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I, Boudica · Judy Grahn

During the reign of Nero, Roman colonizers occupied what is now southern Britain, having forced the Celtic tribes who lived there to render up one half of their produce and goods. Red-haired Boudica was Queen of the tribe Iceni, but the Romans negotiated with her husband, Prasutagus. Following his death in 61 A.D., the Romans drastically increased their oppression, land-grabbing and massacre of refugees fleeing their rule. When the Queen protested they publicly flogged her and raped her two daughters, to undermine her authority. Consequently she united a large number of tribes for a massive, broad-based, woman-led rebellion that shook Nero's emperorship and left London burned to the ground. The Romans won a last decisive battle/massacre, using war-machine methods against the Celts, and then venting their fear and rage on the civilian countryside, particularly concentrating on Boudica's own tribe.

Because she rocked the Roman world, and because of her place in the Celtic tradition of female warriors, and because of the native Celtic institutions of homosexual love for women and men, which shocked the Roman military, the conquerors attempted to obliterate Queen Boudica's name and memory. Their harshness only drove the Queen's name and reputation underground. There it has stayed for nineteen centuries, passed through lowerclass slang as the word "bulldike" or "bulldagger," describing a serious, tough-appearing, warriorlike lesbian. For personal as well as historical reasons, rediscovering this meaning of Queen Boudica's story has been one of the most thrilling acts of my life.

I, Boudica

A queen am I,
a warrior and a shaman.
Shameless is my goddess and ferocious;
my god's foot cloven.

I am protectress of my horsebound clansmen.
A red-haired, full-robed, bronze-belted swordswoman,
I am a queen of sacred groves and other old realms
where astronomers divine from droves of animals
or flocks of birds, and study the signs in palms;
a queen of times when men are lovers to the men
and the women to the women,
as is our honored pagan custom.
Ever and ever did we think to reign
in such an independent fashion,
until the day the foe came.

He came to my temple.
In ships he came to me.
Our possessions upon the prow of his ship he put.
He with hired soldiers came
to our self-ruled regions.
The foe, he with legions, entered my court.
He put his hands upon me, he filled me with fear.
My garments he tore away, and sent them to his wife.
The foe stripped off my jewels and put them on his son.
He seized my people's lands and gave them to his men.

He put his hands upon me, he filled me with rage.
I spoke to him in anger.
I told him of his danger.
So for me myself did he seek in the shrines.
In front of my folks he had me beat;
and this was not the worst I had to meet:
he seized my young daughters and had them raped.

He seized my daughters
and had them raped,
Oh queen of heaven, queen
who shatters the mountains;
how long before you must my
face be cast in hate?

A queen am I, my cities have betrayed me.
A queen, Boudica am I, my cities have betrayed me.
In that rebellious year
of sixty-one A.D. I rose up
I, Boudica, over the countryside
from clan to clan and ear to ear,
I drove round in a chariot,
my daughters with me.

To every woman and every man
I spoke:

“Now is the battle drawn
which must be victory or death.
For today I am more than your queen,
and more than your mother deeply wronged,
I am all the power of women brought down;
one who will fight to reclaim her place.
This is my resolve. Resolve is what I own.
We women shall fight. The men can live,
if they like, and be slaves.”

And so we went to war.
Our men went with us.
And for centuries since, the foe has
searched for us in all our havens,
secret circles, rings and covens;
almost always we elude him,
we who remember who we are;
we who are never not at war.

On that day
didn't I, Boudica
Didn't I up rise
didn't I slay,
didn't I hold fast
the ancient ways.

Wasn't I like a wall
wasn't I a great dike
against a giant spill,
that iron sea
of Roman pikes
that came to conquer Gaul.

Even if for one day
didn't the foe almost fall,
didn't his teeth gnash,
wasn't his bladder galled,
didn't the foe, even he,
know fear;
he feared me.

He feared me, then
in his being
unable to fully win
unable to fully kill
the rebel things
my name means,
he fears still.

He fears me still,
for my shameless guise
and lesbian ways;
for undefeated eyes,
a warrior's spine
and all my memories
of women's time.

A queen am I, my city
needs to find me.
Meantime the foe arrives
unceasingly
from every steel-grey sea,
by every mountain road on earth
he enters all my cities
and for me myself he seeks
in my varied shrines,
in my temples he pursues me,
in my halls he terrifies me,
saying, "Cause her to go forth."
He goads. He burns, he murders.
He erodes.

A queen am I,
a warrior and a shaman.
Shameless is my goddess and ferocious;
my god's foot cloven.

A queen am I, a living memory
who knows her own worth
and who remembers that the future
is the past rehearsed,

and *not should I go forth*
unless it be for battle girthed.
Unless it be for battle girthed,
and belted, *not should I go forth*

until the foe is driven from the earth.

March 29, 1980