

# Beauty and Lack Thereof in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth- century Travelogues

**Patricia Micallef**

patricia.micallef@um.edu.mt

**Abstract:** In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Malta attracted several travellers, eager to discover this small State in the Mediterranean. In spite of the harsh travelling conditions, the traveller did not lose heart and bravely undertook the discovery of the Other, confined to a small island. Strong emotions are felt and judgements are passed, with beauty and ugliness featuring among the most common perceptions that characterize the travelling accounts.

**Key words:** Malta, Gozo, Order of St John, eighteenth century, beauty, ugliness, travellers

*Beauty is a harmonious relation between something  
in our nature and the quality of the object which delights us.*

Blaise Pascal (1623– 62), French mathematician, physicist, and philosopher

## **The traveller and the notion of beauty**

Perhaps the most familiar basic issue in the theory of beauty is whether beauty is subjective, found ‘in the eye of the beholder’, or whether it is an objective feature of beautiful things. Theories conflict and, while most ancient and medieval accounts placed beauty outside of anyone’s particular experiences, nevertheless, the belief that beauty is subjective was also a common idea from the time of the sophists. By the eighteenth

century, in the *Treatise of Human Nature*, the Scottish philosopher David Hume could write as follows: ‘Beauty is such an order and construction of parts as, either by the primary constitution of our nature, by custom, or by caprice, is fitted to give a pleasure and satisfaction to the soul. [...] Pleasure and pain, therefore, are not only necessary attendants of beauty and deformity, but constitute their very essence.’<sup>1</sup>

This concept of beauty or lack thereof animates the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century traveller who, whether contemplating a work of art or is being lulled by the gentle waves, is subjected to emotions which do not leave him indifferent. For the traveller, beauty is associated with the perceptual experience of pleasure and emotional well-being and its appreciation takes place in the aesthetic attitude adopted towards the discovery of the Other, of his customs, and of his heritage.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, travelling had several intents: spiritual, as in the journey to the Holy Land; economic, like the voyages encouraged by the Sun King to strengthen commercial relations with the Levant;<sup>2</sup> geographical, in order to discover lands still unknown; scientific, especially with the creation of the *Jardin royal des plantes médicinales*<sup>3</sup> in Paris in 1626; and scholarly, the characteristic of eighteenth-century voyages. If very few voyages in the seventeenth century were undertaken to satisfy one’s curiosity, since conditions were harsh and insecure, this changed radically a century later when travelling assumed an innovative purpose: that of observation and discovery. During the Enlightenment, the traveller puts himself at the service of knowledge: very quickly, he feels the strong desire to compare his own experience with those of others, living in different lands.

## Beauty and fear at sea

In the morning of 11 June 1655, the French gentleman Jean de Thevenot, coming to Malta from Messina, delights in seeing dolphins and tuna

1 David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature* (London, 1740), ii, Section viii, ‘Of Beauty and Deformity’. See <http://www.unc.edu/~jjeffrey/Hume%20Files--start%20with%20B3/B2.1.8.html>

2 See *Dictionnaire de l’Ancien Régime*, ed. L. Bély (Paris, 1996), 1266.

3 Founded in 1626 by Guy de la Brosse, doctor of Louis XIII, this royal garden eventually opened in 1640.

jumping playfully in great numbers in the galleys' wake'<sup>4</sup> communicating joy, gentleness, harmony, and vibrancy. A century later, two contrasting experiences are recounted by the British traveller Patrick Brydone and the French visitor Jean Houel. The latter experienced beauty and lack thereof, while crossing over to Malta from the Sicilian harbour of Girgenti. His description creates in the reader a peaceful sensation, aptly transmitted through the precise details of the description:

The day was fading, twilight was heralding a very beautiful night, everything was ready for the departure [...]. Dawn had never been so bright, the air had never been calmer, the weather had never been more serene, everything was announcing a beautiful day, a short and pleasant journey. At eight o'clock in the morning we were out of the harbour, and we let our sails to the wind, which were quite favourable. Eight other ships which had come out of the harbour with us, but having different destinations, formed a small squadron, spread over the distance of a league which, viewed with the coastline and the mountains lining the horizon, offered a pleasant and varied scene. This charming sight changed constantly; it offered a new aspect at every moment, through the movement of the ships, their sails, the way in which the sun illuminated their progress [...] they formed a magnificent maritime scene.<sup>5</sup>

