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The refrain of an eighties' British pop classic rhapsodized the bliss of being run into by a double-decker bus. If the image supplies a motif for the present review of Jonathan P. A. Sell's sweeping new monograph, it is not mainly for its two-volume nature, nor for the reviewer's pleasure and privilege, but rather for the opportunity it offers to introduce prospective readers into the weighty intellectual arsenal that Professor Sell has deployed in his mapping of the multi-levelled territories where Shakespearean dramaturgy achieves an inexplicable though familiar, transitory though enduring sublimity. Perhaps a reader's greatest challenge when embarking upon Sell's study is to find the right balance between the arresting blaze of its subject matter and the solid density of its arguments. Fortunately, striking that balance has been the author's chief methodological aim: Sell's judicious, insightful company in our transit along the complex machinery that resolves—and dissolves—into the Shakespearean sublime guarantees the success of his enterprise. The work's elegant two-part structure is handsomely matched by a flawless layout: two almost identical twin volumes whose tightly parisoned titles announce the orderly discipline with which the author will impart a subject that has traditionally flirted with misrule. The inner title pages of each volume disclose a parenthetical explanation, "(The First/Second Part of *An Essay on the Shakespearean Sublime*)," a sort of *ur*-title that justly aligns Sell's ambitious scope with the endeavors of an eminent cohort of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century essayists, critics and philosophers—Pope, Johnson, Hume, Kant, Burke, Schlegel, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats, Lamb, Hazlitt. And yet, despite

Sell's own claims to the "speculative" nature of his "essay" (*Ethos*, 4), the study's measured symmetry opportunely punts toward the more methodical forms of the *ars* and the treatise, neatly dividing the subject into parts and shrewdly identifying each part's constituents — here called "coefficients" — for systematic parsing.

Sell's aims are defined in the General Introduction opening the first volume; these are determined by the limitations that any definition of the sublime confronts. First, the sublime is a "not always achieved" potential for wonder inherent in works of art but also beyond them; second, if fully realized, that potential often crystallizes in flashes of "momentary experience" (*Ethos*, 11). If, in the case of Shakespeare's drama, this experience risks confinement to the realm of the inexplicable, it is possible, however, to explain its conditions of existence in the plays themselves, in their performative dimensions, in their engagements with audiences, and in the continuum of critical and aesthetic thought produced before, during, after, and around Shakespeare. As these conditions of existence exceed the immanent sublime-in-the-work, they can open to plural experience and, more importantly, they endure translation into analytical categories such as those informing Sell's essay. Sell wisely chooses Porter's *The Sublime in Antiquity* as the main guide to a history of the literary sublime which needs Longinus but which must also trawl before and beyond his influential *On Sublimity* (see Porter 1991, 18–25). Moreover, Sell's constructive critique of former approaches in light of representational and authorial factors (Cheney, 2018), or his more overt attack on the Bloom-inspired sublime critics' campaigning for Shakespeare's innate excellence (*Ethos*, 7–9), enable him to create a strategic distance, of particular usefulness in his freeing the sublime from an excessive dependence on poetic theories of divine inspiration. In his reading of the Longinian tradition, Sell insists on ecstasy, or transportation, as "the end goal [...] of sublimity," which "ushers in the unknowable and inexpressible," and "takes us above [...] the limits [...] of cognition and language" (*Ethos*, 29). Yet the ultimate referent of sublimity anchors "what is unknowable and inexpressible *inside* the knowable or expressible world" (*Ethos*, 31, my emphasis). A human sublime, Sell insists, has the advantage of being ingrained in genuine ideas of art (see also Mann 2021). The ensuing portrait of Shakespeare is that of a gifted mind trained in the Renaissance arts of the rhetorician and the dramatist.

