

Nuns Behind Bars: Desire and Denial in Patrick Brydone's Sicily

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*“In their writings travelers put their fantasies on display often in spite of themselves.”*¹

Dennis Porter

Pour les lecteurs anglophones, *A Tour through Sicily and Malta* (1773) [*Voyage en Sicile et à Malte*] de l'écrivain écossais Patrick Brydone a rapidement transformé le désert délaissé qu'était la Sicile en une destination touristique essentielle du *Grand Tour* méridional. Les spécialistes ont généralement expliqué l'impact du livre par le caractère détaillé et scientifique des observations faites ainsi que par l'évidente ouverture d'esprit de son auteur vis-à-vis des coutumes étrangères, deux aspects supposés avoir séduit un public des Lumières. L'article met en relief une facette moins bien étudiée du livre : l'ambivalence d'un observateur protestant du Nord par rapport au Sud catholique. L'article montre comment la prétendue tolérance des Lumières de Brydone s'adresse surtout aux Siciliens de sa propre classe sociale et comment sa fascination pour la « superstition catholique » trahit sa confusion à l'égard de l'altérité de la religion italienne.

Le propos est centré sur les interactions de Brydone avec les prêtres et les religieuses, notamment sur sa rencontre avec une « jeune et jolie religieuse » avec laquelle il converse longuement à travers le guichet d'un couvent. Dans cette scène, les désirs réprimés de l'auteur rappellent les motifs de l'érotisme anticlérical de l'époque tout en suggérant une attitude contradictoire vis-à-vis de l'île elle-même. À en juger le succès de ce livre – il a connu une douzaine d'éditions jusqu'à la fin du siècle –, Brydone n'était pas le seul à partager ce point de vue. On peut sans doute interpréter son appréhension anxieuse d'un Mezzogiorno « non éclairé » comme le reflet des tensions culturelles de sa classe et de son pays. Outre son utilité en tant que guide de voyage, le livre fournit une mise en scène psychodynamique de l'anxiété impérialiste.

The 18th century was the heyday of the Grand Tour, that long exercise in aristocratic preening that flooded the European continent with British

1. Dennis Porter, *Haunted Journeys: Desire and Transgression in European Travel Writing*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991: 13.

adolescents in search of Roman ruins, Renaissance paintings, and sexual adventure. The standard *termini ad quem* on the Italian leg of this exercise were Rome, Florence, and Venice. Occasionally, someone made it to Naples and, beginning in the 1740s, to recently uncovered Herculaneum and Pompeii.² Further south, though, the promise of rough roads, rougher manners, and even rougher banditti offered “scant encouragement for tourists.”³ The Mezzogiorno attracted a daring handful of travelers interested in classical art and archaeology, but for much of the century, Sicily remained, in British eyes, “no country for a gentleman to travel in.”⁴

Then, in 1773, a Scot named Patrick Brydone published an account of a southern journey he had taken three years earlier, as a traveling tutor, or “bearleader,” to sixteen-year-old William Fullarton. Brydone’s *Tour through Sicily and Malta* transformed Sicily from a negligible backwater to an exotic locale that the smart set was almost obliged to visit.⁵ In Bristol, the lending library could hardly keep it on the shelves: the only book borrowed more frequently there in the 1780s was an account of Captain Cook’s voyages.⁶ By the turn of the century, the *Tour* saw a dozen English-language editions as well as translations into French and German. On the strength of his scientific observations, Brydone was offered membership in England’s and Scotland’s royal societies, while his ascent of Mount Etna made him famous across Europe and precipitated a vogue for “poesie volcanique.”⁷ The *Tour* became so generally accepted as the official word on Sicily that when one visitor to the island, John Patteson, wrote to his mother in England in 1779, he asked her to purchase a copy so that, instead of taking the trouble to personally describe the sights he was visiting, he could simply refer her to the relevant pages in Brydone.⁸

How can we explain Brydone’s popularity? In addressing that question, judicious scholars have emphasized two ostensibly contradictory elements: his “good English empiricism”, which made him tolerant of other people’s customs yet wary of superstition; and his emotional vul-

2. Cesare de Seta, “Grand Tour: The Lure of Italy in the Eighteenth Century.” In Andrew Wilton and Ilaria Bignamini, eds., *Grand Tour: The Lure of Italy in the 18th Century*. London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1996: 14-15.

