

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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# GORBODUC

Thomas Norton (1532 –1584) and Thomas Sackville, 1st Earl of Dorset (1536 – 19

## The Backdrop

To the contemporary theater goer--who hustles into Broadway or into Covent Garden-- the intimacy and personal referencing of the sixteenth century British theatrical experience, is inevitably a surprise. The present play was first performed in the Inner Temple, one of the four inns of Court--the vetting source for the barristers of England and Wales. The audience will have been part of the new upper-middle to elite city folk-- living and working in the City of London and participating in the new values and modish expressions of this early modern age. The relevance of the current play, to the lives of a contemporary theater goer, would have been as tangible as the proximity of the colorfully dressed actors. The play before them would have dealt with the subject of royal inheritance, and particularly with the disastrous consequences of a disorderly monarchical succession. The talk of the culture, after all, was Queen Elizabeth's much hoped for impending marriage, an event passionately hoped for by the British people. The plot of the present play at all points reflects the central importance of a good succession, and of an orderly government to support it.

## The Play

As the manuscripts of ancient classical literature made their way through the scriptoria of European monasteries, from the beginning of the Christian era to the Renaissance, such Roman writers as Seneca ( 4 B. C-65 A. D) came into significant prominence. A moralist and essayist, a prolific letter writer, Seneca came gradually to be viewed as a quasi Christian writer, in which guise he came to be read with close respect by the fourteenth century, square at the moment of Chaucer. It is not of course that Seneca had picked up elements of Christianity--the dates don't fit, not to mention the issue of personal style--but that Seneca's Stoicism, restraint, patience and self-discipline bordered on what influential Christians considered prominent virtues of the new religion. There was no savior in the Stoic cult but there was the kind of deep personal guidance that Buddhist practice then as now offers the searcher. There was in addition, to support the influential popularity of Seneca, the underground sense that he respected the hyper dramatic passions for the singular impulse they give us to calm and quell our passions.

The material of Senecan dramatic presentation will be the opposite of the calm to which the author wants to lead us. In a Senecan drama full exercise will be given to the emotions of jealousy, anger, rage, cruelty--and all to the point of turmoil in displaying tragic consequences. In other words, turmoil is for Seneca the condition in which peace can be generated. In the play before us it is precisely that generation that we experience. The conflicts inherent to the present play will eventuate into a culture world in which the necessity for social peace displaces the human need for possession and domination.

## PLOT

The plot of the present play is relatively stark and simple, although the unique traits of it are noteworthy. Most remarkable, in the refinement of this play, is the prosody: this is the first British drama to advance in blank verse presentation; Gorboduc proclaims that

*Nature hath her order and her course  
Which (being broken) both corrupt the state*

Potent lines of thought which have Shakespeare written all over them. To which be added that the same play is deeply involved with political struggles within the Kingdom of England, between Ferrex and Porrex, the two sons of King Gorboduc. The prominence of the political element in this play is the more

conspicuous in that the national topic up front and center, the hoped for marriage of Queen Elizabeth, carries with it the robust fears and anxieties of the people attending the play. The drama itself advances starkly, one act of violence and fury followed by another, and always under the shadow of anarchy in the state, a frightful anxiety lest the shaky foundations of the state should totter.

Gorboduc is a central launching point for this killing- filled tragedy, although to be sure he dwindles in importance, as the play increasingly drifts into political drama, juxtaposing a furious and violent populace against a noble elite.

Gorboduc decides, against good advice, that he should arrange for his kingdom to be divided between his two sons. This is a bad mistake, for it is not a carefully planned move and the sons fight for power between themselves, each claiming his right to the greater portion of the inheritance. Before long, with the help of a mother who has herself entered the fray, brutally, the subjects in this kingdom are preternaturally horrified and infuriated by the mother's killing of one of her sons, and rebel against Gorboduc and Queen Videna, slaughtering them both. This political insight seems to do as political philosophy--take care of your subjects.

That, in fact, is just about where the drama leaves us, with Eubulus, the secretary to Gorboduc, arguing that parliament and with it order, should have been called into the deteriorating scene far sooner--but also that much has been learned and a brighter future lies ahead.. A surprising ending, given the bleak pall otherwise cast over the human condition as depicted in the play.

## CHARACTERS

Gorboduc, mythical King of Great Britain. A titular paternal figure and revenger around whom an aura of order outspreads. Ultimately he is blamed by the people for the death of Porrex, and in the end, after his death he is looked back at critically, for having failed to act early, by bringing his parliament in to maintain order.

Videna, Queen and wife to Gorboduc. Favoring her older son, Ferrex, whom her older son, Ferrex, has slain, she in turn kills her son, (An act of revenge, on behalf of the preferred son, carried out with Senecan blood thirstiness). Might well add that characterization in this play is one-dimensional, as in the contemporary British comedy *Ralph Roister Doister* (1567). Either of these two dramas promotes a character--Gorboduc or Ralph--who is simply an aggregate of character traits--paternal but ill prepared; lecherous and greedy--so that in the end the play in question has developed no issues and raised none of the questions posed by personal dilemmas.

