

Women as a Spiritual Force in Laura Riding's *Lives of Wives*

In comparing *A Trojan Ending* (1937) and *Lives of Wives* (1939), her two works of fiction set in the distant past, for *It Has Taken Long*—, the retrospective Chelsea issue of her work in 1976, Laura (Riding) Jackson made reference to the different approach to history in the two works:

One must use, for this kind [*Lives of Wives*], a shorthand script that will, in its enlargement into plausible interpretations of its compressed content, make claim to a verisimilitude sufficient for the moment of sympathetic imaginative generosity toward the imagining. This kind of story is on the plane of miracle. The story of historical actuality has to be put together with visibly read pieces of occurrence. The other kind [*A Trojan Ending*] is all a picturing of an imagined actuality as the invisible scene of revelation. Of course, one tries to do more, in non-historical story, than to raise a curtain on the scene, and let it fall before it ages into historical nothing. (147)

A reader looking in 1939 to Laura Riding's *Lives of Wives* as a kind of sequel to her historical novel of the Trojan War, *A Trojan Ending*, must surely have felt a sense of disorientation stemming from its "compressed content." The Foreword to *A Trojan Ending* had stressed the author's commitment to telling the truth about the Trojan War, and the novel had used long, conversational scenes which correspond to a real time of several hours. The latter work is far more dedicated to narrating a series of swiftly moving events. In fact, *Lives of Wives* seems to want to stay so close to the historical record, scanty as it may be, that it deliberately avoids developing into a traditionally realized work of fiction.

There is no genre specification to tell us whether *Lives of Wives* is better read as a novel or as a series of three stories. The three sections, "A Persian Lady and Her Contemporaries," "Macedonian Times," and "New Ways in Jerusalem" do not appear to be closely connected by narrative threads. Instead, it is the approach to history which is the common link. This essay will move through the Foreword and three sections of *Lives of Wives* to understand Riding's view of women as the spiritual force in history.

The brief Foreword presents us with the historical theme: Modern history really begins with the founding of the Persian Empire. The first emphatic punctuation in history after this is the time of Alexander and Aristotle; and the next after that is the time of Herod the Great.

In the language of Daniel: ancient times were of gold and silver; the age of Cyrus the Persian was of brass; the age of Alexander, of iron, later mixed with clay. And then came the stone which broke into pieces this image of many metals: unhewn stone, like that of the altar of burnt-offerings at Jerusalem.

I have called my version of these three crucial ages preceding the Christian era '*Lives of Wives*' because the principal male characters are here written of as husbands rather than as heroes. (5)

From the Foreword we learn that *Lives of Wives* is about historical decline, but we do not realize that it is through the figures of women that this trajectory is presented. Moral decline accelerates as we pass from Amytis to Olympias to Cleopatra. Violence replaces serenity as women gain more political power from one year to the next and as sexuality plays a greater and greater place in their moral degeneration, but she has to die for maintaining her integrity and serenity.

Laura (Riding) Jackson has not subscribed to the version of female protest which centers itself on the political arena. For her, women are the guardians of a spiritual reality that most men cannot find. As she says in her article "The Bondage" (1972):

Thus in fighting for full social liberation as if it held the key for them to fulness of life and performance, women are sealing themselves off from that of which they have, by their woman-nature, pure, sure sensibility—sensibility unobstructed by self-interested appetencies. They add their force, in newly fierce intensity of imitation of masculine exertion towards the creation of social substitutes for spiritual ends, to the removal of the spiritual reality of the human reality to distances of abstraction—morally convenient—seeming distances, by masculine moral optics. They confuse the satisfaction of a male-like vanity in self-emphasizing social

performance with the joy of a new sense of social usefulness. (31)

This passage clarifies what the reader probably cannot anticipate from the foreword to *Lives of Wives*. The depiction of these women's lives is meant neither to lament women's lack of power nor to reveal them as political counselors behind the throne, but rather to show how their spirituality or lack of it affected their husbands and thus the course of history.

