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Englands Happie Queene: Female Rulers in Early English History

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Englands Happie Queene:

Female Rulers in Early English History

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Abstract

This paper examines the historical records and later literature surrounding three early mythic and historical British queens: Albina, mythic founder of Albion; Cordelia, pre-Roman queen regnant in British legend; and Boudica, the British leader of a first-century rebellion against the Romans. My work focuses on who these queens were, what powers they were given, and the mythos around them. I examine when they appear in the historical record and when their stories are expanded upon, and how those stories were influenced by the political culture of England through the early seventeenth century. In particular, I examine English attitudes toward cultivating a sense of national identity and the expectations of women, especially those with political power, within English society, and how these elements influence and inform the changes made to the stories of these queens. This project relies on primary sources from Roman histories written in the first century CE to English chronicles from the beginning of the Stuart era. I have also examined a handful of literary works, particularly plays and poetry, to survey the change in public presentation of these queens.

Key Words: History, Medieval and Renaissance Studies, historiography, Cordelia, Albina, Boudica, British history, history, medieval, chronicle
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When questions of national identity emerge, people tend to look to their cultural history for precedence and reassurance. Where there is not a history to turn to, or the story does not suit the desired narrative or concern at hand, people create the representation they want to see. By tracing the historiography of a nation’s origins and early rulers, we can better understand the expectations and ideals held by the people and societies that recorded them. In some cases, the figures we turn to are intentionally fabricated, providing a template to project a story onto. With real historical figures, however, writers choose to twist their stories, erase them from the narrative, or re-introduce them when they become useful and relevant. In the history and legends of the British, most of these national figures are men; the few women, however, play notable roles that fluctuate depending on their usefulness to the author’s story. In particular, the mythical rulers Albina and Cordelia and the historic leader Boudica enter and exit the historical record in ways that clearly follow and support constantly fluctuating attitudes towards women and the search for a national identity.¹

Through the lives of Albina, Cordelia, and Boudica as detailed in medieval histories, chroniclers were able to cultivate a sense of England’s national identity and comment on the lives of contemporary women, especially those who held high positions of power. The emergence of national identity is seen most clearly in Albina, a fourteenth century origin myth for Britain that gained popularity for roughly 200 years before she was dismissed. Cordelia was

¹ Kenneth Jackson, "Queen Boudicca?" Britannia 10, (1979): 255, https://doi.org/10.2307/526060. Spelling in these early sources is in no way standardized between or within works, which can make it difficult to create a cohesive account. As such, I have decided to use primarily one spelling of each name. All references, except those in direct quotes, will use a standardized form of the name. Albina’s name is the anglicized version of the original “Albine” used in Des Grantz Geanz. Cordelia’s name follows the standardized form used by most scholars. The spelling of Boudica is based on Kenneth Jackson’s reproduction of the Celtic name.
believed to be Britain’s first—and only—queen regnant until the Tudor era when her story was called into question; from her earliest mention to her movement to fiction, Cordelia was used to explore the possibility and consequences of a female monarch with control over the whole of Britain. As the only real historical figure, Boudica’s treatment is a bit different: her earliest mentions are colored by anti-British sentiment, and her absence in the historical record was facilitated by the English struggle between independence and allegiance to the Roman Catholic Church. Her re-discovery and subsequent popularity in England, therefore, are tied to both a new understanding of national identity and the need for a new historic female figure following the fall of Cordelia. Taken as a whole, this lives of these women, as recorded by chroniclers, demonstrate the struggle of understanding women rulers while finding an English national identity in British figures.

In the more than 1500 years that passed between the Roman invasion of Britain and the English Civil War, various historians tried their hand at recording and preserving the history of Britain. Some copied earlier histories and added in contemporary events, with the most notable differences between their pre-history and that of their sources being the inclusion or exclusion of a minor detail here or there. Other chroniclers, however, created entirely new “histories,” either greatly editing/expanding on previous stories or adding in new figures and events altogether. Both types of works are useful; in the first, variations in the stories of the queens I focus on can reveal shifting attitudes toward women and their position in society. The second type does this more clearly; additionally, the addition of new events is often directly influenced by a particular event or movement in the broader society. Intentionally fictional sources, such as plays and poems, allow for a more explicit corruption of the story for these reasons. As such, my paper utilizes both types of sources: those that add in the queens or fabricate new details in their
stories, and those that mostly copy from previous sources with minor variations. Wherever possible I have used the original texts, through either facsimile copies, digital scans, or transcriptions. I rely on translations for non-English texts.

The three women I focus on are not the only women written about by early chronicles, but they are certainly the most popular of their respective categories. Albina is the English response to Scota, the female figure in Scottish chronicles reported to be the origin of the kingdom and the earliest inhabitants of the island. While earlier English chronicles pointed to a Trojan-Brutus origin myth, the Albina story allowed them to create a more ancient origin of the British to refute Scottish claims; she becomes the first person to claim rule over the island and give it her name. Of the mythic monarchs of Britain, only three women rule over the country; although the other two, Gwendolyn and Marcia, held control longer than Cordelia, both ruled only until their sons came of age, while Cordelia was her father’s heir and ruled in her own right. Although very little is known of the early British chiefs and leaders, two women from the first century have made their way down to us: Cartimandua, queen of the Brigantes and ally of the Romans, and Boudica, an Iceni chief’s wife who leads several tribes in a revolt against the Romans. Although both appear in Roman records, disappear in medieval chronicles, and re-appear after the discovery and translation of several Roman authors, it is Boudica who becomes sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England’s central figure from the early Roman-British period.

**Albina**

The earliest historical mentions of Britain give the island the name “Albionum,” or Albion. Though Britain soon replaced the name in Greco-Roman histories and later insular
writers, Albion remained a poetic and historical name for the island. Although a suggested etymology and origin for Britain and its people emerged by the ninth century, a similar explanation of Albion did not emerge until the fourteenth century, when the story of an ancient woman named Albina began appearing in chronicles. While Albina never gained the popularity or credibility of other origin myths, chroniclers who chose to include her story often did so in an attempt to create a national identity that went back further than before. These chroniclers often did so in response to Scottish origin stories or as part of a larger European history that traced the island’s history to Creation. To late medieval English chroniclers, Albina was a national symbol confirming the antiquity and superiority of their nation.

The first writers to mention Britain did not dwell too much on its history. These early chroniclers were Greek and Roman scholars, and too little was known of the distant island that lay outside their empires. In these surveys, the island is called “insula Albionum,” or “the island of Albion.” Although this name was soon replaced by “Britain,” various writers used Albion as a more poetic name for the island. Another popular etymology derives the name from “alba-,” the proto-Celtic term for “white,” reportedly based on the southern cliffs of the island.

By the time the Romans began to turn their focus north, very little information about the inhabitants of Britain had made its way to the empire. Julius Caesar wrote about the island and its people in his *Gallic War*, where he reported that the interior British tribes “claim on the strength of their own tradition to be indigenous to the island,” while he believed the coastal tribes were “immigrants from Belgic territory who came after plunder and to make war.” Another Roman writer, Diodorus Siculus, gave a brief look into the lifestyle of the island’s inhabitants,

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2 Avienus's *Ora Maritima*, line 112. 4th century BCE, believed to have been based on a 6th century text.
noting that they were organized into tribes. Interestingly, he wrote, “they make use of chariots in their wars, just as tradition tells us the ancient Greek heroes did in the Trojan War.”

Although Diodorus presented a slightly more positive account than Caesar, both are overall dismissive of the people they saw as inferior to the Romans. Most following accounts of the indigenous Britons followed suit: not much was known of the origins of the people, but descriptions of their lifestyle grew more violent as the Romans sought to justify their control of the island and subjugation of the local people. Tacitus touched on the question of British origins in his *Agricola*, blaming the uncertainty on their barbarous nature. Various Roman writers attempted to explain the origin of the Britons, but their distance and lack of personal investment left few surviving sources that offer any other suggestions.

The question of the history of Britain arose again after the fall of the Roman Empire. As the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms emerged in Britain, local scholars began to compile histories of the island. These histories served a dual purpose: not only did they cultivate a scholarly understanding of the island’s past and record the present, but also they often helped establish the right of a ruler over their kingdom. The first few English chroniclers follow the same patterns as the Romans; they offer a brief description of the peoples living on the island, propose an origin of some sort, and move onto the Caesarian invasions. These authors were generally descendants of the Romans or part of the new Anglo-Saxon invaders, and as such, the superior attitude over the inferior Britons continued in these chronicles.

These chroniclers are willing to speak with more authority than the Romans; where Tacitus merely suggests an origin of the Britons, Bede’s assertion that the Britons came from

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Armorica has none of the uncertainty of his predecessors. The monks writing Britain’s history toward the middle and end of the first millennium were doing so for a different reason from their Roman sources. The Romans provided commentary on one of the many territories under their control; the English monks, on the other hand, strove to offer stability during a chaotic time of political changes and upheavals by presenting a solid history to turn to. The English were writing of the history of their own homeland, and a defined origin of the island’s earliest inhabitants provided a longer history to nations that were generally only a few decades or centuries old and constantly changing borders and rulers. By creating a solidified history, chroniclers offered their audience the possibility of a defined future.

Nennius’s *Historia Brittonium* is the earliest surviving source that mentions Brutus, the grandson of Aeneas, who becomes the founder of Britain. Interestingly enough, Nennius includes a variety of accounts of Brutus, or Britto, including a Roman consul and descendant of the biblical Noah. His account makes it clear that the Brutus myth emerged before the eighth century, but it had not yet been solidified in English history. This changed within the next four centuries, as seen in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Monmouth was the first chronicler to present a complete genealogy of the pre-Roman British kings, which helped expand on and cement the Brutus myth in English history. In this history, Monmouth briefly mentions the original name of Britain and its first inhabitants. “At this time the island of Britain was called Albion. It was uninhabited except for a few giants… [Brutus and his companions] drove the giants whom they had discovered into the caves in the mountains… Brutus then called

\[\text{Bede, } \textit{Ecclesiastical History of England}, \text{ trans. A. M. Sellar (London: George Bell and Sons, 1907), 1:1.}\]

the island Britain from his own name.” Monmouth manages to give a definite beginning to the Britons while presenting an even more ancient people with no origin. Monmouth’s version of history quickly became the standard in England, but the question of Albion and its new founders appears to have gone unanswered for nearly two hundred years.

The earliest surviving version of the Albina story is the Anglo-Norman lay Des Granz Geans, which was soon translated into Middle English and included as an introduction to the Brut Chronicle. Written in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, the poem establishes the origin of the giants of Albion through the story of Albina and her sisters. Though different versions of this story appear in following chronicles, the basis of the story is the same. The story centers on the thirty daughters of a Greek king, all married to wealthy men but dissatisfied with their marriages. Albina, the eldest sister, decides to kill her husband and convinces her sisters to follow suit. The youngest sister, however, decides she does not want to kill her husband and instead informs him of the plot, and he in turn informs the king, thereby saving the other husbands. Outraged, the king sentences his daughters to death, but his courtiers persuade him to spare them because of their royal blood. Instead, the daughters are set adrift in a ship without sails or oars; eventually, the ship reaches an island, which Albina decides to name after herself.

