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Gorboduc on Fire: The Pyropoetics of Tyranny in Early Modern England

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ABSTRACT

This article rereads Norton and Sackville's Inns of Court tragedy *Gorboduc* (1562) in the light of its neglected preoccupation with fire. It posits the 1561 lightning strike on St Paul's as a critical context for the play's emphasis on fire as a motor of providential justice, through the repeated evocation of the myth of Phaethon, and locates its use of fire in performance at the intersection between political intervention and carnival festivity. Noting the play's coevolution with the fire pamphlet genre, the article suggests that these ephemeral works' commentary on the relationship between fire and tyranny, in line with sixteenth-century resistance theory and *de casibus* tragedy, illuminates how *Gorboduc's* interests manifest in popular discourse, and allows an interpretation of the play's imagining of rebellion which foregrounds the irony of its rhetoric of stability and obedience. In dialogue with recent work on the Pyrocene and European pyrophobia, and its implications in relation to Giorgio Agamben's understanding of civil conflict and the state of exception, the article broadens the existing picture of *Gorboduc's* resonance, to read it not just as pivotal in the development of English drama and political theology, but as contiguous with wider patterns of thought in premodern disaster response and narratives of collective action.

KEYWORDS

commons; counsel;
ecocriticism; fire;
Renaissance; tragedy;
tyranny

Sometimes human symbolism in certain legends is so clear that one too readily disregards the image material they employ. The literature of *ideas* does a disservice to the literature of *imagery*. It interprets human character but stops participating actively in the life of images. It is thus that the rock of Sisyphus becomes a simple phrase designating blind fatality . . . Why appreciate this symbolism only for its formal content and make no effort to experience its dynamic power? We see little *interest* in such an exercise today, having lost familiarity with the experience of *rock*.

(Gaston Bachelard, *Earth and Reveries of Will: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter* [149])

“But first go and set London Bridge on fire; and, if you can, burn down the Tower too.”

(Jack Cade, in William Shakespeare, *2 Henry VI* [2002, 4.6.14–5])

Introduction

Scholarship of the last few decades has tended to think of the ancient British chronicle play as earthy and wet. These Renaissance stagings of British legend are predicated on the dissolution of an island nation, sodden with blood and rainwater. Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville's *Gorboduc* (performed 1562, first printed 1565) and Shakespeare's *King Lear* (c.1606, first printed 1608), for example, necessarily engage configurations of the heavy elements in their dynastic geographies. King *Gorboduc* uses the River Humber to divide his kingdom between his doomed sons, Ferrex and Porrex; their murders leave the world "Drowned in blood, and sunk in cruelty" (Norton and Sackville [1570] 1970, 4.2.170).¹ In the "drenched" and "drowned" ruins of his cartography, Lear's "terrors of the earth" become tautologous, as terror and *terra* merge: Cordelia is "dead as earth" (Shakespeare 1997, 2.2.471; 5.3.259). It is unsurprising in a critical context which has primarily valued Norton and Sackville's tragedy for its dealings with land (Berg 2000; Vanhoutte 2000; Kim 2014; Archer 2019; Frazer 2021), that *Gorboduc's* preoccupation with fire has gone unremarked. But fire, this article will suggest, maps out the play's place in mid-Tudor discourse afresh, and is central to its constructions of the political nation (see Winston 2005). Throughout, youthful intemperance, tragic falls, divine retribution, popular insurrection, and material destruction, as well as Duke Fergus's proto-Scottish insurgency, are all characterised by fire language, a term used here to capture the continuum from imagery, to humoral predisposition, to physical actuality; from trope to prop.

Gorboduc's dramatic legacy is stark. The first original tragedy in English, and the first English play to use blank verse, its impact on Elizabethan drama cannot be overstated. If John Day's preface to the 1570 edition is to be believed, this influence is attributable to an unexpected act of theft: Day claims that the 1565 text was procured for the press underhandedly, following its performance at London's Inner Temple, one of the four Inns of Court, to conclude Robert Dudley's 1561–2 Christmas revels, and later at Whitehall (4–5). What was supposed to be a private, occasional performance became common property, and its interrogation of absolute sovereignty and conciliar discourse was made available to the wider book-buying public. So far, so Promethean, although *Gorboduc* itself has hardly been presented as a metrical fire-brand snatched from an academic context and thrust into popular use. While the play's interventions in sixteenth-century political theology and dramatic culture have been widely discussed, its characters' desire for the preservation of "the common state" (1.2.87) often feels irreconcilable with its metrical and governmental innovations (see Rozett 1984, 113). The work seems to advocate for national unity, as it narrates King *Gorboduc's* fatal decision to divide his kingdom between his two sons, Ferrex and Porrex. After Ferrex's murder by his brother, and Porrex's by their mother, the text presents a harrowing vision of the catastrophic civil turmoil set to follow *Gorboduc* and his wife's assassination as part of a rebellious uprising. This apparent dedication to the sociopolitical status quo necessarily countermands its medium's structuring principles — tragic peripeteia and the festive carnivalesque — while the charges of elite stuffiness which dog *Gorboduc's* reception seem to sit awkwardly alongside its rhetorical corraling of a putative commonwealth. Indeed, Joel B. Altman (1978, 258) concludes that "Sackville and Norton have actually written two tragedies," one

moral and political, and one fatalistic and patriotic. Here, fire helps. The double meaning of *stasis* — at once signifying stability and unrest — makes up two facets of *Gorboduc*'s peculiar paradox (see Agamben 2015), and attention to the polyvalent discourse of fire in sixteenth-century England illuminates its own pertinence as a paradigm for civil conflict and competing structures of authority (see Charteris-Black 2017, 14).

Early modern thinking about the elements mandates their integration, as well as their entanglement with alchemical and humoral schema, and scientific understanding still held faith in the ancient notion of love and enmity between nonhuman substances (Macauley 2010; Grafton [1999] 2001, 161–2). Matter's workings were understood through this elemental drama, and the period's literary drama in turn mobilizes the language of elemental collaboration and conflict to explore emotion and action in material terms. Recently, ecomaterialist criticism has reinvigorated literary consideration of the elements as part of its object-oriented understanding of the nonhuman and its agency, and the agency afforded to the elements is in part contingent on their dynamic interrelation (Bennett 2013; Cohen and Duckert 2015). It is therefore impossible to consider fire in isolation, either from its sibling elements — air, earth, and water — or from (other) matter. However, *Gorboduc*'s imaginary is haunted in particular by fire's multivalent presence; the play's mythological lexicon is dominated by the myth of Phaethon, whose failed attempt to drive the sun-god's chariot across the sky ends in his own fiery death and the scorching of the world, and whose story is invoked across Acts 1–3. Fire does not feature in *Gorboduc*'s plot, and in fact, Norton and Sackville omit the one pertinent incident present in the legend's sources: Videna's burning of her son Porrex's dismembered body, detailed in John Hardyng's *Chronicle* (1543, 25v). Instead, its textual fires are speculative, allusive and metaleptic. Like "sparks which erst lay raked/In living cinders" (4.2.107–8), combustion is latent but ever-present in the play; it functions, in Gaston Bachelard's (1990, 92) terms, as "an unconsummated pre-act, a delicate synthesis of tension and terror."

To understand this preoccupation, this article resituates *Gorboduc*'s performance in January 1562 in proximity to the lightning strike which ignited St Paul's steeple in June 1561, and suggests that this occasion would have resonated for the scholars at the Inner Temple with the evocations of destructive conflagration in the play, centering the Phaethon myth for playgoers. Now a scholarly field led by Stephen J. Pyne, anglophone fire history seems to have been inaugurated in print in 1561, with James Pilkington's (1561, B2r) account of this startling event, when "in fletestrete, & newgate market, by the violence of fyre, burninge coles of greate bignesse, fell downe almoost as thicke as haylstones." What follows considers the play's kinship with the printed fire pamphlet as a means of recovering the place of fire disasters in the negotiation of early modern sovereignty. Fire pamphlets were "memorializations, as well as news items . . . at once communal coping exercises, practical warnings and pleas for aid" (Morgan 2016, 271), and their close contact with the Elizabethan *de casibus*, or "fall of princes," tradition helps make sense of how fire disasters function imaginatively, and how *Gorboduc*'s fire language may have signified for its early audiences and readers. Both tyranny and rebellion are figured in the period as natural disasters over which the subject has little agency. Far from redistributing that power, the play's exhortation to collective action and

unified discourse in fact reveals and shores up the subject's alienation from the workings of authority, in line, this article suggests, with the technological upheavals of the Pyrocene (see Pyne 2016).

