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“Who will be a coward when a woman leads?”: Boudica and the Victorian Female Hero

It was nearly 2000 years after she sacrificed her life in the struggle against Rome that Boudica became a national hero. William Cowper (1731-1800), the famous poet and hymn writer, penned his *Boadicea: An Ode* in 1780. In the poem, he predicted that Britain, personified in its first Queen, would reign over an empire unimagined by the Romans or even by Cowper himself. Cowper could not have known that a queen would be on the throne when that prediction was fulfilled in the rise of the British Empire. He could not have known that her name would be Victoria, synonymous with the ancient name “Buddig”, Boudica’s Welsh name, meaning Victory. This peculiar alignment of events: the age of empire, the ascension of a “victorious” queen, in addition to the outpouring of interest in hero-worship during the period, created the perfect environment for a female hero, Boudica, to emerge.

While a number of authors have described the varying and often contradictory representations of Boudica throughout the centuries, no one has yet examined her evolution, not just as a gendered figure, but as a gendered hero.¹ As Geoffrey Cubitt has pointed out, heroes require a collective emotional investment from their compatriots.² While individual authors have seen Boudica as an object of scorn and admiration in almost equal measure throughout the centuries, she simply had not generated the public interest necessary for heroic status until the latter half of the 19th century. With the birth of a culture of hero-worship, exemplified in figures like Nelson, Wellington, and heroes of the Indian Uprising, heroic reputations were increasingly communicated through public media, most notably statues. The period between 1855 and 1916 saw the creation of three statues of Boudica, three more than had been made in the seventeen preceding centuries.

Why Boudica in the 19th century? Boudica had come to be identified as the first British queen.³ She was linked to Queen Victoria by name and as the origin of the inevitably

¹ For varying representations of Boudica, see R. Hingley and C. Unwin. *Boudica: Iron Age Queen*. London: Hamelton and London. 2005.

² Geoffrey Cubitt. ‘Heroic Reputations and Exemplary Lives’. *Heroic Reputations and Exemplary Lives*. G. Cubitt and A. Warren. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001. 3.

³ For early modern depictions of Boudica and connections with Queen Elizabeth see J. Mikalachki. *The Legacy of Boadicea: Gender and Nation in Early Modern England*. New York and London: Routledge, 1998.

triumphant trajectory of British history over which Victoria presided. This point of view is evident in novels such as Marie Trevelyan's *Britain's Greatness Foretold* of 1900, in which an ancient druid foresees Boudica's disastrous defeat, as well as the rise of the British nation in the future.⁴ Victoria was seen as Boudica's progeny and the heir to all she had made possible. Even as Boudica had failed in her violent attempts to free herself and her people from their Roman overlords, she had laid the foundation for a united British nation to exceed even the glory of Rome. In this way, Boudica was a unifying figure, both for the nation and its history.

The belief that Boudica represented all that was native and traditional is evidenced by her identification not only with Britain, but with Wales in particular. Wales, because it was thought to be the last British territory to continue resisting Roman incursion, was seen as the sylvan glade where native British culture was sheltered from the corrupting influence of Rome. While the Welsh were keen to identify Boudica with Wales, and Wales with ancient Britain, she remained a British hero above all else. Much of the effort to promote her heroism did come from prominent Welsh men.

In fact, Boudica's heroic reputation was constructed during this period by the enterprise and enthusiasm of men in positions of authority. None of the statues of Boudica would have been created or publically exhibited had it not been for the willingness of councilors, MPs, and members of the government to support them. This is not to say that Boudica's reputation was unambiguous or unchallenged. Some authors of the time had a rather different view of her. Women in history were attracting an increasing amount of attention from amateur historians and biographers at the time. Victorian authors who were concerned with the didactic uses of history assembled the stories of famous women and published them in collections with titles like *World Noted Women*, *Heroines of History* and *Brave Women*. Between ten and twelve such books were published each year through the 1850s to the 1870s, often repeating or simply plagiarizing one another.⁵

This expanding body of work focused on famous women demonstrates one form of collective emotional investment in Boudica. However, because most authors were concerned with portraying women whose conduct was exemplary and morally laudable, Boudica's

⁴ Marie Trevelyan. *Britain's Greatness Foretold*. London: J. Hogg. 1900.

