SHE SPEAKS

THE POWER OF WOMEN'S VOICES

YVETTE COOPER



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BOUDICA

'A Woman's Resolve'

BATTLE OF WATLING STREET

Account by Tacitus, AD 60

Two thousand years ago, a British warrior queen made this incredible speech.

It is one of the earliest accounts we have of public oratory by any woman and it is a furious roar against violation.

Reading it, I find it astonishing that this speech was given so long ago, as many of the images and ideas attributed to Boudica have continued to echo through the centuries since, including in the speeches of other women found in this book.

After her husband died in AD 60, the Romans refused to accept Boudica or her daughters as the heirs to the lands and the regency of the Iceni tribe. She was flogged, her daughters raped, and other tribe elders were killed. The cruelty of the Romans provoked uprising among several of the Celtic tribes, and with Boudica leading them the united tribes took Colchester and London, burning buildings

and killing thousands before finally being defeated somewhere in the Midlands at the battle of Watling Street.

According to Roman historian Tacitus, this is the speech Boudica gave to the gathered tribes before leading them into their final battle.

All we really know of Boudica are the stories told about her by men some years later. Cassius Dio describes her as 'very tall, in appearance most terrifying, in the glance of her eye most fierce and her voice was harsh'. Tacitus describes her riding her chariot among the united tribes, her speech a rousing battle cry.

Her words are stirring. Her fierce call for 'a righteous vengeance' against the violation of women and country would be echoed 1,500 years later by Elizabeth I in a speech to her troops at Tilbury. And her invocation of 'a woman's resolve', ready to win or die, would be seized on by the suffragettes, who used her image on their banners.

The rhetoric may owe much to Tacitus, but the legend of a female warrior leader inspiring her people, defending her daughters and her land, has become an important part of British folk history. Be she bellicose warmonger or fearless mother and queen, her story and image have been appropriated through the centuries as the Elizabethans and Victorians erected monuments to her.

By Westminster Bridge in London stands one of those monuments; a huge bronze statue of Boudica and her daughters. Arms raised to the heavens, horses tearing, hair streaming, three women charge their bronze chariot towards Big Ben – a reminder to today's campaigners and activists as they gather around Parliament of the long tradition of women roaring against injustice and turning personal pain and humiliation into a rallying cry for action.

“

But now,
it is not as a woman descended from noble ancestry,
but as one of the people that I am avenging lost freedom,
my scourged body,
the outraged chastity of my daughters.
Roman lust has gone so far that not our very person, nor even age or virginity, are left unpolluted.
But heaven is on the side of a righteous vengeance;
a legion which dared to fight has perished;
the rest are hiding themselves in their camp, or are thinking anxiously of flight.
They will not sustain even the din and the shout of so many thousands, much less our charge and our blows.
If you weigh well the strength of the armies, and the causes of the war, you will see that in this battle you must conquer or die.
This is a woman’s resolve; as for men, they may live and be slaves.

”



QUEEN ELIZABETH I

'The Heart and Stomach of a King'

SPEECH TO THE TROOPS AT TILBURY

1588

Elizabeth I's speech to the troops at Tilbury was the first speech I ever read. It was the Silver Jubilee year for Queen Elizabeth II, and our small-town primary school was celebrating all things Elizabethan from the sixteenth century to the twentieth. In an old Ladybird book on Queen Elizabeth I from the school library, I found this speech. I loved it – as much for the rhythms and poetry as for the sentiment and story – and I learned it by heart.

When Elizabeth I gave this speech in 1588, she had already been queen for thirty years, but England remained divided, troubled and in fear of invasion by the mighty Spanish Armada. By the time she

travelled to Tilbury, the Armada had already been driven off course after struggling against the English fleet, and the threat of invasion was starting to recede. But Elizabeth's decision to appear on horseback and address the thousands of gathering troops was clever and important.

The defeat of the Armada became a turning point for the nation's self-confidence and self-image as an emerging military power. The power of the speech – its timing, its pageantry, its words – is that it bound together Elizabeth and England's victory for ever after, entwining Elizabeth and England's strength.

There are strong echoes of Boudica's speech 1,500 years earlier: a queen seeking to inspire her troops to save her land and her people from invaders; a woman needing to establish her authority over an army of men; a speech, a spirit and an iconic image that has endured through the centuries, but with words that rely on male accounts written many years later.

Like Boudica, Elizabeth seeks first to persuade that she speaks for and with her troops – Boudica says she is 'one of the people', Elizabeth pledges 'to live and die amongst you all'. Like Boudica she invokes the images of violation and dishonour – Boudica calls for vengeance for her 'scourged body, the outraged chastity of my daughters', Elizabeth for scorn against 'dishonour' and any prince who 'dare to invade the borders of my realm'.