Coined by Pyne in 2015, the notion of a Pyrocene sets up an alternative framework to the Anthropocene as an epoch of transformational human activity, and characterises the era on the basis of changing attitudes towards fire, propagated by the imperial reach of “northern, temperate” Europe — “a great anomaly on a fire planet” (Pyne 2021, 29) — where open burning (whether in the landscape or in domestic settings) became epistemologically antithetical to the emerging criteria for modernity in industrializing societies. Like the Anthropocene's, the date of the Pyrocene's inauguration is moveable (see Lewis and Maslin 2015), but Pyne (2016, 5) suggests that John Donne's *The First Anniversarie: An Anatomie of the World* (1611) instantiates “a shift in the deeper status of fire as a generic principle,” recognising in Donne's claim that “new Philosophy calls all in doubt,/The element of fire is quite put out” “the early tremors of what would become the scientific revolution.” Pyne (2021), and recent theoretical work by Nigel Clark and Kathryn Yusoff (2014; see also Norgaard and the Karuk Tribe 2019), explains the transformative impact of mounting European pyrophobia by positing an opposition between “a more primeval narrative in which fire is a companion on our journey and part of a shared stewardship of the living world” and “a Promethean narrative that speaks of fire as technological power, as something abstracted from its setting, perhaps by violence, certainly as something held in defiance of an existing order” (Pyne 2015). *Gorboduc's* dealings with two kinds of fire — Phaethon and Jove's mythic cycle of destruction, emblematic of the reciprocal force of tyrant and rebel, across Acts 1–4, and *Gorboduc's* counsellors' subsequent collaborative defence against the fiery destruction of invasion and civil war, designed to elicit parliamentary consent in Act 5 — map onto this division, as its fire language tracks the trajectory towards what Pyne calls “third-fire,” “the brute force of fire distilled and mechanized” (2021, 5).

Fire was subject to extensive early modern natural philosophical interrogation, but this enjoyed a particular efflorescence in the 1550s and 1560s, in Girolamo Cardano's *De subtilitate* ([1550] 2013, 80–103), and three standalone Parisian editions of Theophrastus's *Peri Puros* between 1552 and 1567. Beyond the scarring impact of the 1561 lightning strike that destroyed St Paul's steeple (which was never rebuilt), 1560s London was on the cusp of a transformation in fuel use, from wood to coal, whose material trace in the appearance, odor and configuration of the built environment foregrounded specific kinds of burning as emblematic of contemporary urban life (see Cavert 2016). *Gorboduc's* imagery and staging posits a hierarchy of combustion, aligning open flame with a spectrum of disorder from rebellion to tyranny that must be suppressed and, more insidiously, with a factitious primitivism which has, aspects of the play imply, been irrevocably superseded. Fire's double symbolic purchase on either side of the sovereign-subject divide comes to resonate with Giorgio Agamben's notion of *stasis*, the ongoing civil conflict which constitutes a body politic that “lives only in the tension between the multitude and the *populus-rex*: it is always already in the act of dissolving itself in the constitution of the sovereign” (2015, 45; cf. Majumder 2019, 119).

By situating *Gorboduc's* pyropoetics alongside the early modern fire pamphlet genre, it is possible to demonstrate the ways in which the play negotiates fire's instigation of a state of emergency *avant la lettre* (see Haddow 2020, 154), and how its pyrophobic

suppression of fire, whether by firefighting or mechanistic sublimation, may be seen to suspend the political status quo it appears to champion, through its dramatization of civil conflict as natural disaster in the context of the Inner Temple's 1561–2 Christmas revelry. While Agamben notes in *State of Exception* that “The idea that a suspension of law may be necessary for the common good is foreign to the medieval world” (Agamben [2005] 2017, 187; cf. van Dijk 2015), his insights into premodern carnival festivity, after Karl Meuli, suggest that “it brings to light in a parodic form the anomie within the law” (228), to “celebrate and parodically replicate the anomie through which the law applies itself to chaos” (229) in the state of exception.² I argue that *Gorboduc* stages in its clash across Agamben's dialectic of the juridical and anomic — that is, the normative rule of law, or *nomos*, and the festive anomie of rebel and sovereign alike — something approaching a state of exception in the name of the “common good,” whose logic takes its legitimacy from the play's participation in the phenomenon of pyrophobia. Unlike the sovereign exception of the monarch and usurper, *Gorboduc*'s projection of conciliar authority briefly hypothesises a phenomenon closer to Agamben's “threshold of indeterminacy between democracy and absolutism” ([2005] 2017, 168).

Whereas the state of exception as a mode of disaster response has generally been understood as a post-Enlightenment phenomenon (see Huet 2012, 7–8), reading the play within Pyne's framework of the Pyrocene as an alternative marker of incipient modernity allows us to perceive this mechanism at work in this earlier period, in line with, for example, Malcolm Smuts' (2014) apprehension of a tendency towards martial law — largely sublimated at home but vehemently implemented in colonial contexts — as the flipside of the Elizabethan monarchical republic's investment in counsel and civility.³ In this respect, the Pyrocene emerges as a doubly effective designation of humankind's transformative and transformed relation to the nonhuman world, since its processes can be seen as implicated in not just the figurative, but the material mechanisms of sovereignty. Where Marc de Wilde casts doubt on the applicability of the city fire as an analogy through which to delineate the state of exception in John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* (1689), for instance, noting that “the example of the burning house does not fit in well, for traditionally the state of exception was associated rather with national emergencies, such as (the threat of) foreign invasion, civil war, or natural disaster” (de Wilde 2010, 254), reading *Gorboduc* through the lens of the Pyrocene illuminates their epistemological interrelation on the cusp of the “modern understanding of emergency government” (253). The (literal and metaphorical) fire disaster as proto-emergency gives rise to an extra-judicial rupture following King Gorboduc's abdication (Majumder 2019, 121), as the comparable decision of Shakespeare's *Lear* has been shown to do (see Mahler 2016). However, this article presents fire not simply as an emblem for catastrophe, but generative of a different kind of extraordinary phase *after* Gorboduc's absolutist experiment, intimately bound up with understandings of tyranny and rebellion set jointly in opposition to a new pyrophobic sovereign polity, whose rhetorical prolepsis of violent exceptionalism is occluded by its discourse of naturalness and biotic growth.

To do this, the article reconsiders the role of pyrotechnics in the play's original performance contexts, and reframes critical questions about the work's political role by placing its engagements with fire's interpretative and practical demands at the heart of the “complex intermingling of iconic and verbal representation” identified as fundamental to its meaning by Mark Breitenberg (1988, 195). My understanding of fire's place

at the intersection of metaphor, materiality, and sixteenth-century admonitory genres draws on its spectrum of valences, from combustive emergency to revolutionary social energy, as set out in the foundational theoretical work of Bachelard (1987), Macauley (2010), and Charteris-Black (2017), and Pyne's magisterial sequence of fire histories (see also Smith 2012), as well as major studies of fire on the early modern stage by Philip Butterworth (1998), Heather Dubrow (1999), Ellen MacKay (2011), and Lawrence Manley (2001). Foregrounding the play's use of fire to produce and negotiate communal identity reconfigures the relationship between performance conditions, the play's mythographical framework, and its participation in the ethical gymnastics of contemporary resistance theory, and offers a new way to address the perennial question of its topical force.⁴

Fire at the theater

Steve Mentz (2015, 60) has noted how “combustion's divided nature” — “fire's forked tongue” — “makes it hard to represent, especially in the flammable world of mostly wooden early modern cities and theaters” (see also MacKay 2011, 139–63). It is therefore striking to find that fire is ubiquitous in *Gorboduc's* original performance contexts, as well as being an overlooked presence in its pages. Its “forked tongue” signals fire's kinship with theatrical representation, and the allegorical mode in which *Gorboduc* and its festive paradramas — dumb shows, pageants, mock battles, and their coded retellings — propagate their layers of meaning. Fire's multiple connotations are both widely varied and frequently self-evident, including forge, pyre, altar, taper, torch, lightning, and wildfire; lust, zeal, caprice, martyrdom, perdition, creative origin, and violent apocalypse; Vulcan, Prometheus, Icarus, Lucifer, phoenix, and salamander; and the destruction of Sodom, Thebes, Troy, Rome, and, in 1613, the Globe Theater (see also Charteris-Black 2017, 127–54]). Before turning to some specific implications, the first important thing to note is precisely this multivalence, which along with the challenges posed for premodern scientific understanding and textual or theatrical mimesis, insists that fire attract epistemological pause (see Mentz 2015, 60–1; West 2006, 103–4; Dubrow 1999, 93–4).

