EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES

Kelly Lehtonen, *Heroic Awe: The Sublime and the Remaking of Renaissance Epic* (Toronto University Press, 2023). 252 pp. ISBN 9781487545369.

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Since its second publication in 1674, Milton's *Paradise Lost* has long been acknowledged as the culminating account of Renaissance epic poetry and, given Boileau's translation of Longinus's *Peri hupsous* within the same year, an exemplary work of sublime literature. Following the emerging scholarship on the dissemination of Longinus in early modern Europe, Kelly Lehtonen's engaging monograph, *Heroic Awe: The Sublime and the Remaking of Renaissance Epic*, argues that 'what has not been recognized is how closely Milton integrates sublimity into his model of epic heroism, and how earlier versions of Renaissance epic also make the sublime central to their own heroic models' (p. 4). Where previous studies have primarily focused on how Milton produced the sublime poetically, Lehtonen explores 'Longinus's concept of the so-called "natural" or psychological sublime, rather than the "rhetorical" sublime, a principle of high literary style' (p. 13). In this respect, the author not only reconfigures the interplay between sublimity and heroic poetry but, most significantly, she locates it in several Renaissance epic poems across Europe, in particular Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*, Guillaume de Salluste Du Bartas's *Les Semaines*, Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. By examining the concept of heroic spirituality in Longinian terms, Lehtonen promotes an alternative history of the genre, which challenges the assumption that Renaissance epic conforms to core Virgilian values — absolute devotion to religious and political authority — and is primarily committed to exemplary service to community and nation.

The book begins with a theoretically informed introduction that defines the concept of the sublime that would play a role in the re-conception of heroism in Renaissance epic poetry. Among its numerous applications, the early modern recovery of Longinus's theory understood the sublime as the human experience of being overwhelmed emotionally and psychologically with terror or ecstasy, producing spiritual

transformation and the encounter with various forms of divine presence. By incorporating this Longinian philosophy of the sublime, the model of epic heroism shifted from a '*horizontal*' (p. 5) commitment to civic duty and glorification of state to an '*external* — exceptional action that a hero performs' (p. 5). Alongside the Virgilian and Horatian influences on epic, Lehtonen contends that the sublime offered a compelling literary paradigm to depart from the pressures of nationalistic ambitions and cultivate a particularly heroic orientation towards God and immortality. However, community remained a central part of the religious experience. In their very different contexts, Tasso, Du Bartas, Spenser, and Milton all find ways to 'qualify (sometimes explicitly and absolutely, sometimes indirectly and moderately) the authority of the institutions represented in epic poetry' as well as to celebrate an independent and heroic pursuit of spirituality that also 'serves as a kind of supernatural bond among those who would pursue divine glory, creating a linking point based outside of civic and religious institutions' (pp. 12-13). Despite being an important part of the genre's development, sublime spirituality is not a ubiquitous feature of Renaissance epic, therefore, for distinct reasons, Lehtonen excludes Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* and Pierre de Ronsard's *Franciade*.

After her introduction, an opening chapter explores the transmission history of *Peri hupsous* in two moments: first, Lehtonen surveys how editors, translators, and commentators of the tractate absorbed Longinian principles in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Second, she illustrates how a series of French, Italian, and English writers incorporated the Longinian conceptions of sublimity in their poetic theories by placing a striking emphasis on the connection to the divine — from Ronsard's defense of the supernatural aims of literature to Tasso's poetic theory of *meraviglia* in his 1594 *Discorsi del poema eroico*, to Milton's concept of the poet actively participating in the magnificence of divine epic. While it is often assumed that these scholars considered *Peri hupsous* a rhetorical text, Lehtonen argues for a different history of reception, where 'a number of Renaissance scholars did engage deeply with the treatise, correctly recognizing that Longinus used the word *hypsos* to refer to a philosophical concept associated with transcendence, rather than a stylistic principle' (p. 22). No less than the later theories of Burke and Kant, early modern rhetoricians and poetic theorists understood the sublime as a philosophical concept, providing a counterbalance to Ciceronian rhetoric or Horatian and neo-Aristotelian interest in civic morality.

After her synopsis of the assimilation of Longinus into early modern theories of epic poetry, the subsequent four chapters address how each epic poem transferred the poetry's aim for transcendence into practice by reflecting the sublime into a model of