Pleasure dominates this description but the ephemeral beauty of nature is experienced within a few hours when the sky is covered with clouds and a frightening wind stirs up violent waves. At night, Houel found refuge in the captain's cabin where he lay down on a mattress on the floor, leaning against one of his trunks, placed strategically so as not to be knocked over by the rolling of the sea. In these extremely uncomfortable conditions and being of no use to the crew, the French traveller tries to sleep in spite of 'the frightening din provoked by the whistling of the wind, the waves breaking constantly against the ship,

4 J. de Thevenot, *Voyages de M. de Thevenot en Europe, en Asie et en Afrique, divisés en trois parties, contenant cinq tomes; Première partie contenant le voyage du Levant, dans laquelle entre autres choses il est soigneusement traité des États sujets au Grand Seigneur, des moeurs, religion, forces, gouvernements politiques, langues et costumes des habitants de ce grand empire*, Troisième édition enrichie de figures en taille douce (Amsterdam, 1727), i, 12.

5 J. Houel, *Voyage pittoresque des îles de Sicile, de Lipari et de Malte, où l'on traite des Antiquités qui s'y trouvent encore; des principaux phénomènes que la nature y offre; du costume des habitants et de quelques usages* (Paris, 1787), iv, 73.

the cries of the sailors, and the manoeuvre they were carrying out above [his] head.<sup>6</sup> The contrast created between the tranquillity of nature and its fury, between pleasure and fear, reminds the reader, comfortably settled at home, of the unpredictable and uncontrollable force of nature to which man must submit.

For Patrick Brydone, the crossing from Sicily to Malta takes place in idyllic beauty. The senses and the intellect combine to make the traveller extremely sensitive to the surroundings:

A little after nine we embarked. The night was delightful; but the wind had died away about sunset, and we were obliged to ply our oars to get into the canal of Malta. The coast of Sicily began to recede, and we found ourselves in the ocean. There was a profound silence, except the noise of the waves breaking on the distant shore, which only served to render it more solemn. It was a dead calm, and the moon shone bright on the waters. The waves, from the late storm, were still high, but smooth and even, and followed one another with a flow and an equal pace. The scene had naturally sunk us into meditation; we had remained near an hour without speaking a word, when our sailors began their midnight hymn to the Virgin. The music was simple, solemn and melancholy, and in perfect harmony with the scene and with all our feelings. They beat exact time with their oars, and observed the harmony and the cadence with the utmost precision.<sup>7</sup>

In line with Pascal's reflection on beauty, Brydone highlights the necessary ingredient to this peaceful scene: consonance which creates the perfect equilibrium. The waves themselves are rhythmic and the moon's clarity evokes fullness and perfection. At the mercy of the sea, known for being unpredictable, hard to navigate in time of storm but also capable of being beautifully calm, Brydone experiences serenity and the fear of pirates gently ebbs away.

The comte de Borch, a Polish traveller who came to Malta in 1776, is in awe of nature and states: 'Nothing in nature illustrates with more majesty the power of its Author and the greatness of his works than the sea [...]; it is in the august silence of a perfect calm that our soul, gathering all its

6 Ibid., 74.

7 P. Brydone, *A tour through Sicily and Malta. In a series of letters to William Beckford Esq., of Somerly in Suffolk* (London, 1773), i, 304–5.

faculties, compares the stillness of the sea with the perpetual movement of all the bodies of nature [...].<sup>8</sup>

Abandoned to this vast immensity of water, this traveller seems to echo the idealist tradition where beauty is conceived as perfect unity and where the human soul recognizes in beauty its true origin and destiny.

