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**TAMING THE HEART OF THE WILD: THE DOMESTICATION
OF WOMEN
IN JOHN FLETCHER'S *TRAGEDIE OF BONDUCA***

SAMANTHA FRÉNÉE-HUTCHINS

Orléans University, France

Château de la Source, Avenue du Parc Floral, BP 6749

45067 Orléans, France

samantha.frenee@gmail.com

***Abstract:** Fletcher's Bonduca is quite explicit in dealing with the patriarchal objective of domesticating the rebellious woman. Bonduca and her two daughters do not conform and so are sanctioned. They are portrayed as wild animals and marginal figures that have to be tamed, broken in through violence and rape in order to be re-integrated into the nation. When they refuse to be domesticated, their only option is suicide. However, this also stands as an allegory for taming the wild heart of England's colonial spaces.*

***Keywords:** Boadicea, Bonduca, Boudica, Caratach, Fletcher, gender.*

Introduction

John Fletcher's *Tragedie of Bonduca* was first presented to a London public by the King's Men sometime in 1613 or 1614 and stands as a record of the change in the status of women in Jacobean England. Not only is Bonduca,

the British queen of the Iceni, excluded by her cousin, Caratach, from the decision-making process of leadership, but she is also demoted as military leader and head of her family when Caratach assumes command of Bonduca's army and family, even taking their nephew, Hengo, into his care.

The play's title announces it as a tragedy whereas it actually belongs to the genre of romance. It is a Roman history play, based loosely on the rebellion of Boudica and her tribe against the Roman occupation of Britain in 60-61 AD, but, in a contrast with the historical accounts, this story ends in a reconciliation between Caratach, general of the Britons, and Suetonius, the Roman leader, following a Roman victory. The 'tragedy' of the play refers not to the Britons' military defeat but to the deaths of Bonduca, her two daughters, her nephew Hengo and other British and Roman characters. It is Bonduca's refusal to follow the honourable path of other women, a refusal which nearly ends in national annihilation, which is the real tragedy.

The two intersecting battle lines which separate the Romans from the Britons and the men from the women are represented as the antithesis between masculine Roman order and feminine barbarian chaos, and the play offers its spectators two equivocal messages (I say 'equivocal' because certain of the dialogues seem to express criticism of the dominant view). Firstly, it is implied that the new British empire under James I is imposing order and civilisation on the conquered peoples of Ireland and America, and on its own Celtic fringes, whereas the very notions of civilisation and barbarity are in fact questioned by the play. The second message apparently implies that female excess leads to the destruction and loss of the family and of the nation, whereas in reality gender roles are aired and opened up to debate.

Bonduca and her two daughters do not conform to the desired image of the perfect woman, which is one of obedience, docility and chastity, and so they are sanctioned. Fletcher's play is quite explicit in dealing with the patriarchal objective of domesticating the rebellious woman. Here the women are portrayed as wild animals and marginal figures that have to be tamed, broken in through violence and rape in order to be re-integrated into the nation. However, Bonduca and her daughters refuse to be domesticated and choose suicide rather than slavery; they may well represent subjects who have got away. This article examines these ideas.

The clearest reference to the role of women is when Caratach shouts at Bonduca for her bad military judgement and tells her to return home:

Caratach.   Why do you offer to command? the divell,
                      The divell, and his dam too, who bid you
                      Meddle in mens affairs?

Bonduca.   I'll help all.

Caratach.   Home,
                      Home and spin woman, spin, go spin, ye trifle.

Exeunt Queene and Daughters

III. v. 132-5

The dialogue above demonstrates male anxiety over powerful women and shows the male protagonist of the play pushing Bonduca and her two daughters back into the domestic sphere of the home. The reference to the devil and his mother further implies that women who meddle in the public affairs of men are motivated by evil impulses which come from the wild

side of their nature. Yet just as the historical Boudica was given a regiment of women to lead in Boece's Scottish account of Boudica's rebellion (Boece 1540: The feird buke, fo. cli), so too is Bonduca in Fletcher's play:

Caratach.   Come, worthy Lady,
                      Let's to our several charges, and henceforth
                      Allow an enemy both weight and worth.

