

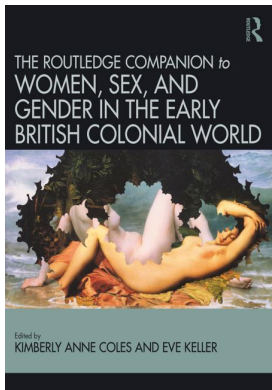
This article was downloaded by: 10.3.98.93

On: 26 Mar 2019

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



## **Routledge Companion to Women, Sex, and Gender in the Early British Colonial World**

Kimberly Anne Coles, Eve Keller

### **Regendering the sublime and the beautiful**

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315613772-4>

Katherine B. Attié

**Published online on: 01 Oct 2018**

**How to cite :-** Katherine B. Attié. 01 Oct 2018, *Regendering the sublime and the beautiful from:* Routledge Companion to Women, Sex, and Gender in the Early British Colonial World Routledge  
Accessed on: 26 Mar 2019

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315613772-4>

**PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT**

Full terms and conditions of use: <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms>

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

### 3

## REGENDERING THE SUBLIME AND THE BEAUTIFUL

### Shakespeare's Cleopatra and feminist formalism

*Katherine B. Attié*

In the opening scene of *Antony and Cleopatra*, the besotted general imagines Rome's political collapse as liquefaction: "Let Rome in Tiber melt."<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare employs the language of melting and mingling, blurring and blending with remarkable frequency in this play, as dramatic form is paradoxically structured by images of formlessness. Along with "melt," which appears six times, more than in any other tragedy, he twice uses "dissolve" and twice "discandy," that marvelous word which he must have coined ad hoc since he never uses it elsewhere. This linguistic pattern might seem to suggest the solubility of gender difference itself. As authority "melts" from Antony (3.13.91) and he imagines his own body unstable as a cloud, made "indistinct/As water is in water" (4.14.10–11), his masculinity becomes likewise indiscernible.

The standard reading connecting "the language of liquefaction" in the play to "the confusion of gender identity"<sup>2</sup> is somewhat misleading, however, because in Shakespeare, liquefaction tends to signify not confusion but feminization. *Antony and Cleopatra* privileges water as a feminine element whose power represents a transcorporeal flowing or spreading of Cleopatra's own emotive, erotic, and aesthetic power. "We cannot call her winds and waters, sighs and tears – they are greater storms and tempests than almanacs can report" (1.2.144–46), marvels Enobarbus. While this Petrarchan hyperbole has been read as a reductive "mock defense" of Cleopatra's spectacular artifice,<sup>3</sup> I read Enobarbus's praise as sincere: if her "winds and waters" are too great to record as statistics, then they are also too great to represent as spectacle. The image makes the queen not an "example of female incontinence"<sup>4</sup> but a microcosmic source of nature's feminine power, a power that defies fixity in the pages of an almanac, which would be reductive indeed. Even her emotional outbursts beggar all description. Whereas the patriarchal system of Platonic moral philosophy feminized the passions and subordinated them to "masculine" reason, this hierarchy is overturned in Cleopatra and in the play at large, not because her passions are tyrannical usurpers of reason's rule, but because her passions themselves, "made of nothing but the finest part of pure love" (1.2.143–44), are metaphysically sanctified, transcendent, sublime.

Just as literary forms are not gender neutral, neither are theories of form, which brings me to the aesthetic categories of the sublime and the beautiful. The distinction is useful for my purposes because it serves as a revelatory nexus of formalist and feminist concerns. While the sublime and the beautiful are obviously matters of form, the categories are subtly yet deeply concerned with gender, particularly with codifying patriarchal norms as aesthetic conventions.

Delineated by Edmund Burke in *A Philosophical Inquiry* (1757), the sublime – vast, overwhelming, imposing, awe-inspiring, terrible – is “naturally” superior to and more powerful than the beautiful – precious, charming, beguiling, reassuring, domesticated. The quality of beauty is highest, Burke opines, wherever “it carries with it an idea of weakness and imperfection. . . . Beauty in distress is much the most affecting beauty . . . and modesty in general, which is a tacit allowance of imperfection, is itself considered as an amiable quality.”<sup>5</sup> From a patriarchal perspective, feminine beauty is enhanced by the appearance of timidity, delicacy, and vulnerability, qualities that “make defect perfection” by tacitly acknowledging masculine superior strength and the inherent female need to be protected by it. Burkean discourse, then, fashions an aesthetic dichotomy that is implicitly a gendered hierarchy: a masculinized sublime over a feminized beautiful.