### The Grand Harbour and its beauty

Once Malta is finally glimpsed at the horizon, the traveller utters a sigh a relief which changes into astonishment as the harbour approaches. According to the comte de Borch, the harbour in Valletta can be considered as ‘the most sure and the most beautiful, an artistic masterpiece rather than the effect of a quirk of nature.’<sup>9</sup> In contrast to this appraisal, it is with horror that he recounts how a vessel which forces its entrance would be pulverized before having crossed the first gorge.<sup>10</sup> The German traveller Johann Herman von Riedesel extends these words of praise to the fortifications that surround the Grand Harbour, an artistic masterpiece worthy of the greatest admiration for the audacity of the initiative and for the skill of the execution.<sup>11</sup> During the sixteenth century, bastions and fortresses were mainly designed and developed by Italian military architects and engineers when the art of war took the form of sieges.<sup>12</sup> Already in the seventeenth century Thevenot speaks thus of Valletta’s fortifications: ‘They are as beautiful as they are good, and create a very pleasant perspective.’<sup>13</sup> This ‘most stupendous work’<sup>14</sup> protects the rulers and the inhabitants from the enemy whose incursions are strongly feared, while the ‘big and magnificent bastions’<sup>15</sup> with their imposing aspect present a barrier to the traveller, a confined space to which, however, he

8 M.-J., comte de Borch, *Lettres sur la Sicile et sur l’île de Malte de M. le comte de Borch à M. le C. de N., écrites en 1777 pour servir de supplément au Voyage en Sicile et à Malte de M. Brydone* (Turin, 1782), i, 158.

9 Ibid., 159.

10 Ibid.

11 J.H. von Riedesel, *Voyage en Sicile et dans la Grande Grèce, adressé par l’auteur à son ami M. Winckelmann, traduit de l’allemand, accompagné de notes du traducteur [Frey Des Landres, J.-Rodolphe] et d’autres additions intéressantes* (Lausanne, 1773), 66.

12 *Dictionnaire de l’Ancien Régime*, 566.

13 Thevenot, 25.

14 Brydone, 316.

15 D. Vivant Denon, *Voyage en Sicile* (Paris, 1993), 137.

is allowed access. This solid defence generates a sense of security while commemorating the courage of the knights: it is beneath the famous Fort St Elmo that Vivant Denon remembers this ‘first fortification of Malta, the one which cost so many men to the Turks, and which they took over only after having killed the last knight who was defending it’.<sup>16</sup>

## The capital city

Once on the island, the traveller embarks on a journey of discovery, often pleasantly contrasting with the Sicilian habits left behind. Brydone immediately reveals his astonishment: ‘On getting to land, we found ourselves in a new world indeed – the streets crowded with well-dressed people, who have all the appearance of health and affluence; whereas in Syracuse, there was scarce a creature to be seen; and even those had the appearance of disease and wretchedness.’<sup>17</sup> After five days in the same clothes, the British traveller looks forward to a good rest in ‘clean, comfortable beds, in expectation of the sweetest slumbers.’<sup>18</sup> A deeper sigh of relief is uttered by the French enthusiastic economist Jean-Marie Roland de la Platière who, when changing into clean clothes, sheds away the past and finally experiences some comfort: ‘How sweet it is to find some cleanliness once again, when one has been twenty days without taking off his clothes except twice to change the underclothes, and everywhere one felt devoured by the causes and effects of such dirtiness.’<sup>19</sup>

Valletta, the main town on the island, headquarters of the Order of St John, reveals itself to the astonished Stranger as

a pleasant and beautiful town at the top of an arid rock, and while bringing together elegance and commodity, it unites in miniature all the beauties that one admires in the most happy places [...]. Its streets as straight as a die are mostly of a very beautiful length, and often provide singular views in that in the middle of two rows of beautiful houses built symmetrically, one climbs mountains or descends in deep valleys.<sup>20</sup>

16 Ibid., 137.

17 P. Brydone, 307.

18 Ibid.

19 J.-M. Roland de la Platière, *Lettres écrites, d'Italie, de Sicile et de Malte, Par M\*\*\*, avocat en Parlement, de plusieurs académies de France, et des Arcades de Rome, A Mlle \*\*\**, à Paris, en 1776, 1777 et 1778 (Amsterdam, 1780), iii, 17.