For Boudica the violation of the Queen is the violation of the Iceni tribe, for Elizabeth the violation of the country is the violation of the Virgin Queen. But while Boudica uses her womanhood as strength, 'this is a woman's resolve', Elizabeth turns it into strength only by showing her ability to disavow it, in her most famous line: 'I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king.'

This account of her speech comes from a letter from Leonel Sharp to the Duke of Buckingham over sixty-five years later. Sharp claims that these are her words, which he was instructed to repeat to the troops at the time. But even if the words themselves are not reliable, the theatre of the speech and the myths woven around it show the remarkable leader that Elizabeth I was.



My loving people,

we have been persuaded by some that are careful of our safety, to take heed how we commit our selves to armed multitudes, for fear of treachery;

but I assure you I do not desire to live to distrust my faithful and loving people.

Let tyrants fear, I have always so behaved myself that, under God, I have placed my chiefest strength and safeguard in the loyal hearts and good-will of my subjects;

and therefore I am come amongst you, as you see, at this time, not for my recreation and disport, but being resolved, in the midst and heat of the battle, to live and die amongst you all;

to lay down for my God, and for my kingdom, and my people, my honour and my blood, even in the dust.

I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman;

but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too,

and think foul scorn that Parma or Spain, or any prince of Europe, should dare to invade the borders of my realm;

to which rather than any dishonour shall grow by me, I myself will take up arms,

I myself will be your general, judge, and rewarder of every one of your virtues in the field.

I know already, for your forwardness you have deserved rewards and crowns; and We do assure you in the word of a prince, they shall be duly paid you.

In the meantime, my lieutenant general shall be in my stead, than whom never prince commanded a more noble or worthy subject;

not doubting but by your obedience to my general,

by your concord in the camp,

and your valour in the field,

we shall shortly have a famous victory over those enemies of my God, of my kingdom, and of my people.

”



GRETA THUNBERG

'Let's Start Acting'

R20 AUSTRIAN WORLD SUMMIT, VIENNA

May 2019

I wanted the final speech in this book to be about the future, and no one speaks about the future with more clarity or urgency than Greta Thunberg.

The Swedish sixteen-year-old with signature pigtails has taken the world by storm since she skipped school in August 2018 to protest about the climate emergency outside the Swedish Parliament. She started a tidal wave of youth activism on the climate crisis, which culminated in more than a million students from around the world taking part in school strikes this spring.

Greta Thunberg has become their champion. The voice of a new generation.

In some ways she is an unlikely figurehead – she's a teenager from Sweden, for whom English is only a second language, and she has talked publicly and bravely about having Asperger's syndrome, a form of autism. But none of that has held her back. On the contrary, she insists that her activism is successful because of her autism, not in spite of it. She told the BBC, 'being different is a gift… It makes me see things from outside the box. I don't easily fall for lies, I can see through things.'[40]

That is evident in her speeches. They are refreshingly direct.

When she came to the British Parliament to address MPs in April 2019, she asked:

'Is the microphone really on?'

[Yes]

'Did you hear me?'

[Yes]

'Is my English OK?'

[Yes]

'Because I'm beginning to wonder.'[41]

Within a week of her visit to Parliament, followed by a wave of disruptive climate protests by campaign group Extinction Rebellion, MPs voted for the first time to declare a climate emergency.[42]

It wasn't a coincidence.

Greta's speeches are effective because they shame the inaction of those with power. She tells off the grown-ups in the room; she exposes their recklessness and their irresponsibility. Her words in this speech to distinguished guests in Vienna are angry and alarmist. The audience doesn't get off lightly with the polite pleasantries typically afforded to politicians and CEOs. Her speech to the United Nations a few months later was even more stark.

Every time she speaks she is sounding an alarm bell and forcing people to listen, forcing them to act. Her words are a challenge to leaders but also a rallying cry to others to join her:

> …we will not let you get away with it anymore.

The impact of Thunberg's campaigning and her blunt, urgent style of speaking have been truly remarkable. Climate scientists who have been trying for decades to be heard say this teenager has made people finally start to listen. Greta Thunberg is displaying the leadership that she calls for from others. Like all the women in this compilation and millions of others around the world, Greta Thunberg is using her voice to demand action and ultimately to inspire hope for the future.



Thank you for inviting me, and thank you for having me here, and thank you everyone for coming.

My name is Greta Thunberg. I am a climate activist from Sweden. And for the last nine months, I have been school striking for the climate every Friday in front of the Swedish Parliament.

