A Miserable Sight

The Great Fire of London (1666)

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A woman might piss it out: A disaster in the making

This paper is about events unfolding on a grand scale. It is about the sudden and utter destruction of the historic centre of a large city by the ferocious force of a firestorm, about failure in the sense of an all-too-evident inability to avert this urban mega-disaster. It is about stories that were told about this disaster in order to come to terms with it, to make sense of it and, eventually, to redefine failure as success. The *dramatis personae* we find in these stories include a king, a pope and none other than God himself.

On September the first 1666, a fire broke out in a bakery situated in the heart of the City of London. This happened in the middle of the night. It began to spread to the neighbouring houses. Smaller fires were fairly commonplace events in early modern London, and this was probably why the danger posed by this particular fire was under-estimated. The Lord Mayor of London was called from his bed. He had one quick look at the fire from a distance and then he went straight back to bed again, saying "Pish! A woman might piss it out".[1] The events of the following hours were to prove that, in this case, the Lord Mayor's assessment of the situation was wide off the mark. In fact it went down in history as a tragic error of judgement.

Seventeenth-century London was a chaotic rabbit warren of timber-framed houses. A hot and very dry summer had rendered their wooden beams and thatched roofs dry as tinder. To make things worse, there was a steady wind blowing from the east which drove the fire on. The

1 | Porter (1994), 85.

flames leaped from roof to roof until the fire reached storehouses on the waterfront which contained large quantities of oil and spirits.[2] These exploded immediately. At that stage, it became absolutely clear that the fire had turned into a major conflagration. As the wind kept blowing, it gathered strength and potential for further destruction by the minute. During this phase of the disaster, there were no organised attempts at all to fight the fire.

There was no such thing as an organised fire brigade in seventeenth-century London. Fire-fighting technology would have been rudimentary anyway. In theory, each parish was supposed to store a supply of equipment to be used by the inhabitants of that parish if the need arose. This included buckets, axes, ladders and fire hooks, i.e. hooks on long poles which could be used to pull down sections of burning buildings. Some parishes provided leather helmets which looked remarkably like the modern Anglo-American type of fireman's helmet that is still in use. There was a small number of manually operated fire squirts. These were implements that looked very much like a large syringe.[3] They were small enough to be carried and operated by one man, which was also why they were of very limited efficiency. All they could do was to squirt small amounts of water at close range. Larger fire engines – barrels on wheels fitted with a hand-pump and a nozzle that could be directed at the fire – had just been developed, but these were still a rarity at the time.

Firefighting technology did in any case not yet rely on ways of extinguishing fires by means of water as a good supply of water would not have been readily available. A trickle of water was carried into the City through wooden pipes. However, the capacity of these conduits would have been in no way sufficient to quench a fire that was getting out of hand. Water could be fetched in buckets from the river, but once again, the amount of water that could be carried into the City in this way would have been limited. The preferred firefighting technique was to pull down burning houses in the hope of thereby extinguishing the flames. This is why the fire hooks

2 | For accounts of the Great Fire, see Bell (1929); Tinniswood (2003); Pepys (1970), 138-140. For early depictions of the Great Fire of London, see Koppenleitner (2011), 45-59.

3 | Examples of these seventeenth-century fire-fighting implements can be found in the collections of the Museum of London which can also be viewed online: archive.museumoflondon.org.uk/Londons-Burning/objects (3 Sept. 2014).

mentioned above could be of considerable practical importance. Several men operating one of these could easily pull down a timber-framed structure. In the absence of other means to fight a major fire, it made good sense to destroy not only buildings that were already burning but also others that were still intact so as to create a fire-break. On the whole, it was a good idea to destroy a limited number of houses in order to save many others, to create a gap between the fire and the rest of the city so that the fire might be contained.

However, just like fetching water from the river, this would have required the sort of co-ordinated effort which was not forthcoming as the vast majority of people were intent on saving their lives and some of their property. What is more, to create fire-breaks, people would have needed to be willing to sacrifice their own houses before these had even been touched by the fire.

Much troubled: The King's dilemma

The most important and at the same time the most fascinating eyewitness account of the Great Fire is found in the famous diary of Samuel Pepys. Pepys, a rising bureaucrat in the Navy Office, was an excellent observer. Almost like a modern reporter, he tried to get as close to the action as possible, and he had a good eye for telling details. He also played an important role in the attempt – such as it was – to manage this crisis. Pepys had access to court circles; he was known to the King. When he understood just how serious the situation was, he took a boat to Westminster to spread the news. Eventually the King called for him, and Pepys took the opportunity not only to point out the seriousness of the situation but also to propose a strategy of pre-emptive demolition to stop the fire.