20 Borch, 168. In line with Borch's observations, Thevenot, who finds the streets of the capital

In his travelogue, the comte de Borch shows a penchant for the use of the hyperbole, although being constructed on a promontory, Valletta does present a considerable number of slopes. To make access easier, a lot of streets have 'wide and beautiful steps running from one side to another, like those of a great palace'.<sup>21</sup> Whereas in France, the physiognomy of towns started to change after the 1750s, in Malta, the new capital built in the sixteenth century under the orders of the French Grand Master Jean Parisot de Valette, is the perfect fortress-town, where orthogonality is associated to the principles of centrality and axuality, founders of classical urbanism.<sup>22</sup> In spite of its beauty, Valletta reserves an unpleasant surprise to travellers: pigs run freely in its streets. Roland de la Platière declares that 'without these ugly animals, [the streets] will be as clean as the houses. On the other hand, they eat all the rubbish thrown to them.'<sup>23</sup>

The beauty of the grid-patterned streets of the city does not only please the eye but it also gives pleasure to the whole body by conveying the idea of freedom, smooth access, and comfort. Streets are well paved and 'the houses are made of freestone, of such a beautiful kind that they always appear new'.<sup>24</sup> Travellers react differently to the sight of houses having flat roofs, a practical means to collect rain water, so scarce on the islands. The seventeenth-century French historian Jean Du Mont compares Maltese houses to those in Italy, so that 'the view of Valetta resembles perfectly that of a straight line theatre'.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, the flat roofs generate in Balthasar de Monconys, another French traveller pertaining to the same century, a sentiment of unease as the perspective creates a feeling of exposure, thus eliminating all sense of intimacy from the dwelling place. Monconys feels that, when looking at the houses from the street, they are unpleasant, similar to those of a pillaged town,<sup>26</sup> evoking

highly tiring, points out that the most beautiful street of all is the one leading from Fort St Elmo to the Royal Gate, being almost a mile long. See Thevenot, 31.

21 Roland de la Platière, 18.

22 See *Dictionnaire de l'Ancien Régime*, 1259.

23 Roland de la Platière, 46.

24 Denon, 137.

25 Jean Du Mont, *Voyage de Mr Du Mont en France, en Italie, en Allemagne, à Malte, et en Turquie, contenant les recherches et observations curieuses qu'il a faites en tous ces pays: tant sur les moeurs, les coutumes des peuples, leurs différents gouvernements et leurs religions que sur l'histoire ancienne et moderne, la philosophie et les monuments antiques. Le tout enrichi de figures* (La Haye, 1699), ii, 19.

26 B. de Monconys, *Journal des voyages de M. de Monconys, où les savants trouveront un nombre infini de nouveautés, en machines de mathématiques, expériences physiques, raisonnements*

images of destruction and death. These contrasting opinions appear to confirm the ideas of the philosopher Hume who, a century later, states:

Beauty is no quality in things themselves: it exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty. One person may even perceive deformity, where another is sensible of beauty; and every individual ought to acquiesce in his own sentiment, without pretending to regulate those of others.<sup>27</sup>

## Beauty in buildings

A characteristic of Maltese houses is the closed balcony, which Roland de la Platière finds very pleasant, from where one can watch passers-by and take some fresh air.<sup>28</sup> Louvers allowed hidden observation while protecting the sacred space of the family and, according to the comte de Borch, it is the people of Gozo who excelled in the work of balconies and niches, with the former being carefully finished.<sup>29</sup>

The French traveller Houel, ‘the painter of history,’<sup>30</sup> roamed Gozo while keeping an eye on what deserves to be shared with the reader. He is most attentive to beauty encapsulated in historic remains, sculpture, and architecture, where stylistic harmony is a must. He abhorred the Gothic style and praises profusely the classic, Greek perfection, for which he is constantly on the lookout. Houel firmly believes in the classical conception according to which, beauty consists of an arrangement of integral parts into a coherent whole, according to proportion, harmony, symmetry, and similar notions.<sup>31</sup> Precise observations, accompanied by a series of plates in order to be well understood, compose most of Houel’s account. An example is the way in which he describes and illustrates the remains of a marble statue found in Rabat, Gozo, probably representing the goddess Juno. Placed in a cavity in the rock between the two gates leading to the Gozo castello, Houel deems it ‘very beautiful and of an

*de la belle philosophie, curiosités de chimie, et conversations des illustres de ce siècle* (Lyon, 1665), i, 141.

27 Hume, 136. See <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/beauty/>

28 Roland de la Platière, 19.

29 Borch, ii, 7–8.

31 Houel, 93.

30 *Ibid.*, 89.

