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REVIEW

MOTIFS OF FIRE IN IMPERIAL LATIN LITERATURE

Virginia M. Closs, *While Rome Burned: Fire, Leadership, and Urban Disaster in the Roman Cultural Imagination*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020. Pp. viii + 353. Hardback, $80.00. ISBN 978-0-472-13190-7.

As SARS-CoV-2 spread like wildfire in March 2020, Donald Trump retweeted a satiric meme of himself playing a fiddle with the text 'My next piece is called … nothing can stop what's coming', commenting 'Who knows what this means, but it sounds good to me!'. Trump was acknowledging (while pretending, sardonically, not to recognise) the QAnon reference, but was apparently oblivious to the highbrow allusion—Tacitus' infamous sketch of Nero, singing 'The Fall of Troy' as he watched Rome burn from his 'private stage' in AD 64. Although the reality and discourse of climate change and global pandemic make our fire-paranoia uncannily specific, Suetonius has Tiberius declare that his successor Caligula would be 'a Phaethon for the planet' (Suet. *Cal.* 11), and both ancient and modern leadership is often measured by the capacity to fight real and figurative fires, to establish security through firewalls. Fire is a visceral metaphor for the unpredictability of tyranny, the lure of apocalypse, and the unstoppability of imperial violence, dying down periodically only to flicker into life again. Because fire's potential for monstrous, all-devouring growth presents the most terrifying risk to bodily integrity, human life, and the human capacity to govern and master the natural environment, the ability to control and instrumentalise fire, to contain it to rituals such as cremation and sacrifice, has symbolised quasi-divine human power and knowledge since storytelling began. Prometheus' theft wins fire as a means of survival and creative force, at the cost of everlasting torture: his myth narrativises the pharmacological paradox of fire as both purificatory and poisonous, both productive and destructive. When wielded, Jupiter-like, as a tool or weapon (or as a means to fashion metal weapons, like Aeneas' sword and shield, courtesy of Vulcan in *Aeneid* 8), fire makes victims of others and is the most hard-hitting instrument and figure both for political oppression (see, most recently, the 2017 Grenfell Tower tragedy in London) and for popular uprising (anarchy is a figural and often literal arson). Yet when it is embodied, the fiery agent is, in sovereigntist-

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patriarchal terms, constitutively contaminated by what he projects, becoming the unbounded antithesis of the Stoic *sapiens*—raging Juno, inflamed Dido suiciding on a pyre, the impassioned warrior doomed to self-combust, or Jupiter not as calm statesman but as Ovid's cartoon rapist (his untrammelled desire incinerating Semele, who is pregnant with Dionysus). Throughout Greco-Roman thought, fire figures contamination, transgression, disinhibition, the problem (or existential threat) of destructive or 'effeminising' desire. In the Roman imagination in particular, it comes to represent the fear of collapse and an untameable vulnerability towards others that subtend—both fatally and apotropaically—imperial drives to absolute, eternal power.

Closs' ambitious and impressive first book begins with the spark of 'Nero's fire'—inseparable from the boiling heat, raging passions, white-hot talent, internecine Blitzkrieg, and incendiary rhetoric that characterise 'Neronian literature' (Lucan, Petronius, Persius, Calpurnius Siculus, Seneca)—and sweeps backwards and forwards across Roman history from the late Republic (firebrand Catiline), into Augustus' fire-taming after the inferno of civil war, and reaching beyond the Julio-Claudians into the Flavian, Trajanic, and Hadrianic eras, which are marked both by memories and physical traces of the 64 fire, and by other significant fires, from the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 to the fire that destroyed Agrippa's Pantheon in 110. Authors like Tacitus, Statius, Martial, and Juvenal return repeatedly to a Catherine wheel of motifs in the Roman cultural imaginary that get reignited by actual material conditions in the expanding, thronging metropolis, where status was measured in real-estate, and the poor lived in rickety wooden *insulae* that could go up like a tinder box in minutes. Famously, Juvenal's caricature Umbricius in *Sat.* 3 bemoans the *incendia* and *lapsus tectorum* that make Rome a death-trap, and that stand for the back-to-the-future, blistering rage to which epic, post-Lucilian satire subjects its audiences. The wound of Trojan self-harm (waking up to find your block of flats on fire recalls Aeneas finding Troy in flames in *Aeneid* 2) is remembered compulsively, auto-immunologically, and fire's unpredictability gives each repetition a transformative kick. The experimental intensity of surviving first-century Latin texts, many written by authors who were relegated or forced to suicide, projects a *Zeitgeist* of feverish paranoia under a series of pyromaniac tyrants epitomised, for us, by Nero. The element of fire, as Closs recognises, pays no heed to walls or boundaries, or to fixed, dualistic categories (genres understood as non-porous identities, strict notions of the 'poetic' *vs* the 'historical', 'lived experience' *vs* 'fiction/phantasy/ imagination', materiality *vs* idea, nature *vs* culture, artist *vs* politician): its violent fluidity scorches everything in its path, shines a blinding light on minutiae only to block out the sun with black fumes. Book-burning, self-censorship, human torches, branding, the sack of cities, disaster imperialism, cosmological events and patterns, apocalyptic angst, terrorism, *damnatio memoriae*, old flames,