La terre avomes encline,
Dunt ne savons le noum dire,
Ne si unques avoit sire;
Pur ceo de moi qe fe fêlle
Deit la terre estre nomée
Albine est mon propre noum,

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9 Des Granz Geans is preserved in the British Library MS Cotton Cleopatra D. ix, and has been published three times: By Achille Jubinal as Des graunz Jaianz ki primes conquistrent Bretaigne, 1842; by Francisque Michel as De primis inhabitatoribus Angliae, 1862; and edited by Georgine Brereton as Des Granz Geans, 1937. No modern English translation of the full poem is currently available.
11 This detail varies; while present in Des Granz Geans, it is often missing in subsequent versions.
The sisters learn to hunt and build houses. The devil travels to the island and the sisters give birth to giants, who control the island until the arrival of Brutus.

Albina and her sisters, like Brutus, have their roots in classical mythology. The clearest influence is the Danaids, the daughters of Danaus who are convinced to kill their husbands by their father. In both versions, the youngest sister saves the life of her husband, though the Anglo-Norman story saves the other husbands as well. The punishment in the Greek myth varies but does not include the sisters’ banishment; however, the sisters do sail to Argos with their father while trying to avoid marriage. Albina’s banishment in a boat without sails or oars also has parallels in other legends and Irish law. The connection between Albion’s founders and the daughters of Danaus was actually made about two hundred years later by Marianus Scotus, an Irish monk whose Chronicon claims to be a universal history of the world, and was a source for several English historians. In his story, the daughters of Danaus flee after killing their husbands and name the island they land upon Albion; they also mate with demons and produce giants.

The original author of Des Granz Geans probably knew a version of these myths, either a Latin translation of the Greek myth or Scotus’s Chronicon. However, Des Granz Geans appears to be the first text to name one of these daughters Albina, thereby solidifying the connection between these two stories. This usage of classical mythology follows the medieval tradition of

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12 Des Granz Geans, from Nouveau Recueil de Contes, Dits, Fabliaux et Autres Pièces Inédites [...], ed. Archille Jubinal (Paris, 1842), lines 342-47, https://books.google.com/books?id=oq9Ws3X9glsC. An imperfect translations of these lines might be: “The land we have come to,/ Which has not known a name,/ Nor that has ever had lords;/ Therefore after myself, who thus governs,/ Call the land to be named./ Albine is my own name,/ Thus shall this land be named Albion.”

13 Ruch, Albina and her Sisters, pp. 3-6.


appropriating Greek or Roman mythology in vernacular, Christianized tales to connect two recognized sources of history. By recalling and expanding on a myth the medieval audience would have had familiarity with, the Des Granz Geans author would have lent credibility to the new history of Albion, connecting the ancient name for Britain to a recognized story.

The story of Albina was translated into Middle English and added to a copy of Anonymous Short English Metrical Chronicle. This chronicle also proposed an entomology for England: a Saxon princess named Inge who leads a group to Britain and eventually betrays the British king who grants her land. These two additions point to a growing concern with explaining the origins of the island and its people. Both Inge and Albina are violent women; unlike Brutus, a man whose violence against the barbarous race of giants is justified in-text, the women are cruel and grotesquely savage, betraying the men who trust them. Their presence indicates both the importance of women as national origin stories and the dangers of women in positions of power. The Short Chronicle traces two people and their names to powerful women: the violent giants of Albion and the Saxon invaders, who are replaced by the more civilized French—ancestors of the contemporary monarchs. While these women serve as ancient origins for English history, they enforce the superiority of the classical origins of Brutus and Britain. By giving these groups female rulers and originators, medieval authors emphasize the inevitability of their downfall.

While Inge’s story did not make it outside the Short Chronicle, Albina’s popularity spread quickly. Though not as popular as other historical narratives, Albina’s story was flexible,

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16 An Anonymous Short English Metrical Chronicle, ed. Ewald Zettl (London: Early English Text Society, 1935), MS. A: Auchinleck Manuscript, in the National Library of Scotland, Adv. MC. 19. 2. 1, no. 155.; fols. 304r/a-317r/b, lines 7-352. Though the oldest copy of the Short Chronicle is believed to have been composed at the start of Edward II’s reign, the only copy to include Albina (MS. B) ends with Edward II’s death and a prayer for the reign of Edward III, suggesting a composition date of c. 1327-28.

17 Short Chronicle, MS. B: Brit. Mus. Additional MS. 19677; fols. 92 v-100r., lines 275-320. This story is found in all manuscript copies of the Short Chronicle, but does not appear in any other work.
with details on the number of sisters, fate of the husbands, and even their father’s country changing constantly. In Castleford’s Chronicle, written in the early to mid-fourteenth century, the king reprimands the thirty-three sisters after their husbands complain of their bad attitudes, and there is no heroic younger sister. As such, the sisters succeed in their plot to murder their husbands; “And qwen þai wer in bed in sclepe, þose lordes,/ They cuttyd all their husbandys throttes.” Additionally, the sisters are the daughters of Dioclesiane, king of Surrey, and his wife Albana. Jean de Wavrin’s 1445 chronicle again expanded details of the story; Dioclesias has four wives, and the daughters give their husbands sleeping potions before killing them. However, in Wavrin’s text, Albana is Dioclesias’s uncle and father-in-law rather than his wife. Furthermore, the husbands of Albina and her sisters respond to their poor attitudes with abuse, explaining (though not justifying) their murders: “Now the husbands, seeing that their wives were changed from pride to humility […] consented together to resume the rude conduct and manners which they had formerly held towards their wives.” Although other historical stories varied between chronicles, the Albina myth lacked an authoritative source like Monmouth; instead, authors who added the Albina story pulled from the source they had and added or changed details as they saw fit. Albina’s history was far more flexible than others, allowing authors to change details to suit their needs.

The Albina myth served another purpose for medieval authors: it provided an even more

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18 The chronicle covers the history of Britain through the year 1327, suggesting a composition date c. 1330. The author is unknown; the text refers to itself as *Pe Boke of Brut* at line 229, but because the name “Thomas of Castleford” is written at the top of the only manuscript, many scholars call it *Castleford’s Chronicle*.
20 Castleford’s Chronicle, 161-162.
21 Castleford’s Chronicle, 3-24. “Surrey” is a medieval name for Syria. Note that “Albana” is different from Albina, who is referred to in Castleford first as “Albane,” then as “Albine” in the remainder of the text.
23 Wavrin, Collection of the Chronicles, 1.2, 1.3.
ancient history of England that included dominion over the entire island.\textsuperscript{24} This became important during the fourteenth century as the English attempted to assert their dominance over the Scottish. In 1320, less than ten years before the composition of \textit{Des Granz Geans}, the Scottish \textit{Declaration of Arbroath} proclaimed the right of Scottish independence due to a history they traced back to Scota, the Egyptian founder of Scotland.\textsuperscript{25} Though the Scota myth has earlier roots,\textsuperscript{26} its usage in the fourteenth century is clearly evoked in cases for national independence.\textsuperscript{27}

In response, English chroniclers began to include Scota in their histories—but at a far later date than their Scottish contemporaries did, occasionally after even the Roman invasion. Additionally, chroniclers used the Albina story to establish clear dominion over the whole of the island; where Brutus and the Britons were considered the historical predecessors of only the English nation, Albina, her sisters, and their giant offspring were the rulers of the entire island. Brutus and the Britons defeated the giants, the Anglo-Saxons defeated the Britons, and the Normans defeated the Anglo-Saxons; ergo, the Anglo-Norman royalty that controlled England in the fourteenth century were the heirs of Albina and the giants and rightful rulers over the whole of Britain, including Scotland.

This convoluted history was an important part of chronicles written during the late medieval period and into the early modern period. The importance of the Albina/Scota debate is clear even two hundred years later. In 1547, James Harrison used the stories of Albina, Scota, and Brutus to argue the right of English control over Scotland. He emphasizes the importance of


\textsuperscript{26} Nennius, \textit{Historia Brittonium}, 15.

Albina and her fifty sisters and their control over the whole of Albion. He also prioritizes the Brutus story and Roman sources, arguing against Scota with historical accounts and entomology. “Albina […] make muche more with the honor and glory of this islanide, then to beduce a pedegree, either from an outlaw of Italy, or a tirauntes sister out of Egipt, as Welshe & Scottishe Poetes, haue phantastically fayned.” Harrison favors the English version and quotes sources that support his intentions, but his decision to recall these origin stories clearly displays their importance and authority in the Tudor era.

During this time, however, the long-cited histories of England were called into question. Rediscovered Roman and Greek texts and subsequent translations and printings into Latin or vernacular languages presented accounts conflicting with the narratives of the chronicles and texts that had defined England for more than half a millennium. The printing press also allowed the widespread transcription and dissemination of different chronicles, allowing scholars and historians to compare more texts; additionally, religious changes inspired historians to re-interpret their sources. As the variations in stories without older sources became more obvious, historians attempted to rectify conflicting reports, balancing deeply held cultural beliefs with the lack of authenticated, original sources. Several late fifteenth and early sixteenth century authors attempted to show the validity of the Albina by clarifying conflicting details, claiming to have uncovered the “true” history of Albina and her sisters. One such example is that of John Hardyng’s Latin Chronicle, written in the mid-fifteenth century and translated into English by Richard Grafton in 1543. Hardyng shares two conflicting stories:

In Greece there was a kynge right excellente

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28 The typical number cited in the Tudor era.
29 James Harrison, An exhortation to the Scotts to conforme them selfes to the honorable expedient and godly union betwene the two realmes of Englelande and Scotlande, (London: Richard Grafton, 1547), page 28-31. http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A02726.0001.001
30 Curran, Roman Invasions, p. 16.
That Dioclesiā, some booke sayeth he hight
And of Surray that had the regimente,
Dame Albyne hight his wife, a lady genty
Who doughters had .xxx. wedded to there degree
To kynges all of greate nobilitie. 31

After giving this first version of the story, however, he writes that “But I dare saye, this chronicle
is not trewe,/ For in that ylke tyme, in Surraye was no kyng.” 32 Instead, Hardyng tells us, “But of
Arginos the kyng of full hye fame/ Had doughters fifty, whose name was Danao.” 33 This
clarification is shows Hardyng’s participation in the trend of questioning these stories while
building credibility by immediately following with what he claims is the true story. 34 Hardyng
displays his own learning and research ability by claiming to have uncovered the truth of Albina
and her sisters. Grafton adds to this credibility by referencing a Roman chronicler, Hughe de
Genesis, citing specifics to add to the validity of the Danaus origin.

Writing more than a century after Hardyng and almost half a century after Grafton’s
translation, Raphael Holinshed further clarifies this story in his description and history of the
British Isles. 35 He gives an even more ancient name and origin to Britain—the island is named
Samothea, after a descendant of Noah—and names Albion after a son of Neptune. 36 He
deliberately disproves the Albina myth; though he follows the Greek story of Danaus and his
daughters and includes the banishment of the daughters and their arrival in Albion, Holinshed
makes a point of listing every one of Danaus’s daughters, pointing out to the reader multiple

32 Hardyng, Chronicle, ed. Grafton, 2.
33 Hardyng, Chronicle, ed. Grafton, 3.
35 Raphael Holinshed, The first and second volumes of Chronicles: Comprising the description and historie of England […] , vol. 1 (London, 1587). http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A68197.0001.001. Because I use both the description and history of England, which are both in vol. 1 and both begin with a book 1, I have elected to use Tim Smith-Laing’s system of referring to the Chronicles.
36 Holinshed, Description of England, 1.3.
times that none of them are named Albina.