The play itself opens with a dumb show, in which “six wild men clothed in leaves” (8) easily break a bundle of sticks once it has been split apart. The stage direction, as printed, reports that “a state knit in unity doth continue strong against all force, but being divided is easily destroyed” (8). But in addition, these sticks function as kindling for the narrative in which ancient Britain is divided between Gorboduc's sons, whose subsequent murders give rise to the annihilation of the royal family, and a lengthy civil war. A stock feature of early pageant theater, the wild man, green man, or wodewose would have been familiar as a bearer of fire clubs (theatrical torches loaded with gunpowder), known to some audience members from Jean de Froissart's account of a notorious 1393 winter entertainment at Charles VI's court during which a torch accidentally ignited the pitch on the wild men's flaxen coats (Goldsmith 1958, 481–4; see also Butterworth 1998, 21–36; MacKay 2011, 167). Attention to fire's symbolic freight allows us to reintegrate this facet of the wild man's semiotic value, and to read the first dumb show as a theatrical tinder-box, evocative of the latent political threat made manifest as the performance unfolds.⁵ Subsequent stage business literalizes this incendiary potential: the fourth dumb show presents “from under the stage, as though out of Hell, three Furies — Alecto, Megaera,

and Tisiphone — clad in black garments sprinkled with blood and flames . . . the third [bearing] a burning firebrand” (44–5), before the final act is prefaced by the arrival of “a company of harquebusiers” (infantrymen armed with the musket-like arquebus) who discharge their firearms on stage to “signif[ly] tumults, rebellions, arms and civil wars” (58–9). Real, material ignition, then, accompanies King Gorboduc’s warning that “The fire not quenched, but kept in close restraint,/Fed still within, breaks forth with double flame” (3.1.103–4). The play exploits fire’s occupation of the boundary between illusive theatrical effect and dangerous reality (MacKay 2011), and draws the slippage between the metaphorical and material, and between wild and domesticated forms of burning, to the center of its representational practice (see Charteris-Black 2017, 9; Hunt 2012, 557; Hills 2007, 190).

The printed text of *Gorboduc* advertises its allegorical import through its unpacking of the dumb shows’ visual metaphors, and the manuscript account of its first performance, discovered in the 1990s, demonstrates its audience’s exegesis in action (see Walker 1998, 210–11). In response, scholarship has long read the play and its reprintings as didactic interventions around the Elizabethan succession question, the threat to Elizabeth’s rule posed by Mary Stuart, speculation about Elizabeth’s marriage negotiations, and the 1569–70 Northern Rising (Small 1931; Watson 1939; Reese 1942; Axton 1977; Graves 1994; James and Walker 1995; Jones and White 1996; Winston 2005). The failure of Gorboduc’s political experiment leaves his realm without an heir, which in turn renders it fractured and open to foreign incursion, specifically from the north, a state of affairs which evidently threatened England following Mary Stuart’s return to Scotland from France in 1561 after the death of her first husband, Francis II (see Majumder 2019, 113–14), and redoubled in the context of the civil unrest with which the decade concluded. A play which encouraged Elizabeth to marry and bear a child might forestall that outcome, and for many readers, *Gorboduc* seeks to make such an intervention, although the degree to which Norton and Sackville endorsed Robert Dudley specifically as the solution to the problem of Elizabeth’s childlessness has been contested (see Pincombe 2003). Increasingly, though, critics have concluded that *Gorboduc* problematizes the notion of exemplarity, such that its topical message resides not in the advice it provides, but in its foregrounding of “an aesthetic and ideological paradigm shift in the political drama of sixteenth century England” (Majumder 2019, 116–17), and the vagaries of counsel itself (Cavanagh 2003; Dunn 2003; Lupić 2019). Herman (2001, 321) concludes that “interpretative incertitude rather than tyranny or political irresponsibility lies at the heart of *Gorboduc*’s disasters”; for Quinsland (2015, 378), too, *Gorboduc* “stages a crisis of interpretation.” If the presence of fire language signals interest in moments of hermeneutic attention provoked by doubt, ambiguity, or wonder, it pays to reconsider the intersections of incertitude, tyranny, and political irresponsibility in *Gorboduc* and its analogues having become alert to fire’s traces and aesthetic freight.

Gorboduc’s first performance on Twelfth Night, 1562, in the great hall of London’s Inner Temple, as the climactic finale to a uniquely lavish Christmas season at the Inns, was encircled with combustion, from the blaze of “candles and torches burn[ing] in great abundance” (Norton and Sackville 1970, xii) in the hall, to the clouds of smoke dissipating outside after cannons were fired to announce the dinner service: one onlooker reported that the artillery were of “so great a number, and so terrible that it darkened thole aire” (Legh 1562, 204v). Performed to an audience of carousing law

students as well as Elizabeth I's council, the play was composed for the occasion by two incongruous rising stars of the three-year-old regime: the first three acts by the Calvinist Thomas Norton, a poet, translator, and freeman of the Grocer's Company, and the final two by the precocious, aristocratic MP Thomas Sackville, around twenty five years old and yet to undergo the prodigal reform which would renew his favor with the young Queen Elizabeth — a relation (Sackville's father, Richard, and Elizabeth's mother, Anne Boleyn, were cousins) and childhood friend. This first performance was a flashy, vital affair; so eye-catching that Elizabeth commanded a second at her own palace of Whitehall less than two weeks later, before the text was surreptitiously acquired and printed for wider consumption. Its retelling of ancient Britain's catastrophic collapse after an heirless monarch's death urgently exhorts the Inner Temple's personnel to secure their country's future, and guard against both invasion and civil conflict — the former often enabled by the latter. One means to do this was to encourage Elizabeth's (with luck, proactive) marriage, perhaps to royal favorite and Lord of Misrule, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, whose wife's recent death had left him, rather too conveniently, free to marry (Winston 2016, 179). The extant manuscript eyewitness account of the play's performance makes clear that Elizabeth's prospective union with Dudley was at the forefront of at least one spectator's mind (see Walker 1998); while making the allegorical tenor of their drama emphatic, however, Norton and Sackville leave the specifics to their audiences' interpretative discretion.

Gorboduc's play with fire is a fitting accompaniment to such epistemological instability (see MacKay 2011). Gerard Legh's *Accendens of Armory* (1562), a composite conduct book and heraldic reference guide, provides an inset narrative of the 1561–2 festivities, told through a dialogue between Legh and “Pallaphilos,” a persona for Dudley (see Hunt 2012, 552–3). On witnessing “the shott of doble canons” which announced the Inner Temple's evening meal, Legh's narrator notes, “although I was in my natiue contrey: yet stode I amazed, not knowing what it ment” (204v). Later, Legh makes explicit the evocative link between the Inn's parodic artillery fire, woven through its festive entertainments, and real military threat: “as thys tale ended: there happened suche noyse of shotte, as if it had been at the Batterie of Bulloynne, wherent I merueyled, thynkyng my selfe, not in safetie” (211v; see also Hills 2007, 195).⁶ Legh's fearful marveling sets the tone for the encounter with the quasi-romance figure Pallaphilos, and establishes the season's atmosphere of festive disorder.

Subsequent records hint at Dudley's calculated deployment of theatrical pyrotechnics as a related hermeneutic prompt at the 1575 entertainment for Elizabeth I on his Kenilworth estate. On July 10, as the day's pageants drew to a close, “fireworks shewed vpon the water, the which were both strange and wel executed.” These fireworks “pass-[ed] vnder the water a long space;” then, “when all men had thought they had bene quenched, they would rise and mount out of the water againe, and burne very furiously vntill they were vtterlie consumed” (Gascoigne 1587, A3v–A4r). This description captures the odd confluence of the marvelous and the bureaucratic which pervades much fire history. The accompanying verse asks, “What meant the fierie flames,/Which through the waues so flue?” and answers with another question: “Can no colde answers quench desire?” (A6r). Gesturing toward the pertinence of unquenchable fire and cold answers to Dudley's persistent courting of Elizabeth, the fireworks embody both the desire to

know and that occluded knowledge, while fire's slippage across material and metaphorical planes facilitates the allegory's inversion and containment of Dudley's own fiery consumption (see Hegarty 2008, 62).

Bachelard (1987, 15) attests to the ways in which fire "gives a material form to man's festivities," and this was undeniably true of the dark northern European Christmas season (Dubrow 1999, 95; Harris 2007, 476–7). The sixteenth-century Inns of Court participated in the long-running tradition of theatrical midwinter revels in which secular hierarchies were overturned under the direction of the temporarily appointed Lord of Misrule; notably, "the Inns' Lords mockingly usurped the Crown itself and the full apparatus of State" (Horner 1996, 50). As Jessica Winston (2016, 177) explains, mock courts established kingdoms in miniature at each Inn in the spirit of "exaggerated parody" and "outlandish humor." Dudley orchestrated events including "banqueting, the reception of ambassadors from so-called foreign lands . . . [and] progresses along the Thames" (Winston 2016, 177) in the days preceding *Gorboduc's* performance, and in a similar vein, the play would see the trainee lawyers repurpose the gravest of dramatic modes and hoariest of legendary narratives, to complex political ends. For Agamben ([2005] 2017, 228), such "anomic feasts" postulate a state of exception as "the threshold of indifference between anomie and law," and potentially offer a test ground from which to posit an ongoing state of exception arising from the persistence of emergency, specifically fire disasters and their epistemological analogues.