humanitarian catastrophes, hot political theatre, myths of rebirth, self-annihilation, survival, and devastating ambition (the Phaethon-as-Oedipus complex) all get sucked into this melting pot. The question is how to articulate each tortuous web of relation.

Closs' book offers welcome stimulus for thinking through the methodologies of this kind of cross-disciplinary project, which is in part a phenomenological response to the dizzying interconnectedness of fire-images, metaphors, and historical records of fire in Latin literature and other sources (inscriptions, coins), and which offers ancient historians, implicitly, a progressive framework for how to read literary texts. Its five polished chapters, plus sparky introduction and conclusion, take us on what Closs calls a 'thematic tour' of the 'intersection of fire, city and ruler' in the first century and a half of Rome's imperial era. Recurring 'motifs' (the *urbs capta* and the fall of Troy, Phaethon, *ekpyrosis*, and the mythical phoenix), as well as repeating stories of rebel-arsonists, and the trackable tendency to oppose good fire-fighting leaders to bad fire-raisers, set the scene.

Chapter 1 presents an original take on Augustan methods and discourses of security through policies of fire-control—a 'significant benchmark for the new regime and its claims to power' (28). To quell social unrest was to dampen (literal and figurative) incendiarism, and political authority was performed as fire prevention (witness the specialised efforts of Egnatius Rufus, an aedile of the 20s BC, and Augustus' transfer of Vesta's cult and her *aeterni ignes* to his own house on the Palatine in 12 BC). The second half of the chapter develops seminal work on imagery in the *Aeneid* (especially Knox's 'The Serpent and the Flame', and Hardie's *Cosmos and Imperium*): fire is perhaps the most powerful metaphor of the epic, and its ungovernable energy explodes in the notorious final scene, where Aeneas, *furiis accensus*, stabs Turnus while hissing *Pallas te … immolat.* The verb *immolare*, Closs suggests, denotes not just sacrifice, but the offering of burnt meat, and the fiery poem is seen to be deeply, contagiously implicated in (making) the political.

Chapter 2 reads sections of Ovid, Manilius, and Seneca (the *Consolatio ad Marciam*), tracing the myth of Phaethon, the mythic vision of the phoenix born from the ashes, and Stoic ideas of *ekpyrosis*, against a backdrop of fraught imperial succession, dynastic ambition, Augustus' funeral, catastrophic urban fires under Tiberius, the emperor's dishonourable half-cremation (Suet. *Tib.* 75.3), and book-burning as a response to 'political dissent': Seneca's Cremutius Cordus, as Closs puts it, 'is phoenix-like, rising up from the ashes to speak again in a new form, "reborn" through Marcia's pious efforts to preserve and republish the fragments of her father's work' (99–100).

Chapter 3 reads key Neronian texts (Petronius' *Satyrica*, Lucan's *Bellum Civile*, and Seneca, *Ep.* 91; Persius goes unmentioned) through the lens of the great fire of 64 and Tacitean Nero's response: Seneca's letter, about the fire

that devastated the provincial capital of Lugdunum, is read, after Elaine Fantham and others, as 'displaced commentary' on Rome's big fire. Like contemporary leaders and would-be politicians moving slickly from reality show and film set to political stage, Nero is (constructed as) artist and choreographer, while author-politicians cook up their own spin.