Although the King ordered the destruction of houses, the Lord Mayor of London, Thomas Bloodworth, was not able to organise the concerted effort that would have been required. Samuel Pepys describes the situation on the morning of the first day of the fire thus:[4]

[...] to White-hall, and there up to the King's closet in the chapel, where people came about me and I did give them an account dismayed them all; and word was

4 | Pepys (1970), Vol. VII, 269.

carried in to the King, so I was called for and did tell the King and the Duke of York what I saw, and that unless his Majesty did command houses to be pulled down, nothing could stop the fire. They seemed much troubled, and the King commanded me to go to my Lord Mayor from him and command him to spare no houses but to pull down before the fire every way. The Duke of York bid me tell him that if he would have more soldiers he shall; and so did my Lord Arlington afterwards, as a great secret.

Pepys went back to the burning City with the King's instructions. However, for the time being, these went unheeded:[5]

[...] At least met my Lord Mayor in Canning Streete, like a man spent, with a handkercher about his neck. To the King's message, he cried like a fainting woman, 'Lord, what can I do? I am spent! People will not obey me. I have been pull[ing] down houses. But the fire overtakes us faster than we can do it. That he needed no more soldiers; and that for himself, he must go and refresh himself, having been up all night. So he left me, and I him, and walked home – seeing people almost distracted and no manner of means used to quench the fire.'

The basic fire-fighting tools provided by the parishes were not used in any co-ordinated manner in the early phase of the fire when the conflagration could perhaps still have been contained. Not enough houses were destroyed in the path of the fire. People lacked the organisation, the resolution and the will to do so. And more importantly, the King lacked the power to make them fight the fire in a much more efficient way.

The role played by the King in the early phase of the Great Fire is of considerable interest. His position (and with it his ability to take decisive action in a state of emergency) differed markedly from that of other monarchs of the period. Both he and his subjects knew that his power was limited. The events of the English Revolution had made it abundantly clear that a King governing without due regard to a consensus with Parliament was in danger of losing his crown and indeed his head. The restoration of the monarchy – and with it the end of the revolutionary period – lay only six years back when the fire broke out. A delicate political balance had been established which needed to be maintained at almost all cost. King

5 | Pepys (1970), Vol. VII, 269-270.

Charles II knew he had to avoid anything involving a risk of upsetting this balance.

In late seventeenth-century England, the King's power was furthermore limited as he governed under the rule of the law. His subjects were to a large measure protected by law, and the law specifically safeguarded their property. To order the large-scale pre-emptive destruction of houses in the City was to take a considerable risk. The City of London enjoyed a substantial measure of autonomy, being self-governed by an elected Lord Mayor. This autonomy was jealously guarded. For the King to send soldiers into the City was to break a taboo. No matter how useful they might have been under the circumstances, the sight of large numbers of troops marching into the City would have been a political affront. This is why courtiers such as Lord Arlington who were acutely aware of the sensitivity of this issue treated the deployment of troops offered by the King as "a great secret" (see above).

Charles II. took a political risk when, following the advice given by Samuel Pepys, he commanded houses to be pulled down. The King knew that, as the first monarch after the revolutionary period, his status was still precarious. If things went wrong, as they easily could in a multitude of ways, his reign would go down in history as a grand failure – a failure which could well go beyond the loss of his power and even the loss of his life. If Charles II. were to fail as a monarch, this could very well mean the end of the monarchy in his country. Therefore, a great deal depended on whether or not he would be perceived as a good king.

A good king needed to be seen doing something when his capital was going up in flames. However, any sort of royal intervention might end in failure and the loss of political standing associated with it. The King had a great deal to lose either way, doing things or leaving things undone. On the one hand there was the risk of being perceived as a monarch abusing his powers, on the other hand there was the risk of the capital being destroyed by the fire.

The direction in which the fire would spread was clear from the very beginning. Moving from east to west with the prevailing wind, it could conceivably go well beyond the City and into Westminster. The Palace of Westminster, the seat of Parliament and Westminster Cathedral were under threat. Therefore, Charles II decided to listen to Pepys's advice and to take the initiative by commanding the destruction of houses.

The fact that the King's instructions could not be carried out in the early phase of the Fire demonstrates just how much his power was limited. No royal command could bypass Thomas Bloodworth, the Lord Mayor of the City of London; he needed to pass on and thus endorse the King's orders. However, the Lord Mayor proved to be completely overwhelmed by the disaster. Having underestimated the formidable danger posed by the fire from the very beginning, he did not manage to come up with anything resembling a coherent and practicable strategy during the early phase of the conflagration. For Bloodworth, the protection of both liberty and property must have been a key concern. He found himself in a dilemma: the only way to save houses was to destroy other houses. What is more, he found that most Londoners, intent on joining an ad-hoc exodus from the burning City, simply would not listen to his orders.

Given the political circumstances, it is not surprising that the Lord Mayor immediately declined the offer of more soldiers. To endorse any large-scale deployment of troops in the City would have smacked of giving in to the King, jeopardising the City's formal autonomy. Both the King and Bloodworth knew that, in the aftermath of the fire, they would have to take full responsibility for their actions.

