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An Analysis of Lady Godiva, from Myth to Brand *Leydi Godiva Üzerine Bir Analiz: Mitten Markaya*

Abstract

This article aims to provide a feminist and cultural reading on the myth of Lady Godiva. In this context, the myth was read within the framework of Levi Strauss's structural anthropological theory, some elements in the story were analyzed with Berger's theory of vision styles, and the transformation process of the myth into a brand name was evaluated.

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Öz

Bu makale, Leydi Godiva miti üzerine feminist ve kültürel bir okuma sunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu bağlamda, mitin Levi Strauss'un yapısal antropolojik kuramı çerçevesinde bir okuması yapılmış, hikayedeki bazı öğeler Berger'in görme biçimleri kuramıyla incelenmiş ve mitin bir marka ismine dönüşüm süreci değerlendirilmiştir.

Keywords

Godiva, myth, brand, Berger, Levi Strauss

Anahtar kelimeler

Godiva, mit, marka, Berger, Levi Strauss

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Introduction

The story of Lady Godiva is a myth that finds echoes all around the world; It renews itself and continues to inspire countless artists, thinkers and activists. Since its emergence, it has become a symbol of women's power and freedom. Although it is interpreted in many different ways, it has continued to spread from one language to another. As a brand / As far as brands are concerned, it has always been a story with a high market value.

The story is basically about a woman in a town called Coventry, who rebelled against the heavy taxes her husband had imposed on the people, accepted her husband's challenge and crossed the town naked on horseback in exchange for tax relief (Davidson and Roderick, 1969). This act of Lady Godiva was interpreted by many as a rebellion and a liberation. It is still possible to see the news of women who use their nudity as a mechanism of rebellion like Lady Godiva in the face of injustice. Grace Oakley's horseback reminiscent of Lady Godiva in 2021 to raise money for an anti-suicide fundraiser (Tooley, 2021), and the vigil organized by Sam Halliwell in front of the Lady Godiva statue in November 2021 to draw attention to disruptions in maternity services (Suart, 2021) are just two examples this worldwide echo.

The purpose of this article is to suggest that the mechanism of behind Lady Godiva's story reveals the position of Godiva in society as a female subject, the way the female body is interpreted by traditional culture and how Godiva is commodified, rather than being a representation of liberation. For this purpose, a short overview of the Godiva myth will be presented in the first part of the article. In the second part, the story will be analyzed within the framework of Levi Strauss's structural anthropological theory. In the third part, Godiva's actions will be perused through the male-female duality suggested by Berger in *Ways of Seeing and parallel to this, Mulvey's Male Gaze theory*. In addition, the inclusion of Peeping Tom's gaze in Godiva's story will be considered within the framework of psychoanalytic theory. And in the last part, how Godiva became a product of the culture industry that has become independent of myth will be discussed through the example of Godiva Chocolatier brand. In the context of these main topics, the article aims to reveal that the story of Lady Godiva frequently repeated by feminist discourse and inspired many current activist movements, contains more controversy than it seems at first look/than meets the eye. In addition, it is important to rethink the myth in connection to the female body and the position of the female subject, and discuss the reasons behind the story's high brand value.

An Overview to The Myth of Lady Godiva

Lady Godiva, wife of Lord Leofric, is thought to be a woman of Saxon descent who lived in Coventry, one of the towns of 11th century England. Godiva is praised by all as a wise, devout and generous lady, famed for her princely gifts to the church, for her devotion to the Virgin