31 See <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/beauty/>

excellent execution, although it had neither head nor limbs'.<sup>32</sup> He does not fail to praise the Maltese architecture, as happens when he visits the small chapel of Our Lady of the Snows, near Marsaxlokk:

Its layout and decoration gave me the greatest delight by the good taste in shape and by the simplicity of its volume and contours. I have had several occasions to admire the Maltese architecture for these two qualities: an exquisite taste in the shape of its volume and a noble simplicity in details.<sup>33</sup>

For him, beauty is the result of several features which are not beautiful in themselves, but which work together to get a comely result. Houel does not fail to point an accusing finger at the Sicilian taste and ironically states: 'For sure the Maltese architects do not go to study in Sicily to form themselves on modern works.'<sup>34</sup> Harmony in forms conveys to Houel a sense of beauty, quickly perceived and pleasantly acknowledged, and he does not fail to criticize the remains of a tower in Gudja, '[whose] construction is very ugly and very irregular.'<sup>35</sup> In spite of this severe judgment, Houel is sensitive to beauty even where he least expects it, as happens when thanks to the recommendations of Monsieur Poussiègue, one of the captains of the Maltese harbour and French consul in Malta, he is allowed lodging at the Capuchins' convent in Gozo. Since the traveller is armed with his own formation and with the impressions of towns previously visited, a stereotypical idea accompanies him when visiting the convent, expecting austerity not only in the way of life but also in the building itself. Houel is, however, surprised by the beautiful layout and by the order of the architecture. He is so sensitive to the unexpected beauty that he goes on:

It is surely the only monastery of this order where one finds such a beautiful entrance: the cleanliness that reigns in this house cannot be compared to that of the convent of Girgenti. There reigns a good taste, carefulness, and an elegance which produces as much surprise as pleasure. The arches of the cloister are decorated with garlands and with vases full of flowers. One looks after them with care: if one does not see those who live in this place, one would think that he is in a retreat house for voluptuous wise men.<sup>36</sup>

32 Houel, 77.

33 *Ibid.*, 93.

34 *Ibid.*

35 *Ibid.*, 84.

36 *Ibid.*, 85.

What surprises Houel is the sharp contrast between his expectation of austerity and the charm conveyed by the flowers which bring colour to life, joy, and, perhaps, even a hint of sensual pleasure. It is by being open to whatever comes his way and by ridding himself of preconceived ideas that Houel succeeds in perceiving beauty even where he least expects it.

## Local beauty

On an island generally thought to be an extension of Sicily, the traveller undergoes experiences that touch the innermost part of his soul. In June, Malta offers one of the most beautiful sights to Patrick Brydone, often sceptical and sarcastic, but somehow sensitive to nature:

We were delighted, on our way back to the city [from Mdina], with the beauty of the setting sun; much superior, I think, to what I have ever observed in Italy. The whole of the eastern part of the heavens, for half an hour after sunset, was of a fine deep purple and made a beautiful appearance. This, the Maltese tell us, is generally the case every evening, at this season of the year.<sup>37</sup>

During these magical final hours of the day, memories are evoked and the soul opens itself to infinity. The purple hue, intrinsically associated with sunset, is a combination between the intense fire of red and the serenity of blue, which not only consoles but also excites.

In contrast to the tranquillity created by such a scene, where the sun has lost its fury, Riedesel evokes the power of this celestial body whose latent energy causes harm and ugliness. He explains how the spring of 1767, when he was in Malta, proved to be extremely cold and unpleasant. He finds it hard to understand how the sun can be scorching, perhaps even more than it is in Germany in the thick of summer, when a freezing cold north wind is blowing violently. Riedesel does, however, remember how prior to his visit to Malta, he had undergone a similar experience at the temple of Selinunte in Sicily. He narrates how, although he had to button up his clothes because of the cold, the sun peeled the skin of his face so badly that it bled.<sup>38</sup>

37 Brydone, 327.

38 Riedesel, 76–7.

Another local source of beauty is the alabaster stone found in Żebbuġ, Gozo. Houel, a naturalist, describes how ‘the owner has the stone sawn on site. While so doing, the colour of the veins is examined and the stone is sawn in a way that the veins produce the most beautiful effect possible at the surface.’<sup>39</sup> Alabaster tables were thus made and then transported on mules’ backs to workshops where they were polished and shaped. In contrast to Houel’s appreciation, Vivant Denon states that, although alabaster is greatly worked in Malta, it is unfortunately without taste and without beautiful shapes.<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, the comte de Borch found Gozitan alabaster of a beautiful wavy and frosty yellow, good for polishing but sensitive to heat, so much so that, as soon as a corner table or a similar piece of furniture is briefly exposed to it, the alabaster shatters and becomes scaly.<sup>41</sup>