In the first section, "A Persian Lady and Her Contemporaries," the chief characters are Cyrus the Great of Persia and his wife Amytis. Because of scanty historical material here Riding has the most freedom to create a story. The major source of information about Cyrus the Great comes from the Greeks rather than from Persian written records. The first book of Herodotus's *Histories* is the most important source. In addition, there is the novel-length pedagogical work, the *Cyropedia* by Xenophon, which presents Cyrus as a model ruler and which offers us examples of the many edifying conversations he engaged in. The fragmentary remains of the works of Ctesias, a Greek physician in Persian, is a third source of information about this era. In addition, in the *Old Testament*, Cyrus is presented briefly as an august deliverer of the Hebrews from Babylonian captivity. Overall, Riding does not change the good impression of Cyrus that we have inherited.

The seven chapters on Cyrus and Amytis cover events from their meeting c. 500 (at about the time Cyrus became Emperor) to his death in 529 B.C.E. and her subsequent voluntary exile. Amytis was the daughter of the defeated Median Emperor, Astyages. She had been married to the elderly Spitamas, a major figure at the Median court, but he treacherously cast Astyages in prison.

Amytis is not a character who changes over time. Her goodness is manifest early in her life. The scene in which Amytis meets Cyrus and they become betrothed (22-30) indicates that although the Medes would be happier to accept Cyrus as ruler if he were to marry the deposed ruler's daughter, the union is still a love-match of two equals. Amytis is noted for her serenity (30) and her "power of putting people in good-humour" (31). When she first meets Cyrus, they banter about women's role in society. Amytis begins:

'And will not your wives in Persia be grieving over your absence?' she asked.

'The good countenance of one wife consoles a man for weeping countenances of those he has left behind.'

'And in your land have you the same virtues as we have in ours; to speak the truth and give hospitality to

all who come fairly, and make no debts?’

‘Rather we say in our land “The most virtuous man is he who is beloved of others.” My virtues are therefore yours to bestow.” (28)

Amytis goes on to ask if there are women in Persia who work the plough along with men, like the Median women. Although Cyrus responds that there are no such women in Persia, he insists that he has not come to make the Medes give up their love of women.

Riding shows that Cyrus’s good administration owed much to the serenity of Amytis. The Emperor and Empress foster a court of urbane conversation in which ideas about the good life are shared and weighed. When Cyrus comes back from defeating the Lydian king Croesus (who later becomes a close friend of his niece Amytis), Cyrus tells stories he has heard about Thales and Solon. Cyrus believes that Solon must have had a wife whom he esteemed greatly since he told Thales that one might be a “clever philosopher without a wife, but never a sensible one” (35). Although Thales, according to Cyrus, believed that even lifeless things have souls, he could not find it in himself to think of women as having them.

In another brief exchange of conversation, the value of the good wife is again stressed. Croesus tells Amytis that Amasis, the King of Egypt, had been impotent with his wife Ladice, but with the help of Aphrodite, the situation had improved. Amytis is glad about this change of events, for if he had continued to have sexual problems, he might have taken another wife—one who might have led his kingdom to ruin rather than prosperity. The talk of Croesus and Amytis drifts to Sphinxes, and Amytis remarks that there may be some justice in the legend that men kill themselves in a frenzy of trying to remember what the creatures have told them in a dream, since “men too easily forget what women tell them, and it is very annoying” (43).

From these conversations, the reader slowly becomes aware that Riding is presenting women as the spiritual guardians of life. So we are not too surprised when we learn that the Garden of Eden myth, according to Amytis, was made up by Persian women with their eunuchs. In fact, her mother might even have been the original storyteller in this case. Just as the Trojans of the epic period were seen by Riding as being spiritually superior to the enemy Greeks, the Persians here again surpass the Greeks in their ability to live fully and in their understanding of women.

Moaning and complaining are not suitable for women, as a story told about Peisistratus, tyrant of Athens, makes clear. He was once driven out of the city for refusing to let his wife have children, says Croesus. However, Amytis does not believe the story because, as she says, “A woman who really wants children

can manage these things” (44). She means that a woman can persuade her husband rather than turn to a lover for children.

