

# Gorboduc

On Sunday 21st June 2008 followers of the Globe Education department's *Read not Dead* series had the opportunity to see a staged reading of *The Tragedy of Gorboduc* (hereafter *Gorboduc*). This play, written and first performed at the Inner Temple only three years after the accession of Elizabeth I, is seminal for many reasons and in different ways. It is redolent of the then current national preoccupation with rightful heirs and lawful succession - a reasonable enough concern, since the nation had experienced during the last eleven years five different rulers, if one includes Lady Jane Grey, and three of them women.

The femininity itself provided the major preoccupation for ambitious nobles. They assumed that a female queen would not remain unmarried and that effectively her husband would rule, as had indeed happened with Mary Tudor - hence her soubriquet 'bloody.' It almost certainly never occurred to any of the princes, dukes and other suitors vying for her attention that Elizabeth, amongst the wisest, craftiest and most successful of Renaissance princes, would continue to remain in charge of her realm.

*Gorboduc* was written by two members of the Inner Temple, Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville, who both achieved administrative responsibility under Elizabeth, and Sackville additionally a knighthood and the estate of Knole. Derived from Geoffrey of Monmouth's legendary but inaccurate *Historia Regum Britanniae*, written in the twelfth century and first printed in 1508, the dramatic action follows the conventions of Senecan tragedy which became so popular in the Early Modern theatre. Stylistic echoes from this early example are evident in Kyd, Marlowe, Shakespeare, Jonson and many others. *Gorboduc* had less influence on Marlowe than on Shakespeare - Marlowe's characters tend to be doers rather than debaters - but the phrase<sup>1</sup>:

*Thou never suck'd the milk of woman's breast;  
But, from thy birth, the cruel tiger's teats  
Have nurs'd thee;*

***Gorboduc* 4.1.72-74<sup>2</sup>**

is brilliantly condensed into Edward's line:

*Inhumaine creatures, nurst with Tiger's milke.*

***Edward II* 2057<sup>3</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Drs Diana Devin and Maggy Williams for background material for this article.

<sup>2</sup> All quotations from *Gorboduc* are taken from the Everyman's Library edition *Minor Elizabethan Drama, Vol I, Pre-Shakespearean Tragedies* (Letchworth: Dent, reprint 1959), and are cited with act, scene and line nos.

<sup>3</sup> All quotations from Marlowe are taken from *The Works of Christopher Marlowe*, ed. by C. F. Tucker Brooke (Oxford and London: Oxford University Press, reprint 1953), and are cited with through line nos (tln).

Similarly, the Duke of Albany who, in Act V of *Gorboduc*, resolves to hazard everything for the crown:

*Shall I that am the Duke of Albany,  
Descended from that line of noble blood,  
Which hath so long flourish'd in worthy fame  
Of valiant hearts, such as in noble breasts  
Of right should rest above the baser sort,  
Refuse to venture life to win a crown?*

**Gorboduc 5.1.136-141**

has his rhythms and imagery picked up by one he would probably have regarded as belonging to 'the baser sort,' elaborated and transformed into the famous trope:

*Nature that fram'd us of foure Elements,  
Warring within our breasts for regiment,  
Doth teach us all to haue aspiring minds:  
Our soules, whose faculties can comprehend  
The wondrous Architecture of the world:  
And measure euery wandring plannets course,  
Still climing after knowledge infinite,  
And always moouing as the restles Spheares,  
Wils vs to weare our selues and neuer rest,  
Vntill we reach the ripest fruit of all,  
That perfect blisse and sole felicitie,  
The sweet fruition of an earthly crowne.*

**Tamburlaine I 869-880**

The Senecan form dictates verse of measured rhetoric which describes actions rather than showing their performance by the actors; long speeches uninterrupted by swift exchanges and precipitate entrances and exits; and action itself being confined to the dumb shows preceding each act and balanced by the summing up of the act by a Chorus. On the whole, the audience was expecting to spend the afternoon in serious mental exercise, endeavouring to follow a play which was of interest only as an arcane curiosity.

It is amazing what a group of dedicated actors can achieve in a remarkably short time with a daunting text. For these occasions they receive their copies of the script one week in advance and meet only on the Sunday morning for rehearsal. They commence performance at three in the afternoon. Oliver Senton, the co-ordinator made the basic decision to allow the words full weight as the authors had intended and not to detract from their effect by distracting stage business and gimmicky interpolations. Oh, that more directors of our subsidized companies and of the commercial stage would follow his example.

He arranged for each of the dumb shows to have a different presentation and unique musical accompaniment, provided simply by a musician alternating between accordion and flute, with the assistance, as occasion demanded, of a drum. He allowed a moment of delightful levity for the fourth act dumb show, with Martin Hodgson in drag as a reluctant queen, before the masked furies appeared and drove everyone off stage.

As the play was written by two lawyers, unsurprisingly it contains a large measure of balanced quasi-legal debate. In the first act, for example, King Gorboduc asks his counsellors for advice - which, of course, he has no intention of following - and each presents his opinion cased in eloquent forensic rhetoric. The names of the counsellors guide the audience to anticipate the thrust of each argument: Arostus, weak, prone to sycophancy, will tell Gorboduc what he wants to hear, Philander, the type who backs both ends against the middle, tries to qualify every statement he makes, and Eubulus, the wise counsellor, explains why everyone else is wrong, wrong, wrong! These three Senecan originals permeate so many characters of the stage, courtiers, military and religious advisors, civil servants, that their echoes can be heard in drama still.

The argument in this instance, the catalytic event for the entire play, is whether or not Gorboduc should divide his kingdom between his two sons and, if so, when. Arostus gives the answer Gorboduc wants to hear: 'Yes. Now. You've earned a life of ease.'