Another element which conveys beauty is water, fundamental in creating and sustaining life, extremely precious to the island because of its scarcity. In Malta, one of the main concerns of the Order was to have water accessible in Valletta. Several attempts were made until in the seventeenth century, under the reign of Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt, an aqueduct was built to carry water from one of the plateaux in the centre of the island to the capital. It is with pleasure that Fr Jehannot narrates how in Valletta, water flows in public squares and in the streets thanks to beautiful fountains while also being available at the city gates to quench the animals’ thirst.<sup>42</sup> Thevenot recounts a delightful scene, resulting from the presence of this vital element that welcomes the visitor when entering the island:

Those who come into the harbour of Malta take great pleasure in seeing the Barracca covered with beautiful trees planted in rows; there is a very beautiful garden, rather elevated which looks on the port beneath the bastion of Italy; it is full of orange and lemon trees planted in rows, and a number of beautiful fountains which spurt water very high, making it all extremely charming.<sup>43</sup>

39 Houel, 84.

40 Denon, 150.

41 Borch, ii, 9–10.

42 Le Père Jehannot (de l’Ordre de la Sainte-Trinité), *Voyage à Constantinople pour le rachat des captifs* (Paris, 1732), 125.

43 Thevenot, 25.

Fountains required hydraulic mechanisms still experimented on while bringing under control the vital element. Symbols of purification and life, they bring relief to the traveller, as did the statue of Neptune, king of the sea, dominating the Grand Harbour, considered as being perhaps the most beautiful in town.<sup>44</sup> At Neptune's feet was a dolphin that threw water high up in the air, the fountain being strategically placed so that ships could replenish their water supplies without taking their barrels down on land,<sup>45</sup> a feature highly appreciated by those at sea. Heralding healing, freshness, and life, a fountain is also present in the courtyard of the Holy Infirmary so as to distract patients and bring a sign of hope amidst misery and death.<sup>46</sup>

Be it fresh or salty, water can also be destructive in its fury. The sea's power and strength because of its immensity brings suffering and fear. The spononara, the light, six-oared boat used to cross the sea between Sicily and Malta in order to escape falling prey to pirates, is not only uncomfortable but it also makes the traveller fear for his life as it cannot withstand a rough sea. The roll of the vessel causes a horrible sea sickness in Brydone,<sup>47</sup> whereas Vivant Denon vomits so much because of the waves breaking against the spononara that he even throws up blood.<sup>48</sup> This unlimited stretch of water has also the paradoxical power to drown and destroy. It is Houel who experiences closely this feeling while travelling around Gozo and sees rocks perpendicularly cut and rising 130 feet above the water.

The rocks disappear vertically into the water, to an immense depth. Their whiteness makes them easily visible in the sea, which appears very black because it is deep and because since it is exposed to the north, it is shaded by the rock; and since it is completely transparent, it offers beneath the boat that is carrying you, near the rock, an emptiness, an abyss of a horrible depth, in the midst of

44 F. Deseine, *Nouveau voyage d'Italie, contenant une description exacte de toutes ses provinces, villes et lieux considérables et des îles qui en dépendent, avec les routes et chemins publics pour y parvenir, la distance des lieux et les choses remarquables qu'on y rencontre, l'origine et fondation des villes, les raretés qu'on y voit dans les églises, couvents, collèges, hôpitaux, palais publics et particuliers, cabinets, bibliothèques, trésors, le gouvernement politique des différents états, les noms des hommes illustres nés en chaque lieu, et des familles principales qui y font leur séjour* (Lyon, 1699), 606.