As Jonathan Gil Harris (2007, 477) notes, the "sulphurous smell" of gunpowder on the Elizabethan stage "probably provoked holiday excitement rather than political outrage," following the tradition of using squibs in Corpus Christi plays and other ritual performance. However, late sixteenth-century drama has long been recognised as a mode in which actorly disorder gave "public voice to the grievances they shared with actual rebels," evoking "the nightmare prospect of a world turned upside down that was the only conceivable alternative (and therefore the justifying antithesis) to the existing social hierarchy" (Rackin 1990, 208). *Gorboduc* and its fire language act as a nexus for this crossover, and in doing so hint at a means of troubling this hierarchy. The affinity between its narratives of rebellion and the tradition of carnival de-crowning which made the play a fitting Twelfth Night entertainment would later be manifested in 2 *Henry VI's* insurgent Jack Cade, described by the duke of York as fighting

so long, till that his thighs with darts

Were almost like a sharp-quill'd porpentine;

And in the end, being rescued, I have seen

Him caper upright like a wild Morisco,

Shaking the bloody darts as he his bells.⁷ (Shakespeare 2004, 3.1.361–5)

At once the quintessence of rebellious anarchy and a thoughtful utopian theorist, Cade explores how fire might be used to raze and remake society, when he calls for the destruction of both symbolic and practical urban infrastructure. His evocation of the Morris dance for York sketches a link between this mainstay of Tudor revelry, and revolution. But we should not discount gunpowder's disturbing evocation of more organized military force, too, as noted by Legh, whose account testifies to the

palimpsestic elision of memories of danger with the present (see Harris 2007). The discharge of firearms onstage is said in the final dumb show's printed exegesis to emblemize popular uprisings, but its mechanized manifestation here also foregrounds the reach of state power and its capacity to quash disorder with violence. By marshalling the emotional impacts of fire's layered sensory freight, the play encourages audiences to entertain plural responses to its own discourse of disaster.

Phaethon

Gorboduc's frequent reference to "kindled" emotions (hate, rage, disdain, envy, and mutinousness, among others) might be considered lexically unremarkable. But the spectrum of fire language in the play repays attention as a unified ecology which disregards post-Enlightenment distinctions between the literal and metaphorical (Harris 2015, 38–40; Charteris-Black 2017, 5–6). Read in this way, *Gorboduc's* rhetorical emphases shift, as the "productive slippage between metaphoric and substantive meanings" (Mentz 2015, 72) affords combustive agency to emotional heat. As Majumder (2019, 118) has most recently demonstrated, part of *Gorboduc's* achievement is to "craft a new poetics of political drama, replacing the monologic discourse of tyranny characteristic of earlier political moralities with a dialogue between absolutist and conciliar models of sovereignty, thus making the operation of power itself a matter of debate." Yet the paradoxical, partial transfer of absolutist power addressed by Majumder, which throws the locus of sovereign authority into doubt as Gorboduc hands power to his sons but remains, somehow, absolute arbiter over their conflict, is shown to be anticipated in the play's mythological underlay, in terms with traction in contemporary admonitory texts, where tyranny was defined as "an illicit claim to power or an unwarranted use of power or both" (Greenberg 2011, 168). The play's fire language affords a parallel articulation of tyrannical unfitnes to rule in both Gorboduc and Porrex's apparent privileging of personal concerns over public responsibility, tied to their respective roles in the recapitulation of the myth of the sun-god Phoebus Apollo and his Ethiopian son, Phaethon. As such, the play integrates the emotional intemperance of the tyrant into its account of the failed division and distribution of sovereign power (see Majumder 2019, 122), with fire central to its evocation of its characters' emotional ecologies, not least in the humoral association of fire with choleric youth and immaturity, as we will see below.

Fire's entanglement with the origins of tragedy as both genre and phenomenon is captured by Jasper Heywood's translation of Seneca's *Hercules Furens* (1561, B4r), where Juno ignites the "wrathfull kyndlyng rage" which will be Hercules' undoing, by exhorting Ire to "lette loose the denne abroade of mounte of Sicilye" (B7r). Tragic praxis emerges with the Titans like fire from Etna; as fire language persistently demands that we "meditate on etiology" (Dubrow 1999, 95) across textual modes, it contributes to the work of tragedy in attempting to make sense of arbitrary suffering, and to *Gorboduc's* specific explorations of the originary sovereign decision. The ten tragedies attributed in the sixteenth century to Seneca are peppered with allusions to Hades' flaming river Phlegethon, and to Prometheus, eternally tormented for his theft of fire from the gods, and *Gorboduc* may inherit its fiery core from Seneca: the play is otherwise greatly indebted to his oeuvre. Critical readings of

Gorboduc's composition have dwelt on Seneca's valence in Elizabethan conciliar discourse, and the importance of the intellectual community mustered around his works to both the play's composition and its advocacy for parliamentary consent (Winston 2016). As significant to *Gorboduc's* imaginary, though, is the fate of Phaethon, whose story is most fully retold across the division between Books 1 and 2 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a mainstay of Tudor grammar school education with greater imaginative purchase beyond the play's immediate intellectual community.

When his fellow demi-god Epaphus throws doubt on Phaethon's heredity, Phaethon seeks to affirm his status as Phoebus's child, and not the son of his mother Clymene's mortal husband Merops, by demanding that he be given permission to drive Phoebus's sun-chariot across the sky. Despite misgivings, Phoebus grants his request, but the chariot's horses run out of control when their fiery dispositions and scorching reins are too hot for Phaethon to handle, proving not his illegitimacy but his inexperience. The flaming chariot veers off-course, wheeling up to terrifying heights ("None knew the costlye glymsyng glades,/where stragglynge Phaeton rode," according to John Studley's translation of Seneca's *Medea* [1566, 29r]) before plunging below its usual route and laying waste to the earth. To put an end to the environmental catastrophe, Jupiter intercepts the chariot with a lightning bolt, and Phaethon is hurled to his death; "so with fire he quenched fire," notes Arthur Golding (Ovid 1565, B1v) in his near-contemporary translation.

Norton and Sackville draw on Phaethon's story multiple times, superimposing its details over the original legend derived from Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth-century *Historia regum Britanniae*, and reworking the disastrous semiotic convulsion at its heart — the splitting of sun from sun-god — for the era of the king's two bodies. Early on, the king's counsellor Eubulus warns against handing "the reins/Of royalty" (1.2.326–7) to the young Ferrex and Porrex, since "Too soon he clamb into the flaming car/Whose want of skill did set the earth on fire" (1.2.330–1). Later, after *Gorboduc* has abdicated and set his sons on their parallel northern and southern thrones, the advisor Dordan observes:

Lo, such are they now in the royal throne
 As was rash Phaeton in Phoebus' car;
 Ne then the fiery steeds did draw the flame
 With wilder randon through the kindled skies,
 Than traitorous counsel now will whirl about
 The youthful heads of these unskilful kings. (2.1.203–8)

Responding to the enmity stirred up between the brothers by just such "traitorous counsel," Philander alludes to the Ovidian world fire when he hopes that "this kindled hate/May yet be quenched, ere it consume us all" (2.2.81–2). The younger Porrex is linked to fiery epithets slightly more frequently than his older brother Ferrex, but both princes attract related imagery throughout the play as their pride and ambition flare alternately in onlookers' imaginations (see Herman 2001, 310–11).