[…] yet certeine it is that none of them bare the name of Albina, from whome this land might be called Albion. For further assurance whereof, if any man be desirous to know all their names, we haue thought good bere to rehearse them […] list of names […] whether the historie of their landing here should be true or not, it is all one for the matter concerning the name of this Ile, which undoubtedlie was called Albion, either of Albion the giant (as before I haue said) or by some other occasion.37

In this chronicle, the daughters of Danaus reach Albion and mate with the giants who already lived on the island instead of begetting all the giants. In this way, Holinshed both includes familiar narratives and simultaneously casts doubt on their validity, providing clarification that adds to his credibility without completely erasing the stories. As with Hardyng, Holinshed is able to modify his stories so that he both disproves and yet still includes questionable details, like the story of Albina.

Holinshed’s version of history, both confirming and doubting traditional chronicles, follows the pattern that many other late sixteenth histories used. Chronicles covering pre-Roman history often included conflicting stories, either simply allowing the reader to decide the truth or with the author’s explanation supporting one version and disproving others. At the end of Holinshed’s section, however, is another method used by writers to emphasize their authority—the declaration of doubt. Holinshed makes a point of noting that his inclusion of the tale of Danaus and his daughters does not indicate his support of the history. “Without further auouching it for truth, I leaue it to the consideration of the reader, to thinke thereof as reason shall moue him.”38 In fact, Holinshed omitted the story in his 1577 publication; it was later added to the 1587 edition of the text. The story is included for historical comparison and study, but it is clear that historians are far more doubtful of the Albina story than they were fifty years ago.

37 Holinshed, History of England, 1.3.
38 Holinshed, I Hist., 1.3.
As more doubt was cast on the story of Albina and her sisters, their continued inclusion in English chronicles became more controversial. Although the origin of Albion was attributed to a handful of sources at the point—usually Albina or the son of Neptune—most texts still included at least some sort of mythic origin story for Albion and explicitly tie it to England. The reasons for this are twofold: one, a display of superiority over the Scottish (and, increasingly, the Irish); and two, a separation of English history from Rome. Regardless of which origin is used, the control over the whole island is noted. This control validates the English assertion of the right of dominance over Scotland. Furthermore, chronicles that attempt to present a history of the world often include Ireland and Wales in these stories, giving the English the right to control them by this same logic. The indigenous peoples of these nations—the Scots and Picts, Irish, and British, respectively—are presented as dirty and barbarous, further justifying the English subjugation of their nations. As always, this claim is solidified by the existence of an ancient Albina or Albion, arriving before any Scottish, Irish, or British ancestors.

Albion’s origin also serves as a way to distance English origins from Rome. As England attempted to distance itself from the Roman Catholic Church and establish its own national identity, ties to Rome and Roman history were no longer attractive ways to lay claim to the ancient roots of Britain. Brutus traced his lineage through Aeneas, the Trojan whose descendants reached Italy and later founded Rome. Though the ancient city of Troy was important, its true weight for medieval authors was in its connection to the founders of Rome. As Rome became a symbol of religious oppression and heresy in England, the Brutus myth began to lose some of its gravity; however, because it was the most widely recognized origin myth of Britain, chroniclers could not do away with it completely. As such, sixteenth century historians needed a more

ancient origin to supplant the Brutus claim. By turning to the origin of Albion, writers were able to point to a pre-Brutus foundation that did not derive its power from Rome. Albina reportedly came from either Greece or Syria, both locations that had enough importance and history to give her story the credentials necessary for a founding myth without relying directly on Rome for importance.

These two issues were not enough to keep Albina and her sisters in English history, however. Holinshed’s text shows the doubt that was already cast over her story by the end of the sixteenth century. Albina’s story had always been questioned: even at the height of her popularity, her late addition into the canon of English history was a source of concern for chroniclers in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, especially given the conflicting accounts of her story. In the seventeenth century, however, the inclusion of Albina was much harder for historians to justify. The Renaissance reinterpretation of history encouraged many chroniclers to scrutinize traditional sources, and many historians elected simply to begin their works with the Roman invasions. John Speed’s History, from 1611, is one of the few works that does include the Albina story; however, his inclusion is only as a survey of the claims about the origin of Albion, and Speed makes it clear he does not believe Albina is a historical figure.\(^{40}\) Other texts do deliberately exclude Albina while commentating on the existence of such stories. Samuel Daniel does not mention Albina specifically in his Collection of the Historie of England, but he does spend a few lines warning against nationalistic histories that attempt to create false pasts.\(^{41}\) His comments are part of a larger movement to rewrite English history with only true events—in general, those found in primary Roman accounts. With this focus on verifiable history, Albina

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and the origin story of Albion fall out of the accepted historical record.

Though Albina’s presence in England’s history is brief, her existence is an important part of the chronicles that include her. Her introduction appears, at first glance, to be a part of the larger tradition of locating name origins for countries, but the broader importance of her character is rooted in her value as a national symbol. Albina became an ancient origin of the contemporary English state, granting a more distant foundation to a country struggling to assert its dominance. Albina was older than Scota and disconnected from Rome, providing the English with a figure that gave them the historical gravity they needed in both conquest and independence. Though her late addition betrays a willingness of chroniclers to include figures who lack the wider acceptance of those found in works like Monmouth’s history, Albina’s status as a symbol of English national identity confirms her importance in English history.

**Cordelia**

When Geoffrey of Monmouth created his history of British monarchs, most of the new figures were male. He included only three women who ruled over Britain; only one of these women was queen regnant: Cordelia, the daughter of Leir. As Monmouth’s chronicle gained popularity across the country, Cordelia became solidified in English history as the first—and only—queen regnant in the nation’s history. As such, many chroniclers adapted and edited her story to comment on the roles of women in English society. Though Cordelia’s reign was removed from the historical record along with the other British kings invented by Monmouth, her story retained its importance in English literature and culture alongside that of her father’s.

Cordelia was first introduced to the English public in 1136 in Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae* as one of the ancient rulers of Britain. As a British monk writing for an
Anglo-Norman aristocracy, Monmouth attempted to give the English monarchy a position of power with his account by linking their throne to an ancient kingdom. Most British chronicles available to Monmouth began with the Roman invasions or later. Those that attempted to move further back mainly dealt with biblical rather than British history. The few exceptions were closer to the narrative found in Nennius’s *Historia Brittonium*, which mentioned a handful of figures like Brutus, but the majority of the ancient past was left unexplored. Without a defined narrative to follow, Monmouth was free to create his own timeline of the British monarchy. He built up his credibility by relating the kings to various locations around England and claiming to have written from an ancient British sourcebook; despite his claims, however, the list Monmouth wrote was almost entirely fictional. Of the nearly seventy monarchs that he claimed had ruled Britain before the Roman invasion, only three of them were women. Two of those women were queen regents, ruling after the deaths of their husbands on behalf of their sons. Cordelia was the only queen in Monmouth’s history that ruled over Britain on her own.

According to Monmouth’s chronicle, Cordelia was the youngest daughter of King Leir. Now an old man, Leir decided to divide his kingdom among his three daughters after asking each which of them loved him the most. While her sisters, Goneril and Regan, flatter their father, Cordelia answers honestly: “Can there really exist a daughter who maintains that the love she bears her own father is more than what is due to him as a father? […] for my own part, I have always loved you as my father.” Enraged, Leir divides the kingdom among the older two and their husbands, leaving Cordelia without a dowry. Eventually, the king of the Franks asks for

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44 Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Briton*, i.1.
45 Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Briton*, ii.11.
Cordelia’s hand in marriage, which Leir grants reluctantly and without any dowry. Soon after, however, his other daughters tire of his demands and poorly behaved entourage, and they take away his knights and income. Destitute and humiliated, Leir turns to Cordelia for assistance, and her husband raises an army to help Leir and Cordelia re-take Britain.

When this was done, Leir marched at the head of the assembled army, taking his daughter with him. He fought with his sons-in-law and beat them, thus bringing them all under his dominion again.

Three years later Leir died; and Aganippus, King of the Franks, died too. As a result Leir’s daughter Cordelia inherited the government of the kingdom of Britain. She buried her father in a certain underground chamber which she had ordered to be dug. She rules for five years before her nephews rebel; “they laid waste to a number of provinces and met the Queen herself in a series of pitched battles.” Ultimately, however, they defeat and imprison her, and Cordelia commits suicide.

As the only queen regnant in Monmouth’s history, Cordelia served as a distinctive examination into the risks of a female ruler, especially in comparison to the other two queens mentioned by Monmouth. Gwendolyn and Marcia were both queen regents, ruling for fifteen and ten years, respectively, after the deaths of their husbands and on behalf of their sons. Gwendolyn overthrew her husband after he abandoned her for a woman he had captured in a raid. “As soon as she realized that her son Madden had grown to man’s estate, she passed the scepter of the realm to him”; she then retired to her home province. Marcia was noted as a skilled and intelligent woman who was credited by Monmouth with writing the Mercian Law translated by King Alfred. Her son was only seven when her husband died; “For this reason his mother, who was extremely intelligent and most practical, ruled over the entire island.” After her death, her

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46 Monmouth, History of the Kings of Briton, ii.14
47 Monmouth, History of the Kings of Briton, ii.15.
48 Monmouth, History of the Kings of Briton, ii.5.
49 Monmouth, History of the Kings of Briton, ii.6.
50 Monmouth, History of the Kings of Briton, iii.14.
son, now seventeen, took the throne. Unlike Cordelia, both women, while powerful rulers, acted on behalf of their sons, who ascended the throne when they came of age. Cordelia, on the other hand, became queen because she was the next heir. She is not a regent standing in place of a male heir; she is queen because her father was king, not her husband. This becomes an issue when her nephews, men descended from the former king, decide they no longer want to be ruled by a woman, despite her having ruled the kingdom in peace for five years.

Monmouth wrote his chronicle during one of the most chaotic periods of English history. Commonly called “The Anarchy,” the country was just beginning a twenty-year civil war following the death of Henry I. Henry had named his daughter Matilda as his heir, but after his death, many lords put their support behind his nephew Stephen. This conflict, while important to the whole of Monmouth’s work, is paramount to understanding the female rulers listed amongst his mythic monarchs. Though the beginning of Cordelia’s story examines two different kinds of father-daughter relationships, that of Cordelia and those of her sisters, the end of her story is a cautionary look into the risks of a female ruler. Especially when compared against Gwendolyn and Marcia, Cordelia’s tale warns that further civil war is inevitable under a female monarch. Monmouth seems to suggest queen regents are acceptable alternatives, but those women must give up their thrones once their sons come of age. At the time the history was written, Matilda’s son Henry was only a toddler. Monmouth’s position, therefore, is a little unclear; he could be supporting Stephen because of the risk a queen would pose, or he could be advocating for Matilda to rule only until her son came of age. Either way, one thing is clear: Monmouth did not believe a country would prosper long-term under a queen who held the throne on her own; regardless of how competent she was, war would inevitably follow.

Cordelia’s story quickly became part of the historical record as Monmouth’s chronicle
spread in popularity across England and parts of the continent. Her story was closely entwined with that of her father’s, and it was his struggles that most writers focused on. Even so, Cordelia was still a prominent woman in a text in which women were far and few in between. Particular attention was paid to Cordelia because the struggle between her sisters and her and her father was one of the longer tales within Monmouth’s chronicle. For almost five hundred years, Cordelia served as one of the most recognizable examples of a female ruler, particularly in English history, and her story was subject to the moralizing ideals of whatever chronicler included her.