45 Thevenot, 26.

46 Deseine, 608.

47 Brydone, 297.

48 Denon, 136.

which the boat appears suspended next to a wall smooth and vertical that does not offer any help. One believes that he is in perfect isolation and suspended in the air, as if by magic: one imagines that should the boat disappear, one will make a frightening fall: the idea of drowning does not present itself at first, it only comes on reflection.<sup>49</sup>

The availability of water contributed to making local products highly esteemed: in the eighteenth century, the cultivation of cotton was strongly encouraged and whole stretches of land were dedicated to this activity. Crop rotation was practised over a period of four years, with several types of cotton being planted during the third year. According to Denon, it is the cotton from the Indies that is the most beautiful.<sup>50</sup> Brydone also describes how one could protect the whiteness of the cotton by picking the ripe cotton pods every morning before sunrise, because the heat of the day turned them immediately yellowish.<sup>51</sup> In Gozo, women made beautiful plain or patterned cotton blankets, found in Italy and widely-spread in France.<sup>52</sup> Brydone notes that the Gozitans are more industrious than the Maltese, probably because they are more isolated, and that they produce highly valued beautiful socks.<sup>53</sup>

Another exquisite product of the island are oranges, imported from south-east Asia by the Arabs and introduced in the south of the European continent towards the year 1000.<sup>54</sup> An exotic fruit of refined taste, the Maltese orange spread in the eighteenth century to the whole of Europe. From the sweet orange to the blood one, travellers affirmed that 'the Maltese oranges certainly deserve their reputation of being the most beautiful in the world'.<sup>55</sup> If, up to the seventeenth century, citrus fruit was only privately cultivated, the attitude towards this fruit changed during the following century when it was deemed capable of replacing cotton. It gradually became a valuable economic asset, closely examined by travellers. According to Riedesel,

the productions of the island are cotton, of which one exports annually for the value of 400 000 Sicilian crowns (each crown is worth twelve Neapolitan carlins)

49 Houel, 87.

50 Denon, 143.

51 Brydone, 339.

52 Roland de la Platière, 38.

53 Brydone, 339.

54 A. Blondy, *Le Commerce des orangers entre Malte et la France au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Malte, 2003), 12.

55 Brydone, 340.

and oranges, whose great reputation is known. The great commerce which one makes abroad is why one even pays up to a Neapolitan grain a piece.<sup>56</sup>

The high price requested makes them more valued and Brydone, for whom the Maltese oranges are ‘better than all those he has seen of the same kind in Spain and Portugal’<sup>57</sup> follows the usual custom and does his best to get hold of some boxes to send to his friends. Struck by the blood orange, he admits how difficult it is to procure some to send to his friends in Naples, as they are so highly esteemed that they are sent as gifts all over Europe, with the knights giving them to friends and relatives as a sign of gratitude or friendship. The red pulp of the orange seems to reflect the heat of the sun, so characteristic of the island.

Roland de la Platière, for whom the Maltese oranges were the best in the Mediterranean,<sup>58</sup> closely studied the link between Malta and France. He found that they are so seducing that Madame Adélaïde, daughter of Louis XV and aunt of the king, rented a garden in Malta and that ‘every week, when oranges are ripe, one sends her two and a half boxes of oranges and of pomegranates, the most beautiful and the best ever known’.<sup>59</sup> Orange trees were not only cultivated for their economic gain but they were also chosen as evergreens to embellish the environment. Thevenot observed how the auberge of Auvergne was very pleasing to the eye because of the number of orange trees that one could see on going in.<sup>60</sup> The orange tree and its fruit convey to the traveller ideas of well-being, good luck, prosperity, and abundance. Generally associated to worldly pleasures, oranges also evoke sensuality which the visitor satisfies by closely observing the fairer sex on the island.

## Women and beauty

For Houel, the public fountain of the Annunzjata near Rabat, Gozo, the meeting place of ‘all the women and the girls of the surroundings who

56 Riedesel, 71.

57 Brydone, 337.

58 Roland de la Platière, 38.

59 Ibid, 39.

60 Thevenot, 31.

come either to wash their clothes or to draw up water',<sup>61</sup> provided the ideal place for the silent contemplation of women: 'I have observed a great number of very pretty young girls and women, who have confirmed my thoughts regarding the beauty of the inhabitants of this island.'<sup>62</sup> Houel undertakes a simple, apparently chaste, description of a sight that accompanied him every evening when concluding his wanderings across Gozo, a narration which stimulates however the reader's imagination. He recounts how he used to meet

groups of men and women carrying on their heads sacks of cotton which they had just picked. [...]. The women especially appeared to enjoy the triumph gained by their work over the ingratitude of the land. Their gait announced this joy and they did not care to imprison and hide scrupulously to the eyes the charms a bit prominent inherent to their sex. There, as elsewhere, the most beautiful were the least scrupulous. Their arm was raised to balance the burden they were carrying; this posture developed their naturally elegant waist and increased the graces bestowed on them by nature.<sup>63</sup>