The authorities – in the shape of both the King and the Lord Mayor – failed in their attempts to prevent the destruction of most of the City of London. This failure can be connected with the influence and power of new ideas: The King was not all-powerful, the law (and hence the integrity of liberty and property) was sacrosanct, and politicians could count on being held accountable for their actions. All of this made England considerably more modern than most other European countries of the period. However, these modern ideas which limited the power of all authorities prevented these authorities from taking the sort of decisive action that might have saved the City. Both the King and the Lord Mayor hesitated when it came to overriding constitutional and legal constraints. There was therefore a somewhat paradoxical connection between emergent modernity and the poor management of an emergency.

What had begun as a mere fire became a firestorm which raged largely unopposed for two more days. Only on the third day of the disaster did soldiers sent by the King begin their work of large-scale demolition in an attempt to create substantial fire-breaks. It is significant that this did not happen inside the City – which by now had been largely destroyed – but on its very margins and beyond. Here the presence of soldiers was less of an

embarrassment. As the fire was moving in the direction of Westminster (i.e. outside the area controlled by the Lord Mayor of the City of London), it approached what was widely regarded as the King's sphere of influence. Anything the King ordered to be done there would tend to be regarded as legitimate. What is more, by now the dimensions of the fire had become apparent. This was an urban mega-disaster which legitimised any drastic action taken against it. Thus the crucial issue of acceptance was resolved by the inexorable progress of the fire and the fact that, now it had left the City of London behind (and in ruins), it was threatening the City of Westminster.

Eventually, the fire was brought to a halt. This was not only due to the firefighting that had at last begun in earnest. These efforts were substantially helped by a change in the weather. The wind that had steadily propelled the fire in a westerly direction abated. There was even some rain. Thus, the fire could be contained at long last, and it slowly began to die down.

An act of God: Making sense of the Great Fire

In the immediate aftermath of the Great Fire, it became apparent how dismally attempts to save the City of London had failed. The fire thus was not only a disaster; it also had the potential to be a huge embarrassment to those who could have done more to fight it. The King in particular must have felt some of this embarrassment as his inability to take decisive action early on demonstrated in very practical terms just how much his power was limited.

On top of this, there was another thing that must have contributed to his unease, and that was an acrimonious debate on the Great Fire that began while the fire was still raging and that continued for months and years to come.[6] This debate was conducted not only in London's streets (ruined and otherwise) and coffee houses, in clubs and at home, at court and in parliament. The Great Fire was also debated in print, in pamphlets, ballads, poems, sermons, books, woodcuts and engravings.

This debate that agitated Londoners from all walks of life was primarily about the meaning of this disaster. People immediately tried to make

6 | For the debate on the Great Fire, see also: Heyl (2011), 23-44.

sense of it. After all, it was not just any part of London that had gone up in flames, it was the very heart of the old historic City. This area had always maintained its own identity, emphasising its autonomy from the other half of London, the City of Westminster, and holding on to its own political positions that were frequently opposed to those of the monarch. The destruction of such a place that was pregnant with meaning must have been a meaningful event in itself – at least this appeared to be self-evident to the vast majority of Londoners at the time. One widespread explanation of the Great Fire was to regard it as a punishment meted out by God. However, this explanation immediately gave rise to another crucial question concerning the meaning of this disaster: Why had God chosen to punish Londoners in this way?

Attempts to make sense of this event, to read the divine message it presumably conveyed, were further complicated by the specific historical context of the seventeenth century. The Great Fire of 1666 was not the only traumatic event that occurred during this period. Immediately before the Great Fire, in 1665-6, London had been struck by the Great Plague, the last major outbreak of the bubonic plague. More than 100.000 Londoners had lost their lives.[7] And just before the Great Plague, there had been the English Civil War, the subsequent revolutionary period and eventually the Restoration of 1660, all of which, depending on one's political outlook, could be regarded as a horrific disaster. For the Royalists, this disaster culminated in the beheading of King Charles I, while for most of the revolutionary factions, it consisted in the Restoration of the monarchy. Either way, the political events of the seventeenth century would have been experienced as traumatic. This means that the Great Fire was not regarded as an isolated calamity. For most contemporary observers, it appeared to be part of a constellation of disasters. Therefore, they tended to think that the key to understanding the Fire was to make sense of a whole cluster of disastrous events.

The Fire as well as the Great Plague and various aspects of the revolutionary period were predominantly read as punishments meted out by God. Many, probably even most Londoners of the period regarded such acts of God as a response to sins committed in London. London had failed to live up to God's commandments and expectations, so it needed to be punished. However, there was no real consensus when it came to identi-

7 | See Weinreb/Hibber/Keay/Keay (2008), 344.

fying these sins. This is why the debate on the meaning of the Great Fire was to a considerable extent a debate on possible reasons for God's anger.