Although feminist critics recently have been paying close attention to form – for instance, when analyzing prosody in poetry written by women – they have been less inclined to consider the gendered assumptions that inform traditional (i.e., patriarchal) aesthetic theory.<sup>6</sup> A notable exception is Barbara Claire Freeman, whose book on the feminine sublime advances “a radical rearticulation of the role gender plays in producing the history of discourse on the sublime and the formulation of an alternative position with respect to excess and the possibilities of its figuration.”<sup>7</sup> Focused on women’s fiction, Freeman is mainly concerned with how female novelists implicitly counter the contained, masculinized version of the sublime with their own unbounded, feminine version. In what follows, I argue that Shakespeare anticipates this feminist move in *Antony and Cleopatra* by aesthetically privileging the language of excess. Focusing on Cleopatra’s association with three vital signs of sublimity – boundlessness, ineffability, and absence – I show how Shakespeare actually foregrounds the feminine aspects of the sublime that later theorists attempted to suppress. Effectively reversing Burkean gender polarity, the play turns on the political-aesthetic conflict between the masculine, Roman beautiful and the feminine, Egyptian sublime while ultimately privileging the latter. Caesar may win politically, but Cleopatra wins aesthetically.

By explicating Shakespeare’s version of the feminine sublime, this reading demonstrates a version of “feminist formalism,” one that moves beyond the circumscribed language of parts and wholes to which formalist criticism generally adheres.<sup>8</sup> While the “old formalism” of Cleanth Brooks and the New Critics privileges aesthetic unity and organic wholeness, the “new formalism” as described by Frederic V. Bogel advocates a “fetishizing of parts – of textual elements – to a point at which the whole they constitute recedes almost to vanishing, or is bracketed almost to the point of annihilation.”<sup>9</sup> Yet as is implied by the latent violence of “annihilation” (not to mention the implicit perversity of “fetishizing”), the language of parts – limbs, pieces, fragments, shards, shatters – tends to have a negative connotation, suggesting something broken, damaged, disintegrated, imperfect. In other words, the language of parts, of not-wholes, ironically ends up privileging the whole. However, feminist formalism transcends the geometric constraints of part-whole theory altogether when allied to the sublime. In contrast to the delineated form of the beautiful, the form of the sublime is paradoxically characterized by formlessness, as theorized by Immanuel Kant:

The beautiful in nature is a question of the form of the object, and this consists in limitation, whereas the sublime is to be found in an object even devoid of form, so far as it immediately involves, or else by its presence provokes, a representation of *limitlessness*.<sup>10</sup>

The language of formal unity, of parts and wholes, of order, proportion, and harmony, governs the beautiful, but it simply does not apply to the sublime, whose power derives precisely from the conception of what lies beyond formal representation and understanding.

The latent anxiety about female power that Burkean and Kantian philosophy share becomes evident in how the masculine version of the sublime, “a discourse of domination,”<sup>11</sup> presumes to commandeer, coopt, and control excess, which patriarchal tradition pejoratively associates with the feminine. Freeman has helpfully exposed “the dominant ideology of misogyny that haunts canonical theories of the sublime,” theories that purport to explain excess where the real purpose is “to keep it at bay.”<sup>12</sup> It might be more precise to say that these theories keep excess at bay *by* explaining it, since explication requires distance; eighteenth-century aesthetic theorists “regularly claim for the spectator a state of detachment that, were it to exist, would nullify the very features of rapture, merger, and identification that characterize and define the sublime.”<sup>13</sup> Yet the feminine sublime has a way of surging past those defensive efforts to keep it at bay. Tellingly, in his attempt to describe, hence to contain, the beauty of the female form, Burke is conspicuously unable to maintain the requisite state of detachment:

Observe that part of a beautiful woman where she is perhaps the most beautiful, about the neck and breasts; the smoothness; the softness; the easy and insensible swell; the variety of the surface, which is never for the smallest space the same; the deceitful maze, through which the unsteady eye slides giddily, without knowing where to fix, or whither it is carried. Is not this a demonstration of that change of surface continual and yet hardly perceptible at any point which forms one of the great constituents of beauty?<sup>14</sup>

Try as he might to systematize his analysis of beauty here, Burke, in spite of himself, describes the effects of the sublime. As Freeman notes, “[t]he absence of a fixed point of view or visual focus produces disorientation” so that the female body “becomes the occasion of giddiness, or vertigo. Vertigo, of course, is a typically sublime feeling connected with the falling away of ground or center; it is what we feel when an abyss opens up before us.”<sup>15</sup> As the female body’s separate features suddenly blend and become indistinguishable, an ostensible praise of formal clarity is overwhelmed by formal uncertainty, and disinterestedness is overwhelmed by desire. “The giddiness produced by Burke’s gaze is the prospect of the sexual which he does not admit, but which guides his viewing [and] drives the sublimity of the moment.”<sup>16</sup> As we will see, the itemizing, stabilizing strategy of the blazon is the masculine observer’s attempt to stave off the vertiginous effects of the feminine sublime – to keep from getting lost in “the deceitful maze” by keeping a safe distance on solid ground.

