

THE OXFORD AUTHORS

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Oxford New York
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1987

Burning of the fleet in the Vlie by Sir Robert Holmes

Nor was this all: in ports and roads remote,
 Destructive fires among whole fleets we send;
 Triumphant flames upon the water float,
 And out-bound ships at home their voyage end.

Those various squadrons, variously designed,
 Each vessel freighted with a several load,
 Each squadron waiting for a several wind,
 All find but one, to burn them in the road.

820

Some bound for Guinea, golden sand to find,
 Bore all the gauds the simple natives wear;
 Some, for the pride of Turkish courts designed,
 For folded turbans finest holland bear.

Some English wool, vexed in a Belgian loom,^o
 And into cloth of spungy softness made,
 Did into France or colder Denmark doom,
 To ruin with worse ware our staple trade.

Our greedy seamen rummage every hold,^o
 Smile on the booty of each wealthier chest,
 And, as the priests who with their gods make bold,
 Take what they like and sacrifice the rest.

830

Transitum to the Fire of London^o

But ah! how unsincere are all our joys!
 Which sent from heaven, like lightning make no stay:
 Their palling taste the journey's length destroys,
 Or grief, sent post, o'ertakes them on the way.

Swelled with our late successes on the foe,
 Which France and Holland wanted power to cross,
 We urge an unseen fate to lay us low,
 And feed their envious eyes with English loss.

840

Each element his dread command obeys,
 Who makes or ruins with a smile or frown;
 Who, as by one he did our nation raise,
 So now he with another pulls us down.

Yet, London, empress of the northern clime,
 By a high fate thou greatly didst expire;
 Great as the world's, which at the death of time^o
 Must fall, and rise a nobler frame by fire.

As when some dire usurper heaven provides
 To scourge his country with a lawless sway,
 His birth perhaps some petty village hides,
 And sets his cradle out of fortune's way;

850

Till, fully ripe, his swelling fate breaks out,
 And hurries him to mighty mischiefs on;
 His prince, surprised at first, no ill could doubt,
 And wants the power to meet it when 'tis known:

Such was the rise of this prodigious fire,
 Which, in mean buildings first obscurely bred,
 From thence did soon to open streets aspire,
 And straight to palaces and temples spread.

860

The diligence of trades, and noiseful gain,
 And luxury, more late, asleep were laid;
 All was the night's, and in her silent reign
 No sound the rest of nature did invade.

In this deep quiet, from what source unknown,
 Those seeds of fire their fatal birth disclose:
 And first few scattering sparks about were blown,
 Big with the flames that to our ruin rose.

Then, in some close-pent room it crept along,
 And, smouldering as it went, in silence fed:
 Till the infant monster, with devouring strong,
 Walked boldly upright with exalted head.

870

Now, like some rich or mighty murderer,
 Too great for prison, which he breaks with gold,
 Who fresher for new mischiefs does appear,
 And dares the world to tax him with the old;

So scapes the insulting fire his narrow gaol,
 And makes small outlets into open air:
 There the fierce winds his tender force assail,
 And beat him downward to his first repair. 880

The winds, like crafty courtesans, withheld^o
 His flames from burning but to blow them more:
 And, every fresh attempt, he is repelled
 With faint denials, weaker than before.

And now, no longer letted of his prey,
 He leaps up at it with enraged desire,
 O'erlooks the neighbours with a wide survey,
 And nods at every house his threatening fire.

The ghosts of traitors from the bridge descend,
 With bold fanatic spectres to rejoice;
 About the fire into a dance they bend,
 And sing their sabbath notes with feeble voice. 890

Our guardian angel saw them where he sate
 Above the palace of our slumbering king:
 He sighed, abandoning his charge to fate,
 And, drooping, oft looked back upon the wing.

At length the crackling noise and dreadful blaze
 Called up some waking lover to the sight;
 And long it was ere he the rest could raise,
 Whose heavy eyelids yet were full of night. 900

The next to danger, hot pursued by fate,
 Half-clothed, half-naked, hastily retire;
 And frightened mothers strike their breasts, too late,
 For helpless infants left amidst the fire.

Their cries soon waken all the dwellers near;
 Now murmuring noises rise in every street;
 The more remote run stumbling with their fear,
 And in the dark men jostle as they meet.