3. Jeremy Black, *Italy and the Grand Tour*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003: 59.

4. Geoffrey Trease, *The Grand Tour*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1967: 140. See also Black, *ibid.*; and Edward Chaney, *The Evolution of the Grand Tour: Anglo-Italian Cultural Relations since the Renaissance*. London: Frank Cass, 1998.

5. The first edition, published in two volumes, was Patrick Brydone, *A Tour through Sicily and Malta . In a Series of Letters to William Beckford, Esq. of Somerly in Suffolk*. London: W. Strahan, 1773. Brydone had been Beckford’s bearleader on a previous tour. Citations in this essay refer to the “new and complete edition,” published as *Travels in Sicily and Malta* (Aberdeen: George Clark and Son, 1848).

6. Paul Fussell, “Patrick Brydone: The Eighteenth-Century Traveler as Representative Man.” In *Literature as a Mode of Travel*, ed. Warner Rice. New York: New York Public Library, 1963: 53.

7. Helene Tuzet, *La Sicile au XVIII^e siècle vue par les voyageurs étrangers*. Strasbourg: Editions P.H. Heitz, 1955: 43-49. See also Vittorio Frosini, “Brydone Viaggiatore Sentimentale”, introduction to Brydone’s *Viaggio in Sicilia e a Malta, 1770*, trans. Flavio Marengo and Maria Zupelli. Milan: Longanesi, 1968: 15.

8. Chaney, 35.

nerability, which allowed him to respond to scenes of the sublime with *Sturm und Drang* enthusiasm.⁹ I say “ostensibly” contradictory because, in the late 18th century, it was precisely the interplay between reason and emotion—Jane Austen’s sense and sensibility—that defined an emergent Romantic mood. Brydone’s display of that mood may well have hit the same nerve that was being twanged all across Europe in the 1770s by Goethe’s inaugural effort, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*.

To Paul Fussell, who takes Brydone as a “representative man” of the late Enlightenment, that display was intentional; Brydone’s frequent allusions to faded ancient glories, Fussell argues, played consciously to his audience’s “appetite for the elegiac”, while in describing “sublime” Etna or foregrounding his “comic disillusionment”, he was “contriving the literary patterns of emotion most in vogue.”¹⁰ Others praise him as a “sentimental” traveler, adept at eliciting “imaginative involvement” in his descriptions.¹¹ Emanuel Kanceff goes further, identifying in Brydone not a self-conscious literariness but an abandonment to proto-Romantic passions. Speaking of late 18th century travelers to Sicily—Brydone’s progeny—he notes, “Li si vede estasiarsi all’ascolto di una musica in riva al mare, al chiaro di luna, e meditare a lungo sulla solenne malinconia di tale scena naturale. Li si scorge disertare i solotti e le dimore nobiliari, per mescolarsi al popolo avidi di sensazioni.”¹²

This is a thoughtful description of the emerging mood, but in one particular it does not apply well to Brydone. While he may indeed have been “hungry for sensations”, he seldom satisfied them by “mixing with the people”. He displays a singular distaste for commoners, particularly for their religious gullibility and their “wretched hovels”; socially he is no more tolerant than any other slumming patrician.¹³ When he praises the Sicilian people, he means the ruling families to whom he has letters of introduction—the well-bred, educated, and anglophile “people of fashion”. Helene Tuzet accurately assesses his narrow social compass: “La culture anglaise de la haute société de Palerme lui rend la sympathie aisée; mais en face d’une population trop différente, il est moins compréhensif; il constate la distance sans chercher à jeter un pont.”¹⁴

9. For the contrast, see Frosini, 21-25. For an argument stressing Brydone’s Scottishness (“There was nothing at all English about Brydone”), see Joseph Farrell, “Patrick Brydone, Enlightenment Traveler,” *Biblioteca del Viaggio in Italia* 36. Geneva: Slatkine, 1992: 291-305.