We need to change the way we treat the climate crisis. We need to change the way we speak about the climate crisis. And we need to call it what it is: an emergency.

I am certain that most of us in here today are generally aware of the situation. But my number one experience during these last nine months

is that people in general have no clue. Many of us know something is wrong, that the planet is warming because of increased greenhouse gases, but we don't know the exact consequences of that. The vast majority know much less than we think. And this should be no surprise.

We have never been shown the graphs which show how much the CO_2 emissions need to be reduced for us to stay below the 1.5°C limit. We have never been told the meaning of the aspect of equity in the Paris agreements and why it's so important. We have never been taught about feedback loops, or tipping points, or what a runaway greenhouse effect is. Most of us don't know almost any of the basic facts.

Because how could we? We have not been told. Or more importantly, we have never been told by the right people.

We are *Homo sapiens sapiens*, of the family *Hominidae*, of the order *Primates*, of the class *Mammalia*, of the kingdom *Animalia*. We are a part of nature. We are social animals. We are naturally drawn to our leaders.

During the last months, millions of children have been school striking for the climate, gaining lots of attention for the climate crisis. But we children are not leaders. Nor are the scientists, unfortunately.

But many of you here today are. Presidents, celebrities, politicians, CEOs and journalists. People listen to you. They are influenced by you. And therefore you have an enormous responsibility. And let's be honest, this is a responsibility that most of you have failed to take.

You cannot rely on people reading between the lines or searching for the information themselves, to read through the latest IPCC report, track the Keeling Curve, or keep tabs on the world's rapidly disappearing

carbon budgets. You have to explain that to us, repeatedly. No matter how uncomfortable or unprofitable that may be. And yes, a transformed world will include lots of new benefits. But you have to understand, this is not primarily an opportunity to create new green jobs, new businesses, or green economic growth. This is above all an emergency. And not just any emergency. This is the biggest crisis humanity has ever faced. This is not something you can 'like' on Facebook.

When I first heard about the climate and ecological breakdown, I actually didn't believe that this could be happening. Because how could it be? How could we be facing an existential crisis that will threaten our very survival, and yet that wasn't our first priority. If there really was a crisis this big, then we would rarely talk about anything else. As soon as you turned on the TV, almost everything would be about that. Headlines, radio, newspapers, you would almost never hear or read about anything else. And the politicians would surely have done what was needed by now, wouldn't they? They would hold crisis meetings all the time, declare climate emergencies everywhere, and spend all their waking hours handling this situation and informing the people what was going on.

But it never was like that. The climate crisis was just treated like any other issue, or even less than that. Every time you heard a politician speak about this, they never talked with urgency. According to them, there were always countless new technologies and simple solutions that, when put in place, would solve everything. Politicians one second say, 'climate change is very important, it is the most important topic, and we are going to do everything we can to stop it', and the next second they want to expand airports, build new coal power plants and

motorways, and then they fly off in a private jet to attend a meeting on the other side of the world. That is not how you act in a crisis.

Humans are social animals. We can't get away from that fact. And as long as you, the leaders, act like everything is fine, and you have things under control, then us people won't understand that we are in an emergency.

You can't only keep talking about specific, isolated solutions to specific, isolated problems. We need to see the full picture. If you say that we can solve this crisis just by maybe increasing or lowering some taxes, phasing out coal in ten or fifteen years, putting up solar panels on new buildings, or manufacturing new electrical cars – if you say that, then people will think we can solve this crisis without anyone making a real effort.

And that is very dangerous because specific, isolated solutions are no longer enough. And you know this. We now need to change practically everything. We now need a whole new way of thinking.

I know you are desperate for hope and solutions. But the biggest source of hope and the easiest solution is right in front of you, and has been all along. And it is us people, and the fact that we don't know. We humans are not stupid. We are not ruining the biosphere and future living conditions for all species because we are evil. We are simply not aware. But once we understand, once we realize the situation, then we act. We change. Humans are very adaptable.

So instead of only being obsessed with finding solutions to a problem that most of us do not even know exists, you must also focus on informing us about the actual problem. We must acknowledge that we do not have all the solutions now. We must admit that we do not have the situation under control. And we must admit that we are losing

this battle. We must stop playing with words and numbers, because we no longer have time for that. And in the words of author Alex Steffen, 'winning slowly is the same thing as losing', when it comes to the climate crisis.

The longer we wait, the harder it will be to turn this around. So let's not wait any longer. Let's start acting. For too long, the people in power have gotten away with basically not doing anything to stop the climate and ecological breakdown. They have gotten away with stealing our future and selling it for profit.

But we young people are waking up. And we promise we will not let you get away with it anymore.

Thank you.