So weary bees in little cells repose;
 But if night-robbers lift the well-stored hive, 910
 A humming through their waxen city grows,
 And out upon each other's wings they drive.

Now streets grow thronged and busy as by day;
 Some run for buckets to the hallowed choir;^o
 Some cut the pipes, and some the engines play,
 And some more bold mount ladders to the fire.

In vain; for from the east a Belgian wind
 His hostile breath through the dry rafters sent;
 The flames impelled soon left their foes behind,
 And forward with a wanton fury went. 920

A quay of fire ran all along the shore,
 And lightened all the river with a blaze;^o
 The wakened tides began again to roar,
 And wondering fish in shining waters gaze.

Old Father Thames raised up his reverend head,
 But feared the fate of Simois would return;^o
 Deep in his ooze he sought his sedgy bed,
 And shrank his waters back into his urn.

The fire meantime walks in a broader gross;
 To either hand his wings he opens wide; 930
 He wades the streets, and straight he reaches cross
 And plays his longing flames on the other side.

At first they warm, then scorch, and then they take;
 Now with long necks from side to side they feed;
 At length, grown strong, their mother-fire forsake,
 And a new colony of flames succeed.

To every nobler portion of the town
 The curling billows roll their restless tide;
 In parties now they straggle up and down,
 As armies, unopposed, for prey divide. 940

One mighty squadron, with a side-wind sped,
 Through narrow lanes his cumbered fire does haste,
 By powerful charms of gold and silver led
 The Lombard bankers and the Change to waste.°

Another backward to the Tower would go,
 And slowly eats his way against the wind;
 But the main body of the marching foe
 Against the imperial palace is designed.

Now day appears, and with the day the king,
 Whose early care had robbed him of his rest: 950
 Far off the cracks of falling houses ring,
 And shrieks of subjects pierce his tender breast.

Near as he draws, thick harbingers of smoke
 With gloomy pillars cover all the place;
 Whose little intervals of night are broke
 By sparks that drive against his sacred face.

More than his guards his sorrows made him known,
 And pious tears which down his cheeks did shower:
 The wretched in his grief forgot their own;
 (So much the pity of a king has power.) 960

He wept the flames of what he loved so well,
 And what so well had merited his love;
 For never prince in grace did more excel,
 Or royal city more in duty strove.

Nor with an idle care did he behold:
 (Subjects may grieve, but monarchs must redress;)
 He cheers the fearful, and commends the bold,
 And makes despairers hope for good success.

Himself directs what first is to be done,
 And orders all the succours which they bring. 970
 The helpful and the good about him run,
 And form an army worthy such a king.

He sees the dire contagion spread so fast
 That, where it seizes, all relief is vain;
 And therefore must unwillingly lay waste
 That country which would, else, the foe maintain.

The powder blows up all before the fire:
 The amazed flames stand gathered on a heap,
 And from the precipice's brink retire,
 Afraid to venture on so large a leap. 980

Thus fighting fires a while themselves consume,
 But straight, like Turks, forced on to win or die,
 They first lay tender bridges of their fume,
 And o'er the breach in unctuous vapours fly.

Part stays for passage till a gust of wind
 Ships o'er their forces in a shining sheet;
 Part, creeping under ground, their journey blind,
 And, climbing from below, their fellows meet.

Thus, to some desert plain, or old wood-side,
 Dire night-hags come from far to dance their round; 990
 And o'er broad rivers on their fiends they ride,
 Or sweep in clouds above the blasted ground.

No help avails: for, Hydra-like, the fire
 Lifts up his hundred heads to aim his way;
 And scarce the wealthy can one half retire
 Before he rushes in to share the prey.

The rich grow suppliant, and the poor grow proud;
 Those offer mighty gain and these ask more:
 So void of pity is the ignoble crowd,
 When others' ruin may increase their store. 1000

As those who live by shores with joy behold
 Some wealthy vessel split or stranded nigh;
 And, from the rocks, leap down for shipwrecked gold,
 And seek the tempest which the others fly:

So these but wait the owners' last despair,
 And what's permitted to the flames invade:°
 E'en from their jaws they hungry morsels tear,
 And on their backs the spoils of Vulcan lade.

