

The Barbarian *Dux Femina*: A Study In Creating Boudicca

Ella Hartsoe

McGill University

Classical Studies/History/Sexuality, Feminist, and Social Justice Studies

As Mary Beard notes, “‘Boadicea, widow of King Prasutagus of the Iceni tribe’ is in almost every sense a Roman creation”¹. This paper will be concerned with unpacking the language employed by ancient historians Tacitus and Cassius Dio to create a foreign, rebellious queen. The tide of scholarship evaluating Tacitus and Dio as historical sources seems to me unsatisfactory. On the one hand, Overbeck dismisses Dio as “[presenting] so little usable information.”² He and others³ seem unconcerned with the ways primary sources can deliver facts that are not related to military or political history. That being said, I also do not agree with L’Hoir’s assessment of Tacitus manipulating only Boudicca’s female identity to communicate his belief that “the continuous female ascent and usurpation of male authority—a reversal of the natural order of the universe—has predicted the inevitable descent and destruction of the Julio-Claudian dynasty.”⁴ While Tacitus’ anxiety about women is certainly apparent, he and Dio curate Boudicca’s identities as *both* native and female, *both* noble and transgressive.

I will argue that Tacitus and Dio’s accounts each create a Boudicca that is more dynamic than simply a negative *exempla*. As Shumate notes “the same people who in one setting functioned as Noble Savages can later do duty as the ‘debased’ Colonial Other [...] sometimes even within the same text.”⁵ When gender is involved (as it is in the case of Boudicca’s revolt), this dialogue within one created character becomes explanatory of the Romans’ conceptions of themselves, their imperialism, and how each related to maleness and femaleness within their empire⁶. This paper will focus on each of the speeches given by Tacitus and Dio’s Boudiccas. It

¹ Mary Beard, “British Queen” in *Confronting Classics: Traditions, Adventures, and Innovations* (London: Profile Books Ltd, 2013) 155.

² John C Overbeck, “Tacitus and Dio on Boudicca’s Rebellion,” *The American Journal of Philology*, v90 n2 (1969): 135.

³ Reed comments that his suggestions “as to the sources used by Tacitus and Dio [...] can, among other things, help us to determine the true historical facts.” Assumingly meaning these “true historical facts” to be the military historical details of the British rebellion, this seems a reduction of other “kinds” of history we could potentially discuss with the use of Tacitus and Dio as they are. Nicholas Reed, “The Sources of Tacitus and Dio for the Boudiccan Revolt,” *Latomus*, T. 33, Fasc. 4 (1974): 926.

⁴ Francesca Santoro L’Hoir, “Tacitus and Women’s Usurpation of Power,” *The Classical World*, Vol. 88, No. 1 (1994), 25. Crawford (Jane Crawford, “Cartimandua, Boudicca, and Rebellion: British Queens and Roman Colonial Views” in *Women and the Colonial Gaze* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002) 17-28) and Williams (Carolyn D. Williams, “Beastly Woman: War Sex and Gender” in *Boudica and Her Stories* (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 2009) 120-121.) generally agree.

⁵ Nancy Shumate, “Tacitus and the Rhetoric of Empire” in *Nation, Empire and Decline* (London: Duckworth, 2006) 96.

⁶ While this is an imperfect line to confine these terms within, over the course of this paper I refer to “maleness” and “femaleness” to mean, very broadly, the general sentiment Eva Keuls argues ancient art expressed concerning women, that “women threaten [...] manhood, and need to be subjugated to prevent them from rebelling against [men].” Thus, although simplistic, I simply mean that often femaleness is a kind of forced submission while

will then contextualize each author's language by bringing in other materials concerned with women, sex, and gender in the ancient world.

Tacitus' Creation of His Boudicca

Primary sources are more valuable than their ability to convey ancient history's episodic facts or events. While Overbeck notes that "the general excellence of the account given in the *Annals* becomes most apparent when it is set against the narrative of Cassius Dio,"⁷ the historicity of, for instance, Tacitus' orations in his *Annals* is dubious at best. As Adler notes, there is serious doubt that Tacitus would or could have recorded an accurate speech given by Boudicca to her troops. Tacitus would have required access to a bilingual eyewitness sufficiently fluent in Celtic, who would have had to have been present at the speech before the battle.⁸ Additionally, Boudicca's opening line that "while it [is] quite normal for the Britons to fight under a woman's command" (14.35) seem redundant considering the British would know their own customs. We can conclude, then, that Tacitus is, at least in part, not concerned with writing Boudicca's narrative for historical detail and accuracy. He is writing for a Roman audience to create a specific, perhaps at times tainted, account. This is vital when considering the ways in which Tacitus creates his historical figures rather than records them; for example, Tacitus has motive in recording that Boudicca introduces herself as a foreign woman. Why? Because for Tacitus, Boudicca's narrative is one primarily concerned with gender. Tacitus manipulates Boudicca's identity as a foreign woman to create rhetoric which serves his interests as an author. Thus, within the first lines of the speech he has highlighted both Boudicca's gender and her foreignness in order to set the foundation for his later commentary on both women and Roman society.