Amytis and Cyrus are impressed by petition of Sheshbazzar (Ezra) on behalf of Hebrew repatriation. Although Riding concedes that Cyrus’s granting the request of Jews to return to Palestine is part of a balance of power operation (54), she is also at pains to present a spiritual affinity between Persians and Jews beyond what is presented in *Ezra* 1: 1-14. Both peoples are trying to tell good from evil, and Sheshbazzar admits that sometimes the Jews become too proud and rejoice at the “power to know evil rather than lament that there should be evil” (55). Later Amytis sends to Ezra for Jewish musicians in Babylon, but since he does not have any to spare, she gets them from Babylon instead. However, their music is so sad that she is only half-pleased (61), for Amytis believes in facing all events with reasoned good cheer.

After Cyrus is killed in the campaign against the Massagetae, his evil son from his first marriage, Cambyses, becomes Emperor, thus beginning a long period of Persian decline. Riding comments: “The times were sad ones; and should have been happy. Cyrus had made them a great and stirring people, yet without corrupting their innate virtues and graces” (70). Finally, Amytis decides to go into exile to India rather than remain under Camybyes’s evil rule. Despite the pain of leaving, she remains optimistic and hopes that her new surroundings will be “entertaining” (73).

The section on Persia closes with this authorial commentary:

This is how we now expect a lady of charm to behave under trouble—it is no new thing. And it is part of her charm that we are unable to judge from appearances what she is privately feeling.

Cyrus had been as good a husband to Amytis as his position in the world allowed.... Every wife shares her husband with the world, which is his grave—and for the immortal trifle that may be left to her should not be ungrateful, considering how much necessary waste there is in the life of any man. (73)

For Riding, women are fortunate in that they are less subject to the public arena than men. The public world is always one of moral compromise, and women should not confront it without full recognition of this fact.

The age of Alexander and Aristotle serves as the proverbial bad example to show men creating “social substitutes for spiritual ends.” The age of Olympias replaces that of Amytis. A two-page opening chapter of “Macedonian Times” entitled “Persia in Decline” runs through the period from 539 to 356 B.C. Riding

tells us that “the Greeks cannot be said to have succeeded the Persians in imperial dignity” (78). None of the men are monsters, but some of the women “achieve the reality of seeming monsters” (98). Refusing to accept the tradition of judging Alexander by Aristotle, she suggests that we must “see how the age of Aristotle looks by the light of the age of Alexander” (78).

The women who seem to be monsters are not Aristotle’s two wives Pythias and Herpillis but rather Olympias, wife of Philip II of Macedon and mother of Alexander the Great; Roxana, wife of Alexander and mother of his posthumous heir Philip; and Eurydice, grandchild of Philip the Great and wife of his son, the feeble-minded Philip (Alexander’s half-brother).

Again an important moral of this historical story does not get presented until the closing lines of the section:

Had Olympias been a woman of great virtue, as well as of great energy, what could she have done with her virtue in that age, in those circumstances, except hide it away? Something she kept hidden away in herself, something that would not be still, that she tried over and over again to destroy: was it, perhaps, virtue? At any rate, there was a zeal in her for noble things. Finding nothing on which to spend it, she turned it into a rage against herself and her time—which were those not only of her son Alexander but of his tutor, Aristotle.

For Riding, the political power that some women were able to achieve in Macedonian times, beginning with Olympias, is not a victory at all, since spiritual power is lost simultaneously. Her aristocratic women of Macedonia and then of the Ptolemaic Empire after Alexander had more personal freedom than the women of Athens during the classical period, as Sarah Pomeroy has shown, but for Riding this does not constitute progress.

Olympias is one of the most fascinating figures of the ancient world, and she is mentioned briefly in many sources. A detailed portrait of her is presented in Grace Hobart Maccurdy’s *Macedonian Queens*, published seven years before *Lives of Wives* and still a valued work. Olympias has one major wrong on her side. She realizes that “Philip was disgusted in her love for him, as if there were something unclean in her thinking him a more noble character than he was or ever meant to be” (82). From this perspective Riding somewhat downplays the idea that rivalry with Philip’s many other wives and consorts caused her notorious wrath.

Although Olympias is presented as a devotee of Orphic and Bacchic rites, Riding passes up repeating some standard material that might put her in a bad light, such as the famous account from Plutarch that she turned off Philip’s

marital ardors by sleeping with her pet snakes. Nor does Riding stress the claims that Olympias supposedly made that Alexander was her son with Zeus, not with Philip. Both of these repressed incidents might support a view of Olympias as mentally unbalanced.

