

BOOK REVIEW

Polyphonic History: The Reception of Boudica and Notions of History-Making

Queen Boudica and Historical Culture in Britain: An Image of Truth: by Martha Vandrei, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, xi + 223 pp., illustrated, £60 (hardback), ISBN 9780198816720

‘Boadicea was a glorious woman!’ declares the heroine of a serial story in *Young Folk’s Weekly Budget*, who takes umbrage when her passionate Welsh patriotism elicits the intended compliment, ‘a civilised Boadicea’, from her new, English, schoolmates.¹ Her tirade continues, ‘Barbarian, indeed! Perhaps you think she lived like a monkey in the forest . . . considering the age she lived in, Queen Boadicea dressed as well as any royal people nowadays . . . Have you never read ‘Researches into the Ecclesiastical and Political State of Ancient Britain under the Roman Emperors’?’² After referencing several other scholarly works on historical costume and naming Boudica ‘Aregwedd Voeddug’, Miss Gwennie’s fictional exchange degenerates into general argument over the Welsh pronunciation.

Martha Vandrei’s fascinating monograph provides an invaluable framework for interpreting even such apparently casual references to Boudica, a figure who assumed an essential role in concepts of Roman Britain and British identity – a controversial test-case for how far Britain could be modelled after Rome. Vandrei embraces an impressively wide range of media, including both scholarly and popular genres, considering in most detail Boudica’s ancient literary presentation and her afterlives between the seventeenth and early twentieth centuries. This sample of her manifold appearances is examined with careful attention to each source’s relationship with the recurring and expected discourses at play, from national and imperial identities to gender politics. The intersection between public and scholarly genres (as demonstrated in Miss Gwennie’s learned references) is a key concern of the book, as is, in the final chapter, community identity across Wales, England, and Scotland.

The ambitious twin aim here is to use the case study of Boudica’s heterogeneous afterlives (‘the idea of Boudicca herself’) to examine historical methodology (‘the idea of history’, (p. 5)), as ‘a lens through which to view the development of history as a sphere of interest, whether popular, scholarly, or some less obvious category’ (p. 21). The advantages of intermedial and transhistorical approaches, both in tracing classical afterlives and illuminating the cultural landscape of (particularly nineteenth-century) Britain, are fully showcased in this careful study. One of the great strengths of nineteenth-century scholarship is its openness to interdisciplinary viewpoints, with the cross-fertilization between different fields this enables.

¹ ‘Ladye Byrde’, ‘Miss Gwennie, the White Lily of Tregarn’, *Young Folk’s*, 26 October 1878, 275 (Chapter 55).

² Francis Thackeray (London: Thomas Cadell, 1843).

Vandrei deliberately chooses ‘methods more often associated with literary scholars and cultural studies, particularly close readings of texts, thick description, and extensive contextualisation ... to excavate the multiple layers of meaning’. As such, this book represents an exciting link with the field of classical reception, although this is only acknowledged in a footnote (p. 11).

The blurring of boundaries between any straightforward understanding of popular and institutional or academic contexts, or between ephemeral and elite genres, is one of the most vigorously growing areas within the field of classical reception.³ In this context, Vandrei’s intention to test notions of ‘historical truth’ (p. 8) is perfectly comprehensible and reaps the reward of discovering the multifaceted extent to which Boudica has become embedded in British historical discourses, of all kinds.

Vandrei’s guiding principle – ‘that history is the product of many voices, not always in harmony’ – also intersects with classical reception’s traditional approach to mythical and historical figures, as traced through different media, time periods and in relation to different sources (for example, Carol Dougherty’s study of Prometheus and Maguire’s *Helen of Troy: from Homer to Hollywood*, by way of Herodotus, Chaucer, Joseph of Exeter, and Goethe).⁴ However, these more commonly choose to span either time or a wider range of media, rather than Vandrei’s combination of both ranges, while a wider range of archival and ephemeral genres are more common in studies of nineteenth-century classical reception.⁵

The nine illustrations represent this scope: a sixteenth-century woodcut, frontispiece and illustrations from seventeenth-, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts, and nineteenth- and twentieth-century sculptures. The cover image of an Edwardian pageant actress as Boudica whetted my appetite for the local traditions and non-elite sources discussed in the text. As this list suggests, the book is chronologically arranged. In addition to setting out the methodological context, located in scholarship on the invention of traditions, the place of the past, and the field of historical culture, the Introduction outlines Boudica’s origins in extant texts: Tacitus’ *Agricola* and *Annals*, alongside her characterization by Polydore Virgil, Geoffrey of Monmouth, and in the eleventh-century epitome of Dio Cassius’ second-century histories compiled by monk John Xiphilinus (p. 3).