10. Fussell, especially 57-63.

11. Charles L. Batten, Jr., *Pleasurable Instruction: Form and Convention in Eighteenth-Century Travel Literature*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978: 102-4. See also Frosini, 25.

12. “We see them going into ecstasies at the sound of music on the shore, at moonlight, and meditating on the solemn melancholy of such natural scenes. We glimpse them deserting the homes and salons of the nobility and, hungry for sensations, mixing with the people”. Emanuele Kanceff, “La ‘Scoperta’ della Sicilia e le Origini del Romanticismo”. *Biblioteca del Viaggio in Italia* 36. Geneva: Slatkine, 1992: 4.

13. See, for example, Brydone, 103-11.

14. “To the English culture of Palermo’s high society he easily lends his sympathy; but faced with a very different population, he is less understanding; he notices the distance without seeking to bridge the gap”. Tuzet, 37.

Yet his shortcomings in this regard are not irrelevant to his popularity. On the contrary. I suggest that it may actually have been Brydone's *inability* to bridge cultural divides—revealed in the book's dramatization of his anxieties—that made him such an apt guide for the British gentry. Those anxieties simmer beneath the surface in his comments about class, about family and social relations, about politics, and especially about religion. I focus in this essay on the last of these categories, for it is in Brydone's superficially glib but ultimately conflicted attitude toward Sicilian Catholicism that I believe may lie one key to his contemporary appeal.

"Catholic superstitions"

Both Brydone's father and his father-in-law were Church of Scotland ministers. Given this heritage—not to mention his reputation as a Scottish Voltaire—one might expect him to display mere contempt for what he calls "Catholic superstition". But contempt is not the *Tour's* dominant tone. True, when Brydone is describing peasants making the sign of the cross or fishermen muttering "Ave Marias," we do hear some puritan smugness.¹⁵ But this is as much a class bias as a religious one—a discrimination perfectly in keeping with Brydone's fawning attitude toward the Sicilian nobility and his casual disdain of the "vulgar." Their crime is not belief *per se*—he approves the nominal Catholicism of his wealthy hosts—but their tendency to personalize it. The "personal worship" of saints, he says, is "better adapted to the capacities of the vulgar than the more pure and sublime modes" of religion, for abstractions can "only distract and confound their simple understandings, unaccustomed to speculation."¹⁶

Brydone's distaste for peasant forms of worship, then, is based more on theatrical style than on theology. Frequently, when he speaks of Sicilian religious customs, we hear him not condemning "Romanism" but working out his own ambivalences, juggling Humean skepticism with curiosity, wonder, respect, even affection. It is in this working out of his own uncertainties that I suggest lies his charm, and perhaps also his appeal to a similarly conflicted audience.

We hear the conflict, for example, in his affection for Father Recupero, the "ingenious ecclesiastic" who serves as his guide, shares his enthusiasm for geology, and confides that his own researches on the slopes of Etna have led him to question Bishop Ussher's famous chronology.¹⁷ We

15. Brydone, 10, 15, 53.

16. *Ibid.*, 61.

17. Giuseppe Recupero's *Storia naturale e general dell'Etna* was published posthumously by the university press at Catania (1815). For his doubts about the age of the earth, see Brydone, 54. Brydone's recounting of these doubts drew fire from, among others, Samuel Johnson. See James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, vol. 3, ed. George Birkbeck Hill. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936: 356.

hear it in Brydone's frank admiration for Palermo's annual Santa Rosalia festival, which produces a feeling of general amity (at least among the nobles) and which leads the Scot to admit, not entirely facetiously, that "if superstition often produces such effects, I sincerely wish we had a little more of it amongst us."¹⁸ We hear it too in his comments on a dinner party to which he and Fullarton are invited by the bishop of Agrigentum.¹⁹