Jupiter's intervention in the Phaethon story is brought to mind again by Marcella, the court attendant who witnesses Porrex's murder and functions as messenger, when she avows that "Jove with justice must with lightning flames/From heaven send down some strange revenge" on the culprit, Videna (4.2.246–7). The chorus which closes the act then mirrors this formula, to suggest that Jove "sends he forth with speed/The dreadful Furies," among their accoutrements "a brand of fire," who "for revenge of wretched murder done/Do make the mother kill her only son" (4.2.276–82). In other words, as far as the chorus is concerned, Videna is a lightning bolt which strikes Porrex down by way of retribution for Ferrex's death before the rebellious commons strike Gorboduc and Videna in turn. The play's insistent recourse to the legend troubles (potentially gendered) distinctions between the righteous justice of Jove and the brutal, "unnatural" vengeance of Videna and the Furies, as one royal family member after another takes on a combination of Phaethon, Phoebus, and Jupiter's roles. Overall, *Gorboduc's* allusions emphasize the role of the erring parent; the sons' pride, rashness, and want of skill; and the deleterious effect of poor advice in the anticipated calamity. The failure of leadership is met with what looks like swift providential punishment, evocative of Jupiter's assassination of Phaethon, but also itself manifests as a request for such punishment: Gorboduc replays his renunciation of royal duty when he calls on the gods to redress his wrongs "with flash of wreakful fire" (3.1.166), and "your wasting flames from wrathful skies" (3.1.25), anticipating King Lear's nihilistic invocation of "You sulphurous and thought-executing fires" (Shakespeare 1997, 3.2.4) after the consequences of his own abdication become clear.

Gorboduc's treatment of the legend accords with other medieval and early modern iterations, which all deal sternly with Phaethon, although the precise nature of his error can vary. For John Gower ([1389] 1483, B4r), in *Confessio Amantis*, Phaethon's wrongs include "veyn glory" and "neglygence," as well as the hint of sedition in the claim that he had "conspyre[d]" with his mother to win control of "His fadre cart," before the conclusion that:

In hyghe estate it is a vyce
 To goo to lowe & in seruyce
 It greueth for to goo to hyghe. (B4r)

The story is also used to extol the "middle path" in a poem in "Praise of Measure-Keping" in Tottel's *Songes and Sonnettes* (1557, 113v–114r), while John Jewel (1566, 255) uses it to confessional ends, drawing a comparison between "Phaeton an vndiscrete . . . fonde younge man" who "for lacke of skil . . . soone set a fier the whole worlde," and "the Bishop of Rome." The 1560 translation of Ovid's fable of Narcissus offers Phaethon as an analogy in its substantial "Moralization," with an interpretation which speaks cogently to its usage in *Gorboduc* the following year:

souche as will a byde
 with small aduice not from there will to slyde
 And do refuse ther fathers counsel suer
 There helpeles harmis, vnto them selues procuer. (B2r)

A printed marginal note by “counsel” adds, “A good warning to yonge people.”

Importantly, Norton and Sackville’s play triangulates this failure: unlike Phoebus and his attempt to dissuade Phaethon from his foolhardy expedition, it is Gorboduc himself who first hears, but refuses to heed, the counsel of his advisors, before, as Majumder (2019, 122) notes, this is played out in miniature among his sons. Ferrex and Porrex are both stubborn in the face of good counsel and susceptible to bad, such that Phoebus’s horses come to signify the flatterers by whom they are misled in the play. Shakespeare takes up this development in *Richard II* ([c.1595, printed 1597] 2002, 3.3.178–9), when Richard uses the legend to frame his own literal and metaphorical descent from his castle battlements as the fault of court parasites: “Down, down I come, like glist’ring Phaëton,/ Wanting the manage of unruly jades.” Richard’s “glist’ring” speaks to the creative iconoclasm and excitement around Shakespeare’s allusions to the myth, as in *Romeo and Juliet* ([1597] 2012) and *3 Henry VI* ([c.1592] 2001): unlike sober Phoebus, following the middle way of his measured diurnal course, Shakespeare’s Phaethons can bend time: “bring in cloudy night immediately” (2012, 3.2.4), or make “an evening at the noontide prick” (2001, 1.4.34).⁸ But as such, Phaethon is a compelling figure for the child-kings Richard II and Henry VI, whose depositions make them historic test cases for the separation of bodies politic and natural. Like Gorboduc’s royal sons, these chronicle plays’ victim-villains’ risk to national stability lies with their inheritance of royal authority out of season, and their concomitant intemperance. To temper metal one must add liquid, or otherwise quench the heated impetuosity of the young, as Shakespeare’s Bolingbroke aims to do by pouring balm on the scorched ground of Richard’s nation, when he claims “Be he the fire, I’ll be the yielding water” (2002, 2.1.33–4; 3.3.58) — a cautious rejoinder to the doctrine of the tyrant-usurper, or Machiavellian “New Prince” (see Majumder 2019). Fire, and Phaethon’s in particular, is the elemental marker not just of hot-headed youth, but specifically the misuse of authority.

When Golding (1565, A2v) parses the myth following his dedication of his *Metamorphoses* to Dudley, though, he foregrounds the parallels between disobedient children and disobedient subjects, in terms (“commonweal”; “estate”; “prince”; “magistrate”) which evoke *Gorboduc*’s place amongst Norton’s translation of Jean Calvin’s *Institution of Christian Religion* ([1559] 1562) and Sackville’s contribution to sixteenth-century vernacular *de casibus* tragedy as part of the *Mirror for Magistrates* (1563):

In Phaetons fable vntoo syght the Poet dooth expresse

.....
 how the weaknesse and the want of wit in magistrate

Confoundeth both his common weale and eeke his owne estate.

.....
 in fine it playnly showes

What sorrow too the parents and too all the kinred growes

By disobedience of the chyld: and in the chyld is ment

The disobedient subiect that ageinst his prince is bent. (Ovid 1565, A2v)

Phaethon's death-drive is intended to offer proof of his heredity as a true son of the sun (see Harris 2015, 47), and it is an unexpected message for a succession play to propound, that no good can come of overemphasizing dynastic right. But Golding's gloss demonstrates that the myth speaks not only to sixteenth-century anxieties around authority, paternity, and the untimely acquisition of power, but also to the threat of public disorder. Phaethon becomes a figure not just for the weak, intemperate, or ill-advised ruler, but also for the rebel.

As Cavanagh (2003) and Herman (2001) have shown, *Gorboduc's* apparent didacticism is radically troubled across a play in which neither the ruler nor the rebel commons may be successfully advised. Historical exempla have proven useless ("though so many books, so many rolls/Of ancient time, record what grievous plagues/Light on these rebels aye" [5.2.3–5]), and the one allusion to religious teaching is unworkably macabre (rebels are "with the strangling cord hanged on the trees/Where yet their carrion carcasses do preach/ The fruits . . . of their uproars" [5.2.52–54]). The play's use of the Phaethon myth might be read as reframing Elizabeth's subjects as potentially disobedient children, which accords with the frequent depiction of Elizabeth as the nation's mother, or England as "the mother of ye all" (5.2.135). But their outcry, like Porrex's, might be only misconstrued as being the product of pride or ambition (see Herman 2001, 310–11), while their parents, if the allegory is played out to its full extent, are responsible for their rebellion. In this light, *Gorboduc* recapitulates the representation of familial revolt in Acts 1–4 through the popular rebellion of Act 5, and aligns the rebel's riotous destruction ever closer with that of the tyrant through the mechanisms of festive inversion and fire language, such that "the play harbors sedition within its piously sententious framework" (Altman 1978, 256). This process is most emphatically articulated in the anonymous *Wofull News out of the West Parts of England* (1612), the pamphlet in response to the 1612 fire at Tiverton in Devon, which describes fire as "a commanding Tyrant" (A4v) and "wasting conquerour" (B2r), but has also framed the town's conflagration as a result of:

that consuming seruant of the world, that subiect of man, *Fire* . . . which being kept under, without getting too rigorous a head, proues obedient to all our needfull uses, (without which we could not liue) but obtaining the upperhand, growes rebellious, and ruins where it comes. (A3r)

The town is burnt by "a flame of subuersion, a spoyling flame" (A4r), phrases which seem to situate the pamphlet's author in reactionary opposition to this societal disruption. Norton (1569) had used this analogy in reverse to advocate, in a similarly reactionary tone, for the speedy and thorough eradication of seditious feeling in his tract against papistry: "It is not good taryng till the flame mountyng in the ayre about the house toppe . . . do plainly declare the whole building past hope of recouery. Fyres oftentimes negligently raked vp, stickes endes not throughly quenched, embers not regarded, a candeles end not looked vnto, haue brought many an honest man to pitifull calamitie" (A4v). But in the Tiverton pamphlet, these antithetical positions — tyrant and subject — merge as the *Wofull News* goes on to enumerate Tiverton's failings in providing for its poor, and expresses mocking sympathy for the town's merchants whose stock has been destroyed. The imaginative elision in fire of cause and cure, tyrant and rebel-as-divine

scourge, becomes explicit: “fire drives out fire,” as Shakespeare’s Brutus will observe to Mark Antony in the course of his justification for Caesar’s murder (Shakespeare [1998] 2018, 3.1.171).

Is fire unkind?