Wace’s *Roman de Brut*, an 1155 Anglo-Norman translation of Monmouth’s Latin history, and Laȝamon’s *Brut*, a Middle English chronicle c. 1200 based on *Roman de Brut*, followed Monmouth’s story closely, but with a few notable differences. Laȝamon’s text is kinder to Gwendolyn, following Wace in offering more praise over her reign and competence than Monmouth had included. At the same time, however, Wace and Laȝamon both end Marcia’s reign with her abdication when her son comes of age, rather than with her death. One notable difference between Laȝamon and his two predecessors comes from Cordelia’s story: her husband did not die until after she had been queen regnant of Britain for five years.

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Cordelia’s brothers-in-law do not feel compelled to rebel during the five years she rules as queen regnant but is still married. When they do rebel, they decide to do so because she is no longer married; no other problems contribute to this decision.

These changes clarify the idea that women should not rule without answering to men. The circumstances are a bit muddied, as Cordelia rules Britain, not her husband, and Gwendolyn and Marcia do not exactly answer to their minor sons, but all three are ultimately allowed to hold power because of the men in their lives. While Gwendolyn and Marcia are both smart and effective rulers, their ultimate job is to watch over the country for their sons. Marcia’s reign in particular is edited to fit this. Monmouth says her son is only crowned king after her death; he doesn’t specify how long Marcia ruled, just that her son was seven when she took control on his behalf. These missing details suggest Marcia ruled for as long as she was able and did not relinquish the throne to her son; he ascends to the throne only because she died. Wace and Laȝamon correct this oversight, ensuring that Marcia relinquishes the throne as soon as her son comes of age, thereby ensuring that her power comes from him and not the other way around. Laȝamon’s Brut furthers this male-dominance agenda with the timing of the death of Cordelia’s husband. Though they rule their respective countries separately and Cordelia is the queen regnant of Britain through inheritance, her marriage creates enough of an illusion of subservience to a man to secure five years of peace. Once her husband dies, however, her brothers-in-law are no longer content to suffer the reign of a woman. Though this idea of female rule derived from male dominance is certainly present in Monmouth, Wace and Laȝamon’s edits indicate a need to

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54 Laȝamon, Brut, 1863-67, 1870-71. “The while the French king died,/ and to Cordelia came that word that she was become [a] widow./ Then come the tidings to Scotland’s king,/ that Aganippus was dead [and] Leir king had died,/ he sent through Britain into Cornwall/ […] For it was very great shame and eke very great grief,/ that should a queen be king in this land.”

55 Monmouth, History of the Kings of Britain, iii.13-14.
clarify this, possibly to take a stronger position on the question following the end of the Anarchy. The story presented in the fourteenth-century *Anonymous Short English Metrical Chronicle* is markedly different from Cordelia’s origin. Omitted completely from all manuscripts except one,⁵⁶ the conflict of Leir is modified to remove Cordelia. In this telling, Leir gives his only daughter to his steward in marriage, and the two of them betray him and drive him out of the kingdom. After decades abroad, Leir gets an army from another king and returns to his kingdom. In the meantime, his daughter has died; Leir hangs her husband and takes back his kingdom, and “Þo he was ded men leyd his bon/ At Leicestre in a marble ston.”⁵⁷ In this narrative, Cordelia is not the important daughter, as Leir’s unnamed daughter does not support him; *Short Chronicle* even removes Cordelia’s touch from the special resting place given to Leir. As such, the unnamed daughter appears to be a combination of Goneril and Regan, both of whom betray their father. The *Short Chronicle* has no need for a positive image of a female ruler. In fact, given that the addition to the chronicle appears to have happened around 1330, this unnamed daughter may have been a deliberate reminder of the dangers of female rulers and women given positions of power, as England had recently seen the overthrow of Edward II and the brief regency of Isabelle of France. Just as the daughter ruled on behalf of her father, Isabelle claimed to have taken control of the kingdom on behalf of her son. To the later contributor of the *Short Chronicle*, the most important element in the King Leir story is not Leir learning humility after turning away his loyal daughter, but is instead Leir defeating the daughter who betrays him.

A century later, England was in the midst of the Hundred Years War, fighting for control of the French throne through the lineage of Isabelle of France. This maternal inheritance necessitated the reinterpretation of Cordelia’s story, once again showing her in a more positive

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⁵⁶ *Short Chronicle*, MS. A, lines 877-932.
⁵⁷ *Short Chronicle*, MS. A, lines 931-32.
light. Though following the story set by earlier narratives, there is a slight shift in the tone of these narratives. One such interpretation comes from John Hardyng, who spent much of the early part of his life in the service of a northern English count and was present at the Battle of Agincourt on the English side.\textsuperscript{58} The first edition of his chronicle ended in 1437, and the second edition continued through 1464. Cordelia is given more power in this chronicle than in many of its predecessors. Hardyng is explicit in detailing Cordelia’s power.

\begin{quote}
Aganippe hir lorde, was kyng of Fraunce  
That graunt hym menne, and goud sufficient  
And sent his wife with hym, with greate puisaūce  
With all aray, that to hir wer apent  
His heire to been, by their bothes assent  
For he was olde, and might not well trauell  
In his persone, the warres to preuaile\textsuperscript{59}
\end{quote}

Here, the French king’s agreement to help Leir is contingent upon his confirmation of Cordelia’s position as the heir to the British throne, and she goes “with great power.”

The chronicle specifies that Cordelia “rule[d] Brytaine alone with outen [men].”\textsuperscript{60}

Although Hardyng preserves the rebellion and defeat of Cordelia’s nephews, he reaffirms her position as the rightful ruler of Britain by confirming her status as Leir’s heir. Once she died, she “buried was, by side hir father right,”\textsuperscript{61} and her soul went to Janus and Minerva, indicating her justified and morally upright actions. Hardyng’s text frequently cites the Roman god each figure’s soul goes to, a consequence of his reckoning heroic figures with a pre-Christian history. While Janus had previously been linked to Leir, Hardyng adds in Minerva here. In medieval canon, Minerva was referenced for her role as a patron of wisdom and war. As such, her appearance here supports the image of Cordelia as both a competent ruler and wise military

\textsuperscript{60} Hardyng, \textit{Chronicle}, ed. Grafton, 27.28.
leader. Though she killed herself, Cordelia is rewarded in her death.

The next major revision to Cordelia’s story appears in a chronicle written by Jean de Wavrin. Wavrin was a Burgundian nobleman; though he fought for the French side in 1415 at the Battle of Agincourt, he assisted the English after the Burgundian duke switched allegiances. His history of Great Britain, first published in 1445 and expanded in 1469, focused on England, with some mentions of the French and Burgundian courts. In his chronicle, Gwendolyn and Cordelia are much more powerful than in their previous iterations. Wavrin makes note of several additional battles Gwendolyn wins against invaders. It is his revision to Cordelia’s story, however, that is most noteworthy. Wavrin is again overt about Cordelia’s authority, noting specifically that Cordelia leads troops alongside her father in the battle to take back Britain:

“[Aganippus] transferred [his troops] to King Leir and to his wife Cordelia, who conducted them into Great Britain, and they fought against the two kings of Scotland and of Cornwall, whom they conquered and deposed.”

Cordelia clearly rules alone over Britain after her father and husband pass. “At the end of three years King Leir died, and left his kingdom to his daughter Cordelia, who caused him to be magnificently buried in Leicester, and she maintained and governed the kingdom vigorously after him; for her husband, King Agampus, did not live long after she had left him.” While her brothers-in-law accepted her sovereignty, her nephews were “very indignant that a woman governed the kingdom” and rebelled. Cordelia is aided by French counts, including one whom,

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63 Wavrin, Collection of the Chronicles, 2.17.
64 Wavrin, Collection of the Chronicles, 2.21.
65 Wavrin, Collection of the Chronicles, 2.21.
66 Wavrin, Collection of the Chronicles, 2.21.
Wavrin notes, “she had nursed as a child.”\textsuperscript{67} The result is a surprising twist to the past three centuries of British history: Cordelia captures her nephews, seizes their lands, and after “her nephews, had made peace with Queen Cordelia, their aunt, she lived seven years, and then died; and they buried her most honourably near King Leir.”\textsuperscript{68} Although Wavrin apparently created this deviation in the Cordelia story, as it does not appear in any earlier versions, he blames a chronicle he calls the “Book of the Treasure of Histories” for inventing the story of Cordelia’s defeat and claims Wace and other “ancient historians” tell the story recounted in his history.

Though ultimately false, Wavrin’s claims are a striking change of pace. In securing the defeat of her nephews, Wavrin’s Cordelia proves unequivocally that women have the power and capability to rule. In relation to the Hundred Years War, which continued until after the first publication of Wavrin’s chronicle, this change seems to confirm the right of rule owed to both female rulers and those who would trace their lineage through matrilineal inheritance. It also speaks to the importance of honoring the will of the previous king; while Cordelia is the youngest daughter of Leir, she is the one named heir, thereby securing her right to the throne. In fact, by preserving the civil war between her two nephews, which follows her death, the issue of succession is not the chaos of a female ruler, but rather the confusion caused by the lack of an heir. Though Cordelia’s lengthy and successful rule is absent from following chronicles, it is this uncertain succession that becomes important to later chronicles.

Polydore Vergil’s 1513 \textit{History of England} was the beginning of a new era in English history. Based on “classic texts” from Rome and Greece that had recently been re-discovered and translated, Vergil’s history began to question the histories that had been spread over the past five hundred years, including that of Cordelia. Though she is included in the chronicle, Vergil notes

\textsuperscript{67} Wavrin, \textit{Collection of the Chronicles}, 2.21.
\textsuperscript{68} Wavrin, \textit{Collection of the Chronicles}, 2.21.
that classic histories do not actually attest to her or the other British kings. Nevertheless, Vergil continues the recent trend of granting Cordelia conditionally more power. In his narrative, Cordelia defeats an uprising of her brothers-in-law that occurs during her father’s reign, after he has regained the throne, and she governs by consent of the people after his death. Vergil, however, is far less sympathetic to Cordelia, writing that her nephews justly rise up against “soe unseemelie a yoke of slaverie.” Furthermore, he claims that she was queen regnant only reluctantly, and that she “wanted nothinge more but the kinde and nature of a manne to surmownt the whole renowne of our former kinges.” Without need for a powerful queen, as Wavrin and Hardyng had used her, Vergil is free to degrade Cordelia and make the case against female rulers. Cordelia becomes a prop of the patriarchy once again, desiring to submit to a male ruler and accepting her dismal fate because she is inherently inferior.

Inspired by Vergil’s history and the translations of classical chroniclers, historians began to re-examine their understanding of English history, resulting in a massive shift in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. After more than four hundred years of the inclusion of Monmouth’s British kings in the country’s chronicles, historians began really to question the validity of these figures. Over the next one hundred years, the early history of Britain was met with skepticism before it was almost entirely removed from chronicles. When Holinshedd wrote his chronicle, he included these earlier kings with a disclaimer echoing the doubt surrounding their existence. By the end of the Elizabethan era, the British kings were omitted from chronicles completely or included only as commentary on the mistaken beliefs of past historians.