In general, however, Riding's sympathies seem to be more with Philip than with his wife, as she writes, "That he left his other son at Olympias's mercy shows how unreal to Philip were her grounds of resentment toward him" (97). She is full of suspicion and desire for revenge. There is no doubt in *Lives of Wives* that she is behind Pausanias's murder of Philip (101).

Riding adheres to the inherited view of Olympias as a woman of great ambition, and she writes that her "life grew darker than it had ever been in Philip's time—not only because her part in great events could now be only a mother's but because they were still far from being those she had dreamed of" (103). For Riding, there are no horrible stories of men from the past which can match the desolate tales of "the frighteningly ungentle women of history" such as Olympias (103).

If we are unable to understand Olympias's motivation, some of this problem comes from the probability that she never had clear goals in mind:

She had abandoned her interest in mystic cults and magical rites. Nothing burned in her mind now but a will working toward she did not care what end—a heat that she could not make burst into flame. Indeed, she was dark within herself as she seemed to others; and had that mistrust of dark which prevents hot-tempered people from giving themselves up innocently to sleep. In Olympias's bedchamber the lamps were not extinguished until dawn. (104)

When Alexander goes off to conquer western Asia, Olympias finds her ambitions put on hold for over a dozen years, since Antipater, whom Alexander designated to govern in his absence, is an effective administrator and holds her in check. After his death, she again has a chance to act significantly in the political arena, but she is defeated.

Riding moves from her unflattering portrait of Olympias to her equally negative evaluation of Aristotle in the chapter "Modernity at Athens." Riding believes that we should not give Alexander high marks for being Aristotle's pupil. Rather Aristotle deserves demerits for being the teacher of such a person as Alexander. Several times Aristotle is presented as a person who creates an empty moral system which has no understanding of real virtue. The implication is that his golden-mean system of ethics is tawdry, and this seems to be the cause for her disapproval even more than his famous comments dismissing the

intellectual capacity of women (113). Aristotle is presented as being a lover of luxury, a political opportunist, and a shallow thinker.

Plato is clearly a better philosopher than his famous pupil, and “philosophy made a hypocrite” of Aristotle:

To Plato’s perfect ideal of the true answer [Aristotle] opposed the more comfortable notion of the reasonable answer; and as his self-confidence grew and his method swelled into a semblance of philosophic achievement, he became more and more content with commentary in place of thought. (107)

Aristotle lived in a time when Athens was characterized by a “gloomy curiosity and knowledgeable despair” (107), but his system of commentary did nothing to change the world for the better. Although he was cheerful, “his optimism was of that inglorious kind which is a mere resolve of invulnerability: the noble optimists do not refuse pain” (107). One way Aristotle had of refusing pain was his always trying to endear himself to one section or other of the crowd (109). Not surprisingly, Philip of Macedon found him too clever for a philosopher (127).

On the personal level Aristotle treats Xenocrates, his rival in his courtship of Pythias, badly, and he deserts the Atarneans (139) when they need him. He abandons his relative Callisthenes to Alexander’s injustice (176) and to eventual death. He also emotionally deserts Pythias after she becomes his wife, and she bears a child to his ward Nicanor (143).

The worst thing Aristotle does is give Alexander bad teachings. He tells him:

‘Greatness is absolute in no man... as truth is absolute in no mind. Power and wisdom lie in being somewhat stronger and somewhat shrewder than others. God is that which is somewhat above what men commonly are. And those men who stand a little above their fellow-men have the secret of divinity’. (145)

For Riding such advice leads to making Aristotle’s pupil a “proud oriental despot.” Quite tellingly, Aristotle’s notion of the divine is entirely severed from the feminine. Furthermore, unlike Plato, who saw the notion of the divine as moving from the higher to the lower, Aristotle believes that from “lower to higher, not from higher to lower, is the flow of being” (160).

It is not surprising that Aristotle’s royal student should eventually declare himself to be worthy of the honors of a god. Furthermore, Alexander suffers from having no good female influences in his life. He is several years into his

campaign before he marries Roxana and other women, and they have no real claim on him emotionally. Riding does not see much value in his attachment to men, which, apparently, she reads not as a valid choice or orientation but as a rejection of women (174). Whereas Mary Renault, in her biography of Alexander (1978), stresses the great capabilities of his favorite Hephaestion, for Riding “Hephaestion was like an immature girl” (174).