Mary, and for her building of Holy Trinity Church near Evesham and founding of the Abbey at Coventry (Davidson and Roderick, 1969). The story of Lady Godiva was first recorded by chroniclers Roger of Wendover in the 12th century and Matthew Paris in the early 13th century, then studied and compiled by Joan Lancaster (Davidson and Roderick, 1969). According to Lancaster (1967), Count Leofric imposes heavy taxes on the people of Coventry under his rule and the people suffer from poverty due to these taxes. Unable to be oblivious to this situation, Lady Godiva, “The saintly countess”, begs, prays and pleads to her husband to “save the people of Coventry from their shameful and burdensome servitude”. She exasperates her husband with her unceasing request and extorts from him a reply: ‘Mount your horse naked and ride through the market place of the town from one side right to the other while the people are congregated, and when you return you shall claim what you desire.’ (Lancaster, 1967, pp. 44-45). Godiva asks whether her husband will allow her to do this or not, and Leofric says he will. So Godiva undresses and mounts her horse, crossing the town from one side to the other. The ambiguity about the myth begins here; In some versions Godiva is completely naked on her horse, while in some versions her long hair covers her completely and only her white legs are visible. In some versions, the word “to undress” means to leave behind jewelry and fabrics, the marks of nobility (Hür, 2006). Comments about the public’s reaction to Lady Godiva’s move are also ambiguous. In early versions of the story, it is told that during Godiva’s walk, people entered their homes and closed their curtains, so that no one could see her naked. But after the 17th century, Peeping Tom, a figure who greatly inspired psychoanalytic theory emerges. It is said that a tailor’s apprentice named Tom watched Godiva walk through his curtains. In one version of the story, Tom dies or is killed after seeing the lady, in another version he goes blind (French, 1992). At the end of Godiva’s story, Count Leofric removes all taxes in town, except the taxes on horses.

As can be seen from this brief summary, there are several important points that distinguish the story of Lady Godiva from ordinary folklore. First of all, Lady Godiva is one of the rare heroines (or female characters) who emerge as early as the 11th century and continued her influence until the 21st century. However, her story includes an economic component as well as being a myth of emancipation. Godiva’s story is the first example of a protest where nudity, especially female nudity, is used for economic and political gain (Burton, 2014). However, the element of nudity also contains many discussions in itself. No source mentions that Godiva voluntarily brings forward the idea of walking naked; The idea is definitively put forward by the count and mocked as it is thought to be something the lady could never do. The power to raise taxes, to publicly display his favor over his wife’s body, and to alleviate taxes by virtue of this grace, rests entirely with the count. This point will be explored in depth in the second part. It is also interesting to examine the changing discourse on Godiva along the centuries, as will be emphasized in the third section; Godiva is first described as naked on her horse, then covered with her hair, and a man, who watched her appears 6 centuries after the emergence of the story. Finally, as will be examined in the last section, it is remarkable that Lady Godiva

is reduced to a naked female body which empowers women to defend their rights on the one hand, and becomes a commodity exhibited by brands on the other.

Lady Godiva as an Object of Cultural Exchange

Levi-Strauss is an important social anthropologist who argues that in order to understand the structures that make up society, the universal structure in the human mind should be understood and who examines the human mind through the dialectical relationship of the id, ego and superego structures. In this context, he claims that the unconscious is universal in all societies, regardless of whether they are primitive or developed, and that this situation can be observed in cultural structures such as giving and receiving gifts, marriage, belief styles, kinship systems (Nar, 2014). According to Levi-Strauss, there is a parallelism between the structure of language and these cultural structures, and the nature of cultural structures can be understood by using these linguistic structures. For example, in his analysis of kinship systems, he explains that the rules of kinship are found in all societies in the world, and that the origin of these rules and all cultural structures built on the kinship system is the mutual exchange of women. The function of the incest prohibition is that this exchange, which creates a distinction between the self and the other, can continue and the choice of spouse can be made from a different group than the group to which it belongs (Eriksen & Nielsen, 2010). Since a man can only relate to a man in another group by exchanging women, the institution of marriage becomes a tool for reinforcing social communication. Thus, Levi-Strauss identifies the symbolization and subordination of women through mutual exchange as one of the founding elements of the cultural structure.

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In addition, Levi-Strauss focuses on what myths do and how they work, rather than why they arise. According to him, myths are things “involuntarily thought of by people”, they all have structural similarities and can be analysed. Myths provide people with the illusion that they understand the universe. And in essence, they convey the insoluble cultural conflicts (Levi-Strauss, 1979).