70 Vergil, English History, bk. 1, p. 36.
71 Vergil, English History, bk. 1, p. 36.
As a consequence, Cordelia fell from her position along with the rest of the British rulers. Unlike many of her predecessors and successors, however, the popularity of their story allowed her and her family to transition from figures of historic fact to characters of popular fiction. The intriguing story behind her was seized by several writers of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries; however, now that they understood the tale was entirely fictional, there was no longer a duty to preserve the original points, resulting in more variation.

Cordelia became a popular figure in Elizabethan literature. Though her story was eventually recognized as pure fiction, she seemed to be the first—and only—queen regnant of Britain until Mary I was crowned Queen of England. As such, she was a helpful figure to use in commentary on Elizabeth I. This connection is clear in Edmund Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, where Cordelia, as with many of the other women cited from English history, is a powerful and active figure. Cordelia is solely responsible for leading the army: “And after all au army strong she leau’d,/ To war on those, which him had of his realme bereau’d.” She is also responsible for restoring her father’s crown: “So to his crowne she him restord againe,” and she ruled over Britain after him: “Who peaceably the same long time did weld:/ A nd all mens harts in dew obedience held,” until the rebellion of her nephews. Though she does hang herself, her previous actions are clearly much more sympathetic than any credited to her by previous authors (with the exception of Wavrin). Spenser’s poem is an extensive metaphor glorifying Queen Elizabeth, and it serves him well to compare her to Cordelia, who defeated her unpopular sisters and ruled well over the country.

Cordelia appears again in the *True Chronicle History of King Leir*. First performed in

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74 Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, II.x.33.1.
75 Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, II.x.33.4-5
1594, this play shows a noticeable shift in the treatment of Cordelia. Numerous changes to the general plot of the story make it clear that the “true history” was no longer viewed as unchangeable fact, but rather as an adaptable story. To that end, the author makes a significant change to the recent narrative surrounding Cordelia: she no longer holder any power. Instead, her husband leads the army alongside Leir—Cordelia is not present during the scenes planning for the invasion or the invasion itself, and she only speaks twice during the confrontation, for a total of four lines. The biggest change occurs at the end, where Leir names the French king as his heir in place of Cordelia.

LEIR: Which if it please you to accept your selfe,  
With all my heart I will resigne to you:  
For it is yours by right, and none of mine.

While other authors shortened or even removed Cordelia’s rule, True History acknowledges Leir’s need for an heir and the right of his youngest daughter to hold the throne, but political power and inheritance is instead conferred upon her husband.

Cordelia’s story again undergoes a transition in 1606 in perhaps the most recognizable story for modern audiences: Shakespeare’s The Tragedy of King Lear. Shakespeare clearly views the story as fiction and makes any changes he wants. For instance, rather than having the French king hear about and become interested in Cordelia after her father disowns her, Shakespeare has her begin the play with two suitors, and after her father disowns her, she marries the French king because he is not dissuaded by her lack of a dowry. Where other authors include discussions on

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78 True History, 32.5-7.

Leir’s greed and pride, *King Lear* instead describes his decent into madness. This change is, in part, because *King Lear* does not need to keep Leir as the heroic figure of the chronicles, as the play does not need to restore his throne. Instead, Leir’s madness makes him unfit to rule.

The biggest change for Cordelia, however, is that she is murdered before she can become queen; in fact, she dies before Leir does.\(^{80}\) Shakespeare’s play is completely different from previous versions because he removes both Leir’s restoration, something that was central to every version of the Leir/Cordelia story, and kills Cordelia before she (or her husband) can succeed him. This second point is perhaps most similar to the *Short Chronicle*, where Leir’s one daughter died before he fought against his son-in-law—but even that version included Leir’s restoration. Furthermore, *King Lear* destroys the line succession by leaving not only Cordelia, but also Goneril and Regan without children. At the very end of the play, Britain is left without a clear heir. The Duke of Albany, Goneril’s husband, says to Kent and Edgar, “Friends of my soul, you twain/ Rule in this realm, and the gored state sustain.”\(^{81}\) There is a recognition of the need for a new ruler, but the play does not resolve this question, leaving Britain in a state of chaos following the death of the royal family and a civil war.

Without a queen sitting on the English throne, dramatists no longer needed to affirm the capabilities of women. Once it was no longer useful to show powerful women, the Cordelia story once again reverted to one that carefully diminished the power of women. Though *True History* and *King Lear* came out near the end of and just after the end of Elizabeth’s reign, the need to show powerful women had declined enough that it was necessary to return to producing works that upheld the patriarchy. Although the two plays accomplished this in different ways, both ultimately serve the same purpose. *King Lear* removes Cordelia’s power completely, denying her

\(^{80}\) Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 5.3.308-13.

\(^{81}\) Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 5.3.387-88.
the British throne and killing her off before she can secure it. Meanwhile, *True History* excludes Cordelia from any real conflict over the throne, and even when Leir is restored and ready to appoint an heir, the play gives power to her husband instead. This story makes clear that, over the course of Elizabeth I and Mary I’s reigns, Cordelia’s power and importance had become entwined with the image of the ruling queen—neither of which had children. With the return of male rule, Cordelia’s position in English cultural history fell, and her story was changed to erase references to the ruling capabilities and prowess of women.

During the five hundred years she was part of English history, Cordelia was the most powerful woman in the country’s ancient history as the only queen regnant over the whole of Britain. Although her story went through countless changes and iterations, her importance in English histories is clear. She served as an allegory for ruling women in the chronicles of England’s historians, who used her to speculate on the effects of a female monarch and comment on the powerful women of their own time. Cordelia gained or lost power as England needed to compare contemporary women to powerful, historical women. When the country needed a strong woman, she was more important; when they did not, she was demonized and weakened. Though her story shifted between these representations or erasure, each case betrays important aspects of English society and its ideas of female rulers. While her story was fabricated, her continued inclusion in the nation’s history displays the power Cordelia held in England for nearly five hundred years.

**Boudica**

English history underwent a drastic shift in the sixteenth century with the discovery and translation of several Roman histories and accounts. While much of the country’s pre-Roman—
and pre-Saxon—history was thrown into question, other forgotten figures and events were brought back to the attention of English historians. Of these figures, it was Boudica who caught national attention and rose to the front of British history. The wife of a British chief, Boudica and her rebellion against the Romans spoke to a nation struggling to form a new national identity amidst religious turmoil and the reigns of two queens. Just as her story spoke to Tudor England, however, its rebellious nature, and Boudica’s gender, caused its exclusion from English chronicles for nearly one thousand years. Boudica’s story, both in its varied inclusion and intentional exclusion, reveals attitudes toward gender and the Roman/British relationship as held by historians from the Roman era up to the Stuart era.

Historical references to Boudica are scarce; just three Roman references to Boudica exist today. The earliest extant reference comes to us from Tacitus, a Roman writing at the end of the first century and the beginning of the second. He first mentions Boudica in *Agricola*. After a chapter detailing British talks of rebellion, Tacitus reports, “the whole nation took up arms, under the command of Boudicca, a woman of royal blood.”

The Britons attack Roman forts before invading the Roman colony itself; Tacitus claims “no sort of barbarian cruelty was overlooked in the hour of victory and vengeance.” The Roman colony is saved by Gaius Suetonius Paulinus, who soundly defeats the Britons, terrifying them back into submission.

Tacitus re-visited Boudica’s story twenty years later in his *Annals*. Boudica appears in the fourteenth book, under the year 61 CE, adding context and detail to Tacitus’s original coverage of the Boudican rebellions. The Icenian king Prasutagus had died, leaving his kingdom to the join rule of the Roman emperor and his two daughters, believing this would guarantee their

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82 Tacitus, *Agricola*, 16.
83 Tacitus, *Agricola*, 16.
safety. Unfortunately, this is not the case; “his wife Boudicca was subjected to the lash and his daughters violated,“\textsuperscript{85} tactics purposefully employed by the Romans to humiliate and subjugate the Iceni, and the Iceni are stripped of their land and power. “Impelled by this outrage and the dread of worse to come,“\textsuperscript{86} the Iceni convince their neighbors to join them in rising against the Romans. The initial Roman response to the British forces is drastically outnumbered and ill prepared, and the Britons overrun the entire town of Camulodunum in two days.\textsuperscript{87} They then move on to London and Verulamium.\textsuperscript{88} In all, Tacitus claims 70,000 Romans and their allies fall, as the Britons do not take captives or slaves.\textsuperscript{89} Suetonius returns to face the British force, bringing ten thousand men to rescue the Roman colony. Though much larger, the British army is unorganized and not prepared for a formidable fight; Tacitus notes that they “brought even their wives to witness the victory,“\textsuperscript{90} forming a boundary of carts and onlookers around the back of the British forces.

Before the two armies meet, the leaders each give a speech to rally their troops. Though undoubtedly fabricated by Tacitus, Boudica’s speech is passionate and inspiring; she delivers it from a chariot, flanked by her two daughters, as she addresses each clan.\textsuperscript{91} Boudica tells her troops that she leads them, not “as a queen of glorious ancestry, her ravished realm and power, but, as a woman of the people.“\textsuperscript{92} She reminds them that the Roman veterans, who had terrorized their lands for so long, were afraid of the British and their uprising, which should give her forces the upper hand. On the Roman side, Suetonius encourages his men not to worry, claiming the

\textsuperscript{85} Tacitus, \textit{Annals}, 14.31.  
\textsuperscript{86} Tacitus, \textit{Annals}, 14.31.  
\textsuperscript{87} Tacitus, \textit{Annals}, 14.32. Medieval chronicles claimed this was the modern town of Colchester.  
\textsuperscript{88} Tacitus, \textit{Annals}, 14.33. Suggested to be St. Albans.  
\textsuperscript{89} Tacitus, \textit{Annals}, 14.33. Tacitus’s estimate is highly unlikely.  
\textsuperscript{90} Tacitus, \textit{Annals}, 14.34.  
\textsuperscript{91} Tacitus, \textit{Annals}, 14.35.  
\textsuperscript{92} Tacitus, \textit{Annals}, 14.35.
British forces comprise of mostly women, not soldiers, who will break quickly, as they have before.\(^{93}\) Once the battle begins, the tide drastically shifts in Suetonius’s favor. The Britons turn to flee from the charging Roman army only to run into the spectators who followed them onto the field. Tacitus claims in the ensuing chaos, the Romans slaughter a little less than 80,000 Britons, including the spectators and their animals; the Romans only lose 400 troops, and only a few more are wounded.\(^{94}\) He notes that, although Boudica managed to escape, she poisoned herself.

Dio Cassius’s Roman history is the only other surviving description of Boudica. Much of his story follows Tacitus, and they seem to have had access to the same sources. He embellishes some details and cuts others; he expands on the speeches of Boudica and Suetonius and the description of the battle, but he cuts out references to the Iceni and the violence against Boudica and her daughters after Prasutagus’s death. Despite this exclusion, Dio’s account also provides a much more detailed description of Boudica. “The person who most stirred their spirits…was deemed worthy to stand at their head and to have the conduct of the entire war, was a British woman, Buduica, of the royal family and possessed of greater judgement than often belongs to women.”\(^{95}\) Dio claims that the rebellion is over the Roman government’s attempts to confiscate money from the Britons and unfair loan practices.\(^{96}\) Considered alongside the causes given by Tacitus, it certainly makes sense why numerous clans, all facing sudden pressure from Roman collectors, would rally behind the leader of a clan that had recently faced extreme prejudice, especially one as formidable as Boudica.