By defining the “sublime moment” as the moment when the imagination comes under the control of reason, which exercises “dominion” over sensibility,<sup>17</sup> Kant also attempts to neutralize the sublime, forcing it to yield to the power of the rational mind. There are “gender-specific scapegoating mechanisms” at work in this “barely disguised hierarchy” of masculine reason over a feminine imagination that becomes “a surrogate victim whose sacrifice allows the restoration of order . . . its role is to submit itself to reason as to a husband.”<sup>18</sup> As the grandiose but finally inadequate imagination tries and fails to grasp the supersensible as an image, superior reason rises to the occasion and takes self-affirming pleasure in its autonomous ability to comprehend the supersensible as an idea. The sublime experience for Kant, then, is counterintuitively the experience of the sublime’s defeat; his insistence on reason’s domination seems unreasonable because “it is precisely when reason is overwhelmed that the sublime occurs.”<sup>19</sup>

In the writings of both Burke and Kant, the desire to masculinize the sublime is further suggested by how much size matters, as does scale, in the natural landscapes or phenomena deemed especially conducive to sublimity: soaring peaks, vertiginous cliffs, roaring rivers, massive earthquakes, violent storms. These examples share a degree of vastness, immensity, and magnitude that

defies comprehension in its totality and that threatens to overwhelm the subject. But the greatest incitement to sublimity in nature, unfathomably deep, dark, and dreadful, “an object of no small terror,” may well be the ocean.<sup>20</sup> Kant privileges the ocean as an especially powerful stimulus of the sublime: “we must be able to see sublimity in the ocean, regarding it . . . in its calm, [as] a clear mirror of water bounded only by the heavens, or, be it disturbed, as threatening to overwhelm and engulf everything.”<sup>21</sup> In order to “see” the ocean, the viewing subject, which “only exists thanks to limits,”<sup>22</sup> requires some degree of separation, detachment, and distance from it. Yet oceanic sublimity derives precisely from the water’s power to remove those limits, to dissolve the separation between the bounded self and its alteritous environment, as Juliet does when she compares her capacity for love to that most powerful of sublime bodies in nature: “My bounty is as boundless as the sea,/My love as deep; the more I give to thee,/The more I have, for both are infinite” (2.1.175–77). Whereas the “spirit of love” for a self-absorbed character like Duke Orsino “Receiveth as the sea” (*Twelfth Night*, 1.1.11; emphasis added) depreciating whatever it takes, swallowing without giving, Juliet’s love completely subsumes and transcends the language of give and take. His “love” sounds insatiable and selfish, hers sounds inexhaustible and sublime.

In *Antony and Cleopatra*, the word “sea” appears twenty-five times, drastically more than in any other play. These references are part of the patterned language of water – its freeing formlessness, its power to swell and surge past boundaries – through which Shakespeare generates the energy of the feminine sublime. The play as a whole is formally structured not just by the conflict between but by the preponderance of the female element over the male element: fluidity over firmness, excess over measure, dissolution over segregation. These oppositions have been critical commonplaces for some time now, and it might seem as though, post-Janet Adelman, there is little that remains to be said about them. But when we approach the play’s representation of gender difference formally by theorizing it in terms of the sublime and the beautiful, we get a more expansive view of feminine power, one that transcends the female body yet remains essentially feminine.

Boundaries are transgressed all over *Antony and Cleopatra* not simply because there is so much excess but because the boundaries themselves are made to seem insufficient, inadequate, or unstable. The spillage manifests itself grammatically as well as thematically from the start, as Philo complains to Demetrius, “Nay, but this dotage of our general’s/O’erflows the measure” (1.1.1–2). In medias res, this Roman conversation itself overflows the measure of the play. The same thing happens in Act 2 scene 2, when Caesar enters with the line, “I do not know, Maecenas, ask Agrippa” (2.2.18) in response to a question we do not hear, and again in Act 3 scene 4, which opens with Antony’s emphatic, “Nay, nay, Octavia, not only that –/That were excusable, that and thousands more/Of semblable import – but he hath waged/New wars ’gainst Pompey” (3.4.1–4). Although we know immediately to whom the pronoun “he” refers, the deictic “that” sets us adrift. While entrances happen too late, exits happen too soon: gasping “What should I stay – ” (5.2.309), Cleopatra dies orgasmically mid-sentence, exceeding the dramatic frame, carried away by her immortal longings, leaving the audience longing for more in a final scene that makes hungry where most it satisfies. Such moments encode, grammatically, thematically, and poetically, the play’s obsession with boundlessness.

In the opening scene, Cleopatra baits Antony by seeing if he is willing to bind or quantify their love, before threatening to establish a limit herself:

CLEOPATRA: If it be love indeed, tell me how much.

ANTONY: There’s beggary in the love that can be reckoned.

CLEOPATRA: I’ll set a bourn how far to be beloved.

ANTONY: Then must thou needs find out new heaven, new earth. (1.1.14–17)

She tests him with a Roman thought, he pleases her with an Egyptian reply. The soldiers behold this scene and see “the triple pillar of the world transformed/Into a strumpet’s fool” (1.1.12–13), but what do *we* see? If we read the scene formally, we see that it is the Roman perspective itself that reduces greatness by seeking to measure it, quantify it, and contain it. The Egyptian perspective, voiced by Antony here, embraces the boundless, entertains the infinite. Antony sounds like Juliet, who moments before her marriage cancels Romeo’s request that she quantify, describe, and evaluate her love in relation to his: “Ah, Juliet, if the measure of thy joy/Be heaped like mine, and that thy skill be more/To blazon it, then. . . . Unfold the imagined happiness that both/Receive in either by this dear encounter” (2.5.24–26, 28–29). However, Juliet knows that to “blazon” her love would only lessen it by assigning a value to the invaluable: “They are but beggars that can count their worth,/But my true love is grown to such excess,/I cannot sum up some of half my wealth” (2.5.32–34). His love sounds beautiful, hers sounds sublime.