One conspicuous feature of this debate was the resurgence of ideas and images that, with the Restoration, had ceased to be part of mainstream political and religious thought. The concept of the apocalypse as something to be expected to happen in one's own lifetime is a case in point. During the English Revolution, apocalyptic thought had featured prominently in republican political propaganda. What many radical revolutionaries wanted was nothing less than the end of the world; they wanted to do their bit to bring on the apocalypse as the ultimate form of revolution. This means that apocalyptic rhetoric acquired clear political connotations, that it was firmly associated with Puritan revolutionary discourse.

When the revolutionary period ended and the monarchy was re-instated in 1660, this concept of the apocalypse appeared to be a thing of the past, embarrassingly obsolete and only fit to be uttered by cranks and extreme political outsiders. However, with the Great Fire, it was suddenly back in fashion again. And so was apocalyptic imagery in visual art. Immediately after the fire, a ballad entitled *The Londoners Lamentation* was printed.[8] The usual format for such ballads was one sheet of paper, and they were frequently illustrated with a simple woodcut. This particular ballad was combined with a lurid apocalyptic scene, an apparition in the sky loosely based on the biblical Book of Revelation.[9] The image found here is much older than the text, it was printed using a woodblock which, based on its style, can be dated to the first half of the seventeenth century. The old image was simply re-cycled, so old apocalyptic imagery was actually back in a physical sense.

From the re-instatement of the Monarchy in 1660 and up to the Great Fire, many Londoners had enjoyed an intensely secular and hedonistic period. This had been come as a considerable relief after the long revolutionary era which had been characterised by Puritanism and its rigorously enforced religious morality. But now, all of a sudden, Puritan preachers were back in business again. The Great Fire brought on a resurgence of the sort of religious rhetoric that had been common in revolutionary England. It is much in evidence in pamphlets and books published in 1667.

8 | Anon, *The Londoners Lamentation*, 2 pp. (n.p, n.d.; London 1666).

9 | Reproduced in: Heyl (2011), 31.

Apparitions! Apparitions! A heated debate

Some authors really warmed to their subject when they wrote about the Great Fire, revelling in the idea of God's burning anger, of a God whose favourite and most appropriate means of punishing mankind was fire. The title of a book written by Thomas Doolittle is a case in point: *Rebukes for sin by God's burning anger, by the burning of London, by the burning of the world, by the burning of the wicked in hell-fire*.[10] The insistent repetitions found in this title neatly encapsulate the distinctive style and the theological approach that are the hallmark of this ad-hoc post-Fire Puritan revival.

Another Puritan preacher, Samuel Rolle, wrote a book entitled *Shilhavtiya, שלחבת׳ח, or, the Burning of London in the Year 1666. Commemorated and improved in a hundred and ten discourses, Meditations and Contemplations*.[11] "שלחבת׳ח/Shilhavtiya" means "the Flame of God", and this was indeed what his book was all about. Rolle emphasised time and again that fire was God's proper element, and that God appeared physically in the shape of fire. So while the members of the Royal Society had just begun to understand what fire actually was, that it was not an element but a process to do with the combustion of gases, authors such as Doolittle and Rolle stoutly maintained that fire in general and the Great Fire of London in particular was all about God.[12]

However, when it came to the question of who precisely was to blame for the Great Fire, authors offering a religious reading of this disaster came up with various answers. Doolittle and Rolle were convinced that the disaster was a punishment for the manifold sins of Londoners, and they found it easy to draw up long and detailed catalogues of sins comprising everything Restoration hedonism had to offer.

However, there were also other explanations. The anonymous author of a book entitled *Pyrotechnica Loyolana*[13] maintained that the Fire

10 | Doolittle (1667).

11 | Rolle (1667).

12 | "But it is a most acceptable thing to hear their [the fellows of the Royal Society's – C.H.] discourses and see their experiments; which was this day on the nature of fire, and how it goes out in a place where the ayre is not free, and sooner out where the ayre is exhausted; which they showed by an engine on purpose." Pepys (1970), 36.

13 | (Anon.), *Pyrotechnica Loyolana*, 1667.

had been deliberately started by Catholic arsonists. He was sure that the culprits were Jesuits acting on the instructions of the pope. *Pyrotechnica Loyolana* came with a remarkable frontispiece in which the pope appears, sitting on his throne in Rome and fanning the Great Fire of London with a huge pair of bellows. He is assisted by a group of Jesuits seen standing around an outsize globe, obviously intent on planning a global campaign of arson.