Dio also includes a physical description of Boudica. The validity of it is suspect, since

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\(^{93}\) Tacitus, *Annals*, 14.36.

\(^{94}\) Tacitus, *Annals*, 14.37. Again, these numbers are likely invented by either Tacitus or his source.


\(^{96}\) Dio 62.2.
Dio is writing two hundred years later, and our only other extant source does not include this description. However, if Dio used another source, one closer to Boudica than Tacitus, this could have provided an accurate description. Alternatively, Dio could have based his description on the physical characteristics and clothing of contemporary noble British women. Either way, Dio paints a particular picture of Boudica, presenting her as a formidable warrior, with a “very tall, with a most sturdy figure and a piercing glance; her voice was harsh; a great mass of yellow hair fell below her waist.” Boudica is not diminutive or meek; even before she begins speaking, she conveys an image of power. Her clothes add to this regal image; she wore “a large gold necklace clasped her throat; wound about her was a tunic of every conceivable color and over it a thick chlamys had been fastened with a brooch.” She is dressed in a distinctively British fashion, but her brightly colored tunic and impressive jewelry communicate her status to both her people and to Dio’s Roman readers.

Dio offers this description of Boudica as she delivers a speech to her army just before she begins the campaign against the Romans. As in the speech recorded by Tacitus, Boudica speaks of the atrocities of the Romans, reminding her allies “how far superior is the poverty of independence to wealth in servitude.” She thanks them for fighting and reminds them that, while the Romans are invaders in a foreign land, the Britons are at home: “Indeed, this very region is to us an acquaintance and ally, but to them unknown and hostile.” The speech ends with Boudica proclaiming that she is glad to rule over mighty warriors whose women “possess the same valor as the males.”

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97 Dio 62.2.
98 Dio 62.2.
99 Dio 62.3.
100 Dio 62.5.
101 Dio 62.6.
plundering and slaughtering two cities. Dio includes gruesome details of the British violence, claiming they “hung up naked the noblest and most distinguished women, cut off their breasts and sewed them to their mouths… After that they impaled them on sharp skewers run perpendicularly the whole length of the body.”\textsuperscript{102} By the time Suetonius hurried back, Boudica has nearly doubled her already large army, amassing a force of 230 thousand.\textsuperscript{103} Suetonius splits his outnumbered army in three, delivering a speech to each group. Again, the Romans completely decimate the British forces, though some escape, in an extremely detailed battle sequence. Dio does not share specific numbers of those killed, and he claims Boudica fell sick and died.\textsuperscript{104}

Determining who the “real” Boudica was is difficult. The only three extant sources on her were written decades to centuries later by two Roman men who show extreme bias in their writing. Primary sources available to these men likely would have been written by Romans retelling the events from the perspective of Roman soldiers and civilians. In these texts, the British are merciless, violent savages who kill innocent Romans. Although both writers make passing references to seemingly valid reasons for rebellions—rape, slavery, cruel treatment from some Romans, monetary conflicts—the British are ultimately presented as ungrateful to the benevolent, civilized Romans. While they seem to present somewhat sympathetic—and almost impressed—depictions of Boudica, they ultimately discredit and disrespect her. Regardless of how impressive her speeches may seem to a modern audience, Suetonius’s speeches are intended to resound with their audiences. Boudica’s rejection of civilization through her insults of the Romans, coupled with her desire for violence, ultimately make her an unsympathetic character to

\textsuperscript{102} Dio 62.7.  
\textsuperscript{103} Dio 62.8.  
\textsuperscript{104} Dio 62.12.
Furthermore, both texts exude clear sexism, simultaneously criticizing British women for being too violent and fighting alongside the men while calling the British forces “women.” The implication here is that the male soldiers are weak cowards, but if British women can fight, how can it be an insult to compare their men to women? Tacitus describes another British tribe with women clearly mixed into the army, and Boudica claims Britons often have female captains, but the speech from Suetonius implies the women among Boudica’s army are not soldiers. ¹⁰⁵ Dio, meanwhile, seems to side-step this question with Boudica’s comment about their women possessing “the same valor as the males,” indirectly implying British women are cowards along with their men; however, Boudica’s speech also establishes British superiority by relying on sexist remarks against the Romans. ¹⁰⁶ Ultimately, these Roman writers struggle to comprehend a society where men and women are apparently treated as equals, and as a result, the British in their depictions appear to have confused their gender roles, resulting in violent women and weak men. This patriarchal understanding of society is so ingrained in the worldview of Tacitus and Dio that even in the speeches attributed to Boudica, she compares men to women as insults and disparages other women. While it would be presumptive and ahistorical to claim the British were proto-feminists exempt from sexism, it seems unlikely that a woman raised in a society where men and women are equals on the battlefield would then complain about the incompetence of women.

Understanding these problems within the source material allows us to extrapolate the truth behind it, particularly when supplemented with other sources and archeological evidence. Boudica’s rebellion certainly took place, and Boudica herself does seem to have led the

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¹⁰⁶ Dio 62.6.
rebellion. The atrocities committed against Boudica and her daughters seem to be true, as there is no benefit to the Romans in including these details. Archeological evidence suggests London and Colchester were indeed destroyed around the time given for Boudica’s revolt.107 And the Romans defeated her troops—this much is clear from their continued presence in the area. However, the speeches are definitely invented, and there is a minimal chance of the physical description of Boudica being the truth, if only by coincidence. Other facts are harder to judge: though the British killed Romans, it is hard to know how many or what tactics they used; the numbers of Roman troops and British victims are also unverifiable. Even so, simply knowing that this rebellion was important enough to merit such a level of detail makes it all the more interesting that it was eventually cut from the historical record.

It is worth mentioning one other Roman source here: De vita Caesarum, written by Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus in 121 CE, shortly after Tacitus wrote his Annals. In his biography of Emperor Nero, emperor at the time of Boudica’s rebellion, Suetonius Tranquillus makes passing references to Britain. The first is a note that Nero “had thoughts of withdrawing the troops from Britain,”108 deciding to stay only to honor the previous emperor, his adoptive father Claudius. While listing disasters later, Suetonius Tranquillus includes “a great disaster in Britain, where two of the principal towns belonging to the Romans were plundered, and a dreadful havoc made both amongst our troops and allies.”109 These brief mentions become all that remains of Boudica’s legacy for nearly a thousand years.

Boudica’s name fades from historical records after the fall of Roman Britain, but tracing

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the specifics of her disappearance is difficult. Uncountable sources have been lost, and determining the sources used by medieval authors is often guesswork based on the wording and content of scattered passages. Even the sources these authors credit are the subject of speculation. As such, we can only speculate what information these authors had access to and how detailed that information was. Those chroniclers who had sources that directly reference Boudica but choose not to name her in their works would have had a more active role in erasing her from the historical narrative than those who were using sources that only vaguely detail the period or indirectly reference Boudica.

Of extant English histories from the early medieval period, only Gildas makes what could be a reference to Boudica. Many historians believe his brief mention of a British rebellion is Boudica’s revolt. Though British himself, Gildas denounces his country and paints the British in a very negative light. He favors the Romans, describing them as superior and the British as ungrateful, faithless barbarians. Gildas then says “that deceitful lioness put to death the [Roman] rulers who had been left among them.”

Gildas’s specificity here—“that deceitful lioness”—suggests a reference to not just a woman, but a specific woman he may have expected his audience to know.

The details Gildas gives in this section are vague and generalized. His record of the past tends to blend events together or generalize long periods of time, making it difficult to date reliably anything in his work. Gildas states that when the Romans turned their attention to Britain, they “imposed submission upon our island without resistance, and entirely reduced to obedience its unwarlike but faithless people, not so much by fire, and sword and warlike engines, like other nations, but threats alone.”

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the first century BCE, and instead gives only an account of the Claudian invasion. Although Dio and Suetonius Tranquillus also mentioned the British do not mobilize an army to stop the invasion,\textsuperscript{112} they attributed this more to an unexpected invasion and the strategical prowess of the Romans than the level of cowardice Gildas attributed to the British. And when the Romans defeat those rebelling under the lioness, Gildas writes that the British “presented their necks to their swords, whilst chill terror ran through every limb, and they stretched out their hands to be bound, like women…the Britons are neither brave in war nor faithful in time of peace.”\textsuperscript{113} Again the British are compared to women to degrade them, even in a narrative as truncated as Gildas’s.

Perhaps this hatred of the British is what encourages Gildas to leave the “deceitful lioness” unnamed, allowing the history of the British to fade into obscurity. Interestingly enough, Gildas’s early chapters do not name any historical figures; in fact, very few individuals actually appear in this section.\textsuperscript{114} For the most part, Gildas talks generally about “the rulers of Rome” and “the rebels.” Before chapter ten, the only person who appears as an individual is this unnamed woman who rose up against the Romans. He does not need to name the rebellion leader, either because his contemporaries may have known her from other works or oral stories or because he is trying to erase her. Gildas’s vitriol towards a specific figure suggests he knows of the story behind this lioness; if he did not know exactly who she was, it would make more sense to use “a lioness” or simply “a woman.” Gildas knows Boudica and is purposefully removing her name from the story, even as he highlights her in his writing.

Gildas appears to be the last reference to Boudica in British and English histories for

\textsuperscript{112} Suetonius, \textit{Claudius}, 17; Dio 60.19-21. Dio says the British did fight back, though not as a united force.
\textsuperscript{113} Gildas, \textit{The Ruin of Briton}, 6.
\textsuperscript{114} Gildas, \textit{The Ruin of Briton}, 3-10. The first named figure (besides Christ) is Tiberius Caesar in ch 8, but he appears only to note the year and spread of Christianity; he is not an active figure in the text or Britain’s history. It isn’t until ch 10 that Gildas actually brings up British martyrs, naming them and actually looking at them as individuals rather than a group.
almost one thousand years. Though later chroniclers cite Gildas, their omission of “that lioness” seems to indicate that they no longer know who she is. Tacitus and Dio’s texts were nearly lost, and the histories they told were absent from the medieval period. Suetonius Tranquillus may have fared a bit better; at any rate, it is his summary of the rebellion that seems to appear in some English chronicles written between the eighth and twelfth centuries. Bede notes that Nero “almost lost Britain; for in his time two most notable towns were there taken and destroyed.”\(^{115}\)

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle includes Nero’s near-loss of Britain but does not mention the cities that are destroyed.\(^{116}\) Boudica’s rebellion, which received so much attention from Tacitus and Dio, is relegated to a two-sentence note in half a dozen chronicles. This shift in coverage is likely less the fault of these later historians and more the result of losing texts that actually name Boudica. These chroniclers only had access to works offering some variation of the story used by Suetonius Tranquillus.

Henry of Huntingdon appears to be the last medieval historian to mention Nero’s near-loss of Britain in his *Historia Anglorum*. His work was first published at the end of 1129, and the last edition, which included contemporary updates, was finished around 1154. Again, Huntington notes that Nero almost lost Britain and “two of its most noble strongholds were overthrown and destroyed.”\(^{117}\) Given the relatively late composition of his work—and the variety of other, earlier sources that include the same information—perhaps this small detail would not have disappeared from English histories were it not for *The History of the Kings of Britain*, which Monmouth published in 1136. While some of his contemporaries dismissed Monmouth’s fabricated chronicle, it was immensely popular and quickly overtook what few details of the past remained


available. The one reference of Boudica’s rebellion that had survived the fall of the Romans—this note of Nero’s incompetence—was soon replaced by a much more detailed and exciting narrative, one that erases even Nero.