Whatever is without form, or has a form so vast that its boundaries are imperceptible, is difficult if not impossible to describe, which makes ineffability itself an important sign of the sublime. According to Burke, a feature of the divine presence is featurelessness: “in a just idea of the Deity, perhaps none of his attributes are predominant, yet to our imagination, his power is by far the most striking.”<sup>23</sup> So is hers. In his *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romaines*, first translated into English (via Jacques Amyot’s French translation) by Sir Thomas North in 1579, Plutarch hints at Cleopatra’s sublimity by what he does *not* say about her person in the famous description of her barge on the River Cydnus. In the source passage, Shakespeare found the poop of gold, the sails of purple, the oars of silver, the music of flutes, and the pretty boys like smiling Cupids “with little fans in their hands.”<sup>24</sup> What he did not find is a description of Cleopatra’s physical appearance, which is promised but not delivered in the following lines as rendered by North: “And now for the person of her selfe: she was layed under a pavilion of cloth of gold of tissue, apparelled and attired like the goddesse *Venus*, commonly drawne in picture.”<sup>25</sup> And that is the extent of it. Shakespeare obviously noticed the omission, as his own rendering calls attention to it: “For her own person,/It beggared all description” (2.2.209–10). Her ineffability has an ironic echo in Antony’s drunken non-description of that “strange serpent,” the crocodile, shaped “like itself, and it is as broad as it hath breadth. It is just so high as it is, and moves with it own organs. It lives by that which nourished it, and the elements once out of it, it transmigrates” (2.7.43–46). Here too, a Roman tongue tries and fails to define a creature of the Nile that beggars all description, resists formal confinement, and triumphantly “transmigrates.”

Unlike Cleopatra, Octavia does *not* beggar all description. Cleopatra gives directives for the cowed messenger to bring her back an inventory of Octavia’s appearance: “Bid him/Report the feature of Octavia, her years,/Her inclination. Let him not leave out/The colour of her hair. . . . Bring me word how tall she is” (2.5.112–15, 119). The Roman man’s ideal female counterpart, the embodiment of the golden mean, cast in the role of mediator, virtuous Octavia has nothing sublime about her. “The sublime,” as Burke says, “in all things abhors mediocrity.”<sup>26</sup> The sublime also abhors categorization. It is not the sublime but the beautiful that is subject to the order-imposing blazon, a poetic convention whose patrilineal, even militaristic heritage is trumpeted by the word’s heraldic origins. The blazon establishes male subjectivity through the deconstruction of female subjectivity, as Heather James explains: “To accomplish the poetic representation of the male subject, the woman’s presence must be carefully restricted, and her body fragmented and dispersed: such is the strategy of a poetics whose hallmark is the blazon.”<sup>27</sup> To itemize, delineate, and describe is in some sense to limit, to dominate, to conquer. By begging all description, Cleopatra eludes such controlling measures, and in so doing, the queen transcends “the artistic, Petrarchan, and ideological codes designed to objectify or depersonalize her on the one

hand, and on the other, to disempower her politically.”<sup>28</sup> Not only does Cleopatra resist being subjected to the tropologically dismembering effects of the blazon, she also resists being encased and limited by corporeality altogether. Reminding Antony of the times that he made himself inseparable from her, she says, “Eternity was in our lips and eyes,/Bliss in our brows’ bent, none our parts so poor/But was a race of heaven” (1.3.35–37). I disagree with those editors who assume that Cleopatra is using the royal plural here; by making her features and Antony’s blend into each other, she orchestrates their mutual transcendence of physical traits, undoing the blazon with shared immortal longings.

