

Queen Boudicca

by [Ralph Berry](#) (June 2023)



Boadicea Haranguing The Britons, John Opie



Penny Mordaunt with the
Sword of State

The performance of Penny Mordaunt in the Coronation, striking in itself, may lead to a larger role. She wielded the 3.5 kg Sword of State throughout the ceremony, a heavy burden for which she had to do weeks of pressups. Still, her time as naval reservist stood her in good stead. She wore a cape dress in teal by the London designer Safiyaa, while hat and lapels were embroidered with golden ferns. All the Press women cried Hail, and men acknowledged a graceful image of warlike femininity. That image came with suggestions that reached into the symbolic and historic past of the nation.

Elizabeth I, when threatened by the impending invasion of the Spanish Armada, addressed her people at Tilbury in words that ring down the centuries:

I know I have the body 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.

The Duke of Parma was the most formidable fighting general in

Europe. The Queen's speech in full is Churchillian. At its heart is the invocation of the Sword, the only means by which England can be kept secure. Of all swords the most resonant is Excalibur, and Tennyson makes it the centre of his 'Morte d'Arhur.' Sir Bedivere, the last of King Arthur's knights, is ordered to throw Excalibur into the nearby lake, and as he makes to do so at his third attempt, there rose

*'an arm,
Clothed in white samite, mystic wonderful,
And caught him by the hilt, and brandished him
Three times, and drew him under in the mere.'*

Mordaunt's 'White samite' is teal fabric, a light blue-green with oceanic hints (and now of course madly fashionable). She took the Coronation outfit she had custom made, and thus made herself an icon of a rediscovered national myth.

Mordaunt reached further back to the history of England, as several commentators picked up. Boudicca was Queen of the Iceni, who led the revolt against the Roman army of occupation in A.D. 60-61. Her forces had initial success, and they took Camolodunum (now Colchester). But the Romans returned and defeated Boudicca's people. She died in captivity. During the eighteenth century Boudicca was used to develop ideas of British nationhood, and her statue was erected in Colchester Railway Station. The name Boudicca still appears, usually I would guess in Remainer families. They rebel against the Treaty of Rome.

And so to the political present. It is widely assumed that the ruling Conservative Party will be defeated next year in the General Election. In that case Rishi Sunak would have to stand down as leader of the Conservative Party, and a party election would be held to choose his successor. The name of

Penny Mordaunt has already come up, and Charles Moore, the doyen of Conservative commentators, has given her his blessing. and sees her as the only challenger. There'll be others, but the Sword of State has empowered her bid when it comes. The mysterious power of the Coronation has given new energy and meaning to an ancient myth.

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Ralph Berry has spent his career in Canadian universities, ending with the University of Ottawa. After that, he took a Visiting Professorship in Kuwait University, followed by the University of Malaya. In recent years he has written for *Chronicles* magazine. His hinterland is Shakespeare, but not as a figure of Tudor history. Shakespeare's works are a mirror to today's issues and themes, through which we can better understand today's politics.