition of the poem.

If the Sicilian word is derived from the Norman French (as would seem probable, there being no other plausible provenance for popular Sicilian words presenting open *e* in Sicilian, but closed *e* or short *i* in Latin) it would point to an OFr *medesme* rather than *medisme*, thus confirming the opinion of Gaston Paris. Other Norman-French words brought into Sicilian at an early date present Sicilian open *e* for French close *e*: *frenu*: *lena* (Fr. *haleine*); *fenu* (Mod. Fr. *foin*); *vilenu* (Mod. Fr. *venin*); *sigretu* (Fr. *secret*); *veru* (OFr *veir*), while Sicilian words derived directly from Latin forms presenting close *e* or short *i* show *i* in Sicilian: *aviri*; *catina*; *cridiri*; *tila*; *misi* (Cl. Lat. *MENSEM*); *chistu*; *chiddu*; *dittu*; *issu*.

Another interesting feature of the Sicilian *midè, mirè*, etc., is the clipped form which is in fact the more common. The reason for this would seem to be that it is usually followed by an intentionally abrupt pause which has the effect of giving it greater emphasis. Examples of the addition of a syllable to words ending in accented vowels in Sicilian are very numerous (see Pitrè, *op. cit.* I, clxxxvi-clxxxvii), but clipped words are rather uncommon. The fact that many words exist both in paroxytonic<sup>1</sup> (sometimes even amplified)<sup>2</sup> and oxytonic forms (the paroxytonic being more common) seemingly has led to the clipping of *miremmi* or *mirè* to make it sound unusual, thus calling attention to it and giving it greater emphasis.

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<sup>1</sup> *città, cittati; virtù, virtuti; verità, veritati.*

<sup>2</sup> *re, rene; è, ène. Re, 'King,' is a Norman-French word. It should be remembered that this title was unknown in Sicily before the coronation of Roger II, in 1130.*