The focus of the first chapter is the politicization of Tacitean history during the seventeenth century. Unpacking the links with Senecan stoicism, Vandrei analyses Edmund Bolton’s *Nero Caesar* (1624) to demonstrate that it ‘casts Boudicca’s rebellion as a cautionary tale’ (p. 21) and ‘showed the utility of the national past to historians and antiquaries’ (p. 49).

The second chapter moves into the seventeenth century, examining ‘the role of dramatic writers and hack historians in establishing [Boudica as part of] the spine of the popular narrative of national history’ (p. 22). As Vandrei explains, this period is usually discussed in terms of the growing ‘history market’, and she argues that the focus on ‘serious histories’ has resulted in ‘only a patchwork understanding of the way in which the English and British past came to be more widely disseminated’ in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (p. 53). In

³ See for example *Deep Classics*, ed. by Shane Butler (London: Bloomsbury, 2016); *Classics in Extremis*, ed. by Edmund Richardson (London: Bloomsbury, 2018): both challenges to such categories.

⁴ Carol Dougherty, *Prometheus* (London: Routledge, 2006); Laurie E. Maguire, *Helen of Troy: From Homer to Hollywood* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

⁵ Emma Bridges, *Imagining Xerxes: Ancient Perspectives on a Persian King* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015) is an exception in spanning a range of media and over six centuries of the ancient world plus twenty-first-century responses.

contrast, this chapter showcases Boudica's increasing number of cameo appearances in more popular genres: for instance, Vandrei suggests that Boudica's presence in Thomas Heywood's *Exemplary Lives* (1640) after her absence from his previous *Gynaekeion* (1624) suggests that Boudica's story was only beginning to percolate through popular culture in the seventeenth century (p. 60). The development of the panoramic history genre, an analysis continued into Chapter Three, is identified as crucial to a shift towards more routine inclusion of Boudica in the 'opening chapter of dozens, more likely hundreds' of such accounts (p. 83), whose format of 'only a few pages to fire the imaginations of their readers with the story of the tragic Queen' (p. 73) necessitated more recurring emotional engagement with the narrative. Analysing Thomas Heywood and Nathaniel Crouch alongside one another 'illuminate[s] crossover between genres and discourses of historical truth' (p. 22) and begins to disentangle 'an older relationship that has yet to be fully understood: that between prose history and stage drama' (p. 55).

Chapter Three continues the chronological momentum into the mid-eighteenth century, with analysis of interaction between historical writers of opposing political opinions and particularly the politicization of the Druids (p. 88). Vandrei is interested in 'political disagreement ... [as] a form of historical argument' (p. 83) centred around the traditional use of the past as 'a repository of examples for the present' (p. 82). One of Vandrei's key examples – Richard Glover's drama based on Boudicca (1753) – is revisited in Chapter Four in its revised form, *Boadicea; or, The British Amazon* (Sadler's Wells, 1800) and analysed alongside Thomas Rhodes' *The Patriot Queen; or, Female Heroism* (1808). Entitled "'Too strange to be popular': Negotiating Past and Present in Early Nineteenth-century Historical Culture', this chapter encompasses a wide set of sources, many ephemeral.

Along with the second chapter's analysis of Boudica's progress from an essential part of a national history narrative to a focus in her own right by the end of the seventeenth century (p. 77), this exploration of the 'variety of historical genres that were available' in the early nineteenth century (p. 115) seems the most essential to the volume's twin aim to achieve greater insight into Boudica's afterlives through juxtaposition of a manifold range of genres and media. Alongside women's and children's periodicals, Vandrei argues that a privately printed tragedy, Coutts Lindsay's *Boadicea* (1857), 'does not ring true as a comment on the recent uprising in India, nor indeed does it speak in any explicit way as to any renewed contemporary interest in Queenship' (p. 135).