⁵ Alison Booth. 'Illustrious Company: Victoria among other women in Anglo-American role model anthologies.' *Remaking Queen Victoria*. M. Homans and A. Munich. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 59-78.

inclusion was problematic. More often than not, she was left out entirely. When forced to acknowledge the unfortunate details of Boudica's story, writers were confronted with her violence, her paganism, and her eventual defeat ending in suicide. None of these lends her to exemplarity.

The portrait of Boudica that emerges from history books and historical novels is muddled and variably used to demonstrate the unsuitability of women for positions of power without male guidance and, more importantly, the dangers of rejecting the civilizing and moralizing influence of Christianity. Boudica, for obvious reasons, could not exist comfortably in the realm of exemplarity, the natural home of such women as Florence Nightingale and Joan of Arc, both of whom could demonstrate piety and obedience.

The artists who portrayed Boudica, by contrast with writers, were unconcerned with questions about her morality. Their concern was with the positive effect Boudica could have on public spirit and national identity. Thus, Boudica's disagreeable qualities were obscured by her more admirable ones. For example, she is always shown with her two daughters, identifying her immediately as a mother. Her militancy, evident in the first two statues, is not the main focus, but is in fact a product of a narrative that entwines a complexity of emotion, vengeance and maternal protectiveness. The last is a symbol of motherhood and, possibly reflecting its Welsh origins, of familial sanctity and sheltered British innocence, as yet uncorrupted by Roman abuses. Her violence, it is implied, was justified by her identity as a mother.

The most iconic image of Boudica was created by Thomas Thornycroft (1815-1885). From the very outset, this representation of Boudica was a labor of love. Thornycroft did not have a commission for the statue, only the interest and support of Prince Albert, whose own horses were provided as models. It took fifteen years for Thornycroft to complete the statue, but he would not see it erected in his lifetime. In 1894, London County Council resolved to open the tumulus at Parliament Hill in Hampstead Heath in an effort to discover Boudica's legendary tomb. While I have been unable to determine the initial impetus behind this endeavor, Victoria's approaching Diamond Jubilee would have provided the perfect opportunity to display any "royal" objects recovered from the site. John Isaac Thornycroft, a naval engineer and Thomas's son, offered the Boadicea Group to the LCC as a memorial for Boudica's tomb. However, no tomb was uncovered during the excavation. Upon seeing the prohibitive cost associated with

erecting the statue elsewhere, in addition to discovering that they did not, in fact, have the authority to raise money for such projects, the LCC abandoned the idea.⁶

William J. Bull (1863-1931), an LCC member and later Conservative MP for Hammersmith, took up Boudica's cause. He undertook the chairmanship of the newly formed Boadicea Fund Committee and proceeded to appeal to council members, members of government, journalists, and the public for subscriptions. A number of eminent Welshmen gave generously to the Fund.⁷ The case was handed over to the Highways Committee, which eventually approved the site on the Victoria Embankment.⁸

William Bull was insistent that statue should be unveiled in 1897, the year of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee. Bull, along with the many LCC members and others who gave to his Boadicea Fund Committee, saw a tribute to their own Queen Victoria in this depiction of the ancient female warrior and "first British queen".⁹ Frances Power Cobbe, the well-known feminist, contributed £5 with an accompanying note in which she expounded on the link between Boudica and Victoria.¹⁰ Despite such support, the statue was not erected until 1898, and even then the Committee had to settle for the plaster model rather than the finished product. When the bronze was finally complete, the LCC rejected Bull's pleas for a formal unveiling, citing the numerous previous delays to the project.¹¹ Instead, the hoardings around the bronze were quietly removed. Boudica was denied the dignity of an official unveiling due to the realities of bureaucracy, not from lack of effort.