The sublime imaginary makes whatever “o’erflows the measure” aesthetically desirable. Once the meaning of “excess” is no longer restricted to bodily indulgence, surfeit, and glut, then it is free to carry more positive connotations. The more corporeal limits are exceeded, the more excess can become sublimated as a form of transcendence. Even though Adelman recognizes that Cleopatra’s “excess” is construed more positively in the play as abundance or Egyptian “female bounty,” which opposes Roman “male scarcity,” her reading continues to privilege the patriarchal perspective: Cleopatra is a powerful, generative force *because* she is the “maternal” source of Antony’s “masculine bounty.”<sup>29</sup> Her agency amounts to the re-creation and nurturing of “a fully masculine selfhood” that supposedly is complemented rather than contaminated by its “incorporation of the female.”<sup>30</sup> But most of the play’s metaphors suggest the reverse: *she* absorbs *him*. As Antony’s authority “melts” from him, so does his sense of a stable, masculine identity. All the vaporous visions to which Antony compares himself when confiding in Eros, “a cloud that’s dragonish . . . a bear or lion,/A towered citadel, a pendant rock,/A forkèd mountain or blue promontory/With trees upon’t” (4.14.2–6), are symbols of the masculine sublime, here exposed as deceptive and illusory. These “images of prominent manhood” betray their formless, fluid, feminine essence.<sup>31</sup> A universe more masculine than Shakespeare’s Rome is difficult to imagine, yet “when the sublime dimensions of the feminine are encountered in the masculine universe, masculine identity begins to break down.”<sup>32</sup> Adelman suggests that Antony is somehow relieved or liberated to dissolve and become “indistinct/As water is in water” (4.14.10–11), but the Antony who “dislimns” (10) and says, “Here I am Antony,/Yet cannot hold this visible shape” (13–14) is not happy to discover “his watery foundation.”<sup>33</sup>

In Adelman’s reading, Cleopatra’s power derives from her body as representative of the maternal body. But Cleopatra herself seems to resist or at least to ironize that figuration: when she alludes to “the memory of my womb” (3.13.165), it is in order to conjure an image of her children dead, rotting “graveless” with her “brave Egyptians all” (3.13.168, 166). And the only time we actually see her pose as a “maternal” body with her “baby” at her breast, it is in order to transcend that body. “This mortal house I’ll ruin” (5.2.50), she vows, before Caesar reduces her to a captive, enslaved body. Bodies are representable, and she will not stay to “see/Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness/I’th’ posture of a whore” (5.2.218–20). The metatheatrical irony of these lines being written for and spoken by a boy actor (if they ever were) has been commented on so frequently that it hardly needs repeating. In any case, for my purposes, the sex of the actor’s body is beside the point: what Cleopatra finds abhorrent is the thought of *any* body representing her. In a way, it makes perfect sense that Cleopatra “may never have been embodied on Shakespeare’s stage”; the play’s virtually nonexistent performance history suggests “that she has too often been found to be unrepresentable.”<sup>34</sup> But then the sublime always is. The play, like the sublime, privileges the unrepresentable; what cannot be represented is more powerful, more godlike, than what can.

This brings me to what I take to be a crucial paradox of the feminine sublime: even as it is predicated upon limitless bounty, it is also predicated upon limitless absence. Luce Irigaray

gestures toward the infinite variety of the transcorporeal feminine sublime in her mystifying definition of “(The/a) woman” as “what cannot be defined, enumerated, formulated or *formalized*. . . . She is identified with every *x* variable, not in any specific way. Presupposed is an excess of all identification to/of self. But this excess is no-thing: it is vacancy of form, gap in form, the return to another edge where she re-touches herself with the help of – nothing.”<sup>35</sup> Construed as a lack by phallogocentric standards, the female “no-thing” is given a presence, a more positive valence, by its association with the sublime imaginary. Kant explains the feeling of the sublime as “a pleasure that only arises indirectly, being brought about by the feeling of a momentary check to the vital forces followed at once by a discharge all the more powerful . . . the delight in the sublime . . . merits the name of a negative pleasure.”<sup>36</sup> We may be able to catch a glimpse here of John Keats and his admiration of Shakespeare’s “Negative Capability, that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason,”<sup>37</sup> a state of acquiescence to the power of the unknown that, if not sublime in itself, is at least a necessary prerequisite of it.

The sublimity of Enobarbus’s account of Cleopatra on her barge is predicated upon the representation of absence. We experience the negative pleasure of a nostalgic narrative describing an event that occurred at a distant place, in a distant past, about someone who is presently absent. Within the speech, we float from the absent presence of her person, to the empty marketplace where Antony “did sit alone,/Whistling to th’air, which, but for vacancy,/Had gone to gaze on Cleopatra too,/And made a gap in nature” (2.2.227–229). An unimaginable image of a literally breathtaking moment, this “gap in nature,” like Irigaray’s “gap in form,” evokes the negative pleasure of the sublime. The air does not actually go to gaze on Cleopatra, does not make a gap in nature, and even if it did we could not see it. Yet we cannot help but imagine that it does, and that we witness it. Even Cleopatra’s own loss of breath is made to sound paradoxically bounteous, as Enobarbus recounts how she did “breathless pour breath forth” (2.2.244). We might read this moment as mirroring the effect that the speech has on the play’s audience: we too are left breathless.

According to its earliest theorist, the Greek known as Longinus, the sublime was primarily a literary phenomenon, associated with a grand or high style, especially apposite to tragedy.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, as Philip Shaw puts it, “central to Longinus’s text is the suggestion that the sublime occurs within representation whist nevertheless annulling the possibility of representation.”<sup>39</sup> A representation of the unrepresentable is precisely what we encounter when Cleopatra describes to Dolabella the Antony of her dreams:

His legs bestrid the ocean; his reared arm  
Crested the world. His voice was propertied  
As all the tunèd spheres, and that to friends.  
But when he meant to quail and shake the orb,  
He was as rattling thunder. For his bounty,  
There was no winter in’t. An Antony it was,  
That grew the more by reaping. His delights  
Were dolphin-like; they showed his back above  
The element they lived in.