Lightning is routinely read as a means of divine punishment across genres and cultures, and “Old Testament retributivism is intrinsic to fire’s phenomenology” (MacKay 2011, 149). Early modern fire pamphlets articulate a providential understanding of disaster specifically in the terms used by political resistance theory and the mid-Tudor efflorescence of *de casibus* tragedy. That is to say, their fire language adopts the discourse of providential punishment, and its intersection with organization and government, to activist ends (see Sanchez 2019, 86, 149–50)], in accordance with the neat contemporary positioning of the rebel commons both as iniquitous in themselves and of benefit to the nation. As Norton’s (1562) translation of Calvin’s *Institution* has it:

... howsoever the very doings of men be iudged, yet the Lord dyd as wel execute his worke by them, when he did breake the bloody scepters of proude kinges, and ouerthrew theyr intolerable gouernments. Let Princes heare and be afraid. But we in the meane time must take great hede, that we do not despise or offende that authoritie of Magistrates ... for though the correcting of vnbridled gouernement be the reuengement of the Lorde, let vs not by and by thynke that it is committed to vs, to whom there is geuen no other commaundement but to obey and suffer. (501v)

Gorboduc’s imbrication with these modes is well attested (Rozett 1984, 111–12; Winston 2016; Archer 2017, 110–11, 136–7). Sackville would contribute the tragedy of Buckingham and a visionary, Virgilian induction to the 1563 edition of William Baldwin’s *Mirror for Magistrates*, the well-known sequel to John Lydgate’s *Fall of Princes* (printed 1494), which translated and extended Boccaccio’s *De casibus virorum illustrium* (1373), while later editions of the *Mirror* feature complaints in the voices of *Gorboduc*’s sons (see Archer 2019). The texts are yet more closely intertwined by the 1590 printing of *Gorboduc* alongside Lydgate’s *Serpent of Division*, an admonitory retelling of the fall of Julius Caesar and the Roman republic, with a title page which bears the Latin tag appropriated as the *Mirror*’s motto: “foelix quem faciunt aliena periculum cautum” [happy is he who is made cautious by others’ dangers]. While Majumder (2019, 131) is right that, in bare narrative terms, *Gorboduc*’s assassination by the commons comes about as something of a bolt from the blue, the play’s emphatic embeddedness in the discourse of the *de casibus* tradition, not least through its evocation of Phaethon’s legend and reception, ensures that the retributive framework of resistance theory plays a part in its aesthetic negotiations.

The *Mirror*’s “foelix quem” tag also appeared as an epigraph on D. Sterrie’s (1586, broadside) ballad about the fire at Beckles in Suffolk, and as John E. Morgan’s (2016, 275) account shows, fire histories at large frequently ape the features of *de casibus* tragedy: “images of the ‘stately’ town, an inverted social order and the ‘mirror’ for other towns are ... recurrent.” Some ballads present their town’s downfall in a first person, *de casibus*-style lament on Fortune’s fickleness, finally parodied by Thomas Dekker (1608, D3v) whose personified church steeple itself complains grandiloquently: “But (alacke) how

momentary is all earthly happiness? Howe fading is our painted Glory?” The interest in aetiology which characterises sixteenth-century examples makes more explicit the role of the wretched as God’s agents of justice; at Woburn, Bedford, for example, the fire begins when “olde Joane” is sidetracked by “some businesses that she had to doe, though verilie they were but meane and small (as such poore folkes haue no great affayres)” (Wilcocks 1595, 14). The most notorious town conflagration of the Elizabethan period, at Tiverton in 1598, is described as “a iust punishme[n]t of god brought vpon that Towne, for their vnmercifulnesse, & small regard of the poore, which were dayly seene to dye and perish in their streetes for lacke of reliefe” (1598, B2r). Tiverton acts as a mirror to “famous London, thou that flowest in wealth,” and the pamphlet exhorts the capital to “cast thy cleere eyes on this ruinous Towne: consider her fall, and pitie her distresse, learne by her calamitie to loke into thy selfe” (B2v). Fire functions here as a check on the unfettered accumulation of property (see Fitter 2019), and the mistreatment of the commons.

Pilkington (1561) attributes the storm which destroyed St Paul’s steeple to divine judgement, and notes that it precipitates a royal clamping down on public misdemeanours. This event, preceding *Gorboduc*’s first performance by some seven months, and striking a site less than a mile from the Inner Temple, must have been brought to mind by the use of lightning to anticipate the popular uprising against Gorboduc and his family, which also refigures destructive fire as a providential good (and later spur to governmentality). In this feature of the plot, Norton and Sackville deviate from their chronicle sources, which have the commons rise against Videna only after Gorboduc’s death: the play deliberately makes the king himself a victim of the commons’ fury, having had him plead for just such a punishment from the gods. Fire, and the rebel and tyrant figured in it, explicitly represent the providential playing out of God’s will. It is not, to use Lear’s term, “unkind” (Shakespeare 1997, 3.2.16), since it precisely emblemizes the symbolic kindred bond between the monarch and subject (as well as containing the vengeful logic behind Videna’s murder of one son for the sake of another, and the symmetrical anomie of tyrant and rebel).

But the play’s nobility do not uphold even this understanding of rebellion, and instead claim, for example, “The Gods do bear and well allow in kings/The things they abhor in rascal routs” (2.1.144–5) such that “no cause serves whereby the subject may/Call to account the doings of his prince,/Much less in blood by sword to work revenge” (5.1.42–4). As Altman (1978, 254) notes, Eubulus “offers a formulation of ‘kind’ that transcends the earlier definitions and incorporates them in a new theory of *realpolitik*.” Fire and its saturnalian properties are materially checked and challenged over the play’s duration, in both the dialogue and the dumbshows, where the wild men’s sticks and furies’ fire clubs give way to the harquebusiers’ weapons, dramatizing the replacement by enclosed, mechanized combustion of the torches’ visible and less regulated burning. The narrative sketched out by the dumbshows’ shifting technologies narrates the violent harnessing of firepower to the work of governmentality, and in doing so contributes to the discursive logic of pyrophobia (see Pyne 1997, 352–60; 2021, 29), which relegates open flame as the property of an uncivilized past, or foreign barbarism, and dramatizes what Majumder (2019, 117) identifies as the play’s “aesthetic choice to break away from the penitential tradition of human transgression and divine chastisement, focusing on absolutism instead of tyranny” (see also Markels 1991). *Gorboduc*’s material shift can be productively situated in the context of the incipient Pyrocene, and Europe’s concomitant pyrophobia,

a phenomenon which speaks to the perceived “unnaturalness” of fire itself in Eurocentric environmental thought (see, for example, Anderson 2005; Kimmerer 2013; Steffensen 2020). The evocation of the fire disaster allows Eubulus to conjure the notion of necessity at the limits of the law when he summons the nobility in common consent to quash the rebels, asserting “I hold it more than need, with sharpest law/To punish this tumultuous bloody rage” (5.1.32–3) in order to inculcate “wholesome terror to posterity” (5.1.92; see also 5.1.26).⁹ His projected parliamentary mode of government and circumscription of absolute power, then, attempts not only to downplay the imaginative potency which Phaethon’s contemporary intersections with the discourse of governance undeniably held, but also to depoliticize the concerns of the rebel commons and the stakes of civil war, which the workings of fire language in various ways make manifest.

A “common foe”

The Inner Temple’s revels worked to promote the cohesive functioning of the student body as a microcosmic state (Hunt 2012, 557). Likewise, *Gorboduc*’s counsellors promote collaborative dialogue between monarch and Parliament: in its prescriptive final act, Eubulus claims that before Gorboduc’s death, “parliament should have been holden./And certain heirs appointed to the crown,/To stay the title of established right/And in the people plant obedience” (5.2.264–7). The play reconstructs ancient Britain *via* the Inner Temple as an imagined community which stands in for Elizabethan England, modelled through its allegories’ creation and encoding of knowledge communities, and Jacqueline Vanhoutte (2000) shows how *Gorboduc*’s political nation is brought together as a “cohesive social group” precisely by the threat of harm; for Vanhoutte this threat takes the form of metaleptic “spoil” (235) or sexual violation. The wider use of fire as a motif throughout the play theorizes the nature and dimensions of the anticipated “spoil” to which the plays’ characters respond, and the bringing together of the political nation is enacted through the mechanisms specifically invoked by the threat of fire for Tudor playgoers. Read with the proleptic evocation of exception in mind, though, the latent biopolitical violence of Eubulus’s wish “in the people [to] plant obedience” may be brought to light (see Mahler 2016, 337), at, as Agamben (2015, 24) notes, “the moment in which life as such — the nation (which is to say, birth) — became the principle of sovereignty” (see also Winston 2005).