I. i. 186

It is of passing interest to note the double sense of the word 'charge' here. In fact, both Caratach and Bonduca have military responsibilities and regiments with which to charge the enemy but they also have their children to look after (Bonduca has her two daughters and Caratach their nephew). Yet within the course of the play Bonduca is shown to be an incompetent and irresponsible war leader, not to mention a poor mother. She is not "a conqueror" (I. i. 123) but "a talker" (I. i. 24) whose gender disqualifies her from understanding military strategy. The war tactics of Bonduca and her daughters are determined by sexual traps and treachery, which Caratach calls "a woman's wisdom" (III. v. 67). Not only is Bonduca ignorant of the rules of war, but she is assigned complete responsibility for Britain's defeat when Caratach, outraged by her inexplicable error of judgement, cries out:

Caratach.   Charge 'em i'th' flanks: O ye have plaid the fool,
                      The fool extremely, the mad fool.

Bonduca.   Why Cosin?

Caratach.   The woman fool. Why did you give the word
                      Unto the carts to charge down, and our people
                      In grosse before the Enemie? We pay for't,

Our own swords cut our throats: Why? ----- on't,

III. v. 126-131

Initial British successes are attributed to Caratach's sound military judgement, and defeat comes only when Bonduca uses her own initiative. In Caratach's soliloquy at the very beginning of the fifth act, which is dominated by him following Bonduca's death, he lambasts Bonduca for her treacherous leadership in the final battle which has effectively led to defeat in the war and to the destruction of the nation and of the very fabric of society with the loss of an entire generation of men:

Caratach. O thou woman,
Thou agent for adversities, what curses
This day belong to thy improvidence?
To *Britanie* by thy means, what sad millions
Of widows weeping eyes? The strong mans valour
Thou hast betraid to fury; the childe's fortune
To fear, and want of friends: whose pieties
Might wipe his mournings off, and build his sorrows
A house of rest by his blest ancestors:
The virgins thou has rob'd of all their wishes,
Blasted their blowing hopes, turn'd their songs,
Their mirthful Marriage songs to Funerals,
The Land thou hast left a wilderness of wretches.

V. i. 3-15

Sadly, Bonduca's widowhood, which had opened the door to her emancipation and power as a woman, raises the proleptic spectre of a nation

destabilised by female rule and defenceless against enemy attack. Britain is now a land of lost souls, and this, according to Jodi Mikalachki, would have been Boudica's legacy to Britain if she had been victorious against the Romans. It is also a legacy that left its mark on British history: "the fear of collapsing into such grotesquely feminized savagery is Boadicea's legacy to early English nationalism" (Mikalachki 1998:15). Such women need to be put down, put back into their place, and in this play naming seems to be a significant factor in this process. For example, Bonduca's name may feature as the title of the play, but it is rarely mentioned. Instead her name is frequently replaced by generic insults such as "woman fool" (III. v. 128).

Bonduca's position of national leader and heroine is further undermined by her presentation as an unnatural mother. She is shown to be harsh and infanticidal when she forces her second daughter to commit suicide. Both Suetonius and the second daughter herself plead with Bonduca in an attempt to save her life:

2. *Daughter.* O perswade her, Romanes:
 Alas, I am young, and would live. Noble mother,
 Can ye kill that ye gave life? are my yeers
 Fit for destruction?

Suetonius. Yeeld, and be a Queen still,
 A mother, and a friend.

IV. iv. 93-96

Caratach, on the other hand, is represented as a protective maternal figure for Hengo. In the initial stage directions in Fletcher's foul papers Bonduca enters with "(*hir Daughter*) **Hengo:** (*hir Sonne*) **Nennius :&**

Soldiers” (Fletcher 1951:2 & Preface xiii). She was thus originally Hengo’s mother. This was later amended to “aunt” and her daughter was given a sister. We can say, then, that Caratach was later chosen by Fletcher to play the maternal role towards Hengo in order to create a binary opposition between the destructive motherhood of Bonduca and the caring motherhood of Caratach. Of Caratach’s role Mikalachki notes: “Caratach takes on the maternal role [...] His whole concern in this last act is the nursing and feeding of the boy, Hengo, who is dying of sickness and hunger after the British defeat. Caratach’s language to the boy is tender and protective” (Mikalachki 1998:105).

The appropriation of the maternal role by Caratach effectively reverses the traditional gender identities of the sexes. In this play Bonduca may be the Queen Mother but it is really Caratach who is the king and, like James, “the new loving nourish father” to his people (Orgel 1990:119-39). Catherine Belsey also makes an interesting point when discussing the “recurrent disappearance of mothers from interpretations of the fifth commandment [honour thy father and thy mother]” during the Jacobean period, when the emphasis was laid more on the father as the head of the family and of the state which effectively excluded any authoritative place for wives (Belsey 1985:158).