Aristotle fittingly outlives Alexander only by a year, having fled to Euboea in consequence of the changed political situation. When Aristotle commits suicide (in confused imitation of Socrates) after the death of Alexander, he leaves behind a very neat will, but Riding lets us know that he subtly destroyed the life of his decent second wife Herpyllis.

In the following year Roxana, mother of Alexander’s posthumous son; Olympias; and Eurydice, wife of Philip, Alexander’s half-brother, are caught up in bloody dynastic fights. Olympias has one big regret—that she made Aristotle her son’s tutor. Riding writes:

She spoke of him always with a vehemence that led people to regard her hate of him as insanity, and her insinuation that he had played a part in Alexander’s death as a delusion. Rumours of his complicity spread, but as they were said to come from Olympias they were discounted. The accusation went into history as something creditable to Aristotle because the authority could be proved untrustworthy. (202)

When Cassander, son of Antipater, finally captures the elderly Olympias, she takes a knife from her dress and slits her throat rather than be executed by her enemy’s soldiers. Riding does not note that beginning with her powerful entry into history, the age of powerful queens begins. Instead, for her it is the end of “the period of iron, later mixed with clay.”

The third section, “New Ways in Jerusalem,” featuring the story of Herod and Mariamne, recounts the last days of the Asmonean Dynasty and the period of Herod and his descendants—the age of stone. The initial chapter, “The Ancestors of Mariamne,” covers the period from Alexander’s death to Caesar’s campaign against Pompey in the eastern Mediterranean. She briefly presents the Asmonean descendants of Judas Maccabaeus, who ruled the Holy Land from 168 B.C.E. Riding bypasses the chance to do more than mention in passing Alexandra, the only queen of this dynasty, who ruled from 78-69 B.C.E.

Our knowledge of the Asmonean and Herodian dynasties comes principally from Josephus’s two major works, *The Jewish War* (79 C.E.) and his later (and more verbose) *Jewish Antiquities* (93 C.E.), both in Greek. The story of Herod and Mariamne is told in more detail in the latter work, with some inconsistencies

with respect to the earlier version. Mariamne was a great-granddaughter of Queen Alexandra, granddaughter of Aristobulus II (ruled 69-63), and daughter of the second Alexandra. In marrying her in 37, Herod, the Idumenean King, cemented his claim to the throne of the Jewish kingdom. He had Mariamne executed in 29, and their sons (who had grown up in Rome) murdered in 6 B.C.E.

The picture that Josephus gives us of Mariamne is of a haughty woman who is insufficiently responsive to her doting husband, although Josephus does make it clear that she truly had cause for complaint. Riding accepts Josephus's unflattering portrayal of Mariamne's mother Alexandra and Herod's sister Salome. Alexandra is a ruthless, scheming woman who despises Herod and his family. Salome acts as an evil counselor to Herod, continually lying and suggesting to him bloody mischief against the Asmoneans. Remarkably, Herod never catches on to his sister's evil nature.

Riding attempts to explain the moral dimension to Mariamne's pride both through a series of short, invented scenes and through a contrast with Cleopatra. The approaches these women take to the evil around them provide one of the chief interests of this narrative.

The key passage in the third section of *Lives of Wives* is Mariamne's evaluation of her personal response to Cleopatra. After the Battle of Actium and Cleopatra's death, Mariamne tells Herod:

‘Do I not still wear the bracelet [Cleopatra] gave me, though she behaved so badly to us when she was in Jerusalem: She saw that the world was evil and yet she craved for happiness in it, which she thought to get by being evil herself. And she had no more happiness than I have had— who chose the other way. There was something that was the same in each of us: we were alike in that we hated the world, and yet saw that it could not have been otherwise. And we both tried to love in spite of this hate: perhaps she was more successful than I.’ (301)

The respect with which Riding treats Mariamne makes it clear that Cleopatra actually was not more successful at loving. Some readers may think that their actions are equally absurd, but more likely they will find Mariamne the sympathetic heroine of the story. Mariamne vaguely feels that their way of life has reached an end and that “it will be a long time before new things come to replace them” (301). She cannot realize that Christianity, introduced by the appearance of the Magi at Herod's court a quarter century after her death, symbolizes that new order.

Although Cleopatra is presented in part as first the wife of Julius Caesar and

then of Marc Antony, as queen her power is contrasted with Mariamne's political powerlessness. Unlike Cyrus's wife Amytis, Cleopatra is repulsed by the Jews. She hates them because, as she says, "They knew only one kind of happiness and virtue, which was to cast out evil from their lives but take nothing in its stead lest that too be evil" (219). She associated the color gray with the Jewish faith and thinks of their "god of clouds, frowning and solitary, hidden from the living and the dead alike" (256). It is Mariamne's mother who sends the twelve-year-old daughter to Cleopatra in Egypt, an event which apparently Riding creates in order to allow us to see Cleopatra as a woman who, in Mariamne's eyes, kills people and then makes a joke of it (221). Although Cleopatra is not the temptress presented by the Augustan propaganda that has colored her picture for centuries, she does not become the politically motivated champion of Egyptian independence that some historians have made of her. Rather Riding's Cleopatra is the existential heroine who has chosen the wrong path, somewhat like the contemporaneous Caligula of Camus.

Cleopatra finds that even the Jewish law is preferable to Aristotle's philosophic system:

'Though I hate these people, I cannot help admiring them for their extremeness in reverencing what they call the Law: I would do nothing myself except extremely. All the truly serious philosophers, such as Pythagoras and Plato, have borrowed from the Jews their idea of a supreme truth— in combatting the looseness of Homer in whom there is neither thought nor mention of Law. But this Aristotle has cut up truth into mean morsels, for the convenience of mere appetites. I have been very wicked in my life, but always with sincerity, and so am not to be deceived by those who make a learned hypocrisy of virtue.' (270)

It is surprising to find this critique of Homer here, even from Cleopatra, since Riding's Foreword to *A Trojan Ending* two years before does not ask us to see the world of Homeric epic as suffering from an inadequate concept of truth or law.

It is only Mariamne who really lives up to the Jewish system of morality. She does not believe in allowing politics to overwhelm the moral sphere. In agreeing to her marriage, she tells her mother:

'If my marriage to Herod will really save my grandfather's life,' Mariamne answered, 'I shall be glad to marry him for that reason alone. Yet, when I become his wife, I will be a true one. I will love him for what

is good in him, and try to help him to resist badness;
and as he is cruel and bad, I will accordingly hate him.
But I will not carry on any war against him except my
own.' (231)

Mariamne is even willing to have her marriage to Herod delayed so that she has time to learn to love him. Unfortunately, he is the one who fails her, despite his good intentions to live morally and to honor Judaism. Herod does not receive any praise from Riding for trying hard to maintain Jewish independence from Rome in extremely difficult circumstances. She does not see him any more than she does Alexander as a relative internationalist at a time of debilitating nationalistic rivalries.

Riding, however, does acquit Herod of guilt in a famous murder. She presents Herod's sister Salome as the mastermind behind the drowning of Mariamne's younger brother Aristobulus, the newly installed high priest. Josephus, in the *Jewish Antiquities* A. 15, Chapter 3, Paragraph 3, is quite explicit here in naming Herod the guilty party, not an aggrieved bystander.

When Herod has an interview with Antony's estranged wife Octavia, Riding comments that both Octavia and Mariamne were virtuous and beautiful women. She asks, "Was there an ill omen in this resemblance? Were such women given to men not for love but to be mirrors of their failings?" (279). Not surprisingly, Mariamne must die, not for what she has done, but because her virtue is a reproach to Herod's submission to evil. He can no longer have her in his sight.

When Mariamne learns from Herod's younger brother Joseph that Herod had left behind a secret order to have her killed to prevent her from falling into Antony's hands, Riding interjects a claim that she does not know how Mariamne felt at this point:

There are clues to many things in the past, and with the air that the people of other times once breathed, also, we can swell trifling relics of them into a near semblance of what was. But we cannot make the portrait or the story exact. Of those who are only recently dead, even, it is impossible to say: 'This is exactly what they were like, how they felt, and thought'.... If they could read what we write of them, they would probably be able to say no more than 'No, I do not think I could have done that': or 'Yes, I might well have spoken in that way.'" (283)

For Riding, the "shape of history" is a "haze," and "we must be careful not to make the light too clear—or the things we try to see by it will vanish"—like the

ancient murals discovered by the construction workers in Fellini's *Roma*. After reading a comment like this, it is not surprising to find that Riding did not publish any more historical fiction. Quite possibly the claims of history stood too strongly in the way of fashioning credible characterization.

When Salome has Mariamne falsely accused of attempting to poison Herod, Mariamne and her mother Alexandra are put on a show trial. Although Alexandra speaks out hysterically, Mariamne remains silent. One wonders if here Riding has combined a gesture of defiance toward the evil world on Mariamne's part with her own refusal to pry into the minds of historical characters. In describing the later events of Herod's reign, Riding briefly introduces us to the arrival of Nicholas of Damascus at court. Although she does not mention that he was a historian as well as a philosopher, the informed reader will know of him as a major source for Josephus's accounts. Here we have another instance of Riding's vouching for the credibility of her narrative.

In the last chapter of eight pages, "The New Era," Riding takes us from the arrival of the Magi at Herod's court to the exile of Herod's grandson Herod Agrippa (son of Mariamne's son Aristobulus) about forty years later. In describing the coming of Christianity, Riding presents John the Baptist as suspicious of Jesus of Nazareth before their first encounter. John was stern-minded, whereas Jesus was preaching "of a time of great bliss to come" (321). After their encounter, Jesus adopts some of John's harsh rhetoric. He "began to denounce the Pharisees, and also to stiffen his language against sinners—though he spoke more often in his own beguiling manner than in the manner of John" (321). The conclusion of the novel is ambiguous, and some may find it disappointing, for Riding refrains from commenting about the value of the coming of Christianity. She does not speculate on religion in the authorial voice in a way that would take us back to her statement on the ages of history in the foreword. Instead, we are left with the closing words of the exiled Herod Antipas to Herodias in Cadiz, "'Let Agrippa [Herod Agrippa I] tease his head with such things, which we have put far behind us'" (323). The "altar of burnt offerings at Jerusalem" (5) will be gone by the end of the next generation with the Roman destruction of the Temple. The Diaspora will have begun, and the apostles will be spreading Christianity.

Riding had already made a provocative statement comparing Judaism and Christianity in the first issue of *Epilogue* in 1935 in answer to a questionnaire about "The Idea of God." She takes an objective view of the issue, avoiding polemics for either side from her own post-religious perspective:

Jesus, in aiming at universal salvation, knew that he was making an experiment. As a Jew he felt the formidableness of the law which he was trying to soften in so final a sense. But he persuaded himself, in a manner

suggesting Greek philosophical influence, that while an idea might as action be untenable, as thought it could have probability. He translated the Hebrew God, the Critic of action, into a lenient God of thought, adding to the fixed Hebrew standard of immediate practicability philosophical connotations of futurity. (20)

Whereas this substitution of thought for action is presented as having its positive and negative sides, Riding shows less sympathy for Christianity when she connects it specifically with women's issues. According to Riding, the "virgin-birth of Jesus represented complete disconnexion from irksome dependence on the female patron of origination" (20). With Jesus, we have an intensification of "the original spiritually restricted female source of personal existence—the humiliating sense of having-been-child" (20).

The world into which Jesus is born hangs under the shadow of people such as Cleopatra, who chose to do evil in an evil world. Whereas Amytis represents goodness and serenity, and Olympias a hysteria that leads to evil, Cleopatra is wicked in a deep sense. She also has the most power of the three. Amytis wields political influence by being a moral force behind the throne, which is what Mariamne could also have been, had Herod understood her nature. Mariamne, unlike her mother, has no dynastic ambitions. The progressive degeneration marked in *Lives of Wives* is echoed by women's involvements in politics beginning in the Macedonian era and continuing through the Ptolemaic. We should also note that in the earlier *A Trojan Ending* the women are without direct political power, and here they are closely associated with the moral force as the guardians in Troy of Cybele worship.

In a striking statement in the fifth part of *The World and Ourselves*, edited by Riding in 1938, she writes of the way in which women have sustained the religion of men:

Men have been, in general, the sponsors of religions. This was appropriate in that men have been more preoccupied than women with the impermanent elements of life: they needed religion as a counterpoise to their activities of change. The division of spiritual labour between men and women was, in history, on the basis of women's instinctive suspicion of change and men's instinctive love of it. Women have thus practiced allegiance to the existing permanences, however few they happened to be; men have practiced religious cancellation of the impermanences they created in their experiments with change. It might be said that in

women was lodged the sense of what was right; in men the sense of what was wrong. Women nevertheless sustained the religions of men.... (424)

In *Lives of Wives* the brief appearances of John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth are indications of this tendency for men to be the religious reformers. Indeed, Herod has the new Temple constructed, whereas Mariamne has no new religious vision.

Riding in 1938 felt that we had passed out of the age of religion and that there was nothing bad about this change in itself.

Religion embodied the faith of people that life, purified of its falsities, its bad means, must consist ultimately of permanences. Religion was people's way of being intelligent about the future. Intelligence no longer takes that form—because we are the future to which they were loyal. We have in us the power to make life consist of permanences: it is by the permanences that we should now be living. (422)

It will take an internal discipline to consolidate this new age in which religion has been superseded. A conspicuous part of this discipline means that people must maintain an "invariable good temper" (426). We must approach evil "not in the immoral good temper of tolerance, but a serene consciousness of the permanences on which we can rely, however few they may be" (427). Amytis and Mariamne are foremothers here because of their serenity, and we can say the same for Cressida in *A Trojan Ending*.

Because Riding connects sexual experience with religion, it is also important to note that as we move through time, sex unfortunately becomes more important in some of the relationships. In *A Trojan Ending* the presumably happy married life of Cressida and Diomedes lies in exile beyond the pages of the novel. In *Lives of Wives* Amytis has children with Cyrus, but the wife and husband are presented very much like good friends. Sexual discontent plays a large part in the unsuccessful marriage of Olympias and Philip of Macedon. In the cases of Antony and Cleopatra and Herod and Mariamne sexual passion comes to have an even larger role in the emotional lives of the men. This is not a good sign for Riding, who writes in "The Idea of God":

Woman, I have said, constitutes for man complete experience. She is the material of both subjective and objective feeling: in her he may both understand and 'see.' But civilized man has used her only as an

instrument of his subjectivity; as such she is what he 'loves,' identifies with himself. The rest of the experience which she constitutes for him he evades sexually. In sex he makes his subjective experience of her the complete experience. In sex he dismissed the experience as complete in his subjective aspect.... (17)

Both women and God compete "in man's consciousness with his idea of his own importance" (7). Because woman is "something other than man" and the "answer to man's contradictory behaviour toward the something else, which is both insulting and propitiatory," she is the answer to the question, "Does God exist?" (7). Not surprisingly, when Herod oversexualizes his relationship with Mariamne, he loses both her and God at the same time.

Because Riding has spoken so vocally against the politically and socially oriented manifestations of American feminism since the 1960s, it is important that we come to understand *Lives of Wives* in a context larger than the historical novel. The key emphasis is not on what history, written mostly by men, did not get to tell us, but in Riding's presentation of women as the 'spiritual other' in the life of man. More work needs to be done to contextualize her essentialist vision in the light of contemporary work on women's spirituality.

NOTES

1. *Lives of Wives* has not captured the attention of critics. Joyce Piell Wexler writes of it: "Although her 1935 proposal pictured woman as more than 'domestic creatures,' by the time she wrote the book she had decided domesticity was the center of life" (95-96).

2. For a brief account of Cyrus's life see Jim Hicks, *The Persians*, pp. 19-28.

3. For a noted discussion of Aristotle's ethics, see David Ross (187-224). More recent essays by many authors are available in Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, ed., *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*. Aristotle's discussion (5: 1138b) of the golden mean can be found at the beginning of Book 5 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

4. The standard classical source for the life of Aristotle is Diogenes Laertius. On this point see B in Book 5, Chapter 1, Sections 12-16 (II: 455-59).

5. Perhaps the most famous work of literature based on the story of Mariamne is Friedrich Hebble's *Herod and Mariamne*, a blank-verse tragedy with a Hegelian frame of reference, which premiered in Vienna in 1848.

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