"We were just thirty at table," he writes, "but upon my word, I do not think we had less than a hundred dishes of meat." That announcement sets the tone for Brydone's description of a drunken banquet in which his amazement at his hosts' largesse battles his suspicion that anything so enjoyable must also be sinful. Having made the punch, he is himself partially responsible for the general merriment, yet he cannot own that pleasure without reluctance, and so he attributes the revelry to a "libertine spirit" which priests adopt to offset the "nonsense and mummerly in their worship." Yet this exculpatory reading is itself offset by his obviously delighted, if ambivalent, quoting of one "reverend father" whose creed seems unusually Epicurean:

"We have exploded," said he, "from our system every thing that is dismal or melancholy, and are persuaded that, of all the roads in the universe, the road to heaven must be the pleasantest and least gloomy; if it be not so," added he, "God have mercy upon us, for I am afraid we shall never get there... Abstinance from all innocent and lawful pleasure we reckon one of the greatest sins, and guard against it with the utmost care; and I am pretty sure it is a sin that none of us here will ever be damned for."

The priest's surrender to God-given pleasures is less striking here than Brydone's inability to share in that abandon, suggesting that it may be the lure, and fear, of pleasure, that drives his anxiety about Catholicism and that made his dramatization of that anxiety so appealing to his readers.

"The most interesting object in nature"

That dramatization becomes complex in two passages that reveal Brydone's ambivalence toward religious women. The first is a rumination occasioned by his visit to a Catania church dedicated to Mary.²⁰ Brydone cannot fathom Mary; the whole panoply of worship associated with her confuses and disturbs him. In this passage, it generates in him a puerile glee in uncovering Roman Catholicism's dirty secrets. Recognizing that the church was once a pagan temple, he launches into a delirious little riff on the ironies of syncretism. "How small is the deviation in almost every article of [the Sicilians'] present rites," he says, "from those of the ancients."

18. *Ibid.*, 204. For a subtle reading of this passage, see Francois Forray, "Brydone et la fête sicilienne." *Biblioteca del Viaggio in Italia* 42. Geneva: Slatkine, 1992: 233-48.

19. For the dinner party discussed in this section, see Brydone, 146-47.

20. Brydone, 58-61.

In some places the very same images still remain: they have only christened them: and what was Venus or Proserpine, is now Mary Magdalene or the Virgin. The same ceremonies are daily performed before these images, in the same manner. The saints are perpetually coming down in person, and working miracles, as the heathen gods did of old. The walls of the temples are covered with the vows of pilgrims, as they were formerly. The holy water, which was held in such detestation by the first Christians, is again revered, and sprinkled about with the same devotion as in the time of Paganism. The same incense is burnt, by priests arrayed in the same manner, with the same grimaces and genuflexions, before the same images, and in the same temples too.

Indeed, the very gods and goddesses of the ancient pagans have been absorbed into the modern Catholic pantheon. Were a pagan priest to return to Catania today, Brydone supposes with studied mischievousness, he would recognize all of his old friends—even Venus Meretrix, the patroness of prostitutes—in the statues that are now dedicated to Catholic saints.

Despite this gleeful effrontery, though, Brydone is also taken with Sicilian popular worship and even envious of its naïve devotees. He is so enchanted by Palermo's Santa Rosalia festival, for example, that—so Goethe tells us—the saint becomes “universally famous through Brydone's description of her feast day.”²¹ In another revealing passage, he even hints that the emotional richness evident in “superstitious” practices is a central feature of Sicily's appeal for him. Commenting on the “poor Catholics” who typically evoke his disdain, he admits:

I own I have sometimes envied them their feelings, and in my heart cursed the pride of reason and philosophy, with all its cool and tasteless triumphs, that lulls into a kind of stoical apathy these most exquisite sensations of the soul. [...] If once you have steeled it over with the hard and impenetrable temper of philosophy, these fine-spun threads of weakness and affection that were so pliable, and so easily tied, become hard and inflexible, and for ever lose that delicate tone of sensibility that puts them into a kind of unison and vibration with every object around us; for what has been truly said of one part of our species, may almost with equal justice be applied to the whole— That to their weakness half their charms we owe.²²

Brydone himself fears (or boasts?) that he lacks this allegedly feminine quality, and he is ineffectively comforted by the realization that, in its place, he possesses a temper that is “hard,” “impenetrable,” and impervious to passion.

21. Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Italian Journey, 1786-1788*. Trans. W.H. Auden and Elizabeth Mayer. New York: Schocken Books, 1968: 225. For the description of the festival, see Brydone, 201-11.

22. Brydone, 60-61.

Brydone's longing for the *ewige Weibliche* is obvious here, and it is one key, I suggest, to his fascination with the Italian South. This becomes clear when he ends his discourse on superstition by contrasting his belief in a "being that is immaterial, and yet whose essence penetrates all matter" with the more concrete imaginings of the Sicilian faithful. The Sicilian peasant, he says, could never understand an immaterial god. "But set up before him the figure of a fine woman, with a beautiful child in her arms, the most interesting object in nature, and tell him she can procure him every thing he wants, he knows perfectly well what he is about, feels himself animated by the object, and prays to her with all his might."²³

Whose longing is being dramatized here? Although on the surface Brydone seems to be smirking at the peasant's intellectual shortcomings, his envy of that deficiency is palpable; he longs for the immediacy that his more abstract faith denies him. And he does so, characteristically, by imagining a woman—that "most interesting object in nature"—whose being concentrates all the emotional depth his "philosophy" discounts. The entire passage works as a staging of anxieties—about an image-rich mode of worship, to be sure, but also about the appropriate response due a female "object" that is as appealing as it is unapproachable. It is in passages like this that Frosini nicely locates a "sfumatura di malinconia," suggesting Brydone's "rimpianto delle credenze infantili."²⁴

"Conversing with amiable nuns"

Brydone's anxious fascination with Sicilian religion is even more palpable when he describes a visit that he and Fullarton make to a Messina convent.²⁵ The account begins straightforwardly enough, as Brydone notes that the nuns, speaking through a parlatory grate, receive them "with great politeness and affability" and prove to be "by no means deficient either in point of knowledge or sprightliness." After some hours of this banter, however, Brydone confesses dissatisfaction:

None of them had sincerity enough (which we met with in Portugal more than once) to acknowledge the unhappiness of their situation. All pretended to be happy and contented, and declared they would not change their prison for the most brilliant situation in life. However, some of them had a soft melancholy in their countenances, that gave the lie to their words; and I am persuaded, in a tete-a-tete, and on a more intimate acquaintance, they would have told a very different story.

More evidence of Brydone's sympathetic nature? Hardly. Far from being open to the nuns' experience, Brydone here displays the same ethnocentric armoring that he expresses in responding to peasant piety. To

23. Brydone, 61-62.

24. Frosini, 25.

25. The visit discussed in this section is described in Brydone, 27-28.

this very social Scot, it is self-evident that no one would willingly deny herself a “brilliant situation in life,” no matter what her spiritual impulses. Clearly any woman who would so isolate herself must be under duress; and if she had but the opportunity to speak with him more intimately (interesting word!), she would readily confess that her convent was a prison. On one level this is simply the blinkered indignation of the metropolitan extrovert, the man to whom a contemplative life is unimaginable. But more is at stake here than thwarted extroversion. Noting that several of the nuns are “extremely handsome,” Brydone continues:

I am very certain, from frequent experience, that there is no artificial ornament, or studied embellishment whatever, that can produce half so strong an effect, as the modest and simple attire of a pretty young nun, placed behind a double iron grate. To see an amiable, unaffected, and unadorned person, that might have been an honor and an ornament to society, make a voluntary resignation of her charms, and give up the world and its pleasures, for a life of fasting and mortification, it cannot fail to move our pity; And pity melts the mind to love.