The days were all in this lost labour spent:
 And when the weary king gave place to night, 1010
 His beams he to his royal brother lent,
 And so shone still in his reflective light.

Night came, but without darkness or repose,
 A dismal picture of the general doom;
 Where souls distracted when the trumpet blows,
 And half unready with their bodies come.

Those who have homes, when home they do repair,
 To a last lodging call their wandering friends.
 Their short uneasy sleeps are broke with care, 1020
 To look how near their own destruction tends.

Those who have none sit round where once it was,
 And with full eyes each wonted room require;
 Haunting the yet warm ashes of the place,
 As murdered men walk where they did expire.

Some stir up coals and watch the vestal fire,
 Others in vain from sight of ruin run;
 And, while through burning labyrinths they retire,
 With loathing eyes repeat what they would shun.

The most in fields like herded beasts lie down,
 To dews obnoxious on the grassy floor: 1030
 And while their babes in sleep their sorrows drown,
 Sad parents watch the remnants of their store.

While by the motion of the flames they guess
 What streets are burning now, and what are near;
 An infant, waking, to the paps would press
 And meets, instead of milk, a falling tear.

No thought can ease them but their sovereign's care,
 Whose praise the afflicted as their comfort sing:
 E'en those whom want might drive to just despair, 1040
 Think life a blessing under such a king.

Meantime he sadly suffers in their grief,
 Outweeps a hermit, and outprays a saint:
 All the long night he studies their relief,
 How they may be supplied, and he may want.

King's prayer

'O God,' said he, 'thou patron of my days,
 Guide of my youth in exile and distress!
 Who me unfriended broughtst by wondrous ways,
 The kingdom of my fathers to possess:

'Be thou my judge, with what unwearied care
 I since have laboured for my people's good; 1050
 To bind the bruises of a civil war,
 And stop the issues of their wasting blood.

'Thou, who hast taught me to forgive the ill,
 And recompense, as friends, the good misled;
 If mercy be a precept of thy will,
 Return that mercy on thy servant's head.

'Or, if my heedless youth has stepped astray,
 Too soon forgetful of thy gracious hand;
 On me alone thy just displeasure lay,
 But take thy judgments from this mourning land. 1060

'We all have sinned, and thou hast laid us low,
 As humble earth from whence at first we came:
 Like flying shades before the clouds we show,
 And shrink like parchment in consuming flame.

Our king this more than natural change beholds,
 With sober joy his heart and eyes abound;
 To the all-good his lifted hands he folds,
 And thanks him low on his redeemed ground. 1130

As, when sharp frosts had long constrained the earth,
 A kindly thaw unlocks it with mild rain,
 And first the tender blade peeps up to birth,
 And straight the green fields laugh with promised grain:

By such degrees the spreading gladness grew
 In every heart, which fear had froze before;
 The standing streets with so much joy they view,
 That with less grief the perished they deplore. 1140

The father of the people opened wide
 His stores, and all the poor with plenty fed:
 Thus God's anointed God's own place supplied,
 And filled the empty with his daily bread.

This royal bounty brought its own reward,
 And in their minds so deep did print the sense,
 That, if their ruins sadly they regard,
 'Tis but with fear the sight might drive him thence.

City's request to the king not to leave them

But so may he live long, that town to sway,
 Which by his auspice they will nobler make,
 As he will hatch their ashes by his stay,
 And not their humble ruins now forsake. 1150

They have not lost their loyalty by fire;
 Nor is their courage or their wealth so low,
 That from his wars they poorly would retire,
 Or beg the pity of a vanquished foe.

Not with more constancy the Jews of old,^o
 By Cyrus from rewarded exile sent,
 Their royal city did in dust behold,
 Or with more vigour to rebuild it went. 1160

The utmost malice of their stars is past,
 And two dire comets which have scourged the town,
 In their own plague and fire have breathed their last,
 Or, dimly, in their sinking sockets frown.

Now frequent trines the happier lights among,^o
 And high-raised Jove from his dark prison freed,
 (Those weights took off that on his planet hung,)
 Will gloriously the new-laid work succeed.