However, two points need to be added. Firstly, Bonduca refuses to charge the enemy’s lines until she knows where her daughters are and that they are safe (III. v. 55-56). Secondly, Bonduca and the first daughter invoke suicide as the only means to protect their honour from the charge of whoredom (IV. iv. 96-97) and in order to protect them from further rapes (IV. iv. 110-111). With these arguments the second daughter finds the courage to kill herself. Although both Bonduca’s and Caratach’s roles end

in the death of their children, we witness once again the exclusion of women from their maternal role.

In the literary texts of the time those women who did not conform, the ones who refused to be brought into the home, were punished; they were pushed to the margins of society as witches, Amazons or wild animals, where they had to be broken in through violence in order to be re-integrated into the nation through marriage. Those women who did conform to the respectable image of feminine honour displayed an image of obedience, silence and sexual purity, traits which are lacking in both of the daughters in *Bonduca* because of their rebellion and their having been raped. Unfortunately for them, the chaste and honest woman had to appear to be so, and she herself was responsible for protecting her reputation. Little sympathy is shown for the daughters' having suffered rape and they are shown more as a threat to male control and national security. This is transparently clear when Bonduca's second daughter says to her uncle, Caratach: "We will have vengeance for our rapes" (III. v. 69). To which he replies: "By ____/ You should have kept your legs close then" (III. v. 70).

Accused of implicit compliance, rape victims in the literary texts had only one recourse to prove non-complicity: suicide. At the end of this play Bonduca's first daughter refers to two Roman ladies, Lucretia and Portia, who had killed themselves for this reason (IV. iv. 115-119), after which she too commits suicide. Another reference can be found in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, in which Lavinia, who has been raped by Tamora's sons, is unable to commit suicide due to the mutilation of her body, but she still has to die in order to save her honour, and so it is her father who stabs her in the final scene of the play:

Titus. Die, die, Lavinia, and thy shame with thee;
And with thy shame thy father's sorrow die!

V. iii. 46-47

Here, it is not just Lavinia's shame or honour which is at stake but also that of her family name. This is clearly recognised by Junius in *Bonduca* when he falls in love with Bonduca's second daughter and says to himself: "But to love there .../Mine honour dare not ask: shee has been ravish'd" (II. ii. 33-4). Because of the loss of her honour through rape Junius knows that he should not fall in love with Bonduca's daughter or his own honour will be compromised. Such 'dishonoured' or 'dishonourable' women are represented as wild animals, savages and marginal figures.

Bonduca and her daughters feed into the social idea of the disobedient woman as something wild and free that has to be controlled. In *Bonduca* we learn that the attempt to tame the female characters has already occurred before the opening of the play; Bonduca has already been flogged by the Romans: "they abus'd me" (I. i. 146), which is the only reference to her historical whipping, and her two daughters have been raped. The reference to the second daughter as "crackt i' th' ring" (I. ii. 271) may be a reference to her loss of mental balance, but its primary meaning is the loss of her virginity through rape. A 'ring' in early modern English had several meanings, of which two are applicable here: the ring as the female vagina and the ring as the *gyrus*, a training ring for breaking in horses. Not only has she been "crackt" open by rape but she has also been broken in like a horse.

The notion of rape as a crime is ambiguous in a number of the Jacobean plays. In law it was certainly a crime but in the literary texts of the early modern period rape could prove a man's virility and/or his position of

power within his community, as it does for Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Theseus, the Duke of Athens, has won Hippolyta's love after defeating her in battle:

Theseus.   Hippolyta, I woo'd thee with my sword,
                  And won thy love doing thee injuries;
                  But I will wed thee in another key,

I. i. 7-9

The “injuries” refers to Theseus's rape of the Amazon queen. Their fight and the defeat of Hippolyta through rape seems to symbolise the ritual passage of a female into marriage and thus into womanhood. Traditionally, marriage was seen as domesticating the Amazon woman by integrating her into society (Macdonald 1988:6). This seems to be the case in a number of Fletcher's chastity plays too, although Nancy Cotton-Pearse inserts a degree of warning into this interpretation of Fletcher's plays when she writes “that some component of the so-called Elizabethan world picture has been lost to us, and that this loss makes us unable to see the didactic qualities in the Fletcherian plays”. Certainly the initial critics of Fletcher's plays commended them for their didactic benefit in teaching correct and virtuous behaviour to the two genders. It is, of course, surprising that in some of the early modern plays the rape victim is held responsible for her own rape, as we saw earlier in the passage in which Caratach tells his niece that she should have kept her legs together. Such rape victims had only two courses of action open to them: suicide, or marriage to their rapist.