As suggested above, it might be said that fire occupies the role attributed by Agamben (2015, 19) to *stasis*, or civil conflict: rather like King Lear’s “wheel of fire” (Shakespeare 1997, 4.7.47), it is the “threshold through which domestic belonging is politicized into citizenship and, conversely, citizenship is depoliticized into family solidarity.” The simile of fire is used in the play to assemble a martial union when Fergus, Duke of Albany, intends to take advantage of the national disorder by raising an army and seizing power. In the face of this additional danger, the Cornish duke Clotyn exhorts the British nobility,

Let us, my lords, with timely force resist

The new attempt of this our common foe

As we would quench the flames of common fire. (5.2.93–5)

Fergus is a threat to national security at once internal and external, as he hails from within the bounds of ancient Britain, but also from Albany, recognizably aligned with contemporary Scotland, and outwith Elizabethan English territory; his sixteenth-century counterpart, Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots, had been styling herself “Queen of England” since 1559 (see Graves 1994, 90, 95). Fire, then, is an appropriate simile with which to characterize the nature of Fergus’s threat, simultaneously domestic and foreign. Heather Dubrow (1999, 94) notes fire’s particular early modern association with “the trespass into a precious space [and] . . . the corruption of foreign invaders,” being at the same time a “household helpmeet turned household scourge,” which “aptly represents unruly forces lurking within the home.” Fire is a “common” risk regardless of its origins, too, and stands usefully for an enemy which transcends questions of right and requital. With Clotyn’s invocation of proto-emergency, the play musters a new discourse of commonality, put into service against Phaethon’s juvenile solipsism.

Clotyn’s plea has much in common with a passage from Norton’s *Orations of Arsanes Against Philip the Treacherous King of Macedon* (1560[?]). The *Orations* recount the counsel of the Lieutenant of Asia Minor to the Persian king on the occasion of Philip of Macedon’s projected invasion, and evidently evoke the contemporary threat posed to Elizabeth’s England by the Catholic Philip II of Spain. The slippage between the two Philips is regularly exploited to encourage readers to apply the lessons of history to the present day, through the exercise of counsel to those in power. The gathering storm of Philip’s incursion across Europe, Arsanes avers, “is like the smoldring fyer of mount Chymera, which boyling long tyme with great buskling in the bowels of the earth, dooth at le[n]gth burst out with violent rage” (B3r). Arsanes advises that pre-emptive action be taken by the Persians in defense of their neighbors in Cappadocia: “When perils are common,” he notes, “they woulde be repulsed with common power, because they breede common mischief. I lyke not to haue that fier spred ouer into Asia for want of fewell to féede vppon at home” (C4v-D1r). As such, “wee should lay our purses together . . . for the suppressyng and quenchyng of this comon fire. Necessitie inforceth vs to this warre, except we wil seeke our owne destruction, and betray our trustie freendes to their and our common truthlesse foe” (D1v). Later he reiterates, “it is not good to be carelesse when our next neighbours house is on fier” (E3v). Norton’s *Orations* act as a primer for how to read the ancient British drama topically, while extending the strong contemporary emphasis on how fire manifests necessity and networks of dependence.

Fire allows the play to convey, for example, the economic implications of rebellion and societal disruption on a sophisticated level, evoking the breakdown of rural production, and the infrastructural networks which supply the materials of urban life, as well as the destruction of cities themselves. The ecological motif of fruitfulness which governs Eubulus’s stylized anti-rebellion narrative would have had purchase for the urban class which made up the play’s primary audiences. From a family of grocers, Norton frames Britain’s prosperity with a mercantile eye, focusing on the production of goods from the land and their transportation to “stately cities” and “foreign parts/ports” (2.1.38; 2.1.41). Fire symbolically threatens the vegetative economy on which this vision of the nation rests, as allusions to Phaethon’s scorching of the “parched earth” (1.2.387) make clear, and works to figure the literal damage which civil conflict precipitates. Eubulus prognosticates that “Thus shall the wasted soil yield forth no fruit,/But dearth and famine shall possess the land” (5.2.225–6); a long-term unfolding of disaster set against his

subsequent prediction that “The towns shall be consumed and burnt with fire,/The peopled cities shall wax desolate” (5.2.227–8). Paul Hills (2007, 191) suggests that, for medieval Europeans, “Conflagrations mocked the dignity of man, and by striking cities threatened the very order in which civic humanists of the fifteenth century had put their trust.” *Gorboduc* seems to place its trust in the civic collectivism its humanist counsel aims to inspire, while entertaining the spectacle of its own failure and, at a further remove, Hobbesian *ademia* (Agamben 2015, 51).

In keeping with the biblical conception of the neighbour relationship as “a site of ethical responsibility” (Blurton and Houlik-Ritchey 2020, 177), late sixteenth-century victims of fire damage might look to their neighbours for charitable assistance. At least, this was the message of Elizabeth I’s 1591 proclamation in response to the destruction of property belonging to Hugh Evans of Thetford. His goods were “vtterly burnt[,] waisted and consumed with fire . . . to [his] extreme impouerishing and vitter vndoing . . . vnlesse [he] bee charitably holpen and relieued with the deuotion of well desposed people.” The proclamation commands “euery of you, that at such times as the sayd *Hugh* . . . shall come and . . . aske and gather the charitie and deuotion of our louing subiectes . . . quietly to permit and suffer [him] so to do.” However, as Morgan (2016, 292) points out, texts like this can only evidence “the experience of individuals who were prioritized under the institutional culture that produced such records . . . These are the people included in the corporate ideal of the community.” The proclamation’s discourse of common regional “devotion” and “love” invites, but does not extend to, all subjects. Here, as in the play itself, the catastrophe of “common fire” functions aesthetically, anticipating the tendency David Glimp (2012, 366) identifies in Thomas Middleton’s drama to “create an affective public sphere,” “defined around the spectacle of personal and national vulnerability” (363). Crucially, though, this is achieved in the play within a group of characters, Gorboduc’s nobility, who still believe that “The guiltless King” has been assassinated “without desert” (5.1.15), running counter to the perception of the chorus, Videna, and Gorboduc himself, and casting an ironic pall over Arostus, Cloytn and Eubulus’s condemnation of the commons even as they advocate for common consent.

Twentieth- and twenty first-century popular anthropology supports Clotyn’s contention: Rebecca Solnit’s study, *A Paradise Built in Hell* ([2009] 2010), provides evidence of community cohesion in the face of modern catastrophes, while Susan Sontag’s essay on dystopian cinema, “The Imagination of Disaster” ([1965] 1966, 220), suggests that “A great enough disaster cancels all enmities and calls upon the utmost concentration of earth resources.” Reading *Gorboduc* as Tudor disaster movie feels compelling, and Sontag’s assessment of mid-century sci-fi aptly captures the way in which Eubulus’s vision of social collapse, too, seems “concerned with the aesthetics of destruction,” marshalled to express “bellicosity . . . channeled into the yearning for peace” (Sontag [1965] 1966, 213, 219; see also Sanchez 2019, 83–4). But Clotyn and Eubulus’s fantasy of the common is not allowed to stand, either in the play or contemporary reports which foreground popular disunity and thus highlight the need for a potentially exceptionalist state. Arostus’s observation that, “Uncertainly the divers minds do think,/Even of the learned sort, and more uncertainly/Will partial fancy and affection deem” (5.2.128–30) reflects the marked emphasis in the extant fire pamphlets on opportunistic theft, the exacerbation of poverty, and above all cognitive divergence as the more likely responses to a fire disaster. Sheer variety, put across through rhetorical copia, is presented as the

primary barrier to united action, anticipating modern applications of complexity science to collective action theory (Berge and van Laerhoven 2011). Pilkington (1561, B1r), for example, notes that “Diuers substantial Citizens toke paynes as if thei had bene laborers, so did also diuers & sondrye gentlemen,” anatomizing London’s class structure even as it is pelted with molten lead. Thomas Wilcocks’ (1595) response to the fire in Woburn evokes the helplessness of a largely benevolent, but divided, popular reaction, recalling:

Though the people . . . came in very louingly . . . to helpe to extinguish and quench the fire, and indeed though diuers of them wrought and toiled very sore and hard there about: yet some thorow want of experience . . . and other some for lacke of good guidance and direction . . . tooke not the readiest and easiest way to stop or hinder the passage of this fearefull flame, but being . . . of many mindes, what thorowe ignorance and strangenes of the sight . . . confounded in themselues, cried some one thing and some another, and . . . increased rather the desolation and wast, than any manner of way lessened the same. (17–18)

Yet more emphatically, Sterrie’s (1586, broadside) account of the fire at Beckles takes poetic anaphora to extremes in the town’s first-person evocation of frenetic, divergent activity:

Such wayling, such crying, through scourge of Gods ire,
 Such running, such working, such taking of payne,
 Such whirling, such haling, such reauing in vaine,
 Such robbing, such stealing, from more to the lesse,
 Such dishonest dealing, in time of distresse.