According to this interpretation, the Great Fire was not a punishment meted out by God. It was an evil Catholic attack on the Protestant religion, that is, on the true believers. For the author of *Pyrotechnica Loyolana*, the Fire had not, as Doolittle and Rolle believed, been sent down from heaven – on the contrary, it had come straight out of hell. This point was driven home in somewhat clumsy rhyme:[14]

> And we now do know that this flame
> From Hell and Purgatory came

This reading of the Great Fire as the result of an attack carried out by foreign powers was plausible to many Londoners. Samuel Pepys recorded in his diary that while the fire was still raging, there were widespread fears of an imminent invasion and that at that time foreigners were very much under suspicion.[15] Conspiracy theories gained even more credence when a Frenchman by the name of Robert Hubert surrendered himself to the authorities, confessing to having started the Great Fire by means of an incendiary device, a kind of firebomb.[16] Although the man was clearly deranged (he had probably not even been anywhere near the City of London on the night the fire began), a scapegoat of some sort was badly needed, so he was duly executed.[17]

The story of arson at the hands of a Catholic survived for a very long time. This conspiracy theory allowed for a range of different interpretations. Thomas Vincent, a Puritan divine, published a book about the Great

14 | (Anon.), *Pyrotechnica Loyolana*, 132.

15 | Pepys (1970), 277.

16 | Hubert is depicted in the frontispiece of (Anon.), *Pyrotechnica Loyolana*.

17 | See Porter (2004).

Fire entitled *God's Terrible Voice in the City* (1667).[18] Vincent was certainly among those who believed in a Catholic conspiracy. However, for him, the Catholic arsonists were simply a means used by God to punish Londoners for their sinfulness. Unlike the unknown artist who created the drastic frontispiece for *Pyrotechnica Loyolana* featuring the pope with his bellows fanning the flames of the Great Fire, Vincent casts God in this role: "[...] and God with his great Bellows blowes upon it, which makes it spread quickly [...]".[19]

As a Puritan preacher, Vincent was a professional when it came to writing fire and brimstone sermons. When he wrote about the Great Fire, he really pulled out all the stops. For him, the fire was not only the voice of God, it was also a visible manifestation of God. In Vincent's text, God, rendering himself both audible and visible through fire, takes centre stage in an apocalyptic scenario:[20]

> *Awake!* then *O London awake!* open thine eyes, draw thy curtains, come forth of thy bed; look out of thy windows; *Apparitions! Apparitions!* strange sights to be seen; Behold! Heaven is opened, and God is come down upon earth, cloathed with garments of lightning: God is come down in his Majesty, and looks upon London with a terrible countenance: Behold the amazing terrour of God in the late strange and prodigious Judgments. What! doest thou not seen him? Surely thou art fast asleep still, thine eyes are closed, the vail is before them.
> *Awake! London Awake!* open thine ears, Harke! Oh the Trumpet that hath been sounding from Heaven over the City exceeding loud! Oh the Thundrings of the terrible voice of the Angry God! The voice of the Lord hath been powerful and very dreadful: What! canst thou sleep under such a noise?

The texts written in the aftermath of the Great Fire preserve the outlines of a debate over the significance of this disaster, and they vividly convey a sense of just how acrimonious the debate about the meaning of this event must have been. Tempers got hot because the contributions to this debate were based on conflicting religious and political agendas. Puritans hated the current Royalist establishment they regarded as godless, and Royalists

18 | Anon. ("T. V." = Thomas Vincent), *God's Terrible Voice in the City*, [London] 1667.

19 | Vincent (1667), 56.

20 | Vincent (1667), 194.

hated the Puritans because they regarded them as revolutionaries. The debate on how to read the great Fire brought a powerful resurgence of the sort of partisan rhetoric – both Puritan and Royalist – associated with the Civil War.

One reader of Vicent's Puritan tract on the Great Fire was so enraged by his ideas that he carried on the debate about the meaning of the disaster by annotating his own copy of the book. His manuscript notes amount to a full frontal attack on the author. He was convinced that firebrand preachers such as Vincent had been responsible for the English revolution in general and the execution of King Charles I. in particular, and that God now punished these Puritans with the Great Fire. Here is part of what this anonymous reader wrote in the margins of Vincent's book:[21]

> Such Minesters as this trumpeted that horrid Rebellion in 1641, which followed ye overthrow of both Church & State [...] This Rebellion occasioned that Barbarous & Audatious Murder of this → GOD's King a pious & goode King, which the Gospell Ministers to work their ends falsly bespattered with abominable false lies, which I am thorryly persuaded was the Greatest Cause of those Judgments on London.

Here we have a Royalist reader fuming over a Puritan preacher coming out of the woodwork and trying to make a triumphant comeback. His acerbic textual intervention shows how the debate over the meaning of the Great Fire immediately touched a nerve. People across the religious and political spectrum put forward conflicting readings of the event, and they did so with considerable verve. Some saw an evil Catholic conspiracy against Protestantism behind the Fire. For others, it was a Catholic conspiracy ordained by God as a just punishment. Puritans (who were not happy with the restoration of the monarchy) said that God was punishing non-Puritan Royalists. Non-Puritans accepting the new order brought by the Restoration said that God was punishing the Puritans who had started the ungodly political upheavals of the English revolution.