(5.2.81–89)

The hero celebrated in this encomium is a mythological Roman god. Even so, he does not beggar all description. Cleopatra’s blazon, conventionally hyperbolic even if exceptionally grand, distinguishes body parts and physical attributes: legs, arm, voice. His bounty, which grew the more by reaping, seems to be patterned on his and other men’s boundless appetites for *her*, which



grew the more by feeding. The succession of images pulls Antony down from colossus to creature, from standing over the ocean to swimming in it; his dolphin-like delights cannot survive apart from the element they lived in: water, her element.

The skeptical slant of Cleopatra's question to Dolabella, "Think you there was or might be such a man/As this I dreamt of?" (5.2.92–93), seems designed to elicit the negative response, "Gentle madam, no" (93). But the dictates of Dolabella's reason only serve to amplify Cleopatra's imagination:

You lie up to the hearing of the gods!  
But if there be, nor ever were one such,  
It's past the size of dreaming. Nature wants stuff  
To vie strange forms with fancy, yet t' imagine  
An Antony were nature's piece 'gainst fancy,  
Condemning shadows quite.

(5.2.94–99)

A pinnacle of the play's language of sublimity, this speech dramatically recasts the relationship between reason and imagination as figured by Kant. "For the attainment of the Kantian sublime is dependent upon a sacrifice; its cause is the collapse of the imagination's capacity to connect empirical reality with the realm of abstract ideality . . . the imagination's defeat is the key to reason's triumph."<sup>40</sup> But Cleopatra's imagination, past the size of dreaming, defiantly refuses to collapse. Her speech sounds all the more sublime precisely because it sustains what reason according to Kant is supposed to sever: the relationship and the rivalry between the Antony of empirical reality, made by "nature," and the Antony of abstract ideality, formed by "fancy." Cleopatra rejects the subjugated role symbolically assigned to her by the Kantian sublime: she does not and will not submit to Roman reason.

Dolabella is right, of course: Cleopatra's vision, which could only come in Antony's absence, has nothing to do with the all-too-corporeal form of the dying, middle-aged man the queen and her women heave awkwardly atop the monument. The bathos of that action requires some discussion in light of its seeming pull against the sublime. Like numerous other scenes, such as the burlesque of Cleopatra's petulantly beating the messenger, or her noble suicide being preceded by the vulgar clown wishing her "joy o'th' worm" (5.2.275), the "sport indeed" of hauling Antony up is not as antithetical to the sublime as it seems. Shaw's explanation is especially germane here:

In a very strong sense the sublime does indeed verge on the ridiculous; it encourages us to believe that we can . . . reach the stars and become infinite when all the time it is drawing us closer to our actual material limits: the desire to outstrip earthly bonds leads instead to the encounter with lack, an encounter that is painful, cruel, and some would say comic. The sublime, somewhat ironically, given its overtly metaphysical ambitions, turns out to be a form of materialism after all.<sup>41</sup>

If the transcendent aspirations of the sublime are inevitably – and tragically – checked by material limitations, then they are also inevitably – and tragically – checked by political realities. Cleopatra's entire dream of Antony is politically inflected, and not simply because she fancies that "Realms and islands were/As plates dropped from his pocket" (5.2.90–91). Shakespeare significantly politicizes the speech from the outset with one word: "I dreamt there was an emperor Antony" (5.2.75; emphasis added). Cleopatra, who has just been addressed by Dolabella as "Most noble empress" (5.2.70), is indulging in a fantasy of unachievable, untenable, sublime

imperial power, a fantasy that exceeds the bounds of history. A triumvir does not lend himself to deification the way an emperor or a pharaoh does. Unlike his rival Caesar, Antony was not and never would be sole emperor. In this play, the negative pleasure of the sublime includes nostalgic contemplation of what is politically past the size of dreaming.

Even if we accept Kant's rule that "the sublime . . . cannot be contained in any sensuous form,"<sup>42</sup> we must concede that Shakespeare comes tantalizingly close to staging a version of the sensuous sublime in Cleopatra's suicide scene. But even here, sublimity turns out to be more a function of language than of spectacle. Before her suicide, Cleopatra pays tribute to the Roman Stoic ethos by seeming to adopt it: "My resolution's placed, and I have nothing/Of woman in me. Now from head to foot/I am marble constant. Now the fleeting moon/No planet is of mine" (5.2.237–40). As she dissociates herself from the moon, she also dissociates herself from the feminine elements, water and earth, claiming a more masculine constitution: "I am fire and air. My other elements/I give to baser life" (5.2.285–86). Yet water, and dissolution, come rushing back as Charmian cries heavenward, "Dissolve, thick cloud, and rain, that I may say/The gods themselves do weep" (5.2.295–96). Water extinguishes fire, after all, and the language of female desire overwhelms that of male duty in this highly sensual, eroticized, feminized death scene. She is most certainly not head-to-foot marble constant when she asks, "Dost thou not see my baby at my breast,/That sucks the nurse asleep" (5.2.305–6). We do and we do not see a baby at her breast. According to Longinus, "metaphors conduce to sublimity" by making us see what can only be imagined, while sublimity helps conceal the trick of metaphor so that "the artifice of the trick is lost to sight in the surrounding brilliance."<sup>43</sup> Longinus goes on to explain that it is in the nature of strong emotions and genuine sublimity "to sweep and drive all these other things along with the surging tide of their movement. Indeed, it might be truer to say that they *demand* the hazardous. They never allow the hearer leisure to count the metaphors, because he too shares the speaker's enthusiasm."<sup>44</sup>