Chapter 4 leaps forward to the Flavians, and accounts for the aftermath of Neronian pyrography in the pseudo-Senecan *Octavia*, Martial's *Epigrams*, and Statius' *Silvae*. The eruption of Vesuvius and memory of the 64 fire orientate literary intensifications alongside political moves (Domitian, for instance, dedicated a set of altars to Vulcan sometime after 83, fulfilling a vow to repel fires after the city burned for nine days under Nero's watch).

Chapter 5 completes the cycle by turning to Trajanic and Hadrianic Rome (Juvenal's *Satires*, Pliny's *Panegyricus*, Tacitus' *Annals*); in Tacitus' final extravaganza in *Annals* 15, the Great Fire becomes a 'physical manifestation of the damage done to Roman society by political scheming, volatile crowds and unstable leaders'. Like Lucan's epic, the *Annals* itself summons and enacts a political-poetic firepower, or as Closs prefers, uses 'a wide range of incendiary metaphors' (205). After a summary conclusion, two short discussions—of Raphael's *Incendio di Borgo* (1514), and of a series of art installations set up in the Colosseum's exhibition spaces in 2010—provide the coda: in both, the iconic story and imagery of Troy's fall, and of the Great Fire of 64 kindle 'current concerns', and weld the imaginary and the material.

In its bid to look 'holistically' at the representations of fire (especially, thinking big, 'fire that can destroy a city') in the Roman cultural imagination, the book must take its cue from the real-symbolic force of fire itself, which is always 'threatening to leap beyond the bounds of the structures we create around it' (3), and addresses several questions that are both familiar and pressing for literary critics and historians working with classical texts: how do literary worlds relate to (often otherwise inaccessible) historical and material realities? How might we respond to and articulate the politics of literature, and of reading? What distinguishes literary from non-literary engagements with such texts, and what modes of reading are being engaged here? In soldering together performative literary texts of many different forms, which enact many different kinds of fictionality, with other historical artefacts (visual art, monuments, inscriptions, coins), Closs makes important points about the imaginative richness of historiographical prose texts, and affirms the entanglement of different modes of cultural production, as well as the impactfulness and potential physicality of our engagement with texts as part of our lived experience of the world. These interconnected texts emerge as fully embedded in worlds they produce as well as 'reflect' or 'remake', and the topic prods the limits as well as the challenges of cultural constructivism: Virgil, Ovid, Lucan, Seneca, et al. make Rome for us, as we encounter and enter into their odd worlds through our own idiocultures. Closs insists several times on the 'fusion'

or 'blend' of historical and literary memory in imperial Rome, but although the book seems to be about the relationship between Latin literature and socio-political realities, or the 'difficulty of separating the political from the poetic' (102), the nature of that difficult relation is for the most part not explored. For me this is both what the book is missing, and what it forces its readers to confront. There is much—perhaps productively—that remains unspoken or naturalised, but which I would like to explore, briefly, in the remainder of this review.

While Closs' work builds on creative literary responses to imperial historiography (Ash, Haynes, Henderson, Kraus, O'Gorman, etc. on Tacitus, for example), it also takes refuge in schematic understandings of how Greco-Roman texts are to be read, which represent a certain critical status quo (or the coalescence of unexamined modes of reading paradigmatic for many ancient historians on the one hand, and for many scholars of Latin literature on the other) but which are not brought into awareness in the book. And so while Closs emphasises the extent to which 'historical' and 'literary' memories or experiences blur together, and the 'fundamentally literary nature of all spaces described in text', she also seems to conceptualise literary texts as secondary cultural acts that are informed by and represent not just Rome's material conditions but also what is implicitly the hard reality of political ideas. This constellation of ideas/conditions/events provides the 'material' for authors to 'advance their own literary and ideological goals' (10). The fantastical, provocative, and playful analogy staged in imperial Latin literature between writer and emperor now becomes literal ('The successful leader, no less than the outstanding poet, portrays himself as capable not just of facing the catastrophe but of embracing these challenges to his genius and turning them to his advantage', 67); the politics of literature amounts, in this account, to the text's literal enactment of the author's careerist political campaign. As a result, the uniqueness of these texts' form, or of their performative mobility, is lost. 'Poetics' itself is not the fleshy singularity of form-content that we meet in subtly or even radically different ways in each act of reading, but a lexicon of terms, a stash of metaphors and images, a filing cabinet of allusions to be used, tweaked, and catalogued by the scholarly reader. In the effort to trace a discourse across the cultural field, and to convince of the 'ideological centrality of fire in Rome', Closs spots 'well established features', 'consistent thematic concerns', recognisable 'networks of allusions', and 'stock descriptions' that have a 'long pedigree' (140). Yet the bid to produce a paradigm and to join dots makes all these texts seem not just interrelated but indistinguishable from one another. All that changes is the 'political context', to which the texts respond differently in their content, 'reframings', or 'political agenda'.