The pamphlets’ copiousness, and Eubulus’s fantasy of homogeneous obedience, are two sides of the same coin: both posit an ideal, unified response, which remains elusive.

Their coexistence in the play and its analogues anticipates Agamben’s (2015, 50) characterization of “the intimate contradiction that marks . . . the concept of people,” and “attains awareness” in Hobbes’s *Leviathan*: “an internal split,” between “a dissolved multitude” and “the people virtually contained in the body of the commonwealth or sovereignty” (Hobbes 1969, 124–5, in Agamben 2015, 52). The fundamental paradox of Eubulus’s exhortation is that he requires common action on behalf of “the people as a politically qualified body” (Agamben 2015, 50) while resisting the common ownership of goods and land (see Fitter 2019), as demanded by, for example, Robert Kett’s 1549 rebellion against enclosure in Norfolk, and leaving the people to their fate “as a politically unqualified multitude” (50). Despite his emphasis on geographical nativity’s relationship to ethnonational identity, Eubulus, like Sterrie’s “from more to the lesse,” reveals the gains to be made in a time of civil war for certain subgroups, claiming “All right and law shall cease, and he that had/Nothing today, tomorrow shall enjoy/Great heaps of gold, and he that flowed in wealth,/Lo, he shall be bereft of life and all” (5.2.204–7), while Arostus’ plea for unity plays on the nobles’ “kindly care . . . Of present wealth and noblesse of your stocks” (5.2.142–4). The multitude is divided seemingly along economic lines into those “Whom common country’s care and private fear/Taught to repent” (5.2.30–1) and to turn in their ringleaders, those who “Stale home by silence of the secret night” (5.2.40), and those

most desperate, “With minds hopeless of life, dreadless of death,” who persist in fighting and are “slain in the field” (5.2.46, 5.2.51). As Morgan (2016, 293) observes, in the aftermath of premodern fires, the successful “return to routine was a return to routine structural inequalities . . . [T]he experience of recovery was as much a function of previous socio-economic positions as it was of personal distress” (see also Blanchot [1980] 1995, 80). Civil conflict reveals existing fissures within the proto-nation, and the vested interests of the powerful in political inertia as maintained by a perceived crisis of self-interest.

Phaethon’s legend as told by Ovid also has pertinence here. Ovid (1565, A4v) claims that “The Aethiopians at that time . . . became so blacke and swart” when their blood “by force of that same heate” from the careening sun-chariot was “drawne to the outer part,” such that Phaethon’s fall comes to be used as a vehicle for theories of racial difference (and, ultimately, white supremacy) in the classical and early modern periods (see Hall 1995, 63, 95–7). Phaethon’s generation of Blackness marks out white identity as ostensibly normative and distinct, to “posit blackness as the result of disorder” (Oldenburg 2001, 50), and as Kim F. Hall notes, whiteness emerged as a marker of aesthetic superiority in the 1550s, just as “England itself had a heightened nervousness about group identity and power” (Hall 1995, 3; see also Poitevin 2011, 63). While Blackness is not a focus for the play, and Norton and Sackville make no overt reference to this dimension of Phaethon’s myth, race broadly conceived is very much its subject (see Hall 1995, 13–14). The premodern connotations of the term (including implications of kinship, legitimacy, and territorial belonging) buttress the play’s action, while also being key to Phaethon’s legend, and Eubulus in particular constructs his appeal for the united loyalty of the Britons to their motherland around incredulous horror that those who “spring” from the “womb” of their “native soil,” and who are “Born to defend their commonwealth and prince/ . . . should give consent thus to subvert/Thee, Britain land” (5.2.18–21). The Ethiopian Phaethon’s mythic generation of Blackness strengthens the play’s projected community bonds through his implication in the production of white identity.

However, this facet of the myth also functions to fracture the illusion of racial uniformity. Defining race as “a structural relationship for the articulation and management of human differences, rather than a substantive content” (Heng 2018, 3; see also Hall 1995, 6), we might profitably read the generation of such organizing structures back into *Gorboduc* through Phaethon’s myth as a container for this fictive racial history. Phaethon’s fire, as a figure for intemperate, inadequate leadership, imposes structural power imbalances upon particular groups, producing hierarchies to be maintained within this ostensibly homogeneous community. His actions are generative of inequality, but the myth itself and its operation in the play additionally reveal the inequality already embedded in social organization. So, when Gorboduc’s nobility invoke their common identity and collaborative action through the imagery of fire disaster, the play’s existing currents of fire language subvert this attempt to unify the splintered commonwealth. Instead, attention is drawn to the vista of extra-judicial possibility which opens up “in the while” (5.2.263) between the “then” (5.2.264), “While yet the prince did live whose name and power/By lawful summons and authority/Might make a parliament to be of force” (5.2.268–70), and a future time when parliament will “once with yielding hearts agree” (5.2.262). Mobilizing the language of threat

towards a fictive commonality, they go so far as to posit, in their festive emergency's suspension of the law, an alternative vision of governance: the extra-judicial nation that "neither should nor can subject itself to constitutional forms" (Agamben 2015, 51).

Conclusion

Fire is a prevalent and defining feature in *Gorboduc*, and for good reason: it represents a hermeneutic prompt, and the interdependent workings of tyranny and rebellion, as well as revealing attempts to occlude pre-existing social inequalities. Fire's bold but multiplicative symbolism captures how the stylized stance of legendary narrative can mislead, and the rhetoric of fire responses amplifies this, by speaking to a fear of various kinds of diversity. As Pyne notes, fire offers "both narrative and analogue" (2021, 6): far from being simply metaphorical shorthand, or an allusive reflex born of *Gorboduc*'s classical heritage, its fire language brings the work's proximity to a popular vernacular tradition and the material reality of lived experience into focus, along with a more developed sense of the potent contemporary application of its Latin sources. This allows us to reconfigure *Gorboduc*'s legacy for Elizabethan commercial drama, too, beyond the importance of its Senecan shape and innovative prosody. While this influence is still a compelling one to chart, it is also important to look outwards, to consider the play's resonances with other forms, and past the immediate political moments of its composition and dissemination: in the fire pamphlet, we encounter another mode equipped to reconcile *Gorboduc*'s sociopolitical contradictions (see Altman 1978, 258). The discursive points of contact between fire pamphlets and the *de casibus* tradition within which *Gorboduc* was conceived reinforce the ways that the play's negotiation of sovereignty and interpellation of the commonwealth echoes across a wider cultural spectrum, and how this aspect of *Gorboduc*'s traffic with the nonhuman, and with the modern West's foundational political theory, is entangled with an emerging popular form.

Notes

1. All subsequent line references or page numbers given in parentheses after the quotation in the main text will refer to this edition.
2. Agamben's most recent intervention on the state of exception and the state of emergency (2021, 82–5) is also instructive, although this is not to endorse the wider drift of that publication as regards the Covid-19 pandemic.
3. On the relationship between martial law and the state of exception see Agamben ([2005] 2017, 181). On Thomas Norton's own role as an Elizabethan commissioner for torture, see Simpson (2011, 5). Pyne's chronology of the Pyrocene also necessarily accelerates toward the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution; his observation that "the age of Enlightenment became a dark age for fast combustion" (2021, 33) might also profitably be read in dialogue with Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in this connection (see Soewarta 2012).
4. This article focuses on the contexts of the play's early performances, and the printed editions of 1565 and 1570; as Laura Estill (2013) has shown, of course, the work's significance and usages shifted as Elizabeth I's reign progressed.
5. William Prynne (1633, 961–2) claims that "mans nature . . . [is] more apt to be inflamed with any lascivious amorous speeches, gestures, Playes and Enterludes, then Tinder, Gunpowder, Flax, or Charcole are with the least sparkes of fire." See also William Rankins cited in MacKay (2011, 167).

6. Thomas Norton's own son, Robert, a gunner and engineer, would go on to write a treatise on artillery (Norton 1628) whose subtitle specified the parallel applications of "the making of extra-ordinary artificiall fireworkes, as well for pleasure and triumphes, as for warre and seruice."
7. The passage alludes, of course, to the purported Moorish origins of festive "Morris" or "Morisco" dancing. See Forrest (1999, 5–7; 47–72); Hall (1995, 23–4); and the torch-bearing "Moreskoes" in Smith (2013, 10).
8. See also 3 *Henry VI*, 2.6.12.
9. Also instructive here is Joshua Clover's ([2016] 2019, 4) distinction between the strike, which connotes cooperation and organization, and the riot which "has no place in this conceptual landscape. Often enough riot is understood to have no politics at all."

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