The frustration is palpable. Pretty young nuns, who might have become adorned and ornamental, voluntarily withhold their charms and deny themselves pleasure—this moves his mind first to pity, then to love. To what kind of love can Brydone be referring?

The language is guarded, and I don’t want to represent him as another skirt-chasing James Boswell. But it’s hardly reaching to discern here a sublimated longing, a public avowal that the sight he is being offered through that quasi confessional window is evoking something less ennobling than pity. Brydone is clearly tempted by the pretty young nuns, and their very inaccessibility heightens that sensation. His male gaze, then, might better be seen not as “tolerant” or “curious,” but as intrusive. Chloe Chard stresses this point in describing Grand Tourists’ descriptions of monasticism. Their emphasis on restricting habits, walls, and impenetrable grates, she writes, “[invest] nuns with an intriguing inaccessibility at the same time that they dramatize prohibition and restriction: the emphasis on improper restraint is elided with an implication that the traveler’s gaze is itself intruding transgressively into a restricted or prohibited area.”²⁶

As this description suggests, Brydone’s was not the only travel book to hint at a taste for such intrusive tableaux. In a book that saw six editions between 1781 and 1798, Irish writer John Moore provided a view of his visit to a Naples convent that, whether because of plagiarism or a shared sensibility, plucked exactly the same heartstrings that Brydone had done. Identifying girls sent to the convent as “victims to the pride of fami-

26. Chloe Chard, *Pleasure and Guilt on the Grand Tour: Travel Writing and Imaginative Geography, 1600-1830*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999: 128.

ly, to avarice, and superstition", he gives this provocative view of a meeting with them:

The interest you take in a beautiful woman is heightened on seeing her in the dress of a nun, by the opposition which you imagine exists between the life to which her rash vows have condemned her, and that to which her own unbiased inclination would have led her. You are moved with pity, which you know is akin to love, on feeling a young blooming creature doomed to retirement and self-denial, who was formed by nature for society and enjoyment.²⁷

Travel accounts were not the only source of such staged titillation. As Peter Wagner notes in his study of Enlightenment-era erotica, "The tendency of obscene writing to shock and to violate existing taboos, provoked a preoccupation with monastic life and clerics."²⁸ That preoccupation generated scurrilous literary jabs at both Protestant and Catholic clergy, a burgeoning of "rake's clubs" that parodied Catholic practice, and erotic "convent novels" of which the most famous was *Venus in the Cloister, or The Nun in Her Smock*. When Brydone and Moore expressed frustration at seeing "blooming creatures" in prison, then, readers might well have heard echoes not only of this "naughty nuns" literature, but also of the common Protestant reading of the confessional window as a medium through which equally naughty priests could enjoy tales of lechery.²⁹

Whether or not Brydone was consciously referencing this subliterate material, the convent passage's sexual implications are clear enough. They become overt when, having announced his pity for the "imprisoned" woman, he first fantasizes that he might rescue her and then laments that this knightly function is to be denied him:

The pleasure of relieving an object in distress is the only refuge we have against the pain which the seeing of that object occasions; but here this is utterly denied us, and we feel with sorrow that pity is all we can bestow.

From these, and the like reflections, a man generally feels himself in bad spirits after conversing with amiable nuns. Indeed, it is hardly possible, without a heavy heart, to leave the grate, that inexorable and impenetrable barrier. At last we took our leave, expressing our happiness in being admitted so near them, but at the same time deploring our misery at seeing them for ever removed at so immeasurable a distance from us.

In this coded description of sexual frustration, we see that the most painful aspect of the situation is not the nuns' imprisonment but their champion's inability to affect it. The barrier prevents him from achieving the freedom—or the consummation of desire—to which the sight of these

27. John Moore, *A View of Society and Manners in Italy*. Boston: Apollo Press, 1792 [1781]: 416.

28. Peter Wagner, *Eros Revealed: Erotica of the Enlightenment in England and America*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1988: 48.