In Fletcher's *The Queene of Corinth* (1617) another rape victim, Merione, should traditionally plead for death but instead pleads for marriage when she says to Theanor:

You have had your foul will; make it yet fair with marriage;
Open your self and take me, wed me now.

II. i.18

Following Cotton-Pearse's analysis of this play we can concur with her view that "Merione is a Christianised Lucrece in that she does not contemplate suicide as a remedy for rape" (Cotton-Pearse 1973:163). Instead she intends to "live a poor recluse Nun" until she dies or "till Heaven shall ... send me comfort" (II. ii. 25). The "comfort" in question would be eventual marriage to the man who had raped her (Cotton-Pearse 1973:162). Even if marriage did not save them from the charge of complicity at least it saved their honour, their place in society and their lives.

However, here, in *The Tragedie of Bonduca*, the first daughter invokes suicide as the only choice. Furthermore, the deaths of the female victims are seen as acts of heroism and defiance against the male conqueror. The daughter's speech is particularly challenging in this respect:

Generall,
Hear me, and mark me well, and look upon me
Directly in my face, my womans face,
Whose onely beautie is the hate it bears ye;
See with thy narrowest eyes, thy sharpest wishes,
Into my soul, and see what there inhabits;
See if one fear, one shadow of a terrour,
One palenesse dare appear but from my anger,
To lay hold on your mercies. No, ye fools,
Poor Fortunes fools, we were not born for triumphs,

To follow your gay sports, and fill your slaves
With hoots and acclamations.

IV. iv. 50-61

Their suicides will protect them from Roman ‘triumphs’, from further rapes and armed conflict, for death is a place “where no Wars come,/ Nor lustful slaves to ravish us” (IV. iv. 110-110). As a rejection of her place as controlled subject, a woman’s suicide, as analysed by Catherine Belsey, was “paradoxically, the supreme assertion of both the autonomy of the subject and the sovereignty of the social body” (Belsey 1985:124). The literary critic Peter Berek even suggests that the powerful women in the Beaumont and Fletcher plays functioned as a challenge to Jacobean absolutism (Berek 2002:359-377).

A further interpretation of the two battle lines, between the Romans and the Britons and between men and women, could link them to the Jacobean debate about England’s own colonial ambitions in the British Archipelago Isles and the Americas. Taming the rebellious woman is an allegory for taming the heart of the wild, that is, the colonies and the colonised too. In Fletcher’s play Britain’s integration into the Roman Empire stands primarily as an allegory for Welsh integration into England. If Wales holds a significant place in the Roman plays of the period we may add that Ireland is the subtext and the sparring ground for penetration into the Americas. Yet relations with the native population could also be dangerous and could threaten the identity of the coloniser. For example, intermarriage between the coloniser and the colonised, as envisaged by Junius, the Roman captain, when he falls in love with Bonduca’s younger daughter, could submerge the identity of the occupying forces and lead to a loss of reason and a return to a more primitive state. When Junius falls out

of love with Bonduca's daughter he cries: "I am my self" (III. v. 126), for he has recovered his mental faculties.

Contact with native women is represented as something which could lead to degeneracy and a loss of military judgement, as shown in Petillius's necrophilic desire for Bonduca's first daughter, now dead:

Petillius.   What do I ail, i' th' name of heaven? I did but see her,
And see her die: she stinks by this time strongly,
Abominably stinks: she was a woman,
A thing I never car'd for: but to die so,
So confidently, bravely, strongly.