*Thus think I that your grace hath wisely thought  
And that your tender care of common weal  
Hath bred this thought, so to divide your land,  
And plant your sons to bear the present rule,  
While you yet live to see their ruling well,  
That you may longer live by joy therein.*

**Gorboduc 1.2.204-9**

Philander says: 'Of course you've earned it and of course you should hand over, but not yet. Guide them for a while so that they are ready for the responsibility when you die, which, of course, we all hope will not be for many years yet.'

*Wherefore, most noble king, I well assent  
Between your sons that you divide your realm,  
And as in kind, so match them in degree.  
But while the gods prolong your royal life,  
Prolong your reign; for thereto live you here,  
And therefore have the gods so long forborne  
To join you to themselves.*

**Gorboduc 1.2.304-311**

Eubulus says: 'Don't do it. It will result in death and total disaster.'

*Arm not unskilfulness with princely power.  
But you that long have wisely rul'd the reins  
Of royalty within your noble realm,  
So hold them, while the gods, for our avails,  
Shall stretch the thread of your prolonged days.*

...  
*Time, and example of your noble Grace,  
Shall teach your sons both to obey and rule.*

**Gorboduc 1.2.395-403**

Gorboduc hands over anyway and disaster indeed ensues, a fratricidal, regicidal, parricidal bloodbath couched in more high rhetoric.

The all-important critical debate was articulated with intelligence and clarity, the delivery of David Oakes smooth, almost oily, as Arostus, Martin Hodgson as Philander, and James Wallace, reasoned and forthright as Eubulus, beautifully contrasted, giving each character an individual voice and all different from Martyn Read's deep register as Gorboduc. Martin Hodgson has so perfected the art of appearing to give well considered advice whilst allowing his character to retain all his options that if he decided to give up acting he should have a golden future as a politician. In more serious vein, Janet Greaves, who played Videna, Gorboduc's queen, dressed in a simple black costume, with no props and no distraction, employing just the words in the service of her acting skills, brilliantly conveyed her anguish at the murder of her favoured elder son, Ferrex, at the hand of her younger, Porrex, spurred to the unnatural deed by envy and ambition.

Inevitably the pace faltered after the interval, due largely to the fact of Sackville having taken over the writing of the piece and having saved time and effort by employing sections of his *A Myrroure For Magistrates* in prophesying the doom and gloom consequent upon divided rule, airing his xenophobia, and lobbying for rule of England by an Englishman (himself?). His narrative didn't include enough plot development to maintain momentum. What his contribution did provide was tremendous pickings for later dramatists, furnishing ideas and images for Kyd, Shakespeare in *Henry VI* and *V*, Johnson in *Sejanus*, and Massinger in *The Roman Actor*, among others.

Shakespeare especially picks up ideas from *Gorboduc* and adapts them for his own dramatic purposes. Eubulus's speech in the final scene has furnished the following:

*The father shall unwitting slay the son  
The son shall slay the sire and know it not,*

**Gorboduc 5.2.375-6**

which is elaborated into the telling scene in Act II of *Richard Duke of York* (formerly *3 Henry VI*) where a father and son each bewail exactly that event during the civil war.

*Oh wretched mother, half alive,  
Thou shalt behold thy dear and only child  
Slain with the sword while he yet sucks thy breast*

**Gorboduc 5.2.383-5**

is fired into Antony's image in *Julius Caesar*:

*mothers shall but smile when they behold  
Their infants quartered with the hands of war,  
All pity choked with custom of fell deeds.*

**Julius Caesar 3.1.270-272<sup>4</sup>**

Eubulus's lament over Britain:

*Dismembered thus, and thus be rent in twain  
Thus wasted and defac'd, spoil'd and destroy'd,*

**Gorboduc 5.2.393-5**

is moved across the Channel and becomes a lament for France, first by Joan in *1 Henry VI*:

*Look on thy country, look on fertile France,  
And see the cities and the towns defaced  
By wasting ruin of the cruel foe.  
As looks the mother on her lowly babe  
When death doth close his tender-dying eyes.*

**1 Henry VI 3.7.44-48**

and the observant will have noticed that Shakespeare, never one to waste a dramatic opportunity, has included another mother/infant couplet. Burgundy employs similar ideas in his elegy for France in the last scene of *Henry V* where:

*our houses and ourselves and children . . .  
grow like savages - as soldiers will  
That nothing do but meditate on blood.*

**Henry V 5.2.56-60**

In totally different idiom, Shakespeare has enormous fun with some of the conventions of Senecan tragedy in his adaptation for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* of Pyramus and Thisbe. The insistent alliteration and reactions to death such as King Gorboduc's:

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<sup>4</sup> All quotations from Shakespeare are taken from *The Oxford Shakespeare*, ed. by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, reissue 1998).

*oh draw this sword of ours,  
And pierce this heart with speed! O hateful light,  
O loathsome life, O sweet and welcome death*

**Gorboduc 4.2.272-4**

must surely have inspired lines like:

*Approach ye furies fell.  
O fates, come, come,  
Cut thread and thrum,  
Quail, crush, conclude, and quell.*

**Midsummer Night's Dream 5.1.279-282**

and:

*Come tears, confound;  
Out sword, and wound  
The pap of Pyramus.*

**Midsummer Night's Dream 5.1.290-292**

*Gorboduc* is unlikely to receive a commercial airing. Nevertheless, it deserves attention as a performable text. It proved to be gripping theatrical entertainment thanks to the determination of Senton and his team to give it dramatic purpose and to illuminate that purpose by focussing their talents on a clear delivery of its tropes and sounds.

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