Methinks already, from this chemic flame,^o
 I see a city of more precious mould;
 Rich as the town which gives the Indies name,^o
 With silver paved, and all divine with gold. 1170

Already, labouring with a mighty fate,
 She shakes the rubbish from her mounting brow,
 And seems to have renewed her charter's date,
 Which heaven will to the death of time allow.

More great than human, now, and more august,^o
 New deified she from her fires does rise:
 Her widening streets on new foundations trust,
 And, opening, into larger parts she flies. 1180

Before, she like some shepherdess did show,
 Who sat to bathe her by a river's side;
 Not answering to her fame, but rude and low,
 Nor taught the beauteous arts of modern pride.

Now, like a maiden queen, she will behold,
 From her high turrets, hourly suitors come;
 The East with incense, and the West with gold,
 Will stand, like suppliants, to receive her doom.

The silver Thames, her own domestic flood,
 Shall bear her vessels, like a sweeping train,
 And often wind (as of his mistress proud)
 With longing eyes to meet her face again. 1190

The wealthy Tagus, and the wealthier Rhine,°

The glory of their towns no more shall boast;
And Seine, that would with Belgian rivers join,
Shall find her lustre stained and traffic lost.

The venturous merchant, who designed more far,
And touches on our hospitable shore,
Charmed with the splendour of this northern star,
Shall here unlade him and depart no more.

1200

Our powerful navy shall no longer meet,
The wealth of France or Holland to invade:
The beauty of this town, without a fleet,
From all the world shall vindicate her trade.

And, while this famed emporium we prepare,
The British ocean shall such triumphs boast,
That those who now disdain our trade to share
Shall rob like pirates on our wealthy coast.

Already we have conquered half the war,
And the less dangerous part is left behind;°
Our trouble now is but to make them dare,
And not so great to vanquish as to find.

1210

Thus to the Eastern wealth through storms we go;
But now, the Cape once doubled, fear no more:
A constant trade-wind will securely blow,
And gently lay us on the spicy shore.

AN ESSAY OF DRAMATIC POESY

To
The Right Honourable Charles
Lord Buckhurst°

My Lord,

As I was lately reviewing my loose papers, amongst the rest I found this essay, the writing of which,—in this rude and indigested manner wherein your lordship now sees it,—served as an amusement to me in the country, when the violence of the last plague° had driven me from

the town. Seeing then our theatres shut up, I was engaged in these kind of thoughts with the same delight with which men think upon their absent mistresses. I confess I find many things in this discourse which I do not now approve—my judgment being a little altered since the writing of it—but whether for the better or the worse, I know not. Neither indeed is it much material in an essay where all I have said is problematical.

For the way of writing plays in verse, which I have seemed to favour, I have since that time laid the practice of it aside till I have more leisure, because I find it troublesome and slow. But I am no way altered from my opinion of it,—at least with any reasons which have opposed it. For your lordship may easily observe that none are very violent against it but those who either have not attempted it, or who have succeeded ill in their attempt.

'Tis enough for me to have your lordship's example for my excuse in that little which I have done in it; and I am sure my adversaries can bring no such arguments against verse as the fourth act of *Pompey*° will furnish me with in its defence. Yet, my lord, you must suffer me a little to complain of you that you too soon withdraw from us a contentment, of which we expected the continuance, because you gave it us so early. 'Tis a revolt without occasion from your party, where your merits had already raised you to the highest commands, and where you have not the excuse of other men—that you have been ill used, and therefore laid down arms. I know no other quarrel you can have to verse than that which *Spurina*° had to his beauty, when he tore and mangled the features of his face only because they pleased too well the lookers-on. It was an honour which seemed to wait for you, to lead out a new colony of writers from the mother nation: and upon the first spreading of your ensigns, there had been many in a readiness to have followed so fortunate a leader—if not all, yet the better part of writers.

pars indocili melior grege; mollis et expses
inominata perprimat cubilia.°

[the part better than the ignorant mob; the weak and faint-hearted may remain on their unlucky beds]

I am almost of opinion that we should force you to accept of the command, as sometimes the praetorian bands have compelled their captains to receive the empire. The court, which is the best and surest judge of writing, has generally allowed of verse, and in the town it has found favourers of wit and quality. As for your own particular, my lord, you have yet youth and time enough to give part of it to the