V. ii. 1-5

Junius mocks Petillius's wandering mind by saying:

Observ'd him,
And found him taken, infinitely taken
With her bravery: I have follow'd him,
And seen him kisse his sword since, court his scabbard,
Call dying, dainty deer; her brave minde, mistriss;

V. ii. 89-93

Read in this light, Fletcher's play is somewhat ambivalent. The refusal of the female characters to be tamed, a refusal which results in their deaths at the end of Act Four, can be interpreted as a stand for female independence and as a challenge to absolutism but also as a stand for colonial, or ethnic, freedom, for individual freedom or even for Protestant activism against the Roman Catholic threat. Clearly, the narrative of

Bonduca is not simply one of gender conflict; it is also one of native resistance to empire. The play includes a colonial message for the contemporary Jacobean audience, for inscribed in the play there is a certain questioning of the ethics of colonial ambitions. The new 'British' empire under James I is seemingly imposing order and civil ways on the conquered peoples of Ireland and America, whereas, in fact, the very notions of civilised and barbarous are something this play calls into question.

The stage onto which such ideas were projected in the early modern period was that of the female body, emblem of the earth and of new lands waiting to be opened up and cultivated. In Fletcher's play the Roman soldiers' rape of the two British girls contains these further meanings; the conquest of their bodies represents the conquest of virgin territory and its integration into the Roman Empire. And yet with the ambiguity of Fletcher's play the treatment of unruly women, and their heroism, is equally an allegory for indigenous resistance – and for its suppression.

A significant aspect of *Bonduca's* resistance to her Roman aggressors is that of her death oration before her Roman conquerors. Despite *Bonduca's* occlusion from the play at the end of Act Four, the playwright's treatment of her is not unsympathetic. Her speech is certainly an enigma within such a written ovation to masculine supremacy. Here I include a part of it. When Suetonius tells her that she "must adore and fear the power of *Rome*", and that she "cannot scape our strength" (IV. iv. 14-15) she replies:

'tis fitter I should reverence
The thatched houses where the Britains dwell
In careless mirth, where the blest household gods
See nought but chaste and simple puritie.

'Tis not high power that makes a place divine,
Nor that the men from gods derive their line.
But sacred thoughts in holy bosoms stor'd
Make people noble, and the place ador'd.

IV. iv. 19-26

In spite of Caratach's criticism of Bonduca, she possesses courage and a very clear-sighted patriotism and love of her country, which stands in contrast to Caratach's equivocal love of Britain and his admiration for the Romans. What is more, this speech holds a contemporary message, both religious and political, for Jacobean England. It clearly includes the Protestant values of home, chastity and purity, but its anti-absolutist message: "'Tis not high power that makes a place divine,/Nor that men from gods derive their line," would not have been lost on an audience living under a king who did believe he was God's elect on earth and, what is more, a king who had certain Catholic sympathies, including a wife newly converted to Catholicism.

However, such an anti-absolutist message would also have shocked contemporary audiences, particularly that of the court itself. Another reading of Bonduca's speech may suggest that Fletcher is criticising her insularity. She is represented as an insular Briton in the debate over a united 'Great Britain' (England, Wales and Scotland). Despite this she still emerges as a national icon, proposing a nation of people in opposition to Caratach's vision of territorial amalgamation with Rome. We can say that Bonduca's death even saves British honour and shows that British patriotism has not been tamed.

Following the suicide of Bonduca's daughters Suetonius still pleads with Bonduca to surrender by offering her terms of her own choice (IV. iv. 138). Refusing these, she embraces her end, even claiming victory in death:

Ye should have ti'd up death first, when ye conquer'd
Ye sweat for us in vain else: see him here,
He's ours still, and our friend; laughs at your pities;
And we command him with as easie reins
As do our enemies. I feel the poison.

IV. iv. 142-146

Such exchanges stand for allegories of territorial consolidation, unity and national identity as primitive Britain is absorbed, tempered and civilised by the Roman Empire. Caratach's British embrace of the Roman enemy, the coloniser, the other, at the end of the play represents an initiation into civilisation and the construction of a national identity, but its rejection, the position chosen by Bonduca, leads to death or the loss of self-identity in the wilderness.

In this tragedy, just as Bonduca dies, Decius, a Roman commander, enters to announce to Seutonius: "'Tis won, Sir, and the Britains/ All put to th' sword" (IV. iv. 154). The reconciliation in the play only takes place in the final act once the British resistance has been destroyed. If this is an allegory for 'British' imperialism in Ireland and the Americas, can we say that the English nation was really integrating the conquered peoples into 'civilisation' through violent subjugation followed by reconciliation and education, or were they, the English colonisers, themselves the barbarians? Fletcher's play does seem to question the ethics of conquest and the role of

England in the new world order, as well as looking at masculine honour and the subjugation of women.

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