This bird's-eye view yields teleological narratives, clear historical trajectories, and oppositions—from Augustan fire-fighting to Neronian arson. Beyond the Julio-Claudians, artistic production is about the aftermath, about

processing and remaking memories amid ongoing 'thermal distress'. There are distinct coordinates, historical flash-points where progress tips into decline, or where 'ambiguous discourse' is reframed in 'starkly negative terms', after the death of Augustus; and there are crescendos—paradigmatically, the culmination of disaster narratives in *Annals* 15. Performatively and methodologically, Closs' generalisations exert a damage-limitation and impulse-control that resist the unpredictable particularity of these texts and of our encounters with them, even as the texts themselves are made to showcase fire as the archetypical figure for unstable mastery. The plotting of intertextuality that has dominated scholarship on Latin literature for decades now, and the notion that Greco-Roman texts often perform and thematise artistic competition in a patrilineal or Oedipal scheme, seem to allow Closs not just to envision 'the great artist' and the all-powerful emperor or charismatic orator as interchangeable figures, and to draw out elaborations of the popular myth of Phaethon, in which the son strives to usurp the authoritative father and combusts in his own fiery arrogance, but also to *limit* the making of imperial Latin literature to agonistic display and the enactment of tradition, in a downward trend which the reader then charts, dispassionately and rationally, paying proper homage to her own scholarly predecessors. We are on the look out, therefore, for power moves, oneupmanship, assertions of authority, creative adaptations or transcendences of literary models and predecessors, orientations within traditions; creativity is generated—almost exclusively, it seems—by the phallic drive to 'exceed models', which has the side-effect of 'keeping certain significant themes and motifs animated throughout Rome's ongoing history of conflict, conflagration and recovery' (209). Texts are approached as grids for 'complex networks of allusions' that are not just implicated in the political but are political instruments (Roman authors are 'well versed in the use of literary allusion as an ideological weapon', 3). The resulting performances (although, in accordance with her understanding of literary texts, Closs does not engage with their performativity, even in cases—such as Seneca's *Epistles* or Juvenal's *Satires*—where that performativity is overt, and barbed) are oddly constrained. Even the path through fire imagery in the *Aeneid*, from the fall of Troy, Cupid's torches, and Dido's pyre, to the Trojan women in Book 5, Turnus' attack on the ships in Book 9, and Aeneas' final killing rage (*furiis accensus*), is made to lead back into tepid abstraction: the poem suggests, Closs concludes, a 'delicate balance between the necessity of violence in resolving conflict and the human costs of that violence'. Yet as many have acknowledged, there is not much that is delicate in the hell-raising final scene, which—as soon as we linger, as Closs urges us to, on *furiis accensus* and *Pallas te … immolat*—seems to meld enraged, traumatised Aeneas into fiery Turnus, crazed Dido-Medea, furious Juno and her Furies, or posits those similarities as question marks. Throughout the book, as texts are seen to rework or 'update' stories, images, and ideas about fire as creative-destructive

pharmakon that travels erratically across space and time, they can enact no potential challenge to patrilinearity or to the inevitability of imperial conquest, which is now as natural for the reader as for the poem/poet. In other words, storytelling apart, there is no destruction of the son-as-Phaethon, no disruption of the path of inheritance, and no difficult ethical and ontological questions to try to answer, just tolerable levels of individuation and separation from/competition with the father. Closs' path through the ashes of Roman conflagration is imaginative and rich in detail, yet it also snuffs out any fires these texts might re-start, as we encounter them now. If anything, the classicist's long view is motivated to calm and reassure, lest we live in terror of our 'unprecedented' times: we experience different catastrophes, for sure, but 'the factors that shape our anxieties, our memories, and eventually our histories—remain the same' (220).

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