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21 | Vincent (1667), anonymous manuscript notes found on the last (unpaginated) page of the dedication. The annotated copy of Vincent's book is found in the library of the University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign Campus); it is reproduced in *Early English Books Online*. The marginal annotation discussed here is also reproduced in: Heyl (2011), 37.

Purged with the fire: Royal propaganda

This debate was a threat to the stability of the political system. Six years after the Restoration, the King's hold on power was still far from secure. Many ideas brought forward in various attempts to read the fire, to identify its cause and to make sense of it must have appeared downright dangerous to Charles II. When people pointed their finger at Catholics in general and at the pope in particular, the implication was that both the court and the King himself were to be regarded with suspicion. After all, Charles II's queen was a Catholic, his brother, the Duke of York, who was the heir apparent to the throne, was a Catholic as well, and the King himself was known to sympathise with Catholicism.

What the King needed in this situation was a great deal of efficient Royalist propaganda. He needed a different narrative about the Great Fire, a narrative in which he could appear in the role of a good and successful monarch. This version of the story needed to be put about in ways which, ideally, could make it the dominant narrative about this disaster.

This was not an easy thing to do as the King had not been in a position to take decisive action in the early phase of the Fire. This conspicuous moment of weakness needed to be turned into something that could be perceived as a moment of strength. An embarrassment needed to be re-packaged as a triumph to bolster his authority and thus to put an end to a dangerous discussion that gave Puritan anti-monarchists a chance to air their views.

This is why, in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, we find the first attempts to interpret the Great Fire not as a punishment but as a good thing. Just twelve days after the fire had come to an end, the King issued a remarkable royal proclamation. In this, he (probably with some help from able advisers) introduced the idea that the Fire was really a golden opportunity for London, that now one had a chance to build a new and much more beautiful metropolis, "to make it rather appear to the world as purged with the Fire [...] to a wonderful beauty and comeliness".[22] The metaphor was well-chosen: The fire was re-interpreted as a purge, as a bitter pill with unpleasant effects which, however, is part of a necessary and efficient therapy that will make the patient better. The notion of the Fire

22 | Stuart, *His Majestie's Declaration to his City of London*, 16 September 1666, 2.

being a punishment sent by God briefly appears in the proclamation, but in such a way that it pales into insignificance compared to the idea of God pursuing an altogether different agenda.

Thus the royal proclamation floated the idea that God had merely used the fire to clear some space for a new, much more beautiful and magnificent London. At least as far as the rebuilding of London was concerned, such claims were not entirely without substance. The proclamation announced rules and regulations for the re-building of the City which, among other things, introduced an entirely new aesthetic of terraces with uniform facades. Making a virtue out of a dire necessity, considerable thought was given to matters of proportion and symmetry. The proclamation made sure that the re-building of the City of London would indeed amount to an aesthetic transformation.

This idea of the fire being, on balance, a good thing was immediately taken up by others. A clear echo of it can be found in a broadsheet poem entitled *London Undone; or, A Reflection upon the Late Disasterous Fire*. The close intertextual link with the royal proclamation suggests a date of publication in September 1666, i.e. still in the immediate aftermath of the fire. Here are the concluding lines of this poem:[23]

> [...]
> Then shall this ruin'd City like a Ball
> Rebound so much the higher for her fall.
> And with the *Phoenix*; (Heaven will so contrive,)
> From her own Ashes shall again revive.
> When, like the *Churches* you her Streets shall see
> Founded, and fronted *uniformallie*:
> Houses so firmly build, so fairly furnisht,
> As if it had been *burnt*, but to be *burnisht*;
> Then you'l conclude with me, the Flames were kind,
> She was not so much *ruin'd*, as *refin'd*.

It may very well be that this broadsheet was part of a concerted propaganda effort rather than evidence for spontaneous agreement with the idea that the fire had not been such a bad thing after all. It is likely that the

23 | (Anon.), *London Undone; or, A Reflection upon the Late Disasterous Fire* (London, 1666).

King and his advisers used such ephemera to spread what in the immediate aftermath of the fire must have been a fairly counter-intuitive idea.

Annus Mirabilis: From failure to triumph

The most vigorous and striking re-interpretation of the Great Fire as a positive event can be found in a long narrative poem by John Dryden which was entitled *Annus Mirabilis, The Year of Wonders, 1666*.[24] In this poem he describes some naval victories over the Dutch (which had also happened in that year) and the Great Fire of London. Both events are presented as miraculous in the sense of wonderful and worth celebrating. Dryden's poem is informed by a Royalist perspective, it is both a polished piece of literature and a polished piece of propaganda. This becomes apparent in his choice of imagery. Dryden uses an epic simile to compare the Great Fire to an upstart usurper (and, by implication, to a low-born revolutionary) whose first aim is to destroy the seats of secular and religious powers, and with that state and church:[25]

> As when some dire Usurper Heav'n 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:
> [...]
>
> Such was the rise of this prodigious fire,
> Which in mean building first obscurely bred,
> From thence did soon to open streets aspire,
> And straight to Palaces and Temples spread.

