

Patrick Cheney. 2018
English Authorship and the Early Modern Sublime
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Jonathan P. A. Sell
Universidad de Alcalá de Henares, Spain

It requires little more than common sense and a certain familiarity with the poetry, drama and prose of the period to realize that early modern English authors were capable both of experiencing the phenomenal sublime and of expressing it in their writings. Yet, the category of the sublime has been largely ignored as a potentially useful concept for analyzing early modern English literature. If not quite taboo, the concept has been sidelined as somehow not *à propos*, whether because of its purported anachronism or its contravention of standard rhetorical practice. It is true that the term “sublime” was not used in its current aesthetic sense until the second half of the seventeenth-century, but that does not mean the related experience did not exist. It is true, too, that the figures typically associated with the literary sublime often involved elocutionary license and were therefore treated and used with caution; but they were in no way anti-rhetorical as has sometimes been asserted. It is certainly not true that until Boileau’s 1674 French translation of Longinus no aesthetic or philosophical discourse of the sublime was possible, nor that Longinus was the only classical source that dealt with the sublime.

Fortunately, the history of the sublime in literature has come to look very different over the last three decades. Much of the credit for this face-lift is due to classical scholar Porter (2016), who has demonstrated beyond all doubt that the sublime existed before, and could quite well have existed without, Longinus; to Renaissance scholars such as Refini (2012) and Martin (2012), who have uncovered a thriving continental discourse of the sublime *avant la parole*; and to literary historians such as Boitani (1989) and Jaeger (ed. 2010 and 2012), on the one hand, and Norbrook (1999 and 2010) on the other, who have filled the gap in the history of the sublime between classical antiquity and late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century aesthetics by pointing to its centrality in medieval literature and Milton, respectively. It was only a matter of time before the gap between

Dante and Milton started to be filled, and Cheney's book achieves much of that task in many ways. Indeed, taken all in all, *English Authorship and the Early Modern Sublime's* principal claim to present fame and future posterity lies in its partial completion of the history of the English literary sublime by using the authors it discusses to plug that historical and critical blindspot. Thanks to Cheney, the timeline of the English literary sublime is now almost finished, featuring, last but not least (and better late than never), the Fabulous Four of Spenser, Marlowe, Shakespeare and Jonson.

Cheney's Introduction surveys the recent scholarly rediscovery of early modern sublime discourse on the continent and in England; it also anticipates what will be one of Cheney's main theses, namely, that "the invention of the modern notion of the author is coterminous with the recovery of the classical sublime as an aesthetic category" (4). This explains the fusion of two usually distinct categories into the single "sublime authorship," which is the true object of Cheney's study of inscriptions – or "fictions" – of a sublime authorial self in the works of the Fab Four and their drawing on a repertoire of replicable topics (fire, flight, magic, rapture, transport, wonder, etc.) inherited from classical antiquity. It should be noted that a poet's fashioning of himself as a sublime author is no guarantee that his work will be sublime in effect; readers looking for an account of how early modern literary texts actually contrive to set readers' pulses racing should look elsewhere.

Through a host of close readings Cheney, one of today's most prolific writers on early modern English literature, proves beyond doubt that his writers did indeed fashion themselves "sublime," while in his Afterword, he concludes by exploring the link between sublimity and canonicity: canonicity depends on "literary greatness" (Cheney's "working definition of the sublime," 36), "literary greatness" is the aspiration of authors who write themselves sublime, the Fab Four were the first to do so in English and therefore, by ushering in the sublime, inaugurated the English canon. All that is well and good and makes *English Authorship* worth reading; it is also controversial in its own terms, as well as negligent of more materialist accounts of the rise of the author (e.g. Kesson 2014, Squires 2007). But the relative simplicity of Cheney's central thesis is sometimes obfuscated by a tendency to overcomplicate. For his Introduction also raises the question of "whether we see the sublime as an aesthetic of

citizenship or of godhood, in service of the nation or the deity, a principle finally of immanence or transcendence" (21). While this question is to be welcomed for its built-in critique of Kantian disengagement, it leads on the one hand to an awkwardly taxonomical approach to the four writers discussed and, on the other, to occasionally forced claims for political engagement.