In line with this emphasis on art, Sell's study organizes its subject along terms whose nature ultimately refers to Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (*ethos, pathos*), and within them, along "coefficients" (matter, stage, form, person, audience, language) whose oblique parentage is found in Aristotle's six dramatic constituents in the *Poetics*. The first volume, *Shakespeare's Sublime Ethos: Matter, Stage, Form*, explores what we might call a Shakespearean propaedeutics of sublimity, or in the author's terms, the creative strategies in Shakespearean writing and dramaturgy that prepare or predispose audiences intellectually and emotionally toward experiences of the sublime. *Ethos* is thus understood as Aristotelian "mood" yet with an emphasis on how this psychological quality crystallizes along the invention, scenography, and formal experiments of Shakespeare's drama. Sell plays on the (re)presentational nature of these three coefficients, on their capacity to put audiences on paths that draw near but do not wholly reach the sublime. He argues that "for the sublime to work, Shakespeare's readers and audiences have to be primed if they are to respond appropriately to the presentation of sublime simulacra" (*Ethos*, 50). That priming work characterizes Shakespeare's endeavors of art, exemplified in his handling of a full catalogue of traditional sublime matters, or topics (*Ethos*, 50–89). In revising that catalogue, Sell's glosses of Shakespearean size—from minimal, as in the "minimus of hind'ring knot-grass" into which Hermia is shaped in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 3.2.330, or Innogen's "diminution | Of space" in *Cymbeline*, 1.4–18.19 (*Ethos*, 64), to massive, as in Antony's memorable bestriding the ocean in *Antony and Cleopatra*, 5.2.81 (*Ethos*, 74–75)—count among the most enjoyable moments of this first volume. As for stage, the "sublime scenography" analyzed in chapter 4 propounds a phenomenology of the Shakespearean thrust stage that should be read as a priceless complement to early modern theatre studies. The discussion of form in chapters 5 and 6, in light of the Shakespearean breaches of temporal structures and orthodox notions of beauty, reveals unforeseen perspectives on plays that would not qualify as first candidates for parading sublimity—*Troilus and Cressida* (*Ethos*, 155–156), *Henry IV, Part II* (*Ethos*, 202), or *King John* (*Ethos*, 204).

Over half of the second instalment, *Shakespeare's Sublime Pathos: Person, Audience, Language*, is devoted to the materialization of the sublime in Shakespearean character, which surfaces in the intersections of *person* and *audience*. Intent on dismantling standard theories of

Shakespearean ambiguity, and convinced that “current models of identity are inadequate to Shakespearean character” (*Pathos*, 5), Sell builds on metaphors such as the Eliotian “hollow men” (*Pathos*, 59–66) to propose a model of “mutualistic character” that is made possible by the appeal to a “sympathetic imagination” whose origin lies in the early modern rhetoric of affect. For Sell, the impossibility of attaining consensus on the interpretation of Shakespeare’s characters is largely the result of our “transferring to them elements of our own, unique and individual identities,” whereby we become their “psychic adjuncts” (*Pathos*, 77). Detaching himself both from liberal humanist and postmodern accounts of subjectivity, Sell resorts to Renaissance poetics and rhetoric as well as to Romantic criticism to substantiate a plausible model of character analysis that finds its full realization in Shakespeare’s language of the passions, exemplified by *Richard II*, *Macbeth*, or *Twelfth Night* (chapter 5) – a model whose advantages and discontents are subjected to severe scrutiny (chapter 6).

It is in this second part that Sell’s unwillingness to “offer any complete reading of particular plays” (*Ethos*, 11) may deprive us from higher rewards. The decision is well grounded on the momentary quality of the sublime experience. However, in the same way as our fleeting enjoyment of Sell’s brief analyses should not distract us from the more edifying journey granted by the full reading of his study, we could legitimately argue that Sell’s exhaustive tour along all the stations of the sublime should render his method valid for full explorations of plays like *The Comedy of Errors*, *Richard II*, *Twelfth Night*, *Measure for Measure*, *King Lear*, *Pericles*, or *The Winter’s Tale* – while wishing on the way for a stronger dose of the *Sonnets* than the extremely delightful appetizers offered here. The powerful categorizing of the sublime’s coefficients is proof of Sell’s immense merit, and designates this monograph as superior research destined to become seminal in Shakespeare studies. Its lucid prose, sprinkled with moments of witty exuberance, supplies a trusty guide to a number of precious encounters with the Shakespearean rich and strange – encounters that should multiply in future work by Sell and by others. In proving with exemplary rationality what many readers and theatregoers have for long intuited and experienced, Sell reassures us in the happy conviction that, in and with Shakespeare, there is a light that never goes out.

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