In the context of Levi-Strauss’s propositions summarized above, it is important to draw attention to some points in the Godiva myth. Godiva’s name was pronounced as “Godgifu” at the time the story unfolds and etymologically means “god gift you” (Hür, 2006). So the lady is first and foremost a gift from God and a boon from God.

Secondly, as mentioned earlier, the idea of riding naked around town is not the lady’s idea, but is demanded of her by her husband. The count exposes the naked body of his countess to his people in order to mitigate the high taxes he imposes on them. The lady’s body belongs to her husband as much as to herself, so that even if she decides to ride, she has to get her husband’s permission on this matter. On the economic plane, Leofric shows his favor by exchanging his wife’s body for the loyalty of his people. In almost all the sources describing the

lady's ride, she is described as "god's lover" and "a saintly grace". After the "lady's sacrifice", the people prosper and offer their full devotion to their lord, not their lady (French, 1992). So while the lady is first a gift from God, in the next step, she becomes a gift and a blessing from the count to his subjects. In a sense, she takes back what others have with the nakedness of her body. Other people are forbidden to see her, because the Lady's body is sacred and possessed by the count. So much so that the only man who is said to have seen the lady has to die or go blind. The interpretation suggested here is that Godiva's feminine body is made an object of barter by an all masculine system (God, her husband, the people, and Tom peeking at her). This body is like a kind of belongings exchanged between powers.

This myth of the cultural exchange of a woman's body, as Levi-Strauss describes, also contains some universal cultural conflicts and insoluble dualities. The main conflicts such as the ruler and the ruled, man and woman, wife and husband are clearly visible in the story. Thus, Godiva's exchanged body becomes the founding myth of a town. The economic prosperity in the town can only be achieved thanks to this exposed body.

Lady Godiva as an Object of the Gaze

John Berger (1990), in his provocative work *Ways of Seeing*, mentions that the positions of men and women are very different from each other due to the ongoing practices and customs in society. For Berger, being born a woman means being born in a private, enclosed space that is owned by men. Women have been taught from childhood to observe themselves and that it is a necessity. Therefore, Berger claims that women are always with their own image, that is, women always act as if they are being looked at and observed by someone (a man). This situation has become an existential issue for women and the way women perceive themselves is shaped by how men see them. Women have internalized this male observer so much that while men watch women, women have begun to watch what they are watching (Berger, 1990).

For Berger, who states that women always have to watch themselves, the fact that women are always the object of the gaze and that men are always the watching subject has been made clear in countless examples throughout the history of art. Berger examines how the female body is presented in Eurocentric art in paintings, portraits and even underwear advertisements. He explains that women have never been presented in this tradition with their natural appearance, nudity and posture, and they are always in the position of an object of gaze that is prepared or undressed for an audience. Berger, who claims that naked women are often drawn with the mirrors, says that these mirrors emphasize the fact that women see themselves as objects of spectacle (Berger, 1990).

In the case of Lady Godiva, Berger's propositions seem to be embodied. Godiva is aware that she is exposing herself as a watched subject, an-object of spectacle. In the earliest versions of the story, even before Peeping Tom appears, Godiva still remains the object of gaze when the townspeople close their curtains and empty the streets to avoid seeing the lady. It is told

that she tries to cover herself with her hair, and even the earliest words to describe the event, as quoted above, emphasize “her white legs” (Lancaster, 1967).

The interpretation of Godiva’s act echoes the different positioning of men and women as the gazing subject and the gazed subject as mentioned by Berger (1990). If it were Leofric who rode on a horse and walked around naked, would stories speak of his legs, or would artists have struggled for centuries to represent him in all his majestic beauty? Would people close their curtains to avoid watching him, or would the person who peeked at him be killed? Probably no. The power behind Godiva’s action comes from the fact that she is a woman, and as a woman she knows that she is always being watched. It is so obvious that the possibility of the lady being watched by others becomes an impetus for Leofric to change the economic structure of the city.