This revolutionary usurper is a monstrosity, and therefore he appears as a monster: "[....] th' infant monster, with devouring strong/Walk'd boldly upright with exalted head."[26] The place where the fire began (which was a bakery) is metaphorically turned into a prison, hence the monstrous revo-

24 | Dryden (1667).

25 | Dryden (1667), 54-55 (stanzas 213 and 215).

26 | Dryden (1667), 55 (stanza 218).

lutionary usurper is also a jailbird on the run. His mere existence is an insult: "So scapes th' insulting fire his narrow Jail [...]".[27] All of this is a far cry from the idea of the fire as a scourge wielded by God.

Dryden then proceeds to construct his own narrative of the Great Fire using the conventions of epic poetry. He incorporates actual events into this narrative; however, he sometimes does so in an extremely fanciful way. Just like the vast majority of other texts written on the conflagration in late 1666 and in 1667, it contains a reference to the steady wind that propelled it. However, in doing so, Dryden comes up with an image that would certainly have amused the court and its hangers-on, i.e. people who were known for their hedonism and especially their very active sex lives. The winds blow, so Dryden poetically describes them as "crafty courtezans", as high-class prostitutes who only do their job which, in this case, happens to be a long and lingering a blow job:[28]

> The winds, like crafty Courtezans, with-held
> His flames from burning, but to blow them more

This frivolity was not just gratuitous. It served a purpose. In Dryden's poetic account, the fire is being secularised, it is controlled not by God but by winds acting like prostitutes. This was a calculated provocation guaranteed to enrage any Puritan reader who might have come across this text while it might well have put a smile on the face of hedonists such as Samuel Pepys. Later on, the fire's consuming heat is once again sexualised (it spreads its "longing flames", a phrase that would not appear out of place in erotic poetry of the period).[29]

Then, Dryden describes the Fire in military terms. It is like a hostile army trying to destroy the capital. Things come to a head when this army makes for the palace (i.e. when most of the City has been destroyed and the fire begins to move on in the direction of Westminster): "[...] the main body of the marching foe/Against th' Imperial Palace is design'd."[30]

The conflagration is turned into a fierce epic battle. Fighting and fire-fighting merge into one. In this context, the King, Charles II, appears

27 | Dryden (1667), 56 (stanza 220).
28 | Dryden (1667), 56 (stanza 221).
29 | Dryden (1667), 59 (stanza 233).
30 | Dryden (1667), 60 (stanza 237).

as the heroic commander-in-chief who at last makes his grand entry: "Now the day appears, and with the day the King [...]."[31] He is cast as a saviour both in secular and in religious terms. When things become desperate, the King, like a modern Moses, addresses God and begins to negotiate. He reminds him that the last disaster, the Great Plague, had perhaps been not quite fair because it affected both the just and the unjust. Then he offers himself as a sacrifice: "On me alone thy just displeasure lay,/But take thy judgments from this mourning land."[32] He is thereby cast in a messianic role. When the King reminds God that the impending destruction of London's naval magazines would mean the end of England as a global power, God sees sense at last and immediately sends an angel to drive away the fire:[33]

> Th' Eternal heard, and from the Heav'nly Quire
> Chose out the Cherub with the flaming sword
> And bad him swiftly drive th'approaching fire
> From where our Naval Magazines were stor'd.

The Cherub and the flaming sword were of course familiar ideas associated with the wrath of God.[34] However, this avenging angel is sent to do something about the fire rather than to do something to the inhabitants of London, which indicates that God does have London's best interests at heart after all. Soon after this, God proceeds to extinguish the fire, using a giant extinguisher in the shape of a huge hollow pyramid (modelled on the implement used to extinguish candles at the time). Just to make sure, this pyramid is "in firmamental waters dipt above".[35] London has been saved by the King's intervention, the disaster is turned into a miraculous triumph:[36]

31 | Dryden (1667), 60 (stanza 238).

32 | Dryden (1667), 67 (stanza 265).

33 | Dryden (1667), 69 (stanza 271).

34 | Especially after the fall of man, see Genesis 4, 24: "So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims [sic!], and a flaming sword which turned every way [...]." (King James Bible.)

35 | Dryden (1667), 72 (stanza 281).

36 | Dryden (1667), 72 (stanza 283).

> Our King this more then [sic!] 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.

The ground is redeemed, the king is the redeemer – an epithet usually reserved for Christ. Charles II is thus once again characterised as a messianic figure. What is more, he is God's anointed, God's representative and deputy on earth:[37]

> The Father of the people open'd wide
> His stores, and all the poor with plenty fed:
> Thus God's Anointed God's own place suppli'd,
> And fill'd the empty with his daily bread.

