
Balloon Madness: Flights of Imagination in Britain, 1783–1786

By Clare Brant
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To readers who have wondered what to make of gestures like Percy Bysshe Shelley's floating of sonnets in balloons, Clare Brant's *Balloon Madness* will offer more than one answer. Her book takes its place among several recent studies that explore aerial voyages and the wider scientific and cultural production spurred by investigations of air (Michael R. Lynn, *The Sublime Invention* [London & New York: Routledge, 2010]; Marie Thébaut-Sorger, *Une Histoire des Ballons* [Paris: Éditions du Patrimoine, 2010]; Richard Holmes, *Falling Upwards* [New York: Pantheon Books, 2013], for instance). While interest in air sprawls throughout the long eighteenth century, Brant shows that the focus on aerial means of transportation in the shape of air balloons is a more concentrated chapter. Her study covers a short, but intense period of time before the French Revolution from 1783–1786, delving into the beginnings of aeronautic experience, the rapid spread of balloon frenzy and the different areas that it affected. People of diverse ranks, international circulation of balloon news, fashion, print culture, kings, and wars appear in Brant's study and reanimate key aspects of the first flight experiences. The beginnings traced by Brant lie in France, where the brothers Joseph and Étienne Montgolfier, papermakers by profession, were the first to launch a paper hot-air balloon in June 1783. From there the hype crossed the Channel, was highly publicized in Britain, and stayed for some years. These were years in which not only balloons but also the hope took off that the sky could become as traversable a space as land and water. It remained a short-lived hope, at first. Three years of experimentation and witnessing of numerous ascents convinced specialists and spectators that balloons were a quirky, uncertain construct, too unwieldy to be turned into dependable means of transportation. Brant relates catastrophic and bathetic balloon travels like Jean-Pierre Blanchard's and John Jeffries's crossing of the Channel and whose ascent succeeded only after the travellers relieved the balloon of all their belongings, and finally, to shed any dispensable weight, relieved themselves urinating into spare bladders. To their satisfaction, the balloon rose and reached France on 7 January

1785. As Brant painstakingly shows, these first experiences of aerial mobility deserve attention because they planted in people the awareness of the dawn of the aerial age. Brant argues that we must retrieve balloons from the scientist's cabinet for the sake of this awareness that had wide-ranging ramifications: 'To lock balloons into a history of science, even of imaginative science, means losing their history in imagination' (p. 9). In the heyday of 'balloon madness' – a phrase frequently used in the first two years to capture epidemic balloon enthusiasm, if not addiction – balloons inspired the scientist, the politician, the philosopher, the satirist, the poet, the moralist, the man and woman of fashion, children and parents, monarchs and milliners, military men, criminals, and charlatans ready to draw profit from balloon sensationalism. Even animals had a part to play. The second balloon ascent organized in September 1783, by the Montgolfier brothers for Louis XVI, Marie-Antoinette, and a sizeable crowd at Versailles, saw a duck, a cock, and a sheep as the first aerial passengers. After these animals' safe landing, humans would ascend balloons. In Britain, Brant investigates the key centres of balloon experimentation and the people who directed them: Patrick Copeland in Aberdeen, James Tytler in Edinburgh, Weller and Deeker in York, Vincenzo Lunardi in Newcastle, Thomas Baldwin and Lunardi in Liverpool and Chester, Richard Crosbie in Dublin, James Sadler in Manchester and Oxford, and Jean-Pierre Blanchard and Stuart Arnold in London. Brant carefully relates the marriage of amusement and money inaugurated by the new invention. Drummed up as a spectacle, balloon viewing attracted large crowds ready to pay for the new sensation. However, as Lunardi sourly recognized, balloon spectacle was a democratic affair, as the floating globe could be viewed from the ground by non-paying bodies. But commerce would pave its way to profit from and fuel the balloon vogue. Perhaps the most memorable item was the balloon hat for women, called the Lunardi bonnet: large and colourful, it claimed space and signalled by its spherical shape a woman's sphere of influence. For some, it fittingly suited the female character by satisfying visual appetite as much as reminding viewers of women's waywardness and ephemeral beauty. Ephemeral could be an epithet to describe 'balloonomania' (Horace Walpole's coinage), and the doubtful status of balloons as scientific objects. They were scientific objects insofar as they required a combination of knowledge of chemistry, physics, and more. But their public appearance as well as the aesthetics which rendered them beautiful objects, not least for the purpose of attracting wealthy sponsors, incited definitions from all sorts of people beyond the scientific community. This is where the levity and gravity surrounding balloons enter. (Tellingly, Thomas Baldwin titled his narrative of a balloon excursion *Airopaidia* (1785), tying air with childish amusement.) The heart of Brant's book elaborates on these complementary sides in the reception of balloons. The satirist and sceptic harped on about balloons' resemblance to bubbles, activating the anxiety connected to financial

schemes like the South Sea Bubble or the fear of air becoming taxable like light (i. e. wax candles). To others, who saw in balloons flying globes and miniatures of the earth, the new mobility held the promise, or the threat, to expand imperial desires in unprecedented form. Quickly, conquest of the air translated into conquest of land. Although the first balloon to be employed in a war, at the Battle of Fleurus in 1796, produced little effect, warfare seemed to have been at the origins of the invention. It was the Franco-British war on the island of Gibraltar that incited Joseph Montgolfier in 1782 to imagine an assault from the air, a flight of imagination leading to his hot-air balloon. Not surprisingly, balloons acquired something of a Promethean quality, a sign of man's growing ability and presumption (presumption being the word later associated with Frankenstein, Mary Shelley's modern Prometheus).

The period discussed in *Balloon Madness* may be short, but Brant's patience in mapping the rhizomatic spread of the awareness of the arrival of the aerial age is amply rewarded. She also succeeds in showing that despite the waning of balloon enthusiasm, the opening of aerial possibilities had an abiding influence. In one of the most enlightening chapters, Brant asserts that aerial voyages expanded existing definitions of the sublime, adding to visual encounters with sublime soundscapes. Not surprisingly, and despite (or due to) their rocky descents, balloons would lend themselves to the sublime which was increasingly associated with elevation. However, what astonished aeronauts among or above clouds was an experience of calm described as nothing but sublime, for which Brant finds in Blake's *Jerusalem* a perfect rendering: 'silent, calm, & motionless, in the mid-air sublime'. Brant's references to literary works will delight students of literature; indeed, imaginative responses frame her story, which sets out with a balloon sonnet by Hester Piozzi and concludes with a chapter on the balloon attraction shared by poets, visual artists, and children.

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