It may be useful to recall the ideas of Laura Mulvey, who, in parallel with Berger’s theory, draws attention to the patriarchal focus of the film industry and cinematography, and examines the “male gaze” on female subjects. According to Mulvey, woman is always represented as ‘other’, as an object rather than a subject, materializing man’s unconscious in the films (Sassatelli, 2011). The function of woman in forming this patriarchal unconscious is two-fold, she first symbolises the castration threat by her real absence of a penis and second thereby raises her child into the symbolic (Mulvey, 1989, p. 15). In other words, woman is created not as a meaning maker, but only as meaning, and trapped in the symbolic order of patriarchal language and subconscious. Cinema, with all its economic, technical and symbolic possibilities, is a place where this positioning becomes visible. Following the literature on the pleasure of looking or peeking at a human form, especially Freud’s work, Mulvey emphasizes that “scopophilia” objectifies the person being looked at by the looking subject. For Mulvey, this is exactly what happens in cinema. In addition to the fact that the bodies appearing on the screen are visible in the focus of each other’s gaze, the audience itself objectifies what appears on the screen through their gaze (Mulvey, 1989, p. 17). But the pleasure of looking is not divided equally between the sexes, because women are encoded as images for erotic pleasure, and this pleasure belongs to the male subject, the bearer of the look. Women are objectified, eroticized, exhibited in the focus of this male gaze (Mulvey, 1989, p. 18). This gaze is also the gaze of the power represented by the male subject and the spectator peeking at the screen (Mulvey, 1989, p. 19). Of course, how the inter-gender dynamics are shaped, the power of the gaze and the pleasure of seeing are bestowed on which gender, how the women are reduced to the position of the objects to be looked at, and how all the generalizations that are hypothetically assigned to the genders are shaped and determined within the persons depend on the built relationships. Gender and inter-gender relations, and hence the gaze-based exchange between men and women, are not fixed categories, natural or necessary, but the constructed and performed processes at every moment (Buttler, 2008, p. 57, trans.). Godiva’s body, which is first defined as belonging to her husband’s gaze, then exhibited for the gaze of the masculine society through barter, and finally imaged on chocolate packages by being associated with an

erotic object and oral flavor for everyone watching, is objectified on the axis of Mulvey, in the focus of symbolic power and male gaze.

The emergence of Peeping Tom contains another irony. The chasm between the rulers and the ruled, the saved and the savior, is bridged by Tom. Tom is only there as a male subject and has no other direct purpose than to peep at the female body on display. The inclusion of Tom as a tailor's apprentice is also interesting because a tailor's job is clearly about the body. Tom looks at Godiva both as a person of the opposite sex and as someone "capable of judging, dressing the body he sees". Tom's position in the story constitutes a key point for psychoanalytic theory, combining gaze and sexual drive, especially Freud's ideas based on the pleasure of looking and seeing, which can never be separated from sexuality. According to Freud, the pleasure of looking and the gaze, when it does not turn into a sexual perversion, that is, when it spreads not only to the genitals but to the whole body, allows the libido to turn to artistic purposes, in other words, it is what sublimates the sexual impulses to artistic purposes (Freud, 2002, p. 41, trans.). Thus, in Tom's case, his gaze represents not only the expression of a sexual urge, but a moment of sublimation when a tailor looks at a naked female body in order to perform his art. With Tom, Godiva shifts from the position of a "holy female saint free from human gaze" to the position of a naked woman who is clearly watched.