Chapter 1 complicates things further. Intended as a theoretical framework, it is rather a woodpile of concepts and authorities (from Longinus to Lyotard) awaiting assembly into a coherent whole. A further problem is Cheney's decision to use *phantasia* as a rhetorical thread running through the Fab Four's negotiations with the sublime. Glossing the term as "visualization" (38), Cheney seems to understand it as the psychological correlate of elocutionary *energeia*, later glossed as "visuality" (75), and as a near-cognate of imagination (38n27). *Phantasia*, we are told, is "the technique of the immortalizing process [of sublimity]" (38). The question begged here is whether *phantasia*, or the use of the imagination, is a sufficient condition for immortality via literary sublimity: if that is the case, then, *ut pictura* (i.e. as something visual), almost all *poesis* must be sublime and all writers of it immortal. Furthermore, the equation of Longinus' "posthumous fame" with immortality is either disingenuous or lacking in thought: one doubts whether Faustus would have traded his soul for mere posterity, one knows that the Fab Four are only really immortal metaphorically. And that figurative immortality certainly cannot be a sufficient condition of any retrospective attribution of sublime authorship, for all kinds of long-dead writers are still remembered today, but not all of them are regarded as sublime. Recent studies of *ekphrasis* have shown its consanguinity with *phantasia* (Webb 1999, 2009), but none have hailed it as offering a fast route to immortality. Indeed, in an important article, Goldhill reminds us of Longinus' own remarks to the effect that *phantasia* can "enslave" (*douloutai*) the reader "to get round the censor of the intellect" (2007: 6). Enslavement is the underbelly of rapture or ravishment that Cheney prefers not to see since, eager to proselytize for a liberating sublimity which flourishes in a democratic society, he overlooks the relevant passage in Longinus (15.9). And in this connection, Cheney once again does not quite think things through, for if sublimity really is "the highest mark of a democracy" (43), where are the sublime artists of today, and why were the great sublime writers of the past all

unfranchised citizens of pre-democratic societies (with the arguable exception of the Greek tragedians)?

There is something whiggish to Cheney's five chapters of practical analysis which want Spenser to lead to Marlowe and Marlowe to Shakespeare, despite their very close contemporaneity, with each building on or against each other and culminating in a Jonsonian synthesis, pending the arrival of Milton. So, Chapters 2 and 3 speak grandiloquently of Spenser's "inventing an art form impossible to subject to the rationalizing powers of the mind: an art form, that is, of liberating revelation" (86) and differentiate his sublime into four strands, the "theological" or "godly," the "political" or "patriotic," the "erotic" or "marital," and the "artistic" or "laureate." Spenser's sublime is, Cheney suggests, "instrumental" and therefore "immanent" as the poet "assume[s] an active role in shaping the world" (257). In contrast, so Chapter 4 would have it, as well as innovating an English "counter-national" (157) tragic sublime of terror, Marlowe prefers transcendence to immanence, "using the immanent to disappear inside transcendence itself [in] a sublime coupling with the literary image" (258). Chapter 5 shows how "The Shakespearean sublime combines those of Marlowe and Spenser, and somehow pushes beyond them, inventing a myriad-minded sublime [...] that is the quintessence of creative freedom" (258) as well as inventing the "comic sublime" (Falstaff) and providing us with "one of the greatest moments in theatre history" when Octavius becomes "a resurrectional witness" (259). Finally, in Chapter 6, Jonson's sublime "counters Shakespeare's myriad-mindedness with a Protean sublime," variously "comedic," "tragedic," "parodic," "lyric" and "romantic". Jonson is "nationalist" like Spenser, "parodic" where Marlowe was "tragedic," and, with Shakespeare, co-founder of the comic sublime. In this brief summary we observe the pitfalls of Cheney's taxonomizing: is there a qualitative distinction between "myriad-mindedness" and "Protean" (both used of Shakespeare by the Romantics), or are they both sides of the same coin, or, better perhaps, is the former not simply an explanation of the latter? why should Spenser be any less "Protean" than Jonson, if Cheney himself attributes to him as many varieties of sublimity as Jonson?