Thornycroft's Boudica is by far the most stridently militant of the three statues. This statue is particularly reminiscent of depictions of war goddesses, such as Athena, as well as of Britannia, the ancient symbol of the British Isles. Britannia is a nation personified, not an individual representing her own femininity. Boudica, even if her style and stance might conjure up comparisons, has an individual story to tell that goes beyond the personified nationhood evident in Britannia. Boudica is a military leader, urging her troops to battle and wielding her

⁶ LCC/MIN/6323. General Purposes Committee (hereafter GPC) Presented Papers. 22 Dec. 1896.

⁷ LCC/MIN/6323. GPC Presented Papers. 7 Dec. 1896.

⁸ Highway Committee Report to LCC. 31 Jan. 1899.

⁹ LCC/MIN/6323. GPC Presented Papers. 7 Dec. 1896.

¹⁰ LCC/MIN/6324. GPC Presented Papers. 25 Jan. 1897.

¹¹ LCC/MIN/6726 Highway Committee Minutes. 10 June 1902.

spear against the enemy. She is also a mother, with her two daughters crouched in the chariot with her, looking bewildered and uncertain.

Sir Morton Peto, of Peto and Betts, the firm responsible for the construction of the Houses of Parliament, commissioned John Thomas (1813-1862) to create a statue of Boudica sometime in the early 1850s. Thomas was engaged in renovating Peto's family home at Somerleyton Hall in Suffolk at the time. He completed the statue in 1855 and exhibited it at the Royal Academy in 1856. It ended up in Birmingham where, many years later, it was mistakenly identified as the work of John Evan Thomas, a Welsh sculptor. Thus, the statue was removed to Wales, where it now stands on the grounds of the Brecknock Museum in Brecon.¹² It is unclear why Sir Morton Peto commissioned the sculpture of this barbarian woman. Peto was an ardent Baptist, but he obviously felt no qualms about her paganism. He did, however, have a close relationship with the royal family, having provided a great deal of money and support for the Great Exhibition of 1851. He was eventually granted a baronetcy.¹³ Therefore, we can be fairly certain that Peto identified himself as a patriot and that he was interested in promoting the legacy of the "first British queen". As in Thornycroft's work, Boudica's daughters are present, cowering at her feet and grieving for the wrongs done to them. Boudica's stance is reactive, as if she has only just taken up the sword and made the decision to conduct her campaign of violent revenge. She is a mother responding to the outrages perpetrated against her family, and, for those who knew her story, a queen defending her country.

The most recent statue of the period to be erected was begun in 1910, ten years after Victoria's death, and was created by James Havard Thomas (1854-1921). This statue was meant as a part of the new Cardiff City Hall and is the only statue to have been entirely a Welsh effort. One room of the City Hall was to be given over to works depicting great Welsh heroes. The heroes were chosen by public vote, with the help of a panel of three judges.¹⁴ Boudica was not part of the original plan. Instead, an eleventh position had to be added in order to accommodate her. That a special effort had to be made to include this British hero in a Welsh collection is telling. It was no less a figure than Lord, later Viscount, Rhondda, the powerful Welsh coal baron and member of David Lloyd George's government during the First World War, who

¹²Public Monument and Sculpture Association, National Recording Project. <http://pmsa.cch.kcl.ac.uk/AH/POWYS012.htm>. Accessed 9 June 2009.

¹³ Sir Henry Bart Peto. *Sir Morton Peto: A Memorial Sketch*. London: Elliot Stock, 1893.

¹⁴ City of Cardiff. *Welsh Historical Sculpture Illustrated Catalogue*. Grafton Galleries London. 1916

commissioned the statue of Boudica.¹⁵ David Lloyd George, then secretary of state for war, unveiled it himself in October 1916.¹⁶ Like Thomas's and Thornycroft's works, Havard Thomas's Boudica was actively made possible by men with intimate ties to the government.

