

Boudica's Revolt as *Exemplum*

The British queen Boudica has enjoyed a very healthy *Nachleben*, becoming a symbol for British nationalism, women's suffrage, and feminism (Gillespie 2018). She even has a new film starring Olga Kurylenko premiering in late October 2023. Despite her tremendous presence in popular imagination, there is a dearth of documentation for her reign and revolt against the Roman Empire. She is mentioned only in Cassius Dio's *Roman History* and two of Tacitus' works, the *Annales* and the *Agricola*.

There has been much interest in anti-imperialist viewpoints in Roman sources (Pagán 2000, Adler 2011), and Boudica (especially her speeches) has been studied as a mouthpiece for those sorts of critiques. Both Cassius Dio and Tacitus present accounts of Boudica's rebellion and include indictments of Roman imperialism. However, a major difference between the two narratives is the cause of Boudica's death. In the *Annales*, she kills herself by means of poison (*Boudicca vitam veneno finivit*, Tac. Ann. 14.37), while she dies from a sickness in Cassius Dio's account (ἀποθανούσης δὲ ἐν τούτῳ τῆς Βουδούικης νόσῳ, Cass. Dio 82.12). While scholars have contended that Boudica was depicted sympathetically in Tacitus' account (Adler 2011, Gillespie 2015), missing from these treatments is a larger discussion of the role that Boudica's suicide plays in her characterization. This paper will fill that gap, considering how the British queen's death contributes to her characterization and fits into larger literary patterns, both in Tacitus' *Annales* and in wider Latin literature.

On the one hand, Boudica's suicide fits into a larger pattern of "enemies of Rome" taking their lives with poison after defeat (Van Hooff 1990), a list which includes Hannibal, Mithridates, and Cleopatra. However, Boudica's revolt and suicide also fit into a pattern of

figures whom Tacitus depicts resorting to suicide rather than submit to servitude (cf. Arminius, Epicharis, and Cremutius Cordus) (Pagán 2000). Rather than portray her as a haughty, barbarian queen, Tacitus characterizes her as a Roman matron (Addler 2011). She stresses her role as a mother and freedom fighter over her nobility (*sed tunc non ut tantis maioribus ortam regnum et opes, verum ut unam e vulgo libertatem amissam*, Tac. Ann. 14.35), and Gillespie has even identified Livy's Lucretia as a major *comparandum* for Tacitus' Boudica (Gillespie 2015).

Furthermore, Tacitus juxtaposes Boudicca's death with negative Roman behaviors. Immediately following her suicide is that of Poenius Postumus, a Roman officer who had held the troops under his command from fighting in the climactic battle against the Britons (Tac. Ann. 14.37). He had denied the glory of victory to his soldiers, whereas Boudica, although unable to grant her soldiers victory, was able at least to give her warriors an honorable death in battle. She does what was expected of a Roman officer in that situation (Hill 2004). The end of the British revolt also ushers in imperial intervention in the Suetonius' administration of the province and the legate is reduced to obeying a freedman (Tac. Ann. 14.39; Strunk 2017). The Roman general, despite being victorious, does not have the *libertas* for which the Britons fought.

Thus, Boudica becomes a non-Roman Roman *exemplum* in the struggle for *libertas*, while Poenius and Suetonius becomes a Roman, un-Roman *exemplum*. By juxtaposing these *exempla*, Tacitus can criticize and undermine Roman characters and their flaws, while at the same time ultimately promoting Roman values.

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