Monmouth’s broad revision of the early Roman period becomes the standard; as such, Boudica does not exist in medieval chronicles. However, Monmouth’s history works certain elements of early Roman history, as it was known to his English predecessors, into his chronicle. As Nero is absent from Monmouth, the closest comparisons to Boudica’s rebellion are the revolts against and around the Claudian invasion and rule. Though these events follow different figures, some of the battles are reminiscent of descriptions of the Boudican rebellion, including the destruction of Winchester and Porchester.118 While these are different cities than the ones destroyed by Boudica, the two destroyed cities could be a reference to the two cities lost during Nero’s reign. Monmouth follows Gildas in praising the Romans and blaming the British for revolts.119 The reason behind this is twofold. On one hand, the English still showed animosity toward the indigenous British, and convincing themselves that they had conquered a godless and violent nation made for a better narrative than a bloody conquest. Even as the Normans took power, disparaging the British and the Anglo-Saxons helped validate their invasion and occupation of England. The English also saw themselves more as the Romans, particularly because the British (Welsh) still lived in England. On the other hand, however, medieval historians began to use the relationship between the Romans and the British as commentary on the Church and their own country.

118 Monmouth, History of the Kings of Briton, iv.14.
119 Monmouth, History of the Kings of Briton, iv.16. “[Arvirargus] became arrogant and looked down on the majesty of Rome. He refused to continue his homage to the Senate, arrogating all things to himself instead. When this was discovered, Vespasian was sent by Claudius either to bring about a reconciliation with Arirargus or else force him back into subjection to Rome.”
Medieval historians conflate the Romans with the Catholic Church, especially after Monmouth’s history, which skips over controversial Romans like Nero, gains popularity.\(^{120}\) To medieval historians, most of who were members of the church, the powerful Romans conquering the pagan Britons served as a handy metaphor for the Catholic Church and its domination over Europe. While the British could have been justified in these texts for fending off Caesar’s pagan invasion, rejecting Claudian Rome after 40 CE, after the death of Christ, appeared to be a rejection of Christianity. In Monmouth’s history, there are two kinds of British kings after the Roman invasion: good kings, who pay tribute to and obey Rome, and evil or unruly kings, who continuously pick fights with the Romans.\(^ {121}\) The implication here is that a good king is always subservient to Rome—that is, to the Catholic Church. For medieval monks writing during times of conflict between the Church and the monarchy, showing the British submitting to Rome, and presenting that as a positive thing, may have been commentary on contemporary issues.

Boudica finally returns to British history in the sixteenth century, almost a millennium after her last allusion in Gildas’s chronicle. Tacitus’s *Annals* 11-16 were first published in Florence around 1470, and the first English translation appeared in 1598.\(^ {122}\) As such, Polydore Vergil’s *Anglica Historia* served as Boudica’s re-introduction to the English historical record. Vergil was an Italian historian tasked with writing a history of England, the first manuscript of which appeared in 1513 and was published in 1534. Vergil set out to write the most accurate history he could, conducting thorough research that used both English and foreign sources. The result is a somewhat clumsy attempt to consolidate the mythic history of England with the history provided by Roman authors. He repeats a history of the mythic British kings, listing them

\(^{120}\) Curran, *Roman Invasions*, p. 37.

\(^{121}\) Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Briton*, iv.11, 12, 16-19.

through the reign of Julius Caesar, where classical texts finally pick up the history of Britain. Vergil’s solution to the discrepancy is that infighting fractures the country into the tribes detailed by the Romans, but after some time the monarchy is restored once again, and he continues the list of British monarchs.

His description of Boudica and the revolt follow Tacitus, while undoubtedly still Roman, removes much of Tacitus’s emotional language and reports the facts he extrapolates. Actual discussion of Boudica is brief; he says that she was banished and her daughters “disteined with lecherie”\textsuperscript{123} and mentions a speech, though he does not copy it in full: “Voadicia emonge the reste didde chieflie exasperate their mindes with great plaintee of her wrongs which she hadd sustained at the Romaines, whoe, bie cause she burned of all others in greatest hatred, it was broughte abowght, herselfe beinge capitan.”\textsuperscript{124} Most of the account sticks to numbers and details of the battle. At the end, Vergil says that Boudica poisoned herself to avoid falling into enemy hands.\textsuperscript{125} Interestingly, Vergil asserts that Boudica’s tribe was the Igeni, not the Iceni, which he clearly distinguishes between. Furthermore, the Boudica of Vergil’s account is less directly responsible for the revolt; though she is still a leader among the British, the revolt is more of a people’s uprising. At any rate, Vergil’s inclusion of Boudica is the beginning of what becomes a cultural movement; after a thousand years of obscurity, Boudica becomes one of the most iconic figures in ancient English history in less than a century.

This change is not immediate, though. The first historians to really embrace Boudica are actually Scottish, most notably Hector Boece, who wrote *The History of the Chronicles of Scotland* in 1531. Boece’s history haphazardly mixes figures from both English and Roman

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{123}{Vergil, *English History*, bk. 2, p. 70.}
\footnote{124}{Vergil, *English History*, bk. 2, p. 71.}
\footnote{125}{Vergil, *English History*, bk. 2, p. 72.}
\end{footnotes}
histories, making Boudica the wife of the British king who opposes Claudius in Monmouth’s narrative. Histories written over the following decades vary in their representation of Boudica and her revolt, due in no small part to broader changes taking place within English society and the turmoil taking place within the English understanding of history. By the time Holinshed includes Boudica in his 1577 chronicle, she has transformed into an icon of English resistance and power.

Boudica’s popularity is assisted by the timing of her resurgence. Just as Boudica’s story was upending the English understanding of British history, England was undergoing a dramatic change in its relationship with the Catholic Church and Rome. For centuries, English historians had worked to connect their history to Rome, the center of the medieval world. The Roman period of English history had been focused around the image of a superior Rome and an obedient Britain, justly punished for the occasions where it pushes against Roman occupation. Such a portrayal was no longer suitable in a newly Protestant England, which quickly worked to distinguish itself as an independent and morally correct nation. To the historians of this England, Boudica provided a new kind of historical precedent: one of defiance against Roman oppression, of brazen British strength and determination. No longer aligning themselves with the historic Romans, English historians instead began to ground modern England in ancient Britain. What set Boudica apart from other British leaders, especially male leaders, was her relation to another modern change: the ascension of Elizabeth I to the English throne.

While Boudica’s story was certainly inspiring, there were other contemporary figures who could have become popular, such as Caratacus or Cartimandua. Perhaps if either of

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126 Hector Boece, *Heir beginnis the hystory and croniklis of Scotland*, trans. John Bellenden (Edinburgh, 1540), bk. 4, ch. 4, [http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A16292.0001.001](http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A16292.0001.001).
127 Catuvelaunian chieftain who opposed the British during the Claudian invasion.
128 Queen of the Brigantes and an ally of the Romans, who joined her in defending her land from her husband.
Elizabeth’s siblings had ruled as long as Elizabeth, one of these other leaders would have become the central figure in Roman Britain. Instead, the new English queen is closely linked with the British queen and her struggle against the atrocities of the Romans. Though the violence of the British is still included in histories written at this time, these are often relegated to a paragraph summary. At the same time, much more attention is given to the horrors committed by the Romans and the reasons the British revolt. The Romans also bear more of the guilt for the extent of the British success; Holinshed, for instance, clarifies a detail Tacitus gave: the Roman generals leave certain parts of the colony under-defended, and Suetonius Paulinus abandons London to the British.  

While Roman accounts make it sound as if London is abandoned by its citizens before the British reach it, Holinshed says that Suetonius reached the city before the British and chose to abandon it for a more defensible position, ignoring its citizens’ pleas.  

Where Vergil removed Boudica’s speeches from history, Holinshed included both the speech found in Dio, given before the British begin their assault on the Romans, and in Tacitus, given before the battle against Suetonius. Boudica is eloquent, regal, and fierce, with a vengeance justly inspired by her mistreatment at the hands of the Romans. Such a powerful queen reminded many of Elizabeth herself, a Protestant queen who defended her country against moral and physical assaults. This connection becomes even more relevant in 1588, when Elizabeth gives a rousing speech to her troops just before they defeat the Spanish Armada. She rides among her troops before declaring her love for her people and her willingness to die with them, proclaiming, “I know I have the body of a weak, feeble woman; but I have the heart and

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stomach of a king, and of a king of England too.”¹³¹ The similarities between Elizabeth’s actions and speech and those credited to Boudica are striking: both place themselves among their troops, making themselves “one of the people” while still appearing as regal queens ordained by merit of their birth, and both proclaim the moral superiority of their cause and their strength and capability despite their sex.

Contemporary poets made note of this similarity in their depictions of Elizabeth. James Aske’s *Elizabetha Triumphans* was written about the defeat of the Spanish Armada and Elizabeth’s speech, giving a detailed and ornamental account of the event. Aske’s poem shows an acceptance of the British origins of modern England, as Boudica is called “Englands happie Queene,” an epitaph applied to Elizabeth only seven lines later.¹³² He says that Boudica and her daughter “Are now reuiu’d, their vertues liue (I say)/ Through this our Quéene.”¹³³ A direct line is drawn connecting Boudica and Elizabeth; the latter is the heir of the former, inheriting both her country and her courage. This earnest comparison is continued in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, an epic dedicated to Elizabeth, who is represented as the fairy queen Gloriana. Spenser praises Boudica, claiming she only lost because her captains betrayed her.

[Boudica], whiles good Fortune favoured her Might,
Triumphed oft against her Enemies;
And yet tho overcome in hapless Fight,
She triumphed on Death, in Enemies despight.¹³⁴

Though Boudica was defeated by the Romans, she does not truly lose in Spenser’s poem. While past accounts show Boudica’s suicide as an admission of defeat, Spenser sees this as a victory, a

¹³¹ *Cabala, Mysteries of State and Government: in Letters of Illustrious Persons and Great Ministers* (London, 1663), 373. Though it is preserved in a seventeenth-century letter, most historians believe this transcription of the speech to be accurate.
¹³³ Aske, *Elizabetha Triumphans*, p. 23, lines 33-34.
¹³⁴ Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, II.x.
refusal to give in to the Romans. That refusal is what the English latch onto in their depictions of Boudica. Early modern historical and fictional accounts of Boudica alike praise her courage and persistence against the Romans, her refusal to give in. In these accounts, her defeat is either minimized, changed, or transformed into her final victory, a final act of resistance.

Boudica’s re-introduction to English history helped fill the void left by the removal of the kings of Britain. The translations of Roman historians that restored Boudica also led to the re-evaluation and subsequent dismissal of the British kings invented by Monmouth. As such, England found itself in an unfortunate position in the sixteenth century: after four hundred years of a rich and detailed history of kings, their entire national identity was thrown into question. Though England’s new Protestantism and queen explain why Boudica specifically was chosen to represent the English nation, the removal of the British kings from the historical record necessitated the emergence of a new figure upon which the English could project their interpretations of both the ancient British and the modern English monarchy.