Cleopatra demands the hazardous. Aloft on her monument, she proclaims herself an agent of the sublime: "All strange and terrible events are welcome. . . . Our size of sorrow/Proportioned to our cause must be as great/As that which makes it" (4.15.3–6). The snake on Cleopatra's body is terrible; the figurative metamorphosis of the snake into a baby makes the event strange *and* terrible. Her astonishing suicide, which beggars all description, represents the climactic triumph of the feminine sublime over the masculine beautiful. What makes this play a tragedy from an aesthetic point of view is that the poetics of the sublime must be sacrificed to (if never overcome by) the politics of the beautiful. Because it depends on the orderly arrangement of diverse parts into a unified whole, the beautiful is the right form, indeed the only form, for the political state to adopt. By contrast, "investment in the sublime leads to the neglect of social responsibilities."<sup>45</sup> The sublime is not just anti-social but anti-civil; governments exist to set limits, hence the aesthetics of the sublime are fundamentally incompatible with civil rule. Caesar claims the political victory, of course, but aesthetically, he is vanquished, reduced to a crime scene investigator studying slime on a fig leaf and commanding lackeys in rigid rhyme, "Come Dolabella, see/High order in this great solemnity" (5.2.361–62). And there Caesar stands, whistling to th'air, an "ass/Unpolicied" (5.2.303–4) by "A lass unparalleled" (5.2.312).

## Notes

- 1 *Antony and Cleopatra*, in Stephen Greenblatt et al., eds, *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3rd edn (Norton, 2016), Act 1, scene 1, line 34. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by act, scene, and line number.
- 2 Walter Cohen, Introduction, *Antony and Cleopatra*, Norton Shakespeare, 2780.
- 3 Heather James, "The Politics of Display and the Anamorphic Subjects of Antony and Cleopatra," *Shakespeare's Late Tragedies: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Susanne L. Wofford (New York: Pearson, 1996), 208–234, 215.

- 4 James, 214.
- 5 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 100.
- 6 Early modernists who have advanced the conversation between feminism and formalism include Sasha Roberts, "Feminist Criticism and the New Formalism: Early Modern Women and Literary Engagement," *The Impact of Feminism in English Renaissance Studies*, ed. Dympna Callaghan (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 67–92; Michelle M. Dowd, *Women's Work in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Elizabeth Scott-Baumann, *Forms of Engagement: Women, Poetics and Culture 1640–1680* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Lara Dodds, *The Literary Invention of Margaret Cavendish* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne, 2013); Danielle Clarke and Marie-Louise Coolahan, "Gender, Reception, and Form: Early Modern Women and the Making of Verse," *The Work of Form: Poetics and Materiality in Early Modern Culture*, ed. Ben Burton and Elizabeth Scott-Baumann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 143–161.
- 7 Barbara Claire Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 10.
- 8 For a groundbreaking study that vastly expands the possibilities of formalist discourse beyond the language of unity, see Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).
- 9 Frederic V. Bogel, *New Formalist Criticism: Theory and Practice* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 12.
- 10 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith, ed. Nicholas Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 75.
- 11 Philip Shaw, *The Sublime* (London: Routledge, 2006), 14.
- 12 Freeman, 7, 4.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 14 Burke, 105.
- 15 Freeman, 50.
- 16 Kimberly Anne Coles, e-mail message to author, August 8, 2016.
- 17 Kant, 101.
- 18 Freeman, 69, 71, 73.
- 19 Coles, e-mail message to author, August 8, 2016.
- 20 Burke, 54. "Throughout the history of the sublime the sea has often served as its most appropriate, if not exemplary, metaphor" (Freeman, 28).
- 21 Kant, 100.
- 22 Luce Irigaray, *Between East and West: from Singularity to Community*, trans. Stephen Pluháček (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 127.
- 23 Burke, 62.
- 24 Sir Thomas North, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romaines, Compared Together by that Grave Learned Philosopher and Historiographer, Plutarke of Chæronea* (London: Routledge, 1603), 923. British Library Copy.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 922.
- 26 Burke, 74.
- 27 James, "Politics of Display," 213. On the Petrarchan blazon as authorizing male subjectivity by fragmenting the female body see also Nancy J. Vickers, "Diana Described: Scattered Woman and Scattered Rhyme," *Writing and Sexual Difference*, ed. Elizabeth Abel (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982), 95–109; Vickers, "'The blazon of sweet beauty's best': Shakespeare's Lucrece," *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (London and New York: Methuen, 1985; London: Routledge, 1990), 95–115; and Vickers, "Members Only: Marot's Anatomical Blazons," *The Body in Parts: Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe*, ed. David Hillman and Carla Mazzio (London: Routledge, 1997), 3–21. On dramatic representations of the blazon see *Staging the Blazon in Early Modern English Theater*, ed. Deborah Uman and Sarah Morrison (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2013; London: Routledge, 2016).
- 28 James, "Politics of Display," 231.
- 29 Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to The Tempest* (London: Routledge, 1992), 177, 190.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 190.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 189.
- 32 Shaw, 144.