Taking Freud's theory one step further, Lacan considers the gaze as one of the primary elements that establishes the subject. According to Lacan, the baby experiences a breaking state, in which he/she sees and recognizes his/her own image in the mirror, while passing from the reality stage, which is the first stage necessary for the formation of the subject, that is, from the stage where he/she cannot distinguish himself/herself from the external reality and the mother, to the imaginary stage, thus distinguishing his/her own image from external reality. On the other hand, the baby takes the image that carries him/her in the mirror, possibly the caregiver, as the mirror image of the ego ideal, and in this way an ideal about the self is formed. Since this ideal of self will never be fully realized and never-ending, the subject is always something in construction, always desiring, incomplete (Lacan, 2013, p. 271, trans.). In the psychoanalytic context, the depiction of Godiva's naked body, first away from all eyes and then with a male subject looking at her, can be associated with the re-emergence of this unending desire, that is, with the insatiable curiosity about the other who is looked at and idealized.

Godiva on Chocolate Packaging

While Godiva's nudity and story have inspired many artists, it has also become a useful product for brands. Undoubtedly, the most direct example of this is the Godiva Chocolatier brand, which was founded in 1926 and continues to operate under Yıldız Holding Company today. Godiva Chocolatier places values such as "nobility, courage, freedom" at the core of its brand vision by associating the origin of the chocolates it produces with the story of Lady Godiva.

The minimal design in chocolate packaging is the image of a naked woman riding a horse (Bürge, 2020).

At this point, it will be instructive to briefly touch upon the culture industry concept put forward by Adorno and Horkheimer. The cultural dimension of domination, aestheticization of daily life, commercialization of culture, standardization, commodification and social alienation are the main phenomenas of the concept of the culture industry (Kara, 2014). For them, the culture industry is a mechanism that makes everything from daily life practices to works of art a part of mass consumption, removes originality and, most importantly, commodifies it in the context of Godiva. Within this mechanism that creates, protects and reproduces power relations, the origin of the image is reduced to a mass consumption product, a commodity judged by its media value (Adorno, 2007). Benjamin will then take this idea a step further and argue that the work of art has lost its “aura” that made it unique. According to him, the aura of a work of art arises from the combination of factors such as uniqueness, tradition, witnessing history, and unapproachability. However, the age we live in is the age of reproduction, the work of art is detached from its content and reduced to form, commodified and instrumentalized. In this way, for Benjamin, the aura of the work of art is lost (Arslan, 2018).

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There are many studies and compilations on how the female body is transformed into objects of spectacle by brands in advertisements, justifying Berger, and how it is used by the discourse of power in the context of gender politics (Taşkaya, 2009). The same examinations and determinations are undoubtedly made in the context of the images used by the brands in their packaging and products. So far in the article, suggestions have been made about how Godiva was reduced from a position that could be perceived as a cultural exchange object to a naked female body over time. The example highlighted here aims to make sense of the process of transforming this naked feminine body into an image owned by a brand. In the example of Godiva Chocolatier, the brand has turned the image of Lady Godiva into a product of consumer culture, and commodified the naked female body by directly associating it with its own brand vision (nobility, originality, daring etc.). A method frequently used by other food brands (Taşkaya, 2009), the female body is paired with taste, beauty, maybe softness, in short, with the supposed features that a consumer looks for in a good chocolate. The image of Godiva, printed on chocolate packaging, is now reduced, almost entirely, to a naked female body, rather than the other main elements of the myth.

From another point of view, in this age of reproduction we live in, Godiva, who appears again and again on this Belgian chocolate’s packaging, which is produced over and over again in an endless cycle, has lost the original aura beyond her body.

Conclusion

In this article, a general analysis of the Godiva myth has been made and Lady Godiva's position as an object of cultural exchange and a viewed subject has been evaluated. It has been suggested that over the centuries, the story of the lady was reduced to a naked female body presented to the consumer society by the cultural industry.

It is interesting that this deeply rooted myth, which still inspires so many activists, artists, brands and cultural events, has been the subject of so few studies in the literature and has not been criticized on the points mentioned in this article. This study claims to be an introductory reading to fill the gap in this area. It is essential to examine more data, especially on how the female body is used and commodified by brands, and to evaluate Godiva's process through a deeper look.

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