On Burning: Pericles and Shakespeare’s Uncanny Fire

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In *Pericles*, fire incinerates two pairs of villains: Antiochus and Daughter are struck by “fire from heaven” in scene 8, and Cleon and Dionyza are burned in their palace in scene 22. The shocking events are welcome news for the play’s hero, though he need not have traveled as often nor as far to encounter such fire. Shortly after the play’s probable date of composition, in late 1608, fire from heaven reportedly consumed the house in Flanders in which lived a woman who birthed three monsters. In 1613, fire from heaven burned John Hittchell of Southhampton, whose body smoldered for three days and nights before finally extinguishing itself. These startling combustions bear a striking resemblance to the deaths in *Pericles*, a play preoccupied by the elemental intersections of narrative and fire. This essay considers, first, the strange ease with which something as familiar and dangerous as fire moves between the playhouse stage and the newsheet catastrophes of everyday life; and, second, how fire’s uncanny habitation in *Pericles* and others of Shakespeare’s plays link those texts in a conspiracy of intertextual flame.
Though fire performs spectacular works of justice in Pericles, fire in its as deadly but more banal appearances would have been familiar to anyone browsing the bookstalls. The 1613 pamphlet describing Hitchell’s death also included an account of “the fearefull burning of the towne of Dorchester vpon friday the 6 of August,” and similar reports of fires occupied broadsheet ballads, newssheets, pamphlets, and volumes panting with news of scorched barns, destroyed markets, and deceased victims. So numerous are these fiery texts that they might consistute a genre of their own: pyroreportage, literature describing the daily reality of combustion in English life and imagination. A quick survey of some pamphlets, broadsheets, and ballads memorializing these disasters shows how ruthless and resourceful fire proved to be in Renaissance England: A doleful discourse and ruthfull reporte of the greate spoyle and lamentable losse, by fire, in the towne of East Dearham... (1581); A briefe sonet declaring the lamentation of Beckles, a market towne in Suffolke which was...pitifull burned with fire to the value by estimation of twentie thousande pounds... (1586); A short, yet a true and faithfull narration of the fearefull fire that fell in the towne of Wooburne, in the countie of Bedford (1595); The True lamentable discourse of the burning of Teuerton in Deuon-shire...At what time there was consumed to ashes about the number of 400 houses...and fytie persons burnt alieue through the vehementie of the same fyer (1598); and The woefull and lamentable wast and spoile done by a suddaine fire in S. Edmonds-bury in Suffolke (1608). And on July 9, 1614, Stratford-upon-Avon caught fire. The town burned with a speed and ferocity that startled and stunned witnesses. The “sodaine and terrible fire” incinerated, in less than two hours, more than 50 homes and numerous barns, stables, offices, and other structures in the tinderish town that had already suffered other fires in the 20 years prior to this blaze. So extensive was the damage to the town, that the fire came to the attention of James I. According to the broadsheet proclaiming the king’s sympathy and support, the fire drove the the town to “great hazard to be overthrowne and undone...” Stratford was a town stinking of smoke, smothering in cinders, “ruinated & decayed.”

Both the broadsheet fires and the fires in Shakespeare’s plays appear as the fire next time—a fire that is itself a quotation. The fire of Pericles is a repetition on-stage of what happened in Flanders; the fire in off-stage Southampton is a repetition of what happens in Pericles. In plays as in pyroreportage, where sparks leap out to and absorb the cinders of other texts, fire tends to duplicate itself. Through processes of creative or destructive reduplication—repetition, allusion, quotation—texts present fire itself as a phenomenon as familiar and unsettling as uncanniness itself. The same pamphlet reporting John Hitchell’s incineration, for example, includes an account of “the fearefull burning of the towne of Dorchester,” an account that concludes by likening the damage of the destroyed city to “ruinated Troy or decayed Carthage”—literary exemplars for “this great commaunding Element, consuming fier.” This tendency of the blaze to resemble and remind draws Shakespeare’s plays to the glow, illuminating the similarity with which the plays render fire.

To look at the repetitive, intertextual quality of Shakespeare’s fire, I return to Pericles. The late romance Jonson condemned as “mouldy” for being a stale collection of older works’ bits and tired plots’ pieces, Pericles has long been associated with efforts to theorize coherence across texts within the Shakespeare oeuvre. Pericles offers a fire that has not forgotten the echoes of other plays and other histories popping in its flames. And, indeed, there is plenty of Periclean fire in Shakespeare’s oeuvre: fire appears under cauldrons, in hearths, off-stage and summoned for guests, on-stage and proferred to visitors, on the tips of torches, at the top of reports, called for, longed for, witnessed, described. People, palaces, and paper burn in the plays with a flame’s easy menace. It is hard to think of many other phenomena in the plays as frequently invoked as fire which also posed such an immediate a risk to actors and audience. Thus, when fire from heaven strikes in Pericles, it is most notable for its on-stage absence. Reported rather than witnessed, the absence of the lightning strike from the stage serves two purposes. It both saves the play’s decorum in declining to enact such death in front of the audience, and saves the boards of the stage itself from risky pyrotechnics. Instead of combating bodies in front of the audience, Helicanus reports the deaths of Antiochus and Daughter to Aeschines:

No, Aeschines, know this of me:
Antiochus from incest lived not free,
For which the most high gods, not minding longer
To hold the vengeance that they had in store,
Due to this heinous capital offence,
Even in the height and pride of all his glory,
When he was seated in a chariot
Of an inestimable value, and
His daughter with him, but apparelled all in jewels,
A fire from heaven came and shrivelled up
Their bodies, e'en to loathing, for they so stunk,
That all those eyes adored them ere their fall
Scorn now their hand should give them burial. (8.1-13)

Helicanus’s description of the immolations of Antiochus and his Daughter buzzes with repetition. From the homophonic pairing of “No” and “know” to the initial and final couplets of the speech, the digest of events operates under a logic of two-ness; at the same time, its description of charred corpses and reluctant burials resembles that of contemporary reports of the aftermaths of fires. Helicanus pairs words, rhymes, and victims, as much as his language mimics pamphlets and broadsheets. The reduplicative quality of fire is notably in effect, too, in the report of this divinely judicial blaze being itself re-presented, in the form of re(-)port. Helicanus’s remarks allow some reflection on the work of fire in grounding the lightning of literary repetition. Several of the reports of off-stage action within Pericles involve fire, but among the most spectacular is the report that ends the play—the account of fire (again) consuming the play’s second set of two villains. In the last lines of the play, Gower completes his role as narrator by concluding the final scene of reunions and revelations—in which Pericles’s wife Thaisa is revealed to have survived and become a nun, and Pericles’s daughter Marina to have emerged from piratical abduction to become a dance teacher—with a digest of equally thrilling off-stage events:

In Antiochus and his daughter you have heard
Of monstrous lust the due and just reward;
In Pericles, his queen, and daughter seen,
Although assailed with fortune fierce and keen,
Virtue preserved from fell destruction's blast,
Led on by heaven, and crowned with joy at last.
In Helicanus may you well descry
A figure of truth, of faith, of loyalty.
In reverend Cerimon there well appears
The worth that learnèd charity aye wears.
For wicked Cleon and his wife, when fame
Had spread their cursèd deed to th’honoured name
Of Pericles, to rage the city turn,
That him and his they in his palace burn.
The gods for murder seemèd so content
To punish that, although not done, but meant.
So on your patience evermore attending,
New joy wait on you. Here our play has ending. (22.108-25)

While constituting the second appearance of cosmic retribution, the passage recalls the tendency of fire both to come, always, next time, and to signal an appetite for ending. “Cleon and his wife,” like Antiochus and Daughter, shrivel to the pronomial “him and his” as the fire marks the play’s last “turn,” this time to the “burn.” Here, in the remains of Cleon and Dionyza, the play turns in on itself, folding back to the previous immolation of Antiochus and Daughter at the moment of the play’s cessation. The appearance of fire presents as recursive, twisting the text into a ring.

That ring, securing the end of the play with its beginning, and guaranteeing the text’s re-reading, may prove an apt metaphor, considering that this fire’s report is preceded immediately by Pericles’s anticipation both of hearing his relatives’ full stories, and of celebrating the wedding of Marina and Lysimachus. Addressing first Thaisa and then Cerimon, Pericles declares
We'll celebrate their nuptials, and ourselves
Will in that kingdom spend our following days.
Our son and daughter shall in Tyreus reign.—
Lord Cerimon, we do our longing stay
To hear the rest untold. Sir, lead's the way. (22.103-107)

Just before the blaze comes the endless deferral of narrative beyond the margins of the playtext. The
fire consumes the play before “the rest untold” can be unfolded again, the reduplicative blaze
interrupting the play’s own re-presentation. As both the terminus for Pericles and the turn to the play’s
beginning, fire comes as Pericles seeks to find “the way” through “days” in which he promises to “stay,”
beyond the stage. Though the text longs for its own extension—seeks to revel in its narrative
repetition—the fire longs for the end of the play.

In this tendency to assert itself as a next-time phenomenon, the fire in Pericles resembles other plays’
blazes. In the only other Shakespeare play to involve the burning death of a met character, Henry VI
Part 1, Joan La Pucelle, stalking the walls of Rouen with brandished torch in hand, declares, “Behold, this
is the happy wedding torch / That joineth Rouen unto her countrymen, / But burning fatal to the
Talbotites!” (3.2.26-28). Flaming like a dark dream, Joan constitutes an existential threat to England,
and her language of nuptial celebration takes on the ashy threat of combustion. This threat is doubled
by Joan’s own end in 5.4; a theatrical audience knowledgeable of her historical avatar’s ultimate
execution can see in the torch both a danger to the English and a promise of the character’s own
terminus. The fire Joan brings on stage—perhaps literally brings in the actor’s hands—maintains its
sense of imminent menace, both as metonymy for her military assays, and as ironic prolepsis of her
end. In either case, the bright burning longs for an end: the end of English conquest, the end of Joan’s
challenge thereto. These looming fatalities marry in the nuptial torch brought on the theater’s
stage.

