

Tikrit University
College of Education for Humanities
English Department

Third Year

Drama

2025-2026

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Gorboduc (1561)

Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville are two extremely interesting men who wrote an extremely important play, *Gorboduc*. The play was the first regular English tragedy, the first English drama of any type to be written in blank verse, and one of the first English history plays. It was written in collaboration by two young, wealthy, well-educated men, trained in law, who had already served as members of Parliament. The authors performed their play before Queen Elizabeth in the troubled early years of her reign. They had no original intention of publishing their play but were forced to do so after a pirated first edition appeared with various corrupt readings. All of these factors lead to highly interesting points of analysis.

Norton and Sackville wrote *Gorboduc* with one definite purpose in mind: to offer political advice to Queen Elizabeth I, the young relative of Sackville who then sat on the throne of a country sharply divided by political and religious differences. The whole play is an urgent plea for Elizabeth to do everything in her power to keep the nation united.

To dramatize their political statements, the two playwrights made significant changes in the story told by Geoffrey of Monmouth of an ancient British king. In Geoffrey's account, when King Gorboduc grows old, his two sons, Ferrex and Porrex, both desire the Crown. Porrex kills his brother but then is slain by his own mother, Widen, in revenge for Ferrex. Civil war breaks out, and the country is torn apart, eventually being divided into five different kingdoms before it is reunited under one strong leader. The horrors of a divided kingdom and of civil war were already evident in the story, but Norton and Sackville carefully altered other details to make their political arguments clearer and more emphatic, to make their play, in effect, a mirror for one magistrate. The play stresses the necessity of a ruler's heeding wise counsel, distinguishing between flatterers and good advisers, keeping control over the unruly commons, settling all questions of succession to the throne, summoning Parliament at the proper time, and ensuring that the realm will not fall to a foreign ruler.

The political messages begin in the play as early as possible, in the well-known dumb show that precedes act 1. To the music of violins, a group of savages enters with a bundle of sticks, which they try, first individually and then with their combined strength, to break. They fail—until they begin to pull the sticks out one at a time, and then they can snap them easily. The interpretation is clear: Unity is strength; division is weakness. The act that follows contains two scenes. In the first, Queen Viden (Geoffrey's Widen) sorrowfully informs her elder and favorite son that his father plans to divide Ferrex's inheritance and give half of the realm to Porrex. The second scene shows her statement to be true. King Gorboduc, whose mind is already decided on the question, nevertheless asks three of his counselors for their opinions of his plan. The first two, Arostus and Philander, agree to the division of the country, though Philander argues that it should not happen while the king is still living. Only Eubulus, whose name means "good counselor," argues against the dangerous plan, but he is ignored by Gorboduc. After the act has ended, a chorus of four ancient sages of Britain enters to voice their condemnation of the foolish decision of the king.

The tight organizational scheme of the authors is apparent. They begin with a dumb show that clearly relates to the events in the act that follows; then, the chorus comments on the action preceding it and connects that action thematically with the dumb show. The pattern will continue for all five acts, with the exception that there is no chorus after the fifth act.

Gorboduc is a chain of slaughter and revenge written in direct imitation of Seneca.