Ferrex, elder son of Gorboduc

Porrex, younger son of Gorboduc

Clotyn, Duke of Cornwall

Fergus, Duke of Albany

Mandud, Duke of Leagre

Gweard, Duke of Cumberland

Eubulus, Secretary to King Gorboduc

Aostus, a counsellor to King Gorboduc

Dorean, a councillor assigned by the King to his eldest son Ferrex

Philander, a councillor assigned by the King to his younger son, Porrex

Hermon, a parasite of Ferrex and a slave of Fergus.

Tyndar, a parasite of Porrex.

Marcella, a lady of the Queen's inner chamber

Chorus; four ancient and wise Britons. The strains of string and lute, intertwined with voice, enchant the entire archaic setting of the play casting an aura of Arthurian spell over the performance.

Dumb shows, dramatic enactments of future developments within the play; a mummery which bespeaks the rooting of the entire play in the popular street drama of the Middle Ages. The one dimensionality of

this play's characters derives from the representative rather than full bodied presence of these pre modern actor-roles.

## THEMES

While still living, King Gorboduc attempted, wisely it seemed, to share his power by dividing it between his two sons, Ferrex and Porrex. Unfortunately the drive for power set the two sons to fighting against one another. The younger son, Porrex, killed his older brother, which brought on its own murderous onslaught. The Queen, Videna, preferred her older son, and in a fit of vengeance killed her younger son. This act of vengeance naturally inspired its own response. That response is violent throughout the state; a suppressed minority, facing off against an entrenched nobility, rises in horror and slaughters its oppressors. The political analysis of this uprising, and its consequences, reminds us of the considerable modernity we have reached by this point in early Renaissance culture.

*Power* Power pervades this entire drama. The initial power struggle breaks out between the two sons of Gorboduc, who go to war with one another over their father's land. The younger son, Porrex, kills his brother. This of course is a dreadful affront to the Queen Videna, whose favorite is her elder son, Ferrex. To show her own power, and of course to wreak her own vengeance-- *a close cousin to power after all*--the Queen killed her younger son. At this point we run directly into the people, who are horrified and appalled by the behavior of the Queen.. The power of the people explodes at this instant, as they turn against and slaughter both the King and the Queen. At this point the coalition of power with vengeance reaches its climax.

*Politics* Power and vengeance are of course already fundamental ingredients of politics, but the present play emphasizes the political in an even wider sense, as the overall functioning capacity of a social whole. What is needed in Gorboduc's Kingdom is the interaction of a parliament with the behaviors of individual competitors.

## EVENTS

'The sons fell into dissension,' remarks the ancient playbill, introducing the oldest opener in the book ; a litany of the fall takes over at this point, indeed the following play is little besides a litany of disasters brought down on the house of King Gorboduc by the jealousy, violence, and fury of his descendants. There will be an eventual ray of sun--after much turmoil in the kingdom; after almost total collapse of the civil government--with the decision that a new King must replace the defunct Gorboduc, and that justice will eventually prevail.

Gorboduc's own folly plays into the drama from the outset; despite the fatal results of a kingdom division between his two cousins. Gorboduc to the death ignores this destiny, and proceeds to divide his kingdom between his two sons. Their murderous relation to one another leads straight into the heart of the present tragedy, thus into the fatal dissolution of Gorboduc's own family.

With the help of scummy parasites the two children of Gorboduc invent pretexts for war with one another. Gorboduc only too late grows aware of the serious accident he has made In dividing his kingdom. Just as he is preparing to fight against his two sons he is informed of the death of Ferrex. Porrex, called before his father declares that he has acted in self-defense , but for his effort he is slain at the hands of Queen Videna, Gorboduc's wife. It is at this point in the killings that we realize the deep pinch of the Senecan tradition, devoted as it is to the hot and heavy presentation of manslaughter, and at the same time, by an alchemy distinctive to the drama of the Middle Ages, to a call for calm, patience and self-control. The bloody peace established around the death of the Christ rises before us in this unique medieval aesthetic.

## A LOOKING BACKWARD

The present play sits directly atop the literature we call mediaeval. Within that literature--in *The Nibelungenlied*, Dante, Boccaccio, Chaucer, Petrarch--there is much poetic imagination, much tale-telling, much hymnology, but in addition a somber and tragic thematic--running through all genres; in

addition there is a stark theatrical motif of human sin, with its roots in the dark recesses of Our creation. The present play, following such darkness, taps studiously into those spiritual veins through which we imbibe our native 'turn of the screw.'

#### A LOOKING FORWARD

The present play concludes with Eubulus' heavy admonition to his people that they should maintain their state in order, and above all apply their Parliament to serve the purposes for which it is intended-- oversight and legislation. The awesome power of the rebellious populace is highlighted; exemplifying, as it does, the threats inherent in regal carelessness, an ill considered inheritance, a brutal homicide, such as the Queen's of her own less favored son.