So when Pericles declares that he will join with recovered Thaisa to “celebrate their [Marina and
Lysimachus’s] nuptials,” the line carries the fading stench of scorched bodies—both the body of Joan in
1 Henry VI, and the bodies of victims of the fire from heaven, whose remains stink so “That all those
eyes adored them ere their fall / Scorn now their hand should give them burial,” and the bodies of those
struck by the Finger of God in sensational broadsheets. Attending to the oeuvre-leaping uncanniness of
fire in Shakespeare’s plays unsets the nuptials of water-delivered Marina to suggest another Element
in command: the fire next time, last time, each time, like the ruin of Troy, or Stratford, or of the great
Globe itself. Shakespeare’s plays rehearse the idea of burning when those plays themselves—and their
theater, and their actors, and their city—are themselves susceptible to the conflagration. Against an
historical backdrop of fiery danger and disaster, Shakespeare constructs a theatrical logic of
self-consumption: the plays link themselves together in their shared desire for an end, in fire.

When a Prologue seeks a “Muse of fire,” the play is longing for a force that destroys structures with
speed; when a sprite reports that “I flame[d] distinctly,” the play is rewriting watery shipwreck as a
dream of fire; and when crowds promise to burn Caesar’s body “And with the brands fire the traitors’
houses,” the play fantasizes about catastrophic blazes of the sort that eventually consume the Globe
itself. In Pericles and 1 Henry VI, the stage becomes the site of a combustive conflagration: the space
where the will to narrative meets the longing for immolation. The spectacular quality of such a fiery end
allures the playtext, at the same time that fire doubles and destroys such inflammable tales and brittle
buildings. As Henry Wotton wrote to Francis Bacon on July 2, 1613, describing the blaze that razed the
Globe: “Now, King Henry making a Masque at the Cardinal Wolsey’s house, and certain Chambers being
shot off at his entry, some of the paper, or other stuff wherewith one of them was stopped, did light on
the thatch, where...it kindled inwardly, and ran round like a train, consuming within less than an hour
the whole house to the very grounds.” Some of the paper stopped the cannon, and the fire came its
next time, came full circle, like a ring, the perfect nuptial torch of spectacular, uncanny endings.
1. All citations of *Pericles* from *The Norton Shakespeare* (Stephen Greenblatt, ed; 2nd ed.; New York: Norton, 2008), which offers the text of the play in scenes only, without act divisions. My thanks to Lowell Duckert for convening the 2014 Shakespeare Association of America seminar on “Elemental Shakespeare,” for which this essay was initially intended. Thanks, too, to Patrick Crapanzano and Todd Borlik, for their generous, insightful comments on an earlier version of this piece.

2. A true relation of the birth of three monsters in the city of Namen in Flanders: as also Gods iudgement vpon an vnnaturall sister of the poore womans, mother of these obortiue children, whose house was consumed with fire from heauen, and her selfe swallowed into the earth. All which happned the 16. of December last. 1608. Faithfully translated, according to the Dutch copy, printed in the same city. London: Simon Stafford, for Richard Bunnian, 1609.

3. Fire from heauen. Burning the body of one Iohn Hittchell of Holne-hurst, within the parish of Christ-church, in the county of South-hampton the 26. of iune last 1613. who by the same was consumed to ashes, and no fire seene, lying therein smoaking and smothering three dayes and three nights, not to bequenched by water, nor the help of mans hand. VVith the lamentable burning of his house and one childe, and the grievous scorching of his wife: with the birth of a monster, and many other strange things hapning about the same time: the like was neuer seene nor heard of. Written by John Hilliard Preacher of the word of life in Sopley. Reade and tremble. With the fearefull burning of the towne of Dorchester vpon friday the 6 of August last 1613. London: Iohn Trundle, 1613.

4. Iames, by the grace of God, king of England, Scotland, France & Ireland defender of the faith &c. to all and singuler archbishops ... whereas we are credibly certified ... that upon Saterday the ny nth day of July, there happened a sodaine and terrible fire within our towne of Stratford vpon Avon ... London: Thomas Purfoot, 1616.

5. Derrida hints at this quality of fire when he suggests the cinder to be “the best paradigm for the trace” (*Cinders*, trans. Ned Lukacher; Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1991; p. 43).

6. My gratitude to Todd Borlik for pointing out the difficulty engineers had in building London’s current Globe to preserve its antecedent’s architecture while simultaneously meeting twentieth-century fire codes.


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