29. *Venus dans le cloître, ou La religieuse en chemise*, usually attributed to Jean Barrin, was published in French in 1682 or 1683, went into several editions, and first appeared in Henry Rhodes's English translation in 1692. *Ibid.*, 72-79.

“amiable” prisoners beckons him. No wonder he’s in bad spirits. The emotional locus of the passage is not the nuns’ feelings at all. It is the misery he feels at the denial of his own desire.

“This might prove dangerous”

Brydone concludes the episode with a remarkable observation. “They were much pleased with our visit”, he says, “and begged we would repeat it every day during our stay at Messina; but this might prove dangerous.” There is an intriguing coyness in this implication that, despite the barrier, he and young Fullarton have touched the hearts if not the hands of the cloistered women, and have left them—like Brydone himself—wanting more. The element of projection is undeniable. Although it is Brydone himself who is frustrated, he transfers that frustration to the objects of his desire—surrogates, perhaps, for the most interesting object in nature—and imagines it is the pretty young nuns who are longing for *him*.

But why would further contact prove dangerous—and for whom? While Brydone *qua* cavalier might imagine he is protecting the nuns’ reputation by curtailing his visits, it is really his sensibility that is at risk, his peace of mind that is being protected. Like the Santa Rosalia festival, like images of the Virgin, and like boisterous priests, the nuns embody for him a radical otherness whose attractiveness, like that of Sicily itself, is both alluring and fearful. They serve him, therefore, as metonyms for appealing danger; images of forbidden fruit that threaten his emotional stability even as the island’s famous bandits threaten his security. Bandits figure prominently in the early pages of the *Tour*, as Brydone foregrounds his own intrepidity in making their acquaintance and regales his reader with evidence of their ruthlessness.³⁰ While the threat posed by cloistered nuns is not physically comparable, it too dramatizes Brydone’s risk-taking—his willingness to expose himself to a different kind of “captor.” Might we not, then, see his encounters with these incarcerated temptresses as metonyms for his experience of the island as whole?

“Destabilization and danger,” writes Chard, “assume a double role within tourism: on the one hand, they are seen as threats to be contained; on the other, when kept at a proper distance, they may provide acceptable touristic gratification, by allowing the traveler to combine a frisson of excitement and a reminder of risk with a self-congratulatory awareness of having survived.”³¹ Brydone does survive, of course—and lives to tell the tale to generations of readers. Perhaps it was precisely the dangerous aspect of his Mezzogiorno experience—including the danger of conversion to a “superstitious” religion—that made it attractive both to him and

30. Brydone, 7, 31-34.

31. Chard, 213.

to his audience. Even as he confirmed previous notions of the island and its inhabitants as beyond the pale, he demonstrated that, with some boldness, travelers could emerge unscathed from the steamy south. Better than unscathed: invigorated by their brush with cultural difference. His encounter with religious Catholics is one example of that invigoration.

In dramatizing his own confusion about religious exuberance, Brydone may have allowed his mostly Protestant audience to experience temptation vicariously while retaining their aplomb—a welcome reassurance at a time when the first crest of British imperialism was beginning to break. England had long employed the Mediterranean—Montesquieu's untamed *midi*—as a voyeurist's foil, an object of fascination which, because of its alleged wildness, provided a "frisson of excitement" for the more "industrious" North. To understand the appeal of Brydone's *Tour*, then, we might consider it not merely as an Enlightenment observer's "sentimental" survey, but as a psychodynamic staging of imperialist anxiety, registering concern that British manliness might be seduced by pleasure.³² Both elements may have merged to produce the *Tour's* exceptional success. That success demonstrates, at least, that Brydone spoke *to* many of his sight-seeing countrymen. No doubt he also spoke *for* many to whom the "superstitious" people of the Mezzogiorno had long been mysterious, a little frightening, and more than a little useful as objects of fantasy.

32. Katherine Turner notes that the *Tour* "consciously promotes an ideal of rational and manly Britishness." If that was Brydone's ideal, it was clearly threatened by his encounters with Sicilian religion. See her "Patrick Brydone," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 8. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004: 427.