heroism. Lehtonen's re-evaluation of heroic spirituality integrates early modern Longinian sublimity with later theorizations, such as Julia Kristeva's abjection and Max Weber's charisma, to elucidate elements that the ancient treatise left implicit. In chapter 2's discussion of *Gerusalemme Liberata*, Lehtonen identifies two complementary types of hero participating in the sublime: the charismatic characters, such as Goffredo, who are driven 'by their own virtuous, passionate, individual pursuit of divine truth'; and the romantic heroes, such as Tancredi, who 'pass through an experience of *abjection*, a negative or dark sublime' (p. 55), following an indirect route to the divine. For Tasso, both charismatic and romantic heroism is always a risk-taking process, a transgressive impulse that violates the civic-building principles endorsed by the Counter-Reformation. Of particular interest is how Lehtonen associates Tasso's heroism with the theological and artistic tradition of Catholic mysticism, whose emphasis on the quest for individual unity with God overlaps with the spiritual one of Longinian sublimity.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to Du Bartas and forms one of the most interesting sections of Lehtonen's study since the French poet has not been traditionally connected to the reception of the Longinian sublime. Building upon David Sedley's work on Montaigne's *Essais* (1580), bringing skepticism and sublimity together, Lehtonen extends the discussion to Du Bartas, arguing that his descriptions of Longinian ravishment are closely allied to the development of skeptical humility. Caught up in vicious debates between French Catholics and Huguenots, Du Bartas promotes embracing divine mystery and inscrutability 'by a constant, humble readiness to reject claims of certain knowledge, particularly when used for political ends' (p. 90). Du Bartas's insistence on humility and awe is beautifully exemplified by Abraham's moment of terrorizing transport and abjection when God commands him to kill his son. More significantly, Lehtonen reads Isaac's imaginative experience of sacrificial rapture as a form of poetic ennoblement, like 'the *enargeia* or *phantasia* that Tasso and Longinus had both emphasized in their discourses on the sublime' (p. 101). In his effort to unite intellectual humility with transformative rapture and communal support, Lehtonen interestingly suggests that Du Bartas's form of skeptical sublimity would prove especially significant to Milton.

The subsequent two chapters shift the investigation of sublime heroism from sixteenth-century Italy and France to Protestant England. Following scholars such as Patrick Cheney, who has recently recognized Spenser as 'Renaissance England's first truly sublime author' (p. 105), Chapter 4 focuses on Book 1 of *The Faerie Queene* that, according to Lehtonen, is the prototype of Spenser's portrayal of heroism for the entire epic. Spenser creates a complicated model of sublimity and heroism that begins with Redcrosse undergoing a journey of Kristevan abjection and ends with receiving

unmerited divine favor with the support of a Christian community, based outside of political affiliation and sharing a genuine faith. For Spenser, a charismatic community of believers transforms the knight into a heroic agent. Before presenting his genuine model of charismatic community in the later cantos of Book I (Una), 'Spenser features the dangers of idolizing earthly authority and national purposes instead of pursuing the sublimity of heaven' (p. 129). Writing in the context of officially Protestant England, Spenser builds, in contrast to Du Bartas, a more sophisticated Calvinist picture of the sublime that subordinates one's devotion to society and nation to undeserved salvation by grace as the most fundamental source of Christian selfhood.

In *Paradise Lost* — the subject of Chapter 5 — Milton responds to the variants of epic heroism by his Italian, French, and English predecessors with a model of sublimity that aims to foster Christian unity across national borders. Milton first extends Spenser's warning about idolatrous charisma by illustrating how Satan's charismatic monarchy perpetuates corrupt forms of authority. While Tasso portrays charisma as inherently divine, Milton's fallen angel represents a perversion of the heroic model as he attempts to make himself an object of worship and thus refuses a true encounter with transcendent divinity. For Milton, sublime heroism is fundamentally interrelational, based on mutual support and love 'that facilitates direct communication with God' (p. 166). In Adam and Eve Milton celebrates his concept of sublimity, although their path to heroism and mutual connection comes to fruition only after the Fall: 'through the suffering of the Fall (and in Adam's case, an experience of abjection that resembles Satan's), both characters progress rapidly as they choose to identify fully with each other in sacrificial love, and thus prepare to enter unity with God' (p. 144). In her concluding chapter, Lehtonen further explores Milton's model of sublimity in *Paradise Regained* (1671) where the Son's victory over Satan's temptation reinforces the principle of heroism promoted in Renaissance epic: 'that Christian heroism demands the humility to cultivate awed reverence for heavenly glory, seeking this condition above worldly power, yet with the aim to glorify rather than efface the individual self' (p. 178). In this sense, Lehtonen insists on reading the Longinian concept of the sublime as an important response to Virgilian values of civic virtue and service to the nation. The epic heroism of Tasso, Du Bartas, Spenser, and Milton use Longinus's sublimity to celebrate the cultivation of a heightened emotional and psychological condition of heroic awe for the divine as the longing of the individual human soul, and an expression of hope for its fulfillment in a spiritual community.

Particularly noteworthy is the monograph's engagement with lucid close reading and textual details, and the thoroughness and generosity of Lehtonen's scholarship on Renaissance epics. However, readers might be disappointed not to find a more extensive

presence of Longinus's tractate, his translators, and commentators in the chapters devoted to early modern poems. This slippage does not particularly pose problems for the study, which achieves a great deal: redefining the concept of heroism in Renaissance epics from a comparative approach, Lehtonen provides brilliant insights on the connections between early modern authors and offers an indispensable resource for an alternative history of the genre, benefiting from the intersection with the idea of the sublime.