Tacitus highlights Boudicca as foreign and then creates her as Roman; within the next sentence of her speech, rape has appeared as a symbol for a loss of bodily autonomy. Romans were familiar with the event of rape as a sign of political upheaval within historical narrative. As Arieti notes, "there is an important political and constitutional consequence of rape or attempted rape" in a Roman's mind, as "though it is a destructive violation of a woman, rape may also be creative, for it may result in a new life."⁹ Thus the rape of Boudicca's daughters—like the rape of the Rhea Silvia, the Sabine women, Lucretia, et al—becomes a trigger for political upheaval. Tacitus takes a foreign woman and has her tell a Roman story. This serves "both to 'Romanize' Boudicca and to present a justification for the rebellion somewhat akin to Rome's impetus for expulsion of a 'foreign' monarchy."¹⁰

But as L'Hoir notes, Boudicca does not simply cite rape as a means of achieving political change. She herself "[employs] the rhetoric of political rape" as she states that she is "not on that occasion seeking vengeance for a kingdom and possessions as a woman descended from great ancestors [...] she sought it as one of the people" (14.35). Here, Boudicca's language is populist

maleness is a praised dominance of everything in a man's path. Eva C. Keuls, "Introduction" in *The Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 4.

⁷ Overbeck, "Tacitus and Dio on Boudicca's Rebellion," 129.

⁸ Eric Adler, "Men Might Live and Be Slaves": Tacitus' Speech of Boudica" in *Valorizing the Barbarians: Enemy Speeches in Roman Historiography* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011) 123.

⁹ James A. Arieti, "Rape and Livy's View of Roman History" in *Rape in Antiquity* (London: Classical Press of Wales in association with Duckworth, 2002.) 218-9.

¹⁰ Adler, "Men Might Live and Be Slaves," 125.

in her rejecting of her own patrician status and appealing as *una e vulgo*¹¹. Thus Tacitus has constructed his Boudicca—within the first four lines of her speech—as female and native, a rebel leader who also narratives with motifs and traditions which are clearly Roman by nature.¹²

Tacitus continues to create a dynamic Boudicca who is both Roman and not Roman. As Shumate writes, “a bedrock of Roman chauvinism supersedes Tacitus’ cultural anxieties and moral preoccupations in framing a scene [...] then the unregenerate primitive [...] takes center stage.”¹³ While Boudicca’s lamentation of her daughters’ rapes characterizes her as a typical Roman matron,¹⁴ Boudicca’s seizing of military retaliation—in contrast to say, Lucretia’s suicide—makes her non-Roman. In being a *dux femina*,¹⁵ both military commander against the Roman state and a woman monopolizing this power, she becomes doubly non-Roman. Finally, the British troops’ fighting tactics are defined in direct opposition to Roman practice: “the Romans would not stand up even to the roar and shouts of so many thousands of men, much less to their charge and their sword-arms!” (14.35). By this characterization of herself and her troops as specifically not Roman, Boudicca concludes by qualifying herself as non-Roman by again, driving home her gender: “[this is] the decision a woman [has] taken” (14.35). As such, the character of Boudicca is both Roman and foreign for Tacitus. Although this particular method is not particularly uncommon for him,¹⁶ what makes this episode unique is his doing so by means of Boudicca’s gender.