Chapter Four, with its 'avalanche of material' from the nineteenth century (p. 143) struck me as the tipping point in the dilemma that Vandrei identifies in her conclusion: 'that in order to tell one story – that of historical culture – it is necessary that the other story – that revolving around Boudicca's representation – must remain in a state of irresolution' (p. 203). Vandrei rejects a simple reading of Boudica 'as hitched to any number of contemporary cultural concerns or events of public importance' in favour of a 'multiplicity of contradictory images' (p. 143). Charting and contextualizing gradual changes, Vandrei stresses a balanced view: there was a 'distinct degree of continuity ... growth, not wholesale change' (p. 115) and the resultant co-existence of conflicting views.

Chapter Five applies this approach to Thorneycroft's sculptural group of Boudica by the Houses of Parliament, in conjunction with contemporary historical novels, as 'a revealing instance of the importance of understanding, in fine detail, the processes behind the creation of individual historical products' (p. 159). Emphasizing once again the 'more complex story to tell about the relationship between the ancient past and the Victorian present', Vandrei

eschews notions of Boudica as straightforwardly ‘a figure of cultish imperial enthusiasm, or perhaps a female Barbarian of the dark ages both opposing and presaging the civility of modernity’ (p. 148).

Chapter Six, “‘That ubiquitous monarch’: Boudica from Wales to Essex’, likewise argues for multiplicity, as specifically exploited in the local and regional historical narratives which flourished in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Evidence from communities across England, Scotland and Wales, including municipal sculpture and pageantry, demonstrate that Boudica ‘was not rootless’ (p. 171), even as the ability to produce ‘location’ shoots in the new medium of historical film appealed to a new sort of mass audience (p. 197).

The book concludes with a methodological reflection on this ‘experiment’ (p. 203) and its disciplinary and chronological challenges (p. 205). It is fascinating to note that, where Vandrei urges ‘historians of history to look beyond the discipline’ to non-professional genres and ‘cultural historians . . . [to examine] the more thoughtful human stories behind cultural production’ and to embrace ‘history as a field of multifarious culture’ (p. 22), classical reception has tended to move from its focus on the classical tradition, largely tracing ‘family trees’ of classical inspiration in major figures, toward a more inclusive, nuanced approach to popular genres and their cultural and historical contexts.

Readers will find their own highlights throughout the book: I was intrigued to learn that female pageanteers in Colchester were presented with medals struck with Boudica’s likeness (p. 195) and – while sympathetic to the challenges of fitting such a wealth of material into one study – this whetted my appetite for more on the pageants (such as the 1909 suffragette pageant mentioned in Antonia Fraser’s 1988 *The Warrior Queens*) and the periodicals which were among Vandrei’s shorter case studies. These examples reflect my own interests, of course, but perhaps a future edition could provide more of a sense of how representative the various chosen foci are: I would have liked some examples of Cowper’s *Boadicea* in periodicals (p. 116) and more than four references to ‘numerous’ periodical stories (p. 132).

Vandrei’s inclusion of non-professional historical encounters is, to my mind, one of the most valuable aspects of this study, and is what drives the important (albeit occasionally frustrating) realization that ‘we should resist any temptation to seek a single narrative trajectory in Boudicca’s posthumous life’ (p. 144). This is the lens that enables Vandrei to reflect on ‘historical truth . . . as the ambiguous soul that animates the body of history’ – a topic flagged up by the subtitle quote of Edmund Bolton’s words, and about which she clearly holds passionate views (p. 8). The energy of this project shines through, presented as ‘a challenge to the axioms of cultural history, new historicism, and other mainstays of twentieth- and twenty-first-century historical scholarship’ (abstract). Although Vandrei expresses her reserves, in conclusion, that the ‘story of Boudicca’ and ‘the idea of history itself’ (p. 5), ‘could, perhaps more easily and with greater clarity, have been pursued separately’, it is clear that the ‘dissolution of Boudicca’s iconicity into multiplicity’ is less ‘a limitation’, and rather proves the value of including, so far as possible, so full a sweep of the ‘iterative and dialogic nature of history making’ (p. 204).

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