

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **Bonduca 1611-1614**

John Fletcher (1579-1625)

### BACKGROUND

As pre modern Britain makes its way toward the outlines of a modern state, that which will in a century become the 'era of Elizabeth,' the cultural self-awareness of the British Isles grows increasingly more robust. What will in later cultural thinking seem the dominance of such a figure as Shakespeare, has at the time of Shakespeare himself, as he shifted from one flat to another in the walled in, energy-packed new city of London, will to Shakespeare himself, and to his fast growing number of theatrical co-creators, have been just what it was, a throbbing new cultural powerhouse, coming into being from fresh new perspectives onto what then seemed the world. New mentalities and points of expression were bursting up on all sides.

Within this ambience of creativity--the fast blowing cultural currents of a world as that world once was known in Athens, then in Florence--currents that were blowing perspectives drunkenly deep for the thinking Londoner. Was it possible, just possible, that a new cultural world could just then be forming right there at the foot of Big Ben? There could have been many zones of evidence for this fresh awareness. And one of the most potent pieces could have been the vigor of the theater itself, as we see from the outburst of dramatic energy surrounding such already brilliant figures as Jonson and Shakespeare.

Fletcher's play *Bonduca* belongs in this setting. (The name Bonduca is a linguistic recasting of the name Boadicea, embedded in the aura of British national heritage. Boadicea,, famed as the stellar queen of the East Anglians, symbolic of the resistance of native Britons to the Roman 'foreigners?! Given the closeness of British to Ancient Roman culture, this ready to hand reference point is no surprise.) With the revival in premodern times of the archaic Boadicea the semi-modern Briton returns into his sense of national heritage. We have the makings of nationalism on stage, as, perhaps, we Americans found a similar heritage point in the highly successful musical *Hamilton, In which we were enabled to play with and recreate our own founding days.*

### PLOT

Bonduca prides herself on her victories over the Romans. Her chief military commander, Caratach, warns her that the conflict will be arduous and drawn out. (Think Netanyahu warning the Israelis that the conflict in Gaza will be arduous). The conflict between these two individuals takes center stage, and will remain at the heart of this drama. At this point we switch to the Roman camp. The Romans are debating whether to advance against the Britons. Some favor attack, while others consider it suicide. The two sides make their plans for battle, and carry out the necessary rituals and prayers to the gods.

Slowly, from within both camps, the pressure for full scale combat increases. Caratach berates His sister for having failed to prepare adequately, while the Roman forces are disciplined and orderly. That is not the end of the conflict between Caratach and Bonduca. Caratach and his nephew, Hengo, escape the battle and are able to flee. Bonduca and her daughters find themselves trapped in a fortress. Then the micro texture Fletcher loves sets in.

The younger daughter begs her mother to surrender, but is rejected. Her mother and her sister will have nothing of it. When the wall of the fortress is breached, Bonduca forces her younger daughter to kill herself. (Previous rapes by Roman soldiers have driven a madness into Bonduca )At this point the older daughter of Bonduca gives a powerful oratory--to suit Roman ears--about the value of self-sacrifice.

One of the Roman commanders thereupon falls in love with her--they are on the whole a romantic bunch. At this point, however, the Queen and her daughter kill themselves.

The following micro events let us further into the intricacies which characterize Fletcher's creativity. Hengo and Caratach watch from the British heights, from where they can see the funeral of Penius, the most eminent of the Roman commanders. Meanwhile the Roman soldier, Petilius, has continued thinking of Bonduca's elder daughter, on whom he has been seriously soft. While Petilius has been fantasizing a love, he comes in for some mockery from the Roman fellow-soldier, Junius, who was earlier romantic toward another daughter of Bonduca, a sensitivity for which he had taken his share of ridicule.

The fine tuning that characterizes the final scenes of the play takes off from the central actions, and brings us even further down toward the declining of a great battle.

## CHARACTERS

Bonduca is the revered warrior queen of the Britons, who has won important victories over the Romans, and stands for the national power of her people. She is the sister in law of Caratach. In historical terms she was the Queen of the Iceni (in East Anglia, as noted. Anglia). She is known for having driven headfirst against the Romans in the past, and for having gloated triumphantly over her battle victories. Her gloating is part of an exuberant wilfulness for which she was noted above. In the second and major battle of the play, Bonduca ruins the contest for the Britons, by attacking headfirst, and without sufficient organization. Upon her defeat by the Romans she retires to a fortress with her daughters. Besieged by the Romans, the women take poison and die. The tragedy, of this in some ways simply romantic drama, breaks through with the deaths of the women. Bonduca has spun her life thread out too thin.