Dio’s Creation of Boudicca

Like Tacitus’, Dio’s Boudicca serves a larger agenda in his narrative. While decidedly longer than Tacitus’, it would be wrong to characterize Dio’s speech as just as a display of rhetorical showmanship. It would also be wrong to say that Dio’s account is only a damaging attack on British or Roman culture. It is rather in characterizing his Boudicca as both Roman and foreign, good and bad, that Dio’s account becomes as dynamic as Tacitus’.¹⁷

Unlike Tacitus’ opening in the *Annals* which focused on Boudicca’s gender, Dio’s rebellion leader is more concerned with the persistence of freedom in the face of enslavement. This theme also appears in the commentary on the and their rebellion in Tacitus’ *Agricola*, where he outlines the arguments for rebellion against tyrannical Rome:

“On the battlefield it is the braver man who plunders his foe; but under present circumstances it is largely unwarlike cowards who are stealing their homes, abducting their children, demanding levies from them; as though they can die in any cause except their country’s [...] They had their country to fight for, their wives, their parents: the enemy were fighting only for greed and riotous living; they would withdraw” (15).

Scholars Lovejoy and Boast note both authors construct Boudicca and the Britons as “hard primitives” or “Noble Savages,” “unaccustomed to the slothful and effete ways of the

¹¹ *One (woman) out of the rabble*, as in one of the common people.

¹² L’Hoir, “Tacitus and Women’s Usurpation of Power,” 10.

¹³ Shumate, “Tacitus and the Rhetoric of Empire,” 96.

¹⁴ Adler, “Men Might Live and Be Slaves,” 124.

¹⁵ As described by L’Hoir, a *dux femina* being a woman in a position of leadership, often with connotations of transgressing a cultural boundary and defying a system opposed to female leadership and power. L’Hoir, “Tacitus and Women’s Usurpation of Power,” 5-9.

¹⁶ Shumate, “Tacitus and the Rhetoric of Empire,” 96-97.

¹⁷ Eric Adler, “Slaves to a Bad Lyre-Player”: Cassius Dio’s Speech of Boudica” in *Valorizing the Barbarians: Enemy Speeches in Roman Historiography* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011) 141.

civilized.”¹⁸ From the onset, Dio characterizes Boudicca and her followers as morally upright in their lack of apathy towards imperial monopolization of power. Thus Boudicca reflects conservative Roman virtue only by nature of being non-Roman. Dio heightens this sense of “Noble Savage” by, like Tacitus in his *Agricola*, outlining the reasons a British revolt would be noble. Dio mixes “economic complaints with a strong moral appeal,”¹⁹ creating justification for British rebellion by outlining failures of Roman provincial rule.

But then Dio constructs Boudicca as dangerous, feminine, and Other in her ability to exercise divination and call on like female gods for victory in battle. Dio’s Boudicca “[employs] species of divination” in summoning a hare after comparing her troops to dogs and wolves (62.5). Boudicca prays to the female god of victory: “I thank thee, Andraste, and call upon thee as woman speaking to woman” (62.5). This is the first instance of Boudicca referencing her own gender.²⁰ Boudicca’s status as magical or religious, then, is tied to her gender. While Dyson completely contributes these efforts to Boudicca herself (commenting that “her religious connections [helped] stimulate the revolt”²¹), I would argue that in addition, the creation of Boudicca as a female magician is a deliberate and classic method of othering women in the ancient world and its literature. Here this motif is employed by Dio.²² Nevertheless, Dyson’s conclusion that Boudicca’s religious practices stimulated a certain socio-psychology apparent within the British mentality is surely accurate²³. So while Dio initially creates a “Noble Savage” who articulates the issues of strived for freedom in the face of enslavement, he then contrastingly highlights Boudicca’s gender in her use of magic, thus Othering her and the British troops which follow her.

Through the mouthpiece of Boudicca in the final section of her speech, Dio articulates anxieties about gender and maleness while attack the morally transgressive nature of Roman society. Boudicca argues Nero’s love of the theatre qualifies him a female rather than male emperor.²⁴ Allowing a weak, feminine emperor to head the Roman state was a particularly low insult, magnified when from a female leader of a foreign province. Dio’s Boudicca insults Romans because she, by dubbing Nero female, makes his state unable to penetrate British territories and wield political power over the British. Eva Keuls applies her concept of

¹⁸ Quoted in Adler, “Slaves to a Bad Lyre-Player,” 147.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.

²⁰ Adler, “Slaves to a Bad Lyre-Player,” 150.

²¹ Stephen L. Dyson, “Native Revolts in the Roman Empire” in *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, v20 n2/3 (1971), 262.