Havard Thomas's Boudica varies from the other two in that it is not at all militaristic or "heroic" in the traditional sense. Boudica is portrayed in a dignified and composed manner, embracing her two daughters. Havard Thomas chose to present Boudica as she might have appeared before the she and her families were victimized by the Romans. As mentioned above, certain eminent Welshmen were enamored with the idea of Wales as the last refuge of British nativity. Thus, this Welsh artist chose an emphatically maternal image for Boudica, with none of the trappings of leadership or militarism evident in the other two. She is embracing her as yet untouched daughters, the guardian of British purity against the ravages of Rome. Havard Thomas did not depict her with a crown on her head as the others do, obscuring the connection with royalty while maintaining links to British historical narrative.

As mentioned above, there is a tendency among scholars who write about Boudica to equate her with Britannia, the ancient personification of Britain.¹⁷ Thomas Thornycroft's iconic image, because it shares certain imagery found in portrayals of Britannia, might have popularized this idea. One sculptor, John Thomas, made works depicting both women. His allegorical scene with Britannia was completed in 1849 and was on display in Euston station until the 1990s.¹⁸ It is interesting to compare his Britannia with his Boudica. Thomas's Britannia wears a Roman helmet and armor and sits reclining amongst other representations of imperial grandeur. Britannia is the centerpiece of an allegorized scene of prosperity. There is nothing of the emotionality present in Boudica, who clearly shows the anguish of a mother and the aggression of a military leader.

Marina Warner has argued that Boudica, like Britannia can now be seen as an imperial icon, an ironic fate for such an anti-imperialist woman. The British people, Warner notes, did

¹⁵ Public Monument and Sculpture Association, National Recording Project. <<http://pmsa.cch.kcl.ac.uk/AH/CARDIFF001.htm>> 9 June 2009.

¹⁶ City of Cardiff. *Welsh Historical Sculpture Illustrated Catalogue*. Grafton Galleries London. 1916

¹⁷ See for example M. Warner. *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form*. London: George Weidenfeld & Nicolson Limited, 1985. Also, S. MacDonald in *Images of Women in Peace and War*. S. Ardener, P. Holden, S. MacDonald. London: The MacMillan Press. 1987.

¹⁸ Marina Warner. *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form*. London: George Weidenfeld & Nicolson Limited, 1985. 49.

not see the contradiction.¹⁹ This, however, is to ignore the cultural effort that went into creating the heroic Boudica. The men who promoted Boudica as a national hero saw no contradiction because their Boudica was triumph personified, an answer to the blow dealt to her by the Romans. In the person of Victoria and in the continued prosperity of the British nation, Boudica had finally won her battle against the Romans nearly 2000 years after her suicide. Rather than being anti-imperialist, the 19th century Boudica was anti-Roman and actively pro-British. A British empire had, in this particular construction, been her dream and she had killed herself in order to make it possible.

Boudica's reputation is bound to the historical narrative in this period. British history could be traced from Boudica to Victoria, though much, admittedly, had to be strategically ignored in between. Her heroism is, therefore, much like the "masculine" vision of heroism that was so celebrated, evident in writers like Thomas Carlyle. Boudica could not sit quietly in the realm of exemplarity, where women taught other women how to conduct themselves in an appropriately pious manner. She was violent, aggressive, angry, and paganistic. But she was also the first "mother" of the nation, giving birth to the very idea of Britishness and beginning the long gestation of the British Empire, to be presided over by Victoria, her imagined descendent.

That her heroism was made possible by powerful men with royal contacts cannot be ignored. While Boudica was a militant hero to some women in this period, such as the Suffragettes, it was a male effort that placed her in a position of national heroism. As women became increasingly vocal and visible in public life, this began to change. Later female heroes were often promoted by other women, as is the case with Emmeline Pankhurst, whose own likeness stands just down the road from Boudica's. Therefore, it is possible to see Boudica as one of the first among a growing number of women who were publically celebrated for their heroic behavior in a fashion similar to their male counterparts.

¹⁹ Warner, 50.