"God's anointed" carries a double meaning. It alludes to the King's super-natural status once he has been anointed as part of the coronation ritual. I also alludes to the etymology of the word "messiah": ha'Maschiach (המשיח) means "the anointed one". The notion of the King being God's anointed was an established topos in English Royalist rhetoric. To describe him as God's deputy on earth ("God's own place suppli'd") alludes to his role as head of the Anglican Church.

Dryden does his best to glorify both Charles II and the new London that was yet to be (re-)built:[38]

> Me-thinks already, from this Chymick flame,
> I see a City of more precious mold
> Rich as the Town which gives the[c] *Indies* name
> With Silver pav'd, and all divine with Gold.
>
> (c) *Mexico*
>
> [...]
>
> More great then humane, now, and more[d] *August*,
> New deifi'd she from her fires does rise:

37 | Dryden (1667), 73 (stanza 286).

38 | Dryden (1667), 74-75 (stanzas 294 and 296).

> Her widening streets on new foundations trust,
> And, opening, into larger parts she flies.
> (d) Augusta, *the old name of* London.

He is talking about a triple chemical transformation caused by the Great Fire. First of all, the city's architectural substance is transformed: now we have widening streets, new foundations and a general expansion. On second level, the fire transforms everything into gold and silver. In other words: the new London will be an incredibly wealthy city. And at the same time, he is talking about a third-level transformation in religious terms: London becomes "more great than humane", it becomes "deified". All of this is caused by the fire, by its "chymick flame", so the fire eventually emerges not as a punishment but as a blessing.

Annus Mirabilis is a remarkable example of political chutzpah. Dryden managed to present an urban mega-disaster as a cathartic event. The poem tried very hard to cancel out the memory of the King's weakness, his conspicuous lack of power when it came to fighting the fire in its early stages. A moment of failure was turned into an epic success. *Annus Mirabilis* was an attempt to establish a dominant reading of the Great Fire which would hopefully triumph over a re-emerging Puritan agitation that was religious and political in equal measure. Immediately after the Fire, Puritan preachers began to occupy the religious and moral high ground. With Dryden's poem, the Royalist side fought back, trying to turn the fire into a propaganda victory for the King. Like his Puritan opponents, Dryden dared to revive the rhetoric of the Civil War – in his case, the Royalist rhetoric. In a manner of speaking, he thus fought fire with fire.

The conflicting interpretations of the Great Fire and its meaning discussed here demonstrate that a disaster could be what you made of it.[39] Whether something was a crushing defeat or an epic success was very much a matter of interpretation. More precisely, it was a matter of whether the majority of people could be persuaded to follow one particular interpretation if the meaning of an event was contested. These were not merely academic questions. Since the 1640s, since the Civil War, there had been a rapidly developing public sphere in England. It had become normal to

39 | Incidentally, much the same can be said about the second great topic of *Annus Mirabilis*, the naval victories over the Dutch. After a major engagement at sea, both sides claimed victory. See Pepys (1970), 150-155.

conduct political and religious debates through printed texts and images. It was widely understood that there was a crucial link between the power to explain things and political power. It was therefore important to come up with explanations. They might well be utterly fanciful, but they needed to be palatable.

The interpretation of the Great Fire put forward by Royalist propaganda proved to be dominant. It was so successful because it was communicated on various audience-specific levels of sophistication: broadsheet poems, ballads and woodcuts for the common people, and an epic poem in the shape of *Annus Mirabilis* for the educated. The idea of the Great Fire as a golden opportunity for London, as the event that gave birth to a new, modern and therefore much better London became ubiquitous in the historiography of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries.

Thus the story of a disaster became a success story. As such, it remains to be read to this day, physically inscribed in a monument simply known as "The Monument". The Monument – i.e. the Monument for the Great Fire – is a prominent London landmark, a giant structure completed in the 1670s which is still the world's highest free-standing column. It is still very much an element of the collective mental map of the City because there is an underground station called "Monument". The Great Fire is thus an event that remains permanently inscribed in the map of modern London's public transport system. What is more, the Monument perpetuates the reading of the event put forward by the Royalist propagandists on behalf of Charles II.

The massive base of the Monument's giant column is decorated with a complex allegorical representation of the aftermath of the Great Fire. On the left hand of a huge bas-relief panel, one can see London, represented by a downcast mourning female figure. To the right, there is King Charles II in the pose of a Roman emperor coming to her assistance. Behind the woman, there is a male figure offering to support her. This figure is bald, apart from a very prominent forelock. To classically educated viewers of the period, he would have been instantly recognisable as a representation of opportunity, of the right moment, of what the ancient Greeks called the Kairos.

The idea was that the Kairos suddenly appeared in front of you. You had to seize him by the forelock immediately or else he would be gone. (This is the origin of the phrase "to grab time by the forelock".) This Royalist propaganda image was put up while London was still being re-built

and while the debate about the Great Fire was still going on. Here the idea of the fire as a golden opportunity was carved in stone – for all to see and for all time.

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