

By JASON KEITH FERNANDES



Diana and Actaeon: Brexit and the end of empires

Diana and Actaeon' this was the allusion that struck me when I heard the news of Britain's vote in the recently conducted EU referendum, popularly known as Brexit.

The myth of Diana and Actaeon can be found within the Roman poet Ovid's epic narrative, *Metamorphoses*. The tale recounts the fate of a young hunter named Actaeon and his encounter with the chaste Diana, goddess of the hunt. In the myth, Actaeon unwittingly stumbles upon Diana bathing nude in a spring with help from her escort of nymphs. The nymphs scream in surprise and attempt to cover Diana, who, in a fit of embarrassed fury, splashes water upon Actaeon. The hunter is transformed into a deer and, robbed of his ability to speak, promptly flees in fear. It is not long, however, before his own hounds track him down and, failing to recognize their master, tear him apart.

The myth can be interpreted in multiple ways. In one interpretation, Actaeon could represent David Cameron. Before the 2015 elections in Britain, Mr. Cameron had pledged to hold the referendum on EU membership if his party, the Tories, won a majority. The pledge to hold a referendum was a way of mollifying members of his own party and others, who were unhappy about the UK's membership in the EU. In making this promise, Cameron disturbed a delicate scene very much like that of the goddess bathing. Given the fact that despite authorizing the referendum Cameron had in fact been campaigning to stay within the EU makes him a figure very much like the unwitting Actaeon, who really had no intention of intruding on Diana's bath. Regardless of his intentions, however, Cameron has faced an Actaeon-like fate, having now promised to step down from the post of Prime Minister. Only time will tell if this exit marks the end of his political career, but for now, the allusion holds.



Diana and Actaeon by Paul Manship. 1925

Another way to read the myth in the current context is to see Actaeon as the English constituent of Great Britain, who will now be set upon by the hounds that the English have held on an imperial leash for so long. Like so many political entities, Britain is a cobbling together of various entities. Britain was constituted by the imperial ambitions of the English, who first added Wales to their imperium and subsequently Scotland and Ireland. There is a long history of resistance to English imperial rule that has resulted in the assertion of regional identities, as in the case of the Welsh, and wars of independence, as in the case of the Irish. More recently, the Scots made an unsuccessful bid for freedom through a referendum to leave the UK. However, in the wake of Brexit, which shows that the Scots overwhelmingly chose to stay in the European Union, and it was the English who chose to leave it, there is every likelihood that the Scots will demand another referendum. This time round, the English may not be so lucky and find their imperial union being torn apart. England may regret that it trespassed upon a site that it should have left alone in the first place.

A third contemporary reading of the myth could allow Britain to be seen as Diana, who has cursed the Actaeon EU to now potentially be torn apart by the Eurosceptic hounds. No sooner

was the Brexit result announced than a host of largely right-wing hyper-nationalist leaders across Europe begin baying for their own version of the referendum. Marie Le Pen, the leader of the National Front in France, made one such demand, as did the Islamophobic, anti-immigration Geert Wilders from the Netherlands. Similar noises also emerged from the Italian *Lega Nord* or Northern league. In the case of this group, the League would also like to break up the current state of Italy, and there are many in this outfit who would ideally like to get rid of the south of the country, a section that they feel is unduly burdening the more prosperous north of Italy.

While the leadership of the EU suggests that all is under control, one wonders whether this is mere bravado and if Britain has unleashed not merely Actaeon's hounds but also the dogs of war. Europe was very similarly tied up in a set of international treaties and riven with ethnic tensions on the eve of the Second World War. What was also at stake at the time of this war, and the first, was the future of various empires. In the First World War, it was the future of the Ottoman Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In the second, it was that of the Japanese and German Empires. There are some who argue that the EU is in fact a non-coercive imperial formation. What is currently at stake, therefore, is the future of another empire. Given the larger state of the world, which exists in a state of armed conflict and the intervention of third-party states, and the fact that a number of treaties that have kept Europe stable during the past fifty years are now coming undone, one wonders if this is what the beginning of the end of the world order as we know it is going to look like.

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