There is, of course, much to admire in Cheney's impressively documented book. The chapters on Spenser and Marlowe are largely cutting-edge state of the art, while that on Jonson is possibly the most

ground-breaking in applying to its subject's principle of judgement the optic of sublimity. More disappointing is the chapter on Shakespeare, written largely after Coleridge and Bloom. There are also over-readings, signs that Cheney is himself at times intoxicated or enslaved by his own grand ideas. A signal example is the conclusion to his commentary on Vernon's narrative, cited by Edmund Burke, of Hal vaulting onto his horse (1 *Henry IV*, 4.1.96–109): "Overwhelmingly, the imagery is of flight [...]. Yet the high-vaulting Prince *lands*, 'As if an angel dropped down from the clouds,' making clear that for this horseman, sublime transport is not the end but the means to instrumental action in the world" (180). Cheney emphasizes "lands," as if there were something surprising or wondrous about it. Yet, Hal's landing simply makes clear that even if Newton had yet to formulate the Law of Fall, gravity existed in Shakespeare's late Medieval England, a fact which needs no emphasizing at all but at least saves Hal's sublime leap from ending in ridiculous aerial suspension. Nonetheless, despite all the misgivings, Cheney's book is to be welcomed for setting the sublime squarely on the agenda of early modern English literary studies. It is remarkable for its efforts to balance Bloomean aestheticism with Helgersonian-Greenblattian committedness, and it is, finally, bold in its advocacy of a superannuated, WASM-ish canon. Cheney conceives of scholarship as fostering "conversation"; this book will do more than that.

References

- Boitani, Piero. 1989. *The Tragic and the Sublime in Medieval Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goldhill, Simon. 2007. "What Is Ekphrasis For?" *Classical Philology* 102: 1–19.
- Jaeger, Stephen C., ed. 2010. *Magnificence and the Sublime in Medieval Aesthetics: Art, Architecture, Literature, Music*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Jaeger, Stephen C. 2012. *Enchantment: On Charisma and the Sublime in the Arts of the West*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Kesson, Andy. 2014. *John Lyly and Early Modern Authorship*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Martin, Eva Madeleine. 2012. "The 'Prehistory' of the Sublime in Early Modern France: An Interdisciplinary Approach." In *The Sublime: From Antiquity to the Present*, edited by Timothy M. Costelloe, 77–101. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Reviews

- Norbrook, David. 1999. *Writing the English Republic: Poetry, Rhetoric, and Politics, 1627–1660*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Norbrook, David. 2010. "The Sublime Object: Milton, Lucy Hutchinson, and the Lucretian Sublime." *Tate Papers* 13. Accessed July 1, 2019. <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/10spring/norbrook.shtm>.
- Porter, James. 2016. *The Sublime in Antiquity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Refini, Eugenio. 2012. "Longinus and Poetic Imagination in Late Renaissance Literary Theory." In *Translations of the Sublime: The Early Modern Reception and Dissemination of Longinus' 'Peri Hupsous' in Rhetoric, the Visual Arts, Architecture and the Theatre*, edited by Caroline Van Eck, Stijn Bussels, and Maarten Delbeke, 33–53. Leiden: Brill.
- Squires, Claire. 2007. *Marketing Literature: The Making of Contemporary Writing in Britain*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Webb, Ruth. 1999. "Ekphrasis Ancient and Modern: The Invention of a Genre." *Word and Image* 15: 7–18.
- Webb, Ruth. 2009. *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Pleasure in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice*. Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate.

How to cite this review:

Sell, Jonathan P.A. Review of: Patrick Cheney, *English Authorship and the Early Modern Sublime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). *SEDERI* 29 (2019): 183–88.

Author's contact: jonathan.sell@uah.es

Postal address: Facultad de Educación, 4ª planta, 24 – Universidad de Alcalá – Calle Madrid 1 – 19001 Guadalajara, Spain