Caratach is the uncle of Hengo, the young nephew of Bonduca. He is loyal to the Britons but has abundant respect for the manly Roman invaders. He is a counterpoint therefore to the nationalist feminism of Bonduca. His complex attitude toward the Roman British relationship makes him one of the most interesting characters in the play. When Bonduca assaults the Romans, Caratach accuses her of slackness, and himself plays the valorous role of protecting Hengo, her young nephew. Ultimately Caratach is conquered by the Romans, but not greatly to his displeasure, as his Romanophilia continues to dominate him.

The daughters of Bonduca have been raped by Roman soldiers and for the remainder of the play remain fixed on the passion to avenge their humiliation. They have little but contempt for the love advances of the Roman military.

Corporal Judas, Roman officer, commands four starving Roman soldiers. Captured by Caratach, they nonetheless are freed, thanks to their captor's fondness for Rome.

Decius, a Roman officer and friend to Junius the lovelorn and depressed wooer of a daughter of Bonduca.

Druids, background cultists, whose singing accompanies the Britons' prayers to the gods. One should not minimize the archaic-ritual dimension of this drama.

Drusius, compassionate and intelligent Roman officer, who offers Caratach the opportunity to mourn over a fallen corpse he is carrying. Though we think this play a tragedy--fury of clashing armies, the ultimate devastation of one of them--it is criss crossed with romance and the occasional outbreak of tenderness. Fletcher moves here across strikingly premodern territory.

Hengo, nephew to Caratach and Bonduca.

Suetonius, a Roman general who assumed command over the Roman forces in England. He took over from Penius, who was beginning to doubt that the Britons could be defeated. At the play's end he

has narrowed his focus to the capture of Caratach, the strong remaining representative of the British army. He succeeds in bringing Caratach back to Rome.

## THEMES

*Romance.* Junius, a junior officer with the Roman army, develops a crush on the daughter of Queen Bonduca. The presentation of this affection makes the young man's mood read as extraordinarily romantic, essentially a crush. ('Crushes' were not normal affective modes in pre modern--let alone ancient-- cultures, except of course in corners like Hellenistic sculpture or in literary ambiances like Petronius' *Satyricon*. In daily Athenian life, of course, middle aged men typically cuddled their hairless favorites down at the palestra, but that was more nearly a social act than a romantic one).

*Feminism.* Bonduca herself comes on as a powerful military minded figure, with none of the feminine entrapments of a Cleopatra. She is an adamant foe of the Romans, and along with her daughters and allies makes a strong stand against the army of Suetonius. Her implacable courage, demonstrated against one of the world's great armies, has given her a long lived emblematic status among the peoples of the British Isles.

*Nationalism* The present play is in some regards, as the above entry suggests, built around a nationalist theme. Britons, even at the time of Fletcher himself, were engaged with empire building, assembling properties which were to become the United States--or India or Australia. It is of course not that the Britons emerged triumphant from even the kind of battle they engage with the Romans. But it is that a figure like Bonduca personified the latent power of the British. A fierce and courageous defiance marks her from start to finish.

*Ambivalence.* One of the most richly tinted figures in the play is the Roman commander, Caratach. He is marked as a pagan Briton, a defender of Bonduca, yet at the same time a determined supporter of the Roman military discipline and control.

## EVENTS

The perspectives of this play defy the perspectives habitual to our contemporary mindset. While we know that a nationalist can be at the same time an admirer of many aspects of 'the other side,' still the behavior of Caratach, who so brazenly accuses Bonduca of disorganization, and the readiness of Caratach to protect the Romans who find themselves trapped or beleaguered by the Britons' attitudes -- does this set of attitudes congeal into a plausible historical picture?

So what kind of British self-flattery does the present play-document propose to be? Is this a relatively contemporary play, in which the complexity of social constructions is recognized? Or does Fletcher feel free to level a hearty broadsides at his own past, while at the same time saluting one of its emblematic heroines?

By and large we have to feel that the present drama plays the kind of complex role that, say, Aeschylus' *Persians* played for the Athenians in the early fifth century B.C. His remarkable achievement was to portray both sides, the victorious Athenians and the defeated Persians, in sympathetic lights. The Athenian audience was thus coaxed into seeing the strengths of both sides. The folly of war was also brought to the fore, by demonstrating the damage done to both sides by the conflict. (The same dramaturgical effect was achieved by Aristophanes, later in the century, in a play like the *Acharnians*, in which we are made to experience up close the damage done to small farmers by the Athenians' incessant fighting). Though a military people, the Athenians were at all times intelligent in approaching the pros and cons of military action.

An even wider purview extends outward, around the present play. We are prompted to consider the *raison d'être* for the very existence of literature. What are Aeschylus, Aristophanes and Fletcher doing, by sharing through an intricate verbal artefact their inner pictures of war in action? They are adopting a

strategy for unburdening the strain of raw life, life as the weight of life. Letters, concatenations of verbal construction tools, spin out webs of clarity, through which we are enabled to peer freshly into the seething textures that generate a life or the history of a group of lives.