The charms of Maltese women proved to be not only a source of pleasure but also a means of income as a number of travellers, amongst whom Roland de la Platière, state that Maltese men trafficked the beauty of their wives, while the mothers sold that of their daughters.<sup>64</sup> The German Riedesel is even bolder in his admission and perhaps a bit too trenchant when declaring: 'Moreover the knights, one must admit it to their shame, have so highly corrupted the habits that, besides some women who belong to the old nobility, there is not one honest woman or girl in the whole island.'<sup>65</sup> In spite of their vindictive nature, associated to the Sicilian spirit, it seems that Maltese men gave in easily to the love of money to which anything useful was submitted. According to Riedesel, who judges the Maltese rather harshly, the Maltese man 'believes that he is the happiest man on earth when he can obtain an arabesque [sic] beauty for a wife, and eat white onions and garlic to his heart's content'.<sup>66</sup> He continues to point out that 'it is not in Malta that one must look for the beauties so

61 Houel, 81.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

64 Roland de la Platière, 74.

65 Riedesel, 68.

66 Ibid., 63.

famous in Antiquity, both because the local blood is mixed by the knights to that of all the European nations, as well as because [he] do[es] not see how these ideal and sublime beauties could have ever been born on this scorching rock, situated under the burning African sky'.<sup>67</sup> In the eighteenth century, the ideal woman had to have a porcelain complexion as natural looking as possible and the sun's heat, which had such a harmful effect on Riedesel's skin, could surely not permit the presence of such beauty. Riedesel's prejudice against the African continent instigates him to punish severely the Maltese in his judgment. On the contrary, Denon praises the Maltese women who, under a burning sky, 'have the whiteness of the inhabitants of the North, with the passionate expression of the women of the East'. He adds that 'their beauty is neither Greek nor majestic, but it is nonetheless seductive'.<sup>68</sup> This same charm beguiles the comte de Borch, who openly sings the praises of the Maltese women: 'She has a very slim waistline, a leg very well formed, a raised instep, a dazzling whiteness, beautiful breasts, black hair, and an extreme liveliness in her words and in all her actions.'<sup>69</sup>

The theory of the subjectivity of beauty as being located 'in the eye of the beholder' is proven by the reflections of the Italian Sestini whose expectations are met by disappointment: 'I had heard during my stay in Sicily that Maltese women were very beautiful. In truth, I saw some who were quite fine but I then noticed that most of them were ugly and cross-eyed.'<sup>70</sup> Be they beautiful, as white as alabaster,<sup>71</sup> modest or simply vain and unattractive, women entertain the travellers' dreams and provide him another element to examine, describe, judge, and commit to posterity.

67 Ibid., 74–5.

68 Denon, 138.

69 Borch, 226.

70 D. Sestini, *Lettres de Monsieur l'abbé Dominique Sestini, écrites à ses amis en Toscane, pendant le cours de ses voyages en Italie, en Sicile et en Turquie, sur l'histoire naturelle, l'industrie et le commerce de ces différentes contrées. Traduites de l'italien et enrichies de notes par M. Pingeron, membre de l'Académie royale des sciences et arts utiles de Barcelone, ancien secrétaire du musée de Paris, attaché au bureau des plans du département des bâtiments du roi, à Versailles* (Paris, 1789), ii, 392.

71 Roland de la Platière, 66.

## **Conclusion**

The appeal of beauty or lack thereof contributes to the creation of accounts which agree and differ on several aspects. Being both subjective and objective, the evaluation of beauty communicates an approving or condemning attitude which makes travellers' accounts personal, engaging, and at times, controversial. While doing his utmost to rid himself of prejudices so as to come to a genuine judgement of taste, the traveller's quest for beauty and its account make the appreciation of beauty a value that is worth cultivating for its consequences and for itself.