²² Many women across classical literature are portrayed as magic practitioners as a means of highlighting the danger of female monopolization of this particular kind of *ars*. It is also a means of othering women and defining them as not male. This tactic is heightened when the identity of the witch is both female and foreign. Examples of this phenomenon include: Circe, Medea, Clytemnestra, Virgil’s Amaryllis, Dido, Horace’s Canidia, Seneca’s Deianeira, and Lucan’s Erichtho. Ankarloo and Clark write that the ancient male writer’s creation of female witches “was primarily an ideological act...the prejudice that witchcraft was a female phenomenon in particular would have served the function of control: it validated the exclusion of women from normal means of power.”

Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark, *Ancient Greece and Rome* (Philadelphia : University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 64-65.

²³ As the British performed “sacrifices, banquets and wanton behavior” in the very grove of the goddess Boudicca here calls on, woman to woman (62.7).

²⁴ Surely this had to do with Dio’s preoccupations with the theatre and distaste for Nero. Adler, “Slaves to a Bad Lyre-Player,” 151.

phallocracy²⁵ directly to contexts such as these: “in the political sphere, [phallocracy] spells imperialism and patriarchal behavior in civic affairs.”²⁶ Boudicca also references Romans under Nero as “slaves” (62.6). Richlin notes that for the Romans, being a slave was an identity implicitly implying a status as one who is penetrated.²⁷ Williams argues that accusations of Romans becoming effeminate in their customs²⁸ implies that they had become “men who [were][...]suspected of wishing to adopt a passive role unbecoming the dignity of a Roman citizen.”²⁹ Dio’s insults against Nero and his subjects are set in direct contrast to the “Noble Savages” of the British: it is now Nero and his enslaved subjects who are female in opposition to a male Boudicca and her troops who are masculine and vying for freedom.

The motif of female warrior made masculine is, of course, a common motif throughout ancient literature, here used by both Tacitus and Dio. Tacitus describes Boudicca “[riding] in a chariot with her daughters” (14.35) and Dio describes her in Amazonian terms;

“in stature she was very tall, in appearance most terrifying, in the glance of her eye most fierce, and her voice was harsh; a great mass of the tawniest hair fell to her hips; around her neck was a large golden necklace; and she wore a tunic of divers colours over which a thick mantle was fastened with a brooch. This was her invariable attire. She now grasped a spear to aid her in terrifying all beholders.”

In ancient mythology, militaristic women appear in charter myths as the Amazons and the goddess Athena. While Amazonian women cut off their breast as a means of diminishing their femininity to make way for prowess in battle, the goddess Athena’s construct in mythology epitomizes the casting off of femaleness in place of male power and success in battle. Her image usually lacks exposed genitals or breasts and her origin story resists the influence of a woman. Athena becomes distinctly non-female in her seizing of military status.³⁰ We could perhaps say the same of Dio’s finalized creation of Boudicca, the warrior queen.

Conclusion

Shumate notes that, “high barbarian spirits and devotion to *libertas* become unruliness and lack of self-restraint.”³¹ I would add that this “unruliness” can be heightened by what L’Hoir calls Tacitus’ “fixation on the stereotype of the *dux femina*.”³² The creation of Boudicca in both Dio and Tacitus’ narrative is the creation of both a barbarian foreigner and an unruly, transgressive woman. Together, she becomes a figure who forewarns the brutality which results from female monopolization of power, while also playing part as a Noble Savage who articulates the faults of Romans from outside of the system. Her creation as Roman yet not Roman is fluid

²⁵ Which she defines as “a cultural system symbolized by the image of [...] the phallus [...] the concept denotes a successful claim by a male elite to general power.” It is a concept particularly concerned with the domination of elite men over all others, but particularly women. Eva C. Keuls, “Introduction,” 2.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Amy Richlin, “Not before Homosexuality: The Materiality of the Cinaedus and the Roman Law against Love between Men” in *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, v3 n4 (1993), 525 and 586.

²⁸ “Men insolent, unjust, insatiable, impious,—if, indeed, we ought to term those people men who bathe in warm water, eat artificial dainties, drink unmixed wine, anoint themselves with myrrh, sleep on soft couches with boys for bedfellows,—boys past their prime at that,—and are slaves to a lyre-player and a poor one too.” (62.6).

²⁹ Williams, “Beastly Woman: War Sex and Gender,” 121.

³⁰ Eva C. Keuls, “Attic Mythology: Barren Goddesses, Male Wombs, and the Cult of Rape” in *The Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 34-44.

³¹ Shumate, “Tacitus and the Rhetoric of Empire,” 96.

³² L’Hoir, “Tacitus and Women’s Usurpation of Power,” 5.

and dynamic even within a single narrative, and magnifies her transgressive identity as both foreign and female.

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