- 33 Adelman, 189.  
 34 Dympna Callaghan, *Shakespeare Without Women: Representing Gender and Race on the Renaissance Stage* (London: Routledge, 2000), 13.  
 35 Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca and London: Cornell, 1974), 230.  
 36 Kant, 75–76.  
 37 Letter to George and Thomas Keats, 21 Dec. 1817, *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. H. E. Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), Vol. 1, 193–4.  
 38 On the literary sublime in relation to early modern tragedy, see Patrick Cheney, “Edward II: Marlowe, Tragedy and the Sublime,” *The Cambridge Companion to English Renaissance Tragedy*, ed. Emma Smith and Garrett A. Sullivan Jr. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 174–187.  
 39 Shaw, 26.  
 40 Freeman, 70.  
 41 Shaw, 10.  
 42 Kant, 76.  
 43 Longinus, *On Sublimity*, trans. D. A. Russell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 32.6, 17.2.  
 44 *Ibid.*, 32.4  
 45 Shaw, 107.

## Bibliography

- Adelman, Janet. *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to the Tempest*. New York: Routledge, 1992.  
 Bogel, Frederic V. *New Formalist Criticism: Theory and Practice*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.  
 Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Edited by Adam Phillips. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.  
 Callaghan, Dympna. *Shakespeare Without Women: Representing Gender and Race on the Renaissance Stage*. New York: Routledge, 2000.  
 Cheney, Patrick. “Edward II: Marlowe, Tragedy and the Sublime” in *The Cambridge Companion to English Renaissance Tragedy*. Edited by Emma Smith and Garrett A. Sullivan Jr., 174–187. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.  
 Clarke, Danielle and Marie-Louise Coolahan. “Gender, Reception, and Form: Early Modern Women and the Making of Verse” in *The Work of Form: Poetics and Materiality in Early Modern Culture*. Edited by Ben Burton and Elizabeth Scott-Baumann, 143–161. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.  
 Dodds, Lara. *The Literary Invention of Margaret Cavendish*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2013.  
 Dowd, Michelle M. *Women's Work in Early Modern English Literature and Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.  
 Freeman, Barbara Claire. *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction*. Berkeley: Berkeley University Press, 1995.  
 Greenblatt, Stephen et al., eds. *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3rd edition. New York: W. W. Norton, 2016.  
 Irigaray, Luce. *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Translated by Gillian C. Gill. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974.  
 ———. *Between East and West: From Singularity to Community*. Translated by Stephen Pluháček. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.  
 James, Heather. “The Politics of Display and the Anamorphic Subjects of *Antony and Cleopatra*” in *Shakespeare's Late Tragedies: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Edited by Susanne L. Wofford, 208–234. New York: Pearson, 1996.  
 Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgement*. Translated by James Creed Meredith. Edited by Nicholas Walker. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.  
 Levine, Caroline. *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.  
 Longinus. *On Sublimity*. Translated by D. A. Russell. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965.  
 North, Sir Thomas. *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romaines, Compared Together by That Grave Learned Philosopher and Historiographer*. London: Plutarke of Chæroneæ, 1603.  
 Roberts, Sasha. “Feminist Criticism and the New Formalism: Early Modern Women and Literary Engagement” in *The Impact of Feminism in English Renaissance Studies*. Edited by Dympna Callaghan, 67–92. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.  
 Rollins, H. E., ed. *The Letters of John Keats*. 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958.

- Scott-Baumann, Elizabeth. *Forms of Engagement: Women, Poetics and Culture 1640–1680*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Shaw, Philip. *The Sublime*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Uman, Deborah and Sarah Morrison, eds. *Staging the Blazon in Early Modern English Theater*. New York: Ashgate, 2013; Routledge, 2016.
- Vickers, Nancy J. “Diana Described: Scattered Woman and Scattered Rhyme” in *Writing and Sexual Difference*. Edited by Elizabeth Abel, 95–109. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982.
- . “‘The blazon of sweet beauty’s best’: Shakespeare’s *Lucrece*” in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*. Edited by Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman, 95–115. London: Methuen, 1985; Routledge, 1990.
- . “Members Only: Marot’s Anatomical Blazons” in *The Body in Parts: Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe*. Edited by David Hillman and Carla Mazzio, 3–21. New York: Routledge, 1997.