Once Elizabeth dies, however, the English no longer need to convince themselves that women were capable of ruling; in fact, after 45 years of a competent and popular female monarch, it seemed necessary to counter this image. As such, John Fletcher sought a male Briton to confer Boudica’s power upon when he wrote Bonduca, a play detailing a British revolt against the Romans. Though the Roman officers present indicate this is the Boudican rebellion, Fletcher conflates the rebellions of Boudica, Nennius, and Caratacus, who is now Boudica’s brother-in-law. Though the play is named after Boudica, Caratacus is the true protagonist, and he spends most of the time either praising the superior ways of the Romans, complaining of

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135 The earliest recorded performance of Bonduca is from 1613, indicating a composition date of 1613 or earlier. The play was first published in 1647 in a joint collection of John Fletcher and Francis Beaumont; the play has since been ascribed to Fletcher.

136 British prince from Monmouth’s History who fought Julius Caesar, 100 years before Boudica’s rebellion.
Boudica’s incompetence, or actively working against her.

**BONDUCA:** A woman beat 'em, Nennius; a weak woman,  
A woman, beat these Romans!

**CARATACH:** So it seems;  
A man would shame to talk so.137

Caratacus’s conflict with Boudica begins with his very first line, setting up Boudica as cocky and rash and Caratacus as cautious and wise. Boudica and her daughters become the true villains, their treachery and bloodlust contrasted by tragically noble Caratacus and the respectable Romans.

Fletcher’s portrayal is not entirely negative—after all, he cannot completely degrade a figure equated with England itself—which means much of the explanation of who is and is not right is explained through speeches. On the surface, Boudica and her daughters seem smart and tactful. As incompetent as Caratacus thinks she is, Boudica is the leader of the Britons, not him. It is her daughters who succeed in capturing two Roman generals—whom Caratacus then releases. And it is Boudica and her daughters who command the British fort and refuse to surrender. Despite these seemingly brave actions, the audience is constantly reminded that Boudica and her daughters are actually wrong. In nearly every one of his lines, Caratacus bemoans how savage and bloodthirsty the Britons are—specifically, his sister-in-law and nieces—and how much he admires the Romans for their noble fighting and way of life. Caratacus’s correctness is confirmed when the Britons go to a temple to pray before battle. Boudica asks the gods to “Take pity from our swords, doubt from our valours;/ Double the sad remembrance of our wrongs.”138 Her first daughter, meanwhile, brings up her rape: “Thou feared god, if ever to thy justice/ Insulting wrongs, and ravishments of women.”139 Finally, her younger

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138 Fletcher, *Bonduca*, III.i.4-5.
139 Fletcher, *Bonduca*, III.i.28-29.
daughter offers her sacrifice for her family.

This tear for Prosutagus my brave father;
(Ye gods, now think on Rome!) this for my mother,
And all her miseries; yet see, and save us!
But now ye must be open-eyed. See, Heaven,
Oh, see thy showers stolen from thee: our dishonours,
Oh, sister, our dishonours!¹⁴⁰

Though these pleas are earnest and heartfelt, they do not work. Caratacus scolds the women:

Cease your fretful prayers,
Your whinings, and your tame petitions;
The gods love courage arm'd with confidence.¹⁴¹

He asks for good enemies and “good blows o' both sides,”¹⁴² and his prayer is answered, indicating the battle should be fought for glory, not for revenge. Despite all his talk about how they have to fight the Romans, however, his unwillingness to understand the pain of Boudica and her daughters aligns him with the Romans repeatedly throughout the play, even though he is also the most competent Briton fighting against them.¹⁴³

This alignment creates a gender dichotomy between the Romans and the Britons; the Romans represent noble and wise masculinity, while the Britons represent seductive and violent femininity. This is clearly communicated by Caratacus, who uses gendered terms when talking about his fights with the Romans.

>BONDUCA: By the gods, I think
You dote upon these Romans, Caratach!

>CARATACH: Witness these wounds, I do; they were fairly given:
I love an enemy; I was born a soldier;
And he that in the head on's troop defies me,
Bending my manly body with his sword,
I make a mistress. Yellow-tressed Hymen
Ne'er tied a longing virgin with more joy,
Than I am married to that man that wounds me:
And are not all these Roman? Ten struck battles

¹⁴⁰ Fletcher, *Bonduca*, III.i.49-54
¹⁴¹ Fletcher, *Bonduca*, III.i.58-60.
¹⁴² Fletcher, *Bonduca*, III.i.70.
¹⁴³ Fletcher, *Bonduca*, I.i.118-27.
I suck'd these honour'd scars from, and all Roman;¹⁴⁴

Here, Caratacus takes on a subservient female role in relation to the Romans. Late on, however, when the Britons retreat but he goes back to save his nephew, he is spared by “that the sun of virtue, Penius”;¹⁴⁵ who decides to let him go because of this act of bravery, which Penius attributes to his “manly sword.”¹⁴⁶ Thus do the Romans, symbols of masculinity, confirm Caratacus’s masculinity even before he joins them completely.

Though Boudica boasts of her victories over the Romans, the only battles in the play feature Roman victories. The British are willing to kill Romans however they can, utilizing methods Caratacus complains are dishonest and savage. He releases Roman soldiers twice: once when Boudica is about to hang two soldiers who snuck into British territory for food,¹⁴⁷ and later when Boudica’s daughters capture two Roman generals. This capture happens after Boudica’s younger daughter learns one of the generals is in love with her; though disgusted, she arranges a meeting and captures the men.¹⁴⁸ Caratacus comes in at just the right moment to release the men, taking the time to berate his nieces and blame them for their rapes.

  2 DAUGHT.: By Heaven, uncle,
      We will have vengeance for our rapes!
  CARATACH: By Heaven,
      Ye should have kept your legs close then.—Dispatch there!¹⁴⁹

In Caratacus’s opinion, his nieces are evil temptresses, and the only way to fight the Romans is meeting them on a designated field of battle. Later on, as the tide of the final battle shifts in the favor of the Romans, Caratacus gives a speech complaining about how Boudica’s incompetence and cowardice has cost them the battle: “Thou agent for adversities, what curses/ This day

¹⁴⁴ Fletcher, Bonduca, I.i.61-71.
¹⁴⁵ Fletcher, Bonduca, I.i.129.
¹⁴⁶ Fletcher, Bonduca, I.i.134.
¹⁴⁷ Fletcher, Bonduca, II.iii.61-79.
¹⁴⁸ Fletcher, Bonduca, II.iii.156-66, 181-83, 189-95.
¹⁴⁹ Fletcher, Bonduca, III.v.95-99.
belong to thy improvidence!"—except that, without his interference, the Romans would have been without two of their most effective officers. Of course, Caratacus is proved right: at the end of the battle, when the Romans are chasing down the remaining Britons, Caratacus turns to face the Romans, who recognize him and invite him to join them.

SUETONIUS: For fame's sake, for thy sword's sake,
As thou desirest to build thy virtues greater!
By all that's excellent in man, and honest——
CARATACH: I do believe. Ye have had me a brave foe;
Make me a noble friend, […]
I yield then
Not to your blows, but your brave courtesies.
PETILLIUS: Thus we conduct then to the arms of peace.

This friendship allows him to join the masculine Romans, where he belonged all along.

The dichotomy between masculine bravery and feminine cowardice is also presented in the two suicide scenes that occur in Bonduca. Boudica and her two daughters commit suicide by drinking poison as the Romans storm the British fort. Though her daughters are initially uncertain, Boudica encourages/threatens them to join her, and they all drink the poison, dying quickly.

SUETONIUS: Make up your own conditions!
BONDUCA: So we will. […]
SUETONIUS: Be anything.
BONDUCA: A saint, Suetonius. {Drinks.}

The Romans watch on, appalled that women would do something so horrible. This is paralleled a scene earlier, during the suicide of a Roman general, Penius, who is disgraced after he misses a major victory. As with Boudica’s daughters, another character has to encourage him to kill himself. Petillius informs Penius that “‘Tis equal ill; the death of rats and women./ Lovers, and

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150 Fletcher, Bonduca, V.i.4-5.
151 Fletcher, Bonduca, III.v.83.
152 Fletcher, Bonduca, V.iii.252-56, 259-62. Interestingly, Boudica suggests making peace in I.i., and Caratacus talks her out of it; here, though, Petillius confirms they have made peace—now that Caratacus is the only Briton alive.
153 Fletcher, Bonduca, IV.iv.108-204.
154 Fletcher, Bonduca, IV.iv.186-87. 190-91.
lazy boys, that fear correction,” and commands him to “Die like a man.”\(^{155}\) Convinced, Penius kills himself by falling on his sword, thereby preserving his honor. Even though Penius kills himself for missing a battle and Boudica kills herself to defy the Romans after leading an army, Penius’s death is the more honorable one, and in the end Caratacus mourns him while cursing Boudica.\(^{156}\)

As historians move further from Elizabeth, there is no longer a greater society advantage to showing a powerful queen. Instead, Boudica’s story focuses on the British aspects of her rebellion rather than her sex. Though historians who covered the Roman period in depth included additional British figures recovered from classical historians, those who briefly summarized the era were much more limited in space. Samuel Daniel’s *Collection of the Historie of England* covered the pre-Roman and conquest history of Britain in roughly four pages, half of these dedicated to dismissing the Monmouth kings or degrading the British. He mentions Caratacus in one brief sentence; Boudica’s story, meanwhile, occupies almost an entire paragraph. His account only mentions Boudica a few times. “[The Britons] committed on the perfon, and State of Queene Voadicia.” Though Daniel does share the details of the Roman atrocities against Boudica and her daughters, he does not copy out her speech, and ends simply with “whereupon Voadicia poylons herfelfe.”\(^{157}\) As historians rely more and more on the translated Roman texts, which offer few details and names from ancient Britain, Boudica becomes the one recognizable, developed figure who both represents English strength and can be reliably traced to accepted historical sources.

In the sixteen hundred years after her death, Boudica and her rebellion came to epitomize

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\(^{155}\) Fletcher, *Boduca*, IV.iii.168-70.  
\(^{156}\) Fletcher, *Boduca*, V.i.55-80.  
early Roman Britain. To the Romans who recorded the first mentions of her, Boudica embodied the savagery of the British and their gender-confused society; to the early English, she was an embarrassing reminder of their pre-Christian past and the inferiority of the indigenous British. At the time she re-entered the historical record, however, England was in need of a national icon who demonstrated strength against the Romans and the capability of female rulers. Helped by her association with Elizabeth and a shift in the understanding of British history, Boudica emerged as a cultural symbol of English perseverance and bravery. She was enshrined in the English imagination as a celebration of ancient Britain, her wild violence for a noble cause cementing her as a permanent, if mixed, figure in English history.

**Conclusion**

For roughly fifteen hundred years, the nebulous understanding of history allowed for the addition and exclusion of figures as suited the authors of England’s chronicles, histories, and historical literature. The decisions behind those additions and exclusions often betray greater trends in contemporary society; this is certainly true in the historical treatment of the stories of Albina, Cordelia, and Boudica. The importance of these women comes down to their status as symbols of both female rule and national identity. Albina served as an ancient origin for the British, and Cordelia was the archetype of a queen regnant, offering a template for contemporary historians to input their opinions on women upon. As both figures faded from public history, Boudica emerged as a culmination of the ideas they represented. She was both a symbol of Britain and a powerful queen. Through these women, the English grappled with their own understanding of national identity, obligations to the Catholic Church, and the capability of queens regnant. Whether real figures or completely fabricated, all three women are important in
our understanding of medieval and early modern England and its relationship with the past.
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