

Riding and Graves: Partnership as Theft

Miranda Seymour

When Graves said of Laura Riding that "It is through her standards that I have been able to be more clearly the poet I unclearly was before," he meant exactly that, no more. My intention is to demonstrate, by a brief examination of Graves's thought, his poetic attitude, that Laura Riding wronged him in her allegations of his plundering of her work and her ideas. In 1973, Riding published a savage article in *The University of Denver Quarterly*. She called the article "Some Autobiographical Corrections of Literary History".

Riding began by asserting that Graves and his bibliographer had acted wrongly in naming her as his collaborator on *No Decency Left*. This was a novel which Graves was commissioned to write by Cape in 1931 and which Riding, with his consent, took over. In 1931 Riding felt proud enough of her work to inform the publisher that all the best bits of the book were by her, to propose that the pseudonym of Barbara Rich should be abandoned and her own name disclosed as author (Baker, 276-8). She also suggested a sequel, to be written by herself. The book was not a success. Understandably Riding changed her mind about wanting her name to be associated with it. In 1973, she was ready to state that "never was there any authorization" for associating her with the pseudonym Barbara Rich. "He [Graves] had no authority from me for association of my name with himself as collaborator in that book: my say as to my relation with that book is my business" (Riding, 5).

But no wrong had been done: where there is clear evidence of a co-author as there was here, it is the bibliographer's duty to name both authors. The evidence was there.

In this case, where a work failed to be a success but where her involvement was incontrovertible, Riding resented having her name mentioned. It was not always so. She went on in *Denver Quarterly* to express surprise that the bibliographer and Graves had described the name Madeline Vara as a house name, used by both writers in their work for the *Epilogue* books which they edited in the 1930's. Now, in 1973, Riding declared that Madeline Vera was "other signature for writing of mine...as of his authorship. The signature of the piece is Madeline Vara. It was of my writing, as was everything else of that signature, full or abbreviated" (6).

Remembering this, let us turn back to a letter which Riding wrote in 1935 to John Aldridge. In it, she informed him that the name Madeline Vara was used to cover "everybody and nobody." Recently, she told Aldridge in a letter, it had been used in *Epilogue I* as the signature for a piece by Robert Graves on Nietzsche (30 November, 1935). There is no other writing by Madeline Vara on Nietzsche. It appeared among Graves' essays in *The Common Asphodel* in 1949; by this time Riding had convinced herself that the Nietzsche essay was her own work and that Graves had appropriated it lawlessly.

A third area of Riding's long attack on her former colleague concerned *The Survey of Modernist Poetry*, a collaboration between the two writers published in 1927. Here, Riding's concern was to show that she alone had been responsible for the book's influence on William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. The method, she asserted was original to her, not Graves.

The background to this assertion is particularly interesting. Empson had, in the first edition of the book, made an acknowledgement which enraged both Graves and Riding since it referred to Graves as if he was the sole author. Many years later, Riding decided to take the matter up, first with Empson's publisher, Chatto & Windus, and then with Professor Empson himself (Letter from Riding to Empson). This was in 1971. Empson had by this time read a letter from Graves to the *Modern Language Quarterly* in 1966, in which he described Riding as responsible for the general principles of the book but gave himself the credit for the detailed analysis of poems in the book, notably a line-by-line dissection of a Shakespeare sonnet. Empson, in subsequent correspondence with MLQ, provided a convincing reason for his singling out of Graves for his sole acknowledgement. He provided it again to Riding.

As a student of I.A. Richards, Empson had been introduced to all of Graves's methods, read all of his books with keen interest. It was in Graves's 1922 book *On English Poetry* that Empson first came across a passage on the ambiguity of language. "In poetry the implication is more important than the manifest statement," Graves had written, "the underlying associations of every word are marshalled carefully" (14). Graves had offered two examples. The first was Lady MacBeth's "All the perfumes of Arabia cannot sweeten this little hand," a reference, in Graves's view, both to the need to sweeten the smell of blood and to Lady Macbeth's readiness to be sweetened by powerful offers. His second example was Webster's use of the word 'dazzle' in

The Duchess of Malfi. "Mine eyes dazzle," suggested to Graves both the dazzling effect of tears and the dazzling beauty of the murdered duchess on whom Ferdinand, the speaker, was looking when he spoke. *Impenetrability*, of *The Proper Habit of English*, a book written by Graves in 1927, offered Empson further stimulating thoughts in its discussion of the rich ambiguity of language in Keats's "The Eve of St Agnes". When he read the sonnet analysis in *The Survey of Modernist Poetry*, Empson found it impossible to suppose that Graves was not the sole author. The line of development seemed to him clear and decisive. This was what he told Riding in response to her letters.

Riding did not accept the explanation. Having told Empson that the notion of eyes dazzled by tears merely showed Graves's failure to understand the nature of Webster's Ferdinand—he was not, in her view, the crying type—she demanded a public acknowledgement of her influence on the method used in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. Empson declined to provide it. "I really will not tell a lie to encourage that notion," he wrote to her, and with that, their correspondence ended. It did not prevent Riding from asserting herself as the chief influence on his chosen method in her *Denver Quarterly* article.

In 1993 a collection of Riding's fragmented writings on womanhood was published under the title *The Word Woman*. These were mostly taken from a book which Riding had begun in the 1930's, when she was living with Graves in Mallorca, and which she left there when they fled to England in 1936. It was Riding's belief, published for the first time in an appendix to this book, that all of Graves's ideas had been stolen from her, and that this small collection of writings had been his hidden, inadmissible source. She broadened her claim to assert that Graves had drawn upon her own experience and presented it as his.

Was Riding right? I do not think so. Her most fervent anger was reserved for the notion, held by many, but not by Graves himself, that she was the living original of his White Goddess. It seems to me that Riding was, in 1926, appropriated by Graves, but not in the way she meant, to a myth which he already had fixed in his mind. He did nothing after the event of her presence that he had not already begun to do before she appeared.

I can provide some pointers to offer a clear indication of the way Graves's mind was working before 1926, before he encountered Laura Riding.

In 1916, Graves had a near-brush with death on the Somme. He

mythologised the event. Many years later, in *The Nazarene Gospel Restored*, he explicitly described the event as "a resurrection"; in 1916, he wrote a poem, "Escape", in which he personified himself as Orpheus. Orpheus was an important figure in Graves's myth of himself as poet and servant of the goddess. Orpheus, like the Welsh god Bran, was a poet who was torn to shreds by possessed women, the maenads, and whose head continued to sing. In 1916, then, the idea of a mythological role for himself as a poet was already present.

In 1920, Graves began a close series of discussions with William Rivers, the eminent neurologist who had treated Sassoon and Owen in 1917. Rivers was also an anthropologist, and there is a mass of evidence to show that it was from his books and from talking to him that Graves first came in contact with the idea of mother-right and with the idea of a primitive matriarchy. In 1925, Graves began to explore and develop his new sense of an ancient world ruled by goddesses in the novel *My Head! My Head!*

Further to this, we should note that, in 1924, in *The Meaning of Dreams*, Graves wrote a long essay on "La Belle Dame sans Merci", in which he put forward for the first time the case of a poet's need for a personal muse. From then on, Graves unhesitatingly placed himself in a tradition of English poets working under the inspiration of a female muse.

In 1926, Graves, together with his new companion, Laura Riding and his wife, Nancy Nicholson, travelled to Egypt where he was to be a professor of English at the Royal Egyptian University. There, at the same time, Riding and he fell under the spell of the Egyptian myths of Isis, Osiris and Set, in which the goddess Isis is fought over by the powers of good and evil, imagination and negativity, personified by the two-half brothers. Who is to say that this myth, reproduced in Graves' life over and over again with deliberate intent, for the sake of his poetry, was the property of Riding?

In the same period, early in 1926, Graves wrote a poem, "Pygmalion to Galatea". Here, he described the excitement of his association with a poet for whom his profound admiration never slackened. But the poem is also about the act of creative power. Pygmalion, the poet, is seen in the act of imaginatively endowing the woman he loves with the powers he wishes her to possess. The process of deification was already at work, and it had its origin in Graves's own reading and his own active imagination.

Later in 1926, Graves and Riding travelled to Vienna, where Graves

worked on reviewing a book by Malinowski in which he felt that Rivers, Malinowski's mentor, had been given insufficient recognition as a pioneer on the subject of tribal matriarchies. Here, surely, Riding heard for the first time about William Rivers, to whom she would pay grateful acknowledgement in her book, *The Word Woman*, thirty years later.

Many years later, Graves wrote in a poem of "Cruel ordeals long foreseen and known", and of "Springing a trap baited with my own flesh" ("Lion Lover", *New Poems*). This, I would argue, is exactly what he intended to do when he embarked on the relationship with Riding. He had already created his myth of the goddess and yoked it to the idea of himself as a soldier, suffering countless humiliations in the cause of love. Poet, soldier and goddess-server were one in his mind. Riding's formidable presence, her readiness to see herself as a super-human force, made it all the easier for Graves to fit her into the myth he had already created. Serving under her standard, by his own choice, he did indeed become more clearly the